

**University of Pardubice**  
**Faculty of Arts and Philosophy**

**The Influence of African-American music on *Montage of a Dream Deferred***  
**by Langston Hughes**

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### Zásady pro vypracování:

Since Harlem plays such an important role in Hughes' poetry, a short cultural history of the area should be described concentrating mainly on the wave of African-American migration to the neighborhood beginning at the turn of the 20th century. Events, themes and issues that the poet features in MONTAGE should be emphasized for use in the later analysis. The historical development of work songs, the blues, ragtime, spirituals and jazz should be briefly outlined, including the cultural events and issues that shaped these forms in the mid-19th to the mid-20th century. Basic theoretical information and examples of how these genres both influenced and were influenced by American literature in terms of form and content should be presented. Then in greater detail theories specifically concerning 20th century poetry should be outlined, specifically how academics have characterized linguistic influences of African-American music as well as rhythmic and structural patterns taken from the various musical genres. Then using the above categories and patterns, the BP writer should describe highlights of the development of the use of music in Hughes' poetry throughout his previous career. This should naturally lead up to the longest and most important part of the BP, the analysis of the use of music in the book-length suite MONTAGE OF A DREAM DEFERRED (1951) using the trends described regarding earlier Hughes poetry and especially the theoretical tools and cultural context described in the opening chapters. Of course here the influence of contemporaneous 1940s and post-war forms such as boogie-woogie and bebop should be characterized along with more traditional musical genres. Themes and motifs exemplified by the use African-American culture such as racial consciousness, Harlem as a haven and the perceived need for social change should be discussed. Finally the influence and legacy of Hughes' poetry in later works should be mentioned.

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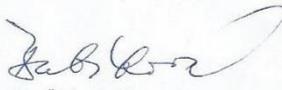
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## **ANNOTATION**

This thesis acquaints readers with the profound influence of African-American music on the poetry of Langston Hughes, more specifically on his poem suite *Montage of a Dream Deferred* from 1951. The theoretical part provides information about Hughes' cultural background that is inextricably associated with the Harlem Renaissance. Then, basic characteristics and techniques of his poetry are briefly outlined. The development of individual African-American musical forms is discussed. Authors and artists that heavily influenced Hughes are introduced. Afterwards, typical poetic devices and linguistic features of blues and jazz poetry are highlighted for use in the ensuing analysis. The following part thoroughly scrutinizes African-American music elements of eight selected poems from *Montage of a Dream Deferred*. Subsequently, Hughes' enduring impact is concisely elucidated. Lastly, the results are addressed in the final chapter.

## **KEY WORDS**

Hughes, Harlem, blues, jazz, influence, montage, music, poetry

## **NÁZEV**

Vliv afroamerické hudby na sbírku básní *Montage of a Dream Deferred* od Langstona Hughese.

## **ANOTACE**

Předkládaná práce seznamuje čtenáře se zásadním vlivem afroamerické hudby na poezii Langstona Hughese, konkrétně na jeho sbírku básní *Montage of a Dream Deferred* z roku 1951. Teoretická část se zabývá vztahem tohoto spisovatele ke kulturnímu pozadí Harlemské renesance. Posléze jsou řešeny charakteristické rysy a metody Hughesovy poezie a vývoj jednotlivých afroamerických hudebních žánrů. Následné kapitoly se věnují autorům a umělcům, jejichž vliv je v Hughesových dílech výrazně patrný. Na tyto kapitoly bezprostředně navazuje výčet básnických prostředků a lingvistických znaků bluesové a jazzové poezie, který je následně využit v analytické části. Ta podrobně zkoumá osm vybraných básní ze sbírky *Montage of a Dream Deferred* a hledá v ní typické prvky a znaky afroamerické hudby. I nadále přetrvávající vliv Hughesovy umělecké tvorby je stručně objasněn v předposlední kapitole. Výsledky práce jsou pak shrnuty v závěrečné kapitole.

## **KLÍČOVÁ SLOVA**

Hughes, Harlem, blues, jazz, vliv, montáž, hudba, poezie

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## Introduction

The chief goal of this bachelor thesis is to reveal the immense impact of African-American musical forms on the poem suite *Montage of a Dream Deferred* that was written by Langston Hughes.

The theoretical part encompasses chapters 1 through 7. This part covers the description of Langston Hughes' perspective in relation to the Harlem Renaissance, briefly highlights the development of African-American musical genres, and introduces the most important artists and events that influenced Hughes' musically inspired works. Chapter 7 depicts in detail the distinctive features of blues and jazz poetry.

The analytical part is contained in chapter 8. The most comprehensive chapter of the thesis examines thoroughly the impact of the previously introduced musical forms on eight selected poems from *Montage of a Dream Deferred*.

In the following chapter, Hughes' contemporary impact and legacy is shortly discussed. This section is targeted at some of the artists Hughes has greatly influenced.

Finally, the results of the thesis are addressed in the closing chapter.

## 1. Relocation of African-Americans

The vast majority of African-Americans aggrieved by slavery and racial discrimination had been living in the agrarian southern parts of the United States before, due to an increasing support for emancipation, some of them flocked to the north. At the beginning of the 20th century, African-Americans started to move to rural areas of the north mostly because they were delighted at the prospect of better life conditions and employment opportunities. Later, the most artistically gifted black individuals settled in the urban areas such as Kansas City, Chicago, and New York City. Shortly after the First World War and during the Great Depression began to emerge avant-garde intellectual groups originating from the socially deprived southern territories with the immediate experience of enslavement that shared two common features: dissatisfaction with racial equality and the pursuit of the American Dream. A fair number of these African-American intellectuals and artists found refuge in Harlem, New York. The relocation of the black intellectual elite established and led to the advent of the literary and artistic “New Negro Movement,” a name that was coined by the philosopher and a contemporaneous figure of the movement Alain Locke in 1925. (Alexander and Rucker 2004, 926)

## 2. New Negro Movement

This movement set forth a new black cultural identity and restored racial pride that later turned the perception and common stereotypes attributed to black people inside out. However, the main purpose of the movement was not political. Instead of attempting to be engaged in politics, the artists of the movement strived to express their thoughts and intentions toward racial equality and civil rights by way of using every accessible artistic means. In a bid to call attention to their plight, black writers, painters, and musicians thoroughly depicted the discriminatory treatment they were undergoing as a race on everyday basis in their works. Aiming their attention at the most authentic portrayal of black people lives, the artists and literary authors of the movement outraged the general public and the academy by breaking down the taboos and pointing out the stigmas pertaining to the inequality of black people. Regardless of the fact that these works evoked an infuriated reaction from the public, it was during this period when black authors like Langston Hughes, Zora Neale Hurston, and W.E.B. DuBois drew at least some interest from the white population. For the first time ever, African-American literary authors,

musicians, and artists gained acknowledgements for their contributions to world culture. (Hutchinson 2007, 96)

### 3. Harlem Renaissance and Langston Hughes

After the 1930s, the New Negro Movement gradually became known as the “Harlem Renaissance,” which was a term coined by the prominent author and activist of this movement James Weldon Johnson, who popularized the designation in his well-known novels. However, this designation did not meet with a positive response from other key figures of the movement. For instance, Ralph Ellison asserted that the “Harlem Renaissance” was more or less an artificial label he could not identify with. He perceived it as “a faddish White construction” that was incompatible with his core ideas about the rebirth of African-American culture. (Simawe 2000, 77)

The views of individual representatives of the Harlem Renaissance diverged in many respects. One of them was certainly the critical view at the early forms of blues and folk materials, and their appreciation. The movement was therefore divided into 2 separate groups with mutually opposing approaches and attitudes. The ostensible audience of both groups were predominantly middle class blacks. The old guard, the first group, gained notoriety for openly enacting its philosophically motivated contempt and its ambivalent stance toward the black folk tradition that was characteristic for lower classes or people of a lower class economic status. The “vulgar and unacceptable” depiction of “the lowlife Negro” and their strenuous journey full of obstacles could not measure with the lofty ideals of European cultivated literature, according to the old guard. Especially the writers of this group felt that the folk materials of “weak and impoverished blacks” could not live up to European standards. (Tracy 1988, 16-20) The old guard wanted to set up a new, much more respectable awareness embodied in the distorted image of the Negro which was a lot more akin to the European ideals. This group stood firm on its desire to rely and draw upon European literature, and possibly even compete with it. Among those endorsing this belief were central figures of the movement, namely Alain Locke, James Weldon Johnson, and W. E. B. DuBois. All of them were widely known for their profound reluctance to accept the African-American folkloric sources, language and imagery. The new guard was a bit more idiosyncratic as opposed to its counterpart. One of the main representatives of the new guard was Langston Hughes. (Tracy 1988, 16-20)

Even from a socioeconomic point of view, the old guard could not find a common ground with the new guard. In the early 1920s, the American economy experienced a remarkable growth which resulted in new employment opportunities for the African-American population. The economic boom positively affected mainly urban areas, including Harlem. Hughes perceived the middle class as an exclusive aspect of white culture and he was adamant in his belief that gaining the same socio-economic status would help blacks in achieving the chief goal of integrating themselves into broader society. Hughes devoted himself to the pervasiveness of cultural differences between the American black and white populations and avidly defended the interests of the black working class. (Rampersad 2002, 144)

The social and cultural uplift of blacks was often the main thrust of his work and the main concern of his contemporaries from the new guard. In contrary to the beliefs of W.E.B DuBois and other prominent figures of the Harlem Renaissance, Hughes was of the view that the “black middle-class masses” and their artistic refinement should not be shaped around and encouraged by European progenitors, he reasoned that artistic expression must come from deep within “the black Negro,” based on their hardship, racial issues, and everyday struggles. (Baker 1989, 9)

In *Montage of a Dream Deferred*, Hughes takes the position of “low” blues and jazz cultures that were mostly afflicted by these struggles. In order to approximate this view, Hughes makes use of a vast range of literary and non-literary devices. (Locke and Murray 2011, 32) As the title indicates, one of the distinguishing motifs is “montage,” a filmmaking technique based on cutting individual passages and rapid shifting from one part to another by dint of juxtaposing or superimposing of diverse designs and images. The Soviet Russian film director and theorist Sergei Eisenstein is said to be the author of this technique. In film, this method is conceptualized as a sequence of condensed, seemingly unrelated but successively arranged shots. (Eisenstein 2010, 297) The introductory poem called *Dream Boogie* might serve as a prime example of how Hughes profusely used Eisenstein's montage technique in the poem suite. (Jones 2011, 38-39)

Good morning, daddy!  
Ain't you heard  
The boogie-woogie rumble  
Of a dream deferred?

Listen closely:

You'll hear their feet

Beating out and Beating out a --

You think it's a happy beat?

Listen to it closely:

Ain't you heard

something underneath

like a --

What did I say?

In the line “Beating out and beating out a —”, a noun is purposely omitted and the line is suddenly interrupted by “You think it's a happy beat?” The reader’s focus is thus abruptly switched to the following line, retaining the message of the first line in isolation from the contents of the new line. These two aforementioned lines are designed to remain visually sequential by dint of em-dashes, even though the first line is not directly connected to the following one.

This poem contains two narrators who are very close to each other, as one calls the other one “daddy” which, in this context, has a similar meaning as “buddy” or “friend.” By employing Harlem slang, Hughes made clear that the speaker addressing “daddy” is a woman. Male African-Americans would not use this word in this form. The use of a female voice suggests that Hughes wanted to make explicit that the Dream pertains to all African-Americans, regardless of gender. (Tracy 1988, 231) By posing the question “You think It's a happy beat?”, the author manifests that the ambience in Harlem is far from being happy due to the fact that the collective Dream of Harlem black residents seems to be unrealizable and must be therefore put off, which is mentioned earlier in the poem *Dream Boogie*.

Similarly, in the line “Ain't you heard something underneath like a —”, an unexpected break and omission of words take place again. The line is then incoherently followed by “What did I say?” Along with musical rhythms and imagery that Hughes established in this poem, the author here underscores and reflects on the current mood state of Harlem residents and tries to impose their mental state upon his readers. This aim is achieved particularly because of the technique of montage. In this light, the montage serves in this book as a visual and textual device for

adding emphasis as well as an emotional intensifier. In both cases, seemingly important passages (lines) are cut apart by the em-dashes (—) and, as a consequence, these “pieces” are collated into a unified whole and altogether constitute a montage. These elements of montage are illustrated throughout the whole book as individual poems are incoherently assembled but altogether serve as a single entity. This technique is supposed to strengthen the overall impression, help lend an almost tangible perception and impose a strong feeling on readers. (Perloff 1991, 54-55) As Laurence Goldstein contended “Hughes intends to put the reader in mind not only of jazz structure but of the fluidity of film, as the poet turns his attention to one scene after another without transition or argument.” (Goldstein 1994, 78) The word “montage” literally translated from French means “cutting.” The text thus seems a mash-up of distantly related poems. However, it is believed that the patterns scattered in the technique of montage bear a substantial resemblance to those of imagery and the montage thus, in all likelihood, developed out of Ezra Pound's Imagism. Imagism is, in the words of Meta DuEwa Jones, “a precise execution of maximum resonance with minimum words.” *Montage of a Dream Deferred* alludes to the feature of sparing with words and economy of language that Pound famously harnessed during the early stages of Anglo-American modernism. (Jones 2011, 39) Pound's impact is therefore particularly most apparent along the lines of the poem *Chord*:

Shadow faces

In the Shadow Night

Before the early dawn

Bobs bright.

Nonetheless, one of the main subjects of *Montage of a Dream Deferred* is the collective appeal of African-Americans who felt discriminated and locked away from the mainstream society. The American majority placed various restrictions on African-Americans and took control over nearly every facet of their lives. As incredible as it may seem, there were numerous cases of racial injustice exposed on black people reported at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Even during this period, African-Americans were treated with profound hostility and no outward sign of courtesy. The practice of lynching was tolerated by the American mainstream society as an act of subjugating blacks that was rampant and conducted on everyday basis even at the time of the Progressive Era. The American mainstream society did not even pretend to be sympathetic to the plight of African-Americans and, on the top of that, it forced them to pay additional fees for renting a property as part of racial discrimination. (Jancken 2010)

This unfair and discriminatory treatment is the main issue in *Ballad of the Landlord* (*Montage of a Dream Deferred*). Defying the white people image as role models, Hughes depicts in the poem patronizingly superior behavior of the majority. The landlord in the story serves as the metaphor of white oppression, while the tenant (the narrator) represents the seemingly defenseless oppressed that cannot own anything. The speaker lives in a property owned by the landlord and always pays the determined sum of money for his rent on time. The tenant finds that his steps are broken down and politely asks the landlord to repair them. The tenant is then dismissed out of hand. Even though the tenant paid his rent on the due date, the landlord seeks additional rent money for no adequate reason to remedy this situation. This condescension of the landlord is not left unanswered. The tenant threatens the landlord: “You ain't gonna be able to say a word, if I land my fist on you.” As a consequence, the landlord calls the police and the tenant is arrested and imprisoned for 90 days in county jail, because he, ironically, could not afford to pay bail.

In this instance, it is not clear whether Hughes draw on his own personal experience but many cases of this kind had been documented even in Harlem in the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Such injustice obviously triggered a massive wave of indignation among black and white activists and led to the establishment of various civil rights organizations such as National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) that played a pivotal part and role in the anti-lynching movement in 1909. This organization was also the most affluent in a campaign against school segregation that was common throughout the whole country. African-American children did not receive an adequate education which was, according to NAACP, the main reason of all inequalities blacks had to encounter daily. NAACP thereby initiated a campaign for desegregated education and protested for equal access to education in 1929. Most African-Americans in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century were dealing with poor living conditions. Hughes, along with his contemporaries, was inspired by the inclement environment, events and addressed these problems in most of his works. (Janke 2010)

The adverse, abysmal conditions of African-Americans during the 20<sup>th</sup> century incited Hughes to vividly write about their equalization which was epitomized in the collective Dream. This Dream was often a common theme of his books. In *Montage of a Dream Deferred*, the “Dream” is sketched as an idyllic picture and hope that cannot be fulfilled. In this light, it is vigorously emphasized throughout the book that the “Dream” will never come to fruition and is therefore inevitably “deferred.” The Dream functions as a vision of cultural and social advancement or

uplift which is also one of the most distinctive features of modernism. Hughes' apparent negative and pessimistic stance stems greatly from the lack of opportunities for African-Americans to pursue their aspirations as well as from their racial insecurity. As is stated in the poem *Harlem*, the narrator does not exactly know what happens to the Dream and only seemingly seeks answers from his readers or listeners by asking them various rhetorical questions based on his conviction. Hughes probably believes that the Dream is gradually vanishing and is not consistent enough to be turned into a reality or to endure reality. When asking "Does it stink like rotten meat?", the author is of the view that the fact that the Dream cannot be fulfilled may lead to sorrow, frustration or anger, and might eventually result in corruption of character. The poem ends with the line "Or does it explode?", meaning the culmination of the abovementioned negative attributes that can result in public disturbances and riots.

Hughes believed that his affirmative insight could change the general view on the African-American lower class. By virtue of his avid advocacy of the people primarily labeled as African-American "low-class," he immediately earned the derisive and ridiculing moniker "Lowrate of the negro race." Even nowadays, several academic sources suggest that "his verse was limited in scope, or otherwise aesthetically deficient, and failed lamentably to satisfy their desire for a Modernist literature attuned to the complexities of modern life." (Ponce 2005, 537)

Repetitive rhyme patterns, fixed forms, and recurring themes concerning the questions of gender, race, and sexuality are so characteristic for blues and jazz discourse nonetheless. It was Langston Hughes that laid the foundations of so-called blues and jazz poetry which is a cross-genre fusing cyclic musical forms, diction, and techniques with the issues of African-American culture. The initial perception of this then-new literary genre did not indicate any signs of success in his endeavor to integrate the early African-American forms of music into his literature. Inflammatory observations in his poetry led to some skeptical responses among scholars and the academy at first. In that regard, Hughes in the June 23, 1926 issue of *The Nation* emboldened his prospective readers to expand their notion about the literature motivated by African-American music as follows: "Let the blare of Negro jazz bands and the bellowing voice of Bessie Smith singing the Blues penetrate the closed ears of the colored neo-intellectuals until they listen and perhaps understand." Although there has been no shortage of debate in recent years as to how much impact his work has had in literary and popular culture studies,

Hughes is now widely hailed as one the most critically acclaimed and influential American poets far beyond his homeland. (Jones 2011, 35-36)

Since music was highly popular and influential worldwide, its role within the black community in Harlem was even more significant in the early 1920s. James Baldwin confirmed “It is only in his music [...] that the Negro in America has been able to tell his story.” Emotions, feelings, and thoughts conveyed in sound and vocally expressed by blacks were distinctive for this period and age. The music both influenced and was derived from African-American poetry which oversaw the creation of a completely new mixture of literary genres. Such literature was generally tangential to the topic of African-American identity and addressed the omnipresent cultural adversity of blacks while using a stylized form of literary expression with a strong emphasis on aesthetics and rhythm. (Locke and Murray 2011, 1-2)

Among the first works of jazz poetry were books like *The Weary Blues*, *Ask Your Mama: 12 Moods of Jazz*, and *Montage of a Dream Deferred*; all of them were chiefly motivated by African-American music. In *Montage of a Dream Deferred*, Hughes adopted nearly all forms of black music, namely blues, boogie-woogie, jazz, and be-bop; and he succeeded in his effort to incorporate them into the full book-length poem that is now recognized as one of his finest. (Jones 2011, 33-34)

As the founder of blues and jazz poetry, Hughes is recognized as an eminent representative of the Harlem Renaissance. His work *Montage of a Dream Deferred* adopted the theme of cultural conflict arising from the real social struggles inflicted upon African-Americans in the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. For emotional and artistic purposes, Hughes also integrated the filmmaking technique of montage to accentuate such issues. These issues are consequently interwoven into “a dream deferred.” Nonetheless, the main subject in the poem suite is African-American music. As a new guard advocate and low-style poet, Hughes draws upon the history of virtually all contemporary black musical genres.

## 4. African-American music and its development

The expansion of slavery in the middle of the nineteenth century in the United States heralded the beginning of new musical forms. Work songs and rhythmic a cappella songs were an essential part of all southern plantations. These early forms of music originated mainly from African chants and spirituals. One of the most distinctive patterns of this music was a unique call-and-response format: A leading worker would sing a few rhymes and the rest of workers would sing a chorus with perceptible rhythmic changes. Singing these songs during the grueling labor in cotton fields was often the only way to cope with the harsh and arduous conditions of work. It also helped sharecroppers or slaves to keep pace with each other, so they could avoid being viciously punished for slow or sloppy work by their owners. Slave songs were also known as a means to relieve boredom, as a mediator of the effect of nostalgia based on reminiscing over their African home. The content of these songs was strongly religious and the singers of this musical form were often relating to god. The core of the music contained so-called "blues feeling," a genuine emotion of deep grief and sadness. (Smith 2010, 466-467)

### 4.1 Blues

After the end of bondage in the United States, the blues as a full-fledged genre further developed in the socially deprived and economically depressed area called the Mississippi Delta. It is generally acknowledged that the blues started to disseminate across the American South at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, though the founding figure of the blues has remained unknown to this day. However, the early forms of blues, easily distinguishable for their quite unconventional instrumental timbres, are unswervingly linked to folk artists like Charley Patton, Robert Johnson, Son House, Blind Willie Johnson, and Blind Lemon Jefferson. These songsters were among the first to transmit their deep feelings of misfortune, frustration, and grief to target audiences. As trite as it might sound, the main essence of the blues was not convincing listeners about how mope a performer is, but rather to abstractly define an image of "the struggling Negro" that is easy to relate to. Boogie-woogie, the closest derivative of blues, emphasized the dancing element of blues with piano but eradicated the emotive aspects of traditional guitar blues. The blues and its approaches are often negatively attributed to the social stagnation of blacks and their unwillingness for social and political development. So whilst being finally accepted as part of culture and society by the majority, certain blacks had a proclivity for

separation that would result in a dichotomy once again. The blues culture did not hesitate to criticize and outright distance itself from the American mainstream, which was an attitude of counter-assimilation that blacks exuded for the first time in history. (Locke and Murray 2011, 30-31)

For obvious reasons, the passive political and social stance led to numerous conflicts between the black and white cultures again. In the wake of the increasing pressure of the majority, the blacks strived to maintain the quintessential qualities of blues while purposely avoiding the “bleaching effects” of mainstream notions. In the early 1960s, several civil rights workers in the United States exhibited efforts to incorporate “the blues culture” into mainstream American life. These workers prompted the black “lower class” people to elevate their economic and social status by actively participating in social and political events. It is documented in the book *Thriving on a Riff: Jazz & Blues Influences in African-American Literature and Film* that numerous central characters of the blues culture categorically rejected voter registration, contending that “their active participation in voting would not change much.” Blues progenitors believed that the implications of racial convergence would have had eventually an adverse impact on them. Quite a few perceived this assiduous endeavor of assimilation as a state of “incarceration” they could not live in. Rather than assimilating properly into society and boosting their social status, African-Americans directly linked to the blues culture opted to preserve and celebrate their original identity. They did so mainly because they were concerned about the American mainstream and its effort to transform their lifestyle and identity according to its own desires (i.e., the “bleaching effects”). African-Americans representing the blues culture were presumably afraid that the cultural interference manifests of whites would have been an affront to their identity. This, in all likelihood, inherited apprehension may be substantiated by their own experiences or the experiences of their ancestors as they were ignominiously working as field and house slaves. It should therefore come as no surprise that a certain restraint or alienation reasonably lied between the “low African-American culture” and the “high American white culture” and persisted for a relatively long time period after the end of bondage. The “efforts of them white folks” to uplift the blues culture came to naught and definitely condemned it to cultural and social stagnation. On the other hand, the representatives of the blues culture claimed that external interventions of the majority would have led to stagnation anyway, assuming that they would just have to do what had already been done, so they could not develop their distinctive artistic potential. In other words, these African-Americans believed that their integration into wider society would only forestall their

development. It was not just this overt controversy that resulted in a schism between the blues progenitors and the American mainstream, though. As a result of cultural and political activism especially in the late 1960s, when intentions towards liberation of women arose and women's social role began to change dramatically due to the emerging efforts of the contemporaneous feminist movement, the public's exasperation with the blues culture started to cast doubt on the quintessential values of blues that were frequently misconstrued. However, the core essence of the blues has been often tagged and perceived as highly masculine and almost misogynistic with a strong sexual background, which was one of the main reasons why the general public paid so little attention to it and subsequently denounced it for social backwardness and primitivism. (Locke and Murray 2011, 30-31)

Conversely, classic female blues artists like Bessie Smith, Ma Rainey, and Ethel Waters were one of the first to openly express their thoughts, emotions and beliefs about the issues of gender disparity, unequal treatment, and domestic violence in the early 1920s. In essence, these woman blues singers were notoriously known for their reluctance to accept the taboos of that time, but especially Bessie Smith, often praised by Hughes in his works, can be regarded as the pioneer of promoting the freedom of expression of women at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. As a celebrated black singer, she also became the symbol of an economically independent woman, something unheard of at the time. (Davis 46, 1999) Even though the female performers were often maintaining a conciliatory stance towards unequal treatment and gender-motivated violence in their texts, it does not necessarily mean that the singers of this musical genre were content with misogynist abuse carried out by men. Smith managed to gain prominence and popularity despite the environment in the United States during the 1920s that was more or less racially prejudiced and hostile to anything and anyone that disobeyed its conventional expectations. Smith, alongside with other early women blues singers, embraced the main essences and nuances of blues but distanced herself from the constituted bulwark of misogyny by avoiding the content of a typical male-centered blues lyric. However, this sort of music did not stray beyond the usual blues topics. The most frequent subject matter of women blues was again characteristically doleful and introspective, but as opposed to the classic "masculine" blues, classic female blues was often relating to gender-based violence that was inflicted by men on women. One of the most unique elements of the blues has always been that it does not draw distinction between the public and private sphere of life which only justifies the penchant of classic female blues artists for infringing taboos and established norms. (Gradient Lair 2013)

Yet the unfavorable conditions and inauspicious events did not prevent the blues from further development. Throughout its expansion, the blues absorbed influences from and drew on other genres like hymns, brass band and vaudeville music; and distorted the genuine sound of ragtime and jazz. (Locke and Murray 2011, 30-31)

## 4.2 Ragtime and jazz

The origins of these genres can be traced to the first half of the 20th century. Ragtime, a synthesis of European classical music and blues music, gained notoriety for its racy syncopated rhythm highly influenced by the marches of John Philip Sousa. Much like blues, ragtime was exploring the racial issues of contemporary America. The artistic nature of this musical style was thus frequently targeted by racial slurs and ridiculed by the wider public. Even though the music might have been often an object of derision and mockery, it does not negate the fact that this genre was highly influential even abroad and had an immense impact on European composers such as Erik Satie and Igor Stravinsky. However, due to the rapid development in the art of musical composition and the early emergence of new popular styles at the beginning of the 20th century, the popularity of ragtime did not last long, began to decline and has never fully recuperated or reinvigorated in the intervening years. (The Library of Congress 2006)

As the jazz music began to disperse far and wide, the role of ragtime progressively diminished. Stemming from the blues tide of the river Mississippi, jazz permanently settled in New Orleans around the year of 1917. The city of New Orleans has always been famously known for developing a multicultural identity and recognized as the center of diverse ethnic and racial groups, which significantly contributed to the advancement of this musical form. This sort of music can be defined as a mixture of all the aforementioned genres complemented by spontaneous and highly idiosyncratic improvisation, syncopation and polyrhythms. Given the fact that the jazz music extensively scattered throughout the streets around the globe, this genre both influenced and was influenced by miscellaneous cultural sources across continents, countries, regions, and locations. (Scaruffi 2005) The establishment of jazz is nowadays identified as an eminent cultural milestone, as during the Jazz Age, African-American music was on the cusp of becoming popular worldwide.

### 4.3 Be-bop

After the Second World War, be-bop became the most controversial style of jazz. This genre highlighted the importance of individualism and identity, thereby the themes originating from blues. As swing (a traditional jazz subgenre) waned in popularity, cities all over the United States were instantly awash in be-bop. Be-bop was pretty much a continuation of swing from which it was derived from. (Owens 2013, 3-4) Nevertheless, what be-bop lacked in formality and moderation, the offspring of swing made up for in improvisation. The main aim of be-bop was to put more emphasis on the sophisticated improvisation of classic jazz and to play tunes at way faster tempos, which was a hallmark of the style. The music was therefore not intended for dancing but just listening. Solo instruments and small ensembles came to the fore and overshadowed lyrical expression typically heard in classic jazz. Layers of rhythmic and harmonic complexity were seen as vital components of this music. Generally, a typical be-bop song marks its beginning with a short piano prelude that fades away and is gradually transformed into a major theme that is afterwards suddenly interrupted by repeated broken rhythms that highlight the improvisation process through chorus. The end of such songs is underlined by the previously established major theme that is concisely expressed again. (Otto 2015) Charlie Parker, Duke Ellington, Dizzy Gillespie, and Charles Mingus were prominent figures of this genre and coaxed the characteristic grooving sound known also as modern jazz from their saxophones, basses, and trumpets. (Owens 2013, 3-4)

All African-American music originates from the same source: the blues. As the prominent songwriter Willie Dixon remarked: “The blues is the roots, everything else is the fruits.” (Muir 2009, 215) However, the development of blues was marred by social struggles that left an indelible mark on blues themes. Ragtime, jazz, swing, and be-bop drew upon these themes and had an increasing tendency to rely more on improvisational structure as a way of imitating freedom of expression in music as time went on.

## 5. Literary and musical influence on Hughes

All of these musical genres were considerably important for Hughes' poetry and Hughes himself was more than familiar with most of them. His far-reaching knowledge of jazz and blues is demonstrated throughout his wide poetic range. Hughes was able to masterfully incorporate a variety of basic blues stanzaic forms and capture their repetition and rhythm in his poems. His poetry motivated by blues, jazz, ragtime, etc., helped to popularize African-American vernacular forms that had not previously attracted much attention. Hughes was a staunch advocate of jazz music and absolutely rejected skewed comparisons with classical music in his essays. In *Jazz as Communication* from 1956, Hughes was adamant that the forms of blues and jazz should be dubbed "high art" because these genres had withstood the test of time and had proved to be irrevocably influential within the confines of musical composition as well as outside the boundaries of music. Hughes stated: "Jazz is a great big sea. It washes up all kinds of fish and shells and spume and waves with a steady old beat, or off-beat." His ardent advocacy of jazz and especially the precise integration of jazz iterations and nuances into his renowned books and anthologies made him the first "true jazz poet." Langston Hughes' success paved the way for a number of artists and many famous jazz poets drew on and fell under his influence, including Sterling Brown. As basically any pioneer of a new genre, even Hughes had to draw inspiration from ambient influences. While residing in Harlem, Hughes began to admire street performers coming from a lower social class. Vaudeville blues musicians and cabaret jazz performers caught his eye and he concluded that he could adopt their artistic creation in his writings in the early 1920s. (Jones 2011, 36-38)

At the age of eleven, Hughes met the blues for the first time when he heard it from an orchestra of blind musicians on Independence Avenue in Kansas City in 1913. When he moved to New York in 1921, he heard the unique sound of blues coming out from the Harlem streets once again. Following this nostalgic experience, he began to express a preference for the blues tradition and heritage which have been conceived of as exclusive belonging of the African-American lower social class. Throughout the remainder of the decade, there were numerous blues and jazz artists that had an impact on the style of Langston Hughes' poetry to some degree, but the influence of Dizzy Gillespie and Duke Ellington was especially profound. Hughes, Gillespie and Ellington had a lot in common. All three played a significant role in the flowering of the Harlem Renaissance, all three shared their love for music, none of them was born in New York and all of them were very artistically gifted. All three were even visitors of the Cotton

Club that was situated in the Harlem neighborhood and where these three frequently performed or just spectated. Their individual performances to a great extent influenced one another and significantly shaped their work. Hughes' admiration for blues and jazz music cannot go unnoticed, because according to Black American Literature Forum, his collection of blues and jazz songs surpassed in quantity his collection of poems. Nevertheless, Hughes was born in Joplin, Missouri, which is located near St. Louis that is considered to be one of the birthplaces of jazz music. His lyrical influence can be traced in many significant works of stellar jazz musicians like Charles Mingus and Red Allen for whom he also wrote songs. In addition, Hughes often performed along with various musicians on-stage and also collaborated with a number of black artists off-stage, so his strong ties to African-American music are thus undisputable. (Storer 2005, 114-115)

The representatives of the Chicago Renaissance (Chicago was also a major center of black culture) were inspired by Walt Whitman's poetry that had also a very strong impact on the poetic range of Langston Hughes. Whitman sought to distance himself from the foot of iambic pentameter, which was the most frequent metrical line in traditional English poetry. The writers of the Chicago Renaissance like Vachel Lindsay and Carl Sandburg were drawing from Whitman's works and Hughes most likely patterned his poetry after both of them. According to Steven Carl Tracy, Hughes "tried to imitate" at the early stages of his career Carl Sandburg. It is obvious from their works that both Sandburg and Hughes shared interest in colloquial diction and racy description of city life. Both tried to find different means of expression and unusual literary genres to convey their message. In *The Weary Blues*, one of the earliest works of Langston Hughes, Sandburg's influence is most evident in the poems *The Negro Speaks of Rivers* and *Proem*. (Tracy 1988, 142-143)

Vachel Lindsay was presumably even more influential for Langston Hughes than Sandburg and Whitman altogether. It was Lindsay who discovered Hughes' literary talents and subsequently became Hughes' mentor. In a letter from 1925 intended for Hughes, Lindsay even emboldened Hughes to establish the "New Poetry" movement. (Tracy 1988, 142-143) As a prominent author of chanting and singing poetry, Lindsay set the pace for Hughes' musically oriented works. Although Lindsay was not of African nor African-American descent, he often depicted in his works the life of blacks. Lindsay's modernist series of poems *The Congo* published in 1914 was widely acclaimed by the general public at the time of its release and obviously left an indelible impression on Hughes' poetic mindset. *The Congo* celebrates the artistry of early

African-American music but the content of the book is currently considered to be racially prejudiced and thus steeped in controversy. The controversy has been triggered by the portrayal of blacks that are especially in the first section called “Their basic savagery” stereotypically characterized as outcasts unable to align with a civilized (and also industrialized) community. These people are thereby prejudicially perceived as an immediate menace to society, which merely justifies why this work eventually drifted into obscurity. (Bernstein 2013) While Hughes’ earliest poem suite *The Weary Blues* is already soaked up in the influence of Lindsay, *The Congo* is vaguely reminiscent of the poem *Dream Boogie* and other poems from the boogie-woogie sequence. Here is an excerpt of *The Congo*:

And “BLOOD” screamed the whistles and the fifes of the warriors,  
“BLOOD” screamed the skull-faced, lean witch-doctors,  
“Whirl ye the deadly voo-doo rattle,  
Harry the uplands,  
Steal all the cattle,  
Rattle-rattle, rattle-rattle,  
Bing!  
Boomlay, boomlay, boomlay, BOOM,”  
A roaring, epic, rag-time tune

There are numerous similarities to Langston Hughes’ boogie poems. While Hughes would use African-American Vernacular English in his poetry, Lindsay employed Old English in the third line of the excerpt to emphasize authenticity of the poem as well as to imply a stark contrast between lowbrow blacks and civilized whites. The poem contains onomatopoeic expressions (“Rattle-rattle,” “Bing!”, “Boomlay,” “BOOM”) that are also characteristic for Hughes’ musically oriented works. Musical imagery that Hughes also tended to establish at the end of his poems seems to be present in this Lindsay’s excerpt as well (“A roaring, epic, rag-time tune”). Reading just this excerpt of *The Congo* can indeed disclose the staggering impact that Lindsay had on Hughes. In contrary to Hughes’ boogie poems, the excerpt does not incline to follow any regular rhyme scheme and is thus entirely written in free-verse.

Vachel Lindsay integrated African American music elements into his poetry even before Langston Hughes. However, this integration into poetry has been deemed as inauthentic or even misconceived, mainly because Lindsay was not sufficiently acquainted with African-American

culture and was not even part of it. (Anderson 2004, 28) Recitation of such poetry in public was accompanied by intonation, dramatic gestures, and rhythm imitations by Lindsay himself. During his performances, Lindsay was able to engage his whole body while reciting at the same time. Nevertheless, chanting and singing poetry in public was quite unusual in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. The principal reason behind Lindsay's endeavor to recuperate the genre of singing poetry was to establish a stronger rapport with his audience, an effort made also by Hughes when he was reading his poetry aloud. (Rummel and Wagner 2005, 49)

The works of Dizzy Gillespie, Duke Ellington, and Vachel Lindsay underpinned by the earlier African-American musical forms constituted a great incentive for Hughes' musically oriented poetry. It is thus apparent that Hughes was influenced mainly by modernist artists and some of their criteria also apply to Hughes' works.

## 6. Influence of African-American music on Hughes' poetry

But what defines Hughes' poetry in the field of modernism and how such poetry deviates from previously established norms? In order to answer this question, it is important to single out the essential features of Romantic poetry, put them into perspective and compare them with the elements quintessential for Hughes' poems. *The Belfry of Bruges*, a central work of American Romanticism that was written by Henry Wadsworth Longfellow in 1845, might adequately serve this purpose. This Longfellow's work is regarded as a typical example of "high" style poetry. This poetry is characterized by rich and intricate texts that are intended for intellectual audiences instead of the general public. As was stated at the beginning of this thesis, Hughes opted to write in popular "low" style accessible to everyone (it is worth noting that some of Longfellow's works were written also in popular "low" style). This way, his writings could appeal to a greater number of African-Americans. In comparison with Hughes' poems, *The Belfry of Bruges* provides more thorough information and vivid depictions. Longfellow's poem overflows with eloquent expressions and very colorful figurative language ("like the weeds of widowhood," "but I heard a heart of iron beating"), whereas the vast majority of Hughes' poems in this corpus is written in austere language. (Parini 1998, 83)

Whilst the Romantic poem is brimming with optimism, Hughes' poems often tend to see the worst possible outlook on the future and share almost excessively pessimistic views. Such pessimism can be exemplified in Hughes' poem *Harlem* that contains an abundance of negatively connoted words like "stink," "sags," "fester," "rotten," "sore," or "crust." *The Belfry of Bruges* is written in a more personal vein as it glorifies in an exalted manner the beauty of a bell tower. Many modernists would presumably perceive such kind of language as unnaturally formal and stilted. Hughes' poetry, inextricably permeated by African-American slang, deals mostly with ethnical and social issues. Besides, these issues are never addressed explicitly. Hughes never mentions specific problems or historical events throughout his poems. Hughes' poem suite from 1951 barely provides any concrete descriptions, his depictions tend to be rather abstract. There are certainly no references to specific time and objects as in *The Belfry of Bruges*, also. (Bloom 2007, 157)

Structurally, Longfellow's poem is relatively long, whereas Hughes' poems are apt to be short, limited in length and contain only short but punchy verses. In contrast to Hughes' free-verse poetry, the meter is constant and the rhythm is regular (couplet) in *The Belfry of Bruges*. (Hengreaves 2007, 90)

It is especially the structure and form that separate *The Belfry of Bruges* from Hughes' blues and jazz poems. But what incited Hughes to follow modernist tendencies and to break with previously established fixed forms? Michael Whitworth explained in his book *Reading Modernist Poetry* these collective efforts of modernists as follows: "[...] they were suspicious of form as a straitjacket, as something that would prevent them from expressing their true visions, or prevent them from depicting the actual chaotic nature of the modern world." (Whitworth 2010, 153)

The new guard poets led by Hughes drew upon and followed these characteristics to the letter. They wanted to establish something unique and inherently connected to African-American culture, so they became emblematic of what they called "New Poetry." Sterling Brown, one of the key figures of the new guard, was known for his critical observations and approaches that yearned to break with elements attributed to Romantic poetry in the 1920s. Brown was of the mindset that such poetry was not "perception of reality" and he did not consider it as an art form. (Sanders 1999, 26).

As a literary critic, Brown could accurately describe the aims of the New Poetry: “reaction against sentimentality, didacticism, optimism, and romantic escape and learning to shun stilted poetic diction, to use fresher, more original language and to humanize poetry.” The New Poetry authors set themselves a literary standard that dictated them to break literary conventions. Brown and Hughes felt that previously established forms that included fixed verse and exorbitantly formal language were unnecessary constraints for their work. (Tracy 1988, 141-142)

Staking out the elements of Brown’s works, we can draw a plethora of similarities between Brown’s and Hughes’ poetry. Brown also aimed to portray African-American life by integrating African-American slang and incorporating African-American musical forms, mainly the blues and spirituals. (Gabbin 1994, 11)

These early African-American musical genres, original and distinctive in form, were an ideal inspiration for the New Poetry writers. But there were multiple reasons why these poets with Langston Hughes at the forefront of the new guard decided to draw upon the blues tradition. Of course, Hughes’ admiration for the history of African-Americans and his appreciation for the blues heritage played a crucial part in the process for setting a direction of his modernist poetry. (Tracy 1988, 141-142)

On the other hand, it was demonstrated in his famous essay *Jazz as Communication* that the nature of his decision to follow African-American musical forms was not so noble. In the essay, Hughes referred to jazz musicians that played their music primarily for a financial reward and he concluded that a literary equivalent of African-American music could bring him money as well. In fact, Hughes believed that at the beginning of 1920s, when African-American musicians and blues figures were on the cusp of breaking out of the grind of local artists into universally prominent performers, he could seize the opportunity and begin to write poetry of the same sort. Moreover, Hughes could have been motivated and buoyed by the success of the blues singer Mamie Smith who was the first African-American to ever make recordings. (Edmondson 2013, 1075) Mamie Smith’s cover versions of the songs *Crazy Blues* and *It’s Right Here for You* were recorded on August 19, 1920 in New York City for Okeh Records. After a month, 75 000 copies of her signature tune *Crazy Blues* were sold. These both tracks were unprecedentedly popular, garnered over one million sold copies combined and paved the way for other African-American artists in years to come. (Davis 1999, 12)

Furthermore, Hughes might have been also lured by the stance exhibited by the Surrealist movement in the 1920s. The movement openly claimed that the artists associated with the blues, the likes of Robert Johnson or Peetie Wheatstraw, were artistically superior poets to already established authors such as T.S. Elliot, Allen Ginsberg, and Robert Frost. (Garon 2001, 8) Both the surrealists and blues representatives openly disregarded the moral sentiments of contemporary society and accordingly acted against the censorship of politically incorrect themes, including explicit imagination and sexual freedom. As a consequence of this similarity, the Surrealist movement was sympathetic to the collective efforts of the blues culture and its penchant for infringing guarded taboos. (Adelt 2007)

Hughes was a modernist author inspired by the blues culture, its initial widespread success and an unprecedented interest of the European-based Surrealist movement. These factors spurred Hughes to write in response to the blues that is ubiquitous in jazz, be-bop, and ragtime. Hughes embraced these musical genres and was very successful in articulating their characteristic themes in his poems with a great sense of musicality.

## 7. African-American music in poetry

Oral poetry in the United States during the 20<sup>th</sup> century has been frequently credited to the significant influence of blues and jazz. These genres along with their derivatives have their own distinctive characteristics that indicate their presence within individual poems. (Anderson 2004, 7) In order to get a solid grasp about such poetry, it is important to dissect and isolate its distinctive features. Although Hughes managed to imprint and imitate various musical forms in his poetry with more attention to detail and meticulousness than anybody else before him, it stands to reason that the visual form presented in his works cannot substitute for the shrill quality of hearing experience that is supplemented with various blues or jazz notes, inflections, and pitch colorations. In his poems, Hughes adopted the general themes of blues, the continuity and connection between lines in blues verses. (Tracy 1988, 145)

### 7.1 Blues in poetry

This genre is prevalent in Hughes' poetry. Repetition of words and lines is an earmark of blues poetry. As in a blues song, the tempo and rhythm tend to be slow also in a blues poem. References to the speaker's cultural and social background, colloquial language, and sarcastic utterances about misfortune befalling the speaker can be seen as vital ingredients of this line of poetry. (Davidas 2001, 267) Another distinguishing feature of the blues within poetry is its dejected theme dealing with the issues of adversity, frustration, catharsis, resistance, sex, desperation, and adultery. Blues frequently encompasses topics dealing with loss, such as lost love, lost dream, or lost dignity. In contrast to the blues, boogie-woogie usually addresses such topics in a more joyful, entertaining way. (Ramazani 1994, 139) The form of a blues poem is especially important. Similarly as in blues music, blues poems often employ the call-and-response pattern that determines their stanzaic form and has a major impact on chord progression. (Cohen and Cohen 2000, 401-402)

There are various chord progressions in the blues genre, but the most frequent one is twelve-bar blues. Twelve-bar blues is also the most influential far beyond blues music and can be denoted as the staple of jazz music. One of the most important structural characteristics of this chord progression within the tune is that it is played in 4/4 time (four beats to a measure) and that it lasts 12 bars or measures while every line is composed of 4 bars of music. (Taft 2006, 9)

If twelve-bar blues is in musical performance regarded as the tone-setting standard from which all others are considered as divergent, then the AAB stanza has a similar role among a number of blues stanzas rendered not only in Hughes' blues poetry but also in sung form. (Keil 1992, 69) All these blues characteristics can be applied also to Sterling Brown's excerpt *Ma Rainey*.

An' den de folks, dey natchally bowed dey heads an' cried,  
Bowed dey heavy heads, shet dey moufs up tight an' cried,  
An' Ma lef' de stage, an' followed some de folks outside.

As can be seen from the excerpt, it is written in compliance with the AAB stanzaic form. This type of stanza is the most frequent one in blues poems and is characterized by a single line that is subsequently repeated and slightly idiosyncratically modified, and then followed by a rhymed line that provides an answer or describes a consequence. (Oliver 1990, 5) Hughes himself rationalized that the AAB stanza gives a performer more space for creativity and facilitates finding a proper cadence and rhyming line. In comparison with blues-singing performers, Hughes was more consistent and had a proclivity to stick to the same stanzaic forms in his written poems. Ma Rainey, one of the earliest blues female singers as well as one of the more important music inspirations for Langston Hughes, obviously motivated Hughes to use the ABB stanza in a few of his poems. Basically, one thought is sung once and the consequent line is reiterated twice. This stanza was typical for vaudeville blues and never gained much popularity among other popular blues songsters, which may be one of the many reasons why this form was not so usual even for Hughes' poetry. Although there are very few poems by Langston Hughes that contain the ABB stanzaic form, the impact of Ma Rainey's vaudeville blues (e.g., the ABB stanzas can be found in her very famous song *See See Rider Blues*) can be traced in the poem *Black Gal* where Hughes also used one ABB stanza: (Tracy 1988, 145-150)

Yet I ain't never been no bad one.  
Can't help it cause I'm Black.  
I hates them rinney yellor<sup>1</sup> gals<sup>2</sup>  
An' I wants my Albert back.  
Ma little, short, sweet, brownskin boy, -  
Oh, God, I wants him back.

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<sup>1</sup> A Harlem slang term that means "yellow"

<sup>2</sup> A Harlem slang term that means "girls"

To be as authentic as possible, Hughes' poetry is imbued with Harlem slang originating from African-American Vernacular English to symbolize the contemporary Harlem culture and to imitate the spirituality characteristic for blues songs. (Howes 2000, 132)

However, Hughes repeatedly used the AAB stanza and was often reluctant to use other stanzaic forms. In the AAB stanza, one thought is reiterated twice and is followed by one resolution line that answers the first two lines. The reason why Langston Hughes gave preference to the AAB stanza was that this form enabled him to find more variation and was generally more popular. There are of course numerous other structures, the most notable ones are AAAB, AB, ABAB, AABB, and many different variants. (Taft 2006, 12-16)

Nevertheless, the AAA (one thought or line is reiterated three times) was the only blues stanzaic form that Hughes avoided and never used because it did not provide him any line of resolution. Besides, the recurring line can stand by its own as a complete statement and does not offer much diversity. As opposed to Hughes, Rainey and most of other blues singers combined multiple stanzas throughout their songs. (Tracy 1988, 145-150)

Hughes also often used various alternatives of the AAB stanza. For instance, he avoided the repetition of the first line and then split the two remaining lines into two parts. This stanza arrangement is formed of a quatrain with the ABCB rhyme scheme and occurs almost exclusively in written poetry. (Nelson 2015, 115)

The content of both blues poetry and blues music is almost identical and usually refers to some unfortunate event or discontent with the current situation that are typically linked to the issues of a lower social class. In the aforementioned Hughes' poem *Black Gal*, the girl expresses her frustration and a futile wish to get her man back and thereby pities herself for the color of her skin that doesn't allow her to "compete" with the girls of a higher social class. The previously mentioned song *See See Rider Blues* deals, in terms of content, basically with the same problem. The unfaithful lover is again the subject matter and the girl here is full of regrets and feels sentimental for her man that is now with some other woman. The only difference between the poem and the song is in resolution. Hughes does not provide any solution whatsoever, whereas Ma Rainey is of the view (exaggeratedly) that the man should be killed in order to boost her happiness.

Hughes himself used these devices to faithfully portray a classic blues performance. However, Hughes did not replicate solely the blues and the content of his poems bears that out. A great number of his poems contains jazz stylistic devices, jazz imagery, and references to jazz music.

## 7.2 Jazz in poetry

It is generally agreed on that jazz poems are frequently imitating improvisation from a jazz performance. As opposed to a jazz performance, improvisation is not naturally spontaneous in poetry, though. It is defined by unusual word combinations, constructions, and free word associations that only replicate spontaneous expressions typical for jazz or spoken informal language. In such poetry, monolithic language and rhetorical devices originating from the repetitive blues such as anaphora (repetition of words at the beginning of lines), epizeuxis (repetition of a word/phrase in immediate succession), assonance (repetition of vowel sounds), or diacope (repetition of a word/phrase with one or two intervening words) often serve as an indication of the improvisation process. (Rosko and Zee 2011, 162)

Alliteration (the repeated sound of initial consonants) is used if the poet intends to replicate jazz sounds within their poetry. When reading such poetry aloud, one can hear the tones of jazz instruments. Usually, the whole form of individual jazz poems relies primarily on improvisation for the sake of rhythmic aspects in lieu of using structured meters typical for “high” European literature. The paramount importance of rhythm is also superior to the role of meaningfulness, which often results in language vagueness. (Anderson 2004, 16-21)

An example of improvisation within poetry can be shown in Michael Harper’s jazz poem *Brother John* from 1970 in its initial four lines:

Black man:

I’m a black man;

I’m black; I am—

A black man; black—

Unexpected line breaks, intentional omission of words, and irregular lines imitate the syncopation of jazz music. Syncopation is an unexpected interruption of rhythm. Em-dashes (—) in jazz poetry serve as the hallmark of syncopation. Another feature of jazz poems is a frequent use of interjections that is referring to a music accompaniment or highlighting audience reactions. Through allusions and references to choruses, scats and riffs, the author suggests the presence of jazz forms. Very important are onomatopoeic expressions which are devices that evoke musical depictions in jazz poetry. These devices are known in jazz glossary as scat language that jazz performers use to imitate the essential sounds of music during improvised passages. In contrary to the blues, voice expression and lyrics are negligible in jazz, although jazz performers tend to frequently imply human presence behind instruments. Onomatopoeic expressions also help to distinguish jazz from its subgenres. The theme of jazz poems is crucial; early jazz forms like ragtime, swing, and classic jazz focus on racial identity, whereas later and more spontaneous forms like be-bop usually attempt to promote individualism and freedom. (Anderson 2004, 20)

The broken rhythm Hughes frequently employs by using musical imagery (references to quick transposing from treble to bass) in his poems is called staccato that is used in jazz as well as in the blues. (Apel 1960, 708)

Moaning, screaming and shouting exclamations are also characteristic for this line of poetry. In the end, jazz poetry do not have to contain any of these elements. Poems that eschew the features stated above but their subject matter happens to be jazz are still regarded as jazz poems. (Davidas 2001, 268)

In a nutshell, blues poetry can be distinguished by its fixed repetitive form, whereas the form of jazz poetry is free, improvisational and seems to resemble spoken language. Both blues and jazz poetry follow in musical footsteps and react to the existing social environment and the issues thereof.

## 8. Blues and jazz poetry in *Montage of a Dream Deferred*

Individual poems in *Montage of a Dream Deferred* combine the elements of both blues and jazz poetry. Langston Hughes clarifies in the preface of the poem suite that the ensuing poems contain various musical sources. These sources have obviously different characteristics in relation to each other. Hughes' musically oriented free-verse poetry is in its entirety built on the blues foundation which is, especially in *Montage of a Dream Deferred*, also supplemented by the layers of highly improvised forms such as jazz and be-bop.

This chapter will analyze those poems that best represent blues and jazz poetry, namely *Blues at Dawn* and *Theme for English B*. A special attention will be drawn to the boogie sequence that contains references to nearly all of the aforementioned musical forms.

## 8.1 *Blues at Dawn*

This poem is a classic example of the traditional blues five-line AABBA structure that is a variation on the standard AAB stanzaic form. This variation was conceived through the genre of vaudeville blues. (Bloom 2007, 119)

*Blues at Dawn* employs the call-and-response format. The AABBA variation that is used in both stanzas can be therefore characterized as follows: The first two lines establish the call, the following two lines answer the call and the last line again repeats the initial call. As can be seen from the structure, the poem's focus is directed at repetition that indeed provides much of the basis of blues poetry. The rhythm of both stanzas is therefore regular, slow, and simple. (Jones 2011, 59)

I don't dare start thinking in the morning.  
I don't dare start thinking in the morning.  
    If I thought thoughts in bed,  
    Them thoughts would bust my head -  
So I don't dare start thinking in the morning.

I don't dare remember in the morning  
Don't dare remember in the morning.  
    If I recall the day before,  
    I wouldn't get up no more -  
So I don't dare remember in the morning.

The position of lines representing responses is deliberately displaced and indented. These response lines are the only lines that change even though their meaning remains pretty much the same. Both stanzas are thus nearly identical except for the second line in the second stanza where the pronoun "I" is purposely omitted to stylistically avoid glaring repetition. Thematically, the poem is rife with sadness, frustration, and the "blues feeling" as the narrator refuses to face the upsetting reality. Notwithstanding that the cause of his despair is not further clarified throughout the poem, it is clear that the narrator apparently feels out of sorts. The theme emerges from the "I woke up this morning" formula which is very frequent in blues lyrics. (Taft 2006, 193)

Reiterating emotional statements gives rise to the feelings the narrator experiences and his emotions are thereby exerted at readers. Filled with despair, the narrator does not want to reminisce about anything pertaining to his past that merely flusters him. The poem contains words and phrases originating from African-American Vernacular English (“Them thoughts,” “I wouldn’t get up no more”).

*Blues at Dawn* as a blues poem is tantamount to any other blues song since it is indistinguishable from blues lyrics in structure and form. (Garon 2001, 165)

## 8.2 *Theme for English B*

Arguably the most distinguished poem by Langston Hughes. (Jones 2011, 35) The “B” in the poem title may indeed seem to be purposely ambiguous, as it stands for “be” as well as for “be-bop.” These two formulations are not mutually exclusive, however. African-American culture associated with be-bop often demonstrated the importance of individualism and emboldened its target audiences to be themselves rather than just to fit in, which was quite a departure from swing that was susceptible to the influence of the American mainstream. In the span of the mid-1930s and the early 1940s, swing was most coveted by the contemporary white middle class. In terms of popularity, Swing was shortly thereafter followed by a highly idiosyncratic musical genre called be-bop. (Otto 2015)

Be-bop, as the most improvisational genre of all the aforementioned musical forms, is the most obvious in the poem *Theme for English B*. In its initial four lines, Hughes aims to keep his focus on improvisation. Here the narrator’s improvisation corresponds to the narrative mode stream of consciousness frequently attributed to modernist authors. (Morris 2013, 17)

I wonder if it’s that simple?

I am twenty-two, colored, born in Winston-Salem

I went to school there, then Durham, then here

to this college on the hill above Harlem”

Hughes masterfully imitated the musical tension of a classic be-bop song that is established with the initial question “I wonder if it’s that simple?”. With the following response, Hughes eased the tension. While be-bop performers would repeatedly use the same musical phrases in order to facilitate their improvisation, Hughes in his poetry used on purpose the same word (here the anaphora of the pronoun “I”) to start an improvisation process. (Otto 2015) The third line contains a diacope (“then Durham, then here”). These rhetorical devices based on improvisation are typical for be-bop and other jazz forms. The poem does not follow any fixed meters or stanzaic forms and is thereby written in free-verse. (Morris 2013, 17)

Thematically speaking, the narrator of this poem is a student whose task at hand is to write an essay about himself, his identity. His teacher encouraged him to be “true,” i.e., not to imitate his white classmates. So he writes about himself in a manner reminiscent of a be-bop improvisation structure. The student then substantiates his decision to write this way, claiming that he is too young and thus cannot yet contemplate about what is true and what is not. He then proceeds to explain the origin of his identity that is affiliated with the Harlem neighborhood. It should be noted that this explanation is purely improvisational. The student writes exactly what passes through his mind and the text is thus imbued with free word associations (“hear you, hear me---we two---you, me”) characteristic for jazz poetry. Jazz syncopation is marked by the em-dashes (“Me—who,” “or records—Bessie, bop, or Bach”). (Otto 2015)

It's not easy to know what is true for you or me  
at twenty-two, my age. But I guess I'm what  
I feel and see and hear, Harlem, I hear you:  
hear you, hear me---we two---you, me, talk on this page.  
(I hear New York, too.) Me—who?  
Well, I like to eat, sleep, drink, and be in love.  
I like to work, read, learn, and understand life.  
I like a pipe for a Christmas present,  
or records—Bessie, bop, or Bach.

When stating that he likes the recordings of Bessie Smith and Johann Sebastian Bach, the student indicates his awareness of the boundaries between two separated cultures. One is black while the other is white. The student makes clear that he is able to absorb both. (Burns 2002, 160)

You are white---  
yet a part of me, as I am a part of you.  
That's American.  
Sometimes perhaps you don't want to be a part of me.  
Nor do I often want to be a part of you.  
But we are, that's true!  
As I learn from you,  
I guess you learn from me---  
although you're older---and white---  
and somewhat more free.

The student reassures his teacher of the importance of being different which is again a typical notion exuded by most be-bop performers straying from the mainstream. At the end of this poem, the narrator authentically depicts and compares the racial circumstances and relations among black and white people. As the only “colored” student in the class, he cannot fathom why he is treated differently when his needs and desires are pretty much the same as those of his “non-colored” classmates. He cannot understand why the color of his skin does not allow him to “be free” and why his chance for freedom is conditioned by race. (Long 2005, 32-33) While be-bop performers like Dizzy Gillespie and Charlie Parker were also openly demonstrating pride in their identity and were often expressing their resort to counter-assimilation, the student here takes quite a moderate tone when stating that the teacher is part of him and vice versa. (Brunner 2004, 138-139)

The poem thereby not only replicates an improvised be-bop structure in a faithful manner, but also deals with the same themes of going against the grain of the assimilative swing culture that be-bop performers represented in their songs during the 1940s.

### 8.3 Boogie poems

The blues subgenre of boogie-woogie, known for its exuberance and emphasis on dancing rather than on emotive aspects, permeates the prefatory poem of *Montage of a Dream Deferred* which is further developed in the subsequent boogie poems. These individual poems directly follow one another but are cut apart by dint of the technique of montage. However, the continuity among them is thematically and sometimes even rhythmically preserved. From a thematic standpoint, the poems that include the word “boogie” within their name are intended to be sequential and in relation to each other. Boogie-woogie transposed into Hughes' written narrative also serves in several boogie poems as a metaphor. (Wheeler 2008, 87-88)

#### 8.3.1 *Dream Boogie*

The whole poem suite starts in the morning and throughout the duration of the book revolves around the same vicinity: the Harlem neighborhood. As far as the boogie poems are concerned, Hughes intends to blend various musical genres to establish a hybrid musical form rather than just to follow one musical form characteristic for its respective genre. (Bolden 2004, 110)

The initial line “Good morning, daddy!” credibly imitates classic phrases often attributed to blues and boogie-woogie discourse. As previously stated, the function of Hughes' poems is predominantly not descriptive. Instead, Hughes uses Harlem slang as a way to codify language. The address “daddy” is in the blues culture used only by women, whereas men would use the address like “Daddy-O.” (Tracy 1988, 229)

The rhythm established in the poem is irregular and randomly interrupted (“Beating out and beating out a —”, “something underneath like a —”), which is characteristic for jazz syncopation. The opening stanza meets the ABCB rhyme scheme that would virtually be present in the remainder of the poem provided that the ending lines of individual stanzas were not interrupted by questions. The rhythm infused here is frequently disrupted by the speaker's questions and the melodic aspect is thus deliberately violated, a feature distinctive for jazz improvisation. (Nelson 2015, 105)

Good morning, daddy!  
Ain't you heard  
The boogie-woogie rumble  
Of a dream deferred?"

Listen closely:  
You'll hear their feet  
Beating out and beating out a —

*You think  
It's a happy beat?*

Listen to it closely:  
Ain't you heard  
something underneath  
like a —

*What did I say?*

The disruptive questions are isolated from their respective stanzaic forms that are dramatically curtailed to disturb the rhythm. By these interruptions, Hughes also underlines the contrast between the gravity of the African-American Dream and the shallow happiness induced by the ongoing boogie-woogie performance. These questions are marked in italics to highlight overlap in talk between speakers. Musical imagery (“You'll hear their feet beating out and beating out”) indicates that the poem is accompanied by a thunderous beat of marching band instruments that are typically used in jazz music. The line “Beating out and beating out” is also a diacope. (Lowney 2006, 115)

The women narrator, full of joy and excitement, tries to depict the tumultuous boogie-woogie sound she hears. With the rhetorical question “You think it's a happy beat?”, the overlapping narrator “daddy” at virtually the same moment expresses dismay over the fact that his companion does not seem to realize the tragedy and resilience of blacks conveyed in the music. The boogie-woogie performer makes a seemingly joyful sound that is essentially deceptive. (Wheeler 2008, 86)

The repetition of the lines “Listen closely” and “Listen to it closely” again alludes to a typical feature of the blues where the reiterated line is a little modified or altered to avoid glaring repetition. (Garon 2001, 165)

Sure,  
I'm happy!  
Take it away!

Hey, pop!  
Re-bop!  
Mop!

Y-e-a-h!

At the end of the poem, the author uses onomatopoeic expressions and interjections “Hey Pop!”, “Re-bop!”, “Mop!”, “Y-e-a-h!” that not only serve as references to jazz music but also prefigure the end of music/poem, which is very useful for the audience and dancers. The last mentioned feature is called “tag ending” which is, in the words of Steven Carl Tracy, “a four-bar section appended to the end of a tune that repeats a phrase, offers a final comment, or indicates that the performance is about to end.” (Tracy 1988, 231)

Concisely, *Dream Boogie* is a poem that refers to a boogie-woogie performance through musical imagery that coincides with scat language, the syncopation and improvisation of jazz. Furthermore, these music elements are also overlapped by a repetitive pattern characteristic for the blues. The result is a hybrid musical form with prevalent jazz features. (Wheeler 2008, 86)

### 8.3.2 *Easy Boogie*

The music that Hughes intends to establish in *Easy Boogie* by dint of musical imagery is blurring the lines among multiple genres as the repetition of the line “Down in the bass” again indicates the presence of more rhythmically regular blues while the line “Riffs, smears, breaks” indirectly implies the syncopation and improvisation of jazz. (Nelson 2015, 274) The epizeuxis in the line “Walking walking walking” also refers to a jazz form. According to Tony Bolden,

“the walking bass image summons the (re)memory of the innovations in the rhythm sections of be-bop bands.” (Bolden 2004, 113)

Hughes employs here the previously mentioned call-and-response format indigenous to the American South. This poem has 3 stanzas of four lines where each stanza corresponds to the ABCB rhyme scheme. The prefatory stanza serves as the call, the second stanza further develops the call and also partly answers it, and the last stanza naturally reacts to the previous two stanzas. Hughes therefore employs here the AAB format that is characteristic for the twelve-bar blues chord progression. (Evans 1987, 22)

Down in the bass  
That steady beat  
Walking walking walking  
Like marching feet.

Down in the bass  
They easy roll,  
Rolling like I like it  
In my soul.

Riffs, smears, breaks.

Hey, Lawdy Mama!  
Do you hear what I said?  
Easy like I rock it  
In my bed!

Throughout the poem, several references to the blues derivative rock n’ roll are deliberately inserted: “They easy roll” and “Easy like I rock it.” As opposed to *Dream Boogie*, a man addresses a woman here. Perhaps that is why the poem contains a strong sexual undertone that specifically appears to be present in the last four-line stanza where the male narrator compares the music rhythm to the sexual act. This again alludes to a classic sexual, muscular, and male-centered boogie-woogie lyric. (Bolden 2004, 113)

Harlem slang is used in the line “Hey, Lawdy Mama!” as a way to maintain authenticity. The phrase has been also popular among blues performers. As well as in *Dream Boogie*, Hughes in this poem repeatedly uses the verb “hear” to emphasize the importance of sound sensations that are absolutely crucial for reading and articulating his poetry. The message of the poem is augmented by the use of figurative language, particularly similes (“Walking like marching feet” and “Easy like I rock it in my bed”). The continuity between *Dream Boogie* and *Easy Boogie* is not only rhythmical. Hughes further expands his “descriptions” of Harlem residents and highlights the importance of their collective Dream. The “rumbling boogie-woogie” introduced in *Dream Boogie* is ubiquitous also in *Easy Boogie* where it is simply referenced to as “the bass.” Hughes’ narrative tends to figuratively imply that “the bass” alone represents the solidary people who are walking up the streets of Harlem fully aware of their plight. (Tracy 1988, 230-233)

To conclude, *Easy Boogie* integrates mainly the elements of the blues and boogie-woogie, such as repetition, an exuberant theme, and colloquial language. With the exception of jazz imagery in the line “Riffs, smears, breaks” and the image of “Walking bass,” there are otherwise no allusions to jazz or be-bop.

### 8.3.3 *Boogie I am*

The poem is again rapt in boogie-woogie imagery as it extensively employs the elements originally implemented in *Dream Boogie*. The main difference between these poems is relevant to the time when *Boogie I am* is set. The narrator wants to make clear that “The boogie-woogie rumble of a dream deferred” remains or should be permanently ingrained in the collective mind of African-Americans. The first part of this poem contains slightly altered lines from *Dream Boogie* as the speaker is again a woman addressing “daddy.” The salutation “Good evening, daddy!” is frequently used in female blues lyrics. (Parini 1998, 241)

The Boogie-woogie imagery (“The boogie-woogie rumble”) originally used in *Dream Boogie* is also present here. As in previous cases, the poem as a whole is not written within the confines of an utterly free-form structure due to the employment of the fixed rhyme scheme ABCB. (Nelson 2015, 105)

Good evening, daddy!  
I know you've heard  
The boogie-woogie rumble  
Of a dream deferred

Trilling the treble  
And twining the bass  
Into midnight ruffles  
Of cat-gut lace.

The second stanza is pointing out the lower class African-American culture that is unwillingly separated from the outside world. In the wake of the preceding poem, Hughes was not tempted here to use any jazz patterns or references and the fundamental impact of the blues thus continues to amplify as its offspring boogie-woogie gradually takes the place of jazz. The previously-established jazz sound of “walking bass” is no longer present in *Boogie I am*, either. Instead of actively engaging jazz allusions and aesthetics, Hughes is leaning on potent images of the dancing beats and notes of the boogie-woogie piano. By employing musical imagery, Hughes desires to emphasize the insistent thunderous sound of boogie-woogie through the alliteration of “t” sounds (“trilling the treble,” “twining the bass”) that imitates a staccato rhythm. The use of the word “trilling” reveals that this music consists of percussive sounds. The integration of the words “trilling the treble” and “twining the bass” metaphorically illustrates the mutually opposing white and black cultures. At the same time, these high treble and low bass notes are typically used in a boogie-woogie performance. (Bolden 2004, 114)

The simultaneous use of the treble and the bass indicates the fruitful cooperation between these notes. The unified notes meant to be the metaphor of black people who should also converge and stick together in order to operate more efficiently in the times of adversity. Their thoughts and attitudes may vary and be totally different but blacks should still pursue the common goal which happens to be equalization of their race. (Tracy 1988, 234)

*Boogie I am* is devoid of jazz elements, contains solely boogie-woogie allusions and images, and can be thus regarded as a full-fledged boogie-woogie poem.

### 8.3.4 *Lady's Boogie*

This poem seems to only follow in the wake of *Boogie I am*. All stanzas in the poem *Lady's Boogie* are written again in compliance with the ABCB rhyme scheme as a way to proceed with the repeated rhythm in the boogie-woogie sequence. The last line of the first quatrain (On her mind –) is interrupted by a sudden pause that is marked by the em-dash, which suggests jazz syncopation. (Anderson 2004, 20) Very important is the use of language here. The contrast between Harlem slang (“She ain’t got boogie-woogie”) and lady’s appearance (“Dressed so fine”) gives us a tiny glimpse about the narrator’s external characteristics. The speaker is apparently a member of the working class criticizing a noble woman of a higher social status. (Brunner 2004, 138-139)

See that lady  
Dressed so fine?  
She ain’t got boogie-woogie  
On her mind –

But if she was to listen  
I bet she’d hear,  
Way up in the treble  
The tingle of a tear.

*Be-Bach!*

In this poem, the narrator observes the lady who is passively witnessing an ongoing injustice in Harlem and thus ignores the issues of her fellow people. These problems are here epitomized in the metaphor “boogie-woogie.” The reluctance and ineptitude of this lady makes her neglect anything but material things. She refuses to listen to the music of boogie-woogie to hear the truth and to fathom the boogie-woogie message: “The tingle of a tear.” The author again stresses the seriousness of the music and encourages his readers to foster their awareness of the everyday issues of African-Americans that incline to be frequently glossed over or thrown overboard. (Bolden 2004, 115)

Hughes throughout this poem again replicates the artistry and rhythm of a boogie-woogie pianist through boogie-woogie imagery. The role of boogie-woogie imagery is especially immense in the lines “Way up in the treble” and “The tingle of a tear” where the switch from the bass rhythm to the treble should again give profundity to the words and induce an emotional reaction. By employing the exclamation “Be-Bach!” at the end of the poem, Hughes highlights the derision that this lady is presenting to black people, for “Be-Bach!” serves as a homophone of the jazz scat expression “be-bop.” The lady’s unawareness thus leads to misconstruction and misinterpretation which pose a threat to the fragile African-American society. The lady is lacking the ability to hear the music and to grasp its true meaning. Although both terms contain musical references, Bach and be-bop obviously come from different cultures and backgrounds. (Tracy 1988, 233)

There are various precursors to the blues and boogie-woogie. Boogie-woogie imagery and the use of African-American English plausibly imitate these genres. Boogie-woogie’s role is augmented by satire as the speaker tantalizingly mocks the noble lady. Still, the poem also contains jazz syncopation and scat language, making it a synthesis of boogie-woogie and jazz.

### 8.3.5 *Nightmare Boogie*

In the ensuing poem *Nightmare Boogie*, Hughes immediately builds on the previously established foundations as the poem continues to take place during the wee hours. The time here is especially important for the subject matter of the poem: a bad dream, vision. The narrator’s previous experience with the indifferent lady is an impetus for a nightmare.

The dream in the poem serves as a portent of how easily and swiftly can “the transition from black to white” happen. The dream’s crushing weight of foreboding laid upon the narrator underlines the urgency for racial unity. Befitting his reputation as an avid defender of the blues and jazz cultures, Hughes clearly indicates in this poem that he is averse to the risks associated with “whiteness” which, as Arnetha Ball expatiates, “has often functioned silently; such silence is a manifestation of power, serving to protect the hierarchical status quo.” In this context, being or becoming “white” means to “go with the flow” and to adopt a passive posture towards racial struggles and issues. (Ball and Lardner 2005, 106)

Hughes encourages blacks to “stay black,” i.e., to actively fight for the rights of their own race instead of “turning white,” which means to take a passive stance and to acquire an attitude similar to the one emanated from the lady in the preceding poem. Hughes’ apprehension of the loss of black identity is perfectly illustrated within the lines of this poem where the dream deferred reveals its true face and is exposed as a nightmare. (Bolden 2004, 116)

I had a dream  
and I could see  
a million faces  
black as me!

A nightmare dream:  
Quicker than light  
All them faces  
Turned dead white!

Boogie-woogie,  
Rolling bass,  
Whirling treble  
of cat-gut lace

As can be seen in the previous cases, even this poem is directly connected to the other boogie poems with the aim to establish a coherently constructed boogie sequence. Apart from the highly coherent time sequence that is established among the poems, the last stanza of this poem also creates an explicit link between *Nightmare Boogie* and *Boogie I am* as it contains slightly altered lines from the latter. (Tracy 1988, 233-235)

The initial line “I had a dream” is in the second stanza reiterated and slightly altered “A nightmare dream,” which is an indicator of the repetitive blues. The third stanza employs again boogie-woogie imagery (“Boogie-woogie,” “Rolling bass,” “Whirling treble”). However, the most important element in the poem is the theme that approximates the resistant nature of the blues.

### 8.3.6 *Dream Boogie: Variation*

This poem starts exactly where *Nightmare Boogie* ended. In light of the preceding boogie poems, jazz and be-bop references are withering in *Dream Boogie: Variation* whilst boogie-woogie imagery (“Rolling bass,” “Screaming pedals”) takes its place. The last poem of the boogie sequence again continues to be delving deeply in the boogie-woogie sound through the “t” alliteration that was initially present in *Lady’s Boogie* (“Tingle of a tear”), and then also in *Boogie I am* (“Trilling the treble”), and in this poem (“Tinkling treble”). However, *Dream Boogie: Variation* does not only lean on music sounds but also aims and focuses on the boogie-woogie performer who is omnipresent in the background of every single poem in the boogie sequence. (Tracy 1988, 234)

While the previous three poems nearly expunged jazz aesthetics, this poem is again engendering music which doleful content seems to only fit a classic blues theme. The subject matter of this poem is not gaily addressed, which it normally should be, given it is a boogie-woogie poem. This obviously means that the music Hughes refers to is not intended for dancing and is more seriously paced, i.e., it does not contain any frivolous topics like adultery or boredom, only the pain of lost dream. The dejected aspects of the blues thus come to the foreground, whereas boogie-woogie is pushed into the background. (Shepherd and Horn 2012, 88)

The narrator first describes the pianist’s countenance (“High noon teeth in a midnight face”), revealing only the superficial characteristics of his face. Afterwards, the speaker draws his focus on the performer’s body, especially on the limbs to further characterize the black boogie-woogie pianist, his stature (“Great long fingers on great big hands”). Then, the narrator turns his focus back upon the saturnine pianist’s face (“Looks like his eyes are teasing pain”). The pianist’s facial expressions and emotional fervor help to visualize his mental state, making it easier for the spectator to reflect on the mood that is authentically conveyed also in the music. In other words, the performer’s music and feelings are one act. (Bolden 2004, 114)

Tinkling treble,  
Rolling bass,  
High noon teeth  
In a midnight face,

Great long fingers  
On great big hands,  
Screaming pedals  
Where his twelve-shoe lands,

Looks like his eyes  
Are teasing pain,  
A few minutes late  
For the Freedom Train.

The meaning of the word “train” is very important here. The gritty blues sound is in many cases imitating the sound of a train riding on a railroad joint. It stands to reason that this fascination with trains is frequently expressed also through blues lyrics, which Hughes aptly noted in the poem. The train is the metaphor of the blues that is representing freedom and a defense against the white oppression. The performer moans in vain because he believes he missed the chance for freedom and his Dream is thus deferred. (Spalding 2011, 6-7)

As in *Nightmare Boogie*, the serious and distressing theme makes *Dream Boogie: Variation* more reminiscent of blues lyrics. There are also no allusions to jazz forms. This poem provides an alternative view and a raw insight into the emotional world of the boogie-woogie performer whose music only seemingly sounds “happy” in *Dream Boogie*.

## 9. Contemporary impact and Hughes' legacy

According to the March, 1973 issue of *Negro Digest/Black World*, Hughes has influenced a wealth of contemporary jazz and blues poets. Among those who actively participate in the development of jazz poetry even nowadays are poets like Michael Harper or Al Young. Prominent authors like Margaret Walker, Richard Wright, and Amiri Baraka often cited Hughes as a major influence. Similarly to Hughes' poetry, Walker addressed the crucial role of music in African-American culture along with racial discrimination in the poetry collection *For My People* from 1942. (Ferris 2009, 54-55) The eponymous poem begins as follows: "For my people everywhere singing their slave songs repeatedly: their dirges and their ditties and their blues." An excerpt from the poem *Poppa Chicken* from the collection *For My People* also strongly resembles, in terms of theme, language and structure, Hughes' boogie poems:

Poppa was a sugah daddy  
Pimping in his prime;  
All the gals for miles around  
Walked to Poppa's time.

Richard Wright much like Hughes often praised the blues culture and referred to it as a "reservoir of the collective strength of African-Americans" in his essays. (Locke and Murray 2011, 29) Amiri Baraka also modeled his work after Hughes. Baraka produced poetry that is fascinated with the Dream and contains several allusions to African-American music as well (*Blues People* from 1963). (Davidas 2001, 268)

However, Hughes' poetry has proved to be profoundly influential even outside the sphere of literature. It is commonly believed that several hip-hop artists were chiefly influenced by Hughes' poetic form as well as his style of reciting. Rapper Keith Elam, better known as "Guru," acknowledged heavy influence of Langston Hughes. Elam contended that he was "Poet like Langston Hughes [...]" (Williams 2015, 14)

Various hip-hop groups like A Tribe Called Quest, Gang Starr, and Public Enemy have repeatedly alluded to Langston Hughes in their songs.

For instance, Q-Tip from A Tribe Called Quest mentions Langston Hughes in the song *Excursions* from the album *The Low End Theory* from 1991: “The abstract poet, prominent like [...] Langston Hughes.” Chuck D, the leader of the social and political hip-hop group Public Enemy, reacts in the albums *Apocalypse 91... The Enemy Strikes Black* from 1991 and *Autobiography of Mistachuck* from 1996 to Hughes’ *Book of Rhythms* from 1954. All these works similarly point at a high proportion of media coverage that sheds a negative light on all African-Americans. In the song *Shut ‘Em Down*, Chuck D addresses the topic in this fashion:

See the TV, listen to me double trouble  
I overhaul and I'm coming from the lower level [...]  
Took a poll ‘cause our soul took a toll  
From the education of a TV station

Chuck D has been also a fervent advocate of African-American culture. But contrary to Hughes, Chuck D expresses his advocacy through the medium of hip-hop. (Bloom 2007, 212) However, Ronald C. McCurdy, a professor of music at the USC Thornton School of Music, claims in *The Langston Hughes Project* that “if Hughes was still alive today, he would be a rapper.” The contemporary poet Jessica Care Moore continues in the same spirit in the January/February, 2002 issue of *The Crisis*, stating: “It's important that the hip-hop generation knows Langston because we were birthed from his ideas, humor, stories and his love for expression.”

## 10. Conclusion

Hughes was a prominent figure of the Harlem Renaissance. As a proponent of the new guard, Hughes follows in the poem suite *Montage of a Dream Deferred* solely African-American musical sources and appeals exclusively to black culture. The use of montage in the poem suite resembles the eponymous filmmaking technique that augments the view of the Harlem neighborhood, which is also the focal point of the Harlem Renaissance movement. The Dream deferred serves as the major impetus for the poems, as Hughes acquaints his readers with the fragility of racial unity that impedes blacks to effectively defend themselves. Hughes frequently refers to the injustice that factually occurred in Harlem.

This injustice is unswervingly linked to the main subject of the poem suite: African-American music that is centered around blues. The disturbed development of blues is reflected upon blues resistant themes. Jazz embraced blues themes, further developed them and consequently rejuvenated the counter-assimilative nature of blues through be-bop.

Hughes' modernist work was motivated by African-American history, the success of blues musicians and the appraisal of the Surrealist movement in the 1920s. His poetry was influenced especially by the singing poet Vachel Lindsay and musicians like Duke Ellington and Dizzy Gillespie.

This musical impact is evident in *Montage of a Dream Deferred*. As a leading exponent of the new guard, Hughes throughout the poem suite is aggrandizing his defensive stance toward the low jazz and blues cultures by portraying their perspectives upon daily life in Harlem. *Theme for English B* and *Blues at Dawn* respectively represent these cultures.

*Theme for English B* highlights in a be-bop manner the importance of identity and replicates the improvisation and syncopation of be-bop music through jazz devices and stylistic markers.

*Blues at Dawn* is almost indistinguishable from a blues lyric, as it contains a repetitive structure, expressive and colloquial language, and the call-and-response pattern in which each line is specifically arranged.

Through jazz and blues poetic devices, Hughes expands his musical horizons in the boogie sequence in which he blends boogie-woogie with be-bop, jazz, and the blues that spawned them. Even though the main theme of these poems is a boogie-woogie performance, they cannot be lumped together and labeled as just “boogie poems” because the impact of blues and jazz genres varies with individual poems.

*Dream Boogie* is mainly influenced by be-bop and jazz, and to a lesser extent by boogie-woogie and the blues. It contains especially jazz improvisation devices, imagery and scat expressions.

*Easy Boogie* and *Lady's Boogie* are balanced syntheses of boogie-woogie, blues, and jazz. Both these poems are comprised of boogie-woogie themes, blues (colloquial) phrases, and jazz syncopation markers.

*Nightmare Boogie* and *Dream Boogie: Variation* theoretically may be considered as boogie poems, but their themes are exorbitantly serious and thus more “blue.”

Only *Boogie I am* can be regarded a full-fledged boogie-woogie poem due to the employment of a boogie-woogie theme, imagery and allusions.

In the end, all of the poems warn against the ubiquitous passivity and ignorance that are plaguing the African-American community. As a significant work of jazz poetry, this poem suite has influenced a myriad of artists. (Bolden 2004, 110)

## Resumé

Tato bakalářská práce zkoumá vliv afroamerické hudby na sbírku básní *Montage of a Dream Deferred*, jež byla napsána Langstonem Hughesem v roce 1951. Hughes v ní popisuje každodenní strasti a útrapy černošských obyvatel sídlících v manhattanské čtvrti Harlem. Afroameričané jsou zde vyliční jako oběti rasové diskriminace, jejichž práva jsou cíleně utlačována bělošskou většinou. Podřadné společenské postavení představuje pro obyvatele Harlemu zásadní svízel, přičemž jediné útočiště tito lidé nachází pouze ve své vlastní hudbě, která jim pomáhá oprostít se od utrpení každodenního života. Celý tento svazek využívá filmovou techniku zvanou „montáž“, která je založená na rychlém přechodu snímků. V poezii je tento přechod zaznamenán náhlým vzájemným překrytím dvou či více nesourodých témat nebo situací. Účelem této techniky je především zesílit emotivní aspekty díla.

Langston Hughes se snaží být ve svém popisu černošského života v Harlemu co nejvíce důvěryhodný, a využívá proto obrazné jazykové prostředky, nespisovný jazyk, struktury a témata vycházející z tradičních afroamerických hudebních forem. Mezi tyto formy patří blues a žánry z něj odvozené: boogie-woogie a jazzové žánry ragtime, swing a be-bop. Hughes byl vůbec jedním z prvních, co zakomponovali hudební prvky všech těchto žánrů do své literatury, a bývá tudíž často označován za zakladatele bluesové a jazzové poezie.

Hughes ve svých pracích a esejích často otevřeně odmítal pozici jazzu ve srovnání s vážnou hudbou a oba tyto žánry vnímal v nejlepší případě jako rovnocenné, čímž jen potvrdil své místo „prvního skutečného jazzového básníka“. Jako zastánce jazzu se za svého života rovněž aktivně zasazoval za práva Afroameričanů z „nižších společenských tříd“ a mermomocí hájil jejich zájmy, za což pochopitelně sklídl i notnou dávku kritiky.

Přesto se stal jedním z nejvlivnějších básníků 20. století a zároveň jednou z ústředních postav Harlemské renesance, která vzešla z hnutí „New Negro“. Z důvodu protichůdných názorů předních představitelů tohoto kulturního hnutí se Harlemská renesance rozdělila na dva tábory. Jeden hlásal přímé následování evropských směrů, neboť mu černošská kultura nepřípadala dost dobrá na to, aby z ní čerpal. Hlavním zastáncem tohoto myšlení byl například sociolog, spisovatel a aktivista W. E. B. Du Bois. Druhý tábor v čele s Langstonem Hughesem naopak věřil, že afroamerická kultura je tím nejlepším zdrojem pro uměleckou tvorbu. Harlemská renesance nejen díky těmto dvěma autorům začala ve 20. letech minulého století navzdory všem

očekáváním v rasisticky nepřátelském prostředí vzkvétat, a černošské umění se tak vůbec poprvé těšilo zvýšené pozornosti většinové společnosti. Kolektivní snažení Harlemské renesance jako kulturního hnutí ovšem začalo v důsledku Velké hospodářské krize ve 30. letech 19. století upadat v zapomnění. Konec Harlemské renesance se ale nikterak nepromítl v Hughesově tvorbě, vždyt' nadále aktivně působil na poli jazzové a bluesové poezie až do konce 60. let. Jeho díla jsou kromě toho předmětem živé diskuze i v současné době.

Hughes se již v útlém dětství seznamoval s černošskou hudbou, která se posléze v jeho dospělosti podepsala na jeho tvorbě. Věří se, že si Hughes umělců této hudby velmi vážil a často si je i idealizoval. Jeho vůbec největší inspirací byli jazzoví skladatelé Duke Ellington a Dizzy Gillespie, které sám i osobně znal. Setkával se s nimi totiž v jazzovém baru Cotton Club, jenž se ve své době nacházel v Harlemu. Zde Hughes recitoval své básně nebo jen poslouchal hudbu těchto dvou jazzových umělců. Dokonce psal i texty písní pro takové jazzové velikány typu Charlese Minguse a Red Allena.

Hughes byl ovlivněn samozřejmě i modernistickými spisovateli, za zmínku stojí Walt Whitman či básníci Chicagské renesance Carl Sandburg a především Vachel Lindsay, který objevil Hughesovo literární nadání. Hughes po vzoru Lindsayho taktéž psal o černoších z ekonomicky a sociálně slabších vrstev a využíval přitom struktury, témata, slang, lingvistické a básnické prostředky typické pro bluesovou a jazzovou poezii.

Zárnými příklady a rovněž vrcholnými díly takové poezie je osm vybraných básní ze sbírky *Montage of a Dream Deferred*. Klíčovým motivem těchto básní je Americký sen, pomocí něhož se Afroameričané z „nižších společenských tříd“ snaží vymanit z okovů společnosti, jenž je prostoupena rasovou diskriminací. Mezi tyto „nižší společenské třídy“ patří kultury blues a jazzu.

Hughes k těmto kulturám promlouvá, když například v básni *Theme for English B* popisuje studentovy myšlenky, které v psané podobě imitují volnou improvizální strukturu jazzového žánru be-bop. Přítomnost tohoto jazzového útvaru nicméně podtrhuje i téma, které obdobně jako be-bop důrazně poukazuje na individualitu a svéráznost osobnosti. Naproti tomu báseň *Blues at Dawn*, která jako by z oka vypadla textům zpívaného blues, neboť její pochmurné téma a především forma jsou od bluesových písní skutečně k nerozeznání.

Tzv. „Boogie básně“ jsou naopak propleteny hned vícero afroamerickými hudebními žánry, protože současně obsahují témata, slang, obraznost a stylistické prostředky pramenící ze žánrů boogie-woogie, blues, jazz a be-bop. Celkově všechny tyto básně poukazují na všudypřítomnou pasivitu a ignoranci, jenž podkopávají kolektivní snahy Afroameričanů začlenit se do většinové společnosti. V důsledku takovéto nepřízně zbývá těmto lidem jen hudba a v ní trvale zakořeněný „odložený sen“.

Hughesova poezie ovlivnila celou řadu umělců, za zmínku stojí například věhlasně známí spisovatelé jako Margaret Walker, Richard Wright a Amiri Baraka. Nebyli to ale jen spisovatelé, jenž vycházeli z Hughesových prací. Hughesova umělecká stopa rovněž sahá zpět do hudebních sfér, a hudební tvorba hiphopových skupin A Tribe Called Quest, Gang Starr a Public Enemy je tak v současnosti neodmyslitelně spojována s postavou Langstona Hughese.

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