

## The Blues and Langston Hughes

What makes a poem sound pleasing to the ear? A solid rhythm for one thing—something we know a good song also depends on. There are two poetic forms that began as song forms: the *ballad* stanza of British and American literature and the *blues* stanzas of Harlem Renaissance poet Langston Hughes.

### Blues in Poetry

A recognizable song structure in popular music is the African American blues stanza. The intention of the lyrics is to express an emotion. The blues rhythm originated in African American field hollers and work songs, and some trace it to centuries-old songs by griots [storytellers] of West Africa. Here is a stanza from Lead Belly's "*Good Morning Blues*":

*Good morning blues. How do you do?  
Good morning blues. How do you do?  
I'm doing all right. Good morning. How are you?*

There are generally three lines in the blues stanza – the second line repeats the first, and the third line brings home the rhyme. The lyrics are usually set to twelve bars of music in 4/4 time. While the lyrics of the blues are rarely in a structured meter, the music often has a driving beat that is not unlike the heartbeat rhythm.

The first to recognize the potential of the blues as written poetry was Langston Hughes, who was born in Joplin, Missouri, in 1902. When he was eleven years old, he heard the blues coming from an orchestra of blind musicians on Independence Avenue in Kansas City. Hughes moved to the East Coast in 1921 and heard the music again, in clubs on Lenox Avenue in Harlem, New York, and 7th Street in Washington, D.C. "I tried to write poems like the songs they sang on 7th Street," he remembered in his autobiography *The Big Sea*. Those songs "had the pulse beat of the people who keep on going." The blues stanza allowed Hughes to convey the African American experience in people's own vernacular language.

The song structure of the blues seems to have originated in the Mississippi Delta in the late nineteenth century. The term *the blues*, as in "having the blues," comes from a centuries-old term for a state of melancholy. Blues lyrics usually tell of some trouble, but often in a comical way.

The "blues stanza" became a standard lyric in popular music. It is composed of three lines: the second line repeats the first; the third line rhymes. Here, for example, is a stanza from "Green River Blues" by the Delta musician Charley Patton:

*Some people say the Green River blues ain't bad.  
Some people say the Green River blues ain't bad.  
Then it must-a not been the Green River blues I had.*

Here is a seminal bit of blues-based rock and roll:

*You ain't nothin' but a hound dog, cryin' all the time.  
You ain't nothin' but a hound dog, cryin' all the time.  
You ain't never caught a rabbit and you ain't no friend of mine.*

Langston Hughes' biographer describes the poet's early description of the blues in this quote, "The music seemed to cry, but the words somehow laughed," as in "Morning After."

*I said, Baby! Baby!  
Please don't snore so loud.  
Baby! Please!  
Please don't snore so loud.  
You jest a little bit o' woman but you  
Sound like a great big crowd.*



When writing in the blues form, Hughes broke the three lines of each stanza into six lines, as demonstrated in the stanzas from the poem "Homesick Blues":

*De railroad bridge's  
A sad song in de air.  
De railroad bridge's  
A sad song in de air.  
Ever time de train pass  
I wants to go somewhere.*

*Homesick blues, Lawd,  
'S a terrible thing to have.  
Homesick blues is  
A terrible thing to have.  
To keep from cryin'  
I opens ma mouth an' laughs.*

*I went down to the station.  
My heart was in ma mouth.  
Went down to the station.  
Heart was in ma mouth.  
Lookin' for a box car  
To roll me to de South.*

The line breaks give a further sense of the music, indicating where a singer might pause or drag a word across a few beats.

"Night and Morn"

*Sun's a-settin',  
This is what I'm gonna sing.  
Sun's a settin',  
This is what I'm gonna sing:  
I feels de blues a comin',  
Wonder what de blues'll bring?*

*Sun's a-risin',  
This is gonna be ma song,  
Sun's a risin',  
This is gonna be ma song,  
I could be blue but  
I been blue all night long.*

African-American writer Ralph Ellison said that although the blues are often about struggle and depression, they are also full of determination to overcome difficulty "through sheer toughness of spirit." This resilience in the face of hardship is one of the hallmarks of the blues poem.