



## “Fantasy in Purple”: Langston Hughes’ Love and Dedicatee to Blues and Jazz Music

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**Abstract:** This paper aims to analyze Langston Hughes’s celebration of Black music, namely blues and jazz music in his poem entitled “Fantasy in Purple.” Hughes’ love for blues and jazz music is revealed in this short poem at the outset when he uses a symbolic title to foreshadow the image, color, content, and musical combination in blues and jazz music. Moreover, he enumerates most of the fundamental musical instruments and elements used in performing and playing this fundamental African music of heritage. Doing so, he pays tribute to this wonderful Black music by celebrating it and by showing its importance and functions in the lives of African Americans. Indeed thanks to a thorough analysis following the theories of symbolism, stylistics, psychoanalytic criticism and African American criticism, we realize that this poem while being a celebration, honor and dedicatee, it highlights two major things which are: one the one hand, Hughes’ love for music, his constant frequentation of blues and jazz clubs, and his integration of blues and jazz rhythms in his poetry and one the other hand, the important role blues and jazz music played on the psychological level in combating tragedy, death, darkness, sadness and pain as far as blacks are concerned.

**Keywords:** Blues, Jazz, Music, Celebration, African Americans, Moral strength, Tragicomic language, Metamorphosis.

### 1. INTRODUCTION

Frequenting the blues and *jazz clubs*, the cabarets, the nightclubs and all the rest of the hectic nightlife in Harlem where he listened to blues and jazz music, Langston Hughes was never far from this African American music he loved so much. Significantly influenced by the sounds and traditions of blues and jazz, he even incorporated blues and jazz rhythm in his poetry, mixing by moment the jazz and blues genres in his poetry<sup>1</sup> and writing sometimes blues poems and jazz poems<sup>2</sup> such as “I am a bad man” or “The Weary Blues.”

Early on, Hughes’s love for the music found its way to the page, giving rise to the fusion genre known as jazz poetry. In the same vein as his beliefs about jazz, Hughes felt that jazz poetry could be a uniquely African-American literary form, distinctive among the venerable—and very white—poetic canon. When he wrote about jazz, Hughes often incorporated syncopated rhythms, jive language, or looser phrasing to mimic the improvisatory nature of jazz; in other poems, his verse reads like the lyrics of a blues song. The result was as close as you could get to spelling out jazz.<sup>3</sup>

<sup>1</sup>For more insight, please read the following article “Enter the Blues: Jazz Poems by Langston Hughes and Sterling Brown” written by Hao Huang in *Hungarian Journal of English and American Studies (HJEAS)*, Vol. 17, No. 1 (Spring, 2011), pp. 9-44.

<sup>2</sup>As the following title of the book written by Frédéric Sylvanise shows it: *Langston Hughes: poète jazz, poète blues*, August 31, 2009. And also as the following title of the Essay written by Ray Smith shows it: *The Blues and Jazz poetry of Langston Hughes*, November 2010. On <http://www.earlyblues.com/Essay%20-%20Langston%20Hughes%20-%20Introduction.htm>. Visited on 28<sup>th</sup> March, 2018.

<sup>3</sup>Rebecca Gross, “Jazz Poetry & Langston Hughes” published on April 11, 2014. <https://www.arts.gov/art-works/2014/jazz-poetry-langston-hughes>. Visited on February, 21st 2018.

Indeed, “Jazz poems being inspired by the blues”<sup>4</sup> and “Jazz being a broad category that embraced all black American music—not only the blues, ragtime...”<sup>5</sup> we observe a close link between blues and jazz that has favored his poetry to be closely connected to jazz and blues music<sup>6</sup> as we may see it symptomatically in the poem “Fantasy in Purple,” a poem in which he celebrated blues and jazz music.

And here the fusion of blues and jazz is well traduced by the poem “Fantasy in Purple,” a dedication to blues and jazz music, in which Hughes pays tribute to this black music by enumerating some musical instruments and elements, and by mentioning the notions of “song” and “beat” to honor this black music he loved so much. Symbolically, metaphorically, and stylistically, he gives an importance to blues and jazz music, sheds light on its roles, its characteristics, while celebrating and honoring it. And such an interest and honor on the part of the poet Hughes shed light on the important place blues and jazz music had in the life of African Americans living in the United States.

Due to these aspects mentioned above, the following central questions become important to us in this paper: how does the poem “Fantasy in Purple” celebrate blues and jazz music? And how do Hughes’ interest, honor and celebration for this black music demonstrate its important and meaningful place in African Americans life in the United States?

The theoretical background that will be used in analyzing the significance of blues and jazz music in African American life through the poem “Fantasy in Purple” will be theories such as symbolism, stylistics, psychoanalytic criticism and African American criticism. And as approach, it will be a hermeneutics analysis of the poem “Fantasy in Purple.”

It is important to precise in terms of theoretical background that symbolism is really important here because Hughes has symbolized black music through some musical instruments and elements such as “Beat,” “drums,” “violins,” “trumpet,” “choir,” “sing,” etc. Stylistics becomes an interesting theoretical approach necessary in this work, because Hughes played on the interrelation between poetry (his poetry) and music through the poetic codes “Beat,” “the choir,” “sing,” “song,” “trumpet note.” Moreover, the metaphors, images, allusion and figures of speech he has used to refer to blues and jazz music and its importance for African Americans during hard times are very important. The connection of this music characterized as “a stormy song” to “tragedy,” “death,” “dying breath,” and “darkness” obliges us to focus on the need for this music and its importance in African Americans life during hard times. This aspect revolves around theories such as African American criticism and psychoanalytic criticism because this music is intrinsically linked to African Americans heritage and their resilience and strength in front of the pains in their lives.

This study will revolve around three parts. We will first analyze the celebration of blues and jazz music as African American music. Secondly, we will study blues and jazz music as music for moral strength to affront “tragedy,” “death” and “darkness.” And thirdly, we will shed light on blues and jazz music as music of tragicomic language or (“a stormy song” and “one blaring trumpet note of sun”) that permits metamorphosis and transformation.

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<sup>4</sup>“Jazz poems inspired by the blues do not simply transcribe blues lyrics; instead, they ingeniously transform standard twelve bar and eight-bar blues forms with strategically placed disruptions of the steady flow of standard meter that recall the sudden stops and starts in improvised jazz. This demonstrates how jazz poetry is an intertextual genre, entailing writing and reciting words that evoke the sounds, pacing, and lyrics of music.” In the Abstract of the article “Enter the Blues: Jazz Poems by Langston Hughes and Sterling Brown” written by Hao Huang in *Hungarian Journal of English and American Studies (HJEAS)*, Vol. 17, No. 1 (Spring, 2011), pp. 9-44.

<sup>5</sup>“For Hughes, jazz was a broad category that embraced all black American music—not only the blues, ragtime, and swing but also, by the mid-fifties, rock and roll, which he believed, would “no doubt be washed back half forgotten into the sea of jazz” in years to come.” On <http://www.openculture.com/2017/06/langston-hughes-creates-a-list-of-his-100-favorite-jazz-recordings.html>. Visited on February, 21st 2018.

<sup>6</sup>“One of many talented poets of the Harlem Renaissance of the 1920s was Langston Hughes. He embraced African-American jazz rhythms and was one of the first black writers to attempt to make a profitable career out of his writing. Hughes incorporated blues, spirituals, colloquial speech, and folkways in his poetry” in the book *Outline of American Literature-Revised Edition* by Kathryn Vanspanckeren, Published by the United States Department of state; p. 69, 1994.

## 2. BLUES AND JAZZ MUSIC: CELEBRATING AFRICAN AMERICAN MUSIC OR BLACK MUSIC

In some of our writings, we used to demonstrate that most of Langston Hughes’s poems titles are not chosen at random because those titles are very expressive, symbolic, metaphoric and meaningful and also suitable to the rest of the poetic text and its content<sup>7</sup>. It is once again the case here with the semantic unit “Fantasy in Purple”, a poetic code used as title for this poem honoring, celebrating and paying tribute to blues and jazz music. Indeed, before engaging in a thorough analysis of the full poetic text and before paying attention to the musical instruments and elements mentioned in this poem, it will be very important for the context of this study to have an in-depth analysis of the title of this poem.

The title “Fantasy in Purple” in its poetic creation combined both the symbol and image of color and namely the color “Purple”<sup>8</sup> to translate an idea about the blues and jazz music in-terms of color, content, and musical fusion. But also Langston Hughes used this symbol and image of the color “Purple” to shed light on the meaning and sensation of blues and jazz music, and the mood and intensity characterized by this blues and jazz music.

And here, it should be known that Hughes’ poetic creation by referring to the symbol and image of the color “Purple” is very genius because first of all, the color “Purple” is defined as follow: “Purple is a color intermediate between blue and red, purple is a composite color made by combining red and blue.”<sup>9</sup> And as far as this color “Purple” is concerned in terms of connotation and meaning, it is said that:

Purple embodies the balance of red’s stimulation and blue’s calm. This dichotomy can cause unrest or uneasiness unless the undertone is clearly defined, at which point the purple takes on the characteristics of its undertone. With a sense of mystic and royal qualities, purple is a color often well liked by very creative or eccentric types and is the favorite color of adolescent girls.<sup>10</sup>

We therefore end up to the conclusion that the red may represent the heat and aggressiveness of life and the blue may represent the calm necessary to stand and appreciate consciously the difficulties of life. And the mixture of aggressiveness and calm may represent the sensation and mood blues and jazz music procure to the black man. It also represents what blues and jazz music signify for the black man in terms of attitude and behavior since the color “Purple” is less aggressive than red, but more active than blue.

So by using the image of this color or by making an allusion to this color to represent the sensation of the Negro while listening to this music, Langston Hughes seems to be more expressive than ever. In a word, this symbol and image of the color seems to talk much more than words.

And the notion of “fantasy” in this title may be linked to the fact that it (this music) is not too aggressive and not too sad. But also, this notion of fantasy refers at the same time to jazz and blues music as a fusion, a mixture thanks to the image and composite of the color “purple” because “Jazz is a way of making music that emphasizes improvisation, swinging rhythm, and blues-oriented melody and harmony.”<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>7</sup>For a further reading please check the following links: Beugre Stephane, “POEM PORTER: A MARXIST READING OF THE RELATIONSHIP BLACKS-WHITES” on [http://www.journalijar.com/uploads/112\\_IJAR-21076.pdf](http://www.journalijar.com/uploads/112_IJAR-21076.pdf)/Article DOI: 10.21474/IJAR01/5974. [And also] Beugre Stephane, ““ONE-WAY-TICKET”: WHEN LANGSTON HUGHES TRADUCES THE MASSIVE, ABSOLUTE AND OBLIGATORY IMMIGRATION OF TODAY’S AFRICANS” On <https://eujournal.org/index.php/esj/article/view/9805> / Article doi: 10.19044/esj.2017.v13n23p153 URL:<http://dx.doi.org/10.19044/esj.2017.v13n23p153>.

<sup>8</sup>Concerning this same poetic code “Purple” as the title of this poem, please remember the title “Color Purple”, the title of a novel written by Alice Walker in 1982.

<sup>9</sup><https://www.hisour.com/purple-in-science-and-nature-26723/>

<sup>10</sup>Kate Smith, “All About The Color PURPLE” on <http://www.sensationalcolor.com/color-meaning/color-meaning-symbolism-psychology/all-about-the-color-purple-4329#.WpL8bFrOXIV>. Visited on 25<sup>th</sup> February, 2018.

<sup>11</sup>Emmett G. Price III, Tammy L. Kernodle, and Horace J. Maxile, Jr., “ Jazz” , *Encyclopedia of African American Music* , Greenwood, Copyright 2011, p. 429.

In choosing to celebrate and honor blues and jazz music, Langston Hughes wrote a blues poem in which he enumerated some musical words and vocabularies such as the notions of “Beat,” “the choir,” “sing,” “song,” and “trumpet note.” And such a fantasy or creativity, in terms of metaphor and allusion to refer to this African American music, he is honoring and celebrating; is very interesting concerning blues and jazz music<sup>12</sup>:

Blues poetry came from the musical form known as "the blues." The blues is American, but its roots are in African music. The earliest American ancestors of the blues were work songs and "field hollers" (a musical form of talk among slaves) that came out of the Deep South. The blues were first made popular around 1900 by W.C. Handy, who wrote the famous "St. Louis Blues." Much American popular music rhythm and blues, rock and roll, disco, rap, and jazz is drawn from the blues.<sup>13</sup>

We realize therefore that this poem is in fact a real dedication to blues and jazz music with its musical instruments and musical elements (words and vocabularies) it incorporated in itself.

“Blues” generally conveys one of three interrelated meanings: (1) a sense of melancholy or dejection, as in “having the blues,” an expression that seems to have entered the American vernacular shortly after the Civil War; (2) a genre of secular music developed in Southern African American society around the turn of the 20th century and quickly disseminated north with the Great Migration; and (3) a composition based on the highly variable but recognizable harmonic progression typically employed within the genre of the blues but also commonly found in jazz, folk, rock, and other popular music.<sup>14</sup>

Jazz emerged as a predominately African American musical style in New Orleans, Louisiana, in the early 20th century, but due to its complexity and constant evolution since its origins, jazz has spread worldwide, encompassing many styles and varying greatly from its original form. The most popular styles found in jazz are New Orleans jazz, ragtime, Dixieland, swing, bebop, cool, hard bop, West-Coast jazz, Latin jazz, free jazz, and fusion, and within each style, musicians can alter the harmonic structure, melody, tonality, or rhythm while playing. Jazz is most commonly identified by musical characteristics such as improvisation, rhythmic swing, and the instrumentation of a big band or small combo, including a rhythm section (drums, bass, piano, or guitar) and solo instruments (trumpet, saxophone, trombone, clarinet, violin, or flute). Yet, it is the manner in which these instruments are played together that stimulates the individuality, creativity, originality, and improvisation of the soloist within the rhythmic and harmonic framework of the music. Usually a soloist (vocal or instrumental) fronts the band, but each musician contributes to the spontaneity within the bounds of supporting the group. It is this balance of freedom and control that gives jazz its unique place in music performance.<sup>15</sup>

In fact, in terms of genre, the poem “Fantasy in Purple” is a blues poem because there are two different kinds of blues poem:

There are two types of blues poems. The first type has no particular form, but has the content typical of the blues. Here is an example of this type of blues, by Langston Hughes, the first American poet to use blues successfully: Evil : Looks like what drives me crazy / Don't have no effect on you / But I'm gonna keep on at it / Till it drives you crazy, too. The

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<sup>12</sup>“To get a better feel for the blues form, you might also listen to a lot of traditional blues songs by Lightnin' Hopkins, Robert Johnson, Furry Lewis, Blind Lemon Jefferson, Big Bill Broonzy, and others” Ron Padgett, *THE TEACHERS & WRITERS Handbook of Poetic Forms*, Teachers & Writers Collaborative, New York, Copyright 1987 by Teachers & Writers Collaborative. All rights reserved. Printed in the United States of America, p. 45.

<sup>13</sup>Ron Padgett, *THE TEACHERS & WRITERS Handbook of Poetic Forms*, Teachers & Writers Collaborative, New York, Copyright 1987 by Teachers & Writers Collaborative. All rights reserved. Printed in the United States of America, p. 43.

<sup>14</sup>Emmett G. Price III, Tammy L. Kernodle, and Horace J. Maxile, Jr., “Blues” , *Encyclopedia of African American Music* , Greenwood, Copyright 2011, p. 123.

<sup>15</sup>Emmett G. Price III, Tammy L. Kernodle, and Horace J. Maxile, Jr., “ Jazz” , *Encyclopedia of African American Music* , Greenwood, Copyright 2011, p. 426.

second type of blues poem is one that has blues content and the structure of the old blues songs. Here's an example, again by Hughes «Morning After »<sup>16</sup>

The poem “Fantasy in Purple” therefore follows the same characteristics of the first type of blues poem which has “the content typical of the blues” likewise the poem “Evil” written by the same poet. So with its blues content, this poem dedicated to honor and celebrate the black music incorporates some of the important musical instruments that musicians use in playing blues and jazz music. This other fantasy or creativity on the part of Hughes is once again very interesting to celebrate and honor this African American music by mixing blues poem and blues and jazz important musical symbols such as: “Beat,” “drums,” “violins,” “trumpet.” In such a context, the poem highlights the power of music that is why the music theme is underscored by numerous references to musical words, terms, and instruments such as “Beat,” “the choir,” “sing,” “song,” “trumpet note,” “drums,” “violins,” and “trumpet,” including references to the color symbolism through the color “purple” to refer to fusion and mixture.

African American music is one of the treasures of the United States. Spirituals, ragtime, the blues, jazz, rhythm and blues, gospel, soul, and hip hop—among other styles—are some of the richest and most distinctive products of our national culture. Developed in the face of centuries of racial discrimination, poverty, and other challenges, this music testifies to the resilience of African and Caribbean musical origins and the creativity of individuals, families, and communities. The biographies of people who make music are fascinating case studies of African American life from the 1700s to the present. In addition, the story of African American music’s impact on nonblack listeners—who have played a role in making it one of the world’s most popular cultural products—is a compelling chapter in the history of U.S. race relations.<sup>17</sup>

Of course there is an intrinsic relationship between the poetic codes used in this poem such as “Beat,” “the choir,” “sing,” “song,” “note” in terms of musical elements playing together in harmony and related to melody, tonality, rhythms, scales<sup>18</sup>, or chords<sup>19</sup>, and traducing an overview of the “hectic rhythms” of black music.

African American music creates intriguing paradoxes where simple musical resources, elements, and formulae, operating on melodic, rhythmic, harmonic, and stylistic features are systematically applied, often rendering simple pitch sets totally chromatic and pan-tonal. (One way in which pan-tonality can be viewed is as an extension of tonality to all keys.) The blues stands as an all-pervasive African American musical system, and its lyrical, harmonic, and melodic conventions have become one of the most influential music powers in many styles of modern and contemporary music around the world. Blue notes are easily discernable embellishments, common to both instrumental and vocal music, that provide examples of how simple musical elements (such as scales, chords, and rhythms) can multiply their musical meaning and potential in highly flexible ways. The application of blue notes to a simple pentatonic pitch set, for instance, results in a wide range of pitch set combinations, and their harmonic implications. Even a basic four-note dominant chord immediately becomes an expansive and innovative pitch set when basic blue notes are systematically applied, forming one of a number of possible “blues scales.”<sup>20</sup>

Moreover this allusion to blues and jazz music, those different poetic codes used by Hughes to refer to musical instruments are very meaningful to symbolize this black music, some of the Black musicians,

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<sup>16</sup> Ron Padgett, *THE TEACHERS & WRITERS Handbook of Poetic Forms*, Teachers & Writers Collaborative, New York, Copyright 1987 by Teachers & Writers Collaborative. All rights reserved. Printed in the United States of America, p. 43.

<sup>17</sup>Burton W. Peretti, “Introduction”, *The History of African American Music* (ROWMAN & LITTLEFIELD PUBLISHERS, INC.), Copyright © 2009 by Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc., p.1.

<sup>18</sup>series of musical notes: a series of musical notes, usually sequential, arranged in ascending or descending order of pitch.

<sup>19</sup>notes struck together: two or more musical notes played or sung simultaneously. In musical contexts the spelling is chord, and this form is also used in figurative expressions that have to do with feelings: The speech struck the right chord. Microsoft® Encarta® 2009. © 1993-2008 Microsoft Corporation. Tous droits réservés.

<sup>20</sup>Emmett G. Price III, Tammy L. Kernodle, and Horace J. Maxile, Jr., “African Influences”, *Encyclopedia of African American Music*, Greenwood, Copyright 2011, p. 6.

and even some important figures of this blues and jazz music. Going from the denotation of those musical elements and instruments and by means of connotation, images and metaphors; we realize that it will be very important to relate those important musical elements and instruments to the main characteristics of blues and jazz music.

As far as the poetic code “drums” is concerned in this poem, we can argue that this poetic code in terms of musical instrument reflects percussion and is related to the meaningful notion and symbol of “tom-tom beating like heart-thuds” in African American music. In other words, the poetic code “drums” symbolizes “tom tom beating” in this black music. And as far as this poetic code is concerned with its relation to the notion of “tom tom beating” with its importance and role in this African American music, this is the definition Langston Hughes gives in its essay “The Negro Artist and the Racial Mountain”:

“But jazz to me is one of the inherent expressions of Negro life in America; the eternal tom-tom beating in the Negro soul—the tom-tom of revolt against weariness in a white world, a world of subway trains, and work, work, work; the tom-tom of joy and laughter, and pain swallowed in a smile.”<sup>21</sup>

As far as the poetic code “trumpet” is concerned in this poem, we can argue that this poetic code in terms of musical instrument is a reference and an honor to all the talented African American musicians and musical instruments players such as the great black trumpet player and singer, Louis Armstrong, the pianist Fats Waller, the Saxophonist Charlie Parker, the trumpeter Dizzy Gillespie, the pianist Thelonious Monk, the Saxophonist John Coltrane, the trumpeter Miles Davis etc. Likewise the poetic code “trumpet”, Hughes mentions the poetic code “violins” in reference and honors to the violinists but also in reference and honor to the major role this musical instrument play in the jazz music.

Indeed those three musical instruments (drums, trumpet, and violins) enumerated here through their meaning and musical role such as “tom tom beating,” “trumpet note” and “violins whirl thin and slow” had important role in the performance of this black music. And as far as those musical instruments are concerned, and the praise we can retain about African American musicians, this is a comment about jazz involving some major figures of this black music:

By the 1920s, jazz had spread through the proliferation of the phonograph, radio, and musicians who, like trumpeter Louis Armstrong and pianist Fats Waller, left New Orleans and traveled to Chicago, Kansas City, and New York, thus spreading the sound that gave its name to the Jazz Age and setting the precedent of talented African American musicians supported mainly by a white audience. This pattern continued into the Swing Era of the 1930s and 1940s propelled by big band ensembles led by Count Basie, Fletcher Henderson, Benny Goodman, and Duke Ellington. Black musicians often lacked the financial support their white counterparts received, until World War II, when the need for big band ensembles diminished thus opening the door for smaller groups of performers. These smaller combos pushed the rhythmic and harmonic speed of popular tunes, resulting in a style called “bebop” that reflected the social and political conditions of African Americans in the mid-1940s. Saxophonist Charlie Parker, trumpeter Dizzy Gillespie, and pianist Thelonious Monk expanded the harmonic boundaries of jazz and influenced the spawning of other styles such as cool, hard bop, West-Coast, and Afro-Cuban jazz. Saxophonist John Coltrane integrated spiritual concepts in his music, and trumpeter Miles Davis anticipated each new modification as jazz pulsed through the midcentury.<sup>22</sup>

The widespread of this music in African American communities, its rapid and popular infatuation among African Americans was not simple due to their everyday lives and the plights of the black people in America. Since the history of the black people’s presence on the American continent as it is known today cannot be fully separated from the experience of Slavery and Racism which characterized their lives as a community of people whose social, economic and political privileges are

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<sup>21</sup>Langston Hughes, “The Negro Artist and the Racial Mountain”, in *the nation*, 1926.

<sup>22</sup> Emmett G. Price III, Tammy L. Kernodle, and Horace J. Maxile, Jr., “ Jazz” , *Encyclopedia of African American Music* , Greenwood, Copyright 2011, pp. 426-427.

tied up with the evils of race and color. So many of them found refuge and were more interested in this African music of their heritage as a mean of struggle for survival rather than sparing the time remembering the traumatic experiences of the Blacks in the hands of their White masters in America. This music was a kind of relief for the traumatized life of the Africans for it was supposed "at once express the agony of life and the possibility of conquering it through sheer toughness of spirit." That is why blues and jazz music was most of time defined as music for moral strength for black people.

### **3. A MUSIC FOR MORAL STRENGTH TO AFFRONT “TRAGEDY,” “DEATH” AND “DARKNESS”**

In terms of content and meaning, in this poem the poet Hughes has associated repetitively the poetic code of “tragedy” and the poetic code of “me”<sup>23</sup>, the poetic code of “death” and the poetic code of “me”, the poetic code of “darkness” and the poetic code of “me”. By doing this, he linked directly the traumatic experiences of “tragedy”, “death” and “darkness” to himself and by extension to his kin (the black community) in the hands of their White masters in America when stating clearly:

V1 Beat the drums of tragedy for me  
V2 Beat the drums of tragedy and death.  
V8 To go with me  
V8 To the darkness  
V10Where I go.

And, we may testify that those lexemes of “tragedy”, “death” and “darkness” used by Hughes to refer to these traumatic experiences of the Blacks in the hands of their White masters in America, are not a coincidence when we have an incursion in the history of the African Americans living in the United States since the slavery time. Because a brief incursion in the Antebellum South or in the era of the 1900’s with a focus on some events permits us to realize that the realities of “tragedy”, “death” and, “darkness” were recurrent in the lives of Negroes.

That is why the themes of “tragedy”, “death” and, “darkness” are most of the time mentioned by African American authors and poets in relation to their sufferings, bad living conditions, predicaments, and ill-treatments in the United States of America and namely according to their coexistence with white people. In instance, concerning the theme of “tragedy” in African Americans literature; the case of the semantic unit “The Negro’s Tragedy” used by Claude McKay as title for one of his poems is suitable as evidence. It is a poem in which the poet mentions clearly and directly the lexeme “tragedy” in relation to the Negroes long life sufferings because of white people:

It is the Negro's tragedy I feel  
Which binds me like a heavy iron chain,  
It is the Negro's wounds I want to heal  
Because I know the keenness of his pain.

Concerning the theme of “death” in African Americans writings; the case of the semantic unit “if we must die” used once again by the poet Claude McKay as title for one of his best known poems is suitable as evidence. It is a poem in which the poet mentions clearly and directly the lexeme “die” in relation to the Negroes massacre by white mobs during the “red summer” in the United States of America:

If we must die, let it not be like hogs  
Hunted and penned in an inglorious spot,  
While round us bark the mad and hungry dogs,  
Making their mock at our accursèd lot.

Indeed, for a better insight related to the theme of “death”, it should be known that this poem “if we must die” was written during the dreadful race riots of 1919 in Harlem and many others cities and in reference to these massacres and events known as the “red summer” in the United States of America.

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<sup>23</sup> “me” the personal object pronoun representing the Poet Hughes or the Negro and by means of metonymy the Negro community or African American community.

Red Summer refers to a series of approximately 25 “anti-black riots” that erupted in major cities throughout the nation in 1919, including Houston, Texas; East St. Louis and Chicago, Illinois; Washington, D.C.; Omaha, Nebraska; Elaine, Arkansas; Tulsa, Oklahoma; and Charleston, South Carolina. In Elaine, Arkansas, whites attacked a meeting of black sharecroppers who were organizing to demand fairer treatment in the cotton market. After a white person was shot, federal troops were called in to “quell” the violence, but instead they joined white mobs in hunting black residents for several days. More than 200 black men, women, and children were killed.<sup>24</sup>

Concerning “darkness” as a theme in African Americans literature; this semantic unit is sometimes used to refer to the lack of joy and happiness and most of the time, this theme is symbolized by the notion of “devil” as it is the case in the expression “I’m goin’ to de devil an’ I wouldn’t go to heaben if I could.” An expression used by the poet Langston Hughes in his poems entitled: “Bad Man.”

Mixing style and content since the outset of this poem through the title itself, we remark here stylistically speaking that the different lexemes or semantic units of “tragedy”, “death” and “darkness” used by Hughes in this poem are both images and metaphors to refer to the realities in the existence of black people living in the United States. That is why the lexeme “tragedy” may also refer to the sufferings of blacks while the lexeme “death” refers directly to the “black brothers murdered, burnt by white people”<sup>25</sup> through lynching, massacres, riots. And the lexeme “darkness” in terms of images and metaphors may refer to the predicaments of blacks or the devil/evil the white people represented for the black people.

Indeed pointing out those three different but interrelated themes is very important to give an insight into the life of the black community living in America. Of course when there is tragedy like it was the case of the “red summer” there is also “death” thanks to the massacres that occurred and when black people life is surrounded by “tragedy” and “death” therefore it is obvious that black people lived in “darkness.” We have therefore here stylistically speaking an ascending gradation when we move from “tragedy” to “death” to “darkness”, and this gradation shows us the way the situation of the Negroes in the United States may moves from bad to worse.

So, on the one hand, in a repetition and refrain, the poet Hughes connected the Negroes to tragedy, death and darkness. But once again, on the other hand and in the same repetition and refrain, he also connected the Negro’s tragedy, the Negro’s death, the Negro’s dying breath and the Negro’s darkness to the beat of the drums, to the choir song, to the whites violins whirring thin and slow, to the blaring trumpet note.

- V1 Beat the drums of tragedy for me.
- V2 Beat the drums of tragedy and death.
- V3 And let the choir sing a stormy song
- V4 To drown the rattle of my dying breath.
- V5 Beat the drums of tragedy for me,
- V6 And let the white violins whir thin and slow,
- V7 But blow one blaring trumpet note of sun
- V8 To go with me
- V9 to the darkness

This new aspect of connecting through the same repetition and refrain, the Negroes tragedy, death and darkness to the “beat of the drums,” to “the choir song,” to “the whites violins whirring thin and slow,” and to the “blaring trumpet note” impels us on the importance of this black music for Negroes. Because we note that when there is tragedy like it was the case of the “Red Summer”, when there is death like it was the case of “Lynching”<sup>26</sup> and when there is darkness like it was the case of

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<sup>24</sup> <https://eji.org/reports/online/lynching-in-america-targeting-black-veterans/red-summer>

<sup>25</sup> A verse in the poem entitled “To the White Fiends” written by Claude McKay.

<sup>26</sup> In reference to the poem “The Lynching” written by Claude McKay. Source: *Harlem Shadows* (Harcourt Brace and Company, 1922).



“Trueblood” singing blues after incest with his own daughter.<sup>27</sup> Negroes needed this blues and jazz music “to preserve the human spirit.” They need it to rebirth and relieve from the bad situation they went through because this black music was seen as:

The one reliable metronome of racial grace, Hughes believed, was black music. Whatever distinction his poetry possesses surely owes more to his regard for black music than to any other source. “Like the waves of the sea coming one after another,” he wrote in tribute, “always one after another, like the earth moving around the sun, night, day – night, day – night, day – forever, so is the undertow of black music with its rhythm that never betrays you, its strength like the beat of a human heart its humor and its rooted power.”<sup>28</sup>

Indeed, the fact to associate in a refrain and constant repetition (three time)<sup>29</sup> this African American music to the symbolic words of “tragedy”, “death”, and “darkness” conveys the meaning that this African American music had a role and namely an important role in the life of African American. A life, which itself was characterized by massacres, murders, lynching, abuse, racism, discrimination, segregation, rape, etc. That is why through an insight analysis of the poem, we observe that the different links made between this music, the poet symbolized by “me” and the context of “tragedy”, “death”, “dying breath” and “darkness” he explained, required more interest.

V1 Beat the drums of tragedy for me.

V2 Beat the drums of tragedy and death.

V5 Beat the drums of tragedy for me,

V8 To go with me

V9 to the darkness

And it is clear that connecting Blues and Jazz music to the time the negro goes through “tragedy”, to the time the negro affronts “death”, to the time the negro is in “darkness” through the expressions “Beat the drums,” “the choir sing,” “the white violins whirl thin and slow,” “one blaring trumpet note,” means that this black music exactly “convey the resilience and strength of the dispossessed.”<sup>30</sup> And it is in this context that “me” (the Negro or the poet) requests this music with insistence (three time through verses 1, 2, and 5) “To go with me to the darkness.” It also means that Negroes used, needed or necessitated this music only when they were going through those terrible periods of traumatism to overcome the difficult times they faced and to “combat the debilitating monotony, weariness, fear and pain of their lives”. That is why this music is also called by Hughes: “drums of tragedy”, “drums of tragedy and death”, “stormy song”, and “blaring trumpet note of sun.” In a word, it means that this black music was very useful at those time, period and events.

As its names suggests, blues songs are about hopelessness, grief, and loss. But they are more than that. As Ralph Ellison says, the blues “at once express the agony of life and the possibility of conquering it through sheer toughness of spirit.” Ellison also says that the blues do not offer a solution to the human condition. They do, however, offer a resolution: an acceptance of pain, sickness, and death that is marked by grace and irony, and a defiant decision to preserve the human spirit. And as Hughes’ “Morning After” shows, a blues poem can even express the humor of a bad situation. Generally, though, they are more serious.<sup>31</sup>

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<sup>27</sup>Norton persuades Trueblood to tell his story. What Trueblood has to say is important not only for what he reveals but also for how he tells it. Trueblood is the first of several important Afro-American folk figures that Ellison creates. He is a storyteller, a singer of spirituals, and a blues singer. He tells Norton, “...while I’m singin’ them blues I makes up my mind that I ain’t nobody but myself and ain’t nothin’ I can do but let whatever is gonna happen, happen.” This is a lesson that it will take the narrator the entire novel to learn. On <http://pinkmonkey.com/booknotes/barrons/invisimn12.asp>. Visited on 28th, March 2018.

<sup>28</sup>Langston Hughes, *The Collected Works of Langston Hughes: The poems, 1921-1940*, Arnold Rampersad, 2001, p. 8.

<sup>29</sup>In order to show an insistence.

<sup>30</sup>Michael D. Hill and Lena M. Hill. *Ralph Ellison’s Invisible Man A Reference Guide*. Greenwood Guides to Multicultural Literature. Greenwood Press: Westport, Connecticut London, 2008, p. P 101.

<sup>31</sup>Ron Padgett, *THE TEACHERS & WRITERS Handbook of Poetic Forms*, Teachers & Writers Collaborative, New York, Copyright 1987 by Teachers & Writers Collaborative. All rights reserved. Printed in the United States of America, p. 44.

Blues and jazz music allows both performer and listener to express their sufferings in musical terms, to make art out of their pain and sorrow. And this meaningful role the poet Langston Hughes reaffirmed to this blues and jazz music in this poem by celebrating it and by showing its importance in terms of giving moral strength to black people when "sad or depressed" is also justified by the fact that in most of his writings and poems “Langston Hughes embraced African-American jazz rhythms and incorporated blues, spirituals, colloquial speech, and folkways in his poetry.”<sup>32</sup> This black music is an important tradition in black music and a “ritual” power necessary “to convey the resilience and strength of the dispossessed” and to “combat the debilitating monotony, weariness, fear and pain of their lives.”

“As a means through which black Americans deal with the pain of life”, the blues has a vital place in black American life. Indeed, this African American music is part of his heritage, and he should plunge into the blues anytime he needs a moral strength to face reality and tell the truth. The blues is such a music which gives hope and exaltation. It is a spiritual that grants a certain freedom and it lies in loving not hating and also in the power of self expression. The blues serves as antidote for pain and describe with humorous exaggeration the quality of his reality. The black man learned from blues of the wisdom of his forefathers, the humors, bitterness, love, disappointment and the will to endure. The blues shield against destruction of identity, and play for maturity, freedom, consciousness, self-awareness and emergence. It is a sort of music that permits metamorphosis and transformation for it is displayed in a tragicomic language.<sup>33</sup>

Of course the mixture of red and blue through the image and symbol of the color purple in terms of title for this poem, the fusion of jazz and blues in terms of musical composition, the mixture of sadness and joy, of pain and hope in terms of mood and sensations are well conveyed in the content and meaning of this poem thanks to the semantics units and poetic codes “a stormy song” and “one blaring trumpet note of sun.” And those semantics units translate necessarily the two aspects of “tragic” and “comic” combined at the same time in this blues and jazz music so that it may relieve black people from their sadness and convey at the same time the resilience and strength for another day of hope and happiness. That is why it is commonly admitted that this African American music is fundamentally displayed in a tragicomic language.

#### **4. A MUSIC OF TRAGICOMIC LANGUAGE OR (“A STORMY SONG” AND “ONE BLARING TRUMPET NOTE OF SUN”) THAT PERMITS METAMORPHOSIS AND TRANSFORMATION**

Blues and jazz music is music of metamorphosis and transformation because at the outset the metaphor of “purple” used to identify this black music is itself a color which is therapeutic for “it uplifts, calms the mind and nerves, offers a sense of spirituality, encourages creativity”<sup>34</sup>. So there is an intrinsic link between the notion of “purple” used in the title of the poem and the role of metamorphosis and transformation, this black music played inside the Negroes (in their soul, spirit, and mind).

On the stylistic level, the antithesis or contrast between the semantic units “drums of tragedy”, “drums of tragedy and death”, “stormy song” and the semantic unit “blaring trumpet note of sun” describes once again the value of the notion of “purple”<sup>35</sup> as title of this poem because as well as we see sadness, pain and crying in the expressions “drums of tragedy”, “drums of tragedy and death”, “stormy song”, we may also see joy, hope and happiness (“joy and laughter, and pain swallowed in a smile”) in the expression “one blaring trumpet note of sun”. Mixing up sadness, pain, crying with joy

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<sup>32</sup>Kathryn Vanspanckeren, *Outline of American literature*, Published by the United States Department of state; p. 68, 1994.

<sup>33</sup>Beugre stephane, ““I’m a bad man”: When Langston Hughes traduces the reflexive bad effects of white people’s racism on black individuals who refuse “Feelin blue” in his poem "Bad man" or the blues poem”, in *International Journal of Multidisciplinary Research and Development*, Volume 4; Issue 11; November 2017; p. 100.

<sup>34</sup>Kate Smith, “All About The Color PURPLE” on <http://www.sensationalcolor.com/color-meaning/color-meaning-symbolism-psychology/all-about-the-color-purple-4329#.WpL8bFrOXIV>. Visited on 25<sup>th</sup> February, 2018.

<sup>35</sup>Like is the contrast between the “red’s stimulation” and the “blue’s calm”.

and hope like a fantasy mixing contrasted states of mind is the way blues and jazz music plays together<sup>36</sup> as one entity to metamorphose and transform the Negro’s mood.

“The blues is an impulse to keep the painful details and episodes of a brutal experience alive in one’s aching consciousness, to finger its jagged grain, and to transcend it, not by the consolation of philosophy but by squeezing from it a near-tragic, near-comic lyricism. As a form, the blues is an autobiographical chronicle of personal catastrophe expressed lyrically.”<sup>37</sup>

Indeed the semantic unit “a stormy song” for example is opposed to the semantic unit “one blaring trumpet note of sun”, but the two entities are both mixed up in this blues and jazz music such as “fantasy in purple”<sup>38</sup> so that the Negroes can metamorphose themselves from sadness, pain, despair and crying to joy and hope and laugh and revival. This song made up of “stormy song” and “one blaring trumpet note of sun” is a song that God himself puts in the mouth of Negroes (“the poet considered jazz and the blues to be uniquely African-American art forms”<sup>39</sup>).

I am the one who labored as a slave,  
Beaten and mistreated for the work that I gave —  
Children sold away from me, husband sold, too.  
No safety, no love, no respect was I due.  
Three hundred years in the deepest South:  
But God put a song and a prayer in my mouth.  
God put a dream like steel in my soul.<sup>40</sup>

This mix up is a kind of therapy which is necessary to “keep on”, to “nourish the dream that nothing could smother” for that “deep in the breast— have only hope”<sup>41</sup>. This mix up is also a kind of therapy to be born anew and appreciate the beauty of life to let “dreams come true”, to “believe in the right”, and also trust the future in terms of hope in a hostile environment dominated and controlled by the white people’s authority and hegemony.

Remember my sweat, my pain, my despair.  
Remember my years, heavy with sorrow—  
And make of those years a torch for tomorrow.  
Make of my past a road to the light  
Out of the darkness, the ignorance, the night.  
Lift high my banner out of the dust.  
Stand like free men supporting my trust.<sup>42</sup>

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<sup>36</sup>According to John William « le meilleur jazz vient toujours du blues. Construit sur le blues, construit avec une telle vitesse et une telle complexité que nous ne savons même pas qu’il vient du blues » in “Le blues du pays”, *Il l’engagement, Littérature Africaine « Textes et Travaux. Tome 2*, (Les Nouvelles Editions Africaines : NATHAN AFRIQUE, 1978), p.130.

<sup>37</sup>Harold Bloom. *Ellison’s Invisible Man*. Bloom’s Guides: Invisible Man, Copyright © 2008 by Infobase Publishing, p. 41.

<sup>38</sup>In terms of the mixing up of “red’s stimulation and blue’s calm” or like is the mixing up of “red’s stimulation and blue’s calm” in the color purple here, we have the mixing up of “stormy song” and “blaring trumpet note of sun”.

<sup>39</sup>Rebecca Gross, “Jazz Poetry & Langston Hughes” on <https://www.arts.gov/art-works/2014/jazz-poetry-langston-hughes>, April 11, 2014.

<sup>40</sup>Langston Hughes, “The Negro Mother”, *The Collected Poems of Langston Hughes*, Arnold Rampersad, Vintage Classics, 1995, p 155.

<sup>41</sup>“I nourished the dream that nothing could smother/Deep in my breast—the Negro mother./I had only hope then, but now through you” in “The Negro Mother”, *The collected poems of Langston Hughes*, Arnold Rampersad, Vintage Classics, 1995, p 156.

<sup>42</sup>Langston Hughes, “The Negro Mother”, *The collected poems of Langston Hughes*, Arnold Rampersad, Vintage Classics, 1995, p 156.

Thanks to all these aspects mentioned above (sadness, pain, despair and crying making fusion with joy, hope, laugh, happiness and revival), we observe clearly that the notion of tragicomic language used to qualify or define this black music is also involved in the image and metaphor of the color “Purple” which is a mixture of red and blue and namely of “red’s stimulation and blue’s calm”. And this mixture is intrinsically linked to the poetic codes or lexemes the poet Hughes uses to qualify this music at the same time as “a stormy song” and as “one blaring trumpet note of sun”.

Indeed, this black music is qualified as a tragicomic language<sup>43</sup> because it is performed through “a stormy song” (tragedy, death, and darkness) and a “blaring trumpet note of sun” (comic, laugh, joy, smile). And this tragicomic language was a good therapy for Negroes to stand and overcome frustration, oppression, discrimination, abuse, injustice, racism, color prejudices and all other predicaments they suffered from.

He was, of course, not an ordinary jazz fan simply enamored with the sound. A vocal proponent of racial consciousness, the poet considered jazz and the blues to be uniquely African-American art forms, both of which spurned the desire for assimilation and acceptance by white culture, and instead rejoiced in black heritage and creativity. Rather than wish away daily hardship, the blues instead elevated the troubles of the workaday African American into art<sup>44</sup>

So likewise the color purple, this blues and jazz music “Uplifts, Calms the mind and nerves, Offers a sense of spirituality, Encourages creativity”. So that it permits a metamorphosis and a transformation moving from the mood of sadness, despair, pain and crying to the mood of joy, trust, light, hope and smile. It acts like a psychological comfort, consolation, and healing for the Negroes. That is why this metamorphosis and transformation is well symbolized by the expression “pain swallowed in a smile”<sup>45</sup> because after the suffering occasioned by frustration, oppression, discrimination, abuse, injustice, racism and other predicaments, the role of this music is to give “a smile”.

“But jazz to me is one of the inherent expressions of Negro life in America; the eternal tom-tom beating in the Negro soul—the tom-tom of revolt against weariness in a white world, a world of subway trains, and work, work, work; the tom-tom of joy and laughter, and pain swallowed in a smile.”<sup>46</sup>

In his critical writing, Ellison singles out the blues and jazz as the most authentically American art forms as well as a means through which black Americans deal with the pain of life. His first serious application of his belief, an essay on Richard Wright’s autobiography *Black Boy* (1945), explains that many critics misunderstand Wright’s presentation of his childhood because they are unfamiliar with the place of blues in black American life. He argues that Wright’s narrative form develops from his exposure to the blues: “In that culture the specific folk-art form which helped shape the writer’s attitude toward his life and which embodied the impulse that contributes much to the quality and tone of his autobiography was the Negro blues” (*Collected Essays* 129). Thus, Wright’s struggle to overcome his Southern heritage to become a writer represents a kind of blues-inspired accomplishment. Using a similar paradigm, Trueblood emerges as a character fortified by his natural reliance on the art of his culture. After singing his blues he returns home to his family and reasserts his manhood to his wife. In spite of his actions, he refuses a definition imposed by others and insists upon his own, thereby offering the narrator a valuable lesson in the art of identity formation. One’s humanity can be determined by general opinion only if an individual consents, and Trueblood roundly rejects such a possibility. Houston Baker concludes that “the distinction between folklore and literary art evident in Ellison’s critical practice collapses in his creative” rendition of Trueblood<sup>47</sup>

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<sup>43</sup>This music is a tragicomic language because it associates or put together “stormy song” and “blaring trumpet note of sun”.

<sup>44</sup>Rebecca Gross, “Jazz Poetry & Langston Hughes” on <https://www.arts.gov/art-works/2014/jazz-poetry-langston-hughes>, April 11, 2014

<sup>45</sup>According to Langston Hughes in his essay “The Negro Artist and the Racial Mountain”, in *The Nation*, 1926.

<sup>46</sup>Langston Hughes, “The Negro Artist and the Racial Mountain”, in *the nation*, 1926.

<sup>47</sup>Michael D. Hill and Lena M. Hill. *Ralph Ellison’s Invisible Man A Reference Guide*. Greenwood Guides to Multicultural Literature. Greenwood Press: Westport, Connecticut London, 2008, p. P 101.

## 5. CONCLUSION

At the end of this analysis, we realize that Hughes through this poem celebrates blues and jazz music as an authentic Black and African American music. By using a blues poem in which he enumerates some of the symbolic musical instruments (“drums, trumpet, violins”) and some musical elements (“beat, song, choir, note, sing”), Langston Hughes achieves this goal. Of course, at the outset and through the title of the poem, he defines this black music and the fusion that exists between blues and jazz or how those two entities play together to be a blues and jazz music. And we may note that the image and symbol of “purple”, Hughes uses for this definition also permits to explain how this music of tragicomic language is useful for blacks to have moral strength to affront or combat “tragedy, death, and darkness”. Being a tragicomic language or a tragicomic music, it permits black people to move from a mood of “sadness, despair, pain and crying” to a mood of “joy, trust, light, hope and smile.” And it is in this value or context that this black music gave moral strength to black people. It is an authentic black music as Hughes himself mentioned “jazz to me is one of the inherent expressions of Negro life in America” and it is this aspect that obliged Hughes to celebrate, honor, and make a dedicatee to this music in this poem. It is really a dedicatee that Hughes owes to this black music he loves so much meaning that in plus of incorporated blues and jazz rhythm in his poetry, he wrote a special poem such is the case of “fantasy in purple” in honor to this African American music. Of course this honor and celebration of this black music is done through the context of the birth of this music which was most of the time tragedy, death, darkness occasioning a blues tone in this poem. But it also shows the contrast between sadness/joy, pain/laugh, crying/smile, darkness/sun as far much (due to the fact) it equilibrates and gives moral strength to black people.

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