

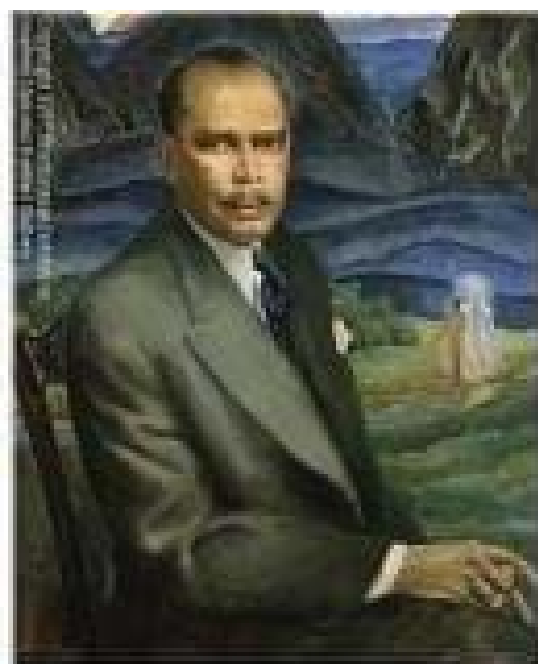
James Weldon Johnson. The Black Bard

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As African American poets have always tried to reflect in their writings the typical concerns of their culture in the context of a larger American civilization, they created part of their poetical compositions by recalling the folkloric values of their ancestors. In fact, they conceptualised poetry as a participatory activity, an active mean of expression by creating an aesthetic tradition shaped with communal values, the primacy of musicality and stylish improvisation.

As a matter of fact, critics such as Sterling Brown, who explored the unlimited possibilities of the folk tradition, found out that black songs and tales may well represent the originality and complexity of the black race and its literature whereas, the nineteenth century white culture was still basing their traditional music on feigned stereotypes and bald sentimentalism. Consequently, the progress of the African American poetic tradition paralleled the development of an important musical practice that covered every single part of the black existence.

However, the close linkage between literature and musical expression will be more palpable during the early twentieth century, especially throughout the period known as the Harlem Renaissance. Within this literary movement, African American poetry began to bloom because of a greater exploration of the black voice. That is to say, poets tried to embark on new cultural expectations based on their realm of experiences by turning away from the western world. In so doing, they chose culture in preference for expressing their past and present reality as representative of their race as well as their individuals.



James Weldon Johnson
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Amongst the main African American poets who searched for exclusive vernacular sources of the blues, spirituals and tales were James Weldon Johnson and Langston Hughes. The

former played a significant role as an anthologist when he introduced African American poetry to the white world with *The Book of American Negro Poetry* (1922). In his preface, Johnson deals with the debate on the limitations of the black literary corpus. He refuses the so-called “minstrelsy dialect” and looks for a new way of expression that would not bound black poets’ emotional and intellectual life. In fact, James Weldon Johnson placed these experiments in some of his best poetry collected in *God's Trombones* (1927) in which he shows his skilful treatment of the black sermon and his use of black folk language.

In addition, James Weldon Johnson believed in the infinite resources to be discovered in-between folk music and speech. He required to merge the musical forms of the blues, jazz, gospel and work songs with poetic expression in order to keep the uniqueness of the former and reach the difficulty of the latter. In fact, Johnson's "O Black and Unknown Bards," a commemoration of the anonymous composers of the spirituals, sets up the importance of the musical tradition in Johnson’s work. To a certain extent, this poem allows Johnson’s emotion to break through the conservative popular verse and at the same time he pays a beautiful tribute to the folk poets who created the spirituals. He opens the poem by questioning the following:

O black and unknown bards of long ago,
How came your lips to touch the sacred fire?
How, in your darkness, did you come to know
The power and beauty of the minstrel's lyre?

Likewise, it is also important to mention the fact that, throughout the poem he entwines lines from the spirituals such as "Steal Away to Jesus," "Swing Low, “Swing Chariot” or "Go Down, Moses", praising the creativity of the composers, who produced their works without any training and under the worst possible conditions. In actuality, Johnson views these songs not merely as aesthetic successes, but as signs of the depth of the black culture. Being this last statement the main motto of his lyrical philosophy, in the next paragraphs some ideas will be provided in order to justify Johnson’s artistic expectations were so well reflected in his works. Going a step further, I will analyse in the following lines, one of the most celebrated excerpts from James Weldon Johnson’s *God Trombones*. In fact, “The Creation” exemplifies one of the best examples that justifies the connection between oral and lyric tradition. The writer in the following lines will depict the “genesis” of the world by recalling the Holy Bible and its sermon-like style.

Firstly, at the beginning of The Creation, (Lines 10-13) words such as "And the" are repeated at the start of each line. This stylistic trait mimics the Biblical story of creation, in which the phrase "And God said" is repeated consistently throughout the passage. This rhetorical technique is often used in oral texts, in speeches and especially, in sermons: the repetition helps those in the audience whose attention has drifted off reconnect with what the speaker is saying:

And the darkness rolled up on one side,
And the light stood shining on the other;
And God said, "That's good!"
Then God reached out and took the light in His hands,

In another part of the poem (lines 14-25) the technique of repetition is again brought into play, with the word "and" beginning five lines out of twelve, and God's refrain "that's good!" is repeated. This phrase expresses the same idea as the familiar phrase "It is good" that is said by God in the Bible, but while the biblical God makes a dispassionate observation, Johnson's God exclaims his approval with enthusiasm, perhaps even with a little surprise. (Line 17) Using the vernacular "a-blazing" helps personalize the sermon:

And God rolled the light around in His hands
Until He made the sun,
And He set the sun a-blazing in the heavens.
And the light that was left from making the sun
God gathered up in a shining ball
And flung it against the darkness,
Spangling the night with moon and stars.
Then down between
The darkness and the light
He hurled the world:
And God said, "That's good!"
Then God Himself stepped down –

Finally, the actual creation of life, mentioned briefly in lines 89-90, is given much less attention than the structuring of the human body. This poem makes no explicit points about what conclusions its readers should draw from all of this, but ends up abruptly with the traditional words for a sermon closing.

Till He shaped it in His own image.
Then into it He blew the breath of life,
And man became a living soul. Amen.
Amen.

Moving now from the stylistic analysis of the poem, it is also important to mention that God's Trombones does not only consist of "The Creation" but, it is also made of seven sermons—"The Creation," "The Prodigal Son," "Go Down Death--A Funeral Sermon," "Noah Built the Ark," "The Crucifixion," "Let My People Go," and "The Judgment Day" by a black preacher. Though Johnson does not use dialect, his free-verse lines echo in the rhythms of a preacher's oratory nurtured on the Bible:

And now, O Lord--
When I've done drunk my last cup of sorrow—
When I've been called everything but a child of God
When I'm done travelling up the rough side of the mountain--
O--Mary's Baby—
When I start down the steep and slippery steps of death—
When this old world begins to rock beneath my feet—
Lower me to my dusty grave in peace
To wait for that great gittin' up morning.

In this last example, the use of the redundant auxiliary ("done"), the biblical, concrete imagery ("cup of sorrow"), the anaphora ("When I've . . . When this . . ."), and the allusion to well-known spirituals ("Mary Had a Baby, Yes, Lord" and "In Dat Great Gittin' up Mornin'") are typical of Johnson's style in this work. In an real church sermon the last line would be a signal for the congregation to break into singing the spiritual.

So as to sum up, the conventionality of these eight poems is already apparent from the fact that they are monologues, whereas in reality a part of the sermon, at least, would have consisted of a dialogue between preacher and congregation so common in-between Gospel songs. Here the presence of the latter is not even suggested, as it might have been by appropriate monologue technique - for example, using the repeated question. Nor is the monologue able to reproduce the oratorical gestures so important for the black preacher. In fact, some sermons are constructed from beginning to end upon spirituals. They borrow their contents and paraphrase their lines. Thus "The Crucifixion" relies for its details on the spirituals "Look-a How Dey Done My Lord!" and "Were You There When They Crucified My Lord." "Let My People Go" is the account of Exodus, related on the lines of "Go Down, Moses," with its classical parallel between the people of Israel and the black people; whereas in "The judgment Day," it is easy to pick out the very expressions used in the spirituals "In Dat Great Gittin' up Mornin'" "My Lord Says He's Gwineter Rain Down Fire," "My Lord, What a Mornin'," and "Too Late, Sinnah."

In conclusion, the simplicity and clarity, so striking in these poems, are the fruits of Johnson's hard efforts. His musical sense is manifested in the choice of sonorities for the free-verse line which, in his hands, becomes magical, and adjusts to the preachers' rhythm as well as to the rise and fall of his voice. This provides us with a pure scent of musicality so well expressed in black sermons, folk tales or many other typical black performances such as jazz or blues. Consequently, James Weldon Johnson gave to music the importance needed in order to express throughout his poetry the past and present reality of his race.

□

A case of study

Sence you went away is a poem which reunites several of the main characteristics a blues composition and a gospel song may have. In fact, blues is an essential part of this poem as firstly, the composition's topic is related to the so common absence or "lak" of someone in this type of works and secondly, because of the constant repetitions (anaphora) of the poem, which concede a subtle tone of grief and despair.

On the other hand, the gospel style is firstly implied in the Vernacular English (some words are written in the way they are spoken); and secondly on the successive repetitions, the bound rhyme and the cyclic structure Johnson gives to the poem. However, there are still many more influences from the "blues rather than "gospel" In any case, both of them are musical performances rooted in the black community for centuries.

Last but not least, it is also important to mention the fact that the repetitions in every verse as well as the cyclic structure of the whole poem recall the diatonic system based on the triadic system and the seventh chords system (from A to G). That is to say, in the poem as

in music, every single line (or in the case of music, the harmony) starts and ends in the same way (triadic system based on tonic, predominant, dominant and tonic). Repetitions provide the idea of continuum (from initial movement towards a resolution and then, back to the initial movement). In fact, Western civilization music has always been based on this beginning – ending – beginning circle. So as to demonstrate this theory, I wrote a musical adaptation for *Sence you went away* which I include in the appendix of this essay.

Finally, throughout this particular score arranged with piano and saxophone (blues' reminiscence), we will observe the melancholic mood so well depicted in the poems' structure and the words chosen by the author. Consequently, it is but a final melodious exemplification of the lyricism and musicality of James Weldon Johnson's work so well theorised by the author himself and so well identified throughout this essay.

Sence you went away

Seems lak to me de stars don't shine so bright,
Seems lak to me de sun done loss his light,
Seems lak to me der's nothin' goin' right,
Sence you went away

Seems lak to me de sky ain't half so blue,
Seems lak to me dat eve'ything wants you,
Seems lak to me I don't know what to do,
Sence you went away

Seems lak to me dat ever'ything is wrong,
Seems lak to me de day's jes twice ez long,
Seems lak to me de bird's forgot his song,
Sence you went away.

Seems lak to me I jes can't he'p but sigh,
Seems lak to me ma th'oat keeps gittin' dry,
Seems like to me a tear stays in ma eye,
Sence you went away.

Repetition Black English Cyclic repetition

Mary had a baby

Mary had a baby (My Lord)
Mary had a baby (Oh My Lord)
Mary had a baby (My Lord)
The people keep coming but the train has gone

Where did she lay him (My Lord)
Where did she lay him (Oh My Lord)

Where did she lay him (My Lord)
The people keep coming but the train has gone

Laid him in a manger (My Lord)
Laid him in a manger (Oh My Lord)
Laid him in a manger (My Lord)
The people keep coming but the train has gone

What did she name him? (My Lord)
What did she name him? (Oh My Lord)
What did she name him? (My Lord)
The people keep coming but the train has gone

Named him King Jesus (My Lord)
Named him King Jesus (Oh My Lord)
Named him King Jesus (My Lord)
The people keep coming but the train has gone

Who heard the singing? (My Lord)
Who heard the singing? (Oh My Lord)
Who heard the singing? (My Lord)
The people keep coming but the train has gone

Shepherds heard the singing (My Lord)
Shepherds heard the singing (Oh My Lord)
Shepherds heard the singing (My Lord)
The people keep coming but the train has gone

Star keeps shining (My Lord)
Star keeps shining (Oh My Lord)
Star keeps shining (My Lord)
The people keep coming but the train has gone

Moving in the elements (My Lord)
Moving in the elements (Oh My Lord)
Moving in the elements (My Lord)
The people keep coming but the train has gone

Jesus went to Egypt (My Lord)
Jesus went to Egypt (Oh My Lord)
Jesus went to Egypt (My Lord)
The people keep coming but the train has gone

Travelled on a donkey (My Lord)
Travelled on a donkey (Oh My Lord)
Travelled on a donkey (My Lord)
The people keep coming but the train has gone

Angels went around him (My Lord)

Angels went around him (Oh My Lord)

Angels went around him (My Lord)

The people keep coming but the train has gone

Repetition

Cyclic repetition

Creation – Genesis¹

In the day that the Lord God made the earth and the heavens, when no plant of the field was yet in the earth and no herb of the field had yet sprung up-for the Lord God had not caused it to rain upon the earth, and there was no man to till the ground; but a mist went up from the earth and watered the whole face of the ground -then the Lord God formed man of dust from the ground, and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life, and man became a living being.

And the Lord God planted a garden in Eden, in the east; and there he put the man whom he had formed. And out of the ground the Lord God made grow every tree that is pleasant to the sight and good for food, the tree of life also in the midst of the garden, and the tree of the knowledge of good and evil.

A river flowed out of Eden to water the garden, and there it divided and became four rivers. The name of the first is Pishon; it is the one which flows around the whole land of Hav'ilah, where there is gold; and the gold of that land is good; bdellium and onyx stone are there. The name of the second river is Gihon; it is the one which flows around the whole land of Cush. And the name of the third river is Tigris, which flows east of Assyria. And the fourth river is the Euphrates.

The Lord God took the man and put him in the garden of Eden to till it and keep it. And the Lord God commanded the man, saying, "You may freely eat of every tree of the garden; but of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat, for in the day that you eat of it you shall die."

Then the Lord said, "It is not good that the man should be alone; I will make him a helper fit for him." So out of the ground the Lord God formed every beast of the field and every bird of the air, and brought them to the man to see what he would call them; and whatever the man called every living creature, that was its name. The man gave names to all cattle, and to the birds of the air, and to every beast of the field; but for the man there was not found a helper fit for him.

So the Lord God caused a deep sleep to fall upon the man, and while he slept took one of his ribs and closed up its place with flesh; and the rib which the Lord God had taken from the man he made into a woman and brought her to the man. Then the man said, "This at last is bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh; she shall be called Woman, because she was taken out of Man."

Therefore a man leaves his father and his mother and cleaves to his wife, and they become one flesh.

And the man and his wife were both naked, and were not ashamed.

*The Creation*²

1 And God stepped out on space And
he looked around and said: "I'm
lonely -I'll make me a world."
And as far as the eye of God could see

5 Darkness covered everything, Blacker
than a hundred midnights down in a
cypress swamp.
Then God smiled,
And the light broke

10 And the darkness rolled up on one side,
And the light stood shining on the other;
And God said, "That's good!"
Then God reached out and took the light in His hands
And God rolled the light around in His hands

15 Until He made the sun,
And He set the sun a-blazing in the heavens.
And the light that was left from making the sun
God gathered up in a shining ball
And flung it against the darkness,

20 Spangling the night with moon and stars.
Then down between
The darkness and the light
He hurled the world:
And God said, "That's good!"

25 Then God Himself stepped down –
And the sun was on His right hand
And the moon was on His left; The stars were
clustered about His head,
And the earth was under His feet. And God walked,

30 And where He trod His footsteps
hollowed the valleys out And bulged the
mountains up.
Then He stooped and looked and saw
That the earth was hot and barren;

35 So God stepped over the edge of the world
And He spat on the seven seas -
Ho batted His eyes, and the lightings flashed -
He clapped His hands, and the thunders rolled -
And the waters above the earth came down,

40 The cooling waters came down.
Then the green grass sprouted,
And the little red flowers blossomed,
The pine tree pointed his finger to the sky
And the oak spread out his arms,

45 The lakes cuddled down in the hollows of the ground,
And the rivers ran down to the sea;
And God smiled again,
And the rainbow appeared
And curled itself around His shoulders.

50 Then God "raised His arms and He waved His hand
Over the sea and over the land,
And He said, "Bring forth! Bring forth!"
And quicker than God could drop His hand
Fishes and fowls

55 And beasts and birds
Swam the rivers and the seas,
Roamed the forests and the woods
And split the air with their wings:
And God said, "That's good!"

60 Then God walked around,
And God looked around
On all that He had made.
He looked at His sun,
And He looked at His moon,

65 And He looked at His little stars:
He looked on His world
With all its living things,
And God said, "I'm lonely still."
Then God sat down -

70 One the side of the hill where He could think,
By a deep, wide river He sat down;
With His head in His hands
God thought and thought
Till He thought, "I'll make me a man!"

75 Up from the bed of the river
God scooped the clay;
And by the bank of the river
He kneeled Him down;
And there the great God Almighty

80 Who lit the sun and fixed it in the sky,
Who flung the stars to the most far corner of the night,
Who rounded the earth in the middle of His hand,
This great God,
Like a mammy bending over her baby,

85 Kneeled down in the dust
Toiling over a lump of clay
Till He shaped it in His own image.
Then into it He blew the breath of life,
And man became a living soul. Amen.

Amen.

Notas

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