Music as a healing language in Hurston and Hughes

Language is one of the most powerful aspects of human communication, and it comes in various forms. While language can be positive, it also has a negative side which can be used to ostracize, oppress, and harm others. One form of language which possesses the tendency to transcend various types of negativity is music. In *Their Eyes Were Watching God* by Zora Neale Hurston, the language of music and Tea Cake’s guitar playing interrupts the persistent troubles within the novel in both Janie’s life and the communities of Jacksonville and the Everglades. In “The Weary Blues”, a musician is able to express his melancholy and set it aside, at least temporarily. In the works of Hurston and Hughes, music is a language that expresses emotion to appease sorrow and unifies in a manner that verbal language fails to accomplish.

In “The Weary Blues”, there is an immediate impression about music’s powerful and enveloping ability. The narrator observes the musician’s passionate connection to the blues:

He made that poor piano moan with melody
O Blues!
Swaying too and fro on his rickety stool
He played that sad raggedy tune like a musical fool
Sweet Blues!
Coming from a black man’s soul  (Hughes lines 10-15)
The musician exudes so much emotion through the piano he is playing, making it “moan” in the same way he would moan with sorrow. He becomes so hypnotized by the music and sways along to the melody. The musician being “like a musical fool” could signify that he has lost any capacity to escape the clutches of music, as well as having no other option but continuing to play. The expressions “O Blues!” and “Sweet Blues” evokes a spiritual quality of the music that could lead to catharsis. The music derives directly from the musician’s soul, making it all the more emotional and compelling.

In *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, music appears later within the narrative, but the struggle with pain is present throughout. In particular, after first experiencing an unfulfilled and undesired marriage with Logan Killicks, Janie’s marriage with Jody is less than perfect and falls apart. After one incident in which Jody abuses Janie, she is unable to tolerate him any longer and reflects, “Janie stood where he left her for unmeasured time and thought. She stood there until something fell off the shelf inside her… It was her image of Jody tumbled down and shattered” (Hurston 72). The symbolic image of Janie containing a shelf within suggests that she holds certain thoughts and feelings away from the external world. Janie has hope for an ideal relationship with Jody, especially after her previous marriage. She remains strong and overcomes the pain by suppressing her internal struggle and creating a perception about Jody that is different than reality. The “shelf” allows for Janie to maintain the illusion about Jody, but once her image of him on the shelf is shattered, everything else falls apart. During this moment, Janie comes to an understanding of how she is broken, “She had an inside and outside now and suddenly she knew how not to mix them” (Hurston 72). Janie realizes that she cannot continue to have false perceptions about people and have those perceptions manifest themselves into her
external world. In an article titled, “‘[J]us’ listenin’ tuh you’: Zora Neale Hurston’s *Their Eyes Were Watching God* as Gospel Impulse” Dubek compares Janie’s relationship with Jody as being like the experience of a blues musician. Dubek explains the similarities of Janie’s experience to blues, “In classic blues fashion, Janie will keep the ‘painful’ details of her life with Joe alive in her consciousness, learning from experience” (Dubek 121). As with blues music, Janie’s experiences are saturated with emotion and stay within her mind for a long time. The repetition of her failing relationships is similar to the repetition in blues music. Therefore, even though in this scene there are no direct references to music, Hurtson expresses Janie’s life experiences in the same way that blues music expresses certain experiences. It is not until Tea Cake arrives that music is directly expressed, and Janie begins to heal and open up again. In “The Weary Blues”, a similar symbolic image is echoed. The musician sings about loneliness, but decides to overcome it, “I’s gwine to quit ma frownin’/ And put mah troubles on the shelf” (Hughes lines 21-22). Through music, the musician is able to find some momentary happiness and set aside his sadness and feelings of isolation on the “shelf”. Both Janie and the musician have methods of putting their feelings away in order to overcome pain. For Janie, she holds an ideal image of Jody up to ignore the truth, and once the realization about the false image is reached the pain occurs. For the musician he places his troubles out of reach, but they could eventually be reached for and brought back once again when the music is gone.

When Tea Cake first arrives and meets Janie, she is apprehensive and tries not to get involved with him, especially because of her past relationships. After Janie spends more time with Tea Cake, he attempts to get her to break down her barrier through an amusing imitation of music, “Tea Cake stood there mimicking the tuning of a guitar. He frowned and struggled with
the pegs of his imaginary instrument watching her out of the corner of his eye with that secret joke playing all over his face. Finally she smiled and he sung middle C” (Hurston 100). Tea Cake creates an illusion of him tuning and then playing his guitar with his voice. Through this “joke”, Tea Cake is able to connect with Janie in a manner that he was not able to previously. Music allows for him to communicate his charm and personality to Janie, which leads to her letting in Tea Cake more than before. Although it still takes a little more time for her to fully allow herself to stop denying her feelings for Tea Cake, this moment is significant in moving forward their relationship.

Music’s cathartic ability comforts both Janie in Hurston’s novel and the musician in Hughes’s poem. After Janie starts spending more time with Tea Cake, he actually plays music for her instead of just making an imitation, “The Tea Cake went to the piano without so much as asking and began playing blues and singing and throwing grins over his shoulder. The sound lulled Janie to soft slumber…” (Hurston 103). Tea Cake’s music brings tranquility and allows for Janie to relax for one of the first times since her painful experience with Jody. After facing the criticism of others through verbal language after Joe dies, the language of music soothes Janie and brings about positivity. Tea Cake begins to play music without being asked, as if he knew it was necessary and could function as a healing power for Janie. In “The Weary Blues”, music has a similar comforting effect on the musician, even after he is no longer physically performing, “The singer stopped playing and went to bed/ While the Weary Blues echoed through his head./He slept like a rock or a man that’s dead” (Hughes lines 33-35). The musician’s song still plays through his mind, even after he is finished playing it. Since the song lives in his thoughts, it continues to hold the same power as it does when being sung and played. The musician is
comforted by the music, and is able to rest in the same way that Janie is able to rest from Tea Cake’s music. The idea that the musician is sleeping like a “rock” or like he’s “dead” exemplifies the peaceful quality of music. With both the image of the “rock” and being “dead”, there is an impression of being unbothered by outside forces. The narrator observes how music can transcend troubles, and relieve an individual’s soul in a manner that nothing else can.

It has become apparent that throughout the texts, music is both directly and indirectly conveyed and significant. Once Tea Cake and Janie establish their relationship, they travel to Jacksonville, Florida. Music has a significant part in bringing Tea Cake and Janie together, and it also symbolically propels them further, “The train beat on itself and dances on the shiny steel rails mile after mile. Every now and then the engineer would play his whistle for the people in the towns he passed by. And the train shuffled on to Jacksonville…” (Hurston 116). Hurston describes the movement and sounds of the train they are travelling on in a musical way. The train makes a steady beat and whistles like a song. Hurston cleverly uses a musical language to describe Janie and Tea Cake’s journey, which demonstrates the manner in which music has a role in their relationship both literally and symbolically. Music is one of the essential forms of language that connects the two, unseen in Janie’s previous marriage and relationships. In an article titled “To the Tune of Those Weary Blues : The Influence of the Blues Tradition in Langston Hughes’s Blues Poems”, Tracy compares the structure of blues music with Hughes’s poems. As with Hurston, Hughes both addresses music directly, and incorporates aspects of music within his language indirectly. Tracy describes Hughes poetry as capturing the essence of blues through the structure of his language, “Hughes, then, shows a strong ability to capture the beat and phrasing of blues songs. He also demonstrates a remarkable success with manipulating
the formulaic quality of blues lyrics” (Tracy 81). In “The Weary Blues”, Hughes writes his lines in a very similar manner to blues music, with the repetition and rhyming. One way in which he is further able to convey its emotion and healing capabilities is through the use of “I”. For example “I got the Weary Blues/I can’t be satisfied” (Hughes lines 25-26). While it isn’t a major change or uncommon for blues to contain “I”, Hughes modifies a Mississippi John Hurt song in “The Weary Blues” with his simple addition of “I”. Both Hurston and Hughes are able to restructure the language music, whether in a major or minor way, in order to further express a character’s thoughts and emotions.

While music can ultimately result in positivity, there can certainly be some sorrow and conflict within the music itself. After Janie and Tea Cake’s arrival in Jacksonville, she begins to feel worried about their relationship when she discovers he must have taken her secret stash of money. Janie waits for his explanation and when he finally returns, Tea Cake similarly shows up at Janie’s door as he did in the beginning of their relationship by imitating the playing of an imaginary guitar again: “After a while there was somebody playing a guitar outside her door. Played right smart while. It sounded lovely too. But it was sad to hear it feeling blue like Janie was” (Hurston 120). Janie is upset with Tea Cake, but his guitar playing has a part in helping to bring the confrontation down a notch. The situation parallels the time when Tea Cake made Janie smile and broke down her walls. Due to the similarities between the two situations, Janie and Tea Cake are able to discuss their problems. Janie acknowledges how through his music Tea Cake expresses sadness as well. Therefore, the music itself might not always be positive, but it still has the ability to eventually lead to positivity and unity. In an article titled “‘The World in a Jug and the Stopper in [Her] Hand: Their Eyes as Blues Performance”, Johnson argues that Janie’s
journey with challenging relationships functions as one of the several levels of blues within the novel. Johnson focuses on Janie’s relationship with Tea Cake as being an element of the many types of blues written within the novel, “Janie’s relationship with Tea Cake, himself a blues singer/guitarist, is itself the love of many blues, with its pain and pleasure, jealousy and passion, short life and sudden end” (Johnson 401). Janie and Tea Cake’s relationship contains the same ups and downs as relationships and love described in blues music. Although Janie experiences some pain and jealousy within her relationship with Tea Cake, it usually is resolved. In comparison to her two previous relationships which were solely negative, the aspect of music aides in escaping any problems and balancing emotions. In “The Weary Blues”, the song the musician is performing also expresses sadness:

Got the Weary Blues

And can’t be satisfied-

I ain’t happy no mo’

And I wish that I had died. (Hughes lines 27-30)

The musician sings about not being able to ever find happiness and satisfaction in life, even going as far as to wish for death. The content of the lyrics is painful and sorrowful, however, but in expressing these negative emotions, the musician is able to find relief. The musician’s wish for death comes true, but in a different manner. Rather than finding literal death, he finds the death of his sorrows and troubled state of mind through music.

In *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, music unifies Janie’s internal destruction as well as unifying Janie and Tea Cake romantically. Music also has a unifying role within the community of Jacksonville and later in the working community of the Everglades. After Janie and Tea Cake
resolve their conflict about her missing money, they go out and spend time eating and inviting others to join and have a good time with them. Initially another man is assigned to play guitar for the company, but his inability to play upsets the people and they start yelling. Tea Cake then decides to take over the music by performing, “So Tea Cake took the guitar and played himself. He was glad of the chance because he hadn’t had his hand on a box since he put his in the pawn shop to get some money to hire a car for Janie…” (Hurston 123). Not only does Tea Cake’s guitar playing help to calm down the disruption of the get together, but it also brings joy within himself. Previously, Tea Cake had only been able to pretend to have a guitar when “playing” for Janie. Now, Tea Cake actually has a physical guitar and his playing unifies on an even greater scale than before. His guitar also comes into use to unite the community of workers later on in the Everglades, “Tea Cake’s house was a magnet, the unauthorized center of the ‘job’. The way he would sit in the doorway and play his guitar made the people stop and listen… He kept everyone laughing in the bean field” (Hurston 132). Even within a different community than before, Tea Cake’s music brings positivity among the workers of the bean field. Music allows for the workers to temporarily escape the stress and demand of their job, and they find some joy together listening to Tea Cake. Once Tea Cake acquires an actual guitar, he can project music on a greater scale while simultaneously conveying its power in a more significant magnitude.

In *Their Eyes Were Watching God* and “The Weary Blues”, music resolves trouble and pain. In Hughes’s poem, music functions on an individual scale, helping the musician overcome sadness and loneliness. In Hurston’s novel, music has power both individually and collectively. Both the content and structure of both works reflect music, demonstrating the consuming ability of music which can reach grounds that other forms of language might not. Music is a universal
language that can be understood and applied to several situations, which is why music is still as important today.
Works Cited


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