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***Poetry Unit:* The Weary Blues**

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| **Lesson Objective:** Analyze Langston Hughes’s “The Weary Blues” as an example of Harlem Renaissance Jazz Poetry. |

**Do Now**

**Directions:** Read this article about the blues, then answer the questions below.

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| **The Blues**  In the late 1800’s, a new type of music was beginning to emerge from the American South in places like Texas, Louisiana, and the Mississippi Delta. It was music that was deeply rooted in the ballads, spirituals, and work songs of enslaved African Americans. This music, called the blues, was “rural music that captured the suffering, anguish, and hopes of 300 years of slavery and **tenant** farming.”[[1]](#footnote-1) Usually performed by solo musicians playing acoustic guitar, piano, or harmonica, blues songs focused on expressing the pain, sadness, and **defiance** that Black people experienced day after day.  Following the Great Depression and World War I, many African Americans began leaving the South to come to Northern cities, bringing the blues along with them. The blues exploded in popularity when it arrived in cities like Chicago and Detroit. Solo musicians were now joined by electric guitars, bass, and drums, which made the emotional rawness and intensity of the blues soar to new heights. Because of this explosion, the blues would become one of the main influences of jazz, soul, and rock and roll.  **tenant:** a person that pays to use another person’s property **defiance:** refusing to obey someone or something |

1. What might it mean for the blues to be music of both “suffering” and “hope”?

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1. Some people still say they “have the blues” when they are feeling sad or down, and many musicians and writers put “the blues” in the titles of their work (“Black Cat Blues,” “Levee Blues,” and “Walking Blues” for example). What might these artists be trying to convey?

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| **Vocabulary: Melancholy, Spontaneity** | | | | |
| **Word** | **Definition** | **Related**  **Parts of Speech** | **Situations** | **Image** |
| **melancholy** *adjective* | feeling or showing intense sadness | melancholy *noun* | * Even though he had gotten the highest score in class for his project, Raul’s **melancholy** mood could not be lifted ever since he failed his midterm. * \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_ \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_ \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_ |  |
| **spontaneity**  *noun* | done without advance thought or planning | spontaneously *adverb*  spontaneous *adjective* | * The **spontaneity** of the clowns kept the audience engaged while the circus performers switched between acts. * \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_ \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_ \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_ |  |

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| **Vocabulary Active Practice** |
| **As we apply our new word knowledge, be sure to use the vocabulary word in your answer!**   1. Could a **melancholy** person do something **spontaneous**? Why or why not? 2. What is something **spontaneous** that you’ve done? If you have never done something **spontaneous**, why not? 3. Is it **spontaneous** if you always do the same thing (like go to the same restaurant for dinner)? 4. Can a **melancholic** song be beautiful? Why or why not?   \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_ |

**Cycle 1**

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| **The Harlem Renaissance**  In the decades that followed the Civil War, lack of economic opportunity and the threat of violence caused hundreds of thousands of African Americans to leave the South and travel to the North and Midwest, seeking fairer treatment and more opportunity. This movement would become known as the Great Migration.  As part of the Great Migration, thousands of Black Americans moved to and settled in the Harlem neighborhood of New York City. By the 1920s, Harlem had become a vibrant center of Black culture. Many brilliant African-American artists and scholars in Harlem began to create works that changed the landscape of American art and helped produce “one of the most significant eras of cultural expression in the nation’s history—the Harlem Renaissance.”  The creative works of the Harlem Renaissance were both a celebration of Black culture and a criticism of the continued racism that Black Americans faced. Even though moving to the North provided new job opportunities and a **respite** from the violence of the rural South, Black migrants continued to face discrimination in their new homes. They were often forced to settle in less desirable parts of cities and prevented from buying or building homes in better areas. **Enclaves** like Harlem emerged as communities where Black Americans both thrived and continued to struggle.  As described by Alain Locke, a Harvard-educated writer, critic, and teacher, the Harlem Renaissance was “a ‘spiritual coming of age’ in which African Americans transformed ‘social **disillusionment** to race pride.’”[[2]](#footnote-2) Through the works created during this time, artists, writers, and thinkers gave voice to the ongoing struggles of Black America and critiqued a society that still treated them as unequal. Simultaneously, their works joyfully celebrated Black culture, expression, and thought in ways that still captivate today.  The Harlem Renaissance led to an explosion of all types of art forms that were unified under their presentation of life as a Black person in America, or, as writer Langston Hughes said, an “expression of our individual dark-skinned selves.” Duke Ellington and Ella Fitzgerald, two of the most important jazz musicians of the time, immortalized Harlem as a major cultural destination with their song “Take the A Train,” about the subway line that leads to Harlem: “Hurry, get on board, its comin’/Listen to those rails a-thrumming all aboard/Get on the “A” train/Soon you’ll be on Sugar Hill in Harlem.”  **respite:** rest or relief from something difficult or unpleasant **enclaves:** areas within cities where people of a common culture or background live that are surrounded by people who are different from them  **disillusionment:** disappointment at discovering something isn’t as good as you expected |

1. Which statement best describes the Harlem Renaissance?

a. It refers to African-American migration from the South to the North.  
b. It refers to the experience of discrimination African Americans experienced in Harlem.  
c. It refers to a cultural and artistic movement developed in Harlem by African-American migrants.  
d. It refers to things like the poetry, painting, and music that African Americans created in the South.

1. a. In one sentence, explain why many African Americans felt “social disillusionment” during the time of the Harlem Renaissance.

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1. What do you think it means when the article says that African Americans “transformed social disillusionment into race pride” with their art?

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1. Image result for key icon**Turn and Talk:** Consider the article above and what you read about the blues in the Do Now. Why might the blues have been an important influence on artists of the Harlem Renaissance?

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| **Notes** |

**Cycle 2**

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| **The Weary Blues**  Langston Hughes (1902-1967) is arguably the most notable Harlem Renaissance jazz poet. Like jazz, the blues was highly influential in the poetry created during the early to mid-1900s. Hughes’s poem “The Weary Blues,” written in 1925, shows the influence of both musical genres.  **Droning** a drowsy syncopated tune,  Rocking back and forth to a mellow **croon**,  I heard a Negro play.  Subject  Speaker  Audience  Down on **Lenox Avenue** the other night  By the pale dull **pallor** of an old wan bulb *5*  He did a lazy sway. . . .  He did a lazy sway. . . .  To the tune o’ those **Weary** Blues.  With his ebony hands on each ivory key  He made that poor piano moan with melody. *10*  O Blues!  Swaying to and fro on his **rickety** stool  He played that sad raggy tune like a musical fool.  Sweet Blues!  Coming from a black man’s soul. *15*  O Blues!  In a deep song voice with a melancholy tone  I heard that Negro sing, that old piano moan—  “Ain’t got nobody in all this world,  Ain’t got nobody but ma self. *20*  I’s gwine to quit ma frownin’  And put ma troubles on the shelf.”  Thump, thump, thump, went his foot on the floor.  He played a few chords then he sang some more—  “I got the Weary Blues *25*  And I can’t be satisfied.  Got the Weary Blues  And can’t be satisfied—  I ain’t happy no mo’  And I wish that I had died.” *30*  And far into the night he crooned that tune.  The stars went out and so did the moon.  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. *35*  **droning:** making alow, continuous, dull noise  **croon:**  quiet singing or humming  **weary:** very tired **Lenox Avenue:** a busy street in Harlem  **pallor:** lack of color (in an unhealthy way) **rickety:** not strong or well made |

1. Image result for key iconHow would you describe the “weary blues,” according to the poem? Underline at least three lines that support your thoughts.

Image result for key icon\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_

1. a. **Turn and Talk:** Where do you see musical influences in this poem? Consider things like word choice, rhythm, and rhyme**.**

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| **Notes** |
| **Discussion Notes** |

b. Why do you think the speaker of the poem chose to include lines sung by the blues singer? Try to think of more than one idea.

### Cycle 3

**Annotation Task:** While you read, underline lines that reveal different reactions to jazz music in the 1920s.

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| **Jazz and Jazz Poetry**  Much like the blues, jazz was more than just music. While the blues dealt with themes of struggle and sorrow, jazz was more lively and celebratory. Jazz became a cultural movement, influencing the way people dressed, how they spoke, and even the way they acted. Jazz was both a musical genre and a lifestyle that was particularly popular in Black enclaves and young working-class communities.  In the first half of the 20th century, jazz quickly became the most popular form of dance music in the United States. At the time, jazz was a musical style that had been born from the blues and was very different from the pop music typically played on the radio at the time, which many jazz musicians found commercial, “repetitive and unchallenging to play.”[[3]](#footnote-3) Because jazz musicians rejected the status quo, many people in both the musical establishment and the upper classes of society hated the jazz scene.  The **countercultural** movement around jazz attracted more than just musicians. As the National Humanities Center notes, “Visual artists and writers were frequently inspired by jazz, many thinking its sense of spontaneity, its **dissonance**, its **anti-bourgeois** (borsj-WAH) attitude” were powerful ideas that made sense for the future of their art.[[4]](#footnote-4) Many writers would contribute to the formation of Jazz Poetry, poetry that is inspired by jazz, speaks about jazz, and is even read while jazz music is playing. As Poets.org explains further:  “Jazz poetry, like the music itself, encompasses a variety of forms, rhythms, and sounds. Beginning with the birth of blues and jazz at the start of the twentieth century, jazz poetry can be seen as a thread that runs through [movements like] the Harlem Renaissance… and it is still vibrant today. From early blues to free jazz to experimental music, jazz poets use their appreciation for the music as poetic inspiration.”[[5]](#footnote-5)  **countercultural:** values, ideas, and ways of acting that are different from the rest of society **dissonance:** lack of agreement or harmony **anti-bourgeois:** an attitude against a comfortable middle class seen as self-centered and obsessed with wealth |

1. a. The article mentions the **spontaneity** of jazz. Where do you see evidence of that **spontaneity** in “The Weary Blues”? Why do these moments seem **spontaneous**?

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*And far into the night he crooned that tune.*

*The stars went out and so did the moon.*

*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.*

1. Image result for key iconReread lines 31-35 again:
2. When someone says they “slept like a rock,” it usually means that they went to sleep feeling satisfied after a lot of effort (like completing a hard project or winning an important game). Why do you think the blues singer might have “slept like a rock” at the end of the poem?

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1. The last line also says that the singer slept like “a man that’s dead.” How is this different than sleeping “like a rock”? Why might Hughes put these ideas side by side? Consider both the similarities and the differences between the phrases.

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1. Image result for key iconDo you see “The Weary Blues” as more **melancholic** or more celebratory? What makes you think this?

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**Name: \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_ Date: \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_**

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**Exit Ticket**

1. Explain how “The Weary Blues” can be read as an expression of both struggle and celebration during the Harlem Renaissance. Be sure to include references to both jazz and the blues in your response.

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