Three Blues: A Study of Sterling A. Brown’s Select Poems

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ABSTRACT

Sterling Allen Brown was a pivotal figure in African American literature. From relative obscurity early in his career, he was, in the words of Brown himself, “rediscovered, reinstituted, regenerated, and recovered” later in his life, and went on to become “The Dean of American Negro Poets.” His first collection of poems Southern Road (1932) brought rural folk to life with poignant integrity in the rhythms of ballads, blues, and jazz. From section two of Southern Road, in “On Restless River,” the musical form Blues can be found in “Memphis Blues,” “Riverbank Blues,” and “New St. Louis Blues,” trilogy. The Blues mood is a sorrowful one; the word “Blues” is part of the American vocabulary, now a synonym for melancholy and for unhappy moodiness. Brown’s poems reflect the understanding of the often tragic destinies of African Americans in the United States.

Sterling A. Brown (1901-1989), African American poet, critic, professor, and “the Dean of American Poets,” grew up squarely in the black middle class of Washington, DC, but interest in the lives of common folk took him from the lecture hall to the barrel house and the barbershop. He began collecting folk songs and stories, and then published Southern Road in 1932. His later works included Negro Poetry and Drama (1937), The Negro in American Fiction (1937), and The Negro Caravan (1941).

At the beginning of the 20th century, observers in New Orleans and elsewhere in the South began to notice a new kind of music. This music borrowed harmonic and structural devices and vocal techniques from work songs and spirituals. The Father of the Blues, W. C. Handy (1873-1958), wrote “the most widely known blues of all,” the St. Louis Blues. Brown portrays Blues and its significance through “Memphis Blues,” “Riverbank Blues,” and “New St. Louis Blues,” trilogy, with endurance, tragedy, destruction, and pain.

In the poem “Riverbank Blues,” Brown wrote a very strong message about life that applied to many African American people at the time of the Harlem Renaissance, but can really be applied to anyone. Brown emphasizes the message that sometimes people get stuck at a spot in life and do not want to go any further. People get lazy, and settle for something that is not what they really want. There may be something good where they have stopped, but they know that they can achieve so much more. Opportunities come and pass them by, and often people do not take them because they are lazy, or have no hope left in them. Other people may try to convince one that where they are in life is a good place to be, but that is just holding one back. One has to listen to his or her inner self and urge him or herself to keep on going in search of something better. Though sometimes it may be tempting to just sit down and stop trying, one has to keep going, because “you’re a fool you ef you stay” (32).

Brown talks about getting stuck in a “sticky mudbank”(1), and by this he means that sometimes one gets stuck in a place in life and cannot get out of it without some hard work. One may end up thinking that there is “No need for hopin’, no need for doin’”
(3), and decide that there is no point in trying to get out of a bad situation in life. When Brown says “Muddy streams keep him fixed for good” (4), he means that sometimes if a situation is hard to get out of, people may just decide to remain in it.

“Little Muddy, Big Muddy, Moreau and osage, Little Mary’s, Cedar creek” (5) are examples of rivers, in this case, that may wind themselves “roundabout a man’s roots”(7), and distract a person from his true cause and goal. “Big mules, black loam, apple and peach trees” (13) are symbols of the good things that may appear when we get stuck in life, but often people refuse to hang on to these things. Brown emphasizes this point when he says, “de river washes us down” (14).

Brown personifies the river when he says, “Heard the water talkin’ quiet” (18). He says that it can tell one to “take yo’ time” (19) and stop trying to get somewhere in life. Brown is trying to get across in the poem that one has to be dedicated and tell him or herself to just keep on going, “Better be movin’ . . . better be travelin’” (23). If one does choose to remain at a low point in life just because it is hard, one is a fool “better not git rooted Muddy water fool you, ef you stay” (32), Brown says.

Throughout the poem, Brown uses various symbols to show that sometimes one can get stuck at a spot in life. For this, he uses the river as a symbol. There are many things that may seem appealing at this point, and these are symbolized by the fruit trees, cabin, etc. Brown continues to say that if one gets stuck at this point in life, one is a complete fool. The overall message is that even though life may seem hard at times and you may just want to stop, you have to tell yourself to keep going.

In the poem “Memphis Blues,” Brown employs the rhythmic idiom of the black folk church. In fact, he fuses the rhythm and imagery of the black folk sermon with the ejaculatory response of the blues and gospel, and the rhythm of folk rhymes. Parts one and three of “Memphis Blues” employ the rhythm of black folk rhymes. Although part one uses the rhythm of the folk rhyme, underlining its Biblical and historical allusions is the black folk preacher’s vision of the threat of destruction. The threat here is not so much “the fire next time” for which the sinner is to prepare his soul, but the destruction of Memphis, Tennessee, by floods and tornadoes. Ultimately, the poem is a comment on the transitory nature of all things man-made. In other words, just as great cities of the past fell to decay, so will Memphis. But, because this Memphis does not belong to the black man, the various speakers are indifferent to its inevitable destruction; if Memphis falls, “Nigger won’t worry,” or if “Memphis come back / Ain’ no skin / Off de nigger’s back” (58). Rather than prepare for the destruction as the auditors of an exhorting preacher would expect his congregation to do, the speakers stoically accept it without reprimand from the general speaker. Their indifference is summed up in part three, an excellent employment of the rhythm of black folk rhymes:

Memphis go
By flood or Flame;
Nigger won’t worry
All de same–
Memphis gi
Memphis come back,
Ain’ no skin
Off de nigger’s back.
All dese cities
Ashes, rust. ...
De win’ sing sperrichals
Through deir dus’. (51-62)

The rhythm of that stanza is similar to that in the following rhyme entitled “Aunt Date”:

Ole Aunt Date, she died so late
She couldn’t get in at the Heaven Gate.
The Angels met her with a great big club,
Knocked her r’ight back in the washin’ tub (27-30)

and in “Precious Things”:

Hold my rooster, hold my hen,
Pray don’t touch my Grecian Bend.

Hold my bonnet, hold my shawl,
Pray don’t touch my waterfall.

Hold my hands by the finger tips,
But pray don’t touch my sweet little lips. (26-31)
Through the rhythm of folk rhymes, Brown intensifies the black man’s indifference toward the destruction of Memphis, for folk rhymes are not only humorous but playful. The threat of the destruction of Memphis is discussed lightly, for it is of less concern to the black man than it is to the white man, who claims the city as his own.

Presenting each speaker’s reaction to the threat of destruction, part two of “Memphis Blues” fuses the voices of the black folk preacher and a response in the voices of musicians. Like the black folk preacher using repetitious, formulaic, and rhetorical questions to exhort his congregation to prepare their souls for Judgment Day, the general speaker calls: “Watcha gonna do when de tall flames roar,/ Tall flames roar, Mistah Lovin’ Man?” (26-27) and the Loving Man responds: “Gonna love my brownskin better’n before–/ Gonna love my baby lak a do right man,/ Gonna love my brown baby, oh, my Lawd!” (28-30)

The first two lines, which initiate the last three lines of each stanza, convey the threat of destruction, presented in terms of the traditional fire-water-wind-flame imagery, found in the folk sermon. The general speaker’s identification or address to each speaker responding by his vocation or avocation recalls the descriptive appellation of the “sinner man” and “gambling man.” The repeated, formulaic call (“What you gonna do when ...”), presented in a carefully measured rhythm, exemplifies one of the techniques used by the folk preacher to “move” his congregation. Ironically, the response of each speaker in the poem has nothing to do with the impending destruction; while Memphis is being destroyed, each speaker plans to do what he thinks is best for him. On the other hand, the sentiment and repetition of the response recall the blues, but its ejaculatory “oh, my Lawd” is from the tradition of the “shout,” and spiritual and gospel singing, which runs throughout. “Memphis Blues,” then, is not a blues poem in the sense that “New St. Louis Blues,” “Riverbank Blues,” are. But underlining each speaker’s indifference in “Memphis Blues” is the sensibility of the blues singer—his stoic ability to transcend his deprived condition.

In “New St. Louis Blues,” Brown draws more directly on the traditional form, the subjects, and the idiom of the blues in other poems. In some of those, however, he, as a self-conscious artist, is less successful than in others in which he fuses various folk and literary techniques.

In the former, he, as Alvin Aubert observes of Langston Hughes’s direct use of the blues mode, almost replicates those artistic techniques marking the distinctiveness of the blues form. The three poems which comprise “New St. Louis Blues,” for instance, adhere too closely to the blues form. In them, Brown uses the two-part three line stanza form of classic blues, each line marked by a caesura. But instead of the common aab rhyme scheme, Brown’s stanzas are triplets.

Aesthetically, these poems are like Hughes’s “Morning After,” and “Midwater Blues.” They lack what George Kent calls the resources of the blues singer: “the singing voice, instrumental music, facial expression and gesture”—all of which help the singer drive his lyrics “into our spirit.”

What interests us most about Brown’s poems in “New St. Louis Blues” is the breadth and variety of his subjects and his handling of them. In Hughes’s blues mode poems, the central subject is usually love relationship, rendered in the first person and through the associational technique of the blues. Less individualized, Brown’s poems in “New St. Louis Blues” cover various subjects.

Beyond the obvious blues form previously noted, the art of “New St. Louis Blues” is an achievement, for here Brown takes the blues techniques to a literary level. Brown achieves the “deeper idiom of feeling” in the “New St. Louis Blues” trilogy.

Brown is, however, not experimental in his trilogy, “New St. Louis Blues.” Undoubtedly, Brown had in mind the man reputed to be the Father of the Blues when he wrote these poems. Twenty years before, in 1912, W. C. Handy wrote the “most widely known blues of all,” the “St. Louis Blues.” The plaints of a lonely, love-sick woman filter through its lines.

In “Market Street Woman,” Brown retains the cadence of the popular Handy song with its quickened pace in the first half of the line, while he transforms the St. Louis temptress into an aging streetwalker whom the men now ignore:

Put paint on her lips, purple powder on her choklit face,
Paint on her lips, purple powder on her choklit face,
Take mo’ dan paint to change de luck of dis dam place. (7-9)

Gettin’ old and ugly, an’ de sparks done left’ her eye,
Old an’ ugly an’ de fire’s out in her eye,
De men may see her, but de men keeps passin’ by– (10-12)

Brown, in portraying this hard luck woman to whom life is “dirty in a hundred ornery ways,” uses the softened, elided sounds of folk speech and song. However, the strong racial flavour is not dependent upon dialect. As Alain Locke had predicted several years before—that someone would reveal the soul of the Black man “in a characteristic way of thinking and in a homely philosophy rather than in jingling and juggling of broken English”—Brown achieves the deeper idiom of feeling” in “New St. Louis Blues” trilogy. The “deeper idiom” that Locke speaks of is conveyed in Brown’s sensitive treatment of the ironies, paradoxes, and near tragic situations of Black life.

In the first poem of the trilogy, “Market Street Woman,” the old prostitute is a symbol of a demoralized Black community in which only the slimmest prospect of “luck” can change an agonizingly desperate situation. And ironically, unlike her diamond-studded prototype, she has no power to entice. The dispossessed man in “Low Down,” bumming tobacco from passers-by, views him as worthless and views life as a gamble in which the dices are loaded and the cards are “all marked to hell.” He is heard saying:
“Bone’s gittin’ brittle, an’ my brain won’t low no rest,/ Bone’s gittin’ brittle, an’ my brain won’t let me rest./ Death drivin’ rivets overtime in my scooped out chest” (37-39).

Diseased, lonely, and spiritually lost, the man sees his personal worth reduced to “bummin’ cut plug from de passers by”(34)

Significantly, in these poems, Brown is consistent with the blues mode and presents more than “a woman’s plaint for her departed or departing lover”(A Son’s Return 223); he handles the human concerns over aging, fear of death, and the confrontation with natural disasters.

Recognizing in the best folk blues “their elemental honesty, depth of insight, and strong original phrasing,” Brown fuses these qualities with the resources of the literary artist to give genuine expression to “the soul of the Negro.” For example, in “Tornado Blues,” he personifies the death and destruction wrought by the St. Louis Cyclone: “Destruction was a-drivin’ it and close behind was Fear,/ Destruction was a-drivin’ it and hand in hand with Fear,/ Grinnin’ Death and skinny Sorrow was a-brinin’ up de rear” (19-21).

Death, Destruction, Fear, and Sorrow are allegorical figures taunting the victims of this deadly tornado. The following lines, created by nameless blues singers, commemorate its victims:

The wind was howling, buildings began to fall
I seen dat mean ol’ twister comin’ jes lak a cannon ball.

De world was as black as midnight, I never heard such
a noise before,
Like a million lions, when turned loose, dey all roar

De people was scrammin’, runnin’ ev’y which-a-way,
(Lord, help us, help us)
I fell down on my knees an’ began to pray.

De shack where we were livin’ reeled an’ rocked but
never fell.
How de cyclone started, nobody but de Lawd can tell.(qtd in Negro Caravan 480)

In the poem, “Tornado Blues,” Brown heightens the treatment of this theme. His poem begins with these remarkable lines: “Black wind come a-speedin’ down de river from de Kansas plains,/ Black wind come a-speedin’ down de river from de Kansas plains./ Black wind come a-roarin’ like a flock of giant aeroplanes” (16-18).

Couched in a convincing folk idiom, Brown’s “aeroplanes” simile is strikingly original; it parallels the folk figure “lak a cannon ball.” In the next line, Death, Destruction, Fear, and Sorrow take on flesh as they allegorically express the truth of the dirty work wrought by merciless tornado winds. Also, implicit in the poem is a subtle irony that demands that the tornado visits the poor Black people and Jews, rather than the wealthier whites, especially since “they had little to offer their cruel guests.”

Thus, in these three poems, Brown portrays the Blues in such a way as to present their sorrow, death, and destruction. Blues is a musical form that influenced Brown’s poems. His poems embrace the themes of tragedy, feelings, etc. Finally, in all the poems, the message which Brown conveys is “give one more try for anything.”

Works Cited