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Hiermit bestätige ich diese Arbeit nach bestem Wissen und Gewissen selbstständig verfasst und die Regeln der guten wissenschaftlichen Praxis eingehalten zu haben.

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1 Introduction

Even a century after the “birth” of blues and jazz in the United States interest in these music styles has not decreased. Innumerate clubs, magazines, books, films, documentaries, reissues of past jazz recordings as well as new recordings by contemporary musicians, renowned institutes for jazz education etc. point towards the vitality of blues and jazz. These styles became so incredibly successful that they soon conquered not only the United States but the whole western world. Most genres of popular music today like R&B, Rock and Roll, Soul, Funk, Soul, Bluesrock, Fusion, Rap, Hip Hop and many more would not exist without blues and jazz. This music, which was originally created by Afro-Americans and is now firmly integrated into the American mainstream, was not imported into the United States but evolved against the background of black and white experiences and is appreciated as independent American creation. As Cataliotti explains:

[...] it is apparent that the music-making impulse in the African heritage has dominated the European, and the music that comprises the continuum is regarded as the outstanding form of artistic expression that has been produced in America. For this reason, music that is characteristically African American is considered characteristically American throughout the world. (Cataliotti, *The Music*, x)

Jazz, blues and all related styles of popular music have had and still have a significant impact on fiction. There is an abundance of creative works, by both black and white writers, with a strong affinity to jazz and blues. Authors have been - and still are - fascinated by the energy that emanates from these styles; the improvisation and spontaneity, the lifestyle of the musicians as well as the intensity of the live performance which is so utterly different from classical entertainment. Jazz and blues incorporate many elements of African music traditions that were taken to the United States by slaves and therefore represent the African heritage and collective roots that connects African-Americans all over the United States today. Moreover, music as an essential form of expression in the black community is very much a part of everyday life and is a device for African-American authors to verbalize social and political attitudes.

My thesis aims to give an insight into black and white literature in which blues and jazz play an integral part. First, an introduction about the development of these musical genres

will be given since this information is essential for the political, social and musical understanding of the texts. The central part of the thesis consists of six texts, among them five short stories and one novel which were written by five Afro-American authors (Rudolph Fisher, Langston Hughes, James Baldwin, Maya Angelou and Alice Walker) and one white author (Eudora Welty) which will be analyzed. They will be presented in chronological order. For the better understanding of the representation of music and musicians, two additional chapters will deal with literature and the different usages of music within African-American fiction from the Reconstruction Era to the 1980s. The appendix deals with the harmonic structure, chord patterns and improvisational techniques concerning the blues, since this art form, which influenced jazz and gospel, combines African and European stylistic devices which demand more detailed explanation.

2 The Blues

2.1 The economic situation

For the understanding of the blues and its use in literature, the historical and the sociological context of the South, especially the Mississippi Delta is significant. During Reconstruction Era, after blacks were granted equal civil rights and anticipated a hopeful future, the white population tried to re-establish white supremacy and the antebellum status quo through various measures. The slave-master relationship gave way to the landowner-sharecropper and landowner-field hand relationships.

After the Civil War most of the land remained in white hands as only few blacks could afford the costs of establishing their own farms. Therefore they opted for sharecropping, which became the basic institution in the agricultural South (see Cooper/Terill 424-425). The arrangement stipulated furnishing by the landlord, meaning the provision of accommodation (which in many cases was not more than a dilapidated log cabin), tools for farming, seeds and animals. The landlord also generally advanced credit to meet the living expenses of the cropper family - which indebted the croppers even before they actually had started to farm. In return for their work, sharecroppers usually gained fifty percent of the profit realized through crop sales. Croppers were "legally bound to settle their debts for land rentals and then for furnish before they paid other debts or anything for themselves" (see Cooper 427), a regulation that often made it impossible for them to buy essential goods like e.g. clothing. Landowners supervised their debtors very closely, and interfered with decisions like when to plant, harvest or repair fences. Since many landowners ran their own stores and supplied their croppers directly, they had an overview of their tenants' consumption and thus a tight grip on them. Due to frequent illiteracy and inability to calculate expenses and income, croppers often (rightly) suspected that they had been cheated by the store owner (see Cooper 430).

White landowners benefitted from that system of severe disadvantage that tied the croppers to the rented land and made it almost impossible to clear their debts. Although many blacks left the South, the larger part stayed and was affected by that economic system. Their farming knowledge and financial situation often allowed them no other

choice but to farm and plant cotton. The costs to start cotton planting were comparatively low and most tenants lacked the required capital to try something different. Unfortunately, there was not much industry in the South, therefore non-farming options were scarce and seldom attractive (see Cooper 435). Only a few cities supported an urban working class and in most counties there were only few manufactures like sawmills and cotton ginning companies (see Harris 168).

2.2 Discrimination and segregation

Even before segregation was built into many constitutions of the southern states, discrimination of the black population was customary and a fact of life in the South. Therefore, living conditions and social life were overshadowed by violence and disadvantage and this meant, resulting from economical factors mentioned above, also bad nourishment, high infant mortality and insufficient medical care. The educational standards were incomparably lower since school budgets were unequally distributed (see Harris 154).

The Mississippi Delta developed into an area “where extremes of white affluence and privilege were sustained by equally striking levels of black deprivations and powerlessness” (Cobb 153). This economic situation protected the wealthy whites from any form of black competition and even if this arrangement could be eluded by some, they had to be extremely cautious in order to avoid white resentment. Although poor whites also took part in the landowner–sharecropper relationship and suffered severe economic insecurity, the black population additionally had to cope with political confinement, daily humiliation, exclusion and violence. Blacks were seen as second class people and the abolition of slavery by no means changed that view. Humiliating “traditions” like refusing to address them by their proper names - instead calling them for instance “auntie” or “George” - remained in practice for a long time (see Ayers 132).

Alan Lomax, in his book *The Land Where The Blues Began*, aptly describes such a situation when he reports his encounter with the sheriff of Tunica County. The music ethnologist who worked for the Library of Congress had visited the guitarist Son House and had caused suspicion by interviewing and recording this influential blues artist. For House's boss and the sheriff, Son House was just another “darkie”, as black people were

depreciatively called. Lomax was summoned to the sheriff's office by House's boss and when he explains to him that Tunica County had very fine musicians, the sheriff asked for their names, to which Lomax answers as follows:

“Well, Mister Son House is the-----” I knew I made a mistake before the words were out of my mouth. The Sheriff's red face turned beet color. His eyes narrowed to pinpoints. “You call a nigger Mister,” he snapped. [...] You're probably a spy. And I'm gonna hold you till we can check the FBI. “ A big jail door opened right off the sheriff's office. (Lomax 23)

Race regulations had to be accepted by both sides, and when they failed to be executed, severe retributions were the result. Lomax further explains:

Every county in the south is a small empire, with its own autonomous power. This county system of government has the virtue of allowing a small area, a small parcel of votes, the opportunity to shape local lifestyle, independent of the state and national pattern, so often controlled by party politics. (Lomax 20)

According to custom, blacks and whites never shook hands or walked together in public. Blacks lived in special areas of the town and were allowed to enter whites' houses solely through the back door (see Ayers 133-134). A black person was expected to know “his or her place”; acts of defiance resulted in severe punishment, violence and often death. Lynchings hit one peak in the 1880s and 1890s with some regions having higher numbers of victims than others. Two regions in particular witnessed substantial rates of lynching: the Gulf Plain, stretching from Florida to Texas, and the cotton uplands of Mississippi, Louisiana, Arkansas and Texas. This seems to have been due to the immense increase of the black population. Although other states, like Kentucky or North Carolina, also experienced massive racial conflicts and were heated up by populist campaigns against blacks, lynching rates there were comparatively low (see Ayers 158). Very often (allegedly) sexual assault on white women, xenophobia of hobos – vagabonds - and itinerant men mobilized the mob. The absolute taboo of interracial sexuality was characterized by a double standard where a mere look of a black man towards a white woman could entail lynching, which was juxtaposed to a considerably more tolerant attitude on the white side. “Even though strict segregation was the order of the day, it somehow seemed to have slipped at night” (Glifton, Taulbert quoted in Cobb 157) whereas “[...] he (the white man) acts if an attack upon or an approach to the white woman were an attack on himself” (Dollard quoted in Cobb 159).

Suppression and intimidation in the South secured social prevalence for whites which

was enforced through the so-called “Jim Crow” laws. These laws installed the systematic racial separation on a legal basis which actually affected most public facilities.

Cities segregated cemeteries and parks; counties segregated court houses. Churches quickly broke into different segregations of blacks and whites. Hotels served one race only; blacks could see plays only from the balcony or separate seats; restaurants served one race or served them in different rooms or from separate windows. (Ayers 136)

In situations where interracial encounters could not be avoided, like at work and travel, Jim Crow laws were enforced. For other activities, where these laws did not expressively forbid black people to participate, separation became customary (see Ayers 136). Different measures were put in place to keep the aspiring black middle class, which grew increasingly self-confident and which would not tolerate inequitable treatment from an insecure white population, under control. Grace Elizabeth Hale explains:

But in the aftermath of Reconstruction, despite pervasive discrimination and violent oppression, some African American obtained the education, financial resources and respectability that signified middle-class status. Class and race, then, became more visibly unhinged as railroads disrupted local isolation, and the possibility grew that whites might make a mistake in identifying strangers. Confusion reigned. In an increasingly anonymous world where class status depended upon appearance, this uncertainty endangered the very meaning of white racial identity. (Jumpin' Jim Crow 164)

Courts decided that facilities should be “separate but equal” which meant that “equal accommodation had to be provided for those who paid equal amounts for their ticket”. This was often not the case; in reality blacks for instance were accommodated in cars of inferior quality than the cars of whites (see Ayers 142-145).

After the Reconstruction Era more and more blacks succeeded in their endeavor to gain white standards of literacy, education, wealth, success in business, politics and landowning. Therefore Democrats, who held the power in the South, enacted laws to disenfranchise the black population. They passed laws to make voter registration and elections more restrictive, with the effect that electoral participation by most blacks and many poor whites began to decrease. This development resulted in the loss of federal representation of these underprivileged groups and led to high rates of black migration in the 1880s and 1890s.

2.3 The Origins of the Blues

No exact date can be attached to the birth of the blues, since the blues is an amalgamation of black and white cultures that interacted over centuries. Most certainly it developed at the end of the 19th century in the Mississippi Delta. The term “Mississippi Delta” itself does not refer to the area where the river enters into the Gulf of Mexico, but to the territory bordered in the West by the Mississippi river and in the East by the Yazoo River. It stretches from Memphis to Vicksburg and is a plain area which, due to countless floods, became one of the most fertile grounds in the entire South of North America (see Oakley 43). The emergence of the blues was not confined to the Delta - more likely it “appeared almost simultaneously on the plantations and the logging and levee camps throughout the Deep South” (Cobb 278) but a vast number of blues musicians were born and were performing in the Mississippi Delta in the formative years of this music genre (see Oakley 43).

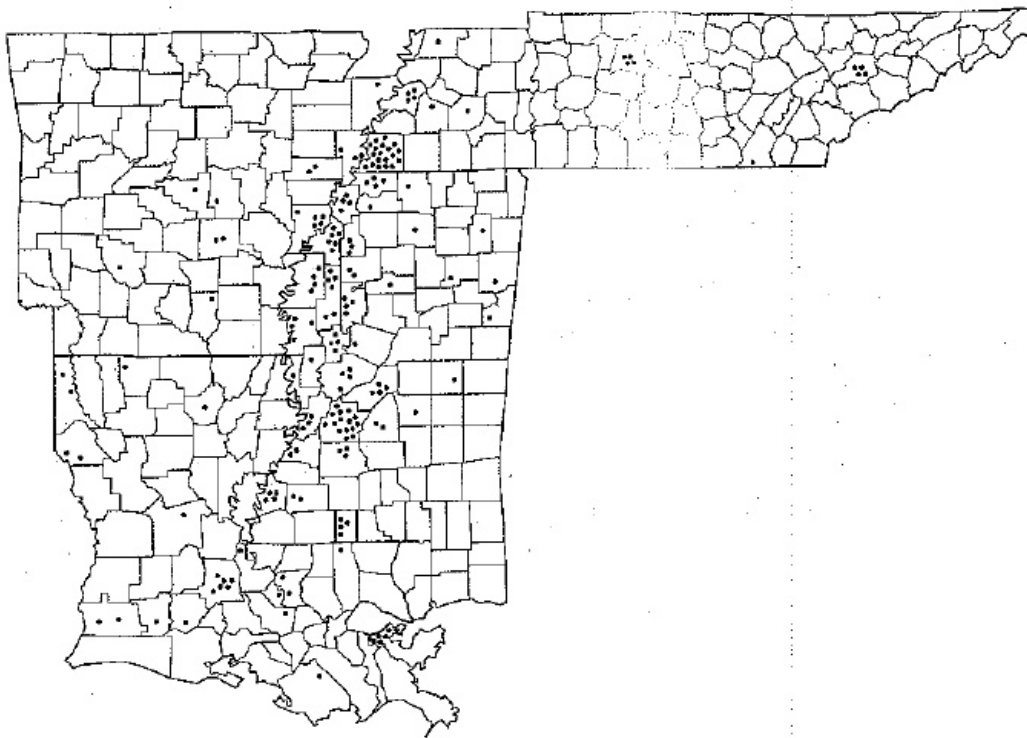


Fig 1. see Cobb 278: Birth places of blues performers during the formative years of the blues.

Blues drew on many sources, which demonstrates the close interrelatedness of the African heritage of the former slaves with features of white traditions (see Malone 5). During the era of slavery, people of various regional and tribal backgrounds were mixed together, but they soon discovered common elements in their music, like the call-response pattern, improvisation and the important rhythmical sensibility. These building blocks of African music were used to establish a new kind of music which generated styles highly influential for the development of the blues. Among these influences were the “holler”, the “work song” and folk music.

The holler has its origin in slavery times. Field hands and cotton pickers used hollers, which could be heard over a great distance, to communicate with other slaves who were working alone in a field. Another source was the work song, which had its origin in western Africa, where most of the slaves came from, and which was also performed by slave gangs in America. In the home countries of the slaves, music played an important role – “for almost every activity among the Africans, there was an appropriate music” (Southern 5). The non-ceremonial type of music included work songs often dealing with planting and harvesting, which were transferred to America. They are characterized by the “call and response” pattern, where the leader introduces a phrase and the group answers. The leader and the chorus parts can overlap rhythmically, thus creating polyrhythm¹, which is an important feature of African music that found its way into blues, jazz and gospel. Syncopation² and polyphonic³ elements were also transferred and integrated into the new music style (see Baraka 32 and 40). The work song of the enslaved Africans went beyond the creation of artistic expression; it was a tool of survival which beat set the pace for work, helped to focus energy, lowered fatigue and made the day go by faster thus helping the slaves to bear the drudgery of forced labour (see Lomax 260-263).

With the transformation of big plantations into farms cultivated by sharecropper families,

¹ Polyrhythm: overlapping of two or more simultaneously played or sung rhythms (triplets against eights etc.) (see Korff 164, my translation).

² In music, syncopation is the stressing of normally unstressed beats in a bar. [...] For example, in 4/4 time, the first and third beats are normally stressed; if instead the second and fourth beat is stressed and the first and third remains unstressed, the rhythm is syncopated. Also, if the musician suddenly does not play anything on beat 1, that would also be syncopation. The stress can also shift by less than a whole beat so it falls on an off-beat. [...] It is a fundamental constant presence in such styles as ragtime and jazz.

(see www.knowledgerush.com/kr/encyclopedia/Syncopation/)

³ Polyphony: two or more different strands of music, independent of each other, sound together like in a fugue or canon (see www.musiklehre.at/fachwortlexikon/p.htm, my translation).

these work songs gave way to a more individualized form of expression, which is intensively reflected in the blues. Chester Burnett, known as Howlin' Wolf, one of the most successful blues musicians in the 1950s, explains:

There was a lot of music around there. Work songs. Some of the fellows was making songs like "I worked the old Maude, and I worked old Belle" - things like that. They just get out there and sing as they worked. Plowing song, songs to call mules by. They'd get out there mornings and get to plowing and get to hollering and singing. They'd make these songs up as they go along. (Oakley 37)

The exposure of the slaves to the white environment kickstarted an exchange of musical ideas and they began to create "their *own* music that satisfied their *own* standards." (see Cataliotti 90) On the plantations the slaves came into contact with folk music of British, Irish but also German, Swedish, Italian and French origin. They sometimes had the opportunity to learn a musical instrument (like e.g. the fiddle) and were made to play at plantation balls and similar gatherings (see Malone 12). These songs and ballads were then adopted by blacks, who reshaped them and developed them further.

The melting of these retention (African elements of the music like call-response, improvisation and rhythm) with Eurocentric elements, such as song forms, lyrical content, melodies, sophisticated harmonic sensibilities and, eventually European instruments and instrumental techniques resulted in the formation of distinctively *Afro-American* musical expressions. (Cataliotti, *The Songs* introduction xii-xiii)

The blues in its rudimental form was played in the South as a highly individual form of music and was performed in a private setting. With the minstrel shows, it got disseminated throughout the US and was raised to a more professional level (see Baraka 98). Whites became interested in black music already before the Civil War and at the end of 1830s blackface minstrelsy came into existence. There were many touring groups like *The Virginia Minstrels* or *The Moore and Burges Minstrels*, where white performers showed parodies of black music and black stereotypes. In these performances the slaves were portrayed as simple-minded, good-hearted, awkward and lazy (see Oakley 22-23). Composers of the minstrel songs were highly indebted to black music, which they mixed with white folk music in order to create a style that was highly popular till World War I. At the end of the 19th century blacks entered this kind of entertainment business. The early black minstrelsy groups still corked their faces and transferred the traditional formal framework to their shows but they were more authentic and humorous and also

caricatured white behaviour (like with the *Cakewalk*). Minstrel Shows offered black artists, comedians, dancers and also blues singers steady employment for the first time (see Baraka 101-102). This created the opportunity for the highly talented black musicians to earn a living and often served as a stepping-stone for a solo career. W. C. Handy, Ma Rainey and Bessie Smith worked as minstrel entertainers and later achieved success in the so-called “classical” or “urban” blues (see Malone 24).

The blues evolved around the 1890s and was created by the black men and women in the cotton plantation region. Due to the working conditions in the Deep South a large number of men - among them many capable of playing an instrument – and their families were in constant movement, wandering from one plantation to another in search of fertile soil and a fair boss. Other itinerant men were seasonal workers seeking employment as day laborers. Many of them were just hobos, men on the road without fixed abode who broke loose from the limitations imposed on them by the southern way of living and enjoyed their freedom of rambling (see Oakley 57). This constant stream of migrants fostered the circulation of the blues, which at the beginning was characterized by the “finger picking style”⁴ and “bottleneck playing”⁵ and has become known as “rural blues” or “country blues”. Delta musicians sang with “an unmatched intensity in a gritty, melodically circumscribed, highly ornamented style that was closer to a field holler than it was to other blues” (Robert Palmer quoted in Cobb 282). Blues musicians would often gather at house parties and dances. As Roebuck Stapes, a musician, recalls:

Everybody would go into town and those fellows like Charley Patton, Robert Johnson and Howlin' Wolf would be playing on the streets, standing by the railroad tracks, people pitchin' 'em nickels and dimes, white and black people both. The train came through town maybe once that afternoon and when it was time, everybody would gather around there, before and after the train came, and announce where they'd be that night. And that's where the crowd would go. (Cobb 281)

The desire to move on, to live a nomadic life, was significant for the Delta musicians. They were meandering throughout the Delta, thus contributing to the creation of the stereotype of the hard drinking, fancy-free womanizer, who abhors hard work and leads

⁴ Finger picking is a style of guitar playing. It is applied especially in folk music, in which the thumb plays bass notes and the index and middle fingers a syncopated treble melody, often with the use of a special pick (fingerpick) made of plastic or metal that fits on each finger. (see www.yourdictionary.com/fingerpicking)

⁵ An object, such as a piece of glass or metal, is passed across the strings to achieve a gliding sound. (www.answers.com/topic/bottleneck)

a turbulent and unsettled life (see Cobb 282). The blues musician seemed to reject the moral standards and was therefore mystifying and intriguing to the listening audience (see Harris 191). This aspect, among others, made blues attractive for authors because it showed a self-conscious and independent individual stemming from the black society, actively participating in the establishment of a counter-culture. It was a culture which developed a special vocabulary, a special way of behavior and thus created an “in-crowd” that was hip.

For many black people, however, the blues was a “sinful” music because of its frequent sexual allusions and references to the devil. But in the view of many musicians the two oppositional standpoints of sin and holiness could be combined; some famous blues men like Son House or Robert Wilkins even quit playing for a time and became preachers. Saturday night dance and Sunday morning service had much in common, as guitarist Bobby Rush explains:

The people that go to church are the same people you see Saturday night, the same one you see on Sunday morning. I talk about: Jesus lift me up. And on Saturday night: Baby lift me up. You know I just wanna be lifted up by my baby and on Sunday morning I wanna be lifted up by my lord. No difference, no difference at all. No difference in the dance, you dance for Satan like you dance for Christ. (Bobby Rush interviewed in “The Road To Memphis”, directed by Richard Pearce, my transcript)

This switching from blues to gospel is quite easy from the musical point of view since many characteristics of blues can be found in church music as well. Nevertheless, it was - and still is - not acceptable to play blues during a church service. God-fearing people always kept their distance to blues musicians and their music and developed their interpretation of Afro-American music. The old hymns sung in churches, frequented by the black population, were altered in an astonishing way. They were not sung in unison but “there emerged a remarkable kind of harmony, in which every singer was performing on the melody at his or her pitch” (Lomax 71). This collective improvisation (an African heritage) to which each member of the community could contribute, was transferred to blues and jazz and became another significant and outstanding feature of these styles.

It was almost impossible to understand the exact wording of the spirituals for even the same singer never sings one twice exactly the same. The singer will vary the words, lines, and melody every time...begins with a simple sweet melody, but as the singer becomes more...uplifted and enthused by oft repeated lines, all sorts of quavering notes and melodious expression will be improvised. (E. A. Mc Ilhenny quoted in Oakley 22)

The black spiritual is characterized by its emotionalism, a fact that also W. H. Holloway, an educated black minister, stated in 1903:

[...] while we hate to confess it, the “supreme element” in most black worship is emotionalism. The church which does not have its shouting, the church which does not measure the abilities of a preacher by the 'rousement' of his sermons and indeed which does not tacitly demand of its minister the shout-producing discourse, is an exception to the rule. (Harris 166)

The conveyance of a text through emotionalism rather than harmonic structure and sophistication is paramount in blues and its most eminent style element. Blues musicians, who often received their first and most intensive musical schooling in music in church, were massively affected by the spirituals, whose many characteristics they later adopted for their own musical expression. Langston Hughes in his novel *Not Without Laughter* illustrates the interrelatedness of the two genres of African-American music. When Aunt Hager one evening asks her son-in-law, Jimboy, who plays the guitar, to play “something kinder decent” (meaning a spiritual), “Jimboy, to tease the old woman, began to rock and moan like an elder in the Sanctified Church, patting both feet at the same time as he played a hymn-like, lugubrious tune with a dancing overtone” and used blues lyrics to go with the song: “Tell me, sister, tell me, brother. Have you heard de latest news?” Then seriously as if he were about to announce the coming of the judgment: A woman down in Georgia, got her sweet-men confused (*Not Without Laughter* 58-59).

The musician, providing entertainment, enjoyed an outstanding position within the black community. Therefore, a popular musician, although playing for tips at house parties, would get an excellent pay compared to the daily wage of a regular worker (see Harris 193). This male dominated environment produced only few female blues performers in the Delta. The insecurity and the vilification of such a life style made many women choose the church choir rather than the barrelhouses as an outlet of their feeling (see Cobb 296). Apart from musicians like Memphis Minnie, who also played guitar, women often chose minstrel groups, like e.g. the famous Gertrude “Ma” Rainey, who led a successful life, singing the blues later in the 1920s. Alan Lomax explains that “no truly respectable woman was supposed to sing the blues even in private.” (Lomax 358)

The rural blues was well known in the South - it was the music that was played in barrelhouses, brothels and honky-tonks - but throughout the rest of the United States the

blues was fairly unknown. Only in the middle of the 1920s did this style become more widely recognized (see Malone 44). This happened, on the one hand, because of composers like W. C. Handy⁶, a black, trained musician and a band leader who, touring with a Minstrel Show, succeeded in reaching a wide audience and who, most importantly, published highly popular blues sheet music. In 1912 he published *Memphis Blues* and in 1914 *St. Louis Blues*. Until then blues had many different forms and structures. With the publication and distribution of the printed versions, the blues developed a coherent structure that was later adopted by the majority of musicians (see Oakley 42). On the other hand, the formalization of the structure and popularity of blues are also to be credited to *race records*, records produced for the Afro-American market. Because of the success of *downhome* musicians, many Afro-American artists who were popular within the black community were signed by record companies like *Okeh*, *Black Swan* or *Vocalion* (Guralnick 116-117). Before that, the blues form was dominated by local traditions but from the 1920s on, popular blues singers and instrumentalists could be copied more easily because they were available on shellack and thus the “classical urban blues” was created (see Baraka 119).

2.4 The musical and textual elements of the Blues

As the blues evolved, performers used a myriad of forms and textual contents to express themselves. The musicologist Alfons M. Dauer identified over 180 different forms (see Berendt 216). But eventually the structure was marked by a twelve-bar form, consisting of three lines with the first statement repeated in the second line and a resolution or supplement given in the third as demonstrated by two stanzas of Robert Johnson's *Walking Blues*:

⁶ The legend says that in 1903, when he and his band, the *Knights of Pythias*, were stopping in Tutwiler, Mississippi, he heard a black musician playing the blues and singing “Going where the Southern cross the Dog” which is a reference to the railroad line. (“The Dog” stands for “Yellow Dog”, which is a slang expression for the Yazoo Delta Line) (see Guralnick, 12). The blues singer was sliding a knife on the strings of his guitar. Handy was a trained musician who, when he first heard this raw rural blues, could look back on thirty years’ of band experience. He was a multifaceted musician, touring with different minstrels bands like the *Alabama Minstrel Unit* or the *W. A. Maharas Minstrels* which had a highly eclectic repertoire - they played everything from marches to overtures. (see Malone 44) Handy later became the bandleader of the *Knights of Pythias* and after encountering the blues he started orchestrating local blues tunes.

I woke up this mornin', feelin' round for my shoes
Woke this mornin' feelin round for my shoes
But you know by that, I got these old walkin' blues

Well, some people tell me that the worried blues ain't bad
Some people tell me that these old worried old blues ain't bad
It's the worst old feelin', I most ever had

Regarding the text, the blues is a reflection of the life and difficulties the black population experienced. After the long anticipated emancipation and the great hopes that were attached to it, there was a cruel waking up for the former slaves (see Cobb 278). Frustrations stemming from the continuous endurance of discrimination and abuse needed an outlet and it was the blues that helped to articulate this experience. Naturally, this form of music was highly individualized and emotional because it was also directed at an audience that shared many of the experiences of the musicians. But most importantly, the blues was played to both divert and amuse the listener; it may have evolved out of a context of pain and poverty but it was not sad. The listeners wanted to dance and have a good time and therefore, musicians had to be entertainers (see Malone 40). The writer Langston Hughes identifies the blues as a source of inspiration for his poetry: "I tried to write poems like the songs they sang on Seventh Street (Washington), gay songs because you had to be gay or die; sad songs because you couldn't help being sad sometimes. But gay or sad, you kept on living and you kept on going." (Hughes quoted in Kent, *Hughes* 22)

The early blues texts were composed of spontaneous verses, dealing with everyday life. Other verses apparently came from a more traditional stock, consisting of old folk song lyrics, whilst others drew their material from popular songs of the time, like "ragtime" songs⁷ that workers would have heard at house parties or juke joints. Later texts became more personal, describing one's own feelings and experiences. But once a blues tune is composed, it does not mean that the text has been put into its definite form: a song could begin with a fairly fixed opening verse, then the singer could improvise and cite from other blues songs (see Harris 189). The verses can even have a non-logical structure - the

⁷ Ragtime: a piano - based, predominantly composed style where the left hand beats out a percussive rhythm and the right hand plays a syncopated melody. Ragtime is not improvised as jazz and blues and often consists of parts arranged in consecutive order like piano music of the 19th century. (Berendt 21; Malone 39)

singer is free to operate. Blind Lemon Jefferson's lyrics of just one blues, for instance, can range from loneliness, traveling, sexual intercourse to marriage (Kent, *Hughes* 30). As the railroad system developed, many of the texts tended to deal with leaving the Deep South and moving northward in search of a better life.

Took my baby to meet the morning train
Took my baby to meet the morning train
And the blues came down baby like showers of rain
(Charley Patton, *Pony Blues*)

or:

Got the blues, can't be satisfied
Got the blues, can't be satisfied
Keep the blues I'll catch that train and ride
(Mississippi John Hurt, *Got the Blues, Can't be Satisfied*)

For families, leaving the South was a difficult decision, particularly because many parents did not want to uproot their children and were clinging to the hope for a better crop in the following season, which would enable them to become independent from the landowners and to buy their own stretch of land. Moreover, it was costly to move and therefore beyond the means of many who had no education or experience apart from farming (see Cobb 284). Aside from the rambling blues, the principal theme of the country blues and virtually all other blues was the man-woman (sexual) relationship.

Been down hearted baby, ever since the day we met
Been down hearted baby, ever since the day we met
Our love is nothing but the blues,
Baby how blue can you get

You're evil when I'm with you and you are jealous when we're apart
You're evil when I'm with you and you are jealous when we're apart
How blue can you get baby,
The answer is right in my unhappy heart
(B. B King, *How Blue Can You Get*)

Other themes like riding the train, leaving town, financial problems, work trouble, loneliness, alcohol etc. boiled down to this one central theme of concern (see Oakley 55)

Three quarters of the recorded blues songs focus on relationships, on leaving, on being left, on being mistreated, cheated on, on sadness, jealousy and the hope that the partner would come back. Sometimes it would deal with anger and violence as well (see Oakley 56-57).

The blues draws a very authentic and emotional picture of the musician and his/her surroundings. Many musicians like John Lee Hooker were autodidacts and could not even read music - but that was not necessarily expected or needed. Many listeners with a classical western trained ear might perceive the blues voices “as harsh and rasping which is attributed to a deficiency of musical schooling but not to a desire to deliberately use this effect.” (Baraka 44, my translation) Afro-American music has a different cultural background than western classical or folk music and the performers favor different ideals, forms and styles to articulate themselves. In the case of the blues the emotional expression is paramount and it does not aim at producing art but a soulful and spontaneous reflection of feeling (see Baraka 44-45).

2.5 The further development of the Blues

During World-War I, migration to the North increased due to war-time labour shortage. People from the Delta and the central Deep South of Alabama, Mississippi and Louisiana followed the railroads to Chicago, Detroit and Cleveland. Big companies like the Ford Company employed a huge number of Afro-Americans and paid them, compared to the southern standards, relatively good wages. With the departure from the South and the adoption of a new life style in the industrial towns, the black society changed considerably. This also affected the blues (see Baraka 103) and gradually the urban blues developed in the decade 1910-1920. Urban blues was a style detached from the fields, the individual expression of music, and was set on a more professional and commercialized level. It reflected the new self-consciousness and the new way of life in the urban surroundings. In 1920 the first blues recording was produced. Mamie Smith, a black singer with a vaudeville and cabaret background, recorded “*Crazy Blues*”, which was a huge success. Many companies began to sign up black female singers like Bessie Smith or Ma Rainey, and *race records* became financially highly profitable enterprise. The classical blues sound was almost exclusively female and urban, existing side-by-side with the country blues style that was male dominated and rural and which soon

afterwards was followed the urban blues' path into the recording industry (see Oakley 76)

In 1929, the economy crashed and record companies suffered the harsh impact of the crisis. Nightclubs and cabarets had to close down and the number of recording sessions decreased drastically. The urban blues era came to an end. In the South, the country blues remained popular, and since many bluesmen moved to the north and started playing in bands there, a new style eventually emerged: the electric blues. (see Guralnick 19-24). During post war era many other different styles like the *Boogie-Woogie*, a piano based blues form, *Rhythm and Blues*, *Rock and Roll*, *Soul*, *Funk* and *Blues Rock* were created. Blues also became an integral part of jazz – bebop in particular reclaims blues and included it in the standard repertoire (like Charlie Parker's *Now's the Time*, Thelonious Monk's *Blue Monk*, etc.).

3 Jazz

3.1 Origins of Jazz

Similar to the blues, no exact date or place can be pinpointed with regard to the emergence of jazz due to the absence of written or contemporary recordings. Not even the origin of the word “jazz” can be adequately explained. It can only be said with certainty that the rural South and the southeast of the United States played a decisive role in the shaping of jazz that presumably emerged in the last decade of the 19th century. In this process New Orleans can be highlighted as an early center with its unique amalgamation of Afro-American and white American musical elements that were constitutive for jazz. This was due to the extraordinary heterogeneity within the new Orleans population, which was composed of a high percentage of former slaves along with French, Irish and German immigrants and Creoles. The term “Creoles” is ambiguous and stands in this context for the descendants of white upper class men and black women. This last group has been brought up like legitimate children, enjoying a European style education - also musical education - and has gained civil and economic rights, which secured its members high positions in the social as well as the cultural hierarchy. All these groups mentioned brought their own musical backgrounds into the mixture (see Jost 17-30), and thus jazz was influenced by a wide spectrum of musical forms – from the Afro-American work songs, shouts and the blues, to dance and entertainment music, including ragtime or minstrels. European dance and folk music, classical, religious and military music of the omnipresent brass bands, too, helped to create a successful popular music genre (see Berendt 24).

3.2 The musical and textual elements of Jazz

Like the blues, jazz emphasizes individualism. The performer is at the same time composer, shaping the music into style and form. A traditional melody or harmonic framework may serve as a takeoff point for improvisation, but it is the personality of the player and the way he improvises that produces the music. Like the blues tune, the pre-existent core of musical material used by jazz players is generally short. The length of the jazz piece derives from the repetition of the basic material. (Southern 376)

An important feature of early jazz of the 1920s was the collective improvisation where the soloists in the band (cornet, clarinet, and trombone) improvised together and thus created a balanced whole. With Louis Armstrong and his group *Hot Five* who performed in the late 1920s, the soloist was backed by the band and took on an increasingly prominent role (see Baraka 170). The rhythm section normally consisted of drums, banjo, bass and guitar. Later the piano was added, the trumpet began to replace the cornet and the saxophones replaced the clarinets.

Another feature of jazz is interpretation. Unlike western classical music where a homogeneous, standardized sound is important, jazz features authenticity and expressiveness. The author Ralph Ellison, who had studied music at Tuskegee College, reflects:

These jazzmen, many of them now world-famous, lived with and for music intensely. Their driving motivation was neither money nor fame, but the will to achieve the most eloquent expression of the idea-emotions through the technical mastery of their instruments [...] and the give and takes, the subtle rhythmical shaping and blending of idea, tone and imagination demanded of group improvisation. The delicate balance between strong individual personality and group during these early jam sessions was a marvel of social organization. I had learned too that the end of all this discipline and technical mastery was the desire to express an affirmative way of life through its musical tradition and that this tradition insisted that each artist achieve his creativity within its frame. He must learn the best of the past, and add to it his personal vision. (Living with Music in Cataliotti 121)

After a few notes, the listener of a jazz record can say with great certainty which musician is playing. With an orchestra it is much harder to say who the conductor is or who plays the first violin (see Berendt 198). Intonation⁸ helps to make a sound more personal, the note does not have to have perfect pitch but can be bended – a method that was introduced by southern jazz bands and was called “hot” playing; the blues, too, uses this element (see appendix) (see Southern 376 -378). The musician Garvin Bushell explains: “We later absorbed it [the blues] from the southern musicians we heard, but it wasn't original with us. We didn't put that quarter-tone pitch in the music the way the Southerners did. Up north we learned toward ragtime conception – a lot of notes” (see Bushell 19). Along with improvisation, and a personal and authentic sound there is a third feature, namely, phrasing, which has its origin in the black heritage (see Berendt 200).

⁸ Intonation: a manner of producing or uttering tones, especially with regard to accuracy of pitch. (see www.answer.com)

Phrasing means to rhythmically place a phrase⁹ into a musical context. The jazz musician has uncountable possibilities of incorporating his or her interpretation of a phrase into a chord progression, and the way musicians choose their phrases also define their individual sound.

Concerning the texts, jazz standards cover many topics of everyday life but in contrast to the blues, jazz texts do not express matters as individually and forthrightly. While the blues does not shrink from bringing up topics directly and unadorned, jazz often limits itself to describing romantic love like in *Fly me to the Moon*:

Fly me to the moon and let me play among the stars

Let me see what spring is like on Jupiter and Mars

In other words: hold my hand

In other words: darling kiss me

Fill my heart with song and let me sing forever more

You are all I long for, all I worship and adore.

In other words: please be true

In other words: I love you

(*Fly me to the Moon*, Bart Howard)

Problems in relationships are described too, but in a harmless and tame way. Commonplaces and well known phrases are used to amuse and divert the listener whereas religious, political and social allusions are scarce. This may be due to the fact that jazz has an urban origin, where it has been played in public places like brothels and barrelhouses right from the beginning in contrast to the blues that was created in the private space. Moreover, jazz has not been developed by individuals like the blues but by *Big Bands* and smaller ensembles, like the jazz combo (rhythm section with horns). They commercialized the music sooner and wanted to entertain both black and white audiences and thus the texts deal with neutral and inoffensive matters.

3.3 Development of Jazz

An important pre-condition for the development of jazz was the Civil War and the

⁹ Phrase: a tone sequence, built from figures, motives and cells that has a complete musical sense of its own. (see Korff 162)

abolition of slavery. After the Civil War, the creoles had to face an abrupt loss of privileges. The plantation owners and ex-slave holders soon torpedoed attempts at full civil rights and every person with black ancestors and relations had to face racial discrimination. A reluctant approach of the well-educated creoles towards blacks took place. In both cultures music played an eminent role, albeit with a different accentuation, and because of this convergence each group actually profited from the other. Musicians trained in classical repertory and able to read and write music, soon played together with autodidacts who improvised and used syncopation. Financial beneficiaries of this new style, however, often were white musicians. They established themselves in the business and in 1923 the *Original Dixieland Jass Band*, consisting only of white musicians, recorded the first jazz album ever (see Jost 17-39).

With the migration of blacks to the north, jazz was disseminated all over the United States and its first station was Chicago. Like blues, jazz in the 1920s underwent a professionalization due to the abundance of potential jobs it offered. An increasing number of night clubs offered live music since no juke-boxes or radios were available. The type of the part-time musician, who had a regular day job to earn his or her bread, was found less frequently in towns because plenty gigs for both blacks and whites were available. Moreover, the status of full-time musicians - who in earlier times were seen as dubious and shady characters at best - improved. In these years “black musicians of New Orleans in the diaspora formed a strongly integrated group with a distinctive feeling of community” (Jost 45, my translation). At the end of the 1920s the jazz scene shifted from Chicago to New York.

The expansion of jazz throughout the United States in the 1920s was fueled by various impulses: the great migration of the black population, [...] the traveling shows, circus orchestras and riverboat bands; eventually the media like radio and records that had developed with immense vehemence and now transported the new musical ideas even into the remotest back provinces. (Jost 56, my translation)

At the end of the decade New York became the centre of the music industry and jazz musicians, seeking a better income and fame, moved to the city. For black musicians, Harlem was the center because almost all of the prominent night clubs and therefore engagements could be found there. For the black inhabitants of Harlem, however, many of the clubs were not accessible because they were segregated and only open to white customers (see Jost 56-65). With the Great Depression, the speedy life style of the 1920s

slowed down and the audience craved for a more “sentimental and restrained” (Jost 73, my transcription) kind of dance music, that clearly favored the white kind of jazz with moderate black elements. This style was called *swing*. The word *swing* actually has two meanings: it denotes a rhythmically formative element of jazz¹⁰ and it names the most prominent jazz style of the 1930s. It is said that the term *swing*, that gave this musical era its name, derives from Duke Ellington's famous jazz standard: *It Don't Mean a Thing if it Ain't Got That Swing*. Big Bands, which played dance music and preferred the 32 bars popular songs of the time, came into fashion and got successful throughout the States and even Europe. Although black musicians contributed a huge share to jazz, mixed orchestras and bands were almost non-existent. When Benny Goodman brought Teddy Wilson into his trio in 1935, he was the first white bandleader to hire a black musician (see Southern 395). Even then, full emancipation only took place on stage. White musicians still occupied the lucrative studio jobs while blacks were underrepresented on records. In segregated clubs, artists could perform but after the show they were not allowed to mix with the audience and were forced to stay backstage. The musical corset of the swing big bands imposed heavy restrictions on the creativity of the musicians. The role of the entertainer and band member with only limited possibility of individual expression soon frustrated many and “after hour sessions” became popular. There, the *bebop* was developed (see Berendt 36)

The jazz combo was predominant and African elements like “the rhythmic complexity and the blues feeling” (Jost 90, my translation) that had been suppressed by swing, enjoyed a comeback. Moreover, it was an instrumental style without the so-called “crooners” - romantic jazz singers who were popular the decade before - and if bebop featured vocals, the voice functioned as instrument and the singers scatted.¹¹ In the beginning, bebop records actually shocked the audience because this new style was so completely different from swing. Bebop, for many, was inaccessible at first and since it clearly did not want to be dance music, it was often rejected (see Jost 77-96). For the biased listener, this style was characterized by nervous phrasing, by tearing the melody apart and leaving out every unnecessary note (see Berendt 36). But it put the musician in the centre of the music again and created the *artist* as opposed to the *entertainer*. As artists, the performers felt that they did not belong to the usual crowd anymore and

¹⁰ Swing rhythm: gets its dynamic because of the ternary way of accentuation (the second of two noted eights is delayed). (see Korff 208)

¹¹ To scat: vocal improvisation with meaningless syllables, which often imitates the sounds of instrument.

success was not defined by the approval of the audience but by the acceptance of the fellow bebop musicians. “The adoption of the role of the outsider, [...] not only influenced their [the musician's] mentality and their way of thinking but shaped their actions and their ways” (Jost 102, my translation). An “in-group” evolved where fashion and bop-talk was significant. Drug addiction also became a big issue in the bebop scene. Drugs like alcohol and marijuana had been a part of the musical life right from the start, but then heroin took over and many musicians relied on it in order to cope with the stress of being “on the road” and to stabilize their emotional balance (see Jost 105-112).

Many life-style facets of the *boppers*, as they were called, were taken over by the outside white culture and their impact was felt especially in literature. The *Beatniks* like Jack Kerouac, Allan Ginsberg or William Burroughs in whose literary works music played an important role, “protested against the uniformity of the personality, culture and everyday life, the pursuit of material prosperity and the lush, self-satisfied life of the despised bourgeoisie, the *squares*.” (Jost 116, my translation).

The white beboppers were as removed from society as Negroes, but as a matter of choice. The important idea here is that the white musicians and other young whites who associated themselves with the Negro music, identified the Negro with this separation, this nonconformity, though, of course, the Negro himself had no choice. But the young Negro musician of the forties began to realize that merely by being a Negro in America, one *was* a nonconformist. (Baraka 188)

Whites, musicians and writers among them, felt related to the beboppers; Charlie Parker, Thelonious Monk, Dizzy Gillespie, Miles Davies and Art Blakey became iconic figures and role models (see Jost 113-117). The boppers were seen as nonconformists who separated themselves from the others. Other writers, not belonging to the Beatniks, set their stories in the jazz scene, using the features of this special community but they also showed parameters of the outside world that influenced the protagonists like in “Sonny's Blues” that will be discussed later. After the emergence of bebop in the 1940s, jazz generated other distinctive styles: *Hard Bop*, *Cool Jazz*, *Latin*, *Fusion* and many more. Unfortunately, the framework of this thesis does not leave enough space for more detailed dwelling upon these musical genres. For the texts discussed, the knowledge of the social and musical background from the 1920s to the 1950s will be sufficient.

4 The significance of music and musicians in Afro-American fiction from the 1840s to the 1930s

4.1 Early autobiographies and fiction

As explained above, music has always occupied a central role in Afro-American life. This fact is also reflected in literature, as music within the oral African tradition has historically been used both as an assertive mode of expression and to construct identity (see Campbell and Kean 78). The depiction of Afro-American music, like blues, jazz and ragtime and the music scene with its protagonists, has changed in time since it was subjected to the same social and political pressures Afro-Americans themselves were dealing with. Five of the six texts that will be analyzed in this thesis were composed by Afro-American authors, therefore chapters 4. and 8. are devoted to a brief review of the role of music in Afro-American fiction from the middle of the 19th century to the 1980s in order to portray the shift of codes and the different symbolic presentations of music and musicians in literature.

When Africans were brought to the United States, they were striving to find a voice to counteract the denial of their history, identity, religion, humanity and language. American slaves lost their culture and mother tongue because of the forced amalgamation of the various African tribes and the separation of families. Göbel in this context refers to a “forced cultural amnesia” (Göbel 18). Since no other channels of communication were available to them, their way of passing on their culture was orally shaped and expressed through songs and stories (see Campbell and Kean 79-81). Bontemps describes the situation as follows: “Denied the ABC's, sensible blacks fell back on the oral traditions of their forefathers in Africa and created folk music, the spirituals, and adapted to their new situation the folk tales from Africa.” (Bontemps *Narratives* introduction xvi) Despite the absence of handed down traditions and formal education, Afro-Americans managed to generate a new kind of music, an independent form of expression, which, soon after emancipation, became so successful that it was absorbed into the American mainstream.

In the autobiographies, historiographies and fiction by Afro-American authors in the 19th

century, music is an integral element. First traces of the depiction of Afro-American music can be found in *slave narratives* which were immensely popular in their time¹². The first *slave narrative* was published already in 1760¹³ and the genre continued to be of relevance till the end of the Civil War and beyond (Bontemps, *Great Slave Narratives* introduction xii-xvii). For Afro-American writers of fiction in the 20th century these narratives were very influential:

From the narratives came the spirit and the vitality and the angle of vision responsible for the most effective prose writing by black American writers from William Wells Brown to Charles W. Chesnutt, from W. E. B. Du Bois to Richard Wright, Ralph Ellison and James Baldwin. Consciously or unconsciously, all of these reveal in their writing a debt to the narratives. (Bontemps, *Slave Narratives* introduction x)

Typical for these narratives is the structure in which the tale of suffering and subsequent deliverance is presented with an autobiographic focus (Göbel 49). Out of the abundance of works available, with regard to the music presented, only three narratives will be mentioned as examples. Frederick Douglass' *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass. An American Slave* (published in 1845) devotes several passages to the music of the slaves and explains its importance for personal expression and its function as outlet for feelings (see Cataliotti 4-7). The depiction of music also has a political aim and is programmatically used to attack the inhumanity of slavery and its effects on the individual.

Slaves sing most when they are most unhappy. The songs of the slaves represent the sorrow of his heart; and he is relieved by them, only as an aching heart is relieved by its tears. [...] I have often sung to drown my sorrow but seldom to express my happiness. (Douglass quoted in Ensslen 34)

He further explains that “every tone was a testimony against slavery, and a prayer to God for deliverance from chains.” He criticizes whites maintaining the brutality of slavery, the hypocrisy of the American democracy and Christianity, the violation of the family and the dehumanization of the masters (Cataliotti, *The Songs* introduction x).

Solomon Northup's *Twelve Years a Slave* (published in 1853) offers an unusual plot for a slave narrative. Instead of the usually depicted struggle from slavery to freedom, he tells

¹² The *Narrative of Solomon Northup* for example sold 27.000 copies in 1853 and 1854 and Frederick Douglas *Narrative* had achieved seven editions after its publication in 1854. (Bontemps GSN, introduction xviii)

¹³ *The Uncommon Sufferance and Surprising Deliverance of Briton Hammon, a Negro Man*. (Bontemps GSN, introduction xii)

his story of being freeborn in New York and being sold into slavery. Northup was a musician himself, an accomplished fiddler, who had been kidnapped and brought to Louisiana. He tells of the communal music and the dances of the slaves and gives first-hand descriptions of the music he encounters (see Cataliotti 6). Northup explains about the life-saving importance of his fiddle: "Had it not been for my beloved fiddle, I scarcely can conceive how I could have endured the long years of bondage." (Northup quoted in Cataliotti, *The Music* 6). In William Wells Brown's *Narrative of William Wells Brown. A Fugitive Slave* (published in 1847) the author inserts lyrics of slave songs. Using this technique, he is able to point out the cruelty and injustice of the slavery system in a far more effective manner than by simply relating specific incidents (see Cataliotti 12). Furthermore, Henry Bibb and Harriet Jacobs should be mentioned as prominent writers of slave narratives.

Summing up, it can be said that music in the slave narratives illustrates the importance of music in the lives of black men and women as a means of expressing themselves and coping with their situation. Moreover, music is used as a statement against slavery and it decries the brutality of the South.

After the Civil War and due to the abolition of slavery, the realization of the promises of emancipation replaced the tales of flights to the North. The writers after the war were intent on achieving social change and equal rights in regard to education, politics and social status; they were, like the author Charles William Chesnutt, determined to accomplish this aim by writing fiction (see Ensslen 50-65). Furthermore, fiction was used to portray blacks authentically and to clear it of the stereotypes that prevailed in white prose. Thus Afro-Americans were able to become aware of their history and identity was created. The writer Pauline Hopkins explains:

Fiction is of great value to any people as a preserver – religious, political and social. It is a record of growth and development from generation to generation. No one will do this for us, we must ourselves develop the men and women who will faithfully portray the innermost thoughts and feelings of the Negro with all the fire and romance which lie dormant in our history, and, as yet, unrecognized by writers of the Anglo-Saxon race. (Hopkins quoted in Ensslen 83)

Early examples of Afro-American novels are William Wells Brown's *Clotel, or the President's Daughter* (1853) and Harriet Wilson's *Our Nig* (1859) in which the influence of the slave narrative can still be felt (see Göbel 50). As music was part of everyday life

and reflected the changes in society, it is only natural that it left an imprint on literature. Therefore, at the beginning of the 20th century, authors like Pauline Hopkins and Paul Lawrence Dunbar, to name just two, integrated Afro-American music into their fiction. It functions as “a link of the cultural expression of their African and American past” (Cataliotti 36). Hopkins, in *Contending Forces*, published in 1900, uses music to express the slaves' awareness of their situation and the rejection of their exploitation. But she also emphasizes the emergence of cultural pride concerning the originality of their art that slowly awakes in Afro-Americans and which is influenced by but which is not a product of white training and therefore is a unique cultural achievement (see Cataliotti 29-37). Dunbar, in *The Sport of the Gods*, published in 1902, introduces, like Hopkins, the “professional” musician - the musician who is able to make a living out of performing Afro-American art. This demonstrates the success of ragtime, spirituals and blues with the white audience at least in metropolises like New York. This fact created pride and opportunity in a world where possibilities were otherwise limited and allowed social advancement.

From the turn of the century on, the music created by Afro-Americans became increasingly popular. For the black population, music was not only an important part of daily family and church life; it was played in clubs, house parties and the like and was an essential part of leisure time. In addition it enabled them to express their feelings and thoughts and music opened the doors for Afro-Americans to pursue a career as musicians that made it possible to earn a living (see Cataliotti 34-41). With this success and its recognition by the white man, this music also became a symbol for blackness with all the implications entailed. As Cataliotti states:

Even though different forms appeal to different people, African-Americans are aware of the music's function as a touchstone for racial identity and recognize the expressiveness, the inventiveness and the resiliency that enables the music to renew itself. (Cataliotti, *Music* Introduction x)

New York emerged as the centre of music and culture in the United States: theatre shows and musicals were produced there and agencies relocated their offices to New York. Many of the migrants from the South headed towards “The Big Apple” in order to try their luck in show business. Ragtime became a fashion and white and mixed clubs also employed blues and jazz musicians for entertainment. Naturally Afro-American authors incorporated this recognition of music into their fictional works. Many musicians were

successful in their field thus showing the black community that “black artists could make advances for themselves and for their race.” (Du Bois quoted in Cataliotti 72) This development became a main target for writers, visual artists and musicians in the first decades of the century and was mirrored in the movement of the Harlem Renaissance, where artists strove to improve the situation of blacks. Music was one tool to achieve this aim:

While music is an outlet for the individual, creative expression that can open up opportunities and enable an artist to rise above physical limitations, it also provides a means for the uplift of the race and thus subverts the racial status quo in the twentieth-century America (Cataliotti, *Music* 73).

4.2 The Harlem Renaissance

The term Harlem Renaissance refers to the cultural activities of Afro-Americans in New York City during the 1920s and 1930s. Historians and literary scholars disagree about when exactly it started. One of its notable figures, Arna Bontemps, explains in his book *Harlem Renaissance Remembered* that the movement was first publicly recognized in 1924. With the publishing of Claude McKay's *Home to Harlem* (1928) and his own work *God Sends Sunday* (1931) Bontemps felt that “the golden days were gone” (see Bontemps 26). Other sources date the Renaissance between 1917/1919 and 1930/1932. (see Spencer, introduction xxi). Harlem played an essential role at that time. As Alain LeRoy Locke (publisher of the volume *The New Negro*) observes, Manhattan not only had the “largest Negro community in the world, but the first concentration in history of so many diverse elements of Negro life” (Locke quoted in Huggins, 49). Peasants from the South but also students, business men, workers and artists, all converged on Harlem, attracted by the possibilities of a big city. In this climate, “a spiritual coming of age” (Locke 56) of the Afro-Americans took place and was displayed by a “remarkable outpouring of literature, art and music” (see Huggins 3). The Harlem Renaissance not only stood for the artistic output of the Afro-American intellectuals in New York, it also aimed at a “vindication of the Negro” (a term coined by Locke, see Spencer introduction, xv). At the beginning of the 20th century, Afro-Americans became more self-confident in regard to racial consciousness; they were demanding their legal rights and their integration into American democracy. Therefore, the movement stands for more than just the actual works of art it produced, and when analyzing texts of that period, one has to

keep in mind that political and social standpoints play an important role and influence the representation of life, music and the musicians in fiction (see Huggins 4-5).

A new consciousness emerged – blacks demanded to fully participate in society since they fully carried out their duties to the state and this attitude was already voiced at the beginning of the century. Important and influential authors, who preceded as well as initiated the movement, were Booker T. Washington with his novel *Up from Slavery* and W.E.B. Du Bois, who published the magazine *The Crisis*. With Du Bois' book *The Souls of Black Folk* (1903), a statement against cultural suppression was made. Along with James Weldon Johnson, the author of the *Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man*, Du Bois was an important path-maker for the Harlem Renaissance and established much of the foundation for the artistic impulses to come (see Cataliotti 73). Johnson's work was first anonymously published in 1912 and republished under his real name in 1927 when the Harlem Renaissance was already in full swing. “Major motives important to an understanding of the Negro Renaissance were present in this work” (Spencer introduction, xvi), like defining oneself within a white society. He writes:

It is a struggle; for though the white man of the South may be too proud to admit it, he is, nevertheless, using in the contest his best energies; he is devoting to it the greater part of his thought and much of his endeavor. The South to-day stands panting and almost breathless from its exertions. And how the scene of the struggle has shifted! The battle was first waged over the right of the Negro to be classed as a human being with a soul; later, as to whether he had sufficient intellect to master even the rudiments of learning; and to-day it is being fought out over his social recognition. (Johnson, Chapter V online)

The black community felt that whites wanted to keep the Negro “in his place” and certainly Jim Crow laws successfully helped to hinder economic and social advancement. Johnson analyses the deep gulf between black and white and the envy of white men of what blacks could achieve if they had the same opportunities: “I am in grave doubt as to whether the greater part of the friction in the South is caused by the whites having a natural antipathy to Negroes as a race, or an acquired antipathy to Negroes in certain relations to themselves” (Johnson, chapter V). Africans were defined as inferior human beings and this system of downgrading the abilities and talents of Afro-Americans helped whites to maintain their claim to power and thus to exploit them economically (see Campbell and Keen 79). The members of the Harlem Renaissance fought against that conception of inferiority and used their literature as mouthpiece against the stereotyped “aunties” and “uncles”, “Georges” and coon characters which

were so persistent in American culture. Music was an important factor for the recognition by the white society and the realization of their aims.

Generally, the Harlem Renaissance used and was supported by and accompanied by music. The music of the black theater shows, the dance music of the cabarets, the blues and ragtime of the speakeasies and rent parties, the spiritual and the art songs of the recital and concert halls all created an ambience for Renaissance activity and contemplation. (Spencer, introduction xviii)

Johnson uses music to portray black society, their fears and struggles. He had written lyrics for vaudeville songs and plays before writing novels and was on the pulse of time concerning the emerging ragtime and blues (see Ensslen 88). He portrays popular music of the time, folk-derived music, as inspiration for African-American artists and as a means to enter a professional career. For him, folk music was something to be proud of and nothing to be looked down upon, like many blacks themselves did. This kind of popular music, he thought, was in no way comparable with the socially accepted and approved high art. Nevertheless, Johnson realizes, like many authors of the Renaissance, that the popular music of Afro-Americans was an amazing achievement. He writes:

It is my opinion that the colored people of this country have done four things which refute the oft advanced theory that they are an absolutely inferior race, which demonstrates that they have originality and artistic conception; and, what is more, the power of creating that which can influence and appeal universally. The first two of these are the Uncle Remus stories, collected by Joel Chandler Harris, and the Jubilee songs, to which the Fisk singers made the public and the skilled musicians of both America and Europe listen. The other two are ragtime music and the cake-walk. No one who has travelled can question the world-conquering influence of ragtime; and I do not think it would be an exaggeration to say that in Europe the United States is popularly known better by ragtime than by anything else it has produced in a generation. In Paris they call it American music. [...] These are lower forms of art, but they give evidence of a power that will some day be applied to the higher forms. In this measure, at least, and aside from the number of prominent individuals the colored people of the United States have produced, the race has been a world influence; and all of the Indians between Alaska and Patagonia haven't done as much. (Johnson, chapter V)

In the 1920s whites became aware of and interested in the musical activities of Afro-Americans and black culture. *Shuffle Along*, an Afro-American musical, was a major success on Broadway in 1921. This show, produced, written and performed by Afro-

Americans¹⁴, caught the attention of the general public and initiated the beginning of the “jazz age” (Wintz 147-152). Innumerable shows followed this first success and white people began to come to Harlem in droves. Jazz clubs in Harlem flourished and attracted an increasing number of white costumers, albeit with the disapproval of blacks since the “tourists”, as they were called, literally annexed the clubs and shut the black costumers out. Harlem night life became very commercial and therefore the “Harlemites” organized their entertainment on a more private basis. House rent parties began to flourish, where guests could enjoy the evening among themselves without being stared at and where jazz and blues were vital ingredients of the entertainment (see Hughes, *Big Sea* 176-181). Also literature by Afro-Americans enjoyed wider recognition. Arna Bontemps remembers:

*Nigger Heaven*¹⁵ remained for month on best-seller lists, and while this continued Harlem was discovered by the local, national, and international smart set. They came in droves, as we sometimes say, from Park Avenue as well as from abroad, and from remote parts of this country. And, significantly, this influx brought on phase two of the Harlem Renaissance, the phase in which the travail of the young black artists caught the attention of more mature, more “professional” whites and became an exotic vogue with the cognoscenti. (Bontemps 24)

“Now books by Negro authors were being published with much greater frequency and more publicity than ever before or since in history”, Langston Hughes reflects in his autobiography (*Big Sea* 178). After authors like W.E.B. Du Bois and James Weldon Johnson, young artists like Countee Cullen, Jessie Faucet, Zora Neale Hurston, Claude McKay, Nella Larson, along with Langston Hughes and Rudolph Fisher, to whom the following two chapters are devoted, took over the scene and transformed their ideals and ideas into a movement known as the *Harlem Renaissance*. In their books, race and self-definition are the issues:

Afro American identity was then, as it is now, a major preoccupation with black artists and writers. To be black in a white society, African in the “western world”, raised perplexing problems. The question, “who am I, this Afro-American, this new man,” is a black version of the general American question. (Huggins 11)

¹⁴ *Shuffle Along* was directed by the famous Hall Johnson and William Grant Still. The music was written by Eubie Blake and Noble Sissle. Florance Mills, along other stars, starred in the musical (see Hughes, *Big Sea* 175).

¹⁵ *Nigger Heaven* was written 1926 by Carl Van Vechten, a white writer who was in close contact with the members of the Harlem Renaissance.

As to the success of the Harlem Renaissance, disagreement prevails among authors and scholars. For a period of approximately ten years, when the “Negro was en vogue”,¹⁶ a brisk cultural exchange between whites and blacks took place, enabling many Afro-American artists to publish their works. Critics argue that this movement was no self-contained achievement, but that it was dominated by whites who had the financial means to support artists and to influence them. Many writers were accused of catering for a white audience, imitating its style of writing. Langston Hughes articulated his view on the end of the Renaissance as follows:

I was there. I had a swell time while it lasted. But I thought it wouldn't last long. [...] For how could a large and enthusiastic number of people be crazy about Negroes forever? But some Harlemites thought the millennium had come. They thought the race problem had at last been solved through Art plus Gladys Bentley. They were sure the New Negro would lead a new life from then on on green pastures of tolerance created by Countee Cullen, Ethel Waters, Claude McKay, Duke Ellington, Bojangles, and Alan Locke. [...] The ordinary Negro hadn't heard of the Negro Renaissance. And if they had, it hadn't raised their wages any. (*Big Sea* 178)

With the depression, the interest in Afro-American literature abated and the second phase of the Renaissance came to an end, revealing the same prejudices blacks had to put up with as before. Economic and political disadvantage of the black population had not been solved, but perhaps a new self assertiveness within the educated class had evolved and the racial question, the question of identity, the problems blacks encountered in a white society had been investigated more intensively than ever. Apart from presenting the “Negro” in a different light and trying to brush aside preconceived ideas and prejudices of whites, the works of the authors depict the everyday life of the various social classes of Afro-Americans in Harlem. Therefore they function as documents of the time, as a depiction of social realities of a minority. Musicians play an important role since their music seems to be as new and thrilling as the newly adopted attitude of the protagonists of the Harlem Renaissance. They mirror a new life style, a new self-image and a counter-concept to the white puritan ideals in America.

¹⁶ This phrase was coined by Langston Hughes in his autobiography *The Big Sea*.

5 Common Meter by Rudolph Fisher

The short story “Common Meter” first appeared in the *Baltimore Afro-American* in 1930. It was later republished in the collection “City of Refuge” named after Fisher's first published short story in 1925 (see Löbbermann 98). Rudolph Fisher is one of the notable artists of the Harlem Renaissance, a formally trained intellectual with degrees in art and medicine. After studying biology at Brown University, he went on to Howard University Medical School and finally opened a practice in New York. While in medical school, he successfully started writing stories and laid the foundation for his writing career. Due to his premature death at the age of thirty-seven, his literary output has been rather slim, consisting of two novels, various short stories and articles (see Tignor 87). Yet Langston Hughes ranks Rudolph Fisher “among the wittiest, able to exchange barbs with Alain Locke” (Joseph McLaren 12). He explains: “His tongue was flavored with the sharpest and saltiest humor. He and Alain Locke together were great for intellectual wise-cracking. I used to wish I could talk like Rudolph Fisher.” (Tignor 86)

Harlem is at the centre of Fisher's fiction. His novels and short stories are set exclusively in this part of New York (Löbbermann 98) where he describes black social life and everyday situations in Harlem's barbershops, churches, cafes and dance halls of the lower working class (see Chander 163-167). His stories are full of realistic details that give the reader a sense of the habits within this micro-universe. Ensslen attests him therefore a “special mastery in comprehending social spaces” (Ensslen 110, my translation). In his work he demonstrates familiarity with all social strata and presents a “wide-ranging social panorama” (Ensslen 110, my translation). Löbbermann warns that the reader should not expect an accurate portrait of Harlem in Fisher's prose - Fisher rather tends to affirm the stereotyped picture already existing in the reader's mind and seasons his fiction with a strong dose of irony and absurdity. In contrast to other authors of the Harlem Renaissance, who tried to promote the picture of an intellectual and progressive Harlem, Fisher depicts a Harlem with all its peculiarities, its multifaceted inhabitants and slang expressions. He is particularly interested in the *black vernacular* like “playing the dozens”¹⁷, the talk of distinct social and professional groups such as

¹⁷ “The Dozens” are an elaborate insult contest. Rather than insulting an opponent directly, a contestant derides members of the opponent's family, usually his mother. The dozens has its origins in the slave trade of New Orleans where deformed slaves – generally slaves punished with dismemberment for

musicians, but also in everyday conversations, which he pointedly portrays in *Common Meter* (see Löbberrmann 100-102). Fisher, who is acquainted with every class, gives an “insider's view of Harlem and of the race, his detached and sophisticated treatment of his subject, and his inclusion of a glossary of Harlemese for those who did not understand it opened up the black life of New York to the uninitiated” (Tignor 91).

In his fiction, music plays an important role in the portrayal of Afro-Americans. McCluskey, in his introduction to Fisher's *City of Refuge*, finds that Fisher uses music as an active force, sometimes as foreshadowing, as an agent or as a metaphor. Music is not only a backdrop but gives an insight into a transformation. The 1920s brought a change for Afro-Americans in society and economy and with it a racial awareness which was also reflected in music. The author strove to affirm the forms and expressions of folk culture to picture the complexity of black urban (night) life (McCluskey, introduction xi-xii). Fisher had a sound knowledge in this field since he regularly visited all the black clubs:

In the late 1920s, during late evenings with his wife or friends, Fisher visited the many cabarets, speakeasies, nightclubs, and theaters in Harlem. According to his widow, they would visit the Savoy, “especially on bad nights” to listen to music. All the while Fisher would be observing, mentally noting the conversations and gestures of those in the audience. (McCluskey, introduction xvii)

His familiarity with all the cafes and cabarets is also demonstrated in his famous essay named “The Caucasian storms Harlem”. Fisher gives a detailed description of the abundance of clubs at the time of the first World War. The Cotton Club, the Lybia, the Capitol, the Oriental and many others were visited by the black in-crowd. Not many whites, or so-called 'fays' (ofays), were seen there. This territory belonged solely to the inhabitants of Harlem. As Fisher puts it, “never did white guests come to the Oriental except as guests of Negroes”. And if they did, then the “group of 'fays would huddle and grin and think they were having a wild time” or “weren't any too comfortable” at all (see *Caucasian* 76-77). The author James Baldwin later explains the intimacy and the social importance such clubs provided:

disobedience – were grouped in lots of a “cheap dozen” for sale to slave owners. For a black to be sold as part of the “dozens” was the lowest blow possible.” (see http://www.louisianafolklife.org/LT/Articles/Essays/creole_art_african_am_oral.html)

They know, on one level, everything concerning each other that there is to know: they are all black. And this produces an atmosphere of freedom, which is exactly real as the limits which have made it necessary. And what they don't know about each other, like who works where and who sleeps with whom, doesn't matter. No one gives a damn [...] in the club. No one gives a damn because they know exactly how rough it is out there, when the club gates close. (*Color* 676)

The story "Common Meter" is set in the "Arcadia", a huge ball room in Harlem and consists of two parts. It starts with an evening where two bands are hired to entertain the all-black audience. Right at the beginning Fisher introduces the crowd: "People. Flesh. A fly-thick jam of dancers on the floor, grimly jostling each other, a milling herd of thirsty-eyed boys [...] a congregation of languid girls [...] a restless multitude of empty-romance hungry lives." (CM 13) He portrays his protagonists, the two bandleaders, with great humor. Bus Williams with his Blue Devils (the term blues is said to originate from "blue devils") with his brown countenance and round face is well liked by the crowd. His antagonist Fess Baxter is portrayed as a "cheese-colored" (*ibid.*), ignorant womanizer; nevertheless, he, too, has a successful orchestra which is popular with the audience.

Fisher manages to compose a setting everybody is familiar with in Harlem. His two exaggerated characters and the setting convey a vivid and energetic picture of Harlem. Fisher articulates the color conception in the 1920s as a reflection of the awareness of racial problems transferred from the experiences of white America into the black society. A hierarchy with the individuals of the fairest complexion on top mirrors the wish for accommodation to the white society. Men, as this story shows, are fascinated by women with amber or yellow skin. On the other hand, blacks are proud of their culture and their achievements, therefore the fair skin-color of Fess Baxter in the context of the story is used pejoratively. "The snobbery around skin-colour is terrifying. The light-skins and browns look down on the black; by some friendships with *ofays* are not tolerated" (see Cunard 130). Langston Hughes, in his essay *The Negro Artist and the Racial Mountain*, describes the grotesque color situation as initiated by whites and carried on by blacks: "Father is often dark but he has usually married the lightest woman he could find. The family attends a fashionable church where few really colored faces are to be found. And they themselves draw a color line." (*Racial Mountain* 306)

Jean Ambrose, an amber skinned young hostess, becomes the object of rivalry between

the two conductors. Baxter informs his trumpet player Perry Parker about his interest in her. Bus Williams has also developed a liking for Jean but has far more serious intentions than Fess. Jean at first avoids any closer contact with the musicians and tries to stay aloof. When Bus has to go on stage and Fess trying to approach Jean, he lets his orchestra play a blues. Fisher depicts the weight and the importance the blues has for the audience. The people understand the emotional impact and its powerful expression and react to it:

The blues were low down, the nakedest of jazz a series of periodic wails against a background of steady, slow rhythm, each pounding pulse descending inevitably, like leaden strokes of fate. Bus found himself singing the words of the grief-stricken lamentation:

Trouble-trouble has followed me all my days

Trouble-trouble has followed me all days

Seems like trouble gonna follow me always

The mob demanded an encore, a mob that knew its blues and liked them blue. Bus complied. Each refrain became bluer as it was caught up by a different voice: the wailing clarinet, the weeping C sax, the moaning B-flat sax, the trombone, and Bus' own plaintive tenor [...]. (CM 17-18)

Fisher is very interesting for the music-adoring reader because of the vivid depiction of the musical performance and the communication within the band. In his story the reader almost participates in the dance and gets to know what it was like to have a good time in a ballroom in the “roaring twenties”. But underlying this depiction there are also exaggeration and irony used to portray this “immoral” place. A substantial part of his story consists of dialogues and conversations mirroring the vernacular of the crowd as well as the “hipster talk” of musicians who are concentrated on performing but experienced and versed enough to have a chat on the side without making mistakes or missing a bar.

The next scene affirms Fisher's talent for inserting comical scenes into his short fiction: when it is Fess Baxter's turn to play again with his band, Bus Williams overhears his conversation with Perry Parker in which he boasts about a woman who had apparently fallen for him. Believing they are talking about Jean Williams, Bus runs across the platform and starts a fight with Baxter. He attacks him and forces him to reveal the name of the lady who fortunately turns out to be only Nellie Grey. The atmosphere is very tense and in order to cool down the hotheads, the owner of the club proposes a band

contest: "Listen. You birds fight it out with them jazz sticks, y'a hear? Them's your weapons." (CM 19) The winner can look forward to the award - the "lovin' cup" and, presumably, the undivided attention of Jean Ambrose.

The second part of the story depicts the night of the contest. The two orchestras are introduced to the audience and the rules are explained. Each orchestra will play three songs in different styles and the band who eventually receives the longest total applause for all three performances wins the cup. For Bus Williams, rhythm is paramount in his music, the most important device for arranging his pieces. Unfortunately, during the first number, the band realizes that the drums had been manipulated and cannot be used for the contest. The people stop dancing since the solo instruments are not backed by the throbbing beat of the snare and bass drum. Baxter pursues a different recipe for winning: "Contrary to Bus Williams' philosophy, Baxter considered rhythm a mere rack upon which to hang his tonal tricks." (CM 24) His arrangement of *Jean, my Jean* is "delirious with strange harmonies, iridescent with odd color-changes, and its very flamboyance, its musical fine-writing and conceits delighted the dancers." (CM 25) With that strategy - and with knifing the opponent's drum sheets - he is confident to win. His plan seems to bear fruits, the people applaud his orchestra and Williams' men are discouraged. But the final piece each band has to play is a blues and it changes everything. Due to the absence of drums, following Jean's advice, Bus turns his blues into a shout (which actually has a long tradition in African-American religious service). He makes his men stamp their feet and he chooses the famous St. Louis Blues to turn his luck around:

Clarinets wailed, saxophones moaned, trumpets wept wretchedly, trombones laughed bitterly, even the great bass horn sobbed dismally from the depths. And so perfectly did the misery in the music express the actual despair of the situation that the crowd was caught from the start. Soon dancers closed their eyes, forgot their jostling neighbors, lost themselves bodily in the easy sway of that fateful measure [...] (CM 26)

Fisher subsequently describes the impact the blues and the stamping of feet and clapping has on the crowd. The blues was very popular in the 1920s; it was around that time that the first blues record was released and the country blues was soon afterwards adopted for the cabaret stage. In spite of the new interpretation, it never lost its emotional core. Connecting the blues with the shout shows the back-link to the Afro-American heritage:

They had been rocked thus before, this multitude. Two hundred years ago they had swayed to that same slow fateful measure, lifting their lamentation to

heaven, pounding the earth with their feet, seeking the mercy of a new God through the medium of an old rhythm, zoom-zoom. They had rocked so a thousand years in a city whose walls were jungle, forfending the wrath of a terrible black God who spoke in storm and pestilence, had swayed and wailed to that same slow period. [...] Not a sound but an emotion that laid hold of their bodies and swung them into the past. Blues – low down blues indeed – blues that reached their souls' depths. (CM 26)

Here the blues evokes the times of slavery and even, in the sub-conscience of the audience, points to the African past of their ancestors, their musical traditions that were transferred to America. Underlying all harmonic innovations that were made in the new world, there is this ancient rhythm, the most important ingredient of the blues. Without the shuffling rhythm, the significant beat, the blues cannot unfold its power. Eubie Blake, the composer of the musical *Shuffle Along*, describes the impact of rhythm:

“You know rhythm is the most - rhythm and laughing is the most contagious thing in the world. I'm not a scientist, but I'm saying that on my own. [...] See, you don't have to have music. You can use a tom-tom, anything. Just watch the audience. See, that's how contagious rhythm is ... and laughing.” (Huggins 338)

Fisher goes on describing the intensity of a blues performance. Once the audience is caught in that sorrowful feeling, the music starts to open the flood gates and releases all emotions. The listeners are able to participate in that process and under the guidance of the band they let go of their suppressed sentiments and are thus able to expurgate their souls. This fervor, released by the “common meter”, the beat of the blues, reaches a climax, where everyone joins the pulse and “becomes one with the music and further, one with a collective past.” (McCluskey, introduction xxvi) After the culmination it subsides into a relaxed and renewed spirit.

The rhythm persisted, the unfaltering common meter of the blues, the blueness itself, the sorrow, the despair, began to give way to hope. [...] The deep and regular impulses now vibrated like nearing thunder, a mighty, inescapable, all-embracing dominance, stressed by the contrast of wind-tone; an all-pervading atmosphere through which soared wild-winged birds. Rapturously, rhapsodically, the number rose to madness and at the height of its madness, burst into sudden silence. Illusion broke. (CM 26-27)

This collective experience of setting the emotions free has a healing and strengthening power. Insofar, Fisher's comparison of the ancient rhythm to religion, to a god, is not far-fetched and is truly legitimate. Each side had been borrowing from the other as Nancy

Cunard¹⁸, a white writer and publisher, who was closely related with African-American writers and artists, aptly describes. She remembers a revival meeting with Rev. Cullen (the father of the poet Countee Cullen), which has great similarities with the performance of profane blues described by Fisher:

They begin beat time with their feet too. The “spirit” is coming with the volume of sound. [...] the singing gets intenser, foot-beating all around now, bodies swaying, and clapping of hands in unison. [...] The foot-beat becomes a stamp [...] vibrating ecstasy. [...] It is impossible to convey the scale of these immense sound-waves and rhythmical under-surges. One is transported completely. It has nothing to do with God, but with life – a collective life for which I know no name. The people are entirely out of themselves – and then, suddenly, the music stops, calm comes immediately. (Harlem Reviewed 126-127)

After this communal, spiritual and almost religious experience nothing could compare – Baxter's “subordination of rhythm to tone, his exotic coloring, all were useless in a low-down blues” (CM 28). Although he knows that he has actually been beaten, the total applause for the three songs that he has been given makes him the winner of the cup. Under the protest of the crowd to which Williams' drummer reveals the manipulated drums, Baxter hands the cup to Jean Ambrose. She takes the trophy and presents it to Bus with the audience running wild.

In this short story, Fisher gives us a stunning insight into a world that is completely different from everyday experience of Afro-Americans. The blues and jazz had undergone an amazing development and had become part of the big entertainment business that was created by and catered for blacks. Along with the success of these styles, the labour-situation of musicians changed. Attaining a job in an orchestra like Baxter's or Williams' made it possible to make a living and to abandon day jobs. But not only financial security made the profession desirable - the publicity did as well. Band leaders and their musicians stood in the limelight. Unlike many other jobs, appreciation - but surely also criticism – followed immediately after the performance; feedback was instantly given by the crowd and that enabled the musician to develop a completely new self-confidence.

At the beginning of the “jazz age” many Afro-American musicians were untrained and had no formal education, but they were familiar with church music, blues and ragtime

¹⁸ Nancy Cunard: 1896-1965. (see cup.columbia.edu/book/978-0-231-13938-0/nancy-cunard)

from their early years on. Eubie Blake remembers in an interview with Nathan Huggins his first encounters with Jazz: “I am 90 year old, and I heard that music when I was 5 or 6 years old: the band coming up the streets in Baltimore, the colored bands. They would go to a funeral. [...] Whatever they played going out, they played the same thing coming back, but to ragtime.” (Huggins 338) Many orchestra leaders did not demand that their band members be able to read music. Therefore becoming a musician was a dream that could be put into practice as long as the musical feeling and talent for the instrument were provided. This enabled artists like Louis Armstrong or Duke Ellington, who had almost no musical education, to enter the scene and lift jazz up to higher grounds. The musicians in both orchestras symbolize this new type of musician, who, due to the financial improvement but also the approval by both blacks and whites, gains a new assertiveness. In *Common Meter* Fisher highlights the vernacular of the working class attending such dances. With great humor he depicts musicians as womanizers with a certain amount of charm but also tendency to sauciness when talking to women. The women, on the other hand, are not shy either and are quick at repartee.

“You look like a full course dinner – and I'm starved.”

“Hold the personalities, papa.”

“No stuff. Wish I could raise a loan on you. Baby- what a role I'd tote.”

“Thanks. Look at the farmer over there hootin' it with Sister Full-bosom. Boy, what a side show they'd make!”

“Yeah. But what I'm lookin' for is a leadin' lady.”

“Yeah, I got a picture of any lady leadin' you anywhere.”

“You could, Jean.”

“Be yourself brother.” (CM 15)

Fisher constructs his story around the two contrasting characters and solves the conflict by letting the good win over the bad. He describes the ability of Afro-Americans to improvise in music as well as in life and paints a vivid picture of the scene in the 1920s, but apart from depicting the black life-style and vernacular of his time, he also affirms the importance of music in the community. Clubs, next to churches, are the social centers in Harlem, they are “where it's at”, where everybody meets, and there the communal memory is expressed by the blues, the testimony of the whole race. The blues with its

rhythm seems to be like a heartbeat accompanying Afro-Americans for generation, and strengthening their corporate spirit. The musicians have the duty to let this memory stay alive and keep it real.

Whites quickly became interested in cabarets. In “The Caucasian Storms Harlem”, Fisher explains that African-American entertainment was absorbed into American culture and the clubs literally were invaded by whites. The situation was now reversed – not whites were the exceptions in the club but blacks and Harlem became a centre of white entertainment and exploitation. The author occasionally found himself to be the only black visitor in a formerly black nightclub and he was stared at. Fisher resents this “taking-over”, the piling into a black domain and the interest in “those special Negro features which have a particular and peculiar appeal” (*Caucasians* 79). A new fascination for “African-primitive” art and forms of expression was spreading among whites. White modernists, tired of western repressive civilization, saw Harlem as an exotic jungle, where the taboos of white society were overruled. Whites were fascinated by the fervor, the intensity and enjoyment blacks got out of their music, but they did not realize that Harlem soon commercialized this “primitivism” and eventually provided guests with a picture of the jungle they expected to see (Löbbermann 95-96). The majority of the white audience never revised their prejudices. “From all the time the Negro has entertained the whites, but never been thought of by this type as possibly a social equal” (Cunard 126). Soon blacks were no longer admitted into their most favorite haunts any more and therefore abandoned their clubs in order to seek their entertainment elsewhere. Nevertheless, Fisher concludes his essay with the hope that this interest signifies that whites were at least learning to speak the (musical) language of Afro-Americans. In spite of Fisher's popularity during his lifetime and importance for the Harlem Renaissance, his works were almost forgotten until 1959 when Sterling A. Brown from Howard University initiated new studies about the author.

Wealthy whites soon became attentive to the talents of Afro-Americans and started to support artists as their patrons. The huge public interest in Afro-American art opened immense possibilities, for its creators, not only in financially terms, but also in form of publications and a wider (white) readership. On the one hand, such a symbiosis enabled artists to pursue a musical career; on the other hand, the patrons held influence over their artistic activities and could push them in a certain direction due to the monetary dependency. The next short story, written by Langston Hughes, reflects the white-black

power-relationship mirrored in the field of music.

6 The Blues I'm Playing by Langston Hughes

Langston Hughes, a leading member of the Harlem Renaissance, became famous for his blues and jazz poetry. But apart from his lyrical works he was also an accomplished and versatile author of plays and novels, who became a well-known essayist, movie script writer, translator and librettist. Moreover, he also succeeded in writing short stories. “The Blues I'm Playing” appeared in Hughes' first short-story collection *The Ways of White Folks* in 1934 (Miller Works, introduction xi). This collection comprises stories dealing with the relationship between blacks and whites using irony and sarcasm in order to express the “predicament of African Americans in the United States – where the difference between the perception of “white folks” and the reality experienced by African Americans was so great that an ironic vision was less a matter of aesthetic choice than one of everyday fact” (Ostrom 6). The absurdity and dishonesty that often characterize the interaction between blacks and whites are central in his stories (Bevilacqua, *DLB* 143-145) Social criticism runs through all the stories where Hughes demonstrates how racism operates with violence and direct mistreatment of blacks. But he also shows the polite condescension of whites who objectify blacks and patronize them, as in *The Blues I'm Playing*. “What was clear, however, was Hughes' acute interest in the question of social justice, as well as his sympathetic feelings for the poor and downtrodden.” (Rampersand, introduction *Collected Works* 15, 2) Hughes criticizes the status quo of racial relationships and writes in his essay entitled *My America*: “All over America, against the Negro, there has been an economic color line of such severity that since the Civil War we have been kept most effectively, as a racial group, in the lowest economic brackets” (Hughes quoted in Ostrom 77).

Afro-American folk-derived music such as jazz and blues is an important factor in his output, dominant in his poetry but also in his short fiction. He experienced the emergence and the consequent success of these styles and was impressed by their social impact. Blues and jazz became metaphors for affirming a separate identity within a white surrounding. Apart from their community-forming power, he incorporated them because of the rhythmical structure. Jazz, with its own “common meter”, the swing phrasing, was immensely suitable for his poetry. Hughes also incorporated the blues stanza with its special form. In the mid-1950s he wrote:

Jazz seeps into words - spelled out words. Nelson Algren is influenced by jazz, Ralph Ellison is, too. Sartre, too. Jaques Prevert. Most of the best writers today are. [...] Me as the public, my dot in the middle - it was fifty years ago, the first time I heard the blues on Independence Avenue in Kansas City. Then State Street in Chicago. Then Harlem in the twenties with J.P. And J.C. Johnson and Fats and Willie the Lion and Nappy playing piano - with the blues running all up and down the keyboard through the ragtime and the jazz. (see Ostrom 74)

Hughes speaks of the “undertow of black music with its rhythm that never betrays you, its strength like the beat of the human heart, its humor and its rooted power” (Kent, *Hughes* 22).

Blues as form of expression but also as means of forming a statement in white America can be found in *The Blues I'm Playing*. Hughes tells the story about the relationship between Oceola Jones, a young black pianist living in Harlem, and Mrs. Dora Ellsworth, a wealthy white patron. Oceola is a member of the Harlem music scene and Harlem community, trained in classical but also in popular music, teaching pupils, rehearsing a church choir and playing almost nightly at house parties or dances. She leads an independent life devoid of major financial problems. A music critic, Ormond Hunter, recommends her to Mrs. Ellsworth, an immensely rich widow who has no children and who invests her money in young artists. At first Oceola is not interested in giving up her independence, but Mrs. Ellsworth is determined to take her “under her wings”; she arranges a teacher, buys a grand piano and supports her substantially for many years. Oceola at first seems to mistrust this extraordinary generosity “for she had never met anybody interested in pure art before. Just to be given things for *art's sake* seemed suspicious” (*Blues*, 63). As the relationship develops, it becomes clear that the patron is not only interested in supporting her protégée but also in reshaping her art and her life. Mrs. Ellsworth is captivated by the musician Oceola and her talent for playing the piano, but she also perceives her as something exotic in regard to sexuality. “Mrs. Ellsworth couldn't recall ever having known a single Negro before in her whole life, so she found Oceola fascinating.” She did not know why she was the most interesting of her artists “unless it was that Oceola really was talented, terribly alive, and that she looked like nothing Mrs. Ellsworth had ever been near before. Such a rich velvet black, and such a hard young body” (*Blues* 65-69). To fill the gap of her ignorance of black life and culture she tells her housekeeper to order a book called “Nigger Heaven” and everything about Harlem. “She made a mental note that she must go up there sometime, for she had never

yet seen the dark section of New York” (*Blues* 65).

By giving her a monthly cheque which enables Oceola to study without having to teach pupils and drill the choir, her patron tries to lure her out of her black community. Mrs. Ellsworth thus interferes with her private life. She rents an apartment on the Left Bank and arranges for her to study abroad for a while. Furthermore, she wants Oceola to play only classical music and abandon entirely her work concerning jazz and blues – she only appreciates spirituals, which she sometimes rehearses with her protégée. Oceola, on the other hand, likes the company of the so-called “low-down folks”, the people who enjoy their gin on Saturday night, the music, the easiness, because that is where she comes from and they give her the feeling of belonging. Her patron naturally does not approve of her mingling with the “common element”. Subconsciously, Mrs. Ellsworth also “projects her own fastidiousness and fear of men onto Oceola” (Ostrom 14). The man in Oceola's life, first introduced as her “flat mate”, fills the patron with mistrust because art should suffice for her protégée as it fulfills herself. While Mr. Ellsworth is arranging a concert tour for her, Oceola ends their relationship by deciding to marry and to devote her life to more than music and art. “When she (Mrs. Ellsworth) saw how love had triumphed over art, she decided, she could no longer influence Oceola's life. The period of Oceola was over” (*Blues* 75).

The story shows parallels to Hughes' own life. He, too, like so many others at that time, had an influential and rich patron. In 1927 he met Mrs. Charlotte Osgood Mason, who also supported the famous writer and sociologist Zora Neale Hurston. In 1930 they determined their relationship. Hughes recalls:

During my last years at Lincoln, one of my week-end visits to New York, a friend took me to call on a distinguished and quite elderly white lady who lived on Park Avenue. [...] I found her instantly one of the most delightful women I had ever met, witty and charming, kind and sympathetic, very old and white-haired but very modern in her ideas. (*Big Sea* 234)

Mrs. Osgood Mason offered Hughes to cover Hughes' expenses in the following summer, in order to enable him to begin with his novel *Not Without Laughter*. Subsequently, she financed the following years of his writing and she supported his family and an intense relationship developed between benefactor and writer. “I was fascinated by her, and I loved her. No one else had ever been so thoughtful of me, or so interested in things I wanted to do, or so kind and generous towards me” (*Big Sea* 236).

When Hughes wrote the socially critical poem *Advertisement for the Waldorf-Astoria*, Mason did not approve of it and from that point onwards Hughes sensed a gradual change in their relationship, which made him feel increasingly insecure.

She possessed the power to control people's lives – pick them up and put them down when or where she wished. She wanted me to be primitive but unfortunately, I did not feel the rhythms of the primitive surging through me, and so I could not live and write as though I did. I only was an American Negro - who had loved the surface of Africa - but was not Africa. I was Chicago and Kansas City and Broadway and Harlem. So in the end it all came back very near to the old impasse of white and Negro again, white and Negro - as do most relationships in America. (*Big Sea* 242-243)

This was a blow for the author from which he eventually recovered, albeit very slowly. Disillusioned by the true character of this symbiosis he writes: “I thought she liked *me*, my patron. But I guess she only liked my writing, and not even that any more” (*Big Sea* 245).

The combination of white patron and black artist thus contained preassigned tensions. This constellation embodied an unequal power relationship; the benefactor, on the one hand, having the means to support the artist's work, but with the artist being wholly dependent on their good-will, on the other. Expectations on both sides differed immensely. With regard to music, the situation presented itself as follows: The black artist in the 1920s usually met with success in the field of gospel, blues and jazz. Many black composers did not want to be limited in their musical expression and composed works of serious music like Nathaniel Dett.¹⁹ His sophisticated arrangements and compositions, often based on spirituals and folks songs, were criticized for being “too white” in their style. The white public felt that Dett was influenced too much by white culture and that he had become a “westernized Negro” who forgot his “primitive roots” and the “racial quality” which, it was thought, he was expected to incorporate in his work (see Spencer 42). The audience demanded that spirituals of slavery times should be preserved in their authentic form - they were not supposed to be transferred into some refined composition. Whites adored and appreciated Afro-American spirituals and songs but did not allow the artists to move an inch away from their traditional music. “[The American white people] are very persistent in urging the Negro to 'stick to them' (the spirituals), yet they have apparently never entertained the idea of the universal use of the

¹⁹ R. Nathaniel Dett (1882-1943) was one of the most successful black composers He was head of the Hampton Choir, for which he composed innumerable pieces (see Spencer 38-71).

songs for worship”, Dett complains (see Spencer 42). From the reactions of whites, regarding serious music written by Afro-Americans, one can glimpse the respect for the craftsmanship of Afro-American composers, but one also senses their reluctance towards letting them into a field of classical and abstract music formerly dominated by whites. The white society seemed to be displeased with the idea of Afro-American composers composing at the same level or maybe even overtaking them in an area that was once reserved for whites only. They tried to “put the Negro at his place”. A colleague of Dett, William Grant Still²⁰

became increasingly dismayed by those whites, the music critics among them, who wanted the new Negro to remain old - those whites who supported Negroes working within the musical idioms of the spiritual and jazz but cast 'definite aspersions' on black composers trying to rise to a higher compositional level. (Spencer 85)

Composers thus were motivated to show their ability in composing universal music and their success allowed them, according to Spencer, to “reap glorious revenge” and pay off an “old and bloody score” (Spencer 56). Because of his unyielding attitude towards the wishes of the Hampton authorities for a more “Negro interpretation” of the spirituals, Dett broke with his benefactors and supporters (see Spencer 63-64).

When the musicians stuck to their jazz and blues, the situation was just as tense. As mentioned before, whites stormed Harlem, fascinated by the new rhythms, the way of improvising and interpreting music as well as the seemingly carefree life-style, which was so different from their own. They enjoyed ragtime and blues and here, too, a further development of these styles was received with reluctance. Still explains: “It is true that some people incline to 'stereotype' a Negro composer, expecting him to follow certain lines, for no sounder reason than that those lines were followed in the past” (Spencer 73). The clubs like the *Cotton Club* hired bands playing the “jungle style,”²¹ emphasizing the “primitive and exotic character” of the Afro-American. Suddenly a “Negro purity”, meaning that the Afro-American is uncorrupted by western civilization, was discovered and demanded from artists. Langston Hughes sarcastically describes this fact and the bourgeois white attitude towards Blacks living in Harlem in his short story *Slave on the*

²⁰ William Grant Still (1895-1978) was a successful classical composer but he also arranged for W. C. Handy, Eubie Blake's *Shuffle Along* and wrote film music. Still was the first Afro-American to compose a symphony that was performed by a famous symphonic orchestra, the *Afro-American Symphony*, in 1931 (see Spencer 75).

²¹ Jungle stands for jazz that should symbolize the exotic and mystic world of the jungle. The most striking element of this style was the new growling sound of the trumpet.

Block (in: *The Ways of White Folks*). A young white and wealthy couple, living in Greenwich Village, pretending to be artists and taking pride in their relationships with blacks are the main protagonists. They perceive blacks as naïve and primitive and yet in spite of all their outward benevolence they are racists, looking down on them in condescension. They are full of ignorance of the social realities of blacks and the experiences of race discrimination they make every day. Here, Hughes offers a :

critical backward glance at the 'cult of the Negro' in the Harlem Renaissance, especially as it manifested itself in the glorification of the primitive, a Freud-inspired curiosity about the habits and pleasures of "uninhibited" blacks and the often manipulative interest of white patrons in fostering Afro-American growth. [...] He shrewdly connects the fashionable conception of blacks as exotic primitives to the earlier stereotype of the "contented slave." (Bevilacqua 145)

Langston Hughes also had experienced this demand to be "primitive" and display an African culture, although it was obvious that after having lived for centuries in America the assimilation of blacks into a white society was inevitable. Moreover, the concept of the "African" is a preconceived, theoretical construct which can never be fulfilled anyway. In *The Blues I'm Playing* Hughes shows a more differentiated and far more complex picture of the patron-protégée relationship and reverses the conflict. Oceola is not pushed into playing jazz and blues - quite the contrary: it is expected from her to give up this kind of music and to concentrate on white classical music. Mrs. Ellsworth seems to be on a mission to redeem her of her African heritage and to open her mind to the only true and pure art.

She spent her days practicing, playing for friends of her patron, going to concerts, and reading books about music. She no longer had pupils or rehearsed the choir, but she still loved to play for house parties – for nothing – now that she no longer needed the money, out of sheer love of jazz. This rather disturbed Mrs. Ellsworth, who still believed in art of the old school, portraits that really and truly looked like people, poems about nature, music that had soul in it, not syncopation (*Blues* 68).

She wants Oceola to sublimate her soul and to give in to the higher, more worthy art. Even blacks had a deprecating opinion about the blues. For a long time it was frowned upon by decent people and perceived as sinful music though it was hugely successful from the 1920s on. Spencer illustrates this attitude towards popular music with Nathaniel Dett's experiences: Coming from a "respectable" background himself, Dett understood that in those days (his youth) black music was generally associated with ragtime which

was a music intended for dance or to ridicule blacks (Spencer 73). But Oceola grew up with blues, spirituals and jazz and thus black music naturally belonged in her repertoire.

Hughes presents his heroine as a very talented, yet also very practical person. She feels that music should not isolate a person from others but should integrate him or her into the community. For her, music should not be concealed behind theoretical ideas - she prefers the direct approach and the courage to practice it. Having grown up in adverse financial conditions she “wouldn't stand looking at the stars” (*Blues* 78) as Mrs. Ellsworth would like her to, but stands with her feet on solid ground:

She met many black Algerian and French West Indian students, too, and listened to their interminable arguments, ranging from Garvey to Picasso to Spengler to Jean Cocteau, and thought they all must be crazy. Why did they or anybody argue so much about life or art? Oceola merely lived - and loved it. [...] Only the Marxian students seemed sound to her, [...] the rest of the controversies seemed to be based on air. [...] Oceola hated most artists, too, and the word *art* in French or English. If you wanted to play the piano or paint pictures or write books, go ahead! But why talk so much about it? (*Blues* 70)

In this short story blues again plays a special role as it did in “Common Meter”. Hughes adds a new component to the significance of the blues: it functions as counter concept, standing in opposition to the artificial and intellectual approach of classical (white) music. He satirizes the, in his opinion, serene and uninspired lifestyle of whites which they are desperate to escape from by storming Harlem and getting superficially involved with blacks. Contrariwise, they are afraid of adopting such a lifestyle and fear to lose control and countenance. From the music theoretical point of view the blues has a simple harmonic structure; it is straight forward, highly emotional and unsophisticated, yet not trivial. Because of Mrs. Ellsworth, Oceola focuses solely on classical music in her training but she always returns to her roots. In contrast to classical music, the popular and sacred music she plays privately has an universal appeal, attractive to the lower and middle class, which makes it a reflection of urban black life. It gives her immense pleasure and freedom of interpretation, and enables her to express her love for life. Therefore, every once in a while, she plays in clubs while residing in Paris:

Oceola would take the piano and beat out a blues for Brick and the assembled guests. In her playing of Negro folk music, Oceola never doctored it up, or filled it full of classical runs, or fancy falsities. In the blues she made the bass note throb like tomtoms, the treble cry like little flutes, so deep in the earth and so high in the sky that they understood everything. And when the nightclub crowd would get up and dance to her blues, and Bricktop would yell, “Hey!

Hey!” Ocela felt as happy as if she were performing a Chopin étude for the nicely gloved Oh's and Ah's in a Crillon Salon. Music to Ocela, demanded movement and expression, dancing and living to go with it. (*Blues* 71)

Ocela revolts against the pressure Mrs. Ellsworth is putting on her. It is not a violent and overt resistance but a subtle and artistic one, which is no less effective. She makes a statement by turning her back on the so-called “high culture” and embraces her African heritage by eventually playing the blues to her patron, who associates Afro-American folk culture with “low art” and who feels her powerlessness in regard to Ocela. This quiet but determined rebellion tells her: “I *will* be who I am” in the face of the wealthy white patron who suggests she should change and sublimate her soul (see Ostrom 54). Hughes deconstructs the pretentious distinction between “high” and “low” art, categories he connects, on the one hand with white hypocrisy and repressed sexuality, and liveliness, earthiness and integrity represented by Ocela on the other (ibid 15).

Ocela gladly gives up her musical career, the patronage of Mrs. Ellsworth and the money connected with it. Enjoying life and giving it depth means more to her than to encapsulate herself within a romantic idea of artistry which has its focus on masterly technique but offers only loneliness. For a short time, Ocela had taken what Mrs. Ellsworth had given her - she consumed the lessons, improved her technique and gave concerts; but she never betrayed her principles and views. Therefore she makes a final statement at their last meeting: she plays the blues:

And her fingers began to wander slowly up and down the keyboard, flowing into the soft and lazy syncopation of a Negro blues, a blues that deepened and grew into rollicking jazz, than into an earth throbbing rhythm that shook the lilies in the Persian vases of Mrs. Ellsworth's music room. Louder than the voice of the white woman who cried that Ocela was deserting beauty, deserting her real self, deserting her hope in life, the flood of wild syncopation filled the house. Then sank into a slow and singing blues with which it had begun. [...] This is mine....Listen! ...How sad and gay it is. Blue and happy-laughing and crying... How white like you and black like me... How much like a man... And how much like a woman. (*Blues* 77)

At the end of the story, Ocela emerges as a whole and unbended character. She does not assimilate or give in to the demands of her patron but cherishes her African roots. After cutting off her ties to Mrs. Ellsworth, her future life may be economically uncertain but because of her determined and self-assured behavior, the reader senses that she would make her way as a musician and as person. She would marry, have children and her art to

help her live a fulfilled and happy life. She knows that she is capable of standing on her own feet. Oceola's rejection of the patronage also stands for her identity. She always had known where she belonged, but having accepted the offer by her patron, she asserts the value of African art and casts off the narrow definition of white art. She definitely rejects the subliminal racism and embraces her sexual and emotional identity (Ostrom 54-55).

Finally, Hughes makes Oceola the organ of his ideas accepted by the Harlem Renaissance. Having written the story in the final years of this movement, it seems that the author has no idealistic thoughts about "advancing the race" through art. It appears rather naïve to him that art alone could be the sole remedy for fighting racism; it is rather "another instance" of white exploitation (Ostrom 13). "The Renaissance had come and gone, leaving Hughes with deep ambivalence about such an artistic movement, the nature of white artistic patronage [...] and the connection between art, politics and society." (Ostrom 5) Oceola formulates her ideas thus:

And as for the cultured Negroes who were always saying art would break down the color lines, art could save the race and prevent lynchings! "Bunk!" said Oceola. "Mama and pa were both artists when it came to making music, and the white folks ran them out of town for being dressed up in Alabama. And look at the Jews! Every other artist in the world's a Jew, and still folks hate them. (*Blues* 73)

In a community that is politically and economically dominated by whites, "where the desire to pour racial individuality into the mould of American standardization", music, respectively blues and jazz, remain unique forms of expression. Hughes writes: "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". (*Racial Mountain* 308).

7 Powerhouse by Eudora Welty

After two Afro-American writers a white author, Eudora Welty, who depicts jazz and blues musicians in her short story “Powerhouse” will be presented. Eudora Welty ranks among the most successful and acclaimed female American writers of the 20th century. Born in 1909 in the Deep South, she began her writing career in the 1930s and produced a comprehensive corpus of work. Her achievements were already recognized during her life time - she was awarded a number of prizes, among them the Pulitzer Prize, and numerous honorary degrees from notable universities. She wrote three novels, two novellas and couple of essays on literary criticism; but her focus lay on the short story which was her major field of work (see Marrs, introduction x). Before starting a professional career as a writer, Welty tried to establish herself as a photographer, inspired by her father. During the Great Depression, she took memorable photographs of people from all classes and social backgrounds, particularly of black people (see Marrs 42). Her greatest interest lay in writing fiction. Her first story, “Death of a Salesman”, appeared in 1936 and was eventually published in 1941 in her first story collection *A Curtain of Green*. This collection comprises previously published short stories and includes “Powerhouse”, one of her most famous works (see Devlin 3).

In “Powerhouse” Eudora Welty creates a story around a jazz musician. To her jazz has a different significance than for the authors discussed in the previous chapters. John Panish emphasizes the importance and the symbolic meaning of jazz and the depiction of its performance in Afro-American literature “as a powerful metaphor for larger issues such as the historical experience of racism, group solidarity, the expression of intensely felt emotions, and the development of an Afro-American culture” (quoted in Bouton 79). Langston Hughes, for instance, as explained in the previous chapter, repeatedly takes up the topic of race relationships in America. His experiences as a black person shaped his perception and became part of his everyday reality. Naturally, these experiences are expressed in his writing, not only as a reflection of reality, but also as a reflection of his concern for making his readers aware of the situation of blacks. Through fiction the reader's attention is drawn to the social circumstances of the black community.

Being born and having lived her life in the Deep South, Welty was frequently confronted with the reproach that she did not incorporate race issues in her work. In her essay *Must*

the Novelist Crusade? She argues that, for her, portraying the individual is the most important thing, as well as a diversification of her topics. "When we [Southern fiction writers] write about people, black or white, in the South or anywhere, if the stories are worth the reading, we are writing about everybody" (*Phoenix's Grandson* 811). Eudora Welty is aware of race problems in the South and the pressure they create in the society, but among the various reasons for not making political statements in her fiction, she mentions the following: "What matters is that a writer is committed to his own moral principles." (*Phoenix's Grandson* 809) Moreover, she argues that a writer should not "correct and condone, not at all to comfort, but to make what's told alive." (ibid.) Therefore "Powerhouse" was not written with a political or social intention but to portray a black bandleader and his musicians in a story where "two worlds of dream and actuality are becoming less clearly distinguishable." (Vande Kieft quoted in *Wakoning* 229)

The time span covered by the narration amounts to barely a couple of hours; the concert itself. It gives a detailed description of Powerhouse, his habitus as a bandleader and the way he performs in front of an audience. His band plays at a white dance in the segregated South. Right at the beginning, the reader gets a vivid picture of the protagonist.

He has pale grey eyes, heavy lids, maybe horny like a lizard's, but big glowing eyes when they're open. He has Africa feet of the greatest size, stomping both together on each side of the pedals. He's not coal black - beverage colored - looks like a preacher when his mouth is shut, but then it opens - fast and obscene. And his moth is going every minute: like a monkey's when it looks for something. [...] There he is with his great head, fat stomach, little round piston legs, and long yellow-sectioned strong big fingers, at rest about the size of bananas. (PH 29-30)

Listeners "laughing as if to hide a weakness, will sooner or later hand him up a written request" (PH 30). He does not tell his musicians name of the songs he intends to play but gives them a number, a "combination of figures" (PH 31) which could be anything, the tempo or a secret code that refers to the next jazz standard. The musicians, all of them frantic and behaving like children, stop their inattention due to the strong and powerful physical presence of Powerhouse. "His hands over the keys, he says sternly "You-all ready? You-all ready to do some serious walking? - waits - then, STAMP. Quiet. STAMP, for the second time. This is absolute." (PH 31) Then the band starts playing and when Powerhouse plays the piano, his whole body is captured in music and he is totally

absorbed in it – it's “the end of any known discipline” (ibid.) Powerhouse improvises and offers his audience, that does not dance but watch the band, a real display of passion:

Powerhouse seems to abandon them all – he himself seems lost – down in the song, yelling up like somebody in a whirlpool – not guiding them – hailing them only. But he knows really. He cries out, but he must know exactly. “Mercy!... What I say!... Yeah!” [...] He's going up the keyboard with a few fingers in a very derogatory triplet-routine, he gets higher and higher, and then he looks over the end of the piano, as if over a cliff. But not in a show-off way - the song makes him do it. (PH 31)

The audience does not really appreciate his show. They feel that black musicians should not make such an effort, “giving all they've got, for an audience of one... When somebody, no matter who, gives everything, it makes people feel ashamed for him.” (PH 32) Powerhouse is the central person of the band but he is not the only soloist and he encourages his fellow-musicians to play a chorus²² or two. He approves of their contributions and strengthens feeling of community within the band.

The first part of the story is dedicated to the depiction of the fascinating musicians and their way of playing their gig.²³ In the second part Powerhouse gets bored with one of the requests, the jazz standard “Pagan love song”, and starts an improvisation on the lyrics.²⁴ He introduces his first verse with “You know what happened to me? I got a telegram my wife is dead.” Rather than to take it seriously his band members encourage him to go on. “Uh-huh?” They ask: “Gipsy? Why, how come her to die? Didn't you just phone her up in the night last night long distance?” (PH 32-33) The lyrics and the improvisation Powerhouse uses are in a way reminiscent of Son House's “Death Letter Blues”,²⁵ In the story, dream and reality seem to blur. The musicians do not appear to be shocked by the news (as suggested by Wakonig) but join in and seem to be used to that kind improvisation. Powerhouse carries his idea a bit further and gives them more

²² A chorus: the form of a jazz standard played through once (normally 16-32 bars long)

²³ Synonym for concert

²⁴ Come with me when moonbeams, hah-hah
Light Tahitian skies
And the starlit waters
Linger in your eyes
Native hills are calling, hah-hah
To them we belong
And we'll cheer each other
With the pagan love song

²⁵ I got a letter this morning, how do you reckon it read?
"Oh, hurry, hurry, gal, your love is dead"
I got a letter this morning, how do you reckon it read?
"Oh, hurry, hurry, gal, your love is dead"

information. He tells them that a certain Uranus Knockwood had signed that telegram. The musicians emphasize his remarks with their instruments. They shout: “Tell me, tell me, tell me” (PH 33) and this leads up to the third chorus and finally to the intermission at midnight. It is not clear whether Powerhouse invents the story, or if it's partly true, but nevertheless “the content of his story signals some loneliness within him, the loneliness of a traveling musician.” (Bouton 82)

During the break the band decides to go to the World Café in Negrotown, a place which would serve black customers. Valentine and Scott, his musicians, take Powerhouse's small change and walk over to the nickelodeon, “which looks as battered as a slot machine, and (they) read all the names of the records out loud.” (PH 36) Within the black community, the names of the songs are spoken out, in contrast to the jazz standards written by whites that are communicated through numbers. The nickelodeon unfortunately doesn't play Powerhouse's request of a blues: “Empty Bed Blues”, a song by Bessie Smith. Again the protagonist takes up his telegram theme. It functions like a musical riff being varied as the story develops. The black listeners immediately respond to his story about his wife missing him, getting crazy and finally jumping out of the window. The audience “burst into halloos of laughter. Powerhouse's face looks like a big hot iron stove” (PH 39). They encourage him and testify with “Ya! Ha!”, joining the story in a “call and response” way. Like a preacher he inflames them by his statements, he is getting them excited by his remarks and their answering. After the story had reached its climax it subsides slowly. “Everybody in the room moans with pleasure.” (PH 40) The waitress asks Powerhouse if his story is but he does not answer her and leaves the Café for the second set of the gig. Bouton offers an interesting thought about the reasons of Powerhouse's ambiguity:

The waitress's doubt reflects just how the primacy of white written discourse forces a dominant melody over all dissonant chords. The band, who knows that no written telegram exists, cringes at what Powerhouse might do to sustain his story. His threat to show written proof of a telegram results from the frustration with these non-believers who fail to understand his signifyin(g).²⁶ Though his intent does not seem as malicious to the audience,

²⁶ Bouton, in her essay, *I Gotcha! Signifying and Music in Eudora Welty's “Powerhouse”*, adopts the definition of signifying from Henry Louis Gates', who uses the term “to represent the rhetorical strategies in which black speakers make a “non-native” language their own; signifyin(g) promotes bonding and community and preserves a black heritage that spans several hundred years. [...] It allows the speaker to even the playing fields against their white, governing audience and it enables the speakers, who ordinarily have no voice, to engage in revisionary tactics for the benefit of themselves and their community. (see Bouton 77)

he weaves his story to tease a reaction from the audience. (Bouton 85)

For the last time he takes up the theme and announces that he would write back a telegram saying: "What in the hell you're talking about. Don't make any difference. I gotcha! Name signed: Powerhouse." (PH 41) As if to cast away all his doubts concerning his private life and his relationship with his wife, he makes an effort to appear strong and confident again. The band plays "Somebody Loves Me", leaving the big and "monstrous" Powerhouse wondering: "Maybe it's you!" (PH 43)

The figure of Powerhouse had been inspired by a real artist, Fats Waller.²⁷ Eudora Welty explains in an interview how the story came about:

I loved the music of Fats Waller and had all his records. He played here in Jackson at a program, sort of like the one, well, just like the one I described. I went and watched him, and I was just captivated by the presence, in addition to the music, which I already knew and was familiar with. (Penshaw 327)

Unlike Langston Hughes and Rudolph Fisher, who were musicians themselves and had close contact with the jazz scene, Eudora Welty had no musical background, except her personal listening habits. When she stayed in New York for a couple of months in the 1930s, she "came to appreciate the world of jazz and the African American jazz artists she had heard at the Cotton Club and Small's Paradise" (Marrs 40). By that time, the club had already been abandoned by the notable personalities of the Harlem Renaissance and by the musicians responsible for the success of the club; but nevertheless, Miss Welty most certainly saw Duke Ellington, Cab Calloway and Jimmie Lunceford there. In her story Welty tries to capture the presence and aura Waller conveyed to her. The same night of the concert she sat down and wrote it in one go:

What I was trying to do was to express something about the music in the story. I wanted to express what I thought of as improvisation, which I was watching them do, by making him improvise this crazy story, which I just made up as I went. Nothing like that, of course, happened. I didn't hear anything like that. But I made it up to illustrate the feeling I got a sense of among the musicians; how they talked to each other. [...] I had no idea I was going to write anything

²⁷ Fats Waller (Thomas Wright Waller), born on May 21st 1904 was a jazz pianist, organist, composer and comedic entertainer. He composed famous Jazz standards like Honeysuckle Rose, Squeeze me, Ain't Misbehavin'. Fats Waller's big break-through occurred at a party given by George Gershwin in 1934, where he delighted the crowd with his piano playing and singing. An executive of Victor Records, who was at the party, was so impressed that he arranged for Fats to record with the company. Throughout the 1930s and early 1940s Fats was radio star, played in nightclubs and toured Europe. He died unexpectedly of pneumonia, on board a train near Kansas City, Missouri, in 1943 (see <http://www.redhotjazz.com/fats.html>, 16.7. 2010)

when I went to that. I would've thought, rightly, "You don't know anything." It's true, I didn't. But I was so excited by the evening, that I wrote it, after I got home. [...] But I did have the sense to know that there was no use in me trying to correct or revise or anything. It was that or nothing because it had to be written at that moment, or not at all. (Panish 328)

Bouton states: "This is as close to performance as Welty can come." Although she later revised parts of "Powerhouse" for the collection *A Curtain of Green*, the story is based on the live performance of that night, incorporating the concept of "being in the moment." (see Bouton 76) Welty explains that "Powerhouse" is a "one time thing" that cannot be repeated. Welty was well acquainted with Waller's music but she was not familiar with the musical practice of improvisation and the vernacular of Afro-American musicians was thus unable to create another story within this setting. The author is able to mimick black forms but is not acquainted enough with the improvisational skills of jazz musicians. Yet, Bouton states, "the vibrancy of "Powerhouse" attests her skills in incorporating the form of jazz into her fiction." (ibid.)

Eudora Welty's story leaves much space for interpretation - what exactly is truth and what mere fiction is left for the reader to judge. In her essay "Is Phoenix Jackson's Grandson really dead?" she argues against too far-fetched explanations that can mislead the reader: "It's all right [...] for things to be what they appear to be, and for words to mean what they say." On the other hand ambiguity, as in *Powerhouse*, can be part of reality and is deliberately used by the author. "It's all right too, for words and appearances to mean more than one thing – ambiguity is a fact of life." (Stories 816) In the end it is left open whether *Powerhouse* is able to mend his relationship, which is in a crisis and eventually find a solution that consolidates his marriage.

8 The significance of music and musicians in Afro-American fiction from the 1940s to the 1980s

The depression may have led to the decline of the Harlem Renaissance but the artists had nevertheless achieved a wider recognition within their community as well as among the white readership – a fact that was often viewed with distrust and suspicion by the black readers. In their fiction, Afro-American authors established the value of folk culture as a touchstone for racial identity and pride. Music had proved to be an important factor in the life of the black community; therefore it was natural that musicians would chose to develop their music further using the well-known folk traditions of blues, jazz and gospel as a basis. They “strove to achieve new heights of emotional expressiveness in terms of spontaneity and inventiveness, in improvisation and rhythmical interplay.” (Cataliotti, *The Music* 128). Therefore, new approaches towards literature, that embraced the musical traditions and that investigated the self-perception and political and social changes, were found.

The blues still played an important role. While the classic blues declined in popularity, the country blues got widely recognized also due to the field recordings by Alan Lomax and others. With the constant migration to the north, the various styles were taken to the cities and underwent further development. From the 1920s on, jazz, too, became an integral part of the musical setting in America and found its way into mainstream entertainment as *swing*. In the late 1940s improvisation and a personal sound became the trademark of musicians who experimented with chord patterns and harmonic structures thus eventually creating one of the most creative and outstanding forms of jazz, the *bebop*. Its most famous exponent was Charlie Parker,²⁸ who had been referred to more frequently than any other jazz musician. His search for an individual sound and his swimming against the (musical) current inspired authors to integrate his personality, his

²⁸ Charlie Parker: his nickname was “Bird”. He was born in Kansas City in 1920 and died in 1955. At the age of thirteen he started to play the baritone saxophone to which he added the alto as well. Parker developed a new style of improvising and at first was confronted with fierce criticism. Together with Dizzy Gillespie and his Charlie Parker Quintet (in which he featured the young Miles Davis) he made landmark recordings for the bebop. Many of Parker's songs have become standards, like “Billie's Bounce”, “Confirmation”, “Ornithology”, “Anthropology”, “Thriving on a Riff”, and “Now's the Time” to name just a few. He introduced revolutionary harmonic ideas including a tonal vocabulary employing 9ths, 11ths and 13ths of chords, rapidly implied passing chords, and new variants of altered chords and chord substitutions. He died of a heart attack which was probably caused by drug and alcohol abuse (see Berendt 124-135).

lifestyle and his attitude towards music into their fiction like James Baldwin did in his short story “Sonny’s Blues”. His innovative approach towards music as well as his early death contributed to his legendary status and his popularity (see Albert, Introduction xi). Ralph Ellison considers him to be as important in the development of jazz as Louis Armstrong, and states that “he became a central figure of a cult which glorified in his escapades no less than in his music” and that he stood (especially for the white hipsters) for a “suffering, psychically wounded, law-breaking, life-affirming hero” (see *On Birdwatching in Shadow and Act* 222-228).

In the years after the Depression, the acquisition of legal rights was a major concern for the Afro-Americans and this concern was reflected in the literary output that followed. Richard Wright and his contemporaries ushered a new phase of literary production: Afro-American authors not only strove to present their community and their new discovered pride but tried to make the society aware of racism and discrimination. They wanted to change the situation more radically than the Harlem Renaissance attempted to. (Puschmann-Nalenz, *Afro American Short Stories* 150) Politically and ideologically motivated approaches were more appealing than the aesthetic and cultural examples of the Harlem Renaissance and thus the awareness of political correlations increased (Ensslen 124). In this chapter an overview of the most important authors and their usage of music from the 1940s onwards will be given.

8.1 The 1940s and 1950s

In the 1940s a new generation of writers, like Richard Wright, Ann Petry, James Baldwin and Ralph Ellison emerged. Wright, a communist, who dismissed the work of the Harlem Renaissance, was convinced that “only the adoption of a Marxist political consciousness could allow for any effect or viable action by a black man in America” (Cataliotti, *The Music* 137). In his fiction he uncompromisingly refuses to move the readers emotionally but instead articulates an outcry in order to shake them and make them aware of socially generated violence that affects the relationship between black and white (see Ensslen 128).

His collection of *Uncle Tom's Children* and his novel *Native Son* are saturated with black folk music, the blues, spirituals and worksongs; still the music is often presented as an

insufficient tool – i.e. it has a positive but limited role in changing the situation of Afro-Americans and transcending the racial barriers they faced.. “There is an insistence on Wright's part that music can only provide transcendence for the black character if it goes beyond a culturally specific nationalism and embraces the Communist political agenda.” (Cataliotti, *The Music* 133) In *Native Son*, Bigger's (the protagonist's) mother frequently sings gospels but Christian faith does not help her son in his struggle and flight. It is his reflectiveness and the help of the Communist Party, embodied by Max, that enables him to look at his life from a different angle. This is also true for his character Sue, in his short story *Bright and Morning Star*. She is an old woman who is deeply rooted in the Christian faith but who eventually sacrifices her life for the Communist organization. Gospels are her musical heritage and provide the inner strength that enables her to undertake her mission but she realizes that she has to actions in order to change things.

He walks wid me, he talks wid me

He tells me Ahm his own..

Guiltily, she stopped and smiled. Looks like Ah jus cant seem t fergit them ol songs, no mattah how hard Ah tries... She has learned them when she was a little girl living and working on a farm. Every Monday morning from the corn and cotton fields the slow strains had floated from her mother's lips, lonely and haunting, and later as the years had filled with gall, she had learned their deep meaning. (*Bright and Morning Star* 7)

In her novel, *The Street*, Ann Petry drastically portrays the inability of her protagonist, Lutie Johnson, to break free of the ghetto and lead a humane life. She fails because of the inescapable conditions of “the street” that discourage and inhibit her attempts to support herself and her son (see Ensslen 148). As a single mother, living in Harlem during World War II., she is under constant threat to lose the ground beneath her feet and to end on the street. She seizes the opportunity of being a singer in a big band and to earn some extra money but that dream is shattered when it becomes obvious that the band leader does not intend to pay her. Lutie is reduced to a trading good, a sexual object that can be used by men any time. Unprotected and sexually exploited, she excludes herself from the patriarchal system by the murder of her boss, and as a consequence, pays dearly for it by being forced to abandon her son (see Göbel 114-115). Unlike Langston Hughes' Oceola, she is no spokesperson, no spiritual leader who, with the help of Afro-American folk derived music, helps to forge an identity and a sense of pride. “[Lutie] is not concerned with artistic creativity or communal expression or spiritual transcendence.

Like practical, hard-working Ben Franklin, she sees the position of a vocalist with Smith's band as purely and simply a job" (Cataliotti, *The Music* 140). In the novel, black music again is an ineffective tool to transcend racial, economic and sexual oppression. Both Wright and Petry portray protagonists, who are driven by social circumstances into committing murder.

In Petry's short story "Solo on drums" music is presented in a more positive light. Her protagonist Kid becomes a communal spokesman who is aware of his African roots, of his heritage, and introduces this cultural tradition to the audience. Moreover, he uses music to overcome his personal problems, eventually finds his inner strength and is able to channel his negative feelings of the separation with his wife into creativity (see Cataliotti, *The Music* 144-146).

He forgot the theater, forgot everything but the drums. He was welded to the drums, sucked inside them. All of him. His pulse beat. He had become part of the drums. They had become part of him. He made the big drum rumble and reverberate. He went a little mad on the big drum. Again and again he filled the theater with a sound like thunder. The sound seemed to come not from the drums but from deep inside himself; it was the sound that was being wrenched out of him – a violent, raging roaring sound. As it issued from him he thought, This is the story of my love, this is the story of my hate, this is all there is left of me. (Petry *Solo* 58)

James Baldwin, also a major artist in the 1940s, who incorporated music of Afro-American descent into his work, will be discussed in the following chapter.

In 1952 Ralph Ellison wrote his groundbreaking novel *Invisible Man*. The complex and dense text tells the story of the protagonist's life starting from the moment of his high school graduation in the South to his emigration North to Harlem where he decides to make an inner retreat and becomes an invisible man. Regarding communism, the author is not convinced that it is able to improve the situation for blacks.

The protagonist goes overnight from being a favored (if also carefully governed) student in a black college in the South to being an unwitting outcast who is "kept running" through a kaleidoscopic world of authoritarian business organizations and authoritarian political groups, on the one hand, and disorganized but rebellious and explosive individuals, on the other. He has the curious attribute of being a misfit everywhere. (Cooke 99)

The work is "an ironic reversal of the coming-of-age novel" (Ensslen 141) because, instead of increasing his life- and educational experience, Ellison's protagonist finally

casts off all the unfeasible roles offered by society. Ellison, who had studied music at Tuskegee College, Alabama, was an expert in Afro-American music, a fact which is highly visible in many of his essays²⁹ and also in the novel he wrote. Musical forms, like the call and response technique and analogue verbal techniques are omnipresent (Ensslen 139-142).

The anonymous narrator's encounters with music and other expressive forms of the African-American oral tradition play a significant role in the quest to figure of trumpeter and vocalist Louis Armstrong, plays a pivotal role in the narrator's examinations of these identity issues in both recognize his identity as black man in America and ultimately grapple with the challenge of defining what it means to be American. Jazz, particularly the prologue and epilogue that frame the story of his life. (Cataliotti, *The Music* 143)

In the prologue and epilogue, music, especially Louis Armstrong with his *What Did I Do to Be So Black and Blue* that is referred to several times, presents the major theme of the work. As the protagonist muses: "Perhaps I like Louis Armstrong because he's made poetry out of being invisible. I think it must be because he's unaware that he *is* invisible. And my own grasp of invisibility aids me to understand his music." (IM 8) For the "invisible man", Armstrong, with his biography and his improvisational creativity, functions as role model and as signifier of the African-American experience (Cataliotti, *The Music* 144-145). Polyrhythm, syncopes, blue notes³⁰ that expand the diatonic system, improvisation and *playing dirty* (introduced by Louis Armstrong) which revolutionized the established norms of taste, become, in this novel metaphors for the fight for freedom of development (see Göbel 59).

Summarizing, one could say, that the impulses which the Harlem Renaissance initiated, were aimed at political- and self awareness in the 1940s.

We moved from the posture of Richard Wright's *White Man Listen!* to one of *Black Man Speaks To Black People*. This is the stage where black American consciousness overcomes at least the division in audience, the twoness in vision becoming more evident, foregrounded by a new awareness of African American writers forming a link with Du Bois and Garvey back at the beginning of the century. (Puschmann- Nalenz, *Afro American Short Story* introduction 14)

After the 1950s, the works become more radical, as evidenced by the Black Arts Movement but they also become more individualistic and the authors started to

²⁹ To be found in the essay collection *Shadow and Act*

³⁰ See Appendix for explanation

investigate their African roots. Also, due to the increasing number of female writers, texts start to focus on the role of women within American society.

8.2 1960s to 1980s

From the late 1950s to the end of the 1960s the Civil Right Movement took place. It was an effort by Afro-Americans to transcend the limitations of racism and to achieve equality through political and communal effort. Soon the optimism towards the hope of achieving a change in the American society vanished and was replaced by a more radical attitude, embodied in the *Black Power* movement, which had a new definition of African American identity (see Ensslen 156-157). In literature, this change was reflected by a “critical, even aggressive approach against the norms of the dominant culture, as well as the recollection of specific Afro-American traditions, history and collective norms and values” (Ensslen 163, my translation). In the 1960s the *Black Arts Movement* was formed and writers like LeRoi Jones a.k.a Amira Baraka or to some extent Henry Dumas made political statements via their fiction. (see Puschmann-Nalenz, *Afro American Short Stories* 150)

The writers of the 1960's and 1970's repoliticized the discourse on racism. They also reformulated it in far more complex terms. Racism now belonged to a larger system of social repression in which race became one, not necessarily the most important coordinate. Race, Gender, and Class formed the new paradigm within which to rethink and rewrite majority/minority relations. (Karrer 3)

Literary productions aimed (in connection to political commitment) at independence and empowerment, at awareness and celebration of the black cultural heritage and roots. (Cataliotti, *The Music* 204) Therefore, a new self-perception, that celebrated Afro-American language, music and history, developed which continued to play a pivotal role in literature. Authors who did not use political radicalness concentrated on the oral tradition, music and magic to depict Afro-American forms of expression. This focus on the history by African-Americans, who were cheated out of their cultural heritage and the representation of history in official books, proved to be paramount for the construction of group identity and self-discovery. From the 1970s on, an increase in feminist literature can be noticed (see Göbel 54 and 101). “And gender, defined as related sex roles of “femininity” and “masculinity,” emerged as the most powerful

category to dissect double and even triple repression.” (Karrer 2) An erratic increase in literary output took place and led to a new Renaissance which was not only confined to Harlem but encompassed the entire United States (see Ensslen 159-163). Due to this abundance of works, only some representative authors dealing with music and musicians can be presented in this thesis.

The approach to a new self-awareness and definition of identity through a (re-) constructed history and dealing with one's roots was embraced by, among others, Margaret Walker. Based on the stories that her own grandmother told her about her ancestors, she chronicles the lives of the mulatto slave woman Vyry Brown and the freeman Randal Ware in her novel *Jubilee* (1966). Walker begins each chapter with an epigraph that is taken from the lyrics of songs - Civil War songs, spirituals, work songs - folk songs and popular tunes which reflect the integral role of folk derived music. Vyry, listening to her aunt's singing, learns how music can help people deal with their lives and understands that it functions not only as relief from physical work but also as a survival mechanism that gives strength in times of trouble (Cataliotti, *The Music* 187-192).

With his novel *A Drop of Patience*, William Melvin Kelly adopts a similar attitude towards music. He portrays a blind jazz musician who tries to define his position in white America and to cope with racism. In comparison to Ann Petry's Lutie, he can earn a living by playing the saxophone. He also experiments with sound and creates the new approach to improvisation, which is modeled after the innovative approach of Charlie Parker in the 1940s. After a personal blow, which made him stop playing his horn, he can reconnect to his Afro-American culture. For the authors in the years after the Harlem Renaissance and the following decades, exploring the roots, being aware of one's own history and oral tradition and thus being able to find identity, has been crucial (Cataliotti, *The Music* 192-196). John A. Williams is also an author who uses music as a central theme in his work. In his novel *Night Song* (1961) his protagonist is modeled after Charlie Parker. As well as generating energy and strength for the community music is also described as an effective tool for forging identity (see Ensslen 170).

Baraka, who initiated the Black Arts Movement is an eminent figure in Afro-American literature and regarded music as the most important artistic form of Afro-American expression. In his short story “The Screemers” he breaks with the traditional form of the short story. The beginning is like a jazz improvisation - fragmentary and disjointed - but

at the end it clearly expresses its message. The story is set in the 1950s in a jazz club in Newark. The saxophonist Lynn Hope plays a powerful rhythmical riff that makes the audience and band follow him into the Newark streets.

Then Lynn got his riff, that rhythmic figure we knew he would repeat, that honked note that would be his personal evaluation of the world. And he screamed it so that the veins in his face stood out like neon. “Uhh, yeh, Uhh, yeh, Uhh, yeh,” we all screamed to push him further. So he opened his eyes for a second, and really made his move. He looked over his shoulder at the other turbanes, then marched in time with his riff, on his toes across the stage. (*The Screemers* 266)

They are attacked by the police who interpret that ritual performance as labour riot, “nigger strike” or anarchists rampaging through the streets. The “sweet” revolution, carried out by musicians and a peace-loving audience, fails to initiate a change. The participants return to their homes misunderstood (Cataliotti, *The Songs* 206-211). Dumas, in his “Will the Circle Be Unbroken”, has a more radical approach and goes a bit further. He sees the Afro-American music as a weapon, which in his story is symbolized in his story by the “lethal vibrations of the new sound” (*Will the Circle* 180). Every white person, who enters the club and is exposed to the vibrations, dies. In the story, a black community is created through music - a new music that whites don't understand and to which they are not allowed to have access like they had before. One evening, three whites demand access to the club. At first they are warned about the fatal vibrations, but after displaying a very patronizing attitude and failing to understand the significance of the music, they are allowed to enter the club and are eventually executed by the “shock waves” (*Will the Circle* 182).

In the Post Black Arts Movement the representation of music continues to play a key role in fiction. Ishmael Reed, Gayl Jones, Toni Morrison and finally Alice Walker, to whom one of the next chapters is dedicated, are famous exponents of that literary movement. These artists, too, embrace the oral African tradition and cherish the huge influence that Afro-American music has on the black community in regard to identity and equality. They added magical elements into their fiction and female authors started emphasizing the “womanist” point of view and “carefully rewrote the black experience in terms of gender, race and class” (Karrer 4).

Reed's multi-faceted novel *Mumbo Jumbo* (1972) has strands that are not easily put to a coherent plot. It starts in 1920 in New Orleans and depicts the struggles of "The

Wallflower Order", dedicated to the white traditions and culture, against the "Jes Grew" virus, the "(dis)embodiment of the creative energy of the African oral tradition" (Cataliotti, *The Songs* 7). Black creativity expressed by *Jes Grew*, who disclose a conspiracy of the white culture, stands opposed to norms like discipline and order (see Ensslen 172). Cataliotti further explains: "The African rooted tradition has been denied legitimacy in Western culture, and *Mumbo Jumbo* is concerned with finding (writing) the text that will authenticate this legitimacy." (Cataliotti, *The Songs* 4) With a kind of roll call, Reed includes Afro-American artists such as Charlie Parker, John Coltrane, Fats Waller, Louis Armstrong, Bessie Smith and others into his fiction, all carriers of the *Jes Grew* virus and therewith makes references to the powerful role music plays as a touchstone for racial identity (see Cataliotti, *The Songs* 16).

In Toni Morrison's *Jazz* and *Song of Solomon* the importance of music within the black community as contribution to western culture, as means to change society and to investigate the African roots via Afro-American folk song, is a major theme. In *Song of Solomon* (1977) the African oral tradition is presented through a folk song that appears as recurrent theme throughout the story. This song is presented at various times and enables the protagonist, Milkman Dead, to explore his familial and cultural heritage. During a journey through the South he renews the connection with his ancestors. By finding out their stories and names he rewrites black history and finally understands the role music plays in the preservation of oral culture and he realizes the significance of his heritage for his own identity (see Göbel 126-127). He finally actively participates in Afro-American culture and thus transcends his modern, disconnected existence. "In the *Song of Solomon*, Morrison acknowledges the importance of the oral tradition in keeping African-Americans in touch with their identity and heritage." (Cataliotti, *The Songs* 30, 130-131)

This brief investigation of Afro-American literature and its representation of music from the 1940s onwards does not claim to be complete. Some of the major and influential exponents of Afro-American fiction have been presented but there are numerous writers, among them Al Young, Ntozake Shange, Walter Mosely, Bebe Campbell, Toni Cade Bambara, Xam Wilson Catier, Nathaniel Mackey and others who published their works in the 1970s and 1980s and onward, who use music as eminent motif in their work.

One of the most famous Afro-American authors is James Baldwin, whom the next

chapter is dedicated to. In his short story “Sunny's Blues” he focuses on the identity-forging and healing power of blues and jazz for the black community. Music is described as a powerful tool to find inner peace and understanding, which enables people to reconnect with other members of the community. Afro-American music also makes it possible to choose a life which does not aim at assimilation but rather accepts and incorporates different values that are not necessarily values of the white society.

9 Sonny's Blues by James Baldwin

“Sonny's Blues” was originally published in the *Partisan Review* in 1957 and was reprinted in the short-story collection *Going to Meet the Man* in 1965 (see Reilly 139). This collection comprises eight stories presenting a complex picture of the social situation of Afro-Americans (see Ensslen 165). He puts a clear emphasis on the relationship between whites and blacks and tries to express the situation of the black man in America. He deals with the “lack of sense of a positive self-identity (Dance 55).

“Sonny's Blues” is basically the story of two brothers who have chosen different ways to cope with life in the ghetto of New York, and their reconciliation through Afro-American music, the blues. The narrator, Sonny's brother, whose name is not mentioned in the story, has obtained a college education and eventually a high-school teaching job. He is seven years older than Sonny and “his response to the conditions imposed upon him by racial status was to try to assimilate himself as well as he could into the mainstream American culture” (Reilly 142). The narrator attempts to design his life according to middle class traditions and tries to acculturate himself to white America. In contrast, his brother, Sonny, had chosen to become a jazz pianist. Because of their different lifestyles and attitudes, the two siblings have ceased to keep contact. When the narrator, at the beginning of the story, reads in the newspaper that his brother had been institutionalized by the police because of drug abuse, he admits to himself that he had tried to ignore his brother's condition. He has had his suspicions but “he kept putting them away” (SB 110) because he wanted to maintain his facade of middle-class respectability.

On the one hand, his inability to accept Sonny's decision to become a musician makes the narrator dissociate himself from his brother. He fears that Sonny is one of those “good time people” (SB 110) who takes no responsibilities. Therefore, he tells a friend of his brother, who tries to sensitize him to the need and troubles of Sonny: “Look, I haven't seen Sonny for over a year. I'm not sure I'm going to do anything. Anyway, what the hell can I do?” (SB 95). On the other hand, he feels guilty for not fulfilling his mother's request to take care of his brother (see Reilly 142). The narrator recalls the scene when he saw his mother for the last time. She told him the story of his uncle, an amateur musician, who had been run down on a dark country road by a car of drunken whites. His father had witnessed the scene and had never got over this experience and feeling of

helplessness. Her story of Sonny's father and uncle functions as a parable of proper brotherhood.

She explains:

I ain't telling you all this to make you scared or bitter or to make you hate anybody. I'm telling you this because you've got a brother. And the world ain't changed. [...] You may not be able to stop anything from happening to him but you got to let him know you's there. (SB 107-108)

The narrator represses his pricks of conscience because he is aware that he did not even try to protect his brother from coming to harm and his remorse is transformed into disregard and distance. Sonny's decision to become a jazz musician is not compatible to the ambitions of the narrator and he first suggests that Sonny should get a classical education: “[...] it's not going to be funny when you have to make your living with it” (SB 109). The narrator's concern is not with the creative process but with the necessity of earning a living which is understandable since Sonny has no parents to support him. But the brother actually does not believe in Sonny and his ability to take care of himself. Moreover, in the middle-class world the narrator lives in, jazz and blues clearly have a negative reputation. The narrator perceives this music as “something black and bouncy” (SB 96), which makes him unable to understand why Sonny “would want to spend his time hanging around nightclubs and clowning around bandstands [...] It seemed – beneath him, somehow.” (SB 110) In the conversation with Sonny, the brother appears ignorant of the current Afro-American music sub-culture. His ignorance of the cultural significance and innovations in that genre by Afro-American musicians makes him consider jazz as an unimportant art form and therefore he elevates classical music, and hence white art, above it. He associates jazz with the “old fashioned” Louis Armstrong style and has never heard of Bird (Charlie Parker), the main protagonist of the bebop era who also functioned as a role model for the young generation of the 1940s.

Bebop in “Sonny's Blues” represents the spirit of the young generation of the 1940s and 1950s and is not only a musical style but a lifestyle, encompassing fashion, talk - and also walk. The narrator realizes that Sonny “has a slow, loping walk, something like the way Harlem hipsters walk, only he's imposed on this his own half beat. I had never really noticed it before” (SB 119).

In its hip style of dress, its repudiation of middle-brow norms, and its celebration of esoteric manner the bebop sub-culture made overtly evident its

underlying significance as an assertion of Black identity. Building upon a restatement of Afro-American music, bebop became an expression of a new self-awareness in the ghettos by a strategy of elaborate non-conformity. (Reilly 142)

Sonny has decided to become a jazz pianist and not a classical pianist - he has opted for jazz because this distinctly Afro-American art form allowed him maximum personal expression. One of the outstanding characteristics of jazz, as mentioned before, is improvisation. Within a certain chord progression - a frame - the musician can quite spontaneously voice his or her ideas and this spontaneity could also be found in the Harlem scene. Ralph Ellison, a writer, trumpeter and connoisseur of classical and Afro-American music states:

I had learned too that the end of all this discipline and technical mastery was a desire to express an affirmative way of life through its musical tradition and this tradition insisted that each artist achieve his creativity within its frame. He must learn the best of the past, and add to it his personal vision. (Ellison, *Shadow and Act* 189)

Especially bebop is a jazz form that stands for individualism and radicalism, and Baldwin deliberately makes his protagonist a *hipster* in order to depict a musically emancipated and self-confident person, who is aware of his present and past (Cataliotti 149). The ignorance and depreciation of Afro-American culture on the part of the narrator signify an alienation not only from his brother but also from the black community and his own roots. For Sonny, music becomes an existential necessity which actually urges him to become a professional artist and he points out that the narrator focuses on wrong values. He rejects the narrator's notion that one has to make compromises and to back down in order to live one's life:

Everything takes time and - well, yes, I can make a living at it. But what I don't seem to be able to make you understand is that it's the only thing I want to do. [...] I think people ought to do what they want to do, what else are they alive for? (SB 111)

The narrator is not able to accept this standpoint and dismisses Sonny's ambitions as a fancy. He prefers a secure life, a middle-class life, which he does not have to question, but which also offers no perspectives for the future. Sonny's insecure and, in the opinion of the narrator, idle life does not suit his concept of a successful existence.

At this point in the story, Baldwin starts to portray the complex picture of a person who

is becoming an artist. Sonny opposes the narrator's prejudices and becomes a seriously determined pianist. He practices obsessively, listens to records over and over again and accurately copies phrases in order to acquire a musical vocabulary and be able to reproduce these passages in his own solos. Sonny virtually loses himself in a world of sound. For the family of Isabel, the narrator's wife, with whom Sonny lives after the death of his parents, his permanent practicing becomes a burden. When Sonny realizes that, he enlists in the army and escapes as far as he can.

The breakup of the siblings manifests itself at their last meeting when Sonny throws his brother out of his apartment and replaces his family with friends he can relate to. The brothers lose contact for a couple of years and only when the narrator's daughter, Gracie, dies of polio at the age of two, this stroke of fate unites the two brothers again. The narrator begins to communicate with Sonny via letters and because of his own experience he starts to comprehend the complex and deep feelings of pain his brother has faced in his life. When the two brothers meet, the narrator realizes that all his attempts to escape the racial restrictions imposed upon him have been futile and that all the energy he had invested into his attempts to leave the “vivid, killing streets” of their childhood, like Lennox Avenue,³¹ behind, are useless since

[...] boys, exactly the boys we once had been, found themselves smothering in these houses, come down into the streets for light and air and found themselves encircled by disaster. Some escaped the trap, most didn't. Those who got out always left something of themselves behind, as some animals amputate the leg, and leave it in the trap. It might be said, perhaps, that I had escaped; after all, I was a school teacher. Or that Sonny had, he hadn't lived in Harlem for years. (SB 101)

He starts to question his life and “gradually discovers the significance of his brother's life” (see Kinnamon 144). In the second part of the story, the musical theme is predominant. Baldwin introduced further events beginning with a Revelation meeting on the streets. For the author himself, church music was highly influential in his youth. His stepfather, David Baldwin, had been a laborer but also a Baptist minister, who had preached in New Orleans and later in Harlem. Baldwin himself, at the age of fourteen, joined Fireside Pentecostal Assembly and began to preach there. He turned his back on the church when he was seventeen, but the church seemed not to have left him, and

³¹ Baldwin himself was born in Harlem Hospital at Lennox Avenue and spent his childhood in Harlem (between 130th Street and 135th Street), just like the two brothers in Sonny's Blues did (see Campbell 3-4).

eventually became his major inspiration (see Campbell 3-10). The first and only kind of music he was able to discover while his father was still living was gospel music. After his father's death, James Baldwin often visited the studio of the painter Beauford Delaney, where he began to listen to Ma Rainey, Louis Armstrong and Bessie Smith and where he realized that these forms of African-American music they were performing stemmed from the same roots and that between sacred and secular music there was virtually no difference: "Worshipping at the temple of the spirit or the body, Southern blacks in a Northern Street were driven by the same tambourine and piano, the same rhythm and the same beat." (see Campbell 35)

For the two protagonists, such meetings were a common sight since church permeated every part of Afro-American life. The narrator observes that the power of music "seemed to soothe a poison out of them [the listeners]" (SB 119). The performance of the singers who address themselves with "brother" and "sister" functions here as a catalyst which brings the relationship of the brothers onto a new level. The shared experience of music enables them to engage in an uncomfortable yet important conversation in which Sonny openly talks about his drug abuse. The narrator is tempted repeatedly to voice moral judgement but restrains himself, sensing that this moment is crucial for their future relationship (see Reilly 143-144). Sonny explains: "It makes you feel- in control." (SB 121) He professes that he did not need drugs to play his instrument but rather to cope with life and to "keep from shaking into pieces" (ibid.). Baldwin, in this passage, brings up the musician-drug relationship that reflects the situation in the music scene where heavy drugs started to play an important role from the 1940s on. Before that time, alcohol and marijuana were predominated, but with Sonny's hero, Charlie Parker, as well as with John Coltrane and Billie Holiday, heroine took over and their drug abuse became publicly known.

Cataliotti explains that "Sonny is aware of how severely his possibilities are limited. The menace of American racism is so overwhelming that Sonny succumbs to the quick fix of drugs in order to insulate him enough to play." (Cataliotti 149) Sonny does not depend on drugs because they make "something real to him" (SB 121) or in order to be able to play complex and complicated solos. It is obvious that progress in proficiency can only be achieved by intense practice. Sonny Rollins, a famous tenor saxophonist belonging to the circle of Charlie Parker, for instance, regularly practiced up to sixteen hours per day and drug abuse would certainly have been rather an impediment than a help. Sonny is

aware of this fact; he had taken drugs in order to cope with the suffering, the “storm inside”, and to “keep from drowning” (SB 122-123). He realizes that there is no escape from suffering, a fact the narrator himself painfully experienced after the death of his little girl. For Sonny, drugs are a strategy to bear the pain, but after his detoxification he manages to face his feelings and channels them into something else: his music. He thus stays sane and is able to mature, as the following and most important passage shows.

Together, the brothers enter the club, where Sonny is greeted by fellow musicians and other people who have become his family over the years and who appreciate his music. The concert starts like a church service, where Sonny is to testify to the power of music, and at first he is unable to let out the “roar rising from the void and impose order on it as it hits the air” (SB 127). He struggles to find the right keys to voice his innermost feelings. There, the narrator senses the tenuous relationship between musician and instrument, and the passion that allows him to express himself through it. When Sonny starts to play “Am I Blue”, things change.

Creole [the bass player and leader of the band] stepped forward to remind them that what they were playing was the blues. [...] Creole began to tell us what the blues were all about. They were not about anything very new. He and his boys were up there keeping it new, at the risk of ruin, destruction, madness and death, in order to find new ways to make us listen. For, while the tale of how we suffer, and how we are delighted and how we may triumph is never new, it always must be heard. There isn't any other tale to tell, it's the only light we've got in all this darkness. (SB 129).

The blues signifies the legacy that had been passed on for centuries and that had been a tool for expressing the “black experience”. It also reflects the history and the present situation of the black community. Although many different and financially more successful styles emerged out of the blues and musical forms related to it, “the blues endured as a vital and poignant artistic and cultural tradition which conveyed the essence of what it meant to be black in America” (Cataliotti 118). The author Ralph Ellison confirms the important function of music: [...] each solo flight or improvisation, represents a definition of his identity, as a member of the collectivity and as a link in the chain of tradition” (see Kent 17).

The blues has often been perceived as being primitive and many jazz musicians refused to play it because of its simple form. But exactly this form enables the musician to fully concentrate on the sound and the improvisation without being distracted by difficult

chord progressions. With Duke Ellington, who incorporated blues as a major ingredient into his repertoire and later on with the beboppers, who resented the whitewashed jazz of the swing era, the blues became respectable again in the jazz scene. Sonny avails himself of this art form in order to bear witness to his inner self. The blues with its emphasis on emotion and personal experience makes it easily accessible for the listeners. Reilly explains:

[...] the blues functions as an art of communion. It is popular rather than elite, worldly rather than otherwise. The blues is an expression in which one uses the skills he has achieved by practice and experience in order to reach towards others. It is this proposition that gives the blues its metaphoric significance. (Reilly 145)

The blues plays a significant role for Baldwin. In his essay "The Discovery of What It Means to Be an American" he acknowledges African-American music as a key for the discovery of his racial identity. Living then in a small village in Switzerland, the expatriate writes:

It was Bessie Smith, through her tone and her cadence, who helped me to dig back to the way I myself must have spoken when I was a pickaninny, and to remember the things I had heard and seen and felt. I had buried them very deep. I had never listened to Bessie Smith in America but in Europe she helped me to reconcile me to being a "nigger" (Cataliotti 148)

In the second set, the musicians have attuned themselves to each other and a communication between the musicians starts. The band answers and encourages Sonny to testify, and, buried deep within the blues, he is able to speak for himself. He takes his time and, through music, talks about his life and his past experiences. He has understood that if he wanted to survive and if he wanted to develop his personality, he had to deal with the dread, the terror and all the negative experiences, and convert them into sound. Music therefore has a therapeutic function for Sonny because instead of using drugs, he surrenders to music and opens himself up. He consciously looks at his problems and the racial situation he is in. At this point "[...] Sonny's brother begins to understand not so much Sonny, as himself, *his* past, *his* history, *his* traditions and that part of himself he has in common with Sonny and the long line of people who have gone before them." (Williams 148) Music enables him to break free of the conventions that had alienated him from his brother and black culture. Pratt explains the fundamental situation:

Thus, Sonny's brother became liberated from the enslaving image of himself projected by white society. He has recovered a personal history and an ethnic

pride, excavated from the ruins of his wrapped personality. He is now free to discover his own destiny (Pratt 34)

He surrenders himself to the power of music although he knows that there is a hard life waiting outside the club. A club like the one the narrator visits with his brother is a place of freedom, an urban retreat where the black community can, without white disturbance, enjoy themselves. The black nightclubs are places where, through music, identity is formed, “because of the way of life which has produced it, and the peculiar needs it serves” (*Color* 677).

In the final scene Baldwin takes up the religious tone again. The musician is depicted as a redeemer able to free his listeners, who, taking in his music, his gospel, are helped to see the truth. “And he was giving it back, as everything must be given back, so that, passing through death, it can live forever.” (SB 130) The narrator buys Sonny a drink of scotch and milk – “a cup of trembling” (the quote can be found in Isaiah 51,17) - “which can be seen as a symbol for human life and which is actually a mixture of pain and joy, intoxication and disillusionment, that should be consumed with caution and reason. Sonny is aware of that fact. He accepts his life as it is, including the pain, which it entails” (Huke 181, my translation). Sonny is also aware of the problems of blacks in America. The individual triumph over the pain and the chaos inside signifies, according to Huke, an identification with the black community and its history (Huke 181). Keith Byerman agrees with him insofar as he claims that the drink transformed into or interpreted as a “cup of trembling” suggests not only a relief from suffering but it also makes it easier for Sonny to cope, since from that moment on, the narrator shows willingness to become involved in Sonny's life (see *Critical Essays*, 202).

For James Baldwin the black jazz and blues musician becomes a ritual leader, who does not push away the racial question but faces it, and who can communicate his way of dealing with it to his audience. He is able to shake the people up and motivate them to search for their individuality and thus contributes to the process of establishing a self-confident culture. Baldwin explains in his essay “Color” that “everything done by Negroes in this country is, in a way done in imitation of the white people.” (*Collected Essays* 675) Baldwin feels that the black man is trying to adapt himself to the white standards, just like the narrator does. Sonny, the musician, offers a counter image: he actively explores his origins, his past; he strives to define his own image and, thus

overcomes the limitations of the society he lives in (see Pratt 34). Through the positive ritual act of making improvised music, the musician participates in the communal act of creation and thus contributes to the development of new perceptions, self-definition and attitude towards life. This new self-image does not depend on the norms of the white society, but can be experienced within the black community (see Ensslen 166-167). The musician, as Master of Ceremony, has great responsibility, because not only is he accountable for questioning his own life but he also has the duty to show the audience how to cope with their own.

Ann Williams explains the position of the musician in James Baldwin's fiction:

He is the hope of making it in America and the bitter mockery of never making it well enough to escape the danger of being black, the living symbol of alienation from the past and hence from self and the rhythmical link with the mysterious ancestral past. That past and its pain is always an implicit part in the musician's characterization in Baldwin. Music is the medium through which the musician achieves enough understanding and strength to deal with the past and present hurt. (Williams 147)

Baldwin in *Many Thousand Gone* wrote: "We cannot escape our origin, however hard we try, those origins which contain the key [...] to all that we later become." (quoted in Dance 56) The musician in James Baldwin's fiction holds up that key and through music, the narrator in *Sonny's Blues* attains inner peace. Sonny is eventually able to open the eyes of his brother and his audience by dealing with Afro-American heritage and culture.

10 The Reunion by Maya Angelou

Short stories rank among the lesser known artistic output of Maya Angelou, who is not only a writer, poet and autobiographer, playwright, film-maker, teacher and editor, but has gained fame as dancer, singer and actress as well (*Conversations*, 47). The short story “*The Reunion*” was first published in 1983 in *Confirmation: An Anthology of African-American Women Writers*, edited by Amiri Baraka. Maya Angelou is primarily famous for her series of four autobiographical volumes covering her childhood and adult experiences. The first book of the series, *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*, was highly acclaimed and is still seen as one of her most important works. Maya Angelou focuses on the relationship between blacks and whites and highlights in particular the situation of black women in a male dominated society. Her “literary significance rests upon her exceptional ability to tell her life story as both a human being and black American woman in the twentieth century” (Bloom, 3). She explains in an interview: “You see, black women have been incredibly free to struggle for hundreds of years. And the story of the black woman is about the most noble story I know of mankind, in the history of man” (*Conversations* 20). Angelou grew up in the segregated South and learned what it meant to be a black person in a world whose boundaries were set by whites. She experienced the inequality and the powerlessness that resulted from it and deals with these experiences in works like *The Reunion*.

The main protagonist in the story is Philomena Jenkins, also called Meanie. It is 1958, and she is the pianist in Cal Callen's band, which plays a Sunday matinee in the Blue Palm Café. They start off with a blues, *D. B. Blues* by Lester Young,³² Callen's favorite piece. The audience is predominantly black, with only a few white customers who are “trying hard to act natural...like they come to the South Side of Chicago every day or maybe like they live there” (*Reunion* 223). Suddenly Philomena spots an old acquaintance of hers, Beth, the daughter of the rich Southern family that she and her parents had worked for when she was a child. All the unpleasant memories of her youth, the humiliation caused by “Miss Cotton Queen Baker of Georgia”, the blue eyed and

³² Born: 27th of August 1909, Woodville, Mississippi; Died: 15th of March 1959, New York City. Young started his career playing the tenor saxophone in Fletcher Henderson's and Count Basie's Orchestra (see Berendt 115-124). He worked with Billie Holiday, Ella Fitzgerald, Oscar Peterson, Charlie Parker, Nat King Cole and many more and developed a new style of playing that was copied by many tenor saxophone players of the subsequent generation.

blonde Southern Belle and her family, begin to rise up inside her (*Reunion* 223). Beth is accompanied by a black man, “the grooviest looking cat I'd seen in a long time” (*Reunion*, 224) and Philomena cannot stop thinking about this situation while the band continues with *Round 'bout Midnight*, a famous jazz standard:

That used to be my song, for so many reasons. In Baker, the only time I could practice jazz, in the church, was round 'bout midnight. When the best chord changes came to me it was generally round 'bout midnight. When my first lover held me in his arms it was round 'bout midnight. Usually when it's time to play that tune I dig right into it. But this time I was too busy thinking about Beth and her family. [...] Then I took thirty-two bars. My fingers found the places between the keys where the blues and the truth lay hiding. I dug out the story of a woman without a man, and a man without hope. I tried to wedge myself in and lay down the groove between B-flat and B-natural. I must have gotten close to it, because the audience brought me out with their clapping. Even Cal said, “Yeah baby, that's it.” (*Reunion* 224)

Philomena channels the intensity of her feelings into her music and becomes aware of the pain inflicted upon her by whites. The humiliation and arrogance she had to feel day by day still have an effect on her. After her solo, she asks herself: “How did she like them apples? What did she think of little Philomena that used to shake the farts out of her sheets, wash her dirty drawers, pick up after her slovenly mama?” (*Reunion* 224). Maya Angelou herself experienced segregation while living in Stamps, Arkansas, with her grandmother. Dental care, for instance, was denied to her by a white doctor who said that he would rather stick his hand into a dog's mouth than into a nigger's, and the Ku Klux Klan constantly threatened the inhabitants of Stamps (see Bloom, 4). Blacks held a life-saving distance to whites:

In Stamps the segregation was so complete that most black children didn't really, absolutely know what whites looked like. They were different, to be dreaded, and in that dread was included the hostility of the powerless against the powerful, the poor against the rich, the worker against jobless and the ragged against the well dressed. I remember never believing that whites were really real. (*Caged Bird* 25)

Apart from the physical violence, the threats and insults, the debasement of blacks by whites was a source of great frustration for the black community – they conveyed the feeling that blacks would never be able to overcome this situation. Maya Angelou describes this feeling of hopelessness and the effect it had on her in her autobiography. At the graduation ceremony at her school a white school official held a very patronizing speech and Maya Angelou thought: “It was awful to be Negro and have no control over

my life. It was brutal to be young and already trained to sit quietly and listen to charges brought against my color with no chance of defense. We should all be dead” (*Caged Bird* 180).

During intermission, Philomena stays at the bar and orders a drink. Beth seems to have left the Café and Philomena imagines what she would have told her had they spoken. Her accusations are bitter and sarcastic; she remembers the hypocrisy of Beth's father, who had fathered three children with a black woman, and the alcoholism of Beth's mother, who had called Philomena's mother a gem and her father a treasure. Suddenly Beth appears at the bar and Philomena can remember none of her previous thoughts. Beth explains that she is engaged to that black man, who is a college teacher, and tells Philomena about her parents' resistance to their marriage. It is obvious that Beth is completely ignorant of the indignities blacks had been forced to suffer back in Georgia and, without doubt, throughout the United States. She defends her home town by saying: “I know that there is a lot wrong with Baker, but it's my home” (*Reunion*, 227). In the course of their conversation, she narrowly avoids a slip of the tongue – she is about to utter the word “nigger” and corrects herself only in the last moment, substituting it with “black man”. This incident demonstrates that the mentality, albeit suppressed at the moment, had sadly not change after all these years. Beth explains: “I just wanted to talk to somebody who knew me. Knew Baker”. She even invites Philomena to her wedding but it is apparent that she had never really understood Philomena and has never reflected on the political and social situation in the South. Philomena has left the South behind her and cannot accept the hypocrisy and ignorance any more. Self-confidently, she expresses her opinion of both Beth and her parents: “Good-bye Beth. Tell your parents I said go to hell and take you with them, just for company” (*Reunion*, 228). When the second set starts, Philomena sits down at her piano and she still reflects upon the encounter at the bar. She frowns upon Beth's ludicrous problems, knowing that everything will work out for her because she is white. There is one thought that consoles her: “She had the money, I had the music. She and her parents had had the power to hurt me when I was young, but look, the stuff in me lifted me up high above them. No matter how bad times became, I would always be the song struggling to be heard” (*Reunion*, 228).

Maya Angelou herself is deeply rooted in African-American music. She had been brought up in the South where the church and therefore gospel music played a significant role in social life. Her grandmother had been an active member of the church and

regularly sang solo hymns at church services. But Maya also got in touch with the blues. In her autobiography *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* she explains the connection between the two styles in a scene where, after a Revival meeting, the church members pass a juke joint on their way home:

Passing near the din, the godly people dropped their heads and conversation ceased. Reality began its tedious crawl back into their reasoning. After all, they were needy and hungry and despised and dispossessed, and sinners the world over were in the driver's seat. [...] A stranger to the music could not have made a distinction between the songs sung a few minutes ago and those being danced to in the gay house by the railroad tracks. All asked the same question. How long, oh God? How long? (*Caged Bird*, 132)

Angelou aptly describes the blues with its African roots as something that cannot be pinned down to the Western music tradition. The blues lies between two keys – it is neither B-flat nor B-natural (see citation on p. 75) or exactly any of the remaining ten keys. That accounts for the fascination that emanates from the blues. There seems to be a slight inharmoniousness, to the western ear, which also thrills because the listener longs for the dissolution of the harmonies into familiar chord patterns (see appendix). Philomena describes that space between the keys as a place where the blues, but also the truth lays hidden– the truth of Afro-American existence and experience.

Maya Angelou herself was active as a musician. In 1957, at the age of 27, she recorded her only album to date, *Miss Calypso*, on which she sang and for which she wrote half of the material herself³³ (see www.cduniverse.com). She also appeared in the musical comedy *Calypso Heat Wave*, for which she wrote the songs (*Conversation* 32). Moreover, she had joined the cast of *Porgy and Bess*, the famous jazz opera by George Gershwin in 1954 and toured Europe for a year with the group (*Conversations* 31). Philomena is presented as a musician who is appreciated by her fellow musicians and her audience. It is noteworthy that she achieved such a respectable position as one of the rare female instrumentalists. In those days, as Selwyn Cudjoe explains, black women “never really seemed to have lives worthy of emulation. They invariably seemed to live for others, for black men or white, for children or parents; bereft always it appeared, of an autonomous self” (Cudjoe, 11). Women working in the music business were mainly singers but Philomena managed to gain a reputation for being a highly regarded

³³ Calypso: musical style and dance developed in Trinidad; mostly in 2-to-the-bar or 4-to-the-bar rhythms. It became popular in Europe in the 1950s. One famous representative of this style was Harry Belafonte). (see Korff, 34)

instrumentalist. Apart from guitarists like Memphis Minnie or Sister Rosetta Tharpe, who were successful from the 1940s onward, female instrumentalists have only managed to gain national and international recognition during the last thirty years. In the South, the educational standard for blacks was low and access to Higher Education often limited or even completely barred, and therefore their career opportunities were restricted. In the field of music, blacks have been immensely innovative and have played at the same eye level - albeit not under the same conditions - as white musicians. The white audience appreciated black music and visited the performances of black artists. Philomena sarcastically comments on this situation, having been humiliated and belittled all her life by whites; she is now in the position to sell whites what they wanted. "I guess what I wanted was to rub her face in "See now, you thought all I would ever be was you and your mama's flunky." And "See now, how folks, even you, pay to listen to me" and "See now, I'm saying something, nobody else can say. Not the way I say it, anyway" (*Reunion* 225). As the popularity of jazz and blues grew, whites strove to copy these styles and eventually tried to internalize the Afro-American feeling for music. It fills Philomena with satisfaction to see that her race, in spite of all impediments, has accomplished to create music that has a major influence on American mainstream. Whites used this music to express themselves and Philomena refutes the white conviction of black inferiority. In her autobiography, Maya Angelou remembers a boxing match between Joe Louis³⁴ and his white contender when she was a little girl. The discrimination and debasement endured for centuries made heroes like him a symbol of black pride and self-esteem:

If Joe lost we were back in slavery and beyond help. It would all be true, the accusations that we were lower types of human beings. Only a little higher than apes. True that we were stupid and ugly and lazy and dirty and, unlucky and worst of all, that God himself hated us and ordained us to be hewers of wood and drawers of water, forever and ever, world without end. (*Caged Bird* 135)

Music fulfills the same function as the boxing match; it enables blacks to realize what capacities they actually possess and helps them to overcome prejudices and the limits imposed upon them. It is a useful tool in the quest for self-identity and the claim for a legitimate place in society. Philomena is aware of that fact, but she is at the same time

³⁴ Joe Louis was born on the 13 of May 1914 in Lafayette, Alabama. He started his professional career in 1934 and could defend his heavyweight boxing championship 25 times. In 1951 he retired from boxing (see www.whoswho.de/templ/te_bio.php?PID=2440&RID=1).

aware of the price her people had to pay in their fight for a better future.

To illustrate the influence of jazz and blues as a generator of identity and possibilities, of independence and self-realization, but also as a means to overcome male hegemony, Walker's *The Color Purple* will be discussed in the following chapter.

11 The Color Purple by Alice Walker

The Color Purple, Walker's third novel after *The Third Life of Grange Copeland* and *Meridian*, was published in 1982. It won both the Pulitzer Prize and the American Book Award for Fiction and in 1985 it was made into a highly successful movie that was directed by Stephen Spielberg and featured Whoopi Goldberg and Oprah Winfrey (see Winchell 85). In addition to her novels, Alice Walker has published four collections of short stories and several volumes of poetry, essays and non-fictional work (see www.alicewalkersgarden.com).

Although the novel includes a number of letters sent to Celie by her sister Nettie, the story is primarily told by Celie, a poor, uneducated southern woman, who is addressing her letters to God in the black folk idiom (see Henderson 68). The story is set in the rural South during the early decades of the 20th century (see Cataliotti 91). Celie, the main protagonist, tells the story of her abuse and oppression by men and her fight for independence and self-determination. At the age of fourteen, she is repeatedly raped by her father (who later turns out to be her stepfather) and bears him two children, a daughter and a son, both of whom she is not allowed to keep and who are taken away by her tormentor. After the death of her mother and the remarriage of her father, she is married off to a widower, whom Celie calls Mr.--. She takes care of his four children and does all the farm work and domestic chores without any help by him. She does not experience any love from her husband, quite the contrary: the marriage perpetuates her plight - she is beaten, overworked and treated like a slave. Her sister Nettie aptly describes the situation Celie has to deal with: "It's like seeing you buried" (CP 19). In an interview in June 1982 Walker revealed that Celie's character was modeled after her grandmother, who was raped at the age of twelve by her slave owner (see Henderson 67).

After being harassed by her stepfather, Nettie, for a short time, lives together with her sister and her husband but is soon forced to leave on behalf of Mr.-- since she does not acquiesce in his sexual advances. When the sisters say good-bye, they promise to write to each other regularly but no letter from Nettie ever arrives. Years later Celie discovers that Albert (which is Mr.--'s Christian name) has been intercepting Nettie's letters from Africa, where she has gone with Samuel and Corrine, a missionary couple who have

adopted Celie's two children, Olivia and Adam. Celie is caught in a patriarchal system where black men abuse their women and children. She is struggling to cope with the constant physical and psychological abuse:

He beat me like he beat the children. Cept he don't never hardly beat them. He say, Celie, git the belt. The children be outside the room peeking through the cracks. It all I can do not to cry. I make myself wood. I say to myself, Celie, you a tree. That's how come I know trees fear man. (CP 23)

The Olinka tribe, with whom Nettie and the children live in Africa, fosters this system as well. Suppression of women and female circumcision are traditions that have been handed down for generations. Men as *patres familias* demand subservience from their wives and deprive them of education and autonomy.

But it is not only Albert, who is trying to impose male dominance on his family; this patriarchal oppression has already been practiced on him by his father who dissuaded Albert from marrying Shug Avery, the true love of his life. Albert passes his frustration on to Celie and eventually on to his son Harpo, whom he detains from marrying Sophia. Harpo defiantly marries her in spite of his father's opposition and although he is very happy with his wife, he adopts the system of dominance for his marriage. Albert advises his son to beat her: "Wives is like children. You have to let 'em know who got the upper hand. Nothing can do better than a good sound beating." (CP 35) This finally leads to the break-up of Harpo's relationship and brings much distress and pain to his family (see Henderson 70). Celie accepts the life imposed on her:

Over and over again, Celie accepts abuse and victimization. [...] Unlike Sophia, Celie submits to a system of beliefs and values which reinforce conventional notions of race, class and sex – and relegate her to a subordinate status. Celie submits to male authority because she accepts a theology which requires female subjugation to father and husband. [...] It is a theology which validates her inferior status and treatment as a black woman in a racist and sexual culture. Not only does she devalue herself, but she attaches little value to a world which reflects her as "black, pore and a woman... nothing at all". (Henderson 70)

The encounter with Shug Avery is the pivotal point in Celie's life after which she starts to change. Shug has had an on-and-off relationship with Albert for many years and is the mother of his three children. She lives an independent life as a blues singer known as "Queen Honeybee", performing in bars and juke joints all over the United States. Albert's father describes her as "black as tar, she nappy headed. She got legs like

baseball bats” (CP 20). But for Celie, “she was a woman. The most beautiful woman I ever saw. She more pretty than my mama. She bout ten thousand times prettier than me.” (CP 8) When Shug becomes ill and is treated like an outcast, Albert brings her to his house. Mad with concern, he advises Celie to take care of her. While Celie is nursing Shug back to health, an intimate friendship develops between the women, and Shug teaches Celie self-respect and respect of her body. She also supports Celie's endeavor to earn a livelihood through her creativity and industry.

Shug is the complete opposite of Celie; she is aware of her good looks and the effect it has on men. She values stylish clothes and acts like one of the blues divas that were popular in the 1920s. She “is a liberator and mentor who inspires Miss Celie and Mary Agnes (“Squeak”) how to break free from male oppression and become blues women in their own right. Through her art and her approach towards life, Shug shows Celie and Mary Agnes “how to do it,” how to enrich and enlarge their views of existence.” (Cataliotti, *Songs* 91) Walker acknowledges the impact of blues women had as a model for the character of Lilly “Shug” Avery:

When I started working on “The Color Purple,” I was listening to a lot of Bessie Smith and Ma Rainey, the women on the 'Mean Mothers' album. I loved the way they dealt with sexuality, with the relationship with men. They showed you had a whole self and you were not to succumb to be somebody else's - as they would say 'play toy' (see Cataliotti, *Songs* 91)

Shug's songs and their texts relate to Bessie Smith's songs, which had an explicitly sexual content and were very self-confident; they were apparently used by Alice Walker for being symbolic for female emancipation (see Huke 219). Shug has a reputation of leading an extravagant and glamorous life and having numerous affairs. Being an artist also gave her greater freedom than most women, who were caught in their conventional lives in the 1920s. In the rural South, options to earn money and an independent life were extremely limited since women were usually tied to their families and children and had to support them financially through hard physical labour (see Cataliotti *Songs*, 91). In Shug, Celie has found a person to confide in and eventually the two women enter a sexual relationship where Celie for the first time in her life is not abused and exploited, but experiences love and sexual arousal. After having recovered, Shug revives her career and sings a blues gig at Harpo's juke joint. She eventually gets her band together again and tours the States. “She singing all over the country these days. Everybody know her name. She know everybody, too. Know Sophie Tucker, know Duke Ellington, know folk

I ain't never heard of. And money. She makes so much money she don't know what to do with it.” (CP 101)

But Shug pays dearly for her freedom. She has no contact to her parents and her children who live with them on account of her profession. Celie reports about her parents' reaction, when they hear of her illness: “Her mammy say she told her so. Her pappy say, Tramp.” (CP 42) The church community, too, slanders her: “Even the preacher got his mouth on Shug Avery. He take her condition for his text. He don't call no name, but he don't have to. Everybody know who he mean. He talk about a strumpet in short skirts, smoking cigarettes, drinking gin. Singing for money and taking other women mens. Talk about slut, hussy, heifer ad streetcleaner” (CP 42). Her independence and social flexibility provoke jealousy.

Shug, the musician and artist, breaks free from the conventions dictated by both black and white communities. The blues has enabled her to overcome all the impediments and therefore she becomes a role model for Celie and Mary Agnes, giving them the strength to realize their human worth and to take their lives into their own hands:

First Shug sings a song by Bessie Smith. She say Bessie somebody she knew. Old friend. It call “A Good Man is Hard To Find.” She look over at Mr.--- when she sings that. [...] And Mr.--- looking at Shug's bright black red dress, her feet in little sassy red shoes. Her hair shining in waves. [...] Then I hear my name. Shug saying Celie. Miss Celie. And I look up where she at. She say my name again. She say the song I'm about to sing is call Miss Celie's song. Cause she scratched in out my head when I was sick. First she hum a little, like she do at home. Then she sing the words. It is all about some no count man doing her wrong, again. But I don't listen to that part I look at her and hum along a little with the tune. First time somebody made something and name it after me.(CP 69-70)

Shug initiates Celie's transformation from a “non-entity” (Cataliotti, *Songs* 95) into a self-determined person. With Shug's help, Celie finds out that Albert has been hiding her sister's letters in an attempt to separate her from the only person she loved. After this discovery she is in a shock and she feels she could kill Albert, but she manages to channel her feelings into verbal accusations towards him. She finally declares that she is leaving Albert and accompanying Shug to Memphis. “You a lowdown dog is what's wrong. I say. It's time to leave you and enter into Creation. And your dead body just the welcome mat I need. Say what? He ast, Shock” (CP 180). Naturally, Mr.--- tries to dissuade her from leaving and attacks the little self-esteem Celie has managed to build

up:

You'll be back., he say. Nothing up North for nobody like you. [...] You ugly. You skinny. You shape funny. You too scared to open your mouth to people. All you fit to do in Memphis is to be Shug's maid. [...] Look at you. You black, you pore, you ugly, you a woman. Goddam, he say, you nothing at all.” (CP 186-187)

But Celie has overcome her former submissiveness and had undergone a metamorphosis. She answers him: “I'm pore, I'm black, I may be ugly and can't cook, a voice say to everything listen. But I'm here.” (CP 187).

In Memphis, she manages to earn a living by sewing her self-designed trousers and is finally able to open up a business. When her step-father dies, she finds out that the store he had possessed for years had in fact been left to her and Nettie, and she decides to use it for her clothing business. Shug finally leaves Mr.--- because she wants her freedom more than his love. In her eyes, Albert has proved to be a weak person unable to stand up to his father, and she cannot forgive him the mistreatment of Celie, one of her dearest friends. Albert becomes depressive and secludes himself but he finally opens his eyes to the pain he has caused to others through his brutality and oppression (see Byerman 65-66). Therefore Celie is eventually able to make peace with Albert, because she “not only has the power to free herself from unjust oppression but also the potential to release Albert from the burden of his own oppressiveness” (see Henderson 75). At the end of the novel, “like in a womanist fairytale” (Byerman 59), all the characters are united and freed from the oppression and cruelty of both male and white worlds (see Byerman 66).

In *The Color Purple*, blues is not a tool used to reconnect to the past, to explore the roots of Afro-American culture and the African heritage that the black community shares; it is a tool to live a financially independent life, albeit at the cost of social ostracism by some groups. This independence allows them to shake off the shackles of male dominance and enables them to find their own way through the thicket of rules and limitations imposed on them. The blues is rather a medium of communication between men and women than a symbol for an Afro-American culture (see Huke 220). Moreover, it can channel the negative experiences into creativity. Celie observes: “What I love best about Shug is what she been through, I say. When you look at Shug's eyes you know she been where she been, did what she did. And she know.” (CP 244). Shug not only influences Celie, she also has a major impact on the life of Squeak, the second wife of Harpo, who at the

beginning of their marriage has been as subservient and quiet as Celie. After hearing Shug sing, she decides to pursue a career as blues singer and Shug encourages and mentors her: "Let's go sing one night at Harp's place. Be like old times for me. And if I bring you before the crowd, they better listen with respect." (CP 104) Having found her voice, even though it is apparently not an impressive one - Celie compares it to the meowing of a cat - she stands up to Harpo and assumes her right to her given name, Mary Agnes. Vocal technique is not as important as the expression and authenticity - the personal style of the singer. It is more relevant what the artist has to say and how he or she says it – the people will listen to the message. Therefore, the blues is more than entertainment; it is something Shug is taking very seriously. As Cataliotti observed:

She insists on commanding respect in the communal setting of the juke joint because she is conscious of the majestic achievement of her blues singing sisters – the construction of a public platform that affords African-American women the opportunity for self-expression and self-empowerment in a society which has attempted to relegate them to silence. (Cataliotti, *Songs* 96)

The blues song functions as public testimony - women can convert their experiences into songs that are appreciated and respected by the crowd. It also gives them the possibility to find their own voice and offer their own interpretation, which is a major element of Afro-American music (see Huke 219). Blues singing women, with their ability to express their thoughts, desires and wishes may become role models for those who are still without voice.

12 Conclusion

This thesis deals with texts that were written in various decades of the 20th century by both black and white authors, texts that possess one unifying element: the music, in particular jazz and blues. These styles enjoyed and still enjoy great popularity with all age groups and social classes because of their vitality and spontaneity, which are experienced best in live performances. Although records and CDs are available they cannot replace the impact jazz and blues have when they are played by talented musicians in a club. The communication between musicians and the audience is something special that, in contrast to visual art or writing, happens in the here and now. Eudora Welty and Rudolph Fisher make the reader feel as if he or she was sitting in a club and was watching Afro-American musicians in a jazz concert. They take a close look at the band leaders and at the way they communicate with the band members and the audience. Thus, they are capturing the spirit and the power of creativity displayed on stage. With the presentation of the jargon the musicians use, the “hipster talk” is presented. Welty and Fisher depict how music works: it is spontaneous and emotional and it relies on personalities that are able to captivate the audience.

Due to the success and popularity of jazz and blues, and the impact it has on American society, Afro-American writers use these styles for transporting more than just American culture, life-style and creativity – blues and jazz are used to articulate political and social concerns, to discuss racism, feminism and gender. Moreover, as the analysis of the texts has shown, Afro-American music, especially the blues, is the reflection of the “black experience”, and stands for Afro-American culture and identity.

Writing has, of course, often been claimed as a concession to contrasting cultural demands. Orality appeared as the “natural” artistic expression of African Americans. But writing also has come to be regarded as a means of survival for black Americans, in addition as an instrument to liberate themselves. (Barbara Puschmann-Nalenz, *African American Short Story* 22)

Langston Hughes and Maya Angelou not only deal with the performance situation of the artists but they also broach the issue of racism. The musicians presented in their works know that jazz and blues emerged to a large part from the creativity of Afro-Americans. The protagonists are proud of their heritage and are aware of the identity-forging power music has for the black community. Oceola, Baldwin's heroine, is interested in both

white classical music and popular Afro-American music but she refuses to give up playing the “low-brow” blues and does not allow her benefactor to patronize her. Philomena, the protagonist in *The Reunion*, recognizes the importance of Afro-American music for American culture. Jazz and blues developed in spite of slavery and discrimination and Philomena demands respect for this achievement. Blacks like herself and her family had to suffer great injustice and had to lead a submissive life but Philomena believes that music helps to lift blacks up and make them free.

James Baldwin and Alice Walker deal with racism but also take a closer look at the motivations of artists for becoming musicians and the personal development they underwent. Sonny, in *Sonny's Blues*, tries to find his place in a society that is dominated by whites and where blacks have to adjust to white norms. In spite of all difficulties and the ignorance of his brother, Sonny succeeds in becoming a musician and eventually comes to terms with his life. Baldwin describes Sonny's passion and the determination, his drug addiction and his problems but he also depicts a personality that stays sane because of music. Shug Avery, the major character in Alice Walker's *The Color Purple*, is not only a musician but a woman. Banned from her family and black community who disregard the blues, she seems to lead a careless life, earning enough money to support herself and touring through the United States. But Shug has to assert herself in a white *and* male dominated society and defies male violence and oppression. With the help of music she is able to lead a fulfilled and independent life and helps women close to her to love themselves and fight against suppression.

An abundance of texts that employ music has been published in the past decades. Although this thesis can only present a limited part of this multitude of relevant works, it nevertheless mirrors a cultural achievement that had a huge impact on black and white societies. Jazz and blues are not only musical styles – they stand for the American society with its racial and social problems but also for a new type of musician: one, that is able to express himself spontaneously and channels his experiences and emotions into a wonderful new form.

13 Appendix

The majority of blues pieces consists of three chords which are built on the tonic, the dominant and sub- dominant³⁵. Each of these chords is a dominant seventh chord – a major chord, consisting of root, major third, perfect fifth and minor seventh. Accordingly, a frequently used blues scheme looks like this:

I 7 | IV7| I7| I7|

IV7| IV7| I7| I7|

V7| IV7| I7| V7

This structure is sometimes varied and extended (the jazz blues has additional chords) and also minor blues chord schemes can be found in the standard blues repertoire.

The text, too, has a certain structure: in the first line a statement is given. The singer normally uses only two bars to express his or her thoughts, the two last bars are used for solo instruments to improvise or are simply left for instrumental accompaniment. In the second line the statement is repeated on the subdominant, which creates a more intensive sound. The last line ends on a “authentic conclusion”³⁶ (my translation) which directly leads up to the next stanza. Textual examples can be found in chapter 2.4)

The blues is, harmonically speaking, very special since a dominant seventh chord is not only played over the dominant but also over the tonic and subdominant which would normally demand a major chord or a sixth chord (see Burbat 36-38). This chord progression is chosen because it is accompanying the voice in the most suitable way, especially since blues vocalists use the so-called “blue notes”. Blues singers tend to intone the third and the seventh a tinge too low, they flatten them. This diminishment clashes with the dominant seventh chord and thus creates that typical “blues feeling”, which is done deliberately in order to create tension. The use of dominant seventh chords and the blues scale, which does not include a major third, creates a tension that is mainly due to the harmonic clash between major and minor third. (see Haunschild 112) Another

³⁵ Tonic: the first tone on the major scale. Subdominant: the fourth tone on the major scale. Dominant: the fifth tone on the major scale.

³⁶ Authentic conclusion: the dissolution of a dominant into its corresponding tonic.

tension is achieved by the use of the perfect fifth in the chord and the minor fifth in the melody and blues scale. This is the sound that is characteristic for blues and makes it very distinct from other styles.

These “blue notes” seem to have their origin in the African tradition and are only perceived as flattening a tone in the western world (the African pentatonic scales cannot be compared to the European systems of the well tempered tuning) (see Berendt 216-217). With the rise of bebop in the 1940s when jazz traditions underwent radical changes, the minor fifth became very important. The tritone, which in classical, church and folk music was avoided, was then frequently used by the “boppers” and was soon added to the blue notes.

The blues is very popular for musicians who are beginners of improvisation because it enables the player to improvise with just one scale, the blues scale - consisting of minor pentatonic scale with an added diminished fifth (see Haunschild 112). This technique is called horizontal improvisation, in contrast to the vertical improvisation where the scales change with the chords (see Burbat 38). Vertical improvisation is mainly used in jazz because harmonic patterns are complicated and one only scale cannot cover the material presented.

The blues may consist of a simple chord progression that can be easily memorized and gives beginners an easy access to improvisation but, nonetheless, it not easy to sing or play. The chords allow the musician much room for the presentation of a theme, no version of one and the same blues will ever sound identical. Even more, it actually is not allowed to sound identical. Many vocal and instrumental blues licks³⁷ must be internalized to make a blues authentic but the personal interpretation is paramount.

³⁷ Typical musical phrases that will be repeated during a performance of a song.

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15 Zusammenfassung

Die vorliegende Diplomarbeit *The Representation of Blues and Jazz Musicians in American Fiction from the 1930s to the 1980s* beschäftigt sich mit der Darstellung von Musikerinnen und Musikern in Kurzgeschichten und Romanen der amerikanischen Literatur und gibt einen Überblick über die Veränderung des Musikerbildes in fünf Jahrzehnten. Der Musiker als öffentliche Person, sein Musizieren auf der Bühne sowie seine Funktion als Spiegel sozialer und politischer Verhältnisse werden in dieser Arbeit beleuchtet.

Im ersten Teil der Arbeit wird ein kurzer Überblick über die Entstehung und Entwicklung der zwei Stile gegeben. Es wird auf den Blues und seine Wurzeln, sowie auf den Jazz, der Anfang des 20. Jahrhunderts ebenfalls im Süden der USA entstand, eingegangen. Die Darstellung beider Stile ist relevant für das Verstehen der Texte, da in diesen natürlich die stilistischen Elemente, beziehungsweise die sozialen und historischen Bedingungen unter denen Blues und Jazz entstanden sind, nicht beschrieben werden. Musiktheoretische Erklärungen zum Blues finden sich im Appendix.

Im zweiten Teil der Arbeit wird die Musik in Zusammenhang mit der Literatur gebracht. Der Analyse der Texte *Common Meter* von Rudolph Fisher, *The Blues I'm Playing* von Langston Hughes, *Powerhouse* von Eudora Welty, *Sonny's Blues* von James Baldwin, *The Reunion* von Maya Angelou und *The Color Purple* von Alice Walker, werden zwei erklärendes Kapitel zur Musik in Afro-Amerikanischer Literatur hinzugefügt. Da fünf der sechs Texte von Autoren afro-amerikanischer Abstammung verfasst wurden, bietet diese Einführung einen Überblick über die Verwendung von Blues und Jazz als wichtiges Mittel des Ausdrucks und der Identitätsfindung. In den Texten werden die Künstler nicht nur während des Musizierens auf der Bühne dargestellt und ihre Kreativität und Spontaneität gezeigt - die Analyse der Texte demonstriert, dass Blues und Jazz auch als Transportmittel sozialer Gegebenheiten und wichtig für die Erforschung der eigenen Geschichte ist. Der Blues, im Besondern, beinhaltet wichtige Elemente des afrikanischen Erbes und wird als Ausdruck der Erfahrungen der Afro-Amerikaner begriffen.

16 Curriculum Vitae

Persönliche Daten:

Name: Elisabeth Strauss

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Ausbildung:

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1985 - 1988 Gymnasium Gänserndorf

1988 – 1993 Gymnasium Friesgasse

Abschluss Matura

Studium: 1993 – 2003: Diplomstudium Studium Anglistik und Geschichte

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1995 – 1999: Diplomstudium Jazzgesang am Schubert Konservatorium

Diplom in Jazzgesang

1999 – 2000: Goldsmith University London

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Berufserfahrung:

Seit 2000: Volkshochschule Meidling, Jazz- und Populargesang,

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2002 - 2003: Musikschule Schaller

2004-2006: Sommerkurse KFJ Edlitz: Dozentin für Jazzgesang

Seit 2010 : Private Musikschule Klangspiele

Aktive Musikerin im Bereich Jazz, Blues und Populärmusik in diversen Formationen