

THESIS

RHETORICAL OPERATIVES IN SELECTED BLUES
LYRICS OF BESSIE SMITH

Submitted by

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WE HEREBY RECOMMEND THAT THE THESIS PREPARED UNDER
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ABSTRACT OF THESIS
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A joint study of music and rhetoric allows for the expansion of the function and scope of both disciplines. This study is concerned with the periphery of rhetoric, specifically, its relationship to 1920s Blues. Thus, the purpose of this study is to examine whether popular musical lyrics can be analyzed rhetorically and to further assess the potential rhetorical operatives in Blues lyrics by Bessie Smith. The subject, Bessie Smith, and the study, are justified because both attempt to articulate an idea based on a particular culture; the former applies the theory whereas the latter explains the theory and how it has useful rhetorical dimensions. Thus, the study examines how Blues lyrics modify existing attitudes. In order to assess the extent of attitude modification, the study reviews the cultural context in which Blues was performed, develops a conceptual model, based on Burkeian theoretical premises, for analyzing rhetorical operatives in Blues lyrics, and applies the model to selected Blues lyrics.

The conclusion to this study points to how a poetic form functions rhetorically. By analyzing nine selected lyrics composed by Bessie Smith between 1923 and 1930, it

can be concluded that her lyrics were persuasive statements which sustained Black America until the inception of the Civil Rights Movement of the 1960s. In many respects, Blues serves as a liberating catharsis for Blacks amidst oppression. Bessie Smith employs an epideictic address while influencing the Black audience. At the time of Bessie Smith's performance, Blacks were in the midst of a premove-ment era and Blues was a means for communicating by evoking the transcendence of pain incurred by Black degradation and deprivation. From this perspective, it may be concluded that Bessie Smith's Blues was a "responsible rhetoric."

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To my mom, Mary

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

Problem

The scope of rhetoric has concerned theorists since the time of Plato. Cowan states that "[r]hetorical theory and criticism have most traditionally been concerned with oratory."¹ Recently, theorists have attempted to provide perspectives which expand the scope of rhetoric to encompass other forms of communication. Fulkerson, for example, contends that the "Letter from Birmingham Jail," by Martin Luther King, Jr., "deserves more extensive study, for it is an instance of superb rhetoric in action."² Thus, a major concern of contemporary theorists seems to revolve around the age-old argument regarding the relationship of rhetoric to other arts of discourse. The attempt to assess relationships between disciplines such as poetry, literature, music, and rhetoric, has occupied the attention of writers throughout history.

Rhetorical dimensions in music is one area of interest to contemporary theorists. Irvine and Kirkpatrick suggest that "[r]hetorical critics and theorists are now faced with the need to develop a series of models that can account for the musical form in rhetorical exchange."³ Drawing upon Irvine and Kirkpatrick's article, Cowan analyzed an Italian

opera and concluded that "opera can, indeed, function as an appropriate vehicle for persuasive communication."⁴

Contemporary critics have attempted "to analyze the persuasive impact of the protest songs of the late 1960s"⁵ while others have analyzed early twentieth-century labor songs. Carter suggests that song is a means for oppressed groups to endure "unbearable conditions." He states:

One perennial way of dealing with hard times, oppression, bosses, or bitterly unbearable conditions is through song. A song tells the story simply. Heroes and villains are identified, struggles and crises are amplified, and the hopes for salvation and nirvana are shouted. Songs become means of uniting against and coping with a common enemy.⁶

Carter "examines the role of songs on the IWW's rhetoric to determine the extent to which the songs were used and to explore the rhetorical functions of the lyrics"⁷ during a period of protest. The focus of Carter's article is the persuasiveness of lyrics apart from the musical form which was adapted from popular music of the day. He suggests that lyrics are persuasive in conjunction with the more traditional dimensions of rhetoric--oratory as well as propaganda. Furthermore, Carter points out that "Kaye's [Kosokoff's] study of songs as singing persuasion also suggests that 'songs and speeches in combination may have considerable rhetorical potential.'"⁸

Yet another area of study for the rhetorical critic has been the relationship between rhetoric and poetic. In The Rhetoric of the Contemporary Lyric, Holden establishes a congruence of the rhetorical dimension of the lyric.

If "rhetoric" is traditionally the "art of persuasion," then, whenever we consider the ways in which a poet or novelist might have tried to anticipate and play upon the expectations and the disposition of his audience, we are considering the rhetorical aspects of a work of imaginative literature.⁹

In a compilation of essays regarding British and American poetry, Holden considers the "rhetorical aspects of a poem or any piece of literature"¹⁰ to be those which "touch on the issue of who is speaking to whom, through what mask, and for what ostensible purpose."¹¹

Fregoe asserts that there is a potential impact of rhetoric upon poetic and vice versa. By analyzing works of contemporary rhetorical scholars on the subject of rhetoric and poetic, he discovered that "rhetorical criticism can, and does, include the poetic form."¹² Specifically, he points to "The Committee on the Advancement and Refinement of Rhetorical Criticism" who define the application of rhetorical criticism:

[Rhetorical criticism may be] applied to any human act, process, product, or artifact which, in the critic's view, may formulate, sustain, or modify attention, perceptions, attitudes, or behavior.¹³

Thus, the theories of the two arts are distinct, yet rhetorical criticism can be applied, with good yield, to poetic discourse.

Studies in these areas have led to questions regarding the "boundaries of rhetorical dimensions." The exploration of human communication has expanded traditional rhetorical boundaries to encompass "new situations." The broadening of the scope of rhetoric to account for these new situations

results in a constant probing of new ground for the contemporary critic. Carter introduces an important point when he suggests that the song is significant as a communicative form for the oppressed. Perhaps in addition to providing an historical account concerning unrest, the song may serve as a rhetorical device specifically for the audience enduring hardships.

One rhetorically significant form of music and poetic which has not been studied for its persuasive content is Blues lyrics. The purpose of this study is to determine whether popular, musical lyrics can be analyzed rhetorically and to ascertain the underlying motive for potential Blues persuasion. This study also aims to assess major persuasive operatives in popular Blues lyrics between 1923 and 1930 by the Blues performer and lyricist, Bessie Smith. In order to complete the task of determining persuasive operatives in Blues, this study aims to examine the cultural context from which Blues derives.

Blues is, for the most part, attributed to Black Americans and grew out of the slavery institution in America. The period 1923 to 1930 was chosen because 1923 was the first year that Bessie Smith recorded, and these years generally marked the popularity of what is known as "classic" Blues. This was the period in which Blues gained a widespread audience. Jones explains how primitive Blues differed from what the classic performer had to offer:

Blues, until the time of the classic blues singers, was largely a functional music; and it emerged from a

music, the work song, that did not exist except as a strictly empirical communication of some part of the black slave's life. . . .¹⁴

Blues was, for a while, a means of transcending the real world of experience and an "art of enchanting the soul" through human experience. From this near Platonic perspective, Blues sought a truth beyond experience. Cone implies that this search beyond experience is a method of survival for Blacks:

The blues singer articulates this mood, and thus provides a degree of transcendence over the troubles of this world. When the blues caught the absurdity of black existence in white America and vividly and artistically expressed it in word and suitable music, it afforded black people a certain distance from their immediate trouble and allowed them to see and feel it artistically, thereby offering them a certain liberating catharsis. That black people could transcend trouble without ignoring it means that they are not destroyed by it.¹⁵

The latter part of 1929 marked the Great Depression. Until this time, Race records, which became the label for those recordings between 1920 and 1930 mainly by Black Blues and jazz artists, had flourished. However, by 1930, record companies faced a drastic decline and the music of such artists as Smith was virtually obsolete. This marked the end of classic Blues in this country. Therefore, the time period 1923-1930 is an appropriate period for analyzing popularized Blues as a vocal music and, specifically, classic Blues performers such as Bessie Smith, the "Empress of Blues." After 1930, Blues became less vocal and more instrumental and merged into a jazz-Blues form with a stronger emphasis on the music.

There are several reasons why this study is significant. First, Blues lyrics transcend the Black American's experiences in America, and therefore should not be ignored by the rhetorical critic. The rhetorical implications of Black lyrics have not yet been analyzed from a non-protest viewpoint, and Blues, specifically, has not been discussed fully in the speech communication field as a form with rhetorical dimensions. Therefore, an exploration of this area is appropriate.

Second, the historical and rhetorical dimensions of Blues deserve a conjunctive analysis. Black lyrics have traditionally conveyed, orally, the Black experience in America and have provided rhetorical statements regarding the plight of Blacks enduring oppression in America. Blues represents an integral part of the saga and thus deserves to be illuminated. The Civil Rights Movement of the 1960s resulted from the growth of unrest among Black Americans. The rhetorical statements of the 1960s have been illuminated by speech scholars; however, little has been done to analyze the "premovement" era which occurred during the 1920s and served as the foundation of the move toward social justice. Black lyrics of the 1920s provide the rhetorical critic with artifacts which are historically significant in that they convey the historical setting and life of the Black American. The lyrics are significant rhetorically because of persuasive elements which sustained Black America until the inception of the Civil Rights Movement.

This study also attempts to produce a critical model for the rhetoric of a Black secular music; a music whose lyrical content is distinctly different from European art lyrics of the time. Jones echoes this by stating:

. . . [T]he insistence of blues verse on the life of the individual and his individual trials and successes on the earth is a manifestation of the whole Western concept of man's life, and it is a development that could only be found in an American black man's music. . . .

But if the blues was a music that developed because of the Negro's adaptation to, and adoption of, America, it was also a music that developed because of the Negro's peculiar position in this country.¹⁶

Method and Scope

This study focuses upon "popular Blues lyrics" written between 1923 and 1930 by a popular Blues artist of that period--Bessie Smith. Only those artifacts actually written, performed, and recorded by Smith are analyzed. "Popular Blues lyrics" will be operationally defined as Blues Race recordings by Columbia Record Company.¹⁷ Bessie recorded exclusively with Columbia Records.

Race recordings became popular following the release of the first Blues recording by Okeh Records. Titon explains Race record trends during Smith's most successful years.

Race record trends in the 1920's may be explained by the following simple hypothesis. Companies wished to sell as many copies of Race records as possible; in particular they longed for best-sellers which would net them huge profits from relatively small investments. Therefore, they sought the singers and songs they believed most popular. Once a particular singer had a record which sold well, he would be recorded frequently thereafter until his records no longer seemed to sell.¹⁸

Thus, record companies only recorded those songs from artists perceived to be most popular. Smith proved the perceptions of company officials to be correct. Because of low overall record sales in 1920, "[f]rom the industry standpoint, Race and hillbilly records were very important because they accounted for a large percentage of the total output."¹⁹ Some information regarding sales figures for records may be found in company master books or files. Titon discusses these figures and what they mean in terms of the Black community:

Odum and Johnson [in 1925] concluded that the combined sales of three Race companies "alone amount to five or six million records annually." These companies apparently included Okeh and Columbia but not . . . Paramount. . . .

Five or six million Race records sold annually at a time when the total Negro population was only double that amount meant that a very large proportion of the Negro world must have been hearing the music. . . . The colossal output indicates irrefutably the important part played by the gramophone in the spread of Negro musical culture and gives some indication of its potential strength in directing and forming Negro taste.²⁰

The process of analysis for the Smith artifacts follows the same guidelines as the traditional approach to the analysis of speeches. However, the primary focus is the quality of the Blues lyric apart from its potential effect. Parrish suggests that "[r]hetoric, strictly speaking, is not concerned with the effect of a speech, but with its quality, and its quality can be determined quite apart from its effect."²¹ Thus, this study provides a means for analyzing the intrinsic elements of the musical lyric which ultimately may affect

persuasion. Therefore, the inherent operatives within the lyrics of Smith and the apparent motives, as defined by Kenneth Burke, are examined.

A conceptual approach is employed combining elements of Burkeian, Weaverian, and Aristotelian concepts to illuminate nine Blues lyrics by Smith. The critical approach to the Blues lyrics for this study conforms to a music "that developed because of the Negro's adaptation to, and adoption of, America, . . . [and one which] developed because of the Negro's peculiar position in this country."²² The theoretical foundation is primarily Burkeian. Kenneth Burke offers the critic an explanation of "identification" as a rhetorical means for the ultimate end, persuasion. Furthermore, his explanation of redemption is one which offers insight for the rhetorical end. Ultimate terms as defined by Richard Weaver, as well as ethos and pathos, are also rhetorical elements employed in the lyrical analysis.

It is true that many Blues lyrics revolve around sexual themes; however, there were many lyrics which offered advice for the dejected. Bessie Smith wrote a considerable number of her lyrics which reveal heart-felt identification with the potential Black audience. In this study, nine of her lyrics are divided into two forms, experiential and therapeutic, and analyzed for their persuasive content. Smith, who sang about troubles, and her Black audience, hearing about those troubles transcended by way of a recording, both seemed to experience a "liberating catharsis."

Theoretical principles established by Burke provide a foundation for the analysis of the lyrics which attempt to establish solidarity among the Black race. After analyzing the lyrics individually for operatives, prevalent themes in the selected Smith lyrics are assessed. Summary and conclusions follow in the final chapter. Thus, chapters of the thesis are divided as follows:

Chapter I	<u>Introduction</u>
Chapter II	<u>Blacks and Blues: An Historical and Cultural Account of Blues Music in America through 1930</u>
Chapter III	<u>A Perspective for the Criticism of Blues</u>
Chapter IV	<u>Blues and Bessie</u>
Chapter V	<u>Summary and Conclusions</u>

Previous Research

Most of the previous research on Blues music primarily has been historical accounts depicting the Negro experience in America. However, James Cone's The Spirituals and the Blues: An Interpretation was particularly useful because it provided a broad interpretation of Blues lyrics. Furthermore, Titon's dissertation, "Ethnomusicology of Downhome Blues Phonograph Records 1926-30," as well as his book, Early Downhome Blues: A Musical and Cultural Analysis, offered additional Blues interpretation.

Some articles have appeared in speech journals concerning the relationship between rhetoric and music with a primary focus upon lyrical music as an integral part of social movement persuasion. Works referencing the persuasive impact

of songs and speeches include Kaye's [Kosokoff's] "The Rhetoric of Song: Singing Persuasion in Social-Action Movements"; Carmichael's and Kosokoff's "The Rhetoric of Protest: Song, Speech, and Attitude Change"; and, Carter's "The Industrial Workers of the World and the Rhetoric of Song."

Irvine and Kirkpatrick, in their article "The Musical Form in Rhetorical Exchange: Theoretical Considerations," provide a theoretical approach for the analysis of music and lyrics conjunctively. From the poetic dimension, Fregoe attempts to analyze a compilation of speech journal articles explicating the relationship between rhetoric and poetic. Holden, in The Rhetoric of the Contemporary Lyric, suggests that rhetoric and poetic may be studied conjointly. Others have studied the relationship between rhetoric and poetic from the classical period to the present.

ENDNOTES

¹Thomas J. Cowan, "Giuseppe Verdi's La Battaglia Di Legnano: A Rhetorical Criticism" (M.A. thesis, Colorado State University, 1978), p. 1.

²Richard P. Fulkerson, "The Public Letter as a Rhetorical Form: Structure, Logic, and Style in King's 'Letter from Birmingham Jail,'" Quarterly Journal of Speech 65 (April 1979): 122.

³James R. Irvine and Walter G. Kirkpatrick, "The Musical Form in Rhetorical Exchange: Theoretical Considerations," Quarterly Journal of Speech 58 (October 1972): 272.

⁴Cowan, p. iv.

⁵Carl W. Carmichael and Stephen Kosokoff, "The Rhetoric of Protest: Song, Speech, and Attitude Change," Southern Speech Journal 35 (Summer 1970) as cited in Cowan, p. 1.

⁶David A. Carter, "The Industrial Workers of the World and the Rhetoric of Song," Quarterly Journal of Speech 66 (December 1980): 365.

⁷Carter, p. 365.

⁸Stephen A. Kaye [Kosokoff], "The Rhetoric of Song: Singing Persuasion in Social-Action Movements" (Ph.D. dissertation, University of Oregon, 1966), as cited in Carter, p. 366.

⁹Jonathan Holden, The Rhetoric of the Contemporary Lyric (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1980), p. xii.

¹⁰Holden, pp. xii-xiii.

¹¹Holden, p. xiii.

¹²David Fregoe, "An Analysis of the Contemporary Relationship between Rhetoric and Poetic" (M.A. thesis, Colorado State University, 1980), p. 72.

¹³Thomas Sloan, Richard Gregg, Thomas Nilsen, Irving Rein, Herbert Simons, Herman Stelzner, and Donald Zacharias,

"Report of the Committee on the Advancement and Refinement of Rhetorical Criticism," in The Prospect of Rhetoric (New Jersey: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1971), as cited in Fregoe, p. 72.

¹⁴LeRoi Jones, Blues People (New York: William Morrow and Company, 1963), p. 98. Italics his.

¹⁵James H. Cone, The Spirituals and the Blues: An Interpretation (New York: The Seabury Press, 1972), p. 125.

¹⁶Jones, p. 66.

¹⁷Blues has become a term of widespread use. A "packaged" definition of Blues and its implications is impossible in this study, however, a full explanation of its overall meaning is provided in Chapter II.

¹⁸Jeff Todd Titon, "Ethnomusicology of Downhome Blues Phonograph Records 1926-1930" (Ph.D. dissertation, University of Minnesota, 1971), p. 9.

¹⁹Titon, p. 7.

²⁰Titon, p. 16.

²¹Wayland Parrish, "The Study of Speeches," in American Speeches, eds. Wayland Parrish and Marie Hochmuth (New York: Greenwood Press, 1954), p. 7. Italics his.

²²Jones, p. 66.

CHAPTER II

BLACKS AND BLUES: AN HISTORICAL AND CULTURAL ACCOUNT OF BLUES MUSIC IN AMERICA THROUGH 1930

Black American Music Before 1900

Black music in this country is a counterpart of the Black American experience. Therefore, the significance of classic Blues singers such as Bessie Smith cannot be appreciated fully without an understanding of Black experiences as portrayed through their music prior to the surge of Blues during the twentieth century. Oakley caps this point:

To understand the part played by the blues in American society, we need to consider what psychological impulses the blacks inherited from the days of slavery, and also what cultural and artistic forms existed in those times--the spirituals, the plantation songs, work songs, . . . All these elements were there, and to see how and why the blues emerged at the end of the nineteenth century, we must first look at slavery society.¹

Jones, in Blues People, discusses the relationship between Black music and history.

It seems possible to me that some kind of graph could be set up using samplings of Negro music proper to whatever moment of the Negro's social history was selected, and that in each grouping of songs a certain frequency of reference could pretty well determine his social, economic, and psychological states at that particular period.²

The African heritage of Black Americans is the beginning point for tracing Black music. The African clearly

related music, song, and dance to the experience of everyday life. The music, in other words, was a reflection of the deep religious and social values of an African. Jones says:

It was, and is inconceivable in the African culture to make a separation between music, dancing, song, the artifact, and a man's life or his worship of his gods. Expression issued from life, and was beauty. But in the West, the "triumph of the economic mind over the imaginative," as Brooks Adams said, made possible this dreadful split between life and art.³

Therefore, African music may be considered as functional. This aspect of their music continued to remain foremost in the actions of Black Americans.

Slaves were singing religious songs in America as early as 1688. About this time, Whites began to convert Blacks to Christianity. It was previously held that the African was subhuman and, therefore, incapable of worshipping. Meanwhile, Blacks were playing instruments for special occasions in the colonies. White American holidays, such as New Year's Day, Easter, Thanksgiving, etc., provided the "Negro" with opportunities to play fiddles, drums, trumpets, etc. However, because instruments were used as signals for escape, slave masters often opposed their use on the plantation. Moreover, "coded" songs became informative messages indicating where and when an escape was to take place. Walton cites an example of coded lyrics:

I'll meet you in the morning.
Safe in the promised land;
On the other side of Jordan
I'm bound for the promised land.⁴

Such lyrics assist in understanding the progression of Black music. Blues was integrally related to what has

become a tradition in Black music--"masked" and "unmasked" forms. That is, the artist may employ special words with meaning exclusive to the Black culture. Walton describes dual forms and their significance for Blacks:

This duality of masked and unmasked music is quite significant since it is symptomatic of the origin of the dual facets of Afro-American culture. One facet is concerned with the expression of meanings that are palatable to encounters involving secondary relationships with whites, and another set of meanings is reserved for primary relationships involving other Afro-Americans.⁵

African rituals continued to exist in America and were transformed by the Black American into various types of song and dance circumscribed by the social and psychological experiences being faced. Eileen Southern depicts the African tradition as it existed in the colonies:

Black men in the English Colonies found ways to carry on some of their traditional African practices despite the bonds of slavery. . . . Although the slaves that were brought into the colonies originally came from a wide area of West Africa (and parts of East Africa) and represented many different tribes, they shared enough traditions of music and dancing in common to enable them to participate in collective dances with ease.⁶

As White America discovered these musical talents, Blacks were allowed to refine those talents in college settings. When White students went to college, they took their slaves with them.⁷ Thus, in such an atmosphere, some Blacks became accomplished instrumentalists.

With the advent of the Revolutionary War, army bands employed Blacks for their musical talent. Moreover, the War of 1812 had more sophisticated Black musicians in

all-Black brass bands, which perhaps marked the beginning of the New Orleans brass bands.

As time elapsed, there was a distinct delineation of Black secular and sacred music. In the secular world, minstrelsy, worksongs, field hollers and shouts, and ballads, were attributed to Blacks. As Christianity spread and Blacks began to establish their own churches, sacred music or spirituals rang out in the Black community. Black secular and sacred music were instrumental in shaping the Blues form. Although Blues has been labeled "devil's music," primarily because of the lyrics, the form is similar to the spiritual.

Black Minstrelsy

Southern explains minstrelsy as popular entertainment:

Blackface minstrelsy was a form of theatrical performance that emerged during the 1820s and reached its zenith during the years 1850-70. Essentially it consisted of an exploitation of the slave's style of music and dancing by white men, who blackened their faces with burnt cork and went on the stage to sing "Negro songs" (also called "Ethiopian songs"), to perform dances derived from those of the slaves, and to tell jokes based on slave life.⁸

In an explanation of the caricatures developed in minstrelsy, Southern adds:

Two basic types of slave impersonations were developed: one in caricature of the plantation slave with his ragged clothes and thick dialect; the other portraying the city slave, the dandy dressed in the latest fashion, who boasted of his exploits among the ladies. The former was referred to as Jim Crow and the latter, as Zip Coon.⁹

Minstrels became highly popular and, eventually, the White actors were replaced by Black ones who demonstrated expert skills as singers and dancers which could not be surpassed by their White predecessors. As Southern points out, Blacks also met with international acclaim:

After the war, genuine Negro minstrel companies were organized. To be sure, there had been isolated performances by Negro troupes earlier. . . .

The minstrel show had come to represent America's unique contribution to the entertainment stage, and during the last quarter of the nineteenth century and the first decade of the twentieth, both white and black troupes enjoyed an international vogue.¹⁰

Blackface comedy consisted of songs and dances. Basically, three types of songs were used: ballads, comic songs and specialties.¹¹ Some of the pioneers in the Black minstrel shows later became prime Blues artists during the twentieth century. W.C. Handy was one such pioneer in the minstrel shows. Later, Ma Rainey and her husband "Pa" traveled with minstrel shows.

Worksongs, Field Hollers and Shouts, and Ballads

Another form of secular lyrics developed during slavery included worksongs used during the course of physical activity. Such activities included boat rowing, corn husking, and probably tobacco stripping, common in Virginia territory. Worksongs were means for speeding up activity, thus making the chores less tedious. Moreover, the measure of the song was synchronized with the movement involved.

Yet another type of song or musical outcry was what is known as field hollers and shouts. These were primarily expressions stemming from laborious activity. A shout or holler could be heard for a great distance by passersby, neighbors, etc. Some represented the physical and emotional trauma of enslavement and were a means for allowing slaves to endure the pressures imposed upon them. Others were symbolic of special desires such as help or food.

Black ballads were similar in form to the early English ballads in "chord progression." The lyrics were primarily about heroes who took on the law. Oliver explains the characteristics of the Black ballad:

By the end of the century, a strong ballad tradition had grown with the simple harmonic progression of the British folk ballad and similar form, but approached with an essentially Afro-American quality of singing. To a marked extent this trend in song was paralleled in white folk communities--among cowboys and lumberjacks for instance--where the legends of Sam Bass, Cole Younger or Joe Mica were told in ballad form. . . . For Negroes, his battle against authority and the law officers made him a hero and a ballad was soon composed about him.¹²

Ballads were usually in eight-bar form although the twelve-bar form was also utilized. In the case of the latter, there was an eight-bar verse and a four-bar refrain.¹³

Spirituals

Spirituals are sacred music which developed out of the spread of Christianity among Blacks during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. It was through spirituals that Blacks discovered an outlet for their emotions and were

promised a far better life than that on Earth. The melancholy overtones of spirituals were almost a note of identification with the struggles faced by Jesus Christ and His followers. Moreover, the feeling represented through the lyrics is precipitated by the hypocrisy of slavery. Thus, Blacks accepted Christianity from White society and ultimately recognized the sinful activities of Whites. Cone explains the theological premise for Black deliverance from the institution of slavery:

The DIVINE liberation of the oppressed from slavery is the central theological concept in the black spirituals. . . . They did not believe that God created Africans to be the slaves of Americans. . . . Just as God delivered the children of Israel from Egyptian slavery, drowning Pharaoh and his army in the Red Sea, he will also deliver black people from American slavery.¹⁴

Perhaps Christianity evoked Black awareness of the hypocrisy of slavery according to God's promise. In any event, spirituals brought attention to the inhumaneness of slavery as an institution and, therefore, became a unifying force for Blacks seeking a better life beyond. Perhaps most important, spirituals, as vocal expression for deep religious and, thus, judicious beliefs, provided a direction for the Blues form.

To summarize the impact of slave and other music before 1900 upon Blues, it is clear that the blue feeling was born during slavery. Therefore, this feeling, characterized by despair, existed long before Blues vogue. The expression of that feeling, always prevalent in some form of Black

American song--minstrelsy, worksongs, field hollers and shouts, ballads, and spirituals--may be attributed to the African tradition.

Black Music 1900-1930

Black minstrelsy in the 1900s continued to flourish. However, a new type of syncopated music began to emerge in the Black secular arena. Included within this group were new versions of the "coon" songs. Some of these songs generated negative responses from Black audiences. Ernest Hogan composed one such song, "All Coons Look Alike to Me," which became popular during the late nineteenth century. Coon songs were more syncopated than many other pieces and a large number of them were classified as ragtime songs. To delineate ragtime and piano rag, Southern points out that "[t]he ragtime song, as distinguished from the piano rag, was characterized by a regular, straightforward bass and a lightly syncopated melody."¹⁵

Ragtime was not a totally new form of music, but the result of an evolutionary process. "Syncopated and lyric elements of Ragtime can be found in the Spiritual, Field Holler, minstrel and 'coon' songs--four predominantly vocal forms."¹⁶ This musical synthesis, which resulted in ragtime, is attributed to Scott Joplin, historically considered to be the "originator of ragtime." Both Joplin and W.C. Handy have been labeled as "originators" in the evolution of Black music by Walton who states:

. . . Joplin stands in the same relation to Ragtime as W.C. Handy does to Blues. Both men synthesized elements of music that had been evolving over long periods of time, and which include African transmissions and subsequent transformations undertaken in the new environment of America.¹⁷

Blacks popularized instrumental music and syncopation became a key word in defining its form. Although vocal music continued to exist as a popular art, much of it was combined with instrumental accompaniment which later became popular again under a different name--jazz. Because jazz became the perennial instrumental form, ragtime is sometimes forgotten. However, this creative and innovative form was significant in the development of instrumental Black music. Moreover, the instrumental form, combined with vocal Blues, characterized classic Blues. It was this form that ultimately popularized Blues. However, attention will first be turned to primitive Blues and its origin, then toward defining Blues, the various Blues forms and performers, and lastly, the jazz era and its impact upon classic Blues.

Blues Origins

W.C. Handy, "father of the Blues," first heard what may be classified as Blues in 1903 while waiting for a train in Mississippi. Evidently, a young man played a sad tune while strumming a guitar. Moreover, tradition has it that Ma Rainey, "mother of the Blues," first heard Blues in 1902 while traveling with the Rabbit Foot Minstrels. It seems that a young woman sang about being jilted by her lover. Ma Rainey apparently liked the song and decided to add it to her

repertoire. From that point on, she claimed to have originated the term "Blues" when someone inquired about the type of song she sang.¹⁸ However, those who lived during that time did not attribute Blues to any one person.

Southern quotes Blacks regarding Blues origins:

. . . old-timers who sang and played the blues in tenderloin districts across the country scoffed when asked about the origin of the blues. In New Orleans an old fiddler said, "The blues? Ain't no first blues! The blues always been." Eubie Blake answered, "Blues in Baltimore? Why, Baltimore is the blues!" Bunk Johnson, a pioneer bluesman, told an interviewer, "When I was a kid [i.e. in the 1880s] we used to play nothing but the blues." In New Orleans, even the street vendors used the blues, advertising their wares by playing blues on toy horns bought from Kress's dime stores.¹⁹

Oakley adds:

There was no one person who gave birth to the blues, . . . The blues were emerging all over the Southern States of America simultaneously, in Mississippi, in Alabama, Georgia, Louisiana and in Texas and elsewhere. Hundreds of nameless and forgotten singers and musicians, cotton-pickers, levee camp, saw-mill and turpentine camp workers, roustabouts and farm hands, were singing and playing the blues, alone or in groups, at work or at their ease.²⁰

Finally, Oliver, in The Story of the Blues, says "[f]or the field hands, the one and two-line songs were easily adaptable to hollers--and the blues slipped into being."²¹

The Blues Genre: Toward a Definition of Blues

The term "Blues" is difficult to define because of its widespread use to mean any number of things--from a vocal form to any range of instrumental forms. Thus, an attempt to define the Blues genre in accordance with Blues characteristics would be futile. This study, however, will

operationally define Blues as a form derived from its origins in Black deprivation and degradation. Blacks who continued to be consubstantial with pain and suffering were an integral part of the making of Blues. The Blues, then, will be discussed in reference to the unifying force which brought it into being.

Blues, at an early stage, was primarily a vocal music. And, as Walton explains:

It is a music of this earth and all its paradoxes, where both its joys and pains are synthesized and resolved into an emotional-spiritual unity that helps make possible life's continuance.²²

Cone states:

They are not propositional truths about the black experience. Rather they are the essential ingredients that define the essence of the black experience. And to understand them, it is necessary to view the blues as a state of mind in relation to the Truth of the black experience.²³

Blues centers around despair. In that sense, it is a translation of emotion into the medium of song. The channeling of emotion into a poetic communicative form results. Thus, by making the internal force external, the pain is possibly purged for the performer. By reversing this perspective, it is possible for the external form to be created by the performer to make the listener aware of internalized emotions which then allows the listener to externalize such emotions. In either case, relief may be obtained.

Blues themes include "love," "sex," "tragedy," "escape," "advice for the dejected," and may have a note of humor as in these lyrics concerning separation:

Good lookin' woman make a bull dog break his chain,
 Good lookin' woman make a bull dog break his chain,
 Good lookin' woman make a snail catch a passenger train.

Yaller gal make a preacher lay his Bible down,
 Yaller gal make a preacher lay his Bible down,
 Good lookin' high brown make him run from town to town.

Good lookin' woman make a mule kick his stable down,
 Good lookin' woman make a mule kick his stable down,
 Good lookin' woman make a rabbit move his family to
 town.²⁴

.

Blues, then, developed as a result of the Black experience with the lyrics and form unique to the Black way of life.

Typically, the structure of Blues consists of three-line stanzas. The second line usually restates the first. Thus, the arrangement is twelve bar A-A-B.

Yet another characteristic of Blues is double entendre or coded meaning. This allowed the performer to address a specific audience secretly.

Blues have been categorized, by scholars, into three basic forms: country, classic, and urban. Country or rural Blues was the earliest form which existed.

Country Blues

The early Blues resembled the ballad. W.C. Handy, for instance, wrote a Blues "based on a ballad about the Governor of Tennessee's brother."²⁵ Some Blues were created from actual "worksong ballads" from the nineteenth century. However, there are subcategories that appear in country Blues from which the earlier Blues are a part, such as the Delta and Mississippi Blues, "Memphis Blues" composed by W.C. Handy, "Georgia" Blues, "Alabama" Blues, etc.

Country Blues was characteristically an "individual's sad song." As Jones points out, "[p]rimitive blues [mainly country and rural Blues] had been almost a conscious expression of the Negro's individuality and equally important, his separateness."²⁶ Oliver, in a retrospective view of the "primitive" Blues, states that "one of the characteristics of the blues is that it is highly personalised--blues singers nearly always sing about themselves. . . ."²⁷ This is a more adequate description of country Blues. He goes on to say:

For the truly inventive singer, the new blues offered him a means of self-expression. Most of the ballads and folk-songs had been about other people, or heroes, or exterior events: a disaster like the sinking of the Titanic or the coming of the boll weevil. But through the blues a man could sing about himself as he did in the fields; he could be his own hero.²⁸

Classic Blues

The second Blues category is what is known as "classic." Classic and primitive Blues have two different styles. Jones describes classic Blues as the balanced version:

Classic blues is called "classic" because it was the music that seemed to contain all the diverse and conflicting elements of Negro music, plus the smoother emotional appeal of the "performance." It was the first Negro music that appeared in a formal context as entertainment, though it still contained the harsh, uncompromising reality of the earlier blues forms. It was, in effect, the perfect balance between the two worlds, and as such, it represented a clearly definable step by the Negro back into the mainstream of American society.²⁹

As Jones observes, the Black experience may be charted as a graph depicting the historical period and the Black psychological as well as sociological state. Classic Blues,

indeed, reflects a changed "Negro." Blacks were, at this point, in the mainstream of society more than ever. And, as Jones again points out:

Perhaps what is so apparent in classic blues is the sense for the first time that the Negro felt he was a part of that superstructure at all. The lyrics of classic blues become concerned with situations and ideas that are recognizable as having issued from one area of a much larger human concern. . . . Classic blues attempts a universality that earlier blues could not even envision.³⁰

Therefore, classic Blues became the formal, polished version of Blues. It was a style that differed greatly from the primitive form, as Jones explains:

Classic blues differs a great deal from older blues forms in the content of its lyrics, its musical accompaniment, and in the fact that it was a music that moved into its most beautiful form as a public entertainment, but it is still a form of blues, and it is still a music that relates directly to the Negro experience.³¹

It was assumed that anyone could sing the "older Blues form" and that Blues drew directly from life's experiences and was not learned. Thus, Blues was, in that sense, an "individual's sad song." Jones, however, notes that classic Blues demonstrated professionalism.

But classic blues took on a certain degree of professionalism. It was no longer strictly the group singing to ease their labors or the casual expression of personal deliberations on the world.³²

Urban Blues

The third category, urban Blues, will be examined briefly since it was a development of the 1930s. The more popular jazz became during the 1920s, the further Blues

drifted from its vocal form. Country Blues had been the starting point and, as time progressed, it became popularized by classic performers such as Bessie Smith and Ma Rainey. Classic performers began to have larger accompaniments and, following the Depression, Blues took on a new form in the larger cities and the urban sound developed.

Keil states:

In the bands that played the clubs and casinos of the city, jazz and blues styles became so tightly fused that the musicians themselves usually made no distinctions between the two fields.³³

Classic Performers and Composers

Blues was first recorded in 1920 by Mamie Smith. Her "Crazy Blues" marked the first recording by a Black artist, and she was a classic Blues singer. Hence, classic Blues popularized Blues as an entertainment medium and could be heard over and over on the phonograph. Mamie Smith's "Crazy Blues" was composed by Perry Bradford who was responsible for getting her recorded. He was able to persuade Okeh records to take the initial chance, and "[t]he record was a major breakthrough, a turning point in blues history."³⁴

Mamie Smith opened the door for many other Black classic performers at a time when most of the classic Blues singers were women. Oakley explains the significance of Black women in Blues history:

The importance of the women singers in blues history can hardly be overstated. It was the women who were the first big stars, and the names of singers like Ma Rainey and Bessie Smith have become symbols both of black pride and of America's contribution to popular culture as artists in their own right.³⁵

Rainey toured with minstrel and vaudeville shows and incorporated Blues in her shows. Jones describes Rainey's influential style:

Singers like Gertrude "Ma" Rainey were responsible for creating the classic blues style. She was one of the most imitated and influential classic blues singers, and perhaps the one who can be called the link between the earlier, less polished blues styles and the smoother theatrical style of most of the later urban blues singers. Ma Rainey's singing can be placed squarely between the harsher, more spontaneous country styles and the somewhat calculated emotionalism of the performers.³⁶

Yet another renowned classic Blues performer, known as "the empress of the Blues," was Bessie Smith, perhaps the most famous of the classic Blues singers. Smith had one of the most successful sounds of the day. Bessie Smith and Ma Rainey, as well as performers such as "Clara Smith, Trixie Smith, Ida Cox, Sarah Martin, Chippie Hill, Sippie Wallace, [Victoria Spivey,] brought a professionalism and theatrical polish to blues that it had never had before."³⁷

Black Music and Culture: 1920-1930

1920 marked not only the first recording of Blues by a Black artist, but also what is known as the "Harlem" or "Black" Renaissance. Following World War I, Blacks and Whites developed an interest in Black culture. Whites attempted to understand Blacks on a social level and Blacks seemed to experience an identity crisis. Rioting began in urban areas and national organizations coalesced. Before 1919, the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) had formed as well as the National

Urban League, the National Race Congress, and the National Baptist Convention.³⁸ There was a growth of Black militance initiated by Marcus Garvey. In his "Back to Africa" movement, he "succeeded in gaining the support of hundreds of thousands of disenchanted Negroes from all over the country. . . ."³⁹ Moreover, as Southern has pointed out, "[a] general feeling of unrest, defiance, impatience, and even bitterness swept over black communities, and few Negroes were unaffected."⁴⁰

During the twentieth century, there was an even greater awareness that something could be done about the problem and protest began. According to Southern, Blacks began to "rally their forces":

In New York, the nation's business, cultural and intellectual center--and particularly in Harlem, the undeclared capital of Negro intellectual life--black artists began to rally their forces. Writers, poets, painters, and musicians joined together to protest in their own way against the quality of life for black folk in the United States. Out of this grew a movement that has been called "The Harlem Renaissance" or "The Black Renaissance" or "The New Negro Movement." It was primarily a literary movement.⁴¹

Writers such as Langston Hughes, Claude McKay, Jean Toomer, James Weldon Johnson, Countee Cullen and W.E.B. DuBois were publishing poems, prose, and novels. Furthermore, Black musicians once again explored music linked with their early roots, specifically, folklore. At the time that Bessie Smith and Ma Rainey arrived at the recording scene during the early nineteen twenties, Blacks were ready for a catharsis of some form. There was still an enormous percentage of Blacks outside the urban area, in southern and rural areas,

who had not been touched by the activist approach. And, although Garvey attempted to do something about the oppression that Black Americans faced in this country, he did not advocate equality. Instead, he attempted to separate the oppressed by promoting a return to Africa. It is safe to say that, even in 1920, Blacks did not demand equality from America as Martin Luther King, Jr., later did.

The period of the Harlem Renaissance provided a Black opportunity to begin an establishment of Black identity through poetry, prose and novels which served as mirrors of Black society. This, however, was beneficial only for "literate" Black America. Music served as a persuasive device which could reach the illiterate as well as the literate. Oliver, in Aspects of the Blues Tradition, reports the impact of various communication mediums:

Newspapers could only reach the literate, radio stations beamed locally only; records had a greater potential as a communication medium. Their direct impact on the senses made a positive impression and they could be played again and again repeating their message in every playing.⁴²

Following the release of "Crazy Blues" by Mamie Smith in 1920, "Race records" began to develop within the recording industry. "The sales excitement it generated proved the existence of a large and unexploited market, and the production and sales of blues records started to accelerate rapidly."⁴³ Recording artists, such as Ma Rainey, Bessie Smith, Mamie Smith, Clara Smith, Ida Cox, and Lucille Hegamin, were recorded under the Race record label by major companies such as Columbia, Paramount, and Okeh. More

importantly, Race records was one of the highest record selling labels during this era.

The Jazz Era

Instrumental music in the Black arena took a change of course when jazz began to develop during the 1920s. It must be noted that jazz did not reach its peak until the 1930s. The 1920s was the era for the peak of classic Blues.

"The fusion of blues and ragtime with brass-band and syncopated dance music resulted in the music called jazz, a music that developed its own characteristics."⁴⁴ Southern presents one explanation of the origin of the term "jazz":

There are numerous theories about the origin of the word "jazz." One to which several authorities subscribe is that the word is somehow related to an itinerant black musician named Jazbo Brown, who was well known in the Mississippi River Valley country. It was said that when Brown played in the honky-tonk cafés, the patrons would shout, "More, Jazbo! More, Jaz, more!"⁴⁵

Southern indicates that jazz is closely related to Blues in that jazz became instrumental expression whereas Blues is vocal expression:

The most salient features of jazz derive directly from the blues. Jazz is a vocally oriented music; its players replace the voice with their instruments, but try to recreate its singing style and blue notes by using scooping, sliding, whining, growling, and falsetto effects. Like the blues, jazz emphasizes individualism.⁴⁶

By the early twenties, there were several jazz greats who also sang Blues. Among them were Louis "Satchmo" Armstrong and Jelly Roll Morton. Morton "is regarded as the first true jazz composer; he was the first to write down his

jazz arrangements in musical notation; . . ."⁴⁷ Armstrong, already an "accomplished trumpeter," made his debut with King Oliver's Creole Jazz Band as a second cornet player and began a career which spanned over several decades.

Many of the classic Blues performers had jazz accompaniment. Armstrong and many others, such as Fletcher Henderson, Joe Smith and the pianist James P. Johnson,⁴⁸ accompanied Bessie Smith on some of her more famous pieces. Another name in jazz is Thomas Dorsey who frequently accompanied Ma Rainey and later became a gospel composer. Thus, jazz and Blues merged when classic performers were at their prime in entertainment. The two cannot be separated when discerning the classic Blues style.

Conclusion

This overview of the music which Africans brought to America is a brief summary of the Black music and music makers who made some impact upon the Blues genre. It is most important to realize that Black music is an oral history of suffering which stemmed from slavery and proved Black talent as an artistic form. Black artistry brought to Black America a means for survival and, to White America, a new way of making music.

Bessie Smith has been a great influence upon modern music. The evolution of the Black plight in America is marked not only by historical accounts of the events that took place, but also through the music made by Blacks. According to Jones, Black history and music convey the Black

experience and their social, economic and psychological status at the time. The original blackface minstrelsy caricatured the Black way of life during a period when Black protest was minimal. However, by the turn of the twentieth century, Black entertainment was popular not just in minstrelsy, but in all arenas. Blacks moved from early work-songs, field hollers and shouts, to ragtime and, finally, to Blues and jazz. Each evolutionary point was a direct statement of Black social, economic and psychological conditions. For this reason, Bessie Smith appears to be representative of her era. Examining her lyrics in order to mine rhetorical elements may perhaps mirror the times. That is, Bessie operates through the Black social realm, appeals to all economic classes, and, through Kenneth Burke's "identification" principle, the psychological status of the Black American may be more vividly painted.

ENDNOTES

¹Giles Oakley, The Devil's Music: A History of the Blues (New York: Taplinger Publishing Company, Inc., 1977), p. 7.

²LeRoi Jones, Blues People (New York: William Morrow and Company, 1963), p. 65.

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⁵Ortiz Walton, Music: Black, White and Blue (New York: William Morrow and Company, Inc., 1972), pp. 27-8.

⁶Eileen Southern, The Music of Black Americans: A History (New York: William Morrow and Company, Inc., 1972), p. 49.

⁷Southern, p. 63.

⁸Southern, p. 100.

⁹Southern, p. 100.

¹⁰Southern, p. 259.

¹¹Southern, p. 263.

¹²Paul Oliver, The Story of the Blues (New York: Chilton Book Company, 1969), pp. 23-4.

¹³Oliver, p. 24.

¹⁴James H. Cone, The Spirituals and the Blues: An Interpretation (New York: Seabury Press, 1972), p. 34. Italics his.

¹⁵Southern, p. 316.

¹⁶Walton, p. 38.

- ¹⁷Walton, p. 38.
- ¹⁸Southern, p. 332.
- ¹⁹Southern, pp. 332-33.
- ²⁰Oakley, p. 6.
- ²¹Oliver, p. 29.
- ²²Walton, p. 29.
- ²³Cone, p. 114. Italics his.
- ²⁴Cone, p. 130.
- ²⁵Oliver, p. 29.
- ²⁶Jones, p. 86. Italics his.
- ²⁷Oliver, p. 30.
- ²⁸Oliver, p. 29.
- ²⁹Jones, p. 86.
- ³⁰Jones, p. 87. Italics his.
- ³¹Jones, p. 94. Italics his.
- ³²Jones, p. 82.
- ³³Charles Keil, Urban Blues (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1966), pp. 61-2.
- ³⁴Oakley, p. 93.
- ³⁵Oakley, p. 114.
- ³⁶Jones, p. 89. Italics his.
- ³⁷Jones, p. 89.
- ³⁸Southern, p. 412.
- ³⁹Southern, p. 412.
- ⁴⁰Southern, p. 413.
- ⁴¹Southern, p. 413.
- ⁴²Paul Oliver, Aspects of the Blues Tradition, 2nd ed. (New York: Oak Publications, Inc., 1970), p. 3.

⁴³Oakley, p. 93.

⁴⁴Southern, p. 374.

⁴⁵Southern, p. 374.

⁴⁶Southern, p. 376.

⁴⁷Southern, p. 380.

⁴⁸Southern, p. 399.

CHAPTER III

A PERSPECTIVE FOR THE CRITICISM OF BLUES

Any critical approach to Black secular lyrics should be based on Black American history as well as the emotional and psychological impact of historical events upon the minds of an oppressed people. An historical analysis of Black communication, in any of its forms, is incomplete without a corresponding analysis of those who are involved. From the outset, the lyrics of Black music told of Black rejection and suffering since the days of bondage in America. Blues evolved from this manifestation of pain, as Cone aptly explains:

The blues tell us about black people's attempt to carve out a significant existence in a very trying situation. The purpose of the blues is to give structure to black existence in a context where color means rejection and humiliation.

Suffering and its relation to blackness is inseparable from the meaning of the blues. Without pain and suffering, and what that meant for black people in Mississippi, Tennessee, and Arkansas, there would have been no blues. The blue mood means sorrow, frustration, despair, and black people's attempt to take these existential realities upon themselves and not lose their sanity. The blues are not art for art's sake, music for music's sake. They are a way of life, a life-style of the black community; and they came into being to give expression to black identity and the will for survival.¹

By the time Bessie Smith became popular as a classic Blues performer, Black America had pivoted from the

acceptance of a subordinate position to the realization that Blacks had rights. Some sixty years after emancipation, Blacks relayed a different experience through discourse. African traces in Black Americans were not as evident. The eradication of African traces resulted in the emergence of the "new Negro." Thus, the previous Blues forms were more reflective of Black worksongs and other types of songs associated with slavery. Jones explains differences between primitive Blues and Bessie's style:

Classic blues differs a great deal from older blues forms in the content of its lyrics, its musical accompaniment, and in the fact that it was a music that moved into its most beautiful form as a public entertainment, but it is still a form of blues, and it is still a music that relates directly to the Negro experience. Bessie Smith was not an American, though the experience she relates could hardly have existed outside America; she was a Negro. Her music still remained outside the mainstream of American thought, but it was much closer than any Negro music before it.²

Although Jones indicates that Bessie Smith's music is "outside the mainstream of American thought," it is, nevertheless, in the "stream" of American conscience. That is to say, both Blacks and Whites are aware of the "Negro existence," and Blues serves as a reminder of the nature of that existence. Bessie Smith represents the merging of two cultures--Black and White. Jones labels this mode of cultural blending "meta-society." Thus, there exists among Blacks traces of their culture, yet, through the course of time, Blacks began to emulate White society. Blues becomes a rhetorical response which possibly brings the two cultures, Black and White, together. The aim is for "contact where

there has been separation, understanding where there has been ignorance."

With this view in mind, the basis for the analysis of selected Blues lyrics by Bessie Smith will be an adaptation of philosophical premises established by rhetorical theorists. The theoretical foundation for analyzing each set of lyrics by Smith will be "identification" as Kenneth Burke explains it. In addition, Burke's explanation of redemption, an adapted Weaverian perspective on ultimate terms, and the traditional concepts of ethos and pathos will be utilized to illuminate the rhetorical aspects of Blues. This chapter will serve to explicate each of these areas. Therefore, Blues and identification, Blues and redemption, ultimate terms in Blues, and selected rhetorical appeals as addressed in Blues--ethos and pathos--will be discussed.

Blues and Identification

Although the term "identification" is amorphous, as is "Blues," it will operate as the "core" for the analysis of specified Blues lyrics inasmuch as there are distinct channels for understanding identification in relation to rhetoric. Kenneth Burke confines the meaning of identification to a precise area which allows for illumination of this internal form as it becomes external. Rhetoric may then be the result of identification.

An important aspect of lyrical development, as in Bessie Smith's Blues, may be the rhetorical motive which underlies persuasion. Kenneth Burke thus provides the

rhetorical critic with tools for discovering persuasive elements in rhetoric stemming from motives. In Burke's Rhetoric of Motives, the "range of rhetoric" includes the affirmation of self through "identification." Watson explains two meanings of the term "identification" not specifically distinguished by Burke. However, such a distinction is pertinent to this study.

Identification may be understood as 1) the process which allows men to overcome division, and as 2) the "end state" or condition of one man being identified-with-another.

As a condition, identification refers to the convergence of one man's identity (or identities) with the identity (or identities) of another man. This simply means that the signs of substantiality by which one man defines his place in society are the same as the signs of substantiality by which another man defines his place in society. Burke's term for this condition is consubstantiality.³

Focusing upon the "end state" or "condition" to which Watson refers, it is probable that compassionate individuals attempt to converge with others' identities. Perhaps by defining one's place in society, one moves closer to understanding the purpose in life, a step toward obtaining truth. Holland explains the attempt to become consubstantial:

It is characteristically the role of the critic (speaker or writer) to persuade men to act together and achieve identification. To do this he must persuade men to act as he wants them to act, or to adopt the attitudes (incipient acts) he wants them to adopt. Thus, he must identify himself with them (show that he and they share the same oneness or unity). He must persuade them that he and they are "consubstantial." He does this by persuading men through his speeches or literary documents that his attitudes (which he wants them to accept) and their attitudes are "substantially" the same, because he and they have the same essence or substance.⁴

The pathway to the achievement of identification (the condition) is blocked by division. Burke discusses the link between identification and division:

Identification is affirmed with earnestness precisely because there is division. Identification is compensatory to division. If men were not apart from one another, there would be no need for the rhetorician to proclaim unity. If men were wholly and truly of one substance, absolute communication would be of man's very essence. . . . But put identification and division ambiguously together, so that you cannot know for certain just where one ends and the other begins, and you have the characteristic invitation to rhetoric.⁵

It is essential to recognize that division is a characteristic of every individual and, therefore, every social system.

Watson explicates Burke on human division:

The transcendence of division must always be partial, and never complete, because biological separation cannot be overcome. Moreover, the transcendence of hierarchical division is forever threatened with dissolution by the conflicting demands of a complex social order and complex social relations. Nevertheless identification as condition refers to the temporary and partial transcendence of division among men.⁶

The identification crisis, an inevitable part of every individual's life, is compounded when one is Black. Any human, regardless of ethnicity, may be torn by class systems or by the desire to achieve perfection. For Blacks, however, there is double division. Watson goes on to delineate identification of and identification with according to Burkeian principles.

Before men can identify with one another, they must complete the identification of one another. The process entails perception of the symbols in terms of which another establishes his identity, understanding the meaning and value of the symbols, and indication to one's self that his own identity can or cannot be expressed in such terms. The crucial matter is not the similarity of the symbols, but the similarity of the meaning and value attached to the

symbols. . . . Thus, it becomes vital to understand identification of as a process which may or may not lead to the condition of identification which reflects the transcendence of division.⁷

"Identification of" is the process which perhaps leads to the "condition" of identification. In either case, symbolic activity is an important part of the process. In order to complete the process of identification, there must be some uniting factor other than a psychological understanding of individuals and their needs. Symbols become means for mutual expression and the understanding of other individuals. Burke explains the relationship between rhetoric and identification.

. . . we are clearly in the region of rhetoric when considering the identification whereby a specialized activity makes one a participant in some social or economic₈ class. "Belonging" in this sense is rhetorical.

Within this specialized context enters the participant who acts in behalf of the social class, e.g., writers, performers, orators, etc., representing a group. That person thus becomes the symbol maker in this "specialized activity" and, ultimately, the rhetorical source. Holland elaborates on the symbol maker and identification:

You cannot know what a man is and how he feels and thinks about a thing unless you can first comprehend the concept meant by the name he gives to a thing, and second interpret how he relates himself or identifies himself with this name. . . . When they [individuals] participate in common sensations and interests, they become unified; no longer do they feel their generic divisiveness. Linguistically, or dialectically speaking, they are of the same substance, or are consubstantial with one₉ another, for they have achieved identification.

Burke aptly justifies the identification principle, which has psychological overtones, by relating it to the more traditional principle established by Aristotle in his definition of rhetoric.

As for the relation between "identification" and "persuasion"; we might well keep it in mind that a speaker persuades an audience by the use of stylistic identifications; his act of persuasion may be for the purpose of causing the audience to identify itself with the speaker's interests; and the speaker draws on identification of interests to establish rapport between himself and his audience. So, there is no chance of our keeping apart the meanings of persuasion, identification ("consubstantiality") and communication (the nature of rhetoric as "addressed").¹⁰

The identification principle, as Burke explains it, supplies a theory for interpreting rhetoric in relation to human behavior. From this perspective, motives of the Blues artist may possibly be assessed. The Blues artist's identification of and with the audience may provide symbols for fruitful rhetorical criticism. Burke's "identification," then, is one means for analyzing symbols produced by the Blues artist. Watson adds:

Through symbolism men announce their identities. And through identities expressed in social terms men are able to overcome their biological and hierarchical divisions.¹¹

The Blues artist, through song, acts as the persuasive force for the audience in order to reduce division. Substantially, the lyrics reflect similar attitudes of the two--artist and audience.

The analysis of Bessie Smith's lyrics will be based upon the identification principle--both the process and the condition. Because of a need for Black America to maintain

unity through a period of oppression, identification is necessary as an underpinning perspective in exploring the available means of persuasion. There are Blues songs which relay a sense of the artist's heart-felt identification with the audience. As Oakley states, "Bessie identified with the poor and dispossessed."¹² The need to identify with the troubles of the typical Black American indicates a rhetorical motive of Bessie Smith when she performed "Back Water Blues" and other Blues songs.

Blues and Redemption

Redemption is a necessary element in the understanding of Blues and identification. There are two types of redemption which will be described. One is related to Burke's explanation of redemption in society. The second type is that which occurs within a given culture.

Redemption in society derives in part from the notion of Jesus Christ who acts as the Christian redeemer. Society, in general, may make a minority group the object of resentment or the "redeemer" of the guilt of sin. On the other hand, what Edgar Allan Poe describes as the "imp of the perverse" may come into being. That is, those who attempt to accept people or groups as redeemers of their sins may recognize that this is also wrong.

The second type of redemption may occur within an ethnic culture in society. In this case, the ethnic group is redeemed from pain inflicted upon it by other groups. Therefore, redemption does not eventuate from ethnic members'

own guilt, but from guilt inflicted upon those members by others. In some cultures, such as the Black American culture, inferiority has been forced upon the group. Guilt is then associated with that inferiority.

Ultimate Terms in Blues

No matter what the context of the lyrics, the Blues artist employs what Weaver classifies as ultimate terms, specifically, "god" and "devil" terms.

By "god term" we mean that expression about which all other expressions are ranked as subordinate and serving dominations and powers. Its force imparts to the others their lesser degree of force, and fixes the scale by which degrees of comparison are understood. . . .

Now let us turn to the terms of repulsion. Some terms of repulsion are also ultimate in the sense of standing at the end of the series, and no survey of the vocabulary can ignore these prime repellants. The counterpart of the "god term" is the "devil term," and it has already been suggested that with us "un-American" comes nearest to filling that role.¹³

The language used in Bessie Smith's lyrics can be analyzed for the use of ultimate terms through an adapted Weavarian universe of discourse. That is, Weaver's philosophies concerning ultimate terms--god, devil and charismatic, are presented from a social viewpoint. Terms such as "American" and "progress" are, according to him, god terms; "prejudice" and "un-American," devil terms; and, "freedom" and "democracy," charismatic terms. Such symbols provided by Weaver as examples of ultimate terms are purely social and representative of western civilization. However, they are not necessarily time-bound. If Weaver's ideas are

considered from a broader focus, ultimate terms may be discovered within specific cultures in American society. Considering language within the Black culture, there are those expressions "about which all other expressions are ranked as subordinate and serving dominations and powers."¹⁴ Moreover, there are "terms of repulsion," perhaps exclusive to Black culture. Those terms, then, stem from the Black experience. Weaver explains society's role in shaping such a cultural experience.

There seems indeed to be some obscure psychic law which compels every nation to have in its national imagination an enemy. Perhaps this is but a version of the tribal need for a scapegoat, or for something which will personify "the adversary." If a nation did not have any enemy, an enemy would have to be invented to take care of those expressions of scorn and hatred to which peoples must give vent. When another political state is not available to receive the discharge of such emotions, then a class will be chosen, or a race, or a type, or a political faction, and this will be held up to a practically standardized form of repudiation.¹⁵

As objects of resentment, Blacks take on ultimate terms which are social for their purposes, yet cultural within the context of society as a whole. As cultures, such as the Black culture, progress within a superstructure, ultimate terms may shift. Thus cultural terms are not time-bound. This must be considered in historical analysis of any language.

There are ultimate terms, for society in general, irrespective of cultural experiences. Because the rules which constitute the American way of life are formed by the majority, certain terms derived from those rules become

ultimate for all. These would include "American," "progress," "freedom," and "democracy." However, until the 1960s, being a Black born in America did not make that person American from a societal perspective. Yet the struggle for Blacks to become "American" makes that term ultimate according to Weaver's explanation of "ultimate terms."

By employing an adapted Weavarian perspective for assessing motives in Bessie Smith's lyrics, "god" and "devil" terms may provide means for establishing identification and reducing division. These positive and negative associations ultimately induce persuasion to some degree. Language use is a key factor in the assessment of motives which induce persuasion.

Rhetoric as Addressed in Blues

In ascertaining the relationship between the speaker and the audience in oratory, the ethos of the speaker must be considered. The same concern touches the analysis of music. Irvine and Kirkpatrick discuss artistic credibility.

Finally, as is the case with the speaker as persuader, the credibility (ethical position) of the musical artist influences the level of interaction between the audience and the message.¹⁶

Ethos, applied to lyrical analysis, is not entirely circumscribed by the performer's "good will," "good sense" and "good moral character." As Irvine and Kirkpatrick further explain:

In addition to whatever impact character, intelligence, and good will may have upon an audience, the ethos [sic] of an artist will also rest on his reputation as a performer or composer. The ethical

reputation of the artist which allows him to treat the specific problems of the world is generated by the audience-held association between his previous reputation as a performer and the congruity of his rhetorically oriented message with the value structure of the audience.¹⁷

By identifying with the Blues audience, the performer's rhetorical message is integrally woven into the values of the audience, and the appeal made by the artist inadvertently affects the artist's ethical reputation. Identification aids in the establishment of congruence of the message with values. Irvine and Kirkpatrick state:

Thus, the ethical reputation of the source must include an analysis of his knowledge of contemporary issues, an understanding of the audience-held association between the artist's previous reputation and the congruity of his message with the values of the audience, and a judgment of the spirit of the times which produced both the rhetorical message and the values of the audience.¹⁸

Through ethical and pathetic appeals, the Blues artist is able to arouse the emotions of the audience and continues to do so while remaining a reputable performer. Adapting Aristotle's analysis of "emotions," the goal of the Blues artist is ultimately to stimulate such feelings within the audience in order to remain "popular."

The emotions are all those affections which cause men to change their opinion in regard to their judgments, and are accompanied by pleasure and pain; such are anger, pity, fear, and all similar emotions and their contraries.¹⁹

Emotional appeal may help to provide a catharsis and is possibly an integral part of the Blues artist's motive in the creation of Blues.

Next, attention may be turned to the nature of rhetoric "as addressed, since persuasion implies an audience."²⁰

Specifically, the audience must be accounted for as those to whom the rhetorical motive is aimed. One approach which may be employed is a traditional one--analysis of an external audience. Burke notes:

Aristotle's Art of Rhetoric, for instance, deals with the appeal to audiences in this primary sense: it lists typical beliefs, so that the speaker may choose among them the ones which he would favorably identify his cause or unfavorably identify the cause of an opponent; and it lists the traits of character with which the speaker should seek to identify himself, as a way of disposing an audience favorably towards him.²¹

Thus, the speaker addresses a group favorable to the cause he advocates. The speaker must then establish and maintain ethos, specifically a good reputation as an entertainer, with that group.

The Analytical Approach to Blues

The selected Blues lyrics by Bessie Smith may be analyzed on the basis of an adapted Burkeian philosophical premise that there is a desire by the Blues artist ultimately to reach the condition of identification. The underlying motive is sympathetic awareness of existing trouble. Yet, on the border of the condition of identification, there is division. This may perhaps spawn the rhetoric of the artist who acts in behalf of the culture. Redemption may then occur for both the artist and the audience.

Through the identification principle, the Blues artist is able to provide redemption--a liberating catharsis for

the intended audience--or perhaps to provoke a sympathetic response from either a Black or White audience. Oliver states:

. . . recording is a fact of blues history and its influence has been immense. Through the blues record the lower-class Negro was able to hear the voice of his counterpart from a thousand miles away; hear him and feel a bond of sympathy which no other medium could impart at such a personal level. Few radio stations were beaming with Negro audiences in mind when the blues first appeared on record and those that did had small catchment areas.²²

Through the electronic medium, Blues reached millions and redemption could be achieved as the lyrics were repetitively played. Oliver adds:

Newspapers could only reach the literate, radio stations beamed locally only; records had a greater potential as a communication medium. Their direct impact on the senses made a positive impression and they could be played again and again, repeating their message in every playing.²³

Blues employ terms which are, in many ways, indicative of sacrifice by Blacks in the name of justice and freedom. There are also specific terms in Blues exclusive to Blacks which are symbolic of new found freedom. These terms, in many cases, qualify as being ultimate. Oliver, in Aspects of the Blues Tradition, contends that terms, full verses, and "whole blues" have "code implications" intended solely for the Black audience.

For it seems that certain words, verses, even whole blues, may have code implications which can be interpreted by the blues audience in safety. Through them, taboo themes may find expression, whether sexual, racial or related to illicit behaviour. In the chapter "Policy Blues" the deliberate use of code references is examined to show how traditional terms--in this case, number combinations--can act in a closed

society where their meaning can be understood by those within the group while remaining confusingly obscure to those outside it. In a period of tension and in conditions of some oppression, such devices strengthen the group and the individual's sense of identity within it. In this way the blues has become an important medium which has the potential to shape opinion, colour ideas and mould attitudes within the Negro community. And through the coded forms of blues verses it may give expression to those attitudes.²⁴

Ultimate terms, then, become symbolic for the Black audience enduring these hardships. They carry meaning for those who are cognizant of coded implications in lyrics. Underlying these hardships is cultural division.

Finally, the artist's use of ethos and pathos must be considered. It is important to understand those factors which directly affect the audience such as the ethical and pathetic appeal of the performer. Through the process of identification, the Blues singer establishes a sound reputation and a solid rapport with the audience. Pathetic appeal may then become a means for temporarily purging the audience of pain and guilt associated with Blackness within American society.

A Perspective for the Criticism of Blues:

A Summary

The Blues lyrics by Smith will be analyzed as sets of rhetorical statements addressed to a unique community. This awareness is specifically behind the rationale for adapting western civilization philosophies, which have individualistic overtones, to a peculiar people in a unique station in America. As Jones pointed out, Bessie Smith was

not an American, but a Negro who identified with the struggles of the Black community. Cone caps this point.

It is impossible to sing the blues or listen to their authentic presentation without recognizing that they belong to a particular community. They were created in the midst of the black struggle for being. And because the blues are an expression of that struggle, they are inseparable from blackness and trouble.²⁵

Each set of assumptions--redemption, ultimate terms, audience, ethos and pathos--is a means for describing identification as it manifests itself rhetorically in Blues. It is not the purpose of this thesis to generalize about all Blues forms as they existed during the early twentieth century, nor is it intended to postulate that all Blues were rhetorical. Smith's lyrics will be individually analyzed in relation to her consubstantiality. Other areas to be discussed are redemption, ultimate terms, audience, ethos and pathos and how they serve as means for making dimensions of identification external, and, ultimately, rhetorical.

ENDNOTES

¹James H. Cone, The Spirituals and the Blues: An Interpretation (New York: Seabury Press, 1972), pp. 123-4.

²LeRoi Jones, Blues People (New York: William Morrow and Company, 1963), p. 94. Italics his.

³Robert B. Watson, "Toward a Burkeian Framework for Rhetorical Criticism" (Ph.D. dissertation, University of Minnesota, 1970), p. 29, citing Kenneth Burke, A Rhetoric of Motives (New York: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1950), p. 20. Italics Watson's.

⁴L. Virginia Holland, Counterpoint: Kenneth Burke and Aristotle's Theories of Rhetoric (New York: Philosophical Library, 1959), pp. 34-5.

⁵Burke, pp. 22, 25.

⁶Watson, pp. 29-30.

⁷Watson, p. 30. Italics his.

⁸Burke, pp. 27-8.

⁹Holland, p. 34.

¹⁰Burke, p. 46.

¹¹Watson, pp. 28-9.

¹²Giles Oakley, The Devil's Music: A History of the Blues (New York: Taplinger Publishing Company Inc., 1977), p. 108.

¹³Richard M. Weaver, Language is Sermonic (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1970), pp. 88, 99-100.

¹⁴Weaver, p. 88.

¹⁵Weaver, p. 100.

¹⁶James R. Irvine and Walter G. Kirkpatrick, "The Musical Form in Rhetorical Exchange: Theoretical Considerations," Quarterly Journal of Speech 58 (October 1972): 273.

¹⁷Irvine and Kirkpatrick, p. 274.

¹⁸Irvine and Kirkpatrick, p. 274.

¹⁹Aristotle, The "Art" of Rhetoric, trans. John Henry Freese (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1975), p. 173.

²⁰Burke, p. 38.

²¹Burke, p. 38.

²²Paul Oliver, Aspects of the Blues Tradition, 2nd ed. (New York: Oak Publications, Inc., 1970), pp. 2-3.

²³Oliver, p. 3.

²⁴Oliver, p. 20.

²⁵Cone, p. 124.

CHAPTER IV

BLUES AND BESSIE

Two critical approaches are important to the analysis of Bessie Smith's lyrics and both will be presented in this chapter. First, the circumstances in which Bessie composed the selected lyrics are significant. Two prime aspects of Bessie Smith's background, her life-style and her character, are related directly to her compositions. Of the works which have provided biographical sketches of Bessie Smith's life, including Oliver's Bessie Smith, and Moore's Somebody's Angel Child; the story of Bessie Smith, Albertson has probably provided the most complete account in his work Bessie.

Secondly, this chapter explicates the rhetorical elements in Bessie's Blues. It analyzes the rhetorical operatives in the nine selected lyrics by (1) integrating elements of Bessie's character and life-style into the analysis, (2) explaining Blues forms and critical approaches to each, (3) discovering the nature of the Blues audience, (4) expounding the thematic relationships in Bessie's lyrics.

Bessie's Life-Style

Bessie had her own troubles and, in some cases, her lyrics reflect some of her personal pain. Her parents died when she was a child and she was forced, ultimately, into

the real world at an early age. Bessie's difficult marriage, during her successful years as an entertainer, spawned much of the blueness which is reflected in some of her lyrics. Moreover, Bessie's fast-paced life-style was instrumental in causing some of her personal pain. Her fiery temper and violent outbursts even resulted in arrests on a few occasions.

Through the problems, Bessie somehow remained close to those of her culture. Albertson points out:

Bessie's life-style demanded that she be in close contact with her community; she craved surroundings with access to the real emotions of real people, and no written word could match the verbal communication that black people had mastered in the days of slavery.¹

One of her companions was a niece by marriage who saw Bessie through some trying experiences. Bessie had several brothers and sisters, but only one, her brother Clarence, appeared to be her friend. Although she was surrounded by many people, she appears to have been alone emotionally.

Bessie's Character

Bessie was generous with other Blacks and concerned about those in need, possibly because her own background was one of poverty. Her desire to assist those in need is an integral part of her consubstantiality with other Black Americans. Instead of leading the social life of a wealthy Black entertainer, Bessie chose to remain in the social class of the average Black of the time period. She had a taste for Black culture, thus she never had the desire to

become a part of what Jones labels as the "meta-society." That is to say, she refused to adopt the White way of life, albeit she had the option monetarily. Her priorities lay with Blackness and the struggles associated with what "Black" generally meant.

In retrospect, it seems clear that Bessie Smith felt that she had a good life. She knew that there were thousands of other Blacks who desired a small percentage of what she had achieved. Oakley states:

The background of Bessie's life as a black woman was second-class citizenship, segregation and squalid poverty. Despite all her subsequent success and acclaim as a moneymaking hot property, she never forgot who she was and where she came from.²

Bessie's concerns extended beyond her husband to her family and her race. The identification that she felt with poor Blacks made her special to them as a popular entertainer.

The Rhetorical Implications of Bessie's Blues

The theory underlying the analysis of Bessie's lyrics is, for the most part, Burkeian. Identification is significant in linking persuasion and Blues. It must be noted, however, that the general nature of the audience and its receptiveness are important.

The persuasive content of Bessie's lyrics suggest the role of a rhetorician employing epideictic address. Traditionally, this oratorical form, which praises or blames, is, in part, a means for bringing to the surface, in an artful manner, an evil force operating as a problem. An integral part of Bessie's artistry is her ability to confront that

evil, visible to Blacks during slavery days when, through Christianity, they realized that discrimination by color was wrong and that something could be done about it. Musical lyrics became devices for persuasive messages.

The theoretical discussion in Chapter Three is one means for assessing operatives in Bessie's lyrics. Identification is utilized as a tool for probing the problem which eventually surfaces as Bessie's rhetoric. Moreover, the other critical elements for understanding her lyrics, and how identification operates within them, are ethos, pathos, redemption, and ultimate terms.

An Analysis of Selected Smith Lyrics

Paul Oliver, in Aspects of the Blues Tradition, states:

In content the blues, like any folk music, reflects in part the society which produced it. But to what extent does recorded blues give an accurate picture of the culture-producing society and the experience of a minority group within the larger social context? Is the content of recorded blues a comprehensive anthology of the blues as sung in all conditions?³

It seems that Oliver's questions may be answered, almost completely, and perhaps better than any historical account could convey through existing Blues records from the 1920s. Blues lyrics of the 1920s were, in some respects, an oral history which depicts the troubles and sorrows of Black people and sometimes presents advice to provide at least a temporary relief for those troubles. In this respect, Blues not only reflect Black society, but also sustain it.

Cone provides a more detailed explanation of this experience:

Historical experience, as interpreted by the black community, is the key to an understanding of the blues. Black people accepted the dictum: Truth is experience, and experience is the Truth. If it is lived and encountered, then it is real. There is no attempt in the blues to make philosophical distinctions between divine and human truth. That is why many blues people reject the contention that the blues are vulgar or dirty. . . .

The blues tell us about the strength of black people to survive, to endure, and to shape existence while living in the midst of oppressive contradictions.⁴

The rhetoric in Blues lyrics is blatant in some lyrics, subtle in others. Bessie Smith can overtly pronounce disappointment with life and men, or drink gin until the audience discovers that she has lost her man at the point of the last stanza. In other words, some lyrics immediately identify the problem, others make the problem appear as an afterthought, and, in some cases, there are solutions to the problems.

Two forms of Blues emerge from an analysis of selected compositions by Bessie. One form, classified as experiential, echoes the problem or trouble without providing a verbal solution. The artist expresses the blue mood and the lyrics tell of Bessie's own troubles or those of others. The second form, classified as therapeutic, presents the problem as an afterthought, and there is a positive attitude towards existence and/or a solution for the trouble or sorrow. Each of these forms will be examined in relation to the critical perspective outlined in Chapter Three:

identification, the condition and process, redemption, ultimate terms, and ethos and pathos.

Experiential Blues

Bessie's "Back Water Blues," "Poor Man's Blues," "Pickpocket Blues," and "Wasted Life Blues" may be classified as "experiential" Blues. In analyzing her lyrics, there is a distinct difference between the rhetoric of these lyrics and others, such as "Standin' in the Rain Blues." The experiential form projects the problem, and acts as a verbal picture of the problem. Although Bessie was not the victim of floods or poverty during the time she sang the lyrics, she was not out of touch with the needs of others. Through experiential Blues, the Black saga is presented from a melancholy perspective and the rhetorical implications are less than hopeful. More specifically, the suffering is amplified, thus painting a bleak outlook with little hope for the future.

Identification in Bessie's Experiential Blues

The identification principle is vivid in Bessie's experiential Blues. Whether there is a flood, a lost man, pickpocket hands, or sheer poverty, Bessie brings to life, or to the surface, the problem as she sees it. This is done in a way that "touches home" for other Blacks. Each of Bessie's four experiential lyrics to be analyzed demonstrate the identification principle in action. The first experiential song, written in 1927 with a specific audience in mind, was "Back Water Blues."

When it rains five days, and the sky turns dark as
 night,
 When it rains five days, and the sky turns dark as
 night;
 Then trouble's takin' place in the lowlands at night.

I woke up this mornin', can't even get out of my do',
 I woke up this mornin', can't even get out of my do';
 There's enough trouble to make a poor girl wonder
 where she wanna go.

Then they rowed a little boat about five miles 'cross
 the pond,
 Then they rowed a little boat about five miles 'cross
 the pond;
 I packed all my clothes, throwed them in, and they
 rowed me along.

When it thunders and lightnin', and the wind begins
 to blow,
 When it thunders and lightnin', and the wind begins
 to blow;
 There's thousands of people ain't got no place to go.

Then I went and stood upon some high old lonesome hill,
 Then I went and stood upon some high old lonesome hill;
 Then looked down on the house where I used to live.

Back Water Blues done caused me to pack my things and
 go,
 Back Water Blues done caused me to pack my things and
 go;
 'Cause my house fell down, and I can't live there no
 mo'.

Mmmmmmmmm, Mmmmmmmmm, I can't move no mo',
 Mmmmmmmmm, Mmmmmmmmm, I can't move no mo';
 There ain't no place for a poor old girl to go.⁵

The inspiration for writing "Back Water Blues" seems to have come directly from the actual victims, which suggests one dimension of the identification principle in this form of Blues. Bessie identifies with the people as she portrays the victim. Oakley supports this point:

Bessie identified with the poor and dispossessed; inspired by the 1927 Mississippi floods, which covered 20,000 square miles and eventually made 200,000 homeless, her Back Water Blues takes the point of view of a victim.⁶

The state of victimage is reflected through the repetitive use of "can't"; ". . . can't even get out of my do'," ". . . can't live there no mo'," "can't move no mo'." The persuasive factor is the use of self to portray common woe, thus reducing division.

The same factor exists in the lyrics to Bessie's "Pickpocket Blues." Bessie presents herself, once again, as the victim of circumstances. In this piece, however, she experiences a "liberating catharsis" in time of trouble.

My best man, my best friend, told me to stop peddlin'
gin
They even told me to keep my hands out people's pocket
where their money was in
But I wouldn't listen or have any shame; long as
someone else would take the blame.

Now I can see it all come home to me
I'm settin' in the jailhouse now ⁷
I mean, I'm in the jailhouse now.

When Bessie wrote the lyrics to "Pickpocket Blues," she may have been inspired by her personal experiences and the advice she had been given by others to avoid trouble. Not heeding advice had, on some occasions, placed her in similar situations. It all "comes back to her" when she recollects her arrest for disturbing the peace in one instance, and being bailed out by her niece. Thus, in these lyrics, her role as victim is not far from reality. She points to the consequences of erratic behavior such as "peddlin' gin," and "pickpocket" hands as she states "But I wouldn't listen or have any shame. . . . I'm settin' in the jailhouse now." She identifies with those, perhaps "honest," people forced

into compromising situations. In many respects, the story is her own.

While in the "jailhouse," there may be a number of prevailing thoughts. "Pickpocket Blues" recognizes that trouble could have been avoided by heeding friendly advice. Thus, it becomes easy for the individual to sink into "Wasted Life Blues." In this composition, Bessie is downhearted because she has no one to care about her in times of trouble. Although Bessie has little reason to see her own career as a rationale for "Wasted Life Blues," she is nevertheless able to identify with the world of troubles associated with the lower-class Black American.

I've lived a life but nothin' I've gained
Each day I'm full of sorrow and pain
No one seems to care enough for poor me
To give me a word of sympathy.

Oh, me! Oh, my! Wonder what will the end be?
Oh, me! Oh, my! Wonder what will the end be?
Oh, me! Oh, my! Wonder what will become of poor me?

No father to guide me, no mother to care
Must bear my troubles all alone
Not even a brother to help me share
This burden I must bear alone.

Refrain

I'm settin' and thinkin' of the days gone by
They filled my heart with pain
I'm too weak to stand and too strong to cry
But I'm forgittin' it all in vain.

Refrain

I've traveled and wandered almost everywhere
To git a little joy from life
Still I've gained nothin' but wars and despair,
Still strugglin' in this world of strife.

Refrain⁸

Considering Smith's unstable childhood (both parents died before she became a teenager), it is little wonder that Bessie could portray herself as a victim of homelessness and despair. Moreover, she seemed always ready to lend a helping hand to friends or strangers in need, thus indicating a profound sense of identity with other Blacks. Albertson states:

Bessie dispensed her money freely, bailing friends out of jail, responding to an unfortunate stranger's outstretched hand, buying luxuries for herself, her friends, and her family. The more she made, the more she doled out.⁹

The rhetoric of identification, as reflected in Bessie's experiential Blues, seems to sustain Blacks in their efforts to transcend pain and suffering. As Cone points out, Blues promote a powerful sense of unity in relation to common suffering which allows Blacks to cope with life in an oppressive society.

The blues are a transformation of black life through the sheer power of song. They symbolize the solidarity, the attitudes, and the identity of the black community and thus create the emotional forms of reference for endurance and esthetic appreciation. In this sense, the blues are that stoic feeling that recognizes the painfulness of the present but refuses to surrender to its historical contradictions.¹⁰

Perhaps Bessie's awareness of the range of despair and misery of Blacks developed in her a special sensitivity about what back water, pickpocket and wasted life Blues meant to the poor. Evidently, she had few problems recreating such experiences.

Another rhetorical statement about the Black experience is Bessie's "Poor Man's Blues," an overt condemnation

of existing evil in the social system. Oakley, in The Devil's Music, states:

Many regard her 1928 record Poor Man's Blues-- made before the Great Depression of the 30's-- one of her most moving achievements. . . . this was her own composition, delivered with an icy control, and a slow passionate anger.¹¹

"Poor Man's Blues" has been labeled as a "song of social protest." Not only is the problem stated, but the blame for the problem seems to be pinpointed. She states:

Mister rich man, rich man, open up your heart and
mind,
Mister rich man, rich man, open up your heart and
mind;
Give the poor man a chance, help stop these hard,
hard times.

While you're livin' in your mansion, you don't know
what hard times mean,
While you're livin' in your mansion, you don't know
what hard times mean;
Poor working man's wife is starvin'; your wife is
livin' like a queen.

Please listen to my pleadin', 'cause I can't stand
these hard times long,
Aw, listen to my pleadin', can't stand these hard
times long;
They'll make an honest man do things that you know is
wrong.

Poor man fought all the battles, poor man would fight
again today,
Poor man fought all the battles, poor man would fight
again today;
He would do anything you ask him in the name of the
U.S.A.

Now the war is over; poor man must live the same as
you,
Now the war is over; poor man must live the same as
you;
If it wasn't for the poor man, mister rich man, what
would you do?¹²

Bessie boldly proclaims herself as the "poor man" who pleads for the cause--". . . I can't stand these hard times long."

The peak of despair then becomes the verbal recognition ". . . that there is something wrong with this world, something absurd about the way that white people treat black people."¹³ Therefore, Bessie completes the condition of identification on a personal level. That is, she is consubstantial with other Blacks as she "defines her place in society." In addition, she also attempts to lead any White audience that she may have to the process of identification by pointing to the Black struggle: "Poor working man's wife is starvin'; your wife is livin' like a queen."

In the second stanza, Bessie states, "While you're livin' in your mansion, you don't know what hard times mean." This rhetorical statement, which focuses on "hard times," is the truth through experience dimension of life indicative of her consubstantiality with other Blacks. Bessie's use of "hard times" is symbolic of Black suffering. Therefore, in order to reduce the division between the races, there is a call for the process of identification on the part of Whites. This is evident in the pleas ". . . open up your heart and mind, [g]ive the poor man a chance, help stop these hard, hard times." Moreover, in the third stanza she says "Please listen to my pleadin', 'cause I can't stand these hard times long" ending with "They'll make an honest man do things that you know is wrong."

Implied at every turn is the plight of Blacks in a less than just society. The fourth stanza points directly to World War I and, subtly, to the degradation of Blacks

since slavery. The fifth stanza echos the end of World War I (the Civil War also may be implied), and the fact that the "poor" man must blend into an alien society. As Albertson states:

The war had been over for ten years, of course, but Wilson's promise of democracy--if it ever included blacks--had not been fulfilled, and neither the Harding nor the Coolidge administration had made any progress in that direction. . . . "Poor Man's Blues" was, in fact, "Black Man's Blues."¹⁴

Ending the last stanza, Bessie states, "If it wasn't for the poor man, mister rich man, what would you do?" The "poor" man has in some cases provided wealth and security for the "rich" both as slave and as warrior "in the name of the U.S.A."

Ultimate Terms in Experiential Blues

There is a thin line between the classifications of god and devil terms in Blues lyrics. Bessie makes use of such terms as "troubles," "burden," "pain," and "strugglin'," throughout the selected lyrics. Although they may be used to evoke a certain feeling within the audience, specifically as reminders of individual meaning for audience members, this is also a response of consubstantiality. Such terms are the key for creating solidarity. As the symbol maker, Bessie associates herself with the social class in this "specialized activity." As a Black person and symbol maker, Bessie understands "the concept meant by the name he [the Black person] gives to a thing, and second . . . how he relates himself or identifies himself with this name,"¹⁵

thus, she ultimately binds herself with the audience. Hence, "through symbolism men announce their identities."¹⁶ Terms such as "troubles," as used in "Back Water Blues," "pain," and "strugglin'," serve as vehicles for this proclamation.

Experiential Blues compositions by Bessie are stimulating in that they heighten the existing attitude or match the mood of the audience. "Wasted Life Blues," however, does not reveal Bessie's personal optimism about life. Albertson states, "Bessie felt that life had been good to her, and she had remarkably few regrets."¹⁷ Singing the experiential lyrics, which are highly reflective of the feeling brought on by being Black, is a means for reaching the ultimate level of despair. Once at that level, inner peace could be found. A solution is not presented for the primary problems, loneliness and despair, yet the god term "strugglin'," as used in "Wasted Life Blues," is indicative of resistance. The evidence of a struggle amidst "strife" provides the audience with a mental ascension from the obvious problem.

The "travel" that Bessie refers to in "Wasted Life Blues" is a god term in the Black arena. That is to say, the idea of escape, which may be synonymously used with "travel," indicates "freedom"--a more powerful god term for Blacks. Thus, travel points to the desire of Blacks to leave "the harsh realities of an oppressive environment."¹⁸ It meant that one refused to accept degradation and deprivation in life.

In "Poor Man's Blues," it is clear that "rich" is a devil term and is indicative of White society. "Poor" is a god term, also referenced in "Back Water Blues," reflective of Black society. The two opposing terms, "rich" and "poor," point to conflict, or division between races; "rich" represents White, whereas "poor" is a symbol for Blacks. The "rich" man's lack of experience regarding "what hard times mean" is essentially the basis for division.

Therapeutic Blues

Phillips, in "The Therapeutics of the Blues" states:

The idea of recovery is found in all of the blues and this piece of positivism is what characterizes the therapeutic structure. . . .

Though it may sound strange, the Aframerican [sic] knew himself, his oppressors, and he had a valid insight into the emotional problems he had to face--and by being able to verbalize this through reflection more insight was gained in solving the problem which he faced.¹⁹

Classic Blues frequently presents lyrics with a therapeutic structure. According to Phillips, therapeutic Blues are in the problem-solution format, or they at least echo hope through a positive feeling of some sort. These lyrics are persuasive pieces in the sense that they illuminate the problem and a solution. Phillips elaborates:

The early Aframerican [sic] did not have anyone to turn to for help but his own inner and local resources; force. . . . to destroy the hate object, to brutalize it would be a solution; the pain object is gone. . . .

The blues were never a wasted bellow. No they came as a burning vehicle to transport a depressed people to a point of liberation.²⁰

Although all types of Blues, such as Classic and Southern, contain lyrics which are therapeutic, not all Classic and Southern lyrics have therapeutic structures. This is the rationale for the division of the selected Smith lyrics into two forms, experiential and therapeutic. This section analyzes Bessie's lyrics which are therapeutic in nature.

Identification in Bessie's Therapeutic Blues

Therapeutic Blues, as Bessie sang them, offer strength as advice for the dejected. Bessie is also able to promote solidarity through her ability, consubstantiality, to provide solutions and to recognize trouble, yet to conquer humiliation and defeat through strength. "Standin' in the Rain Blues" is characteristic of the therapeutic form.

Standin' in the rain and ain't a drop fell on me,
Standin' in the rain and ain't a drop fell on me;
My clothes is all wet but my flesh is as dry as can be.

It can rain all day I ain't got no place to go,
It can rain all day I ain't got no place to go;
Because it's cold outside in that ice and snow.

If it rains five days that won't give me no blues,
If it rains five days that won't give me no blues;
I've got my raincoat and hat, umbrella, boots and shoes.

Rain, rain, rain don't rain on me all day,
Rain, rain, rain don't rain on me all day;
'Cause if I get too wet I've got to go into the house and stay.²¹

There is a fervor to the lyrics of "Standin' in the Rain Blues." In the first stanza, although she is in the midst of struggle and depression, there is resistance to it. Here she lays the groundwork for the entire composition on a

positive note. The indication of surface woe, the wet clothes, is clear; yet the body or flesh is protected from trouble. Moreover, there is a distinct positive feeling and a command of strength; division is reduced through authoritative language in these notes of solidarity and the words exemplify Bessie's strength--"Rain, rain, rain don't rain on me all day"--almost a command or dare.

"Standin' in the Rain Blues" is a means for coping with the downpour of troubles. Sadly, the rain may become overbearing, and the "house" is depicted almost as a prison to which one must return if unable to weather the storm. However, exposure to the rain for as long as it can be endured is better than returning to the walls that surround the individual prior to escape. Bessie not only provides courage to endure the storm, but also dispels any fear of getting "wet." Instead of succumbing to the overbearing rain, Bessie attempts to meet it face to face in "Standin' in the Rain Blues." The test is one of endurance while under extreme pressure.

"Young Woman's Blues" has a sentiment similar to that seen in "Standin' in the Rain Blues." There is vigor, vitality, and transcendence throughout the lyrics.

Woke up this mornin' when chickens was crowin' for day
 Felt on the right side of my pilla, my man had gone
 away
 By his pilla he left a note readin' "I'm sorry, Jane,
 you got my goat."

No time to marry, no time to settle down
 I'm a young woman and ain't done runnin' 'round.
 I'm a young woman and ain't done runnin' 'round.

Some people call me a hobo, some call me a bum
 Nobody knows my name, nobody knows what I've done
 I'm as good as any woman in your town
 I ain't no high yella, I'm a deep killer of brown.

I ain't gonna marry, ain't gonna settle down
 I'm gonna drink good moonshine and rub these browns
 down
 See that long lonesome road, Lawd you know it's gotta
 end, and I'm a good woman and I can get plenty
 men.²²

Even after discovering that the loved one has left her, there is an humble acceptance of this woe as a part of life. Bessie renders a certain amount of her own pride in her identity as a Black woman. She bestows prestige upon being a "deep killer of brown" to those perceiving themselves as unacceptable by virtue of complexion. Identification with the struggles of the young Black woman springs from Bessie's special insight into the experiences of those women, and the recreation of the trouble through her lyrics is, by its nature, therapeutic.

Bessie provides a traditional Blues composition in "Dixie Flyer Blues." As Cone states, ". . . buses, railways, and trains are important images in the blues. Each symbolizes motion and the possibility of leaving the harsh realities of an oppressive environment."²³ Bessie chooses "Dixie Flyer," part of a friendly experience and one of hope, rather than the "Panama Limited," an object of resentment. Moreover, the "Panama Limited" or the "Sunshine Special" are considered to be trouble trains, and probably echo Blues which may be considered experiential. In either case, the train is symbolic of escape: "Trains figure

prominently in blues in content and musically, in imitation, reflecting very directly the desire to migrate."²⁴ The "Dixie Flyer," on the other hand, is a therapeutic train.

Oliver, in The Meaning of the Blues, states:

In the train the folk Negro invests a character that he admires or hates according to the circumstances of its relationship to him and to his life. The Big 80 or the Dixie Flyer may be a friend as it thunders on to the Southland.²⁵

In Bessie's "Dixie Flyer Blues," she states:

Hold that train (spoken)
Hold that engine, let sweet mama get on board
.

Dixie flyer, come on and let your drivers roll,
Dixie flyer, come on and let your drivers roll;
Wouldn't stay up North to save nobody's doggone soul.
.

Blow your whistle, tell 'em mama's coming too,
Blow your whistle, tell 'em mama's coming too;
Wake it up a little bit 'cause I'm feelin' mighty
blue.

Here's my ticket, take it please conductor man,
Here's my ticket, take it please conductor man;
Goin' to my mammy, way down in Dixie Land.²⁶

Although the artist sometimes personifies the automobile through his or her own eyes, Bessie does not in "Dixie Flyer Blues." Instead, she identifies with the feeling of freedom. Therefore, identification is established through the meaning of the "Dixie Flyer" which has, as its objective, an escape to freedom. Dixie Land is a home for those who share the struggle--and the "Flyer" is a means of escape to that land. Bessie's consubstantiality with the Black audience is her role as escapee. In the last stanza, she states, "goin' to my mammy, way down in Dixie Land." In

another stanza, she says that she "[w]ouldn't stay up North to save nobody's doggone soul." The implication is that the South is "true" home, and the American roots for the oppressed Black. The escape is from Northern society and the melancholy overtones stem from where the border has been. "Blow your whistle, tell 'em mama's coming too; Wake it up a little bit 'cause I'm feelin' might blue." There is an immediate desire to reach Dixie Land and to alleviate the blue feeling. The hope for a better life is contingent upon a return to the South. Usually, the escape is from the South to the North or the Midwest.

Consubstantiality is an important aspect of these lyrics. Bessie, as escapee, returns "home"--the South--even though it means returning to an overt pronouncement of inequality. Yet, the underlying motive for the return is to be consubstantial with family and Blackness. By identifying with the meaning of the "Dixie Flyer" for Black America, Bessie's anticipation, over the prospect of reaching Dixie Land, is amplified in her lyrics. In other words, there is little doubt that she will safely reach Dixie Land even before boarding: "Here's my ticket, take it please conductor man; Goin' to my mammy, way down in Dixie Land."

Ultimate Terms in Bessie's Therapeutic Blues

"Standin' in the Rain Blues" points to "rain" as a devil term and it is used as the force to be resisted. The rain is symbolic of trouble. Another term of the Black

community is "train," usually a god term. However, it may become a devil term when it takes a loved one away. The Dixie Flyer is a friendly train and Dixie Land is a god term because it is the "heaven on earth" for both the Blues performer and audience.

In "Young Woman's Blues," even if the "brown" woman is unconvinced about her positive identity and worth as a female, transcendence is espoused when Bessie states, "No time to marry, no time to settle down." "Marry," then, is a devil term for the young woman upon discovering that her "man has gone away." She then reverts to any thoughts of marriage as being negative and thus, internally, refusal to make the commitment becomes important. The melancholy aspect of this composition is the satirical element. The realistic viewpoint is that there are limited "good" men. The desire to settle down may not exist because they (the men) were not prepared to do so. In that sense, the mental dissatisfaction of being left by her man is deep-seated; on the surface, the humiliation turns into strength and resistance. In other words, internally the "young woman" perceives "marry" as the god term and, externally, as espoused by Bessie, it is translated into the devil term. "Young Woman's Blues" is a means for escaping the internal dissatisfaction and enduring what life had to offer for the Black woman; thus, here again is a means for rising above trouble.

Unlike spirituals, Blues tend to reference a human force as a means of hope. "Gypsy," in "Please Help Get Him

Off My Mind," is the superhuman or source of power instead of God, although there is a reference to the "good Lawd" in the fourth stanza. God is depicted as the omniscient force; the "gypsy" as the cure-all. The last stanza again places the gypsy in the superhuman, cure-all position: "Gypsy don't hurt him, fix him for me one more time."

Ethos and Pathos in Experiential and Therapeutic Blues

Both ethos and pathos affect the Blues audience. All of the selected lyrics demonstrate Bessie's command of the problem and that command operates through her reputation as an artist and the pathos which she adds to her performance.

Bessie's credibility is evidenced by her fans' reference to her as "Miss Bessie" when she was asked to sing about back water Blues. Maud Smith, Bessie's sister-in-law, recollects the events (in Albertson's Bessie) which led to the composition of the experiential piece, "Back Water Blues":

After we left Cincinnati, we came to this little town, which was flooded, . . . It was an undertaker parlor next door to the theatre, and we were supposed to stay in some rooms they had upstairs there. . . . But there was a lot of other people there, and they were trying to get her to stay, so they started hollerin', "Miss Bessie, please sing the 'Back Water Blues,' please sing the 'Back Water Blues.'" Well, Bessie didn't know anything about any "Back Water Blues," but after we came back home to 1926 Christian Street where we were living, Bessie came in the kitchen one day, and she had a pencil and paper, and she started singing and writing. That's when she wrote the "Back Water Blues"--. . . .²⁷

Bessie's ethos thus springs, in part, from her ability to address the problems of the masses. The fact that an ethical source, such as Bessie, perceives the woes of life as her own, is a means for solidarity.

While Bessie's personal role as a victim probably brought her a degree closer to her audience, her level of emotion in Blues performances was said to have been unmatched. It is safe to say that few other performers during Bessie's period of popularity had her ability to elicit pathos. One of her former employers, Frank Schiffman, in Albertson's Bessie, had this to say:

I don't ever remember any artist in all my long, long years--and this goes back to some of the famous singers, including Billie Holiday--who could evoke the response from her listeners that Bessie did. Whatever pathos [sic] there is in the world, whatever sadness she had, was brought out in her singing--and the audience knew it and responded to it.²⁸

Although it would be impossible to analyze Bessie's pathetic appeal by her lyrics alone, her character allows one safely to assume that she was genuinely concerned about Black suffering.

Redemption in Experiential and Therapeutic Blues

Redemption occurs in both Blues forms, although it is more obvious in the therapeutic structure. When Bessie's fans requested that she sing the back water Blues, which she had not yet composed, they probably sought redemption. Bessie's "Back Water Blues," written shortly afterwards, was

a reply to that request. By articulating problems or evils, she ultimately helped to purge the pain felt by other Blacks. In other words, lyrics such as those of "Wasted Life Blues," "Poor Man's Blues," "Pickpocket Blues," and "Back Water Blues," are redemptive because they present an otherwise suppressed problem to the public almost in an epideictic form.

Bessie's "Hot Springs Blues," as a therapeutic Blues form, conveys the luxuries of life that are available to the wealthy Black audience. The cure-all for life's pains, whether physical or mental is Hot Springs.

If you ever get cripple, let me tell you what to do,
If you ever get cripple, let me tell you what to do;
Take a trip to Hot Springs and let 'em wait on you.²⁹

The catharsis or redemptive measure results from exclusive treatment:

With the steam and the sweat, and the hot rooms too,
With the steam and the sweat, and the hot rooms too;
If that don't cure you, tell me what will it do?

Some come here cripple, some come here lame,
Some come here cripple, some come here lame;
If they don't go way well, we are not to blame.³⁰

The cure is "steam and sweat" rather than the "gypsy." While at Hot Springs, one may leave the world of trouble behind "and if you don't get well you sure come back." These Blues are therapeutic in that the audience may be stripped of pain and suffering without repercussions. There is a glimmer of hope even for those who come "cripple" or "lame." Hence, in many respects, Hot Springs is a heaven on earth for those

who can only envision it, thereby alleviating the blue feeling.

The personal effort on Bessie's part to bring about a catharsis for those who were supposedly close to her, and the world, was overwhelming. Ironically, she played the role of "Hot Springs" in the lives of many. That is, many capitalized on her success more than she did. Perhaps this was because she did not define her place in society any differently from others. The troubles of the world could be removed by way of physical treatment of the pain associated with such troubles. On the other hand, Bessie's "Standin' in the Rain Blues" does not state a specific solution such as physical treatment, but the spirit of triumph is catharsis enough. Stubborn persistence is presented through the notion of the "raincoat and hat, umbrella, boots and shoes."

Bessie's "Please Help Get Him Off My Mind" is certainly one of her most autobiographical pieces. It is also clear, however, that through this piece, she seeks truth. At the outset, the first stanza, there is an expression of the existing problem.

I've cried and worried, all night I laid and groaned,
I've cried and worried, all night I laid and groaned;
I use to weigh two hundred, now I'm down to skin and
bones.³¹

As a victim of this problem, Bessie attempts to attain catharsis through a solution provided by the "gypsy."

It's all about a man who always kicked and dogged me
 'round,
 It's all about a man who always kicked and dogged me
 'round;
 And when I try to kill him, that's when my love for
 him come down.

I've come to see you gypsy, beggin' on my bended
 knees,
 I've come to see you gypsy, beggin' on my bended
 knees;
 That man put something on me, oh take it off of me,
 please.³²

The turmoil in Bessie's life at the time of this composition indicates that this was, in many ways, her own sad song. Albertson adds "although she had felt the love of millions whom her artistry profoundly affected, she had not always found love at home where she sought it most."³³ After five years of battle to save her marriage, perhaps reality comes to Bessie through this redemptive piece of rhetoric.

Though the train in "Dixie Flyer Blues" represents escape, in this case, the Dixie Flyer does not necessarily bring about catharsis, because it is a means for escape. However, Bessie's identification with freedom incurred as a result of the escape is the means for redemption.

Both experiential and therapeutic lyrics helped to bring about redemption for Blacks facing "that long lonesome road" which was endless so long as struggle for Blacks continued to exist. Oliver states:

Through the blues record the lower-class Negro was able to hear the voice of his counterpart from a thousand miles away; hear him and feel a bond of sympathy which no other medium could impart at such a personal level.³⁴

The Nature of the Audience in Bessie's Experiential and Therapeutic Blues

Most Blues lyrics are composed for an intended Black audience which, to some degree, is different from other audiences. This is essentially because of the differences between African and American cultures. The Black American is a blend of the two. For Blacks, knowing that others perceive the struggle and identify with it helps in the attempt to rise above those troubles. Bessie had a way of doing just that. It was primarily during her new found success that she established a solid rapport with her audience. At this point in her life, she was not far removed from her youth in Tennessee as a struggling, poverty-stricken individual without parents to guide her. These factors increased her ethical appeal. Albertson states:

Bessie's other magic ingredient was her ability to get an audience to identify with her songs: while the pop singers of the day were busy building a "Stairway to Paradise" or making love "'Neath the South Seas Moon," Bessie sang of mean mistreaters and two-timing husbands with tragicomic optimism, offered advice to the dejected, and made it clear that she herself was not immune to such problems.³⁵

The Blues audience appears to be special for the performer. As Bessie sang lyrics, such as "Please Help Get Him Off My Mind," there can be little doubt that warm responses from the audience were pleasing to her. Such responses were a sign of elation, and the troubles of the world, for a brief moment, seemed less important and more endurable. Oakley provides a vivid portrait of audience response to Bessie Smith's Blues.

There seems little doubt that many of the Classic Blues sentiments were aimed directly at the women in the audience and there could be close identification between audience and singer. The white intellectual Carl Van Vechten saw Bessie Smith in 1925 at the Orpheum Theatre at Newark where "the black and blue-black crowd, notable for the absence of mulattoes, burst into hysterical, semi-religious shrieks of sorrow and lamentation. Amens rent the air, little nervous giggles, like the shattering of Venetian glass, shocked our nerves."³⁶

Psychologically, the deprivation and degradation felt by Blacks were somehow translated into a joyous event.

Thematic Relationships in Bessie's Lyrics

The selected Bessie Smith lyrics comprise most of her compositions between 1923 and 1930. There were, however, many other lyrics written by Clarence Williams, Wesley Wilson, Porter Grainger and a host of other composers that were performed by Bessie. Most of the lyrics that she chose to sing were similar to her own.

Because of the nature of the selected lyrics, it is not possible to make a general statement about recurring themes; however, the relationships among compositions are evident. The division of the two Blues forms into experiential and therapeutic is abolished as the themes of the two overlap. "Young Woman's Blues," a therapeutic form, and "Please Help Get Him Off My Mind," also a therapeutic form, share a single theme. The trouble is over the woes of a lost lover, and the humiliation and bitterness that ensue.

In "Young Woman's Blues," which demonstrates the same positive feeling as "Dixie Flyer," there is little suffering

over the loss of a loved one. At least the suffering is not on the surface. There is a proclamation of a bright future because it is recognized that a young woman can get "plenty men." The trouble is less overwhelming and a solution is evident.

Rain becomes a symbol of despair as well as the theme of both "Back Water Blues" and "Standin' in the Rain Blues." The difference between the two is the despair evident in the reality of floods leading to homelessness versus the protection and strength found in "Standin' in the Rain." Both songs recognize despair, however, there is a solution in the therapeutic form. The solution is the preparation gear, "raincoat, hat, umbrella, boots and shoes," as a protective measure against "rain." Rain in "Back Water Blues" is a sign that "trouble's takin' place in the lowlands at night" and that there "ain't no place for a poor old girl to go." In this instance, a verbal solution is not provided for the listening audience and there is a melancholiness over the situation.

Bessie seems to employ three types of redemptive measures throughout her therapeutic and experiential Blues. Catharsis is brought about through (1) a physical purge, (2) by way of physical or mental force, or (3) through a superhuman or supernatural being. Therefore, the cure-alls fit neatly into one or more of the three categories. "Hot Springs Blues," for example, recommends physical treatment as a possible cure. Moreover, "Please Help Get Him Off My Mind"

employs a superhuman--"gypsy" as a means for catharsis. It is clear that mental force is the catharsis for "Young Woman's Blues."

Of the selected compositions by Bessie, it appears that she employed variation by interchanging forms and themes. Many performers of her day used a theme that seemed popular repetitively. However, Bessie's compositions indicate that she did not capitalize on a particular theme.

ENDNOTES

¹Chris Albertson, Bessie (New York: Stein and Day, 1972), p. 58.

²Giles Oakley, The Devil's Music: A History of the Blues (New York: Taplinger Publishing Company, Inc., 1977), p. 108.

³Paul Oliver, Aspects of the Blues Tradition, 2nd ed. (New York: Oak Publications, Inc., 1970), p. 11.

⁴James H. Cone, The Spirituals and the Blues: An Interpretation (New York: Seabury Press, 1972), p. 119.

⁵Bessie Smith, "Back Water Blues," Nobody's Blues But Mine (Columbia CG 31093, 1927).

⁶Oakley, pp. 108-9.

⁷Bessie Smith, "Pickpocket Blues," The Empress (Columbia CG 30818, 1928).

⁸Bessie Smith, "Wasted Life Blues," Any Woman's Blues (Columbia CG 30126, 1929).

⁹Albertson, p. 59.

¹⁰Cone, p. 117.

¹¹Oakley, p. 108.

¹²Bessie Smith, "Poor Man's Blues," Empty Bed Blues (Columbia CG 30450, 1928).

¹³Cone, p. 125.

¹⁴Albertson, p. 149.

¹⁵L. Virginia Holland, Counterpoint: Kenneth Burke and Aristotle's Theories of Rhetoric (New York: Philosophical Library, 1959), p. 34.

¹⁶Robert B. Watson, "Toward a Burkeian Framework for Rhetorical Criticism" (Ph.D. dissertation, University of Minnesota, 1970), p. 28.

¹⁷Albertson, p. 213.

¹⁸Cone, p. 139.

¹⁹Waldo Phillips, "The Therapeutics of the Blues," Cadence 4 (July 1978): 18.

²⁰Phillips, pp. 18, 19.

²¹Bessie Smith, "Standin' in the Rain Blues," Empty Bed Blues (Columbia CG 30450, 1928).

²²Bessie Smith, "Young Woman's Blues," Nobody's Blues But Mine (Columbia CG 31093, 1926).

²³Cone, p. 139.

²⁴Paul Oliver, Aspects of the Blues Tradition, 2nd ed. (New York: Oak Publications, Inc., 1970), p. 213.

²⁵Paul Oliver, The Meaning of the Blues, with a foreword by Richard Wright (New York: Collier Books, 1963), p. 92. *Italics his.*

²⁶Bessie Smith, "Dixie Flyer Blues," The Empress (Columbia CG 30818, 1925).

²⁷Albertson, pp. 126-7.

²⁸Albertson, p. 198.

²⁹Bessie Smith, "Hot Springs Blues," The Empress (Columbia CG 30818, 1926).

³⁰Smith, "Hot Springs Blues."

³¹Bessie Smith, "Please Help Get Him Off My Mind," Empty Bed Blues (Columbia CG 30450, 1928).

³²Smith, "Please Help Get Him Off My Mind."

³³Albertson, p. 213.

³⁴Oliver, Aspects, pp. 2-3.

³⁵Albertson, p. 50.

³⁶Giles Oakley, The Devil's Music: A History of the Blues (New York: Taplinger Publishing Company, Inc., 1977), p. 117; Carl Van Vechten as cited in Albertson, p. 107.

CHAPTER V

SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS

This study has explored the historical and cultural context of Blues lyrics and the background of the Blues artist, Bessie Smith. Moreover, a theoretical foundation has been created, and selected lyrics by Bessie have been analyzed for their rhetorical implications. The purposes of this study were to (1) determine whether popular musical lyrics can be viewed rhetorically, (2) explicate the cultural context in which Blues lyrics were written, (3) develop a critical model for analyzing the potential rhetorical function of Blues, (4) assess major persuasive operatives in popular Blues by Bessie Smith between 1923 and 1930, and (5) ascertain whether these operatives had an underlying motive.

This chapter will: (1) provide a summary of the study in accordance with the purposes identified in Chapter One; (2) identify conclusions about the findings; (3) suggest limitations to the study; and (4) speculate about related research possibilities.

Summary

A major goal of this study was to discover whether popular musical lyrics may be analyzed from a rhetorical

perspective. Underlying the entire process of rhetorical exchange is the notion that rhetoric is "the study of symbols of persuasion and how men choose among them in 'adjusting people to ideas and ideas to people.'"¹ Thus, this study attempted to support the position that ". . . the musical form, or, for that matter, any form may be considered for its rhetorical aspects to the extent which it manipulates symbols in order to influence and modify human behavior."² Musical lyrics are unique in the rhetorical arena. As a poetic form, they border on the edge of traditional rhetoric. Rhetoric and poetic, from a critical perspective, may operate conjointly "in that both may deal with the assumption that the work is intended to do something to an audience."³ Although Bessie Smith's compositions may be viewed as "lyrical poetry," this study contends that Blues lyrics may be viewed also as persuasive symbols in that the Blues artist attempted to influence a widespread audience through song.

Chapter Two discusses aspects of the Black life-style, essential to the understanding of persuasion in Black musical lyrics of any form. Thus, this study has attempted to explain the cultural context in which Blues was written by defining the social, economic, and psychological state of Blacks. In order to describe Blues and culture during the 1920s, the period which has been the focus of this study, the blue feeling was traced to early slavery in this country and was found to exist over a span of two centuries. Several forms of Black music came into being and all of those forms

had some impact on Blues vogue during the 1920s. Perhaps worksongs were closest to Blues in mood and lyrical development. In tracing the roots of Black music in America, Black suffering also was found to be an integral part of Blacks and Blues.

A third goal of the study was to develop a critical model for analyzing Blues. Chapter Three outlines the critical model adapted for the purpose of assessing how symbols were utilized by the Blues artist in "adjusting people to ideas and ideas to people."⁴ Therefore the model developed for application to Bessie's compositions was essentially Burkeian. Identification and consubstantiality, two areas within the range of rhetoric, provide the foundation for this conceptual model. These concepts were chosen by virtue of the cultural context in which Blues lyrics were composed and performed. In other words, identification is a means for pointing to a problem unique to Black America. Moreover, redemption is another useful concept for understanding the rhetorical end of identification and is therefore a second element in the model. Ultimate terms, ethos, and pathos are tools in the model for explicating both identification and redemption.

Chapter Four provides an assessment of persuasive operatives in popular Blues by Bessie Smith, yet another goal of this study. The task of extracting persuasive elements in specific lyrics was informed by an inquiry into Bessie Smith's character and life-style. These aspects of Bessie

are essential in that they illuminate her position of con-substantiality with other Blacks. The fact that she was generous and led a relatively fast-paced life-style is important to the understanding of her concern for other Blacks. By defining who Bessie was, a clearer view of how she influenced her audience was established.

Nine of Bessie's lyrics, composed between 1923 and 1930, were selected from the total set of her compositions that were reissued subsequently by Columbia. Each of the selected compositions was analyzed for persuasive content utilizing the premises and tools outlined in Chapter Three. In addition, the nature of Bessie Smith's audience was discussed so as to exemplify the impact of her Blues repertoire.

The final goal of this study was to uncover Bessie Smith's underlying motive for persuasion. It is relatively clear that Bessie had some impact upon her audience. Throughout the study, the attempt has been made to probe Bessie's background for the purpose of determining the rhetorical motive for her Blues composition. Probing her character and life-style provides one means for assessing the rhetorical motive for persuasion.

Conclusions

There are three useful areas from which conclusions may be drawn. The first area concerns rhetorical operatives in Blues by Bessie Smith. A retrospective view of the critical model and its use shows that Blues lyrics, as a popular musical form, function rhetorically. Thus, Bessie's

lyrics function persuasively as well as poetically. The lyrics sustain Blacks by representing identification with their troubles and, in some cases, they provide solutions for those troubles through a national medium--the phonograph record. With this in mind, one can see how identification, redemption, ethos, pathos, and ultimate terms operate conjointly for the purpose of persuasion as suggested in Chapter Three. Each of the conceptual tools presented means for extracting from the lyrics individual elements of persuasion, illuminating the process in which the Blues lyrics and Bessie conjointly induced persuasion among an oppressed group of people.

By using selected compositions by Bessie between 1923 and 1930, two forms were identified as serving persuasive functions. The nine lyrics, categorized as experiential or therapeutic, were found to function persuasively. The experiential form was one in which the existing problem was stated in a melancholy fashion. Redemption then occurred, through identification, as the rhetorical end. Therapeutic Blues were also influential; however, the pattern is usually problem-solution. There is a positive note to this form, and redemption is conceivably obtained through the strength that is shown. Identification is reached and specific ultimate terms, Bessie's ethos, and her pathetic appeal assist in the transcendence of the problem.

The underlying rhetorical motive establishes Bessie's ethos. The generosity and concern exemplified in her

character and actions brought her respect as a performer. The relationship between her character and her compositions suggest a motive of sympathetic awareness of existing trouble.

The audience plays a significant role in the analytical process. Bessie's rapport with her audience and the additional force of their response is the primary point of convergence to what Burke defines as the condition of identification, consubstantiality. Bessie's identity is merged with that of her audience. Redemption is then achieved and solidarity among the race results. A new world is opened for the Black audience, thus there is transcendence over the problem faced. This state of redemption may be attributed, for the most part, to Bessie's lyrics. Carl Van Vechten, the notable Blues enthusiast, recalled that during Bessie's performance, "Amens rent the air, [and there were] little nervous giggles, like the shattering of Venetian glass."⁵ The audience response seems to place Bessie in a sermonic role. As a spokesperson employing epideictic address, Bessie blames man, rain, the North and even life, for everyday problems which coincide with race. In this respect, Bessie is the compassionate individual who extends beyond her wealth to provide redemption for the poor. Thus, redemption, as it relates to the audience, is an integral part of the rhetorical end.

In assessing the cultural context in which Bessie's Blues lyrics were composed, it is clear that the rhetorical

end is a uniting factor and a key for solidarity through a psychologically and emotionally difficult experience for Blacks. Bessie's Blues compositions appear to eradicate the impossibility of overcoming the experience, thereby establishing a transcendence over the pain and suffering. Therefore, in this study, Black culture, and rhetorical premises and tools, conjointly define rhetorical operatives.

This study does not purport to generalize about other Blues composers or songs from the Blues genre. However, important aspects of the Blues tradition may be seen through this analysis and ideas presented may prove useful in assessing operatives in many Blues compositions. This study has shown that Bessie had the ability to produce stirring compositions according to the troubles of the average Black. Some of her compositions recount her own experiences; some do not. However, each had a way of imparting truth and, through the acknowledgement of such truths, redemption followed for the Blues audience. Moreover, Bessie's life as an entertainer never separated her from the troubles of lower-class Black America. Her identification with the "poor and dispossessed" rang in many of her compositions which echo advice and consolation for those in need. Inspirational works, such as "Poor Man's Blues," and "Standin' in the Rain Blues," were vehicles for establishing solidarity among the Black race, and ultimately reducing division. Through her ethos as a performer, and the pathos in her lyrics as well as in her actions toward

Blacks as an oppressed people, her music was an additional force in the growth of Black America. Oakley states, "[t]o this day Bessie Smith has remained a symbol of resistance to defeat and oppression."⁶

This study is based upon the assumption that persuasion exists in those areas defined by Kenneth Burke as being within the rhetorical "range." Blues lyrics, such as those composed by Bessie, are persuasive statements, albeit she did not possess what the "true" orator, established by classical rhetoricians, was supposed to possess--education.⁷ During Bessie's time period, Blacks, such as W.E.B. DuBois, brought to the attention of America, an epideictic address in blame of White America. This address largely resulted from the ineffectiveness of the Emancipation Proclamation which had defined a new place in society for Blacks and had proclaimed that they were sufferers of an evil--a wrongdoing. Although Bessie Smith was not a DuBois, her influence, as well as that of other Blues artists, was probably helpful in sustaining Blacks mentally and socially through song. Consolation was brought for the sufferers of wrongdoing--Blacks.

Bessie Smith, as performer, persuades her audience by employing pathos thereby revealing her consubstantiality with the Black audience. This places her in the category of rhetorician in that she uses her "identification of interests to establish rapport between [herself and her] audience."⁸ This study concludes that Bessie Smith's

rhetoric was produced out of her desire to communicate with her audience by persuading them that there was something unique and positive about being a Black American and that trouble could be translated into joy, thereby transcending the apparent problem.

The third area from which useful conclusions may be drawn is Blues as a rhetorical dimension. This writer contends that rhetoric can and does exist among a community that utilizes a style and way of thinking which expands traditional areas to a new and useful dimension. This study entails rhetorical analysis of a poetic form and shows how rhetorical criticism may be applied to musical lyrics. In conjunction with Irvine and Kirkpatrick, Cowan, Carter, and other rhetorical critics, this study confirms the potential existence of persuasion in the musical form. The analytical model created is a suitable one in that it pulls together appropriate theories and tools for the analysis of nontraditional rhetoric within a specific cultural context. Thus, certain circumstances and points in time result in the expansion of traditional rhetorical boundaries. This study supports the position that such an expansion is both necessary and useful in rhetorical criticism.

Limitations

Perhaps the most significant limitation of this study is the focus upon lyrics apart from the music, which is, in essence, the delivery. Any attempt to draw conclusions

about audience response-effect--especially in terms of pathos--had to take into account the separation of music and lyrics.

A second limitation is the problem of possible improvisation. This is a limitation when assessing the rhetorical motive. All of the lyrics analyzed were taken directly from Bessie's Columbia recordings and transcribed. They were then matched with transcriptions made by Blues scholars. However, Bessie's original sheet music with her lyrics was not obtainable for this study. Therefore, she may have improvised when she recorded.

Suggestions for Future Research

This study has combined areas and disciplines which are on the boundaries of traditional rhetoric. There are other areas of Blues and music, conjointly and separately, which may well contribute to existing research. Such studies might include:

- 1) The musical form as rhetorical exchange in Blues.
- 2) Rhetorical elements in other styles of the Blues genre, such as country Blues.
- 3) Musical lyrics as rhetorical artifacts such as those of pop, soul, or country.

A study of the music and the lyrics of Blues will allow for extended conclusions regarding the relationship between performance and audience response. Since this study has undertaken a small area of the Blues genre, one classic

performer's compositions, there are many other performers and Blues categories which may be viewed rhetorically. Moreover, persuasion in more contemporary songs would be another area to explore. Country and soul music could yield valuable insights since they are both forms created from deep feeling, perhaps the best possible means for arriving at truth.

Other models for the analysis of lyrics, especially those by Blacks, might include Burke's pentad or his dramatic approach to criticism.

ENDNOTES

¹James R. Irvine and Walter G. Kirkpatrick, "The Musical Form in Rhetorical Exchange: Theoretical Considerations," Quarterly Journal of Speech 58 (October 1972): 272, citing Donald C. Bryant.

²Thomas J. Cowan, "Giuseppe Verdi's La Battaglia Di Legnano: A Rhetorical Criticism" (M.A. thesis, Colorado State University, 1978), p. 2.

³David Fregoe, "An Analysis of the Contemporary Relationship between Rhetoric and Poetic" (M.A. thesis, Colorado State University, 1980), p. 18.

⁴Donald C. Bryant, "Rhetoric: Its Function and Its Scope," Quarterly Journal of Speech 39 (December 1953): 413, as cited in Irvine and Kirkpatrick, p. 272.

⁵Giles Oakley, The Devil's Music: A History of the Blues (New York: Taplinger Publishing Company, Inc., 1977), p. 117.

⁶Oakley, pp. 109-10.

⁷Quintilian defined the true orator as the honest and educated man. Education was something that Blacks in America were not able to obtain until the nineteenth century.

⁸Kenneth Burke, A Rhetoric of Motives (New York: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1950), p. 46.

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