

Joanne V. Gabbin: On "Memphis Blues"

In "Memphis Blues," Brown uses folk rhymes, working in concert with "the rhythm and imagery of the black folk sermon," to convey "the black folk preacher's vision of the threat of destruction" and a deeper, more pervasive "comment on the transitory nature of all things man-made." Charles H. Rowell recognizes Brown's "excellent employment of the rhythm of black folk rhymes" to emphasize the speakers' indifference to the inevitable destruction of Memphis"

As Rowell suggests, Brown, projecting on the speaker a child's indifference to death, uses playful, teasing, lines to heighten the poem's message. The Black man is indifferent to the destruction of Memphis, for he has never seen it as his own.

In part two of "Memphis Blues," Brown employs the call and response patterns of certain spirituals to create voices similar to the folk preacher's exhorting his congregation to salvation and those of the members responding to his call.

[. . .]

Here, however, is a difference. "Ironically, the response of each speaker in the poem has nothing to do with the impending destruction; while Memphis is being destroyed, each speaker plans to do what he thinks is best for him. " Implicit in their responses is "the sensibility of the blues singer--his stoic ability to transcend his deprived condition." Also present is the blues song's emphasis "on the immediacy of life, the nature of man, and human survival in all of its physical and psychological manifestations." The preacher man, the drinking man, the gambling man, and so on, see themselves as outsiders. As they have been excluded from the society by proscription and prejudice, they define their survival in their own terms; they take their pleasure and their meaning from within the boundaries set for them. However, moving at a deeper level is Brown's paradox. Being outside will not keep them from destruction. Even those distinctions made and boundaries set among men will have no meaning then.

As Brown brings into play a combination of folk forms--the secular rhyme, the sermon, the blues, and the scattered notes of the gospel shout--in "Memphis Blues," they function not only to further the meaning of the poem but also to suggest the essential interrelatedness of the forms.

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