

Mark A. Sanders: On "Memphis Blues"

With a striking vision of apocalyptic retribution, [in] "Memphis Blues" natural and political calamity hold center stage. Yet another folk voice asserts its vision and agency as it identifies the temporal nature of Western civilization and thus of white hegemony. In the larger scheme of things, both modern and ancient Memphis signify the same mutability in human endeavors; edifices constructed in a futile gesture toward immortality, both cities must remain subject to God's destructive wrath. Although the poem never cites God or Christianity directly, its African American emphasis on Old Testament types and judgment is obvious. First listing Old Testament cities of sin and Hebrew or Israelite slavery, the poem begins to position the modern African American relative to transhistorical oppressive forces. The destruction of Nineveh, Tyre, and Babylon serves as evidence of God's justice, as these cities refused to listen to God's will. Thus they were judged and condemned. In the context of the poem, they stand as prelude to contemporary circumstances. Through natural catastrophe, an Old Testament God wreaks his revenge on a people too evil to follow his commandments.

[. . .]

As these rapidly paced lines quickly conflate past and present, they implicitly reiterate the analogy between Old Testament Israelites and modern African Americans. Both structure and statement also establish a critical tension with the ensuing section, one highlighting a folk response to the inevitable apocalypse. In contrast to the declarative statement of part 1, the dialogic approach of part 2 portrays interracial conversations in response to calamity. Brown appropriates the form and mode from a spiritual, "What You Gonna Do?," which Howard Odum and Guy Johnson collected in *Negro Workaday Songs*:

Sinner, what you gonna do

When de world's on fi-er?

Sinner, what you gonna do

When de world's on fi-er?

Sinner, what you gonna do

When de world's on fi-er?

O my Lawd.

Brother, what you gonna do? etc.

Sister, what you gonna do? etc.

Father, what you gonna do? etc.

Mother, what you gonna do? etc.

The spiritual, by implication, implores the sinner to seek salvation in anticipation of the coming judgment. "Memphis Blues" replicates the same sense of urgency and inevitability but stresses consistency, rather than transformation:

Watcha gonna do when Memphis on fire,

Memphis on fire, Mistah Preachin? Man?

Gonna pray to Jesus and nebber tire,

Gonna pray to Jesus, loud as I can,

Gonna pray to my Jesus, oh, my Lawd!

The preacher continues to preach; the lover continues to pursue, and the gambler continues to bet, all in direct contrast to cataclysmic change. The final stanza makes explicit the dichotomy between mutability and permanence, inferring black continuity in the midst of God's wrath:

Memphis go

By Flood or Flame;

Nigger won?t worry

All de same--

Memphis go

Memphis come back,

Air? no skin

Off de nigger's back.

All dese cities

Ashes, rust....

De win? sing sperrichals

Through deir dus?.

In the midst of desolation "de win? sing sperrichals," signaling an African American presence beyond God's judgment and one independent of (perhaps transcending) hegemonic forces. Here, the cultural dynamic within the poem is spiritual, but the poem itself asserts a blues inflection, indeed a blues ballad used for even greater dramatic effect in "Ma Rainey." But here, as we have seen in section one, the blues process itself asserts the ability of specific personas to envision being free or beyond circumscription.

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