The Blues and Langston Hughes

When the shoe strings break
On both your shoes
And you're in a hurry-
That's the blues.

When you go to buy a candy bar
And you've lost the dime you had-
Slipped through a hole in your pocket somewhere-
That's the blues, too, and bad!

“The Blues” – Langston Hughes

A truly American style of music, blues seemed to originate in the Mississippi Delta region in the 19th century. Part slave work songs, part Sunday church spiritual, Langston Hughes was one of the first to recognize the potential of the blues as written poetry. As he once said, “the music seemed to cry, but the words somehow laughed.”

When Hughes moved to the East in 1921 and heard the blues music in clubs on Lenox Avenue in Harlem, he said, “I tried to write poems like the songs they sang on Seventh Street. Those songs had the pulse beat of the people who keep on going.”

For Hughes, the Blues represented a culture and a life that mirrored what he was trying to achieve with his poetry, which was to present a certain section of life (the one that he was familiar with) in the most realistic sense possible. Read the following poems and songs, and see if you can find what Hughes was going for.

The Weary Blues  
by Langston Hughes  1923

Droning a drowsy syncopated tune,
Rocking back and forth to a mellow croon,
I heard a Negro play.
Down on Lenox Avenue the other night
By the pale dull pallor of an old gas light
He did a lazy sway. . . .
He did a lazy sway. . . .
To the tune o’ those Weary Blues.
With his ebony hands on each ivory key
He made that poor piano moan with melody.
O Blues!
Swaying to and fro on his rickety stool
He played that sad raggy tune like a musical fool.
Sweet Blues!
Coming from a black man’s soul.
O Blues!
In a deep song voice with a melancholy tone
I heard that Negro sing, that old piano moan—
“Ain’t got nobody in all this world,
Ain’t got nobody but ma self.
I’s gwine to quit ma frownin’
And put ma troubles on the shelf.”

Thump, thump, thump, went his foot on the floor.
He played a few chords then he sang some more—
“I got the Weary Blues
And I can’t be satisfied.
Got the Weary Blues
And can’t be satisfied—
I ain’t happy no mo’
And I wish that I had died.”
And far into the night he crooned that tune.
The stars went out and so did the moon.
The singer stopped playing and went to bed
While the Weary Blues echoed through his head.
He slept like a rock or a man that’s dead.

Question: In a few sentences, describe what makes you “blue”.

Poetry
Mr. Hart
Blues Songs, or Poetry?
The traditional blues song follows a pretty similar pattern. There is usually a rhyming pattern (AAB) in which the first two lines are often repeated, or changed just slightly. The lyrics usually talk about “real people” problems, such as those which involve love, work, or poor people just trying to stay alive. Read the following lyrics from some blues songs. Analyze them like you would a regular poem. What do you find? Are they examples of poetry?

Love in Vain by Robert Johnson (1911 – 1938)
Well, I followed her to the station with a suitcase in my hand
Yeah, I followed her to the station with a suitcase in my hand
Well, it's hard to tell, it's hard to tell, when all your love's in vain

When the train rolled into the station I looked her straight in the eye
Well, the train come in the station I looked her straight in the eye
Well, I felt so sad and lonesome that I all I could do was cry

When the train left the station, it had two lights on behind
Yeah, the train left the station, it had two lights on behind
Well, the blue light was my baby and the red light was my mind

All my love's in vain.
It's hard to tell when all your love is in vain.
All, all my love's in vain

Hummingbird by B.B. King
Sometimes I get impatient
But she cools me without words
And she comes so sweet and so plain
My hummingbird and have you heard
That I thought my life had ended
But I find that it's just begun
‘Cause she gets me where I live
I'll give all I have to give
I'm talking about that hummingbird
Oh she's little and she loves me
Too much for words to say
When I see her in the morning sleeping
She's little and she loves me
To my lucky day
Hummingbird don't fly away

When I'm feeling wild and lonesome
She knows the words to say
And she gives me a little understanding
In her special way
And I just have to say
In my life I loved a woman
Because she's more than I deserve
And she gets me where I live
I'll give all I have to give
I'm talking about that hummingbird
Oh she's little and she loves me
Too much for words to say
When I see her in the morning sleeping
She's little and she loves me
To my lucky day
Hummingbird don't fly away
Good Morning Blues
by Leadbelly (Huddie Leadbetter) (1941)

Now this is the blues
There was a white man had the blues
Thought it was nothing to worry about
Now you lay down at night
You roll from one side of the bed to the other all
Night long
Ya can't sleep, whats the matter; the blues has gotcha
Ya get up you sit on the side of the bed in the mornin'
May have a sister a mother a brother n a father around
But you don't want no talk out of em
Whats the matter; the blues has gotcha
When you go in put your feet under the table look down
At ya plate got everything you wanna eat
But ya shake ya head you get up you say "Lord I can't
Eat I can't sleep whats the matter"
The blues gotcha
Why not talk to ya
Tell what you gotta tell it

Well, good morning blues, blues how do you do
Well, good morning blues, blues how do you do
I'm doing all right well, good morning how are you.

I couldn't sleep last night, I was turning from side to
Side
Oh Lord, I was turning from side to side
I wasn't sad, I was just dissatisfied.

I couldn't sleep last night, you know the blues walking
'Round my bed,
Oh Lord, the blues walking 'round my bed
I went to eat my breakfast, the blues was in my bread.

Well good morning blues, blues how do you do.
Well, good morning blues, blues how do you do.
I'm doing all right, well, good morning how are you.