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The theme of infidelity in Negro blues songs

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THE THEME OF INFIDELITY IN THE NEGRO BLUES SONGS

A Thesis

Presented to the

Department of English

and the

Faculty of the College of Graduate Studies

University of Omaha

In Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree

Master of Arts

by

Fred Schoning

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for the degree Master of Arts.

Chairman Department

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Name

Department

Psychology

English

English

Music
Sometime during the middle of the last century a number of American writers became interested in what was known as "local color" writing, and attempts were made to study, analyze, and comprehend the various regions of the American landscape. Along with this came an increase in the use of dialects, and writers attempted to capture the essence of a particular locale through the language of its inhabitants. One of the most interesting aspects of this movement was the increased concern with Negro life, habits, and language.

Among some of the more famous writers, a few of whom expressed a marked interest in Negro culture, were Joel Chandler Harris, Lafcadio Hearn, and Mark Twain. Since the creation of Uncle Tom by Harriet Beecher Stowe, and Jim by Mark Twain, American writers have become increasingly aware of the separateness and uniqueness of Negro culture. Vachel Lindsay, William Carlos Williams, William Faulkner, Tennessee Williams, Edward Albee, Kenneth Rexroth, and Jack Kerouac, certainly a varied and odd assortment, are only a few of the American writers who were, and are, concerned with the portrayal of some aspect of Negro life. This does not include, however, such Negro writers as Ralph Ellison, Langston Hughes, Richard Wright, James Baldwin, and Leroi Jones, all of whom are equally concerned with the presentation of Negro culture. American writers have thus shown that the Negro is an important aspect of American life.

One of the surest ways to understand the Negro is to examine his own literature, but it must be kept in mind that writers such as James Baldwin are creating in what is essentially a white idiom, for most Negroes in the
field of literature have been influenced by white writers. The only true American Negro literature is that which is created in the folk idiom, and perhaps one of the most uniquely original of the Negro folk "literatures" is the blues song. The blues song, with its simple stanza form, unabashed honesty, and strikingly original use of language, deserves to be as much a part of American literature as Joel Chandler Harris' animal tales, James Russell Lowell's "Biglow Papers," Sinclair Lewis' Mainstreet, or E. E. Cummings' use of dialect in verse. It is true that the blues songs are often askew in rhyme, contain rather trite imagery, and are expressed in uncouth terms, but they are nevertheless a strong and direct folk verse which expresses a philosophy that is indigenous to one particular group of Americans—the American Negro. The blues song does not represent a pseudo-local color literature, but rather a part of our authentic folk literature.

Whenever the prevalent theme of a certain group of people is examined, one will find that discussion sometimes inevitably turns to the sociological, as well as to the literary. Indeed, it is hard to separate the two, especially when dealing with a minority group that is isolated from the mainstream of American society. This could be comparable to an attempt to examine the themes in John Steinbeck's The Grapes of Wrath, but without regard for their sociological significance. Thus, one will find that this thesis contains much that inevitably, but not wrongly, falls into the sociological. We have in the blues songs of infidelity a social problem that is expressed through a form of folk literature, although the Negro blues singer would be the first person to deny that he is expressing any type of social complaint. If there is any underlying social commentary
in the blues song, it is virtually unknown by most bluesmen, but it must
nevertheless be examined. The best way to examine the blues song is to
consider its merits as literature, as has been done in the "Introduction,"
and then to analyze what it has to say.

A brief explanatory note is necessary in order to clarify several
points in this study. First of all, this study does not contain what
could be considered as the "best" of the Negro blues songs. The songs
were chosen because they were typical and relevant to the topic, not be­
because they were the best. Neither, however, are any of the songs repre­
sentative of the worst.

The date of a recording often has some significance, but I have not
included this information because I feel that the theme of infidelity
has remained relatively uninfluenced by the changing time, and thus, I
felt that including the recording dates would only be irrelevant. Re­
cording locations, as in the case of the dates, were also not included,
and for much the same reasons. The recordings, for those who are inter­
ested, range in date from the early 1920's to the middle 1960's, and
generally speaking, were recorded in such varied places as Houston,
Texas and New York City. The performers discussed are fairly well
representative of the Negro blues singers in general, and are not just
typical of "South Side Chicago style," "Mississippi Delta style," "Texas
style," or any other "style." "Styles" are too often a figment of the
blues collector's imagination, most of whom attempt to put everything into
a neat little category, and then deplore the singer's lack of "purity"
when he fails to fit a particular "style."

The names of the blues singers are often colorful and esoteric. I
have not included quotation marks around the various nicknames, bynames, and pseudonyms because, for all practical purposes, the singers were often not known by any other name. Many of the names were chosen for reasons other than publicity. Most were chosen because they were apropos. Blind Willie Johnson was called "Blind" for the simple reason that he, in reality, was blind. Other singers chose names that would have some significance to their Negro audience. McKinley Morganfield, whose name sounds more like that of an English nobleman, became Muddy Waters, a name with much meaning for those Negroes who came from the great Mississippi Delta region. Other singers were forced to choose pseudonyms, which they were often unable to get rid of, because of the fact that they were under contract to one recording company, and yet, continued to record for another.

There are several people I would like to thank for their more than able assistance. First, to Dean Robert Harper of the University of Omaha, for his help in bringing this rather unwieldy material to something of an organizable pattern. I would also like to express my appreciation to Dean Harper for allowing me to work on this somewhat unorthodox topic.

My appreciation is also extended to Mr. Norman Zinn, Foreign Language Co-ordinator of the Omaha Public Schools, for his assistance in helping to decipher recordings that often sounded more than incoherent.

A great deal of gratitude, more than I can express, should be extended to my wife, Susan, who bore the burden of listening to what must have seemed like a countless number of recordings, but who always managed to comment and assist whenever possible.
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PART I: INTRODUCTION

The anonymous verse story handed down orally has followed an almost continuous course throughout the history of English literature. The tradition of folk poetry is evident as far back as Beowulf, from which it has continued, until reaching a refinement in the pseudo-folk verse of Robert Burns. The oral tradition of folk poetry lost much of its vitality with the advent of the industrial revolution of the nineteenth century and the mass communication media of the twentieth, although one can always cite examples of the existence, in some form, of this tradition today. Oral folk poetry, generally speaking, fell into the hands of more literate craftsmen, who then turned to writing a rather polished pseudo-folk verse, which had many of the characteristics of authentic folk poetry, but in most cases lacked strength because of an overabundance of finesse and a complete loss of a feeling of spontaneity. Robert Burns could be considered as the epitome of the "professional" folk poet, and in many circles is still regarded as an authentic representative of the true folk tradition.

America, having a much larger land mass than Great Britain, and far more room to expand, continued the oral transmission of verse in the folk idiom for a much longer time. This was due to the simple fact that hidden pockets of isolation were left behind as America spread westward, and folk poetry continued to be passed along through generations of provincially oriented Americans. Most of the oral poetry of the American people, however, proves, upon close examination, to be but
an extension and revision of English folk verse. ¹

By the middle of the twentieth century, America was crisscrossed with the lines of mass media communication, and the oral folk poetry had begun to pass from the scene, or to become stylized, formalized, and commercialized, although there were a number of examples to the contrary.

The folk tradition of oral poetry is mainly one of song, and instrumental accompaniment. English poetry, in its earliest stages, was the work of the scop and gleeman. The scop " ... was the shaper or the maker of the verses—above all, the poet. The gleeman, on the other hand, was the harper who chanted what the scop had composed—above all, the singer or reciter. Each, however, often combined the functions of both."²

The tradition of the folk singer and reciter reached something of a peak during the fifteenth century with the popular ballad. The popular ballad was an anonymous story handed down by oral transmission among the folk, and is usually not given a date: when a date is shown, it almost always indicates when the ballad was written down, but not, however, when it originated. Most scholars recognize the fifteenth century as the period when the ballad received its greatest impulse. The ballad was fundamentally the song of the common people, and was developed at the same time as the metrical romance, which was basically the poetry of the upper classes. The metrical romance is aristocratic


in its beginnings and sprawls in a somewhat complex manner over a
number of adventures, while the ballad is humble in origin and centers
in simple style over one particular situation. 3

The ballad became the core of English folk music. Simple in form,
the ballad " . . . is generally developed by means of dialogue and is
usually focused upon one striking episode; earlier and later events,
if mentioned at all, are not treated in detail, but are briefly alluded
to and in many cases, deliberately left unexplained." 4

The ballads usually dealt with themes that were common to universal folk song, or with themes borrowed from romances. Many of the
ballads told of popular class heroes, and historical, or semihistorical,
events. Most of the versions we have today have come to us from the
sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, but there is little doubt that the
ballad thrived in the late Middle Ages. It is unfortunate, however,
that the ballad in its earliest stages, that of the purely oral litera-
ture, was not likely to have been written down, and so has not survived
in its original form. 5

The ballad, however, was not the only form of folk poetry sung.
The carole, " . . . a sprightly ring dance, of French derivation,
which the participants punctuated at intervals with hand clapping or a
vocal refrain," 6 was also quite popular, as were the secular lyrics,
which usually dealt with the subjects of drinking, begging, loving, and

3Tbid., p. 100.

4David M. Zesmer, Guide to English Literature from Beowulf through

5David Daiches, A Critical History of English Literature, I (New
York, 1960), 85.

6Zesmer, p. 139
the changing seasons.

The lyrics and the ballads developed through a process of evolution. The original composer of a ballad or lyric was usually never known, and as the folk verse was passed from one singer to another, the source of the poem became less distinct. David M. Zesmer, discussing the ballad, although his words could apply to the lyric as well, writes:

How did the ballads originate? It was at one time widely accepted and the theory still has its adherents, that ballads were composed communally; that they grew more or less spontaneously out of some group experience and expressed emotions and attitudes shared by the group. Most scholars now believe, however, that ballads—at least in their initial forms—were conceived and sung by individual poets, who remain anonymous. As the ballad circulated orally, other singers would vary both words and music because of the unreliability of their memories, the special interests and demands of their local communities, or, simply, their own creative impulses and abilities. As a result, a given ballad may appear in several forms at different times and places; and one version, whatever its relative literary merit, is as "authentic" as another.7

The tradition of oral transmission, with changes in the verses to suit the individual singer, has continued through the years, and is still to be found in a few isolated areas of England and America, although it has become more difficult for the folklorist to locate authentic material in this day of mass media communication. It has only been in recent years that attempts have been made to preserve what still exists of the authentic folk song traditions, as most earlier scholars regarded ballads and lyric folk verse as written poems, rather than oral transmissions.

Serious ballad-collecting was done as far back as the eighteenth century, and such well known writers as Thomas Percy, Robert Burns, and

7Ibid., p. 149.
Sir Walter Scott participated, but it was not until the twentieth century, and the advent of the phonograph, that authentic folk songs could be heard as well as read. David M. Zesmer has written that only in the twentieth century—thanks largely to the pioneer work of Cecil Sharp, a trained musician—did students begin to realize the importance of the music and, consequently, start an intense and systematic search for ballad tunes. These tunes are still being recorded from the lips of untrained singers living in the backwoods of the British Isles and America.8

The folk song tradition in America, especially along the Atlantic seacoast and inward to the Appalachian and Allegheny mountains, shows the strong influence of the English ballads and lyrics. The subject matter is usually reworked to conform to an American setting, but for the most part, the songs remain fairly close to the original English versions. American folk poetry displays a great deal more in the way of diversity than the English ballads and lyrics, but it must be remembered that America has had the advantage of a variety of ethnic groups to draw material from. Regardless of the changes in specific subject matter, the themes of both English and American folk songs remain the same, for the ballads and lyrics of both are concerned with such topics as humor, domestic tragedy, the supernatural, revenge, death, and love. Love, however, is probably the most frequent theme found in British and American folk songs.

Alan Lomax writes:

Love, they say, means sorrow, invites betrayal, leads to long separation and brings true lovers to the grave. This melancholy view of love probably came to the West from the Orient, where a jealous and patriarchal family system prevails; but in all Europe, notably in Britain, pagan

8Ibid., p. 148.
notes of joy sound in the gloom. In English songs the maiden is very pleasantly seduced before she is betrayed. In Scots songs she is very often raped but, if she has pluck, she may win a fine, noble husband. But our pioneer folk censor struck these pleasurable realities from the songs, and, as far as possible, from life, leaving Americans the sad moral to sing . . .

The grave will decay you and turn you to dust.
There's not one boy in fifty that a poor girl can trust . . .

The full weight of Puritanism did not fall upon the Negroes, who came largely from cultures which placed a high value on erotic and aggressive behavior and which provided vivid outlets for them in song, dance, and ceremonial. As slaves and later, as second-class citizens in the South, they were not expected to conform rigidly to the conventions that harassed the whites. Even the country Baptist preacher looked on sex as one thing and sin as another. At the folk level, especially, the Negro escaped some of the anxieties and conflicts that plagued white Americans, and his often joyous, always sensuous music shows it. Not until the twentieth century, when the group had thoroughly assimilated Western ascetic morality and was beset by discrimination and social dislocation, did Negroes begin to sing the 'careless love' blues.9

This rather lengthy quotation from Mr. Lomax, leading into the topic at hand, is important for the insight it gives us into the attitudes and viewpoints of the American Negro, and how his feelings are expressed in his folk poetry.

Negro folk music takes a number of forms, among which are the street cries, field hollars, work songs, calls, ring games, playparty songs, ballads, and minstral songs. It is the spirituals, more than any other form of Negro folk poetry, that have been given close attention by scholars. However, one aspect of Negro music, the blues song, has been virtually ignored by the scholars of folk poetry. Many volumes

9 Lomax, pp. xviii-xix.
on American folk music already exist, and one will find that much space is devoted to the different styles of the Negro songsters, but the blues songs, if mentioned at all, are usually given a minor place in comparison to the spirituals. It is only in the considerable number of books on jazz that one finds particular note taken of the blues songs, but here, the emphasis is primarily on the music aspect, rather than on the lyrics of the songs. With few exceptions, notably in the books of Harold Courlander, Paul Oliver, and Samuel Charters, the poetry of the blues songs is seldom discussed at any length.

Before discussing the lyrics of the blues songs, it is necessary to place the Negro blues, as far as background and style are concerned, into the spectrum of folk music. The blues songs did not come into public notice until some time after the end of the First World War, but from 1917 on, "... blues, near-blues, and non-blues-called-blues penetrated our popular music through and through." It is ironic, that with the popularity of the blues, the authentic blues singers were so little known to the general public, although some, such as Bessie Smith, were widely known among Negro audiences. The general public, however, accepted as blues singers certain public entertainers, who in reality had very little knowledge of what constituted a blues song. The same problem was found in the related field of jazz, where Al Jolson became known, through the title of a motion picture, as "The Jazz Singer," and Bessie Smith, ironically, had become an almost hopeless alcoholic, virtually unknown by the general white public.

"Harmonically," writes Barry Ulanov, "the blues follows a simple chord pattern, that of most Western folk music."\(^{11}\) Marshall Stearns agrees by stating that the blues harmony is "... clearly derived from European music although colored by the blue tonality of the cry."\(^{12}\) This "cry," along with shouts, calls and responses, and work songs, is African, rather than European, in origin. Cries were simply a form of self-expression, a vocalization of some emotion. A man working under the hot sun might give voice to such a cry on impulse, directing it to the world, or to the fields around him, or perhaps to himself. It might be filled with exuberance or melancholy. It might consist of a long "hoh-hoh," stretched out and embellished with intricate ornamentation of a kind virtually impossible to notate; or it might be a phrase like "I'm hot and hungry," or simply "pickin' cotton, yoh-yoh!" Sometimes this elemental music, carried beyond a single line or phrase, would take on the form of an elemental song.\(^{13}\)

The blues, sometime in the late nineteenth century, evolved from this "elemental song," incorporating also various other influences, including the spirituals and work songs.

Although a discussion of the blues scale, "... which consists of the ordinary scale plus a flattened third note and a flattened seventh note,"\(^{14}\) would prove interesting to the music scholar, it would be rather meaningless to one who is interested in the words of the blues songs. It must be remembered that all poetry is written primarily to be heard, and in the case of folk poetry, the words are sung and accom-


\(^{12}\) Stearns, p. 102.


\(^{14}\) Ulanov, p. 27.
panied by instruments, as well. The blues songs, therefore, are meant to be heard, and the music should, in actuality, not appear "meaningless," although the student of literature does not necessarily have to be well versed on the technical aspects of the music.

Above all other forms of music, folk song is to be heard rather than read. It scarcely exists in a true sense in written musical notation though folk songs have been noted and adapted by musicians and collectors frequently enough. There are no fundamental standards in the manner of delivery, for this is essentially personal to the folk singer himself who is in no way striving after technical perfection and purity of tone. And of all folk forms the blues may well be said to be the one which most requires to be heard. . . . In view of the abundance of recordings, the paucity of published works on the subject of the blues is truly surprising, and it is probably true to say that in proportion to the numbers of examples available to the public no folk music has been so neglected and so little documented. If it is true that the blues is to be heard and not written it is also equally true that the blues eminently deserves to be written about.15

The blues songs are a surprisingly late development in the history of folk poetry. Most American folk songs, as stated earlier, had become somewhat standardized, and as mass media communication expanded, certain versions of folk songs tended to become the accepted ones, although striking exceptions could still be found. The Negro blues songs were unique in the sense that here was a folk poetry which was alive and evolving, and showed many similarities to the English folk poetry genre.

The lyrics of the blues songs were transmitted orally, and seemed to be, at least in the beginning, the work of one man, usually anonymous, whose words were changed by the individual whims of other singers. The themes of the blues songs were essentially the same as those of the

15Paul Oliver, Blues Fell This Morning (New York, 1960), pp. 10-11.
English folk songs, for the Negro sang of love, death, the supernatural, domestic tragedy, revenge, and humor. How then, excluding the differences in vocal and tonal qualities, are the Negro blues songs different from the English folk poetry? This question brings us back to the statement of Mr. Lomax on the impact of Puritanism on American folk verse. Mr. Lomax wrote that the full weight of Puritanism did not fall upon the Negro until the Negro had assimilated much of the American way of life, and this included the fears of damnation induced by our New England ancestors. There was, however, one vast difference. The Negro was almost totally unimpressed by what Mr. Lomax called "... our pioneer folk censor," and it is here that one finds the essential difference between the Negro folk song, and the folk song of the Puritan-oriented white American, for the Negro blues song lacked the feeling of suppressed emotion so inherent in much of American folk song.

Love, as in almost all folk songs, is the universal theme of the blues, but "... it is the pain rather than the promise of love that is repeated over and over again." The "love" found in the blues songs, contends Samuel Charters, has "... little of the sentimentality of the 'love' that dominates American popular song." The blues songs, Mr. Charters feels, have "... the strength of honesty, and, if there is sometimes a lack of emotional subtlety there is in the blues the expression of a love that is mature and intensely felt. In the blues there is an acceptance of the reality of love, both physical and emotional."  

17 Ibid., p. 37.  
18 Ibid.
It is the lack of hypocrisy that makes the blues songs different from most popular American music, and the rather blunt acceptance of what Mr. Lomax's "folk censor" would call "immorality," causes the blues songs to be unique in the folk song tradition of America.

There is little concern with conventional morality in the blues. The attitude toward marriage and fidelity is not hypocritical, as in the popular song of the larger American society. While the popular song remains in its adolescent dream of unending tremulous affection, the blues, with a complete frankness, accepts the reality of adultery and promiscuity with a resigned shrug. The honesty of the expression is so complete that it is futile to argue with the moral value implied. Infidelity is a common experience; although this makes it no less painful when it happens.

Infidelity is one of the most frequent topics of the Negro "love" blues, and one that must be examined thoroughly for an understanding of the way of life of a large portion of the American Negro population.

Promiscuity and infidelity are a major part of the blues songs, and it is "... this open declaration of subjects that the conventions of polite society have decreed shall be kept hidden from view," which has freed the Negro blues songs from "... the fundamental Puritanical streak in American life." In many cases the blues songs were not unlike "... the lusty bawdiness of an Elizabethan playwright." The Negro, however, has a much stronger sense of the cruelty of love, and the blues are permeated with "... a simple recognition of infidelity, murderous jealousy, heartbreak or the natural

19Ibid., p. 62.
20Oliver, p. 111.
21Ibid.
22Ibid., p. 122.
and unashamed hunger of the human body."  

The Negro blues singer comes mainly from the lower economic groups, and generally speaking, has accepted few of the beliefs and morals held by the middle and upper class Negroes, the latter of whom were more closely tied to the white traditions. Any examination of infidelity as a theme in the blues songs must emphasize that most of the blues lyrics do not represent the attitudes of the Negro population as a whole, although they do express the hopes, aspirations, fears, anger, and despair of most of the lower class.

It is not with the upper class Negro that one must be concerned in a study of the blues song, for the economically secure Negro represented, and still represents, a minority compared to the vast number in the lower brackets of the social and economic scale. The rising Negro middle class, the most recent development in the Negro climb to equality, has tended to reject the attitudes of the blues singers, and to take on all the aspects of the upper class Negro, along with a sense of conventional white "morality."

Infidelity among Negroes has its origins in the days of slavery, when marriage on the plantations was virtually unknown.

Most slave owners either did not care about the marital state of their slaves or were interested in seeing to it that they did not form strong marital bonds. The slave owners who did not want some of their slaves to marry were: those who had Negro mistresses, those who bred mulattoes or strong slaves, and those who did not want to make it difficult when they sold slaves individually rather than in family units. The internal slave trade broke up many slave families— even those belonging to masters who encouraged stable mar-

riages, when death or economic disaster occurred—and the threat of it hung over all slave families. Certain cultural practices grew up in slavery which retain their influences up to the present day in rural Southern areas; marriages sometimes occur by simple public declaration or with a ceremony conducted by a minister but without a marriage license. Coupled with this was the popular belief that divorce could occur by public declaration or simply by crossing state or county lines.  

The slave states, at the end of the Civil War, legalized all existing common-law relationships, and this tended to put the weak family structure of the Negro on more solid footing. "But the starting point," writes Gunnar Myrdal, "was so low that Negroes never caught up." The above factors, plus increased mobility due to the lack of work, which caused migrations to the North, led to " . . . increase in desertion, prostitution, and temporary marriage."  

Infidelity, with its roots in the loose sexual relationship forced on the Negro by white slave holders, had become a way of life among the lower class Negroes. Those living close by the plantations, and under the direct influence of the white family, tended to pick up the more conventional morals of the whites, but the field workers, living as they did on the outskirts of the plantations, were not particularly concerned over proper morals. Living with a woman, without a legal marriage ceremony, became accepted as rather common among the Negro field workers, and while the Negroes who lived close to a religious plantation owner


25Ibid.

26Ibid.
sang the spirituals; the field Negro, left to his own devices, developed the blues songs.

Most of the blues singers described situations which arose from the rather tense common-law marriages, and if any of the songs referred to couples who were legally married, this fact was usually not dwelt upon at any length. One must, therefore, assume that most of the songs dealt with a loose, or almost nonexistent, relationship. The greater number of blues songs, in fact, seem to imply that marriage is something outside the normal realm of things.

The fact that common-law marriages could be broken so easily led to a situation in which the Negro had to be constantly aware of domestic disruptions, and especially those which arose from the interference of a third party. Warnings and threats became common under such conditions, and in some cases, resulted in violence. Infidelity, therefore, was a situation which many Negroes had to learn to exist with.

It must be remembered that warnings and threats of violence are not common to all Negroes, but are often, however, an integral part of life among large groups of economically deprived Negroes. This has led to the misconception among whites that Negroes are born to ways of violence. A close examination of the background of the Negro will reveal that the violence is usually associated with environment, and not as the racists would have us believe, with heredity. According to Gunnar Myrdal, crowded ghettoes, poverty, and weak family bonds have caused the Negro to fight for his survival, and it is this fight for survival that has led to the higher Negro crime rate.27

27Ibid., pp. 966-979.
Violence is found in a number of works by Negro writers, perhaps the most famous example being Richard Wright's *Native Son*. The threat of violence, of course, is found in the writings of white Americans also, but the difference is usually that of degree and intensity. F. Scott Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby*, for example, involves violence, but only as a shocking culmination to the novel. The violence in the Fitzgerald work is alien to his characters and their environment, but Bigger Thomas, Richard Wright's main character, seems to accept rather stoically everything that happens to him after he is apprehended for murder.

It is interesting to compare a novel written in the twenties by a Negro, Claude McKay, and Fitzgerald's novel on the career of Jay Gatsby. *Home to Harlem* by Claude McKay is filled with a stream of continuous violence, and a sexual freedom that is never suppressed or hidden. It is sexual infidelity, and its aftermath, that erupts in Fitzgerald's novel and climaxes the story of his characters, but in McKay's book sexual infidelity seems to be commonplace, and the violence that follows appears to be a normal part of the character's lives. Violence gives McKay's book a rambling quality in which there seems to be no structural peaks, but only a set of shifting alliances between the participants.

The reasons for violence among lower class Negroes are many, and one of the chief among these is the lack of concern for crimes among Negroes on the part of law enforcement officials. This is especially

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true in the South. The whites of the Southern plantations were generally unconcerned about violence among Negroes, unless the physical harm done interfered in some way with the white populace. Ray Stannard Baker, as far back as 1908, wrote that one "... fine type of old gentlefolk" expressed a "... common conviction in the South," when she told him that the white Southerners didn't consider "... that the Negroes have any morals."31

There is little in the Negro's background "... to give him any respect for, or conception of, law in the abstract."32 The rules and regulations of the different slave plantations varied a great deal, and some of the slaves enjoyed a surprising amount of freedom. Infractions of rules on many plantations brought very little, if any, punishment.

Owning not even his clothing or the bed in which he slept, the slave had almost no conception of the sacredness of property rights; petty thievery, especially of food supplies, was often his only source of minor luxuries. No pride of position, or of family name, existed to restrain him. Generally, he had known no incentive for thrift, or for material or social advancement. Even as a freedman, public opinion meant little to him. The controlling thought of the community held him always to be a "nigger" and as such incapable of any virtue. If he lost his "name" in any given locality, he easily moved to another. Arriving in the midst of a picking or contracting season, he knew that few questions would be asked about his past. This did not mean that the great mass of the Negroes were entirely without self-respect, or were habitual law-breakers. But it did mean that large numbers of them were.33


33Ibid.
It was this lack of self-respect and habitual law-breaking that led to the steady stream of violence that permeates the lives of so many Negroes.

From the time of the Civil War to the present the lower class American Negro has had to face the problem of physical violence. Gunnar Myrdal has written that "... the general characteristics of the Negro population—poverty, ignorance of the law, lack of influential connections, Southern patterns of illegality and use of weapons in fights, concentration in the cities and in young adult ages in the North—operate to make the Negro crime rate higher than the white crime rate, and so may be thought of as another group of causes of Negro crime." These factors have caused armed assault and murder to be two common crimes among Negroes. These crimes are seldom planned in advance, and are more likely to be "... the result of a moment's anger when it is not inhibited by a developed respect for life and law." Murder among Negroes is a crime that is sometimes considered "... a venial offense" by white judges, but only if the Negro slays another Negro. W. J. Cash wrote that "... a Negro murderer of another Negro often drew no heavier penalty than that commonly meted out to a chicken-thief." It was from this atmosphere of disruption that the blues songs began, and the Negro expressed many of his emotions in this primitive

34Myrdal, pp. 974-975.
35Ibid., 976.
36Ibid.
38Ibid.
folk verse. The blues songs, one could easily say, grew from a background of impending violence, broken relationships, and lost incentives. In form the blues songs became a simple folk verse with three line stanzas. The first two lines are usually repeated in order to give the singer time to improvise a third, although this does not mean that the blues songs are always improvised. This simple stanza form became the accepted one over a period of years, although many variations also exist. Some blues song forms are unique to one particular singer, and for every bluesman using the standard three line stanza, one is likely to find another singer with a form of his own invention. The third line, if the blues song is done in the standard form, is generally used by the singer as a release of tension built up by the repetition of the first two lines. Simple as the form is, when heard it can be profound and moving, and no study of the American Negro would be complete without a careful hearing of the blues singers, and especially their songs of infidelity. The Negro lower class "... has a sexual code of its own, though to be sure, it is a code and not a mandate to license, as many middle-class people think."39 Strangely enough, the Negro lower classes have "... built up a type of family organization conducive to social health, even though the practices are outside the American tradition."40 To know the Negro, however, the simple three line stanza of the blues song, and its numerous variations, must be studied, and in particular, the theme of infidelity.

39 Allison Davis and John Dollard, Children of Bondage (New York, 1940), p. 50.
40 Myrdal, p. 935.
PART II: THE SONGS

Gunnar Myrdal has already pointed out the loose relationship of the lower class Negro family, but it must be emphasized that any examination of infidelity in the Negro blues songs must deal with the unmarried couples, as well as with those who are legally joined by either state or church. There is a lack of information on the marital status of the lower class Negroes, which makes it extremely difficult to discuss the subject with any degree of accuracy. Gunnar Myrdal, an invaluable source of information on all aspects of Negro life, writes that "... unmarried Negro couples are inclined to report themselves as married, and women who have never married but who have children are inclined to report themselves as widowed." Unfaithfulness and adultery are thus more commonly accepted modes of life among the lower economic groups of American Negroes, and it is in the blues song that one will find a great deal of the despair, hope, longing, hatred, and suspicion of infidelity expressed.

There are few lyrics in the Negro blues songs which express the happiness of marital bliss, the raising of children, or the enchantment of first love. This is not to say that love themes are unknown in these songs, but only to say that overly sentimental and maudlin lyrics are, except in cases of commercially exploited singers, almost universally lacking. Many blues song lyrics appear to contain self-pity, especially when seen on the printed page. In reality, however, this is not so, since

41Ibid., p. 934.
much of the true quality of a blues song is lost when the performers
are not heard. Paul Oliver has written that

the recording remains as the only means for common refer-
ence, for the subtleties of timing in voice and instrument,
of touch and 'feel,' of the peculiar beauty of crushed
notes or slid and twisted guitar strings, of the whine of
the bottleneck on an unconventionally tuned instrument,
can only be appreciated in direct performance or on
record. Perfection of tone, purity of voice, accuracy
of pitch are not the principal objectives in the singing
of blues. Though variations might be indicated by symbols,
by graphs and by phonophotography, the subtle qualities of
inflection, timbre, throat humming, gutters and nasal
enunciations, which characterize certain regional and per-
sonal styles of blues singing, remain elusive when any
attempt at new or conventional notation is attempted.42

Mr. Oliver's comment is quoted for a better understanding of the position
of the lyrics in the blues song, since many of the lyrics may appear
to be extremely crude. If the blues lyrics are "... sometimes
trite because they are commonplace, they are truthful too, just be-
because they are commonplace; often they are dramatic, frequently poetic
and moving, always with the elements of personal experience that are
yet shared by a large proportion of the Negro community,"43

Certainly an "experience shared" by so many Negroes is the rootless
feeling of the constant broken relationships. Perhaps the first inkl ing
of trouble, and in this case it makes little difference if the relation-
ship is a common-law marriage or one that has been legally performed,
is the suspicion on the part of one of the two that all is not as it
should be. Sometimes the woman, appearing to be completely bewildered,
sings:

42Paul Oliver, Conversation with the Blues (New York, 1965), p. 10.
43Ibid., p. 4.
My man left me and he never said a word,
My man left me and he never said a word,
It wasn't nothing I did, it must have been
something that he heard.\textsuperscript{44}

It is this type of suspicion that is the hardest for the singer to cope with, for certainly no obvious breach in the relationship had appeared before the man left, although the listener may wonder if the last line indicates more than the singer is willing to tell.

Most suspicions of infidelity are usually sung for stronger reasons than those in the stanza already quoted. One of the most frequently found blues songs of infidelity is that in which the woman is temporarily missing from the home. This, of course, usually leads to the man becoming suspicious as to her whereabouts. There is still no actual evidence as to infidelity, although there certainly are many rather obvious clues.

Honey, I don't believe you think I'm nothin', you don't believe I'm nothin' but a little clown,
Honey, I don't believe you think I'm nothin', you don't believe I'm nothin' but a little clown,
Mmmmm—now when I was lookin' for you last night, you was way out on the other side of town.\textsuperscript{45}

The suspicion of infidelity appears sometimes as a dream, as if the singer were afraid to consciously admit what is happening to his once joyful relationship. Yank Rachell sings that:

My babe went off, stayed out all night long,
She never got back till the break of dawn,
Well, it seem like a dream,
Well, it seem like a dream.\textsuperscript{46}

\textsuperscript{44}Charters, p. 44.
\textsuperscript{45}Oliver, \textit{Blues Fell}, p. 90.
Emery Glen, however, describes, a literal dream, and the suspicion of infidelity is seen with even more clarity:

I went to bed last night with nothin' on my mind,
I went to bed last night with nothin' on my mind,
I felt the good world— it was treatin' me kind.

I dreamed I saw my mama tell me 'Good-bye'
I dreamed I saw my mama tell me 'Good-bye'
Then around the back-door I saw her try another man's size.

Cain't no woman unbackdoor me,
Cain't no woman unbackdoor me,
If I'm your one-an'-all or else your used-t'-be.

I got up this mawnin', 'vestigatin' on ma min',
I got up this mawnin', 'vestigatin' on ma min',
I wanted to see if mama was the right kin'.

Sometimes these dreams's just lak bein' away,
Sometimes these dreams's just lak bein' away,
I saw another man eatin' of my chocolate cake. 47

The vocal team of Brownie McGhee and Sonny Terry relates experiences that are similar to those of Rachell and Glen, only this time, there seems to be a tired acceptance:

Well I dreamed that the gal I married tried to raise me a family,
Dreamed I had ten children and they all looked just like me,
But it was a dream, just a dream I had on my mind. 48

John Lee Hooker sings and chants "Me and My Telephone" to the heavy rhythm of an electrically amplified guitar, one of the post-War additions to the blues instrumentation. Hooker describes, in a strange blank verse of his own origin, his suspicions and fears. He knows that infi-

47 Oliver, Blues Fell, p. 96.

48 Brownie McGhee and Sonny Terry, "Just a Dream," transcribed from a recording (Roulette 25074).
delities are being committed, but still refuses to acknowledge anything openly. Hooker's parting comment on the fact that he knew he "... didn't have no friends," is a rather pathetic and naive blindness, self-inflicted, to the unfaithfulness of his companion.

Yes, I ain't got nobody, nobody,
Just me and my telephone.
Yes, I ain't got nobody, nobody,
Just me and my telephone.
Nobody talk to me and keep me company.

When my baby she was here with me,
My telephone kept on ringin' all the time.
But since she left me,
My telephone don't never ring.

That's why I know, now people,
There was something goin' on wrong.
[after thought, spoken: "Yes, there was."]
That's why I know, people,
I don't get no telephone calls.

Hooker now falls into a hypnotic semi-chant, reaching the point of near-recitation at times:

I'm goin' downtown this morning,
Ask the operator what's wrong with my telephone.
It don't never ring,
It must be out of order.
She said, "No," she said, "No,
Man, your telephone ain't dead."
That's why I know, that's why I know,
Something was goin' on wrong.
Now my baby done come back home,
My telephone ring all the time.
Now my baby done come back home,
My telephone ring all the time.
That's why I know, that's why I know,
I didn't have no friends.49

Memphis Willie B. (Borum) sings of a young country girl, who is somehow no longer the obedient companion she once was. The listener may

49 John Lee Hooker, "Me and My Telephone," transcribed from a recording (Chess LP 1454).
be able to detect, in the words of the singer, a certain underlying knowledge that something like this would eventually happen.

I went way out in the country and got you baby,
    you was way out in the woods.
I went way out in the country and got you baby,
    you was way out in the woods.
You know I got sick of you tellin' me that country life was not good.

It is not long after leaving the farm that the infidelities begin, and again, as in the case of John Lee Hooker and Yank Rachell, there is an almost terrified reluctance to admit to the truth of the situation.

You start to leave me early in the morning,
    you don't come back till the break of day.
You start to leave me early in the morning,
    you don't come back till the break of day.
You gonna keep on doin' that and you gonna drive my world away. 50

The first indication of infidelity is usually only a suspicion, which is aroused by the guilty party being absent from the home with ever increasing frequency. This absence invariably occurs during the hours of darkness, and it is amazing to note the number of variations on lines referring to the missing party.

John Lee Hooker sings an ironical, and somehow humorous, song that is paradoxically filled with tragic implications. The song, dealing with a double infidelity, is done in Hooker's monotone voice and seems, at times, as if he is reflecting on these things to himself, oblivious of any audience. The lyrics, once again, concern a woman who fails to stay at home.

When I first met you darling,
Baby, you was real, real gone.
When I first met you darling,
Baby, you was real, real gone.
You didn't go no place baby,
But to church and Sunday school,
church and Sunday school.
You done got up here darling,
Run around every [incoherent] joint in town.

I'm going back down South darling,
Back down South in Sunny Lane,
I'm going back down South darling,
Back down South in Sunny Lane,
I'm goin' to my wife and family darlin'!
Oh Lord, I'm goin' back there to stay.51

Charlie Lincoln, who has a new woman, warns others to keep away, since
he has found from past experience what can happen when one closes his
eyes, even if but momentarily. It is interesting to compare Lincoln's
reasons for leaving his family with those of Hooker. Hooker leaves his
family because of an infatuation with another woman, while Lincoln
leaves because of his wife's frequent infidelities. Lincoln sings:

You can have my money, all I own,
But for God's sake, leave my woman alone,

Oh, I'm jealous, jealous, jealous hearted see?
I'm jealous, jealous, jealous as I can be.

I left my wife and baby standin' on the doorstep,
I got a house full of cryin' children, ain't none
of 'em mine.

Oh, I'm jealous, jealous, jealous hearted see?
I'm jealous, jealous, jealous as I can be.52

Staying out at night, the failure of the telephone to ring when the

51Hooker, "Real, Real, Gone," transcribed from a recording (Atco
33-151).

52Charlie Lincoln, "Jealous Hearted Blues," transcribed from a
recording (Folkways, Vol. II, RBF 9).
woman is gone, the suspicions that one's children are not one's own, and bad dreams, are only part of the growing picture of infidelity. The picture must now come into focus, and what better way is there to clarify the view than actual evidence of infidelity? The hope that things were not as they seemed can now be dissipated, and no longer can the singer remain blind. It is hard to deny the cold, hard evidence:

She goes downtown,
She don't have a dime,
She come back home,
Lookin' dressed so fine.

She keeps me worried and so lonesome,
I just can't keep from cryin',
Well, life's so confusin',
I b'lieve I'm goin' to lose my mind.53

The change in appearance and attitude on the part of the guilty person is the first obvious "evidence" of infidelity. Huddie Ledbetter (Leadbelly), with his rough and rasping voice, once sang of a woman named Alberta:

Oh, Alberta, Oh, Alberta. Tell me where did you stay last night?
Woman, you didn't come home till just a little before daylight.

Oh, Alberta, Oh, Alberta. Tell me what in the hell you mean.
The way you sneakin' out on me beats all I ever seen.

Oh, Alberta, Oh, Alberta. Tell me what in the hell you mean.
The way you playin', like you been drinkin' benedictine.54

Sam (Lightnin') Hopkins finally notices the evident change in the attitude of his companion, even though he has been warned of "... how

53McGhee and Terry, "Confusion," from record album notes (Folkways FA 2327), p. 4.

54Huddie Ledbetter, "Alberta," transcribed from a recording (RCA LPV-505).
a woman will do."

Tell me pretty mama, why you stay out all night?
Tell me pretty mama, why you stay out all night?
You got it on your mind, but you know you ain't
  treatin' me right.

My mama she told me, my papa did too,
They told just how a woman will do.
  She'll stay out all night,
  She'll stay out all night,
  She'll stay out all night,
Come in when the sun is shining bright.55

Hopkins, however, is not the first blues singer to ask why or where his woman stayed last night:

I want you to tell me, little girl, just where did you stay last night?
I want you to tell me, little girl, just where did you stay last night?
Your clothes is all wrinkled, and your shoes isn't tied up right.56

The appearance of the woman with her clothes "all wrinkled" is now an almost sure sign of infidelity, and the blues songs referring to the outward change in veneer are legion. William (Big Bill) Broonzy, like Sam Hopkins, questions his woman first, and then proceeds to bring in her appearance as an incriminating factor. He first performs a fast presupposition:

Well now, tell me who, baby, who been fooling you?
Well now, tell me who, baby, who been fooling you?
Telling you you're five feet seven, baby, and you is pretty too.

Broonzy quickly jumps on appearance as evidence:

Now they been telling you your hair had ocean waves,

55Sam Hopkins, "Mad as I Can Be," transcribed from a recording (Mainstream 56040).
56Charters, p. 44.
But when you come home to me, baby, it looks like where the rats had stayed.

From here, Broonzy moves back to his presupposition:

Gal, I give you money just to spend on yourself, You goes out, little woman, and you spends it on someone else.57

With the change of appearance and personality in the woman, comes also a change in the home itself. Perhaps Peg Leg Howell expressed it best:

Can't you always tell when your good gal is gonna treat you mean?
Can't you always tell when your good gal is gonna treat you mean?
Your meals is unregular, your house is never clean.

Howell, using the Negro term "rider" to express a sexual partner, continues by stating a rather vague suspicion, followed by a much stronger example of "evidence."

You can always tell when there's something going on wrong, When you come in, your rider, she's out and gone.
When she come in, she got a rag tied round her head, When she come in, she got a rag tied round her head, You speak about lovin', she'll swear she's almost dead.58

The blues song of infidelity has now progressed from the rather vague suspicion that all was not well, to the more concrete "evidence" of changed attitudes, unkept homes, and absences at late hours. Thus

57William Broonzy, "Five Feet Seven," transcribed from a recording (Mercury MG 20905).

far, however, none of the singers have related experiences which deal with direct evidence of infidelity, even though, in most cases, little more evidence is actually needed. As will be pointed out later, when discussing songs of physical violence, the loose relationship of the Negro couples tends to promote feelings of jealousy much more easily. This is probably, although no statistics were found, due to the fact that the common-law marriages could be broken without a great deal of complex "red-tape" involved. It may not be unjust to suppose that the Negro blues singer will be more alert for "evidence" which would indicate a break in the relationship.

Big Bill Broonzy finds audible "evidence," which is as incriminating as the altered appearance and attitude of the woman:

What did I do to be treated the way I am?
When I come home from work, baby, I can hear my back door slam.59

The tale of the Negro going to work, while another man takes his place, is sung in all seriousness by Broonzy, but can also be treated rather humorously. A good example of this situation can be found in William Faulkner's story "Centaur in Brass," in which a Negro, working at a power plant on an alternating shift with another Negro, discovers that his woman is carrying on an affair with his relief help.60 Faulkner had evidently been aware of the existence of these conditions among the local Negroes of his own area.

Hearing the back door slam just as one arrives home is not, of

59 Big Bill Broonzy, "I Wonder," transcribed from a recording (Mercury MG 10905).

course, the only evidence of infidelity. Sometimes the guilty party
does not have the chance to leave at his own leisure, and thus more
evidence is inadvertently left behind. This time the evidence is more
pronounced than the fading sound of a slamming door. Broonzy again
sings of infidelity:

Tell me, baby, whose muddy shoes are these?
Tell me, baby, whose muddy shoes are these?
You've got them settin' right where mine ought
to be.

Yes, goodbye baby, yes, I'm goin' away,
Yes, goodbye baby, yes, I'm goin' away,
When I leave this town you know I'm goin'
away to stay.

Oh, yes. I worked all night and I come home
just 'fore day.
Oh, yes, I worked all night and I come home
just 'fore day.
You're a low down woman, you would do a man
any way.61

Wilson (Thunder) Smith sings a stanza quite similar to Broonzy's when
he asks:

Whose muddy shoes are these?
Whose muddy shoes are these?
Reason I ask you pretty mama, they sure
don't belong to me.62

The leaving behind of tangible evidence such as boots, shoes, articles
of clothing, and cigarette butts became standard subject matter in a
number of the blues songs.

Perhaps the only way to escape an impending act of infidelity is

61Shirley, p. 137.

62Wilson Smith, "Sante Fe Blues," transcribed from a recording
to move away. Jimmy Rushing, Kansas City blues singer with the Count
Basie band, once sung that he was "... gonna move on the outskirts
of town."

I'm gonna move way out on the outskirts of town,
I'm gonna move way out on the outskirts of town,
I don't want nobody who's always hangin' 'round.

I'm gonna tell you baby,
we're goin' move away from here,
I don't want no iceman,
gonna get me a frigidaire,
When we move, way out on the outskirts of town,
I don't want nobody who's always hangin' 'round.

I'm gonna bring my own groceries,
goin' bring 'em every day,
Gotta stop that groc'ry boy,
and keep him away,
When we move, way out on the outskirts of town,
I don't want nobody who's always hangin' 'round.

It may seem funny, honey,
As funny as can be,
If we have any children,
I want them all to look like me,
When we move, way out on the outskirts of town,
I don't want nobody who's always hangin' 'round. 63

Regardless of whether one moves away or not, there is still the possi-
bility that one's mate will find a new partner. Huddie Ledbetter re-
lates that even marriage doesn't break the possibilities:

Took her to a dance,
she danced with another,
When we got married,
she swore it was her brother,
Well, you know she had to do it. 64

63Shirley, p. 221.

64Ledbetter, "Bottle Up and Go," transcribed from a recording
(Folkways, Vol. II, 2942).
To many of the Negro blues singers, the only way to stop infidelity is to keep a constant surveillance of all that goes on. This may require a great deal of footwork, time, and a certain amount of peril to the person investigating. The danger does not necessarily have to be the result of physical violence. It can take the form of pneumonia, as in the case of (Blind) Lemon Jefferson's "Pneumonia Blues."

I'm achin' all over, baby, I got the pneumonia this time,
I'm achin' all over, baby, I got the pneumonia this time,
An' it's all on account of that low-down gal of mine.

Sneaking round the corners, running up alleys too.
Sneaking round the corners, running up alleys too.
Watching my woman, trying to see what she going to do.

Sitting down in the streets one cold, dark, stormy night,
Sitting down in the streets one cold, dark, stormy night,
Trying to see if my good gal going to make it home all right.

Well, baby, in the winter, prowling round in the rain,
Well, baby, in the winter, prowling round in the rain,
Well, baby, give me this pneumonia pain.65

Joe Lee (Big Joe) Williams is reduced to spying through hotel transoms. Williams is sometimes almost incoherent in his vocal delivery, and his lyrics are often, like so many blues songs, filled with a sexual double-entendre. When this double-entendre takes the form of a rough-voiced Mississippi Negro dialect, it is even more difficult to comprehend:

I went to your hotel last night woman,
your elevator running slow,
I went to your hotel last night woman,
your elevator running slow,
I went to see over the transom, trying to make them [ ? ], you said you don't want me no more.

65Oliver, Blues Fell, p. 270.
Big Joe Williams, in a rather blunt statement of double-entendre, tells us that he believes his woman is so low that she must be "... the elevatingest girl in town."66

Jimmie Gordon tells us that he realizes his woman is a "... mean mistreater," and that she "... don't mean me no good." His woman, in fact, has taken to "... ringin' doorbells on the avenue," obviously no longer particular in her choice of men, but Gordon manages to give us a rather whimsical finish by stating that he would "... be the same way if only I could."67

Francis Black (Scrapper Blackwell) had feelings much akin to those of Jimmie Gordon. This time, however, the woman has settled on one lover. The woman's new lover, ironically, is Blackwell's best friend, which makes the situation all the more sensitive, for now the blues singer can no longer trust even those closest to him.

I got a no good woman, and she sure don't mean me no good,
I got a no good woman, and she sure don't mean me no good,
I hope there ain't another woman like her in nobody's neighborhood.

She leaves every morning, comes back at the break of day,
She leaves every morning, comes back at the break of day,
And when she comes in the morning, she ain't got a word to say.

Every time I look at that woman, she's got a frown on her face,
Every time I look at that woman, she's got a frown on her face,
I believe that woman's gonna let my best friend take my place.

66Big Joe Williams, "Elevate Me Baby," from record album notes (Folkways FS 3820), p. 5.

67Shirley, p. 237.
Every evening he used to stop by my door,
Every evening he used to stop by my door,
But since he's got my woman, he don't stop here anymore.68

3

Most of the blues songs dealing with a strong suspicion of infidelity have thus far been delivered with various allegations. The all night disappearances, the changed attitudes and appearances, the unkept houses, the slamming of back doors, the discovery of muddy shoes, and the numerous spyings are all stated, with the possible exception of Big Joe Williams' song, with explicit clarity. With Big Joe Williams one encounters a primitive use of double-entendre, and any good examination of the blues lyrics will turn up many songs which make use of accepted poetic devices. The blues songs are filled with various types of imagery, and one of the most popular devices used by Negroes is that of the animal, which seems to be "... a legacy from slavery, an embittered acceptance of the lack of respect with which he has been held, causing him to take satisfaction from a violent assertion of those animal features of which he has been accused.69

Animal comparison is found in a very simple stanza used by McKinley Morganfield, better known to blues collectors as Muddy Waters. Waters uses the mule for his comparison, and the sexual connotations are certainly not subtle:

68Scrapper Blackwell, "No Good Woman," transcribed from a recording (Decca DL 4434).

69Oliver, Blues Fell, p. 140.
I think I'll make a long distance call.
Well, I picked up my receiver,
The party said,
"Another mule kickin' in your stall."70

Paul Oliver writes:

It is of particular interest that the images used in the blues are never based on tired and artificial, sentimental associations; lilies—even magnolias—do not figure in the blues of love-making; no blues singer has a 'love like a red, red rose'. He may be a 'prowling tomcat', he may wish to hear his 'panther squall' but he never expects his kitten to purr. This is not to say that he has no sentiments nor that they are not genuinely felt: the distress of a man who knows that his absence is causing the grief or the infidelity of his woman is no less because he uses strong images to express it.71

Certainly the use of animals in Negro folk literature has been evident as early as the Uncle Remus tales of Joel Chandler Harris, and one finds a similar use in the rather elaborate double-entendre of the "Hen House Blues" by K. C. Douglas:

Says he looked at that old red hen,
And her comb was turning red.
Says he looked at that old red hen,
And her comb was turning red.
Yes, he flew up on the fence,
And these are the words he said.

He walked down into the hen house yard,
He could hear that old hen a 'cluckin' to herself,
He walked down into the hen house yard,
He could hear that old hen a 'cluckin' to herself,
He knew she had a little company,
But when he got there, they just had left.

He flew up in the hen house window,
And he could see where they'd been havin' a little fun,
He flew up in the hen house window,

70Muddy Waters, "Long Distance Call," transcribed from a recording (Chess LP 1427).

71Oliver, Blues Fell, p. 119.
And he could see where they'd been havin' a little fun,
He knew right then and there,
That little red rooster was not his son.

He flopped his wings,
As if he was goin' to fly away,
He flopped his wings,
As if he was goin' to fly away,
Yes, he got so mad,
He forgot to crow for day.72

Big Bill Broonzy makes use of the fish for comparison, as opposed
to the fowl of K. C. Douglas:

Now, look a-here, Louise,
Now, what you tryin' to do?
You tryin' to make me love you,
And you love some other man too.

Well, Louise, baby that will never do,
Yeah, you know you can't love Big Bill, baby,
And love some other man too.

Louise, I believe
Somebody been fishing in my pond,
They been catching all my perches,
Grinding up the bone.

Later in the song, as Broonzy's subdued anger peeps through, the fish
comparison seems no longer appropriate, and we are told that Louise has
"... got ways like a rattlesnake."73

Muddy Waters presents us with a blues song that could very possibly
be sung by Broonzy's suspected rival. Like Broonzy, Waters makes use of
animal symbolism, and in the process, introduces some wishful boasting.
Waters excuses his actions by reason of his birth, and thus seems to feel
justified in any further acts of infidelity he may commit:

72K. C. Douglas, "Hen House Blues," transcribed from a recording
(Prestige 1023).

73Broonzy, "Louise, Louise," from record album notes (Folkways
FA 2326), p. 3.
Well, I wish I was a cat fish,
Swimmin' in a deep blue sea,
I would have all you good lookin' women,
Fishin' after me, sure enough, after me,
sure enough, after me.

I went to my baby's house,
And I sat down on her steps,
She said, "Come on in now Muddy,
You know my husband just now left,
sure enough, just now left,
sure enough, just now left.

Well, my mother told my father,
Just before I was born,
"I got a boy-child comin',
He's gonna be a rolling stone,
sure enough, he's a rolling stone,
sure enough, he's a rolling stone."74

The snake is often used as a phallic symbol among Negro blues singers. "Blind Lemon Jefferson sings that he is "... gonna run that black snake down," for he "... ain't seen my mama since that black snake took her from town."75 The black snake as a sexual symbol is used by the female singer as well as the male. Martha Copeland sings the incredibly candid "Black Snake Blues," and tells us that:

Some black snake been suckin' my rider—I hear me cryin',
Lawdy, I ain't lyin',
Some black snake been suckin' my rider some,
You can tell by that I ain't gonna give him none.

'Cause my left side jumps and my flesh begin to crawl,
Oh my left side jumps and my flesh begin to crawl,
Bet you ten to one dollar, 'nother mule kickin' ma stall.76

Animals are not the only symbols used by Negroes to express infa-
delity. Domestic metaphors are often used, and "... culinary themes are especially common." These terms are used by the Negro "... with scarcely a thought for their value as metaphors, but in the course of everyday speech." When Big Bill Broonzy sang "Diggin' My Potatoes," jazz critic Charles Edward Smith wrote that it was an entertaining example of double-entendre blues. This is humor, with a raw edge to it. When Big Bill sang out the first line of this quavering blues, I thought of Faulkner's use of double-entendre (the watermelon and the vine) in one of his superbly-written short stories, "That Evening Sun." Broonzy's song has a somewhat allusive quality about it, a quality that is often found in double-entendre blues:

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Baby, I'm diggin' my potatoes,
Lord, they trampin' on my vine.
Now, I've got a special plan, now baby,
Lord, that a-restin' on my mind.

Now, I don't want no cabbage sprouts;
Bring me a solid head,
S'pose they call the wagon (?)
I caught him in my bed...

Now, my vine is all green
'Tatoes they all red,
Never found a bruised one
Till I caught them in my bed...

Now, I've been all around,
Lookin' up and down,
Never found my baby
'Cause she was layin' in another town...

I know she's diggin' my potatoes,
Lord she's trampin' on my vine.
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77 Ibid., p. 123.
78 Ibid., p. 126.
79 Charles Edward Smith, quoted from record album notes (Folkways FA 2326), p. 3.
Yes, now I got a special plan now, baby,
Lord, that a-restin' on my mind.
Yes, I've got a special plan now, baby,
Lord, that a-restin' on my mind.80

The blues songs examined up to this point have ranged from those of vague suspicions to evident and open infidelity. The songs have shown attitudes of fear and regret for what is happening, but none of the victims of infidelity have as yet stated what they will do about the problem. There have been rather weak decisions to "move on the outskirts of town," and Broonzy tells us that he has a plan "a-restin' on my mind," but one feels as if the Negro blues singers have thus far only come to the shocking realization of the problem, and not to any type of solution. Lonnie Johnson once sang of a pathetic situation, but his only solution was the weak warning that he "... won't be your fool no more." Johnson sings that:

I work all day long for you, until the sun go down,
I work all day long for you, baby, from sun-up until the sun go down,
An' you take all my money and drink it up and come home and want to fuss and clown.

I worked for you so many times, when I really was too sick to go,
I worked for you, baby, when your man was slipping in my back-door,
I can see for myself so tell your back-door man I won't be your fool no more.

I worked for you, baby, when snow was above my knees,
I worked for you, baby, when ice and snow was on the ground,

80Broonzy, "Diggin' My Potatoes," from record album notes (Folkways FA 2326), p. 3.
Trying to make you happy, an' you chasing every man in town.81

Lonnie Johnson's weak attempt at a threat to do something about his predicament is typical of many blues songs. The singer who fears that his woman may leave him if he makes a loud and idle threat, thus sits by and usually allows the infidelity to be committed, hoping all along that his woman may someday realize her mistake and return. Other blues singers, however, are not content to sit by and wait for something which they hope may "seem like a dream," but know in reality that it isn't. At first we hear only veiled threats, such as the one that underlines K. C. Douglas' song "Tell Me," with its use of double-entendre:

Tell me baby, where you stay last night?
Well, your hair all down, your clothes, ain't fittin' you right.

Tell me mama, where you get your sugar from?
Way down in Louisiana from daddy's sugar farm.

Tell me mama, who your wriggler be?
Say the reason I ask you, it looks so good to me.

I wished I had your whole heart in my hand,
I would show you, woman, how to treat a man.82

K. C. Douglas merely wishes he had her "whole heart" in his hand, but regardless of this, there is a tone of warning which lies just below the surface of the third stanza, K. C. Douglas implies more than he

81 Oliver, _Blues Fell_, p. 97.
82 Douglas, "Tell Me," transcribed from a recording (Prestige 1023).
states, and the guilty party can never be sure if Douglas' "wish" is a rather harmless one, as in the case of Lonnie Johnson's "won't be your fool no more," or a far more dangerous one. Broonzy's threat that he has a "special plan" to deal with those who are "diggin'" his "potatoes" is a definite warning, but how serious a warning is unknown. It is up to the guilty party, or parties, to make sure that they are never caught, for if they are, Big Bill's nebulous threat may take on a much more concrete form of action. Infidelity, to the economically deprived Negro, is a dangerous game, and the possible results are never certain.

Wilson (Thunder) Smith, for example, finds himself afraid to mention his love's name, probably through fear of the possible physical violence which would follow if the affair is found out.

It's a low-down, low-down, dirty shame,
It's a low-down, low-down, dirty shame,
I love a married woman and I'm afraid to call her name.

Georgia White feels that being in love with a married man is dangerous, but also gives one the impression that it is not an uncommon happening. The tale she tells is directed at women in general, and indicates that adultery may be more commonplace than the surface of the song shows:

Well, the blues ain't nothin' but a woman wanting to see her man,
Well, the blues ain't nothin' but a woman wanting to see her man,
'Cause she want some lovin', you women will understand.

Oh, the blues ain't nothin' but a woman lovin' a married man,
Can't see him when she wants to, gotta see him when she can.

Red Nelson agrees with Georgia White when he tells of the dangers and troubles of being in love with a married woman. Only suffering can result, but not suffering from physical violence necessarily, for this can always be avoided if one is quick enough. The suffering results mainly from the fact that the adulterous pair cannot always meet when they please. Red Nelson tells us about it when he sings:

I says a married woman is the sweetest thing ever been born,
She would be more sweet and true to me if I could go to her home.

Blues and trouble, two things I've had all my life,
I never had so much trouble, till I fell in love with another man's wife.

Muddy Waters, in his twisted and almost incomprehensible voice, tells us of his regrets for falling into this almost unbearable situation. The suspenseful agony of wondering whether one is going to get caught, and whether the woman is worth it, are almost too much for Waters to bear. His use of double-entendre in the first stanza is a somewhat striking portrayal of adultery:

84Georgia White, "Blues Ain't Nothin' But . . . ." transcribed from a recording (Decca DL 4434).
Well now, there's two trains runnin' [incomprehensible] going away.

Well now, one run at midnight, the other one, run just before day, runnin' just before day, runnin' just before day.

I been crazy, yes, I been a fool,
I been crazy, oh yes, all of my life,
Well now, I done fell in love with another man's wife,
with another man's wife,
with another man's wife.

[the next stanza is not coherent, except for the last two lines]

Well, she's no good,
But she's all right with me.

Even if a marriage is legalized, and this is almost impossible to ascertain, it fails to break off old relationships, as a group called the Memphis Jug Band demonstrates in a somewhat whimsical song:

Stealin', stealin', pretty mama don't you tell on me,
I'm stealin' back to my same old used-to-be.

Now put your arms around me like a circle 'round the sun,
I want you to love me like my easy rider done.

If you don't believe me look what a fool I been,
If you don't believe I'm sinkin' look what a hole I'm in.

Stealin', stealin', pretty mama don't you tell on me,
I'm stealin' back to my same old used-to-be.

The woman I'm lovin' she's just my height and size,
She's a married woman come to see me sometimes.

Stealin', stealin', pretty mama don't you tell on me,
I'm stealin' back to my same old used-to-be.

86 Waters, "Still a Fool," transcribed from a recording (Chess LP 1427).

Not all blues songs dealing with infidelity show hopeless situations in which fear of being caught and helpless separation are predominate topics. Leroy Carr feels a humorous satisfaction in cuckoldry:

His wife is gone, but she was all right with me,
His wife is gone, but she was all right with me,
He would give her ninety-four dollars, and she
Would give me ninety-three. 88

Perhaps the best summation of the hopelessness of the situation is given by the prolific team of Brownie McGhee and Sonny Terry. Their song "Heart in Sorrow" has a stanza which shows the hopeless inevitability of a situation in which the participants find themselves entangled:

My babe packed her suitcase and she started to the train,
She's a married woman, but I love her just the same. 89

Some blues singers are more concerned with expressing their own sexual egoism, than with any possible fear of reprisal. There are, for example, songs in which one, or both, of the people committing infidelities boast about their acts. Samuel Charters writes that the women often boasted of their affairs, but that the "... men talked about their infidelities even more than the women; sometimes boasting, sometimes complaining about the difficulties of meeting their women." 90 The fear of reprisal still lurks behind many of the songs, regardless of the egocentric rantings of the singer.

88 Leroy Carr, "I Believe I'll Make a Change," transcribed from a recording (Columbia CL 1799).

89 McGhee and Terry, "Heart in Sorrow," from record album notes (Folkways FA 2327), p. 6.

90 Charters, p. 50.
Texas Alexander, using the term "monkey men" to indicate West Indians or other Negroes who are distasteful to him, boasts of a sexual prowess that is similar to the tall tale tradition in American literature:

I was raised on the desert, born in a lion's den,
I was raised on the desert, born in a lion's den,
Says my chief occupation—taking 'monkey men's' women.91

Big Joe Williams, as in some of the songs discussed earlier, uses the animal for a symbolic comparison, but even his boasting use of the sexual double-entendre is not enough to keep his woman true:

I went home last night babe, just about the break of day,
I went and grabbed the pillow where my baby used to lay,
I'm a rootin' ground hog, you gonna need me some sweet day,
Well look at what Po' Joe done lost, ceh well, cause he's so far away.

I'm a rootin' ground hog babe, and I roots everywhere I go,
I'm a rootin' ground hog babe, and I roots everywhere I go,
[spoken] Lay it on me boy, it's bad!
I'm tryin' to keep my woman from takin' my lovin', she ended up givin' it to So-and-So.92

B. K. Turner (Black Ace) sang one of the most blunt double-entendre songs found in the blues, and his boasting is something less than subtle:

I been a mighty good bull cow, Oh Lord, but I got to go,
I been a mighty good bull cow, Oh Lord, but I got to go,
I found me a pigmeat heifer, I can tell by the way she lows.

She lows all night long, you can hear her for a solid mile,

91Oliver, Blues Fell, p. 117.

92Ibid., p. 119.
She lows all night long, you can hear her for a solid mile,
I can't stand to hear her low, I cried jes' like a chile.

Whoa babe, your bull cow got to go,
Whoa babe, your bull cow got to go,
I can't stay here no longer, she calls me when she lows.

Mama, I'm gone, with a horn long as your right arm,
Mama, I'm gone, with a horn long as your right arm,
And when I get to hookin', I'll have me a brand new happy home.

Good-bye, good-bye, an' I don't see you no mo',
Good-bye, mama, if I don't see you no mo',
Just remember me at night, when your hear mammy's heifer low.

Turner boasts of his sexual prowess and his ability to always find a "brand new happy home," but this can work both ways, as when Bessie Smith brags that she will take the man next door away from his woman:

I ain't gonna cry, I ain't gonna grieve or moan,
I ain't gonna cry, I ain't gonna grieve or moan,
I'm gonna take my friend's man, the one who's living next door.

Edith Johnson, like Bessie Smith, is sure of her ability to find another man, and brags of her skill in acquiring new lovers:

I got one upstairs, one downstairs, one across the street,
Got your eyes wide open, but you're sound asleep.

As in the case of Leroy Carr, Miss Johnson seems to take a certain satisfaction in cuckoldry.

Big Bill Broonzy fortifies his ego by bragging of his ability to steal a woman from another man, but his boasting is not without regrets, as one can see by the second stanza:

93 Ibid., p. 121.
95 Edith Johnson, "Nickel's Worth of Liver," transcribed from a recording (Riverside RLP 150).
I got a gal named Willie Mae, and she lives in the low,
low land,
I got a gal named Willie Mae, and she lives in the low,
low land,
Now the way I got that woman I declare, I stole her from
another man.

All my life baby, you know I've had to roam,
All my life baby, you know I've had to roam,
Lord, just on account of me breakin' up one
poor man's home.

Willie Mae, Willie Mae,
Willie Mae, Willie Mae, don't you hear me calling you?
Lord, if I don't get my Willie Mae, ain't none other
gonna do.96

Brownie McGhee sang of a humorous situation which arose in early
1941 when the Army had begun to draft men immediately prior to World
War II. McGhee quite cleverly saw the Army as an unwitting partner
for his future infidelities, and found that he could not help but
boast of his prowess with women, especially now that their men would
be gone:

Uncle Sam ain't no woman, but he sure can take your man,
Uncle Sam ain't no woman, but he sure can take your man,
Yes, gonna be many a young wife left back here cold in
hand.

Uncle Sam will send you your questionnaire—what in the
world are you going to do?
Uncle Sam will send you your questionnaire—what in the
world are you going to do?
Well you know you gotta go—no need feelin' blue.

Well, all you young men looks worried, blues as blue can
be,
Well, all you young men looks worried, blues as blue can
be,
Well, I've always got a smile on my face, Uncle Sam shall
be my friend.

96Broonzy, "Willie Mae," transcribed from a recording (Mercury
SR 60822).
Well, it's when you gone to the camp, no need to think about home,
Well, it's when you gone to the camp, no need to think about home,
I'll be back carryin' your coal, and keepin' in tryin' to carry your business on.\textsuperscript{97}

McGhee's boasting in the above song may eventually lead to regrets, perhaps caused by a guilty conscience, or, more likely, because he will find that someone else is always more capable. Henry Williams shows a philosophical thread that is often found in the blues songs. The philosophical train of thought differs a great deal from the boasting of Brownie McGhee's song, and we find that a meditative self-evaluation forms the basis of Mr. Williams' song.

Did you ever wake up lonesome—all by yourself?
Did you ever wake up lonesome—all by yourself?
And the one you love was loving someone else?

I wrote these blues, I'm gonna sing them as I please,
I wrote these blues, I'm gonna sing them as I please,
I'm the only one liking the way I'm singing them,
I'll swear to goodness there's no one else t'please.

I tell you people, I don't know your name,
I tell you people, I don't know your name,
But takin' other men's women—I'll swear to God you'd do the same.\textsuperscript{98}

Williams strikes an apologetic and pleading tone that is in strong contrast to the boasting of Brownie McGhee.

The reflective quality of Henry Williams is often found in the blues songs, but much more frequent, however, are the boasting songs. Mississippi Bracey sings a song that has more in common with Brownie McGhee than with Henry Williams:

\textsuperscript{97}Oliver, \textit{Blues Fell}, pp. 252-253.
\textsuperscript{98}Ibid., p. 299.
You got a bad husband now, baby, that will be alright,
I will dodge your husband like a rabbit dodge a dog at night. 99

Although this type of boasting is found more often, the simple philosophical songs of advice, and self-examination cannot be disregarded, for they play an important part in understanding the lives of the blues singers.

John Lee Hooker takes the subject of marriage and gives advice to the listener, most of which is based on his own self-evaluation:

When my first wife left me, she left my heart in misery,
Ever since that day boys, I don't think I ever love again.

If I can get her back again, I'll never roam no more,
I had a good wife, but I did not treat her right.

It's my fault, I only have myself to blame,
She would have been home right now, if I hadn't wanted every woman that I see.

I found out one thing people, these women don't mean you no good,
You mistreat a good girl for some woman, then she'll turn around and turn her back on you.

I'm havin' bad luck, bad luck ever since she been gone,
When she left home, Lord, I did not treat her right. 100

Blind Willie McTell, like John Lee Hooker, has advice to offer on the subject of marriage and women, but unlike Hooker, he makes virtually

99Charters, p. 50.

100Hooker, "My First Wife Left Me," transcribed from a recording (Vee Jay 8502).
no attempt at self-evaluation:

I used to see a married woman, sweetest woman that ever was born,
But I changed that thing, you'd better let married women alone.

Take my advice, let these married women be,
'cause their husband will grab you,
beat you ragged as a cedar tree.

When a woman says she love you about as good as she do herself,
I don't pay her no attention, till she says that same line with somebody else.

I really don't believe no one in the whole round world do right,
Act like an angel in the daytime, but mistreat poor me at night. 101

Some singers, like Curley Weaver, cannot help giving advice and bragging at the same time. Weaver, when he reaches the second stanza, completely forgets the advice given in the first stanza:

Now listen good buddy and let all married women be,
'Cause their husband will grab you, beat you ragged as a cedar tree.

It makes no difference baby, if you changed your lock and key,
'Cause too many women want a hot-shot like me. 102

The philosophical songs which deal with infidelity are varied and difficult to organize into any coherent pattern, for the songs combine the elements of threat, warning, suspicion, violence, advice, and self-examination. Some of the songs are short and terse statements, such as Willie Baker's comment on those who commit infidelities:


102Curley Weaver, "Ticket Agent," transcribed from a recording (Blues Classics 5).
Take a mighty crooked woman to treat a good man wrong,
Take a mighty crooked woman to treat a good man wrong,
Take a mighty mean man to take another man's home.103

Other songs, such as McGhee and Terry's "You'd Better Mind," contain advice on how to prevent infidelity:

Your woman goes out, comes home late,
Watch out buddy, you ain't teachin' her straight.
You got to be a real good lover to hold that line,
You'd better mind, Oh you'd better mind,
You may lose the woman you love any old time.

When you love, you better love and thrill,
If you don't somebody will,
You got to be a real good lover to hold that line,
You'd better mind, Oh you'd better mind,
You may lose the woman you love any old time.

You laugh and grin all in your face,
Watch out buddy, he will take your place,
You got to be a real good lover to hold that line,
You'd better mind, Oh you'd better mind,
You may lose the woman you love any old time.104

Sara Martin, Ida Cox, and Bessie Smith were all involved in songs of advice and reflection. Sara Martin sang:

I've got to have a daddy to tell my troubles to,
I've got to have a daddy to tell my troubles to,
One who knows how to love me and keep me from being blue.

Loving night and day is the thing I crave,
Loving night and day is the thing I crave,
Give me lots of loving and I'll be your slave.

Little drops of water, only grains of sand,
Little drops of water, only grains of sand,
Every sensible woman should have a back-door man.105

103Willie Baker, "No, No, Blues," transcribed from a recording (Blues Classics 5).

104McGhee and Terry, "You'd Better Mind," transcribed from a recording (Roulette 25074).

105Oliver, Blues Fell, p. 96.
The first stanza states Miss Martin's problem, while the second tells of her desire. It is the third stanza, however, that is important, for it is here that we find her giving her women listeners some advice, and we come to realize that perhaps Brownie McGhee and Sonny Terry's suggestion for the men to "love and thrill" contains more truth than realized.

Ida Cox becomes somewhat more philosophical than Sara Martin, and manages to give her audience a more detailed advice. It is interesting to note that Miss Cox cannot help making use of her sexual prowess by boasting in the last stanza:

When you lose your money, don't lose your mind,
When you lose your money, don't lose your mind,
When you lose your good man, please, don't mess with mine.

I'm gonna buy me a bull dog, watch my man while he sleeps,
I'm gonna buy me a bull dog, watch my man while he sleeps, [incoherent] afraid he might make a four day creep.

Yes, I'm gonna tell you, ain't gonna tell you nothin' else,
Yes, I'm gonna tell you, ain't gonna tell you nothin' else,
Any woman's a fool to claim him, she's got a whole man by herself.

But if you got a good man, and don't want him taken away from you,
But if you got a good man, and don't want him taken away from you,
Don't ever tell your friend, woman, what your man can do.

I may be old, high up in the years,
I may be old, high up in the years,
But I can still part with him, without shedding my tears.

I'm a big fat mama, with the meat shaking on my bones,
I'm a big fat mama, with the meat shaking on my bones, And everytime I shake it, some silly gal loses her home.106

106 Ida Cox, "Four Day Creep," transcribed from a recording (Vanguard VRS 8523/4).
Neither Ida Cox nor Sara Martin engage in any close examination of their inner thoughts, but are mainly content in stating facts and passing out advice. Ida Cox manages to give counsel on keeping a man at home, while at the same time boasting of the ease with which she can find a new one. Bessie Smith is far more self-analytical than either Sara Martin or Ida Cox, and her deeply moving "Young Woman's Blues" seems to be an attempt to justify her errors. The song is also unusual in the sense that it does not fit the typical blues song formula of verse, but it is probably one of Miss Smith's most touching performances. It should be pointed out that the line "... Nobody knows my name" appears as the title of a collection of essays by Negro author James Baldwin.

Woke up this mornin' [incoherent]
Look beside me on the pillow.
My man had gone away.
On his pillow he left a note:
"Reason I'm [incoherent] 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 yellar,
I'm a deep yellow-brown,
I ain't gonna marry,
Ain't gonna settle down,
I'm gonna drink good moonshine,
And run these browns down.

See that lonesome road? Lord, you know it's gotta end,
And I'm a good woman.
And I can get plenty men.¹⁰⁷

Bessie Smith saw no end to her misery, and the only answer appeared to be in alcohol, the hope of finding new men, and the end to the long "lonesome road."

Lowell Fulsom shows some of the same regrets for his infidelities, but instead of turning to alcohol and justifying himself with excuses, he only hopes that he can ask for forgiveness and be allowed to return to his once happy home. Fulsom indicates that he has examined his faults, but the song lacks the feeling of intensity found in Bessie Smith's verse.

I had a good woman, but I just wouldn't let her be,
I had a good woman, but I just wouldn't let her be,
I let a no good woman make a fool of me.

My baby she's gone and I'm goin' to lose my mind,
My baby she's gone and I'm goin' to lose my mind,
Because a good woman is so doggone hard to find.

I learned my lesson and I won't do this again,
I learned my lesson and I won't do this again,
Mistreat my baby, take a no good woman for my friend.

I'm gonna find my baby, fall down on my knees,
I'm gonna find my baby, fall down on my knees,
I'm gonna keep on beggin', take me back mama, if you please.¹⁰⁸

Lonnie Johnson also sings advice and reflects on his surroundings in a song called "Growing Rooster Blues." The song is unique as a good summing up of various attitudes taken by Negroes of the lower economic classes.

¹⁰⁷Bessie Smith, "Young Woman's Blues," transcribed from a recording (Columbia CL 857).

¹⁰⁸Lowell Fulsom, "Good Woman Blues," transcribed from a recording (Arhoolie F1006).
What makes the rooster crow every morning before day,
To let the pimps know that the working man is on his way.

We up before sunrise, slavin' sixteen hours a day,
We pay our house-rent and grocery bills, and the pimps get the rest of our pay.

Men, we've got to get together, something's got to be done,
And while there's only house-rent and grocery bills, no-one, no-fun.

Men, can't you see you can't keep a whole woman to yourself?
If your best friend can't get your woman, he'll frame her for somebody else.

Something about some women that I never could understand,
They not satisfied with a good husband, they want some other woman's man.

Johnson's song is an amazing tour de force reflecting the attitudes of certain Negroes, and the theme of infidelity is readily apparent throughout the piece.

It is the search for new lovers, motivated by the loose relationship of many Negro families, that has brought about the complex problem of infidelity. The reasons for needing a new partner are many and varied. Sometimes a woman needs a youthful and energetic love which can no longer be found in her present mate, and so, she turns to a new lover.

K. C. Douglas, the unfortunate victim, sings:

Yes, I'm a poor old watchdog, tryin' to find myself a bone,
Yes, I'm a poor old watchdog, tryin' to find myself a bone,

You know my mistress got a young watchdog, and she done drove me away from home.

She say I used to be a good watchdog, but I done got too old and grey,
She say I used to be a good watchdog, but I done got too old and grey,
And that's why she got a young watchdog, and she done drove poor me away.

She used to feed me, but now she don't even throw me a bone,
She used to feed me, but now she don't even throw me a bone,
That's why I'm driftin', driftin', I'm tryin' to find myself a home.110

Helen Humes finds that she is living with a man who is irresistible
to women, and she finds herself pleading for his return:

I woke up this morning, rolled from side to side,
I woke up this morning, rolled from side to side,
I grabbed my pillow, Lord, how I screamed and cried.

Heaven made you, brownskin, the angels gave you coal black hair,
Heaven made you, brownskin, the angels gave you coal black hair,
A brownskin man get a good woman most everywhere.

Oh Lord, listen to my plea,
Oh Lord, listen to my plea,
Please hear my cry and give me back my used-to-be.111

The man may turn a deaf ear to such pleas as those delivered by Miss Humes, and packing his few personal belongings, he will leave her for a younger and more sexually appetizing woman. The sexual connotations expressed in the third stanza of the following song serve as warning to the woman that she is no longer capable of giving the man the satisfaction that he once knew, and in the last stanza, we hear the singer expressing the sexual attributes of the new woman:


111 Oliver, Blues Fell, p. 103.
I got a brown across town, she's tall as a sycamore tree,
I got a brown across town, she's tall as a sycamore tree,
Says she walked thru' rain and snow trying to ease that
thing on me.

I believe I'll pack my suitcase, leave my home,
I believe I'll pack my suitcase, leave my home,
Yeah--'cos every time I see my li'l woman, she's got her
gimmies on.

Says don't blame me, baby, from talking out of my head,
Says don't blame me, baby, from talking out of my head,
Start worrying 'bout the movements you got, the springs
trembling on your bed.

She got a new way of trimming down a crazy man leave his
home,
She got a new way of trimming down a crazy man leave his
home,
Lord, the way she grabbed and turn you loose make the flesh
tremble on your bones.  

When a new lover is found it is often customary to flaunt the new
mate in front of the old one for the purpose of revenge through jealousy.

Walter Brown sang:

Hello, little girl, don't you remember me?
Hello, little girl, don't you remember me?
I mean, been so long, but I had a break you see.

Well, I'm doin' all right, found me a kewpie doll,
Well, I'm doin' all right, found me a kewpie doll,
She lives two flights up, and she sends me with her
smile.

She calls me her lover, yes, and her beggar too,
She calls me her lover, yes, and her beggar too,
Now, ain't you sorry little girl, that my new little
girl ain't you.

In a few instances a mild warning, coupled with a real attempt to
provide pleasure and happiness for the mate, may suffice to stop infi-

112Ibid., pp. 102-103.
113Shirley, pp. 118-119.
delity. Huddie Ledbetter tells us how this can be done in a song called "Pretty Flower," which, like so many blues songs, is constructed of double-entendres:

Yes, I got a pretty flower, way back in my back yard,
Yes, I got a pretty flower, back in my flower yard,
I got a fence built around it. Oh Lord, to keep all the chickens out.

Come by to see me, Huddie, each and every day,
Come by to see me, Huddie, each and every day,
Well, if you come by to see my pretty flower well,
you sure better stay away.

You got the same kind of flower I got, why do you wanna bother mine?
You got the same kind of flower I got, why do you wanna bother mine?
Tend to yours and treat them just right, that would be just fine.

Water my flower every morning and evening 'fore the sun goes down,
Water my flower every morning and evening 'fore the sun goes down,
Let me tell you one thing, Ledbetter, I got the sweetest flower in this town.

You can't tell me how to treat my pretty flower, (what I mean) I got my own way,
You can't tell me how to treat my pretty flower, I got my own way,
I'm gonna treat my little flower so good ooh, Lord, my back yard'll be so nice and gay.114

K. C. Douglas, like Walter Brown, finds that a new mate satisfies his mind, and perhaps there is even a new way of life waiting for him, a life in which there may now be some stability, happiness, and peace. Perhaps the life with the new companion will be one in which, as K. C. Douglas sang "... I don't have to lose my mind."

No more crying, and no more feeling blue,
I done found somebody, and I don't have to cry
over you.

I done found somebody, love me night and day,
You can pack up your suitcase, and be on your merry way.

I done found somebody stays at home at night,
I done found somebody, and I don't have to fuss and fight.

I done found somebody treats me nice and kind,
I done found somebody, and I don't have to lose my mind. ¹¹⁵

But the feeling of possible infidelity lingers, and the Negro blues singer finds it hard to dispel. There is always the chance that a person will arrive who will pick the "pretty flower" that Ledbetter is so fond of. Clara Smith expressed the helplessness of the whole situation when she sang:

If you take my daddy, take my daddy, I hope you be kind and true.
If you take my daddy, take my daddy, I hope you be kind and true,
Just like you took him from me, somebody's sure to take him from you.¹¹⁶

Clara Smith's song expresses the never ending cycle of infidelity, and there is a resigned feeling when she informs us that "... if nobody wanted him, neither would I."¹¹⁷ Samuel Charters has written that

¹¹⁶Charters, p. 66.
¹¹⁷Ibid.
if the love has ended, then the relationship can sometimes be terminated without bitterness, hatred, and violence. "There is," writes Charters, "a common verse expressing the thoughts of a man and a woman as they stand together for a last moment, trying to think of something to say."

Mr. Charters then quotes the following verse:

I'm leaving now, let's shake hand in hand,
I'm leaving now, let's shake hand in hand,
I'm going to find me another woman, you better find you another man."

Finding a new companion may, after all, be the only solution, and one can only hope that with a new partner there will come a time when, as K. C. Douglas has sung, "I done found somebody, and I don't have to lose my mind."

The fear that a new lover may be found will continue to haunt the blues singer, and inevitably an attempt of some type will be made to stop the cycle of infidelity. We have seen earlier that implied threats of violence can sometimes cause fear, but never does it seem to stop infidelity. Some singers, in spite of their fear, manage to boast of sexual prowess and numerous infidelities. Others, like Blind Willie McTell, have warned us that women should be left alone, "cause their husband will grab you, beat you ragged as a cedar tree." Like the search for new lovers, the threat of possible violence returns again and again to the blues songs.

The Negro blues songs are filled with the warnings and threats of

118 Ibid.
violence, even if few of the songs contain descriptions of actual violence itself. Like the characters of Claude McKay's novel, the blues singers find their lives often darkened with scenes of threatened violence, and they express this impending violence in various ways through their music. Infidelity can certainly be cited as one of the chief causes of Negro violence, and this in turn, is almost always the result of the uninhibited anger which Mr. Myrdal has spoken of. The first inkling of impending danger comes when the blues singer gives veiled and implied warnings, which eventually may lead to open threats, and then to possible violence.

The first warnings are usually weak, almost as if the singer hopes that the infidelity, which causes him so much inward pain, will stop of its own accord. Willie Newbern threatens to disown his woman, who doesn't really seem to take much stock in his rather limpid warning that she "... can't be mine no more." Newbern sings:

I've got a dreamy-eyed woman, lives down on Cherry Street,
I've got a dreamy-eyed woman, lives down on Cherry Street,
An' she laughs and chaffs with every brownskin ol' man she meet.

So I told her last night and all the night before,
And I told her last night and all the night before,
'Say if you don't quit some of your struttin', baby,
you can't be mine no more.'

Put both hands on her hips and these are the words she said,
Put both hands on her hips and these are the words she said,
Said, 'Big boy I couldn't miss you if the good Lord told me you was dead.'

119 Oliver, Blues Fell, p. 99.
The threat of breaking up the relationship, if one of the partners is untrue to the other, is the weakest possible revenge, for the adulterous mate, as we see in the example of Willie Newbern's woman, usually couldn't care less. The blues singer threatens to leave, but the threat takes on the quality of a pleading bluff. The singer sometimes turns the threat upon himself, and we hear the idle warning that he would rather "... drink muddy water," than to allow present conditions to continue:

Babe, we got to have our little talk,
I ought to pack up my things and walk,
I know a dollar goes from hand to hand,
Before I'd let you go from man to man,
I'd rather drink muddy water,
Sleep in a hollow log.

Worked for you just like a Georgia mule,
My friends laughed and they called me a fool,
Your kisses are as sweet as can be,
But 'fore I'll let you make a sap out of me,
I'd rather drink muddy water,
Sleep in a hollow log.

Love you baby but you won't be fair,
You don't know how to be on the square,
Have your fun baby if you must,
Before I'll have a woman that I can't trust,
I'd rather drink muddy water,
Sleep in a hollow log.\textsuperscript{120}

The threat, one feels, is an idle warning, but there is, however, a strong feeling of suppressed anger.

Robert Brown makes one of the more typical blues song threats when he tells his woman that he will "... make a change," but just how this "change" will cause a difference in his woman's attitude and actions is not really apparent. Brown's warning seems somehow as ineffective as the previous threat to "... sleep in a hollow log."

\textsuperscript{120}Shirley, p. 213.
I used to love you baby, used to love to hear you call my name,
I used to love you baby, used to love to hear you call my name,
But you treat me so mean, Hoo! I believe I'll make a change!

I put you in my kitchen, to cook on my brand new range,
I put you in my kitchen, to cook on my brand new range,
But you didn' cook nothin' I tell you sweet mama,
Hoo! I believe I'll make a change!

You go away, mama, and you stay night and day,
I kept on beggin' you to change your low-down ways,
You're gonna come home one of these mornings,
I'll be liable to pack up your doggone things,
Just to let you know, sweet mama, Hoo! I will be makin' a change.

Well, I wait for you, mama, in the ice and rain,
And you wait for my payday, so you can spend my change,
Then tell everybody that you're my ball and chain,
But you ain't gon' be no more, sweet mama, Hoo! 'cause I believe I'll make a change.

Muddy Waters tells his woman that if her present infidelities continue there will be an eventual loss of her "... happy home," a somewhat paradoxical statement. If the home were truly happy there would seem to be little reason for the woman’s infidelity. The threat of Muddy Waters is so weak that he even tells his woman that he doesn't mind her unfaithfulness as long as she returns home. Waters tells her to

Sail on, sail on, my little honey bee, sail on.
Sail on, sail on, my little honey bee, sail on.
You gonna keep on sailin',
Till you lose your happy home.

Sail on, sail on, my little honey bee, sail on.
Sail on, sail on, my little honey bee, sail on.
I don't mind your sailin',
But please don't sail so long.

121 Ibid., p. 255.
I hear a lot of buzzing,
Sounds like my little honey bee,
I hear a lot of buzzing,
Sounds like my little honey bee,
She been all round the world makin' honey,
But now she is comin' back home to me.122

Elmo James, in a sometimes incoherent song, tells of a situation strikingly like that of Muddy Waters:

I don't want no woman (who picks up ev[er] downtown man she meets,
I don't want no woman (who picks up ev[er] downtown man she meets,
Well, she's just no good and shouldn't be allowed on the streets.

I believe, I believe my time ain't long,
I believe, I believe my time ain't long,
I'm gonna leave my baby and break up my happy home.123

Tommy McClenann's rough voice and incoherent words manage to express yet another weak threat:

I got a brownskin woman with her front tooth crowned with gold,
I got a brownskin woman with her front tooth crowned with gold,
She got a lien on my body, and a mortgage on my soul.

Now friend don't let your good woman (treat me) like this woman (treat me),
Now friend don't let your good woman (treat me) like this woman (treat me),
Got me stone crazy about her, how (darn fool can I be?)

Now baby, I ain't gonna tell nobody 'bout the way you do,
Now baby, I ain't gonna tell nobody 'bout the way you do,
Say, you're always kissin' some fat mouth followin' you.

122 Watters, "Honey Bee," transcribed from a recording (Chess LP 1427).
123 Elmo James, "Dust My Broom," transcribed from a recording (Blues Classics 5).
Now I told you once, baby, and I ain't gonna tell you no more.
Next time I tell you, I'm sure gonna let you go.\(^{124}\)

McClennan's threat to let his woman go seems incredibly weak when we have already been told that she has "a lien" on his body "and a mortgage" on his soul. The singer's threat is impotent to say the least, for one has the feeling that his unfaithful woman really doesn't care what he does. McClennan has already warned her once, but obviously to no avail.

Charlie Burse and Sam Hopkins demonstrate transitions from the weak threat of severing the relationship, to the more pronounced warning that perhaps something will be done about the problem, but the singer is not quite sure what it will be. One thing is certain, however; the threat has now become more emphatic and tinged with a veiled hint of physical violence. Charlie Burse, in fact, sings what appears to be an open threat, but the last line becomes a muffled and vague warning which is not entirely decipherable due partially to the Negro dialect:

\[
\begin{align*}
&\text{You been tippin' around on me baby,} \\
&\text{But that awful time's gonna tell.} \\
&\text{You been tippin' around on me baby,} \\
&\text{But that awful time's gonna tell.} \\
&\text{And if I ever catch up with you baby, }  \\
&\text{(last line not coherent).}^{125}
\end{align*}
\]

Sam Hopkins warns that "... there'll come a day" when he no longer puts up with his woman's deeds, and the threat, due to an ominous sound in his voice, seems to be less idle talk than in those lyrics seen

\(^{124}\)Tommy McClennan, "Brownskin Woman," transcribed from a recording (RCA LPV 518).

\(^{125}\)Charlie Burse, "Tippin' Round," transcribed from a recording (Folkways RBP 202).
earlier:

I give that woman all my money,
Just like she was a queen,
That's why I'm wondering why,
She treat poor me so mean.

My mama she told me, now I understand,
It's just on account of that woman,
Lovin' another man,
But that's all right,
I believe there'll come a day,
Yes, when it do, I don't believe I'll put up little girl,
With your lowdown ways.126

"Devil is Watching You," as sung by Sam Hopkins, is another veiled threat, and this time the warning is emphasized by an incessant rhythm which only accentuates the feeling of a suppressed violence:

You'd better be careful about what you do,
I just wanted to remind you, the devil is watching you.
Yes, you better be careful woman, about every little thing you do.

You may go to buy groceries, in a grocery store,
But I want to tell you, the devil gonna watch you everywhere you go.
You'd better be careful, you know the devil is watchin' you.

You can beg, cheat, and borrow,
You can steal a little too,
You may hide it from me,
But the devil is watchin' you,
Oh, devil is watchin' you.

You may take my money, go have some fun too,
But you'd better be careful, the devil is watchin' you,
He's gonna bring it back, just like you take it from me.
You know there ain't nothing unpossible the devil can do.127

The most that these veiled threats accomplish is a severing of the relationship, with the singer feeling that perhaps he has gotten his re-

126Hopkins, "Bad Luck and Trouble," transcribed from a recording (Folkways FS 3822).

127Ibid., "Devil is Watching You," transcribed from a recording (Vee Jay 1044).
venge by leaving the woman to fend for herself. This is rather ironic, since the woman already appears to have the upper hand, but a singer like Big Joe Williams continues to inform us that he "... ain't going to cry no more," and manages to partially delude himself into believing that he has had his revenge.128

The first positive action, outside of leaving, is the threat to find another companion to take the place of the unfaithful one. The singer thus hopes to achieve some sort of revenge by flaunting the fact that the untrue mate was not really needed after all, but this method of revenge is, in many ways, as weak as the threat to leave, since it seems to be more a method to assuage the singer's hurt pride than anything else. Huddie Ledbetter gives a good example of this type of song when he sings "Sail On Little Girl, Sail On:"

You can mistreat me baby,
But you can't when I go home.
You can mistreat me baby,
But you can't when I go home.
   I got somebody there, she'll make you leave me alone.129

The prolific Sam Hopkins sings "I Don't Need You Woman," which falls into a vein similar to that of Ledbetter's song, and again, the sense of revenge is weakened by the feeling that the singer is attempting to pacify his own misery by a display of boastfulness. The boastfulness may be an attempt to induce jealousy, and thus gain vengeance.

128Williams, "Kingshighway Blues," from record album notes (Folkways FS 3820), p. 6.

129Ledbetter, "Sail On Little Girl, Sail On," transcribed from a recording (RCA LPV 505).
I don't need you woman,  
I got someone [who] seem to understand,  
I don't need you woman,  
I got someone [who] seem to understand.  
The reason I say that she understand,  
She don't keep runnin' from man to man.

She's in love with one,  
And that someone she says is me.  
She's in love with just only one,  
And that one is only me.  
I don't need a woman runnin' from man to man,  
Neither jumpin' from hand to hand.

I done told you baby,  
Till I can't hardly understand,  
I don't want no woman,  
If she got to run from man to man,  
And I don't need none that got to jump from hand to hand.  

The threat to find a new partner was not limited to male blues singers. Virginia Liston is shocked when her man tells her that he could "... stand to see you die," and her threat to "... get myself another man" seems pathetically futile in the face of the facts. She sings:

I went to the race-track,  
My man he won,  
Gave the money to another gal,  
And wouldn't give me none;  
You don't know, you don't know my mind,  
You see me laughin',  
Laughin' just to keep from cry'n'.

I said to papa "Can you stand to see me cry,"  
He said "Gal, I can stand to see you die,"  
You don't know, you don't know my mind,  
You see me laughin',  
Laughin' just to keep from cry'n'.

He said he didn't want me,  
I wasn't good enough,  
I'm gonna get myself another man

130Hopkins, "I Don't Need You Woman," transcribed from a recording (Pickwick SPC 3013).
And call his bluff,
You don't know, you don't know my mind,
You see me laughin',
Laughin' just to keep from cryin'.'131

Big Bill Broonzy describes a woman who always "... had four or five cousins around," but only until the singer "... done got wise" to "... the way you women do," and now "... I done got me some cousins."132 Once again the revenge seems to pacify the singer's feelings of hurt pride, but one wonders if his unfaithful woman is overly concerned, and if she isn't, then perhaps more drastic measures must be taken.

More drastic measures usually come in the form of weapons, many of which are used in moments of uncontrollable rage. It has been mentioned earlier that Negro crime is a result of an undeveloped respect for life and law, and that the penalty for a Negro who murders another Negro is often insignificant, as the crime is sometimes considered a minor offense.

The threat of physical violence, as a result of infidelity, is not always something which happens without warning. Of the songs thus far discussed, none as yet has dealt with actual violence. In most cases we find the blues singer pleading for a return to normality although this is often accompanied by an ominous tone of warning. Threats to leave the partner and to indulge in idle self-pity are frequent in the blues song, but most of the time this method is used to no avail. The warning that a happy home may be broken up sounds ineffective, especially when we dis-

131 Shirley, p. 264.
132 Ibid., p. 295.
cover that the singer has already used this threat before. The suggestion that something more pronounced may happen is seldom taken seriously, and Sam Hopkins' threat that the "devil is watchin' you" will probably be ignored just as all the earlier warnings were.

Sometimes the boast of finding a new partner may be effective, but as blues singer Virginia Liston has implied, it is only a last attempt to invoke feelings of jealousy on the part of the one committing the infidelity. Perhaps the guilty one will return when he finds that his woman has a new man, but more often this seems to be just what Miss Liston claims it is, a laughter "just to keep from cry'n."

Since most of these threats may prove feeble, stronger methods are now in order. Sometimes, as in the following song, the singer may be troubled by the possible consequences of a rash deed:

It's four o'clock in the morning, and I can't close my eyes,
It's four o'clock in the morning, and I can't close my eyes,
I can't find my woman, I can't be satisfied.

I can't find her hat and clothes, I wonder where they could be,
I can't find her hat and clothes, I wonder where they could be,
I can't sleep for the evil thoughts that come over me.133

In the fear that he may be forced to go beyond idle warnings, the singer becomes far more blunt than before. K. C. Douglas goes so far as to threaten death:

I worked last week and the week before,
And here I come runnin' with all my dough,
You got a good thing now,
You got a good thing now,
Why don't you use your head,
And don't let 'em find you dead.

133Charters, p. 45.
Looky here mama, what you tryin' to do?
You're tryin' to quit me baby, and I been good to you,
You got a good thing now,
You got a good thing now,
Why don't you use your head,
And don't let 'em find you dead.

Marry me mama, tell you what I'll do,
[I'll] rob and steal and bring it home to you,
You got a good thing now,
You got a good thing now,
Why don't you use your head,
And don't let 'em find you dead.

Looky here mama, where you stay last night?
Your hair all down, your clothes ain't fittin' you right,
You got a good thing now,
You got a good thing now,
Why don't you use your head,
And don't let 'em find you dead. 134

Big Joe Williams sings a blues song that contains a rather obvious
sexual double-entendre, and only a slightly less obvious threat:

Peach orchard mama, you swore no-one's goin' [to] use your
peaches but me,
Peach orchard mama, you swore no-one's goin' [to] use your
peaches but me,
If you want me to work in your orchard, then keep your
orchard free.

You got me to the place, I hate to see that evenin' sun go
down,
You got me to the place, I hate to see that evenin' sun go
down,
Well, get up in the mornin', Hoo, well, peach orchard mama,
she's on my mind.

Got a man to buy your groc'ries, and another gentleman to
pay your rent,
She's got a man to buy her groc'ries, and another man to
pay her rent,
Well, you got me workin' in your orchard, Hoo, while I'm
bringin' you ev'ry cent.

134 Douglas, "You Got a Good Thing Now," transcribed from a recording
(Prestige 1023).
Sometimes she make me happy, and again she makes me cry,
Sometimes she make me happy, and again she makes me cry,
If ever again I get a peach orchard mama, Hoo, well, then
    I wish that she would die.135

The last line of this song contains a combination of wish and threat,
but in "Pinetop's Blues," by way of contrast, we find that the wishes
and implied warnings are gone, and only the threat remains:

Now my woman's got a heart like a rock cast down in the sea,
Now my woman's got a heart like a rock cast down in the sea,
She thinks she can love ev'rybody and mistreat poor me.

Clarence (Pinetop) Smith, however, has a solution to this problem:

    I'm gonna buy myself a graveyard of my own,
    I'm gonna buy myself a graveyard of my own,
    I'm gonna bury that woman if she don't leave me alone.

Smith also finds that alcohol can sometimes make one forget, as well as
fortify one's nerves for a deed that may later be regreted:

    I can't use no woman if she can't help me lose the blues,
    I can't use no woman if she can't help me lose the blues,
    Goin' down on State Street just to buy me a gallon of booze.136

It is ironic that Pinetop Smith was himself the victim of a dance hall
shooting, but the "... accounts vary; some say he was an unfortunate
onlooker, others that he was involved in a dispute about a girl."137

Clarence Williams, in "West End Blues," shows that the use of
alcohol can indeed build one's courage to the point where physical
violence may very well be possible:

    I got the blues from my head to my shoes,
    I'm blue today.

135Shirley, pp. 115-116.
136Ibid., pp. 231-232.
I've got a mean evil feelin',
My belly's full of gin,
I'm on my way to the West End,
And that's where troubles will begin.

My gal, my pal, low down, mean houn',
They're in town, they're cuttin' it up,
Yes, they're runnin' 'round,
Soon I'm gonna take a walk and knock upon her door.

Now those folks in West End,
folks in West End,
They're gonna see some shootin' like they never saw
before,
My gal and my best pal will never cheat in West End
any more.

I got the blues from my head to my shoes,
Blue today, I've got a mean low-down feelin',
I'm gonna hear bad news.
I'm on my way to the West End to lose those West End blues.\(^{138}\)

Perhaps, as Roosevelt Scott once sang, its "... best for you to
keep single, black gal, when you walks like a whore."\(^{139}\) If the woman
cannot "keep single," then violence may be the only answer. Clarence
Williams has already mentioned that "shootin'" is a possible solution,
but there are many other types of possible violence, besides shooting,
with which the blues songs are sometimes concerned. One of these is the
use of the black arts, or "voodoo," sometimes known among the Negroes
as "hoodoo."\(^{140}\) This invariably takes the form of a spell, curse, or
enchantment, and supposedly has the power, if strong enough, to kill.
The "hoodoo hand," which Arthur Crudup sings of in "Hoodoo Lady Blues,"
is sometimes a small bag of various "preparations" used to exert force.

\(^{138}\)Shirley, pp. 258-259.
\(^{139}\)Oliver, Blues Fell, p. 116.
\(^{140}\)Ibid., p. 138, and Myrdal, p. 965.
over another person.

Believe I'll drop down in Louisiana just to see a dear old friend of mine,
Believe I'll drop down in Louisiana just to see a dear old friend of mine,
You know maybe she can help me 'bout my hard, hard time.
You know they tell me in Louisiana there is hoodoos all over there,
You know they tell me in Louisiana there is hoodoos all over there,
You know they'll do anything for their money, murder anyone I declare.

Now Miss Hoodoo Lady, please give me a hoodoo hand,
Now Miss Hoodoo Lady, please give me a hoodoo hand,
I want to hoodoo this woman of mine, I believe she's got another man.\(^{141}\)

John H. Rohrer and Munro S. Edmonson, in a study of the personalities of New Orleans Negroes, found that a preoccupation with violence was dominant in the mind of a young girl named Florence, for whom "... voodoo deaths and poisonings, and fears of sexual attack," were part of her very existence. To one interviewer she told of the difficulties of sleeping because she had numerous dreams about cuttings and slashings.

"Her talk," according to one of the authors, "was replete with descriptions of the violence around her." Florence tells of her father coming home and striking her mother with a hatchet. Her mother immediately retaliates by hitting the father with a hammer, thus taking both of them to the hospital. The authors tell us that Florence "... made frequent reference to voodoo, mysterious poisonings, and decapitations."\(^{142}\)

Florence, although mentally disturbed, lives in a world that is only

\(^{141}\)Ibid.

too real for a large number of Negroes raised under similar circumstances. The various types of violence she mentions are often referred to in the blues songs, even if they are seldom directly dealt with, and it was under conditions of violence that the great Mississippi Delta singer Robert Johnson was murdered. Johnson died of poisoning administered by an unknown person, perhaps "... one of the girls he mentions in a blues refrain."\(^{143}\)

Robert Johnson made only a small number of recordings before he was murdered, but one of the best of these songs dealt with the threat of violence caused by infidelity. The device favored by Johnson is a .32-.20 revolver, a gun that seems to be a very "... accurate and equally deadly weapon in close quarters."\(^{144}\) Johnson sings:

I sent for my baby, man, and she don't come,
I sent for my baby, man, and she don't come,
All the doctors in Hot Springs sure can't help her none.

And if she gets unruly, [and] thinks she don't wanna do,
If she gets unruly, [and] thinks she don't wanna do,
[I'll] take my .32-.20 and cut her half in two.

She got a .38 special, but I believe its most too light,
She got a .38 special, but I believe its most too light,
I got a .32-.20 got to make the chance all right.

I sent for my baby and she don't come,
I sent for my baby and she don't come,
I'm goin' to shoot my pistol, goin' to shoot my gal and gone.

You made me love you, now your man done gone.

---

\(^{143}\) Frank Driggs, quoted from record album notes (Columbia CL 1654).

\(^{144}\) Oliver, \textit{Blues Fell}, p. 201.
Ah baby, where did you stay last night?
You got your hair all tangled and you ain't talkin' right.

Well a .38 special boys, it do very well,
I got a .32-.20 and it [incoherent].

I sent for my baby and she don't come,
Well, all the doctors in Wisconsin(?) sure can't help her none.

Hey, hey, baby, where did you stay last night?
You didn't come home 'till the sun was shining bright.

Ah boys, I just can't take my rest,
With this .32-.20 layin' up and down my breast.145

It is ironic that Johnson, like Pinetop Smith, was killed in a violent manner.

Big Maceo (Major Merriweather) packs a .32-.20, and uses it to invoke the fear of violence:

When I found that woman, they were walkin' hand in hand,
Well she didn't surprise me when I found her with another man.

She started screamin' "murder," and I had never raised my hand,
Now she knewed I had them covered, 'cause I had the stuff right there in my hand.

145 Robert Johnson, " .32-.20 Blues," transcribed from a recording (Columbia CL 1654).
I ain't no bully and I ain't the baddest man in town,  
I ain't no bully and I ain't the baddest man in town,  
When I catch a man with my woman, I usually tear his  
playhouse down.  

Sometimes the violent anger comes at such speed that coherent  
thinking is virtually impossible. Jimmy Gordon tells us that:

I looked out of my window, just 'bout the break of day,  
I looked out of my window, just 'bout the break of day,  
Just in time to see another man taking my best gal  
away.

An' I looked for my pistol, but I found I had the  
safeter on,  
An' I looked for my pistol, but I found I had the  
safeter on,  
But before I could shoot it, that man had my best  
gal and gone.  

The numerous references to guns in the blues songs would indicate  
that this is perhaps the most popular weapon among the more violent of  
the lower class Negroes. Samuel Charters writes that one of the "...  
blues known by every singer is some variation of the old 'Forty-Four  
Blues,' named for the .44 caliber revolver that the man is carrying with  
him." The caliber of the weapon, however, changed as smaller revolvers became more popular. Charters writes that during "... the 1920's  
it was a .44 or a .45 revolver, in the 1930's it had become a .38, a .32,  
or a .32-.20, and by the 1950's it was a .25 or a .22." Memphis Willie  
B., according to Charters, sang the "P. 38 Blues," named after a German  

146 Big Maceo, "Maceo's .32-.20," transcribed from a recording (Folkways, Vol. II, RBF 9).
147 Oliver, Blues Fell, p. 201.
148 Charters, p. 45.
149 Ibid., p. 46.
revolver he had brought back as a veteran of World War II.\textsuperscript{150}

Sometimes the theme of infidelity, and the use of a gun to remedy the situation, is treated humorously. Such is the case in Leroy Carr's "My Woman's Gone Wrong," which uses a .45 wielded by the woman:

\begin{quote}
Now I woke up this morning, my woman was standing over me,
Now I woke up this morning, my woman was standing over me,
She had a big .45, and she was mad as she could be.

Now I prayed to my baby, and to the Lord above,
Now I prayed to my baby, and to the Lord above,
Now I said, "Honey, please don't shoot me—you're the only one I love."

She seen me with a woman, standin' at her front gate,
She seen me with a woman, standin' at her front gate,
Now I tried my best to dodge her, but I was just a little too late.

Now honey, please, please, please, don't take my life,
Now honey, please, please, please, don't take my life,
'Cause you got me all wrong baby, honey, that was another man's wife!\textsuperscript{151}
\end{quote}

Carr uses the last line of this blues song for a humorous "punch-line" ending, but in another song, "Blues Before Sunrise," we find Carr using the last line with a stark seriousness. It is this stark seriousness which dissolves the self-pity found in the first part of the song.

\begin{quote}
I had the blues before sunrise, with tears standin' in my eyes,
I had the blues before sunrise, with tears standin' in my eyes,
It's such a miserable feeling, a feelin' that I feel despised.
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{150}Ibid.

\textsuperscript{151}Carr, "My Woman's Gone Wrong," transcribed from a recording (Columbia CL 1799).
Seems like ev'rybody, ev'rybody's down on me,
Seems like ev'rybody, ev'rybody's down on me,
I'm gonna cast my troubles down in the deep blue sea.

Today has been a long, lonesome day,
Today has been a long, lonesome day,
I've been sittin' here thinkin' with my mind a million miles away.

Blues start to roll in, and stop at my front door,
Blues start to roll in, and stop at my front door,
I'm gonna change my way of living, ain't gonna worry no more.

Now I love my baby, but my baby won't behave,
Now I love my baby, but my baby won't behave,
I'm gonna buy me a sharp-shootin' pistol, and put her in her grave.152

James Wiggins, who prefers a .44 caliber weapon, sings of the moment before the first shot is fired, and the song leaves the listener with a feeling of the intensity and anxiety of the situation. Wiggins sang:

I walked all night long, with my .44 in my hand,
I walked all night long, with my .44 in my hand,
Looking for my woman, looking for her other man.

I was gone so long, running from store to store,
I was gone so long, running from store to store,
When I find my woman she won't run no more.

When I found that woman they was walking hand in hand,
When I found that woman they was walking hand in hand,
You know she did surprise me when I found her with another man.

She started screaming before I even raised my hand,
She started screaming before I even raised my hand,
She saw I was carrying my .44 in my hand.153

152Shirley, pp. 174-175.

153Charters, p. 46.
One of the most famous of the blues songs is "See See Rider," a number which has endless variations, and seemingly countless explanations of the meaning of "See See" in the title. This song, also known as "C. C. Rider," has been recorded by numerous singers in a number of different styles, but one of the first versions was that of the famous Gertrude Rainey, better known as Ma Rainey. It is interesting to note the typical evidence of infidelity as found in the last stanza, this time, however, from the woman's point of view. The "cannon ball" mentioned in the lyrics is the Negro reference to a train, and the term "Rider" has, for the Negro blues singer, a sexual double-entendre.

See See Rider, See what you have done,
Law'd, Law'd, Law'd, Made me love you,
Now your gal has come,
You made me love you,
Now your gal has come.

I'm goin' away baby,
I won't be back 'til Fall,
Law'd, Law'd, Law'd, Goin' away baby,
Won't be back 'til Fall,
If I find me a good man,
Won't be back at all.

I'm gonna buy me a pistol,
Just as long as I am tall,
Law'd, Law'd, Law'd, Shoot my man, and catch a cannon ball.

If he won't have me,
He won't have no gal at all.

See See Rider, Where did you stay last night?
Law'd, Law'd, Law'd, Your shoes ain't buttoned,
Your clothes don't fit you right,
You didn't come home 'til the sun was shining bright.154

Guns are probably the most popular weapons used to eliminate the

problem of infidelity, but various objects that can cut and slash are also found to be effective. Certainly Merline Johnson found them so:

I've got a two-by-four, and it just fits my hand,
I've got a two-by-four, and it just fits my hand,
I'm goin' ta stop all you women from runnin' around with my man.

I don't want to hurt that man, just goin' to kill him dead,
I don't want to hurt that man, just goin' to kill him dead,
I'll knock him to his knees, go back to the man I once have had.

When I leave home, your other woman is knockin' on my door,
When I leave home, your other woman is knockin' on my door,
I'm going to stop so much talkin' and raise heck with my two-by-four.

The "two-by-four," we are informed by Paul Oliver, is a long double-bladed clasp knife, the longer versions of which are known as "chibs." Oliver goes on to list razors, cottonhooks, cleavers, knives of cane-cutters, and ice-picks as some of the varied weapons favored by certain elements of the Negro population. Blues singers Charlie Jordan and Sonny Boy Williamson were slain by just such weapons as these.

William Bunch, better known as Peetie Wheatstraw, sang of a quick-tempered murder caused by his own infidelities:

When the sun was shining I did not stay,
I went to the beer tavern, I threwed all my money away.

I went to the beer tavern, ma baby tol' me not to go,
Come back home, ma clo's was thrown outdoors.

155Oliver, Blues Fell, p. 193.
156Ibid., pp. 193-194.
I took a gal to the beer tavern, things was lookin' hot, 
But ma ole lady took her pocket knife and cut out ma 
baby's heart.157

The end result of a murder which has been caused by infidelity 
can sometimes be prison, especially if the one who committed the deed 
is without legal counsel, or influential white friends. If the judge 
happens to feel that a crime against another Negro is not a venial 
offense, as we have seen many of them do, then the murderer stands a 
good chance of being sent to prison with a much heavier fine than that 
"commonly meted out to a chicken-thief." Roosevelt Sykes sings a blues 
song that reflects this situation, and his use of several layers of 
meaning is surprisingly skillful. In the song, the number of his 
prison cell becomes, in a strange kaleidoscopically shifting metaphor, 
the number of a train, and the whistle of the train becomes the shot 
from his .44 gun.

Lord, I walked all night long with my .44 in ma hand, 
Lord, I walked all night long with my .44 in ma hand, 
I was lookin' for my woman an' I found her with another 
man.

I wore my .44 so long, Lord, it made my shoulder sore, 
I wore my .44 so long, Lord, it made my shoulder sore, 
After I do what I want to ain't goin' to wear my .44 
no more.

Lord, in ma baby's face she heard that .44 whistle blow, 
Lord, in ma baby's face she heard that .44 whistle blow, 
Well, it sounds just like ain't gonna blow that whistle 
no more.

Lord, I got a little cabin, on my cabin is Number 44, 
Lord, I got a little cabin, on my cabin is Number 44, 
When I wake up every morning the wolves scratches on my 
door.158

157 Ibid., pp. 169-170

158 Ibid., pp. 219-220.
The wolves scratching at his door could be interpreted literally as the prison guards, or abstractly as the misery brought upon the singer for his "moment's anger," when it was "not inhibited by a developed respect for life and law." Infidelity, the singer finds, brings anger, which in turn brings quick revenge and long suffering.

The theme of infidelity follows a cycle which seems to be broken only by the occasional acts of violence. In actuality, the violence found in Roosevelt Sykes' song is infrequent, if one compares it to the number of lyrics that contain threats, most of which are not carried out. But whether or not any action has been taken is not the point, for the fact remains that the threats have been made. But the urge to commit an act of infidelity will continue, regardless of threats, warnings, and pleadings. Only in a few instances can it be stopped. Perhaps the victim will learn to "love and thrill;" or perhaps revert to the violence which he constantly threatens.
PART III: CONCLUSION

At the beginning of this study it was stated that a knowledge of the theme of infidelity, as it is found in the blues song, adds something to our understanding of the American Negro. The feeling of many whites, as was seen with Ray Stannard Baker's "fine type of old gentlefolk," is that the Negro has low morals.\textsuperscript{159} Another typical reaction is that the Negro is naturally inclined to crime. Both of these beliefs have been refuted, for we have seen that the beginning of Negro "immorality" was firmly rooted in the attitudes of the white slave holders, who, as Mr. Myrdal has told us, did not care about the marital status of their slaves. In fact, many of them attempted to discourage close ties.\textsuperscript{160} Like the "low morals" of the Negroes, the higher crime rate has an equally strong foundation in white indifference. It is hard to foster any kind of regard for law and order when a large group of people, due to poverty and dislocation, have lost all sense of self-respect. "This does not mean," to quote Mr. Wharton again, "that the great mass of the Negroes were entirely without self-respect, or were habitual law-breakers. But it did mean that large numbers of them were."\textsuperscript{161} Although Mr. Wharton refers to the Negro in Mississippi between 1865 and 1890, his findings are certainly not limited to this specific period. Gunnar Myrdal pointed out that poverty, ignorance of the law, crowded living conditions in big cities, and

\textsuperscript{159}See p. 16 above.

\textsuperscript{160}See pp. 12-13 above.

\textsuperscript{161}See p. 16 above.
the lack of influential friends, have all been contributing factors to increasing Negro crime rates.162

What many whites fail to take into consideration is the long period of time in which the Negro remained outside of white society. The Negro came from a society which, according to Mr. Lomax, placed a high value on "erotic and aggressive behavior," and which the white slaveholders did little to change.163 "Our pioneer folk censor" had little effect on the Negro, and if the Negro was restricted in his ability to move freely, he certainly was not restricted in his ability to create songs and dances. It was this factor that gave rise to an American Negro culture, of which the blues songs are a strong part.

A study of Negro culture, in the present case, the blues song, is useful for a better understanding of Negro problems. It is strange that so much note is taken of a Negro concert pianist, a Negro opera star, or the appearance of a Negro in Othello, and yet relatively little attention is given by the general public to those who perform within a heavily-oriented Negro idiom. It is true that much study has been done on the Negro spirituals, but the spirituals, unlike the blues songs, were probably developed by Negroes who lived in close approximation to religious plantation owners. The spirituals, therefore, represent what could be termed as the "acceptable" way of becoming part of the white world. The unacceptable method is to create within the sphere of Negro culture. Nothing

162 See pp. 14 and 17 above.
163 See p. 6 above.
could belong more strongly to the realm of Negro culture than the blues songs, but the blues songs are ignored by most scholars, for they express a behavior that is, outwardly at least, alien to the white world.

There is much in the blues songs to alienate the white American, and much also to embarrass the growing number of middle and upper class Negroes, many of whom no longer wish to be associated with the more "primitive" elements of their race. We have seen that there are few songs which express the happiness of marital bliss, the raising of children, or the pleasures of domestic home life. First love, a common subject of popular song, is virtually unknown among the blues singers. Overly sentimental lyrics are often buried by the singer's abilities to express the harsh realities of a disrupted existence. The very earthiness of the blues lyrics, with their references to "riders," "rootin' ground hogs," "backdoor" men, "elevatin'" women, "wrigglers," "pimps," "whores," and "hoodoo women," is alien to white society. The use of the double-entendre for sexual connotations has only furthered the remoteness of the blues songs from the scholars of Negro culture, and has perhaps given rise to the idea that the songs are evidence of the "low morals" of the Negroes. The blues songs would undoubtedly be considered obscene by a number of white listeners, but they are obscene only in the sense that they derive from a culture foreign to most white Americans.

The Negro blues singer is fond of using such double-entendre terms as the "mule," who kicks in the wrong "stall," "the old red hen," who has a "little fun" in the barn, and the "perches," that are caught by the wrong
person. We are given such esoteric symbols as "cat fish" and "black snakes" that are sexually appetizing, "vines" that are trampled on by the wrong party, "cabbage sprouts," "tatoes" that are "bruised," "trains" that are "runnin'" on the same track, "bull cows," and "heifers." There are men who are dedicated to "carryin' your coal," and becoming "rabbits" that can "dodge a dog at night." There are "pretty flowers" that need to be "watered" and protected from "chickens." There are Negroes who will "cook on a new range," "sail" like a "honey bee," or "work" in a "peach orchard." Some are fortunate enough to escape by catching a "cannon-ball," while others, less fortunate, are reduced to hearing the "wolves" scratching at their "door."

The Negro makes use of a double-entendre that is almost entirely free from the inhibitions that curb much American folk verse and popular song. Once again, we see how little effect "our pioneer folk censor" had on the Negro. But it is much more than the Negro’s use of indelicate double-entendres which alienates him from general society. It is his outlook as a whole that becomes quite bizarre when compared to the rest of American society. We have seen how F. Scott Fitzgerald’s The Great Gatsby culminates in an act of violence, but violence, or at least implied violence, permeates much of Claude McKay’s Home to Harlem.164 This is also true of the blues songs of infidelity, for although the actual violence is small, the ominous tone of implied violence is not. If these songs are accepted as valid indications of Negro thinking, we will discover an uninhibited outlook toward violence that only furthers the Negro’s alienation from general society.

164 See p. 15 above.
Seldom, if ever, do we hear the white American calmly discuss leaving his family and "going back down South." Nor do we hear many white Americans openly ask "where did you stay last night?" It is doubtful if much American popular or folk song discusses "unregular meals," and "unclean" houses. Along with the white American's concern for "unending tremulous affection," as Mr. Charters stated, comes the Negro's concern that his woman will "swear she's almost dead" when "lovin'" is mentioned.\(^{165}\) The white American is never forced into moving to the "outskirts of town," or to peering "over the transom." If he is, he never permits the subject to enter the mainstream of his song.

These have been some of the factors that go into making the blues songs important as a source of study. We are primarily concerned here with a sociological problem that is expressed through a folk poetry, a folk poetry that is quite unique in its use of the double-entendre, uninhibited language, and lack of hypocrisy. The blues verse offers a frankness that is seldom found in other types of song.

Infidelity is a common experience among the lower economic groups of the American Negro, and the evidence indicates that it is not due to any inborn sense of lust and crime, but to the almost utter lack of stability in family life. Incentive means little to the Negro when everything is often denied him, and he is still considered by the "controlling thought of the community" as a "nigger."\(^ {166}\) What most whites fail to

\(^{165}\) See p. 11 above.

\(^{166}\) See p. 16 above.
take into consideration is the long tradition of infidelity with which
a large segment of the Negro population has been involved.

Infidelity is not a "mandate to license," as Davis and Hollard have
assured us, but it is a way of life that is hard to break, regardless of
slum clearance and better job opportunities. Only when the Negro is
allowed to assimilate himself into white society will the blues songs of
infidelity change, as indeed some are in the process of doing even now.

The blues singers are becoming increasingly rare as the more "ac­
ceptable" fragments of the blues songs blend, and become lost, in the
mainstream of American mass media music. Perhaps there will be a day in
the not too distant future when the authentic blues performers will be
only a vague memory among the older Negroes, but this does not mean that
the blues songs must, at the present time, lie dormant, with interest
shown only by a select group of white collectors and enthusiasts. The
blues lyrics are perhaps an indication of the attitudes of a large group
of economically deprived Negroes, and as such, should not be completely
ignored. It is quite possible that one of the best ways to understand
this group is to study their folk literature. The blues songs are an in­
teresting part of American folk literature, but they exist in a culture
in which they appear remote and alien, even to most scholars of Negro life.
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