

The Blues-like Elements in John Edgar Wideman's *Sent for You Yesterday*

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ABSTRACT

Sent for You Yesterday, having won P.E.N./Faulkner Award as the best work of fiction, is considered to be Wideman's blues novel in American literary circle. The blues-like elements in this novel is mainly in form. Firstly, the title of the novel is adapted from a piece of blues; secondly, the whole structure of the story is arranged according to the blues; thirdly, the special narration in the novel forms a kind of call-and-response. The blues-like elements in this novel is also in content: the black community is immersed in blues environment and blues is considered as the cultural symbol of African Americans and three generation inherited the cultural heritage by blues. By blues, Wideman combines the black aesthetics and daily life and strengthens the artistic beauty.

Key words: John Wideman, *Sent for You Yesterday*, Blues, Music, Cultural Heritage

John Edgar Wideman(1941-) is one of the most respected contemporary African American writers, as evidenced by his receipt of the P.E.N./Faulkner Award in 1984 and 1991. The author of ten books of novels, five collections of short stories and six autobiographies/meditations, he has won consistent praise for his polished style and his serious consideration of contemporary issues such as the deterioration of African-American urban life, the meaning of modern black manhood, and the violence and criminality in American life.

Setting in his childhood community, Homewood, he wrote *Damballah*, *Hiding Place* and *Sent for You Yesterday* consecutively, which were collectively published to be *The Homewood Trilogy* or *The Homewood Books*. In the preface to *The Homewood Trilogy*, Wideman asserts that "music is a dominant, organizing metaphor" (v) linking the three works. *Sent for You Yesterday* weaved stories of three generations in two families covering from 1920s to 1970s. While, what connected the two families and the three generations is the music, or exactly speaking, is the blues. From the introduction above, it is easy to see that blues is the key element in his novel, so this paper aims to explore the blues-like elements of the novel in form and content, especially blues as the symbol of cultural heritage.

THE BLUES-LIKE FORM IN *SENT FOR YOU YESTERDAY*

After *Damballah* and *Hiding Place*, *Sent for You Yesterday*, which continues the saga of the Homewood community

and the role of the descendants of Sybela Owens, weaves the stories of three generations together. The first generation is John and Freeda French, who play important secondary roles, while the real story belongs to John's best friend, Albert Wilkes. He has killed a policeman in a dispute with a white woman and is forced to leave the community. After having run away for seven years, he returns to the community and is finally killed by police. The second generation is composed of Carl, John and Freeda French's son, and his best friend, Brother Tate and Lucy Tate. Brother Tate is an albino African-American who does not speak for sixteen years after the death of his son. The representative character of third generation is John Lawson, also called Doot, who narrates most of the novel. Before we talk about the blues associated content, the blues-like form of this novel will be discussed from the title, the structure and the narration.

The Title Adapted from Blues

The title of this novel is from a piece of blues called "Sent for You Yesterday." The full title should be "Sent for You Yesterday and Here You Come Today." This song is a piece of classic blues recorded by many singers. Until now, the song has been recorded four times between 1938 and 1941. The first time was recorded by Count Basie and His Orchestra on January 3, 1938 with Jimmy Rushing on vocals; the second time by Benny Goodman and His Orchestra on February 1, 1939 with Johnny Mercer on vocals; the third time

by Les Brown and His Orchestra on August 15, 1939 with Howard Smith on vocals; and fourth time by Nat Gonella and His Orchestra on September 26, 1941 with Stella May on vocals. The four times for recording the blues reveal its popularity among the singers and the common people. The lyric of the blues is stated as bellowing:

Don't the moon look lonesome shining through the tree
 Don't the moon look lonesome shining through the tree
 Don't your arms look lonesome when your baby's
 packed to leave

Sent for you yesterday, here you come today, today,
 Sent for you yesterday, here you come today

If you can't do better, might as well just stay away!¹

The melancholic family love and the helplessness of baby's leaving can be revealed in this part of lyric, which is consistent with the tone and theme of the novel. "What John Wideman's books convey, above all, is love—love for family, for culture, for self—and the persistence it takes to 'keep on keeping on' against formidable odds" (TuSmith vii). Half of the title for blues song "Sent for You Yesterday" is directly applied to the novel for better conveying the theme of the novel—love. Different from the song to talk about family love, what Wideman conveys in the novel is not only the love between the family members, but also the love between friends, the love between lovers.

The Blues Structure

The whole structure of *Sent for You Yesterday* is arranged according to the structure of blues. The novel is made up with four sections: "In Heaven with Brother Tate," "The Return of Albert Wikes," "The Courting of Lucy Tate," "Brother." The first section "In Heaven with Brother Tate" is composed of only three pages which is similar to a musical vamp for a song. While the other three sections, "The Return of Albert Wikes," "The Courting of Lucy Tate," "Brother" are thematically and in form arranged in the AAB, twelve-bar blues structure, which is the basis of contemporary American music from Jazz to rock. What's more, the last section "Brother" is composed of four years: "1941," "1946," "1962," and "1970", which is the manifestation of four coda sections. The arrangement of blues structure of the novel has strengthened the blues-like style in form, which lends the resiliency to the novel and makes it escape from a frozen state. The musical rhythm reverses the strong and weak music beats and creates a tempo of changing and instability, by which the structural beauty has been revealed.

The Blues-like Narration

Significantly, the blues-like narration in *Sent for You Yesterday* is one of the characteristics needed to be noticed. The novel is narrated by different persons, while the main narrator is Doot. Throughout the text, Doot's narration perspective is sometimes shifted so that it is in dialogue with the narrator, just like working with the other voices of the other characters in concert. More precisely speaking, Doot always takes on the other characters' voices and cooperates with them. This is in some way similar to the blues performing, just as Nathaniel Mackey notes that blues performers are always in search

of the new voices and nonverbal sounds of the blues. Sometimes it may come in the form of a holler, moan, groan, or shout, sometimes it is an instrument mimicking the sound of train whistle. In Mackey's opinion, the performer is reaching for another voice (Mackey 194-211). Doot is trying his best to reach for the black community's voice, just as he explains:

I was born about six month months before that evening in 1941. So already I was inside the weave of the voices, a thought, an idea, a way things might be seen and be said. [...] In 1941 it's quite possible I heard Brother play the piano, if there was a day nice enough for my uncle Carl to steal me from my mother and bundle me up and carry me to the Tates'. [...] One day I'll be in one of the stories I'm sure someone will tell me, I did hear Brother play. (Wideman, *The Homewood Books* 414-415)²

In the blending of voices and ideas, the familial history has been constructed. In the paragraph above, there are two voices: the naïve "I" who is experiencing African American history and the mature "I" who is recalling the events. It is the past "I" calls and the present "I" answers, which forms a kind of call-and-response that is evident and common in the repetition of the blues lyric form. Not only the call-and-response is very common and widely used in blues, but also a musical pattern common to jazz and much African music. In this kind of music form, the task of "call" is usually completed by a solo singer or instrumentalist, while an instrument, an ensemble, or the participants in a ritual give the "response".

To sum up, Wideman has used the blues-like form skillfully from perspective of title, structure, and narration, which strengthens the music beauty and artistic beauty for the novel.

THE BLUES-LIKE CONTENT IN *SENT FOR YOU YESTERDAY*

The Blues Environment in Black Community

In the novel, the black community is infused with musical environment. When Wilkes returns after seven years, his presence is regenerating, although it threatens the safety of the black community, since the police will come after him. While Freeda is anxious that her husband not be found with his old friend, she begins to search for him in every corner of the streets. The music she hears on the way to search for him portrays the blues culture in the community from hidden perspective. "Bad enough the children and any decent folk walk by the Bucket of Blood can't help hearing the terrible mess they always singing and playing round here. [...] The music was everywhere. [...] As she searched for John French this morning the nasty music dared her not to listen. But she paid it no mind" (369). From the sentences quoted above, it is easy to see the pervasiveness of African American's music. Music is so important to African American that it seems to have already become black people's blood or one part of their body, which is the symbol of African American's culture. Although the quoted sentences show Freeda's distaste against the music around her, her distaste against the music reflects her anxiety to her husband's safety, just as stated in the text, "In the street, in her house, in the church. The music everywhere now, even in her head as she waited a minute outside 725, waited to see her husband's big hat and broad

shoulders ease round the block”(371), thus the love between husband and wife in the community is revealed.

The Blues as the Cultural Symbol of African Americans

In fact, the music or blues which is the symbol of African American’s culture is the very perspective that John Edgar Wideman wants to unveil. After Wideman published his third novel *Lynchers*(1973), he changed his writing ideas just as he stated in the interview, “after those three books, I decided that I wanted to include other dimensions in my writing. I wanted to do some things that I had not accomplished before. I wanted, number one, to reach out to levels of audience that perhaps the earlier works had excluded” (Samuels 17). For eight years’ contemplation, which was called “woodshedding” time to sharpen his tools, he shifts to focus more on African American culture, among which music is the most important aspect. As noted by Alan Cheuse, “In this hypnotic and deeply lyrical novel, Mr. Wideman again returns to the ghetto where he was raised and transforms it into a magical location infused with poetry and pathos” (qtd. Byerman, *Literature Resource Center*). Evidently, such pathos is included in African American’s blues, which can trace its origin to slavery time:

By fateful chance the Negro folk-song—the rhythmic cry of the slave—stands today not simply as the sole American music, but as the most beautiful expression of human experience born this side the seas. It has been neglected, it has been, and is, half despised, and above all it has been persistently mistaken and misunderstood; but notwithstanding, it still remains as the singular spiritual heritage of the nation and the greatest gift of the Negro people. (Dubois 180-181)

As W.E.B. Dubois points out in his “The Sorrow Songs” above, blues music is the brilliant culture of the black people. Blues is an important means for preserving cultural memory and it becomes one of the folk roots from which Afro-Americans can take sustenance and pride identity. In *Sent for You Yesterday*, the characters are in search for their individual existential identity; at the same time, they are also in pursuit of the cultural identity for their whole nation, and blues is the most direct and safe means for African American to express their cultural identity.

Coincidentally, there are three generations in the novel with every generation embodying a blues performer as the representative. Among the first generation, Albert Wilkes is so good at blues that the community consider him to be greatest blues artist in Homewood. As suggested by the role of Wilkes, music rather than storytelling is the key expressive form in the novel. According to John French, Wilkes’s skill at the piano holds Homewood together, from which we can conclude that music has become a kind of force that unites people together in spirit. When he is forced to run away because he has killed a white policeman in a dispute about a woman, the spirit of the community is lost. At the same time, he himself becomes invisible, in other words, socially marginalized. He doesn’t compromise his place in community, and he returns to Homewood in face of danger seven years later with deep love of the community: “I just want to be

here a while. Get used to the old place again. Thought I remembered it. Thought I could draw a picture if I needed to. Thought I had Homewood in my mind and could say it easy as saying the alphabet. Say the streets and people’s names and talk that talk with everybody just like I used to. Like I could just pick it up and start again and never miss a lick” (400). It can be said that he is a blues man without community. His return to community with deep love and his final performance function as conciliatory gestures or as attempts to reestablish communal ties. The fact that he is killed by policemen during his final performances solidifies his place in the Homewood. The blood-stained piano functions as an image of sacrifice. It becomes a complex emblem of music and silence, of joy and suffering.

Albert Wilkes’s death signifies the death of era. His death also leaves behind a rich musical and communal legacy, and Brother, an albino, is its main inheritor, who has no musical training or special skill. At least seven years after Wilkes’s death, he magically plays so well that “somebody got happy and shouted. *Play, Albert. Play, Albert Wilkes. Albert’s home again,*” “because good piano playing and Albert Wilkes were just about the same word in Homewood”(411). The other people’s suspicion strengthens Brother’s culture heritage role, “Must have been Albert Wilkes taught you. And you hiding it all these years. Hiding it all the time then getting up on the bandstand and showing out tonight. Ain’t you something, lil brother”(413). Denise Rodriguez noted the symbolic meaning of Brother’s music heritage, “Brother’s role as a successor provides a vital link between past, present and future” (137). After Brother’s son, also an albino, dies in a fire, he stops talking, which ostensibly makes him “complete the circle of his own invisibility” (Rodriguez 133), but he never really gives up the role as the community’s musician:

And his silence wasn’t really silence. Brother made the noise all the time. Drumming his fingertips on the edge of kitchen table till my grandmother yelled at him to stop, cracking his knuckles, patting his feet, boogieing so outrageously in the middle of the floor you’d hear the silent music making him wiggle his narrow hips[...] his lower lip like it was the string of a bass fiddle. He’d hum and grant and groan, and Brother could scat sing and imitate all the instruments in the band. [...] Brother would make all that music, all that noise, but he never said a word. (344-345)

Finally, according to the story told by Carl and Lucy, Brother dies as a means of escape. However, his music, like Albert’s, provides his lasting link to Homewood since it can be recalled even after he dies. It is the possibility to merge the past with present and the individual with the collective that makes Brother the blues man of the novel, the voice of Homewood.

Before Brother’s death, Doot (John Lawson), a child who left the community to lead a life parallel to that of Wideman himself, returns to the community in the position of Homewood’s next heir, who must restore the community’s pride and faith via musical heritage. He comes back, like “John” in *Damballah*, to gather the tales of Homewood. The returning itself is the search for the cultural identity. He claims the

tradition of Wilkes and Brother Tate by taking an improvisational approach to his material. He lets the various stories, fantasies, dreams, and lives find a shape in the telling rather than impose a rigid form on them. Thus, the book itself becomes the final blues.

At the end of novel, Doot can stand up and dance to the African American's music: "I know how good it's going to sound so I start moving to the music coming from the radio. I know Albert Wilkes will blow me away so I start loosening up, getting ready. I am on my feet and Lucy says, *Get it on, Doot*. Everybody joining in now. All the voices. I am reaching for them and letting them go. Lucy weaves. I'm on my feet. Learning to stand, to walk, learning to dance" (518). Wideman explains his dance in Coleman's interview:

He is learning to dance, and he is learning to dance in the music that is not totally explicable in natural terms. That is, the music is magical. The music has a force that can't be explained in any satisfactory everyday way. The music seems to have an energy all its own that is rooted in some place other than individuals. And so in that sense the music is the pulse, the rhythm, the force, the expression of entire culture; and by learning to dance Doot is learning to, like a fish, live in this medium.[...] Because the book is about creating a useful past, creating a past that will sustain an identity and open door towards the future, for the writer as well as for the character. (72)

There is deep symbolic meaning in Doot's dance in the novel: He can stand up and dance to the black music marks the beginning of not only integrating in the black music but also integrating the black culture, through which his culture identity has been established and African American's culture legacy has been successfully handed down.

CONCLUSION

From the analysis above, we can conclude that the blues-like elements in *Sent for You Yesterday* is not only in form but also in content. As for the blues form, firstly, the title of the novel is adapted from a piece of blues; secondly, the whole structure of the story is arranged according to the blues; thirdly, the special narration in the novel forms a kind of call-and-response. The blues-like elements in this novel is also in content: the black community is immersed in blues environment and blues is considered as the cultural symbol of African Americans and three generations inherited the cultural heritage by blues. By blues, Wideman combines the black aesthetics and daily life and strengthens the artistic beauty.

Music is a dynamic, fluid element of culture. Afro-American music has persisted as a consistent force in Afro-American as well as American culture and thus become an intertextual influence in Afro-American literature. As Wideman argues that "Black music is a moveable feast, fluid in time, space, modality, exhibiting in theme and variations multiple relationships with the politically, socially, aesthetically dominant order, the fullest possible range of relationships, including the power and independence to change places, reverse the hierarchy, be the dominant order" (Wideman, "The Architectonics

of Fiction" 45). Blues, the most obvious example of the black aesthetics, is the truest expressions of the pain, aspirations, and group wisdom of the nation. Viewing it as a language of the richest complexity, Afro-American writers attempt to fill their narratives with blues. Wideman, one of the most musical ones among Afro-American writers, has been the best to fulfill their perfect combination. Like a blues musician, Wideman plays blues notes into his cultural and literary thoughts in his writing. With deep understanding and study on blues, his characters are soaked up blues flavor. The novel resembles blues in its form, content, and spirit. In form, the blues style is the source of esthetic and artistic charm; in content, blues deepens and enlarges the meaning of the novel; while the spirit of blues is fully embodied through the novel. In a sentence, *Sent for You Yesterday* is a piece of blues from Homewood composed by Wideman.

ENDNOTES

- 1 See May 22, 2013 <<http://lyricsplayground.com/alpha/songs/s/sentforyouyesterday.shtml>>
- 2 All the text about *Sent for You Yesterday* is quoted from *The Homewood Books*. Only pages will be given for the other direct quotations from *Sent for You Yesterday* in the following paragraphs.

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