The Dark Angel of *Fine Clothes to the Jew*" 

Robert Grotjohn

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*Fine Clothes to the Jew* (1927), Langston Hughes's second book of poetry, was his highest achievement, according to Arnold Rampersad, who identifies Hughes's great innovation as "deliberately defining poetic tradition according to the standards of a group often seen as sub-poetic—the black masses" ("Langston Hughes’s *Fine Clothes to the Jew*” 145). While his first book, *The Weary Blues* (1926), included some poems in that re-defined tradition, *Fine Clothes* focused exclusively on the supposedly “sub-poetic . . . masses.” That sustained attention to the “low-down” elements of the black community earned the book the vilification of many contemporary reviewers in the black press, who objected to both the form and the contents of the poems as lacking sophistication and dignity. Indeed, in *Fine Clothes*, Hughes makes no concessions to Standard English or received Eurocentric forms but celebrates African American Vernacular English (AAVE) and the blues in form and spirit. Hughes’s innovations in blues poetry have been well documented, but no one has yet considered how the religious nature of the blues functions in *Fine Clothes*. That consideration is my project here.

The blues have a close connection to black spirituality. I will explore the...
implications of those connections, beginning by highlighting two important spiritual qualities of the blues: its holistic theology that unites the sacred and profane, and its communitarian emphasis. I will then apply that blues theology to “Angels Wings,” the poem Hughes placed at the very center of his book. In a detailed reading of that poem, I argue that it creates a theoretical, blues-theological center for the volume. As I turn to the rest of the volume, I focus on two primary metaphors of “Angels Wings” that inform other poems: fire, representing the trials of black experience, and snow, representing the context of white supremacy. I then extend the argument to show how Hughes suggests a kind of experiential sanctification in embracing inclusive community. Finally, I offer preliminary suggestions about the ways in which Hughes’s blues theology finds possible parallels in Korean minjung literary forms.

Hughes is not generally considered a religious poet; indeed, Fine Clothes to the Jew was reviled at its publication for being profane. It was called “100 pages of trash” that “reeks of the gutter and sewer” (Kelley 91), criticized as a “study in the perversions of the Negro” that showed an “apparent obsession with the more degenerate element” (Evans 93, 92), and sarcastically “compliment[ed]” as “about as fine a collection of piffling trash as is to be found under the covers of any book” (Rogers 97). Hughes intentionally wrote the volume in the blues tradition, however, and the blues are intimately connected with religious spirituality, as the famous American bluesman John Lee Hooker indicated: “Way back before you and everybody else and all the peoples was born, spirituals was the thing. Nobody can reach way back and find out just when it was born. But when spirituals was born it was born on the blues side” (qtd. in Oliver 168). That colloquial connection is reinforced by more scholarly observation when Jon Michael Spencer identifies it as underpinning the “theologies of the blues.” Spencer argues that the “pervading ethos” of the blues is “its religious nature,” and that the separation of the blues, as the devil’s music, from religion “resulted from the imposition of Christianity’s bifurcating world view (the sacred versus the profane) on the