

### Ambiguity and Metaphor in Robert Johnson's "Love in Vain"

While I would be initially reluctant to call Johnson's "Love in Vain" a poem, if for no other reason than that it is not presented as such, I would argue that this lyric makes brilliant use of two central poetic devices, and if it were presented as a poem would be a great one. The song uses the speaker's ambiguous position and a startling final metaphor to express the speaker's uncertainty and divided mind which, as Courtney Danforth notes in one of the essays below, is very uncharacteristic for Johnson.

First the text:

<http://xroads.virginia.edu/~MUSIC/blues/liv.html>

Note the two essays given on that page about "Love in Vain", which are both very good but approach the song from a slightly different angle than I will use.

In the first stanza we are introduced to the final scene in a relationship, in which, surprisingly for a song from a writer who writes so often about *his* leaving of women, the woman, named "Willie Mae" in the moaned last stanza, is leaving by train:

*And I followed her to the station  
with a suitcase in my hand  
And I followed her to the station  
with a suitcase in my hand  
Well, it's hard to tell, it's hard to tell  
when all your love's in vain  
All my love's in vain*

Note that he does not say his love *was* in vain, rather that "it's hard to tell." The lines are not a declaration of sorrow or defiance, but of a frustrating uncertainty. There may be hope for renewing the relationship with Willie Mae, once she gets back from wherever she is going. Or the whole affair may have been futile. The speaker is simply at a loss to say, and seems overwhelmed by that- no talk of anger towards her, "mean things on my mind", or leaving town himself.

The speaker feels unable to act in this situation, as seen in S2 when he "looked her in the eye/Well, I was lonesome, I felt so lonesome/and I could not help but cry". Johnson here is rendered helpless by his lover's leaving, a far cry from his other songs, such as "If I Had Possession Over Judgment Day" in which he does not hesitate to condemn a woman he feels has wronged him- Johnson is no fading daisy. But Willie Mae, it seems, is something else entirely. He has invested much more than usual in this relationship, as noted in Scott Lewis's analysis of take four of the song, in which "my suitcase" replaces

"a suitcase". <http://xroads.virginia.edu/~MUSIC/blues/lewis.html>. Losing her creates radical uncertainty in the speaker, who can do nothing but cry a like a baby.

However, the speaker's feelings quickly become more complex, as he reflects on the malaise depicted in the first two stanzas:

*When the train, it left the station  
with two lights on behind  
When the train, it left the station  
with two lights on behind  
Well, the blue light was my blues  
and the red light was my mind  
All my love's in vain*

The metaphor contains both an expected feeling and one that it is difficult to define. Naturally the blue light of the receding train, taking his love away, reflects his sorrow (incidentally, the blue light is probably an invention by Johnson, as I can find no indication that blue lights were ever used in caboose marker lights, which were in usually red, yellow or green). But the red light symbolizes his *mind*, and what that means isn't clear- does it mean stop, as though he was wishing for her not to go, or does it indicate anger or upset? The song furnishes few clues as to how to interpret this color, only perhaps the statement "All my love's in vain", suggesting that he doesn't believe she can come back and final acceptance of futility. Why red, then, to symbolize that feeling when perhaps green (going) or white (blankness) might be more appropriate? The song ends with several despairing "Ou hou ou ou ou"s, and we are left with the image of that mysterious red light glaring at us.

"Love in Vain" is thus a marvelously compact treatment of ambiguous language, imagery and feeling, and could stand alone as a masterful poem.