

## The Aesthetics of Laughter expressed in the Factor of Blues: Ralph Ellison's Invisible Man

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### Abstract

*The exploration of American history and culture lets people encounter the sacrifice and devastation of African Americans. Therefore, lots of African Americans naturally expressed their anger, adversity and ordeal in different forms of art. It is the scar and it has handed down from ancestors to descendents to descendents. As a result, the early African American writers' literary works were full of that emotion. However, fortunately they had a healing cultural heritage. It was the humor and laughter naturally melted in their music, blues. Blues lets African Americans embrace their pain into this melody and let them erupt it in a different way.*

*This paper will research the meaning of blues and the aesthetics of laughter included in blues through the examination of African American's culture and life. In addition to it, this research will be proceeded with the analysis of blues factors permeated through the main hero's laughter in his life journey of Ralph Ellison's Invisible Man. For the whole process of it, this paper will focus on examining the historical and cultural meaning of blues for African Americans, and the aesthetic factors of laughter melted in Ralph Ellison's Invisible Man.*

**Keywords:** *Invisibility, identity, tragic and comic aspects, blues factors, laughter<sup>1</sup>*

### 1. Introduction

This paper is about the research of the influential power of blues on African American culture and history in American society. There have been several examinations on it historically and politically. Even though quite a few researches of blues in African American culture, there has been rare study on the analysis of comic and tragic aspects of blues. With this reason, this paper aims to analyze the characteristic traits of blues through an African American writer's novel. It is Ralph Ellison's Invisible Man. It is his only full-length novel.

In the research of the comic and tragic aspects of blues, this paper will try to figure out the aesthetics of laughter through the main hero's long journey in Invisible Man until he builds up his complete identity. Laughters intermittently appearing in this novel are the key factors which make people recognize the essential base of African Americans. Laughter and humor, the most distinctive elements of blues, serve as catalysts for African Americans to forget the pain of reality and, rather, to help them sublimate it to art. This paper will focus on searching that the aesthetics of laughter lets African Americans pursue the positive life in the midst of an ordeal. It will prove that that element becomes the corner stone of African American's strong identity.

### 2. Blues for African American Writers

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Many critics say that the meaning of blues for African Americans is letting them pursue the harmony and positivity in harsh reality. Among a lot of African American writers, especially Ralph Ellison and Toni Morrison emphasize the limitless power of African American music in their art works. When they say music, it includes the Negro spiritual, blues, rhythm and blues and jazz etc. This genre of music is connected to the process of building up the identity of African American ancestors and descendants who lived up their life, never gave up in harsh reality. African Americans who have lived their life having the issue of sex, double consciousness, invisibility have been underestimated under the biased assertion that they are very violent, vulgar and aggressive.

An African American writer, Ralph Ellison tried hard to embrace the universality of art in his works and many critics evaluated that "his work is the one of aesthetic perfection".[1] One of the significant goals of literature must be delineating life, their thought, the action, and the conflict of human beings to the utmost sincerity. In this point of view, the most authentic human life issue that African American writers cannot but embrace must be a racial theme.[2] It necessarily accompanies the matter of social protest. However, the more important thing is that African American writers since Ellison don't stay in the limit of social rebellion, they sublimate the experience of their sadness and despair into art. They chose music as the representative art form to reflect their experience in life. Likewise, African American writers tried hard to transform their first-hand experience into the form of art and recreate it and accept their self.[3] This paper insists that the whole process of this development for African Americans' art works is absolutely connected with blues. This paper will specially focus on analyzing the unique factors of blues of laughter through the examination of African American's life and culture, and the episodes of the main hero in Invisible Man.

### **3. Blues Melted in Ralph Ellison's Works**

Blues was born in the mid of African American's history of struggle for survival. Blues was the expression of their riot and it has been in the ground of their life. Charters says as follows.

The special feature of the greatest blues singer is the very ordeal. It is a solution to a problem. We know we can express a genuine feeling of sincerity in the trial. We just express what happened to us. The hardship forming a blues is not an individual blues singer's particular difficulty. It means more than that. The ordeal of blues tells about popular history and the pain they went through amid the struggle of survival.[4]

What African Americans felt was that the reality they were living in was filled with contradiction, and they were trying to open a transcendent horizon above the current trials by expressing the realistic atmosphere of White dominated society through blues.[5] The unique factors of laugh and humor of blues provided African Americans a physical distance and a mental stability from the hardship of reality.

Ralph Ellison among a lot of African American writers tried hard to confront racial discrimination of being invisible in the reality with art. He naturally sublimated the painful reality of African Americans to the art of blues which was melted harmoniously in his text. He emphasizes for African Americans to keep the self power like the spirit of blues. He melted his own blues into his works. According to him, the only thing African Americans have to remember to be a real blues man is not to avoid who they are. He insists that African Americans live their life with pride and confidence even though they are living in the reality full of fake air.

Blues makes African Americans be awaken in their sad consciousness  
Makes it feel the delicate part of pain in their atrocious reality.

Makes it touch the rough surface of hands,  
It is the impulse trying to beyond their painful experience by expressing  
the comic or tragic lyricism. [6]

The aesthetics of laughter included in blues is the African American's heritage they had in the inhumane situation of the slavery. It was the ability they could tolerate and laugh the harsh reality. Nobody can't say in a word that blues is the song of losers.[7] Because it shows the possibility of human being's will trying hard to overcome the unavoidable pain with laughter. [8] The aesthetics of blues lets African Americans realize their mental power. Blues encourages African Americans to be aware how far they can fly in reality and reminds them the limitlessness of psychological territory in life.

#### **4. The Aesthetics of Blues through the Factor of Laughter: Ralph Ellison's Invisible Man**

From now on, this paper will more specifically examine the aesthetics of blues through the factor of laughter embraced in Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man*. The main hero in this novel establishes his identity through his long journey. Through the examination of this long journey, this paper will research and analyze the main hero's unique reaction of 'laughter' to each different embarrassing and depressing situation. The main hero represents the writer himself, simultaneously, all African Americans. This paper will more concentrate on analyzing the aesthetic factors of blues like joke and humor being expressed in laughter. These factors usually appear in the moments the main hero realizes his invisibility in reality as a black. This paper will debate the main hero's growth and change through the process of his life journey.

Ihab Hassan classifies the main hero in modern American novel as three types of men like *pharmakos*, *eiron*, and *alazon* and he includes the main hero of *Invisible Man* as *eiron*. [9] *Eiron*, the etimological root of irony, appears as a awkward one and plays a role of suggesting lots of things more than his word or action. He rather accepts his own humanity by acknowledging the deconstruction of heroism.

When looking at the hero who is called as "nonhero", "anti-hero", Hassan's comparison of the hero in *Invisible Man* is appropriate. The main hero's seeking for escape from the machine which oppresses him to turn down his humanity shows his giving up heroism on his own.

I started to think how I can terminate the machine. If I move my body  
here and there, two dots of the circuit might be fused together. No, maybe not.  
Not only no space I can move but also I might die by electric shock.  
I was thrilled. Whatever I am, I am not a Samson. I may want to destroy the machine  
but I don't want to destroy myself. I want freedom, not destruction.[10]

The main hero doesn't have the power like Samson. Even though he had the power like Samson, the invisibility of the absurd reality must not have allowed him to have the honor of a tragic hero like Samson. He is also not the nihilist denying everything by destroying himself and the machine together.

This main hero establishes his humanity through joke and humor of blues factors. In terms of these factors, Ayana Smith mentions that the main hero's educational growth comes with the factor of laughter as the work progresses.[11] This joke and humor shows the limit and possibility at the same time with the comic and tragic factors of blues. In other words, there is

not the factor of joke in the main hero when he dreams of illusion, but there definitely is the factor of joke and humor when he is conscious of the racial reality.[12] This fact - every moment he recognizes the harsh reality, he reacts it with laughter - means that his laughter having both of the factors is the manifestation of his own limitations.

However, there is the possibility to overcome the pain with strong mental power like the spirit of blues through the fact that he says a joke or laughter instead of anger in the depressing moment.[11] This main hero's adventure of becoming disillusioned and using more laughter and jokes is the process of discovering America's racial reality and recognizing how to react and accept in such a reality.

## 5. Conclusion

This paper studied African American writers' view on blues and the surroundings of African Americans in American society. It constantly examined the meaning of blues for African Americans and the influential power of blues on them. For the specific research, this paper looked into the key factors of blues, especially laughter and humor melted in African American's life and culture. This search has been carried out by analyzing the main character's life story in Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man*. The comic and tragic aspects of blues permeated properly into this main character's daily life. In quite a few episodes he went through, he acquires the realization of life. These experiences lead the main hero to realize his identity of who he is. He is sometimes very frustrated and depressed, but he is eventually aware how he could get over the insult and devastation of reality. It was through the humor and laughter. It is the very aesthetics of blues applicable to black people.

Through the examination of the main hero's long life journey of this novel symbolizing African Americans, this paper could reach the conclusion that laughter and humor, the aesthetic device of blues make them endure cleverly the comic and tragic reality. This aesthetic device truly helps African Americans to face their inner self and overcome the ordeal of reality. This must be the power of African Americans who could maintain the positive identity in rough American society.

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