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The Black and the Blue: Comedy, Laughter, and Deformity in Ellison's Invisible Man

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The Black and the Blue: Comedy, Laughter, and Deformity in Ellison's *Invisible Man*

An honors thesis presented to the Department of English, University at Albany, State University
Of New York in partial fulfillment of the requirements for graduation with Honors in English
and graduation from The Honors College

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Abstract

In Ralph Ellison's novel, *Invisible Man*, comedy plays an important yet convoluted role. In his own rendering of the *Blues Aesthetic*, Ellison is able to present laughter and humor as a healthy and natural reaction to painful and distressing events. The significance of this technique, which builds upon *double consciousness*, is evident in Ellison's many essays, where he suggests that laughter may be the only way for America to accept the crude reality of its foundations and move forward. In my thesis, I differentiate between four general types of comedy found in *Invisible Man*. These can be summarized as irony, outright hilarity or puns, laughter as relief from discomfort, and 'comic deformity' or self-shattering imagery. Finally, I show how laughter and a sense of humor is not just the reaction of *Invisible Man*'s unnamed protagonist but an element of modernist American ideology that was crucial to Ellison and is perhaps best detected in improvisational jazz or the techniques some of the major figures in jazz, namely Louis Armstrong. This type of self-referential comedy is troubling, for it can be seen as building upon offensive and antiquated stereotypes, such as the Sambo image, perhaps reinforcing or even validating them. However, Ellison's comedic aesthetic as well as Armstrong's endemic smile and voice are inevitabilities of their artistic essence. Ellison himself saw humor as the only way to negotiate the violent underbelly of American life, "for when American's can no longer laugh at each other, they have to fight one another" (Ellison, taken from Address to the Harvard College Alumni, Class of 1949).

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Introduction

In Ralph Ellison's novel *Invisible Man*, the difficult matter of forming individual identity is the fulcrum around which an unnamed narrator (a black man from the south), tells the story of his disillusionment and growth through young adulthood. After enrolling in a fictionalized version of Tuskegee Institute and later moving to New York, he is reluctant to embrace his southern roots before a new audience whom he deems as civilized and influential. In my thesis, I will argue that humor becomes the major pillar of invisible man's reformed cognizance, and in turn his identity. He uses humor not just as a coping mechanism, but as an art form that allows him to communicate injustice and transform violence. Within the novel, humor takes many forms: from the outwardly comical exchanges and even puns that the narrator hears and is part of, to the seemingly sporadic outbreaks of laughter of black characters, and even, most troublingly, to its use by whites to enforce their superiority over their black counterparts. Each of these will play some role in my analysis. However, what I'm most interested in is how the narrator himself is able to construct a reality in which he has some agency by imagining it as a comedy, however painful the experiences might be.

Now, none can deny that many novels tend to be somewhat autobiographical, and in the case of *Invisible Man*, we almost have to constantly keep reminding ourselves that the narrator of the book is not Ellison himself. However, the similarities are enough that I have cause to believe that a study of Ellison's essays would not be inappropriate in a thesis about his novel. Ellison's numerous essays mention humor frequently, praising it as a method through which mankind can, well aware of the trauma of history, relate to each other and become one. This concept, I argue, is one which also permeates invisible man's understanding of life at the end of the book. More specifically though, in an essay entitled "Richard Wright's Blues," Ellison provides a framework

for reading a Blues Aesthetic in which “the blues is an autobiographical chronicle of personal catastrophe expressed lyrically” (*Shadow and Act*, 129). This transformation/ expression, especially since it is according to Ellison “near-comic” (129), is exactly what the narrator of *Invisible Man* sets out to do at the end of the book when he makes the decision to write, “Having tried to give pattern to the chaos which lies within the pattern of your certainties,” writes the narrator, “I must come out, I must emerge.” (*Invisible Man* 581). Here he asserts the emergence of his identity through the chaotic world of others, who consistently try to impose an identity upon him which never quite fits. The Blues Aesthetic is one strategy that the narrator uses to negotiate the contradictory nature of his identity. He finds his past and present painful and unfair, yet he also finds humor and perhaps beauty in the expression of that past.

The first chapter of this thesis analyzes scenes from the novel and relates them to the narrators formation of an identity, The Louis Armstrong lyric which frames the novel (“What did I do/ To be so Black/ And blue?”) (*IM*, 12) is a useful way to think about my thesis as a whole. The lyric is not just suggestive of the Blues Aesthetic in the obvious way (that the jazz of artists like Louis Armstrong derived from a Southern, blues tradition), but also represents the emotional duality that invisible man eventually comes to realize he has inherited by being a Southern African-American. Sadness, brought on by inhibited opportunities (among other things), is accompanied by, or perhaps the cause of Black comedy, smiling, and laughter.

This first chapter will, at the same time, discuss the ideas of certain critics that have helped me make sense of the novel, whose work I intend to build upon. For example, Valerie Smith describes a number of important concepts which helped inspire my thinking on *Invisible Man*. Perhaps, most importantly, Smith expounds upon the Emersonian emphasis on consciousness (particularly interesting because Ellison was largely influenced by Emerson, his

namesake) to utilize the concept of double consciousness as a tactic of the narrator in *Invisible Man*. W.E.B. DuBois has suggested that *double consciousness* is a way of thinking about oneself that is specific to African-Americans. My argument is that humor is the main way that the narrator employs double consciousness in the novel. As he learns to see the cruelty of the people in control of his fate, he learns also to look at it from a stranger's perspective, and laugh at himself. Thus the concept of humor is itself an act of double-consciousness. Also, important is Smith's claim that "Ellison's invisible man is . . . an artist" (Smith191), as comedy is merely a stylistic quality of the narrator's tone. The narrator's response to violence in the novel, is as much an artistic approach as it is comedic.

Another important critic in this first chapter is Jean-Christophe Cloutier and his analysis of *Invisible Man* as a "Comic Book World." While I agree that comic books probably influenced the form and identity-related questions in the novel, Cloutier misses the point of how the protagonist of *Invisible Man* rises above the violence and hostility that he sees in Harlem, which is through comedic art. Cloutier begins to approach this conclusion when he suggests that "the young Invisible Man overcomes his disillusionment when he understands that the answer to Negro leadership lies in individual power," (Cloutier 301), but what's most important is the form of which this power takes place—words on a page. This is significantly different from the kind of universe Cloutier seems to be invoking in his essay, which is one of violence and vigilantism.

The second chapter will compare Ellison's use of humor to what classical philosophy has to say on the subject. Typically, there are three motivational theories of humor which describe its use: the relief, superiority, and incongruity theory. Each will be mentioned in relation to the novel as it will be important to maintain that the three theories are often considered separately (Perks 121). I separate the comedic episodes of the novel into four categories: blatant or outright

humor, laughter as relief, comic deformity or the laughing hyena, and finally, irony. For the sake of readability, I try to align each of my last three comedic motifs with the three Philosophical theories on the cause of comedy. Relief, a somewhat superficial motivator for humor, is always in the foreground when considering what makes something funny. The narrator, along with other characters to a lesser extent, frequently laughs to ease his discomfort. Or perhaps he is making it all seem humorous, by presenting his experiences in that way, so that he can disregard his emotional pain. More complicated is the way that I relate the Superiority Theory of Humor to my analysis of “comic deformity” in the novel. This is a term I borrow from Henri Bergson that describes an expression or feature that is funny in its inelasticity, yet is, at the same time, imitable. If the Superiority Theory claims that humor derives from an impulse to place oneself above others, than an act of mockery through “comic deformity” is a tactic that aims to, at the very least, distinguish oneself from him which is being mocked. Strangely, “comic deformity” can also be self-shattering, as the narrator’s own invisibility can be considered this kind of “deformity.” Ultimately, however, the narrator combats his invisibility through writing, and finds his voice.

As I have suggested, there is a problematic side to the use of humor in forming identity, at least for a black man in 20th century America. This is because The Superiority Theory of Humor (which describes how comedy is used to elevate one’s self above another person) finds an element of truth in the treatment of blacks by white people in early 20th century America. Throughout the novel, authority figures repeatedly attempt to place the narrator into a role they see fit for him. “The Sambo Image” is a paradigm through which African-Americans are controlled and limited to the role of mindless, smiling entertainer (usually jokester or dancer) by their white bosses. The narrator of *Invisible Man* finds the “Sambo Image” embodied in the cast-

iron bank he finds at his boarder, Mary's, house. He must try to escape this predetermined, limiting identity. However, this proves difficult. As scholars have pointed out, the narrator is forced to carry this bank with him after he encounters it at Mary's, symbolically carrying the burden of this stereotype of his race. It is perhaps ironic, therefore, that the narrator still utilizes humor in shaping his own identity when he decides to write the novel.

The incongruity theory, coupled with my imposition of "irony" as a motif, is also useful for it suggest that humor originates from reconciling two images, sensations, or ideas that seem incompatible. This returns us to the Blues Aesthetic, and to the other themes I concentrate on in the first chapter. Ellison himself emphasizes a kind of "tragicomic confrontation with life" and the novel often portrays scenes which rely on incongruous humor, such as when the narrator must add drops of black paint into a mixture to make it whiter.

Lastly, I believe that double-consciousness and humor can be related to improvisation, an art which finds its home in the Jazz musician. Specifically, Louis Armstrong's smile and singing voice will be discussed as a kind of "comic deformity." Somewhat later, the importance of irony and parody in the jazz tradition will also come into play. In a way, *Invisible Man* is one giant act of improvisation, which the narrator seems to craft on the fly. For this reason the second half of the thesis will briefly enter the realm of musicology, making gestures towards twentieth century jazz, with a special emphasis on the 1950's Bebop Movement and what followed it. I am interested in the way that jazz artists navigate their identity, and I argue that the use of humor is inevitably involved in that evolution.

To recapitulate, this thesis will be an analysis of the way in which humor is a driving force in *Invisible Man*. The narrator of this novel is not just a writer, but an artist who finds a

way to escape the confining roles that authority figures try to impose on him. In so doing, he transforms violence and racism into art and humor. His use of humor aligns him with many of the ancient philosophical theories on the subject, but also allows the narrator's protagonist to become a truly individual artist, in a move that is entrenched in the maneuvers of modernity. I postulate the way that Ellison himself would have likely been looking at the aesthetic and ideology of his novel's narrator, without necessarily making an intentionalist argument. Many have written on the relationship of the blues to Ellison's work, and few would argue that *Invisible Man* is not a work of art, but the way that humor is utilized in the formation of identity and artistry, the way that it transforms violence yet communicates social and political realities, is unique to my project.

The analysis of Ellison's novel, while important on its own terms, is made even more eminent when it is considered as a literary manifestation of the African-American, and jazz or blues aesthetic. While it is difficult to express the ubiquity of comedy as a tactic of jazz musicians, I briefly open the windows to a tradition that epitomizes the sensibility of 20th century African-American expression. Ellison was not only interested in music but trained and involved in it, and his life experience permeates the voice of the narrator in *Invisible Man*.

Chapter 1: *Invisible Man* and the Blues Aesthetic

A discussion of the Blue's Aesthetic is often involved in any serious reading of Ralph Ellison's novel, *Invisible Man*. The relationship between this text and the blues or jazz is not necessarily an explicit one, yet still has led to little contention. The connection is threefold, stemming from the narrator's (and Ellison's) personal experience on horn, the use of the Louis Armstrong song "Black and Blue" at the beginning and end of the novel, and the way in which, in the words of John F. Callahan, the critic most intimately tied to Ellison's work, "Ellison propels his character's story with the velocity of jazz and the unsparing, anguished, joyful, lyricism of the blues (Callahan 6)." This apparent contradiction between a style that is both "anguished" and "joyful" is essential to an understanding of Ralph Ellison's blues aesthetic. Let us not forget the narrator's claim that "contradiction . . . is how the world moves (*Invisible Man* 6)." This seemingly contradictory tradition is one of the major ways in which the narrator of *Invisible Man* is able to form his identity as humor becomes the lens through which he views his life's story.

I turn first to Armstrong. "What did I do/ To be so Black/ And blue?" (12), asks Armstrong, and accordingly, invisible man. This question can be seen as a representation of the African American experience as it is understood by Ellison. When the narrator is under some kind of musical and marijuana-induced trance also in that first chapter, he has a somewhat confusing exchange with "a congregation of voices" (9), interrupted by an old, blues-singing woman who utters the paradox, "I laughs too, but I moans too" (11). The use of the word "congregation" is a clear reference to the African-American Gospel tradition, as is the call-and-response nature of this exchange. More pertinently, however the incongruous duality of both

laughing and moaning are reflective of the “black/blue” dynamic which originates from the Louis Armstrong song, and which, in many ways become the framework for the novel.

Blueness is the negative side; worn and torn; the color of bruises, the moaning of the blues singers and the congregation. We often use the word blue as being synonymous with depression. The blackness, on the other hand, is smiles, laughs, and the entertainer figure. At the same time the obvious ramifications of being black in Western society carry with them a kind of adversity. The inescapable blackness experienced by the narrator, what causes him to be invisible, is reminiscent of the “Sambo” Image, in which black males are stereotyped into the role of cheery and funny entertainers (Boskin 7-8). Invisible man is even called “Sambo” during the battle scene in the first chapter. What invisible man realizes is that seeming to conform to the expectations of his identity placed upon him by the Sambo image is, rather ironically, his only chance at survival. This, in essence, is the message that his grandfather had tried to convey to him in the befuddling array of advice that appears in the beginning of the novel, which invisible man claims haunts him throughout his life. His dying grandfather “had spoken of his meekness as a dangerous activity,” telling our narrator to “overcome ‘em with yeses, undermine ‘em with grins, agree ‘em to death and destruction, let ‘em swallow you till they vomit or bust wide open” (*Invisible Man*, 16). It is not until the end of the novel that invisible man is able to make sense of this advice, that his only chance is overwhelming optimism and complacency. In doing this he learns he can, paradoxically, form his own agency, which he eventually does through writing, giving his own shape and meaning to his experience, through the lens of humor that is both black and blue.

Most notably, the “Sambo” paradigm takes material form in the cast-iron bank of a “very black, red-lipped and wide-mouthed Negro” (*Invisible Man* 319) which the narrator finds at

Mary's. The narrator is disgusted and enraged by the racism in this object. In his distress, invisible man breaks the bank (apparently by accident although it is not entirely clear), making a loud noise and sending pieces of the bank and coins all over the floor. It is symbolic that the narrator is unable to hide the broken bank because it is part of the burden of his blackness. Try as he might, invisible man cannot escape the stereotype of the wide-grinned young, black man, hungry for the white-man's coin. It is one of the contradictions of the narrator's reality that he cannot break through the confines of this stereotype without, in some way, living it.

For the first half of *Invisible Man*, it is clear that our narrator is trying to escape limiting his identity to that of either Sambo or a stereotypical Southern black man. However, his perspective changes in bits and pieces. In one scene, halfway to disillusionment, invisible man feels "a stab of swift nostalgia" (262) for his Southern, bluesy roots when he sniffs some hot yams sold by a vendor in the streets of Harlem. This occurs at a point when the invisible man is not just frustrated, but "hot, burning with an inner fever" (261) at the injustice he sees. The scene is white with snow, perhaps a metaphor for the reigning power he can't escape. "You too can be truly beautiful, a sign proclaimed. 'Win greater happiness with whiter complexion.'" (*Invisible Man* 262). He decides to buy a yam, openly admitting to the vender "I yam what I yam" (266), as he asks for more and embraces his roots. In so doing, he shamelessly consumes what little piece of southern comfort he can find, admitting he's from "South Car'lina" (266) and puts on a comedy show of sorts in the streets, telling a pun (literal "roots" representing metaphorical ones) and quoting Popeye, although in the midst of serious inner turmoil.

Any concern to outwardly express something other than raw emotion, seems to imply that an individual is engaging in some kind of "double consciousness" Many have argued that "double consciousness" is expounded upon by W.E.B. Dubois from the values originally found

in the writing of Ellison's namesake, Ralph Waldo Emerson. Jack Turner explains how Ellison's ideas for "moral and intellectual awakening" (Turner 656) are largely borrowed from Emerson. Turner continues to explain how the history of race relations is a critical to what he calls "Democratic Individualism," the formation of a specific universe and identity through deconstructing another's, while still maintaining "honest confrontation with reality" (656). This undoubtedly holds true in *Invisible Man*, and is supported by Ellison's essays. "Double consciousness" necessitates, for Ellison, "an awareness of the tragic nature of the American experience; the dark underside of our history (*Collected Essays* 434)." By this he means the civil war and race relations. Progress requires Americans, of any race, to deeply acknowledge the tragedies that came before them and not to belittle them. Without the ability to do this, the narrator would be unable to "transcend" his suffering and develop a comedic sensibility from it.

In Valerie Smith's article, "The Meaning of Narration in *Invisible Man*," it is made evident that "the protagonist exchanges single- for 'double consciousness'" (Smith 198). This process of amending Emerson's single consciousness is underscored when the narrator learns to make humor out of his experiences. As Smith says, once invisible man has reached disillusionment, he gains the ability to "learn from his humiliations, instead of running from them" (201). He begins to approach his Southern roots and allows his identity to become more and more apparent. Simultaneously, the acceptance of the unfairness of things that defines his disillusionment begins to permeate the language and attitude of the novel. This is the embodiment of the blues aesthetic.

This being said, however, there is one aspect of Ellison's understanding of the blues aesthetic, which also applies to his personal philosophies, that has been understated in the large body of criticism which deals with his novel. This is the secret ingredient in Ellison's writings;

what he calls “the antidote to hubris, to overweening pride.” It adds both palatability and depth. What I’m referring to, of course, is humor. For let us, for a moment return to the most oft-quoted, oft-relied-upon description of Ellison’s vision of the blues, taken from the essay “Richard Wright’s Blues,” in which Ellison offers, along with a good deal of criticism of fellow African-American writer Richard Wright’s work (namely *Black Boy*), some insight into the blues and the American artistic experience at large:

The blues is an impulse to keep the painful details and episodes of a brutal experience alive in one’s aching consciousness, to finger its jagged grain, to transcend it, not by the consolation of philosophy but by squeezing from it a near-tragic, near-comic lyricism. (*Collected Essays*, 121)

This is what *Invisible Man* is. The novel is written by an utterly disillusioned and frustrated black man from the South who, decides to write down his life story. For my purposes, it is the “near-comic” part that is of special interest, because for Ellison, the consumption of brutality, or trauma, of injustice after injustice which results in an utterly disillusioned conscious, leads to laughter. That is why the narrator of *Invisible Man* cracks up all the time, because he is swallowing his pain. One such example occurs in the last chapter, when invisible man sees a lost white man in the subway, then realizes it is Mr. Norton. Clearly, invisible man should be offended when Mr. Norton doesn’t recognize him and even more so by the suggestion that he (invisible man) is “light-headed from hunger” (578). Invisible man is not just offended, but hurt. Instead, he says, “I laughed all the way back to my hole” (579). Seeing as this is at the end, the narrator’s disillusionment has reached a peak, and he knows it’s all he can do to laugh at his misfortune. By doing this, he claims a sort of agency for himself. While it was the white folks

who seemed to be laughing at him in the beginning of the novel, the narrator of *Invisible Man* eventually emerges as the creator of comedy, and the person with the most reason to be laughing.

In an essay that solidifies the relevance of jazz and humor to Ellison's work, Robert G. O'Meally seeks to identify the meaning of Louis Armstrong's famous smile by using Ellison's literature in "Checking Our Balances: Ellison on Armstrong's Humor." O'Meally reminds us that "Ellison's hometown specialized in hard-dancing big band blues alive with what Ellison always termed a frontier aspect, a lighter, more hopeful ring not as characteristic of, say, Muddy Waters or other blues artists of the Deep South" (O'Meally 118). This biographical context would seem to explain Ellison's insistence on humor as a piece of the blues, at least partially. Yet whatever the origins, it is clear that Ellison employs a sense of humor in the novel not just to lighten one's load, but as an alternate mode of action in response to troubling stimuli.

Another pillar of O'Meally's essay which is helpful here is his explanation of "laughing barrels," a device which Ellison describes in his essay "An Extravagance of Laughter." Supposedly, these literal "barrels" were once "strategically placed in the walkways of Southern towns so that if a Negro felt too turbulent a gale of laughter coming on, he or she could howl down into one of these laughing barrels and thus preserve the public calm and civic peace." (O'Meally 122). Certainly, "laughing barrels" would have been put to good use in *Invisible Man*, where black characters are constantly "laughing hysterically" at seemingly inappropriate moments. Ellison sees this as one of the idiosyncrasies of African-American culture that cannot be forgotten, like the "Sambo" image, and his narrator in *Invisible Man* is haunted by these racist and antiquated traditions. When he moves north to Harlem, a sense of this tradition is uprooted, for "to lose a sense of where you are implies the danger of losing a sense of who you are," (577) and it can be agreed that, at the foremost, the man's identity is what's at stake in this novel. Like

little Easter Eggs, Ellison hides bouts of hysterical laughter in *Invisible Man* undoubtedly with the idea of “laughter barrels” in mind. This is, in part, to give the sense of dislocation that the narrator feels at the core of his identity. For African Americans such as invisible man, this dislocation which causes a crisis in identity is two-fold. First there was the forced movement out of Africa into the new world, then the movement which actually occurs in the novel out of the South and into large cities further north. Ellison’s tactic for reconciling this displaced sense of identity (or at least the tactic he assigns for his narrator) necessarily involves humor.

In Jean-Christophe Cloutier’s relatively recent analysis, our invisible man is read as a comic book hero, likened to the most eminent of the sort—Batman and Superman. Cloutier claims that “Ellison’s predilection for indigenous American forms of expression like jazz, as well as his embrace of popular forms, renders him receptive to the ‘invisible art,’ as Scott McCloud calls comics” (Cloutier 294). Harlem is then read as a “lurid and colorful (296)” playground where violence and vigilantism run rampant. It is significant that “the hero’s secret identity is preserved, for the reader knows him only as *Invisible Man* (303).” Specific references in the novel to the Lone Ranger and Dick Tracy help to solidify it as being in conversation with comic books (305-6). Finally, in vindicating the comic form as art and presenting the narrator as a hero, Cloutier claims that Ellison “offers a glimpse of a world where criminal passions can be harnessed to socially useful ends” (316).

As convincing as this reading is, there is more to *Invisible Man* than just this vigilantism. He’s “an orator, a rabble rouser” (*Invisible Man* 14) but, most significantly, an artist. As the narrator himself realizes, “I am nobody but myself” (15). He refuses to adhere to any reductionist identity, and therefore allows himself to be all things all at once. There’s a musicality in his expression which seems to suggest that “the violence and heroism (Cloutier 296)” that Cloutier

speaks of is hardly the big picture. In the Wright essay, for instance, one of the pivotal critiques Ellison offers against Wright is that he (Wright) sees “his destiny” as drenched in violence and that “his response was likewise violent.” Similarly, Morris Dickstein points out that Ellison disliked Irving Howe’s essay, “Black Boys and Native Sons,” because it “seemed to confine the black writer to a path of anger, protest, and victimization” (Dickstein 127). Cloutier’s essay is vulnerable to the same criticism. What’s lacking is an understanding that the narrator inverts the violence around him to create something more palatable.

This is not to say that our narrator doesn’t flirt with violence. When the young Mr. Emerson (I say young because he is the son of the head of the company, whom the narrator really hoped to meet with) shows invisible man the letter that Mr. Bledsoe wrote for his future employers, which was supposed to be a letter of recommendation, he sees his relationship with Bledsoe for what it truly is. This represents a major turning point towards disillusionment. In the letter, it is stated that the narrators “vain hopes” (*Invisible Man* 191) of returning to Tuskegee shall never come into fruition; that he will never be accepted back due to “a most serious defection from our strictest rules of deportment” (190). In essence, the narrator realizes upon reading the letter that the dream in which he opens letters in his brief case (on his grandfather’s command) was foreshadowing this moment. “Keep This Nigger-Boy Running,” (33) said the letters. That is essentially what the letters Bledsoe wrote for him have also said, as they painted such a negative picture of the narrator, asking the employers, rather quizzically, “to help him continue in the direction of that promise which, like the horizon, recedes ever brightly distantly beyond the hopeful traveler” (191) that none of the recipients would ever dream of hiring him.

The protagonist’s response to this affront, at least initially, is rage. “I could hardly get to sleep for dreaming of revenge,” (195) writes invisible man. At this point he aims to kill Mr.

Bledsoe for sending him out with these letters, acting upon the kind of vigilantism that Cloutier emphasizes on. While this kind of violence could have been the narrators ultimate path, the result of his disillusionment, it is transformed by the end of the book. Therefore, while Cloutier's essay does apply to *Invisible Man*, it misses the point. Instead of furthering violence by becoming a comic-book hero, the narrator of the novel learns to harness his artistic side, as well as the bluesy vision of humor paired with despair, to enact on his disillusionment.

So what are we to do, now, with this humor in the blues? Is it just another contradiction, another example of the novel's aching double consciousness, as rife with meaning as it is trivial? Does it further the idea of the blues man as an entertainer, reinforcing the Sambo Image? O'Meally says of Louis Armstrong "that it was the entertainer's style to wear a smile on stage, simple as that" (O'Meally 119). Is comedy no more than a mask, an escapist, last resort to adversity? I argue that no, Ellison didn't see comedy just as an escape from discomfort, just as his narrator finds that to "undermine 'em with grins" (16) does not sully the reputation of a black man. The characters of *Invisible Man* do not just laugh at their misfortune, but use humor as a technique to weasel their way out of difficult scenarios. Take the Battle Scene, for instance. Our narrator, far from his disillusionment, is among a hoard of other young, black men, just having fought each other whilst blindfolded, scrambling for coins on an electrified battleground;

Suddenly I saw a boy lifted into the air, glistening with sweat like a circus seal, and dropped, his wet back landing flush upon the charged rug, heard him yell and saw him literally dance upon his back, his elbows beating a frenzied tattoo upon the floor, his muscles twitching like the flesh of a horse stung by many flies. When he finally rolled off, his face was gray and no one stopped him when he ran from the floor amid booming laughter. (*Invisible Man* 27)

One can tell this episode is from early on in the novel because of the way in which the metaphors are permeated with the language of the south. This helpless boy, in an unimaginable amount of pain, dances not seemingly but “literally” (27). He is therefore allowed to leave the arena, because he has entertained. He has made the audience laugh.

The narrator’s grandfather would make a lesson out of this episode. Recall that his regret is that he was too meek in his life. The antithesis to this could be violence or outrage. Perhaps violence is in fact, the “more overt action” that the hibernation is preparing for (13). Cloutier’s reading would seem to support this. After all, invisible man claims he believes “in nothing if not in action” (13). However the novel doesn’t end with invisible man setting out on violence. *Invisible Man* ends like it begins, with hibernation. The narrator decides to stay in his hole and listen to Armstrong and write about his life, considering only “the possibility of action” (579). Ultimately, the decision is for art over violence. His exchange with “the old singer of spirituals” (10) in the beginning of the book supports this. This occurs in one of those italicized, dream-like sections, often cited as examples of the novel’s Double Consciousness. The narrator suggests that “Maybe freedom lies in hating.” “Naw, son, it’s in loving,” (*Invisible Man* 11), says the woman, although neither of them are able to define what freedom is. Similarly, the narrator returns to love at the end of the book, reminding us that “too much of your life will be lost, its meaning lost, unless you approach it as much through love as through hate” (580). It would seem, with invisible man’s endorsement of love, we cannot extract from this novel a message that is anything but peaceful.

Towards the very end of the novel, when the narrator overhears two men laughing over an anecdote of Ras the Destroyer throwing a spear at a police officer, invisible man reflects that “Ras was not funny, or not only funny, but dangerous as well, wrong but justified, crazy and yet

coldly sane” (*Invisible Man* 564). For Cloutier this scene demonstrates how “Ellison covertly advises the reader that the fantasies of American popular culture should not simply be apprehended as trivial” (Cloutier 305). For my purposes, however, the narrator’s contention that something could be “funny and dangerous and sad” (*Invisible Man* 564), serves to validate a reading of Ellison’s blues aesthetic as equal parts sorrow and comedy. Ellison’s point is that when we bear witness to violence we see it for what it is but that doesn’t stop us from laughing at it. Also, contextually, that which is funny is not merely funny but can also make a point or achieve an end.

Furthermore, Ellison prescribed comedy not just as an element of the blues aesthetic, but as a restorative and cohesive force for the entire *communitas*. Indeed, Ellison often talks about humor in his speeches and essays, saying, “if we’re to survive and get on with the task of making sense of American experience, we’ll view it through the wry perspective of sanity-saving comedy” (*Collected Essays* 859). His vision was for the nation to awaken to the cruelty and injustices that had happened, to stare at them dead in the face and accept them, but to smile and to make a joke out of them “for when Americans can no longer laugh at each other, they have to fight one another” (430). As hard as it may be to reconcile the conclusion that the narrator of *Invisible Man* has on comedy and on entertaining in light of the offensiveness of the “Sambo” stereotype, O’Meally reminds us that “Ellison’s contention [is] that we Americans need this highly charged comic process sometimes even when it means putting up with offensive racial stereotypes” (O’Meally 124). Just as a jazz artist uses humor in his cadences and attitude while improvising, Ellison and his nameless protagonist use humor to improvise their way through narration and life itself.

Chapter 2: Philosophy of Humor and *Invisible Man*

For my purposes, I purport that the instances in which Ellison uses comedy in *Invisible Man* can be divided into four categorical groups; outright hilarity or puns, laughter as relief from discomfort, ‘comic deformity’ or self-shattering imagery, and, finally, irony. All of the major motivational theories on humor (relief, superiority, and incongruity) which have been philosophically debated for centuries can be considered as in correspondence with the categories I devise here (Perks 120). Significantly, Henri Bergson’s essays on “Laughter” introduce the concept of “comic deformity” which I discuss as a new framework from which to view “the grotesque” element of characterization that Fritz Gysin points to as a defining element of the novel¹. This sense of self-mockery and friendly masking reverberates in the jazz tradition, thus embodying a Modern American attitude that is not necessarily specific to Black America, but tends to nonetheless be continually associated with it. Similarly, ironic humor, indicating incongruity as a major motivational factor, has frequently been a tactic of jazz performance, especially improvisation. If *Invisible Man* can be considered as the emblematic tale of the African-American experience, then we must understand the function of humor in the novel as a reverberation of certain social attitudes, which may or may not be specific to black Americans but certainly resonate with a Jazz or Blues Aesthetic and therefore, the landscape of 20th century America.

It is significant that the ideology that can be extracted from *Invisible Man* is not in conflict with a Western and Eurocentric ideological framework. In an essay by Dexter B. Gordon, entitled “Humor in African-American Discourse: Speaking of Oppression,” *Invisible Man* is used as an example of “African American humor confounding ancient Greco-Roman

¹ Gysin, Fritz *The Grotesque in American Negro Fiction*

perspectives and providing for a rethinking of rhetorical theories of humor” (Boskin 273). My paper contests this. Consistently, Ellison’s use of humor can be argued to align with all three Greco-Roman theories. Just as jazz combines the European aesthetic to the African (largely through polyrhythm), so too does African-American sense of humor combine classic philosophy with a modernist, peculiarly American sensibility.

The first and most basic comedic realm in the novel is composed largely of puns and other forms of wordplay. For instance, the episode analyzed earlier, in which the narrator purchases yams, contains two examples of this. That the yams are literal roots is a kind of double entendre, as they are both a vegetable and a metaphor for the narrator’s origins in the South. Also, more intuitively, the narrator’s use of the phrase “I yam what I yam,” is an example of almost excessively blatant humor. The reference to Popeye is a gesture towards pulp culture, suggesting that the novel prefers to evade being categorized as either “high” or “low” brow, but rather to represents a kind of meeting of the two. The comedy in the novel, much like the violence, balances out the more uncomfortable symbols, like Sambo, and the more distressing realities the novel confronts, like 20th American racism and the very nature of African-American existence. Any sense of white guilt that may be invoked is abated by a humorous tone.

While “outright humor” is essentially a kind of catchall category, the remaining three are more specific, and have direct correlations to the motivational theories of humor. One such theory, known as the relief theory, claims that comedy is a therapeutic force, one which occurs after a bombardment of emotion (Perks 120). Although this does not describe all uses of humor, it certainly occurs in *Invisible Man*. It also has a history of use in African-American culture. Joseph Boskin, for instance, argues that during the Civil Rights Movement, “humor was used as an antidote to the omnipresent tension that accompanied nonviolent demonstrations” (Boskin

208). Similarly, characters in the novel often use humor to ease discomfort. One example occurs when the narrator “laughed nervously” (*Invisible Man* 173) after being yelled at by Peter Wheatshaw on the street, a stranger as of yet who ends up being a fellow Southerner. Our invisible protagonist alleviates his discomfort whilst dealing with Wheatshaw by laughing through the exchange. This is much like how Aristotle describes the ancient Relief theory of humor claiming that the “frame of mind” which spawns humor “is plainly the opposite to that which makes them angry” (Aristotle, *Rhetoric* 2.380b, qtd. in Perks 125). In much the same fashion the narrator in *Invisible Man* uses laughter when dealing with Wheatshaw as an alternative to violence, revenge, or anger.

Comic Deformity and the “Laughing Hyena”

While laughter as relief is necessary to bear in mind in any reading of the novel, and one could make the argument that relief is the motivator behind all forms of comedy, there is something much more peculiar and interesting happening in *Invisible Man*. Gysin, in his book, *The Grotesque in American Negro Fiction*, claims that “almost all the persons in *Invisible Man* assume grotesque traits at one time or other; several of them are portrayed a actual grotesque figures” (Gysin 178). While Gysin’s study of the distorted or “grotesque” element of characterization in the novel is apt, I argue that the consistency of distortion is not something which makes the novel into a kind of gothic, but instead has a largely comedic effect. It is from this element of the novel that I derive my second comic category, *comic deformity*, which is endanger of becoming the “laughing hyena” when it becomes utterly self-destructive.

Comic Deformity may be grotesque and yet it is a slightly different way to consider grotesqueness. It is a distortion that does not frighten or disturb but amuses. Bergson says that a deformity may be comic when;

One would say that the person's whole moral life has been crystallized into this particular cast of features. This is the reason why a face is all the more comic, the more nearly it suggests to us the idea of some simple mechanical action in which its personality would be forever absorbed. Some faces seem to be always engaged in weeping, others in laughing or whistling, others, again in eternally blowing an imaginary trumpet, and these are the most comic faces of all...Automatism, inelasticity, habit that has been contracted and maintained, are clearly the causes why a face makes us laugh. (Bergson 76).

The idea that the deformity has entirely "absorbed" the identity of he who dons it is especially pertinent, since the narrator struggles to understand his identity he must avoid becoming "crystallized" in this way. He therefore will describe multiple other characters as grotesquely deformed in a way that becomes conscious, while at the same time, resisting any deformities himself. Whether or not he is successful at this is subjective, for it could be that his own blackness, or invisibility becomes a kind of comic deformity that he cannot escape.

Whenever a character is described as deformed or grotesque, it seems that his humanity is somewhat belittled. In other words, the language through which they're presented imagines them as inferior. This would seem to support the idea that comedy is motivated by a need to be made superior. Indeed, the Superiority Theory of humor is the one for which, according to Perks, "the ancient philosophers provided the most support" (Perks 126). Plato and Aristotle are cited as the

philosophers, who described Humor as largely motivated by superiority. They had in mind the tendency towards “Deprecatory humor;” or that which pokes fun at someone else, yet expanded it to encompass laughter for which the motivation was less clear. In *Invisible Man*, members of the white authority use deprecatory humor to exert their dominance over African-Americans. As dark as it is, the battle scene that I mentioned earlier is, in essence, a spectacle of young African-American men for the white audience to amuse themselves with. Historically speaking, the Sambo image is one example of violently imposed control and deprecation. Boskin goes so far as to suggest that “Sambo was the first truly indigenous American humor character throughout the culture” (Boskin 8).

As Sambo was propagated throughout society, his uses became more and more convoluted. White actors and directors were able to directly control the use of the Sambo Image in films through use of blackface. Therefore not only were they enforcing their superiority over blacks through Sambo, but they also prevented any actual African-Americans from benefiting in any way from the stereotype. In North’s book, *The Dialect of Modernism*, he explains how the “grotesque exaggeration of blackface makeup had always meant at least in part to emphasize the fact that the wearer was not black” (North 7). North uses incidences of blackface to support his claim that *Racial Masquerade*, or, the ability to navigate between racial representations at will, comprised a major strategy in modernist art forms. This ironic and unfathomably racist trend in early 20th century cinema has led me to the idea that we can perhaps read blackness as a sort of *comic deformity*, of which Bergson also said;

A deformity that may become comic is a deformity that a normally built person could successfully imitate (Bergson 75).

At first, it may seem that blackness is not could not be “successfully imitate[ed]” as skin tone is, of course, innate and visually palpable. This is where North’s book has come in handy, for it makes a point out of the way in which “blackface declares itself openly as a mask, unfixes identity, and frees the actor in a world of self-creation” (North 7). Is black skin itself then, according to white society who are reminiscent of *Sambo*, a comic deformity? Certainly it could be said that invisible man’s blackness handicaps him, much like the way a hunchback (one of Bergson’s examples of comic deformity) is handicapped by his idiosyncrasy.

The narrator, on the other hand, gradually learns that his skin color can be used to both help and hinder him. When he begins to make speeches for “the brotherhood,” he awakens for the first time to the idea of his race being a positive thing. Therefore, the general characteristic of blackness is not in itself a “comic deformity.” The Sambo stereotype, on the other hand, is. Recall the description of the cast-iron bank that the narrator encounters at Mary Rambo’s house: “whose white eyes stared up at me from the floor, his face an enormous grin, his single large black hand held palm up before his face” (319). This ties in with Bergson’s descriptions of comic deformity namely in its fixity. What’s so eerie about this bank, besides its racist undercurrents, is the expression; the “enormous grin” that can never fade. It is also quite literally engaged in “some simple mechanical action” that it can never escape (Bergson 76). The “automatism” and “inelasticity” consume its identity, it’s clownishness has been imposed.

It can thus be said that *Sambo* itself is a deformity, or expression of the comic. In Boskin’s book, he likens it to a jester, or a Shakespearean fool (Boskin 8). Similarly, Louis Armstrong with his signature smile “was less abashed about the entertainer’s role as joy-bringer, good-time roller” than the generations of musicians that would come later (O’Meally 119). Yet

both the narrator of *Invisible Man* and Louis Armstrong manage to navigate an identity that eclipses the “inelasticity” of a comic expression; this is through art.

Aside from the reference to Armstrong in the Prologue and Epilogue (“What did I do/To be So/ Black and Blue”), Louis Armstrong as a cultural icon bears immense pertinence to this discussion. In an essay in the *Shadow and Act* collection, Ellison mentions Armstrong’s “clownish license and intoxicating powers,” suggesting that the trumpeter-turned vocalist “performs the magical feat of making a romantic melody issue from the throat of a gravel.²” Louis Armstrong’s singing voice almost emerges as a symbol of the “clownish license” that African-Americans were accredited with, and at the same time limited by, in the 20th century. Armstrong exemplified racial stereotypes and discrimination, not just through his smile as a kind of mask, but also through the music he created. The trumpeting was not enough to keep white audiences his interested. He had to start singing in that famously deep, croaky baritone, which became a comic deformity of its own.

Armstrong’s voice is does not have the destructive potential of a “laughing hyena.” Armstrong, like the narrator of the novel, instead engages in a more-or-less harmless form of self-mockery. *Comic Deformity* does not suggest that the individual “eat out [his]own guts” but merely that he engage in an expression that forever shapes our perception of him. In *Invisible Man*, the narrator speaks of his life with an air of triviality and inane sensibility, despite the technically realist content. Consider this passage from the beginning of the Epilogue;

² (“Change the Joke and Slip the Yoke” 52); Ellison uses Louis Armstrong as an example of Paul Radin’s “trickster,” a figure who “is to add disorder to order and to make a whole, to render possible, within the fixed bounds of what is permitted, an experience of what is not permitted” (Kerenyi qtd . in *Shadow and Act* 52). Ellison was critiquing the claim by Stanley Edgar Hyman, that archetypal blackface characters embody this trickster figure as defined by Radin and Kenrenyi, pointing out, in essence that “this ‘darky’ entertainer’ is white” (*Shadow and Act* 47).

“So there you have all of it that’s important. Or at least you *almost* have it. I’m an invisible man and it placed me in a hole—or showed me the hole I was in, if you will—and I reluctantly accepted the fact.” (*Invisible Man* 572)

The distinctiveness of this tone is not just what keeps the novel interesting, but also what gives the narrator his own individual identity and allows him to combat his supposed invisibility. He is almost sardonic here. He does not merely say “So there you have it,” like one might suggest, but instead complicates the expression to suggest that he has made conscious choices as to what he will include in his novel. He has acknowledged that his retelling is “important,” and also that it might be too convoluted and contradictory for anyone to really make sense of. He appeals here to the Superiority Theory with this suggestion (“at least you *almost* have it”). This gives him an enormous amount of power, by far surpassing the power he had as a speaker for the brotherhood or anywhere else in the novel.

Still, The Superiority Theory can become troubling and uncomfortable when it suggests that the narrator is making fun of himself or of other characters. This is perhaps most true in the case of Sambo, the most glaringly obvious depiction of a deformity becoming comic. Invisible man must distinguish himself from the negative stereotype “Sambo” established, yet part of invisible man’s quest is to manage his identity through embracing the humor of his Southern forbearers. Incongruous humor achieves this end in many instances in the novel, presenting serious and political subject matter through humorous lyrics. It can also be argued that the narrator confirms his own superiority by harnessing the power of comedy, flipping Sambo on his head. Regardless, it is apparent that as a writer, invisible man’s use of humor is not reductive of his identity, but rather opens up a world of expression that he had previously been blind to.

Although Sambo embodies a concrete example of comic deformity, the novel is rife with other, less obvious examples. Dr. Bledsoe, the president of the all-black college, has the nickname “Old Bucket-head,” (*IM* 101) because of the shape of his face. Invisible man pictures “his broad globular face that seemed to take its form from the fat pressing from the inside, which, as air pressing against the membrane of a balloon, gave it shape and buoyancy” (100-101). This offensive description is incongruous with the fact that the narrator claims Dr. Bledsoe “was the example of everything I hope to be” (101). Still, this humor is clearly deprecatory, in precisely the way Plato and Aristotle described. Perhaps invisible-man is positing himself as above his former college-president in light of the events that happen earlier, in which he learns Bledsoe was never really on his side. Perhaps, as Gysin claims, this is an example of “the method of *realistic description*” (Gysin 186) that Ellison employs in the novel. Whether or not *realism* was deliberately executed when Ellison wrote *Invisible Man*, the comedic element of the description of characters is essential to the voice of the narrator, a voice that Ellison developed as a paradigm of a Modernist African-American aesthetic.

If invisible man symbolizes humor and art, a hero in his own right, then the novel requires a symbolic antihero. This is the role of Ras the Destroyer, who seems to be the complete antithesis of the narrator. As a parody of a Black Nationalist, the highly formidable Ras the Destroyer at one point tells the narrator to “take your corrupt ideology and eat out your own guts like a laughing hyena.” This metaphor suggests a gory, violent act of double consciousness. The “laughing hyena” is invested in his “corrupt ideology” to the point of self-destruction. This is the result of “comic deformity” when it has gone too far. Ras’s use of humor here is indubitably motivated by *superiority*, and the morbidity of his imagery suggests the inherent violence of his character. The image of the *laughing hyena*, a subtle gesture towards Africa as the motherland, is

frequently implicit in the description of laughter in the novel, suggesting that the use of laughter as *relief* may not always be ideal. Ras warns the narrator that the Brotherhood is using him, and is aware that the only way to truly build his identity is to avoid the patriarchy's attempt to assign him one. Yet Ras is wrong. He discards education and "ideology" in a way the narrator cannot, and his transgressive essence is demonstrated by the morbidity of his metaphors. Not only does he suggest that the "laughing hyena" consume its own innards but he implies that after the brotherhood's inevitable abandonment of the narrator, he will be left "stinking and choked up with white maggots" (*Invisible Man*, 375). Furthermore, Ras's way of speaking — the Jamaican accent coupled with anger, repetition, and sentence fragments—becomes itself a kind of "laughing hyena," or *comic deformity*.

In the character of Peter Wheatshaw, we see how the corporeality of soulful, bluesy-ness is another kind of offensive stereotype. In Musicology, the idea of jazz and blues musicians as necessarily having a talent which is "untutored, instinctual, nonverbal," is commonly referred to as "the Primitivist myth" (a term introduced by Ted Gioia) and is considered condescending, even racist by many musicians in the jazz tradition. As a whole, *Invisible Man* both depicts this "Primitivist" stereotype, through characters like Wheatshaw and Jim Trueblood, and contradicts it, namely through invisible man himself, a narrating character who is educated, articulate, and respectful.

This contradiction is not outright rejection. Ellison no doubt understood that "the Primitivist myth," perhaps even *Sambo* to a lesser extent, has a quality of positivity also. Ingrid Monson points out that when the earliest jazz critics, emanating from France, described music as "primitive" they had in mind "a romanticized, uncontaminated ideal toward which artists should aspire" (Monson 286). However, the "Primitive myth" cannot really be applied to Ralph Ellison

himself, because he was technically a classically trained musician (Denby 2). If the “Primitivist myth” is both a compliment and an insult, then its presentation in comedy is a means of both *superiority* and *incongruity*.

Irony & “The Incongruity Theory”

Returning to Peter Wheatshaw, the *Incongruity Theory of Humor* is relevant in a number of ways. First of all, it is incongruent that this stranger on the streets of Harlem knows invisible man’s experience so well. Leon Forrest articulates this, describing Wheatshaw as a “streetwise bluesman” who “knows everything about northern idiom and what it takes to get along in this here man’s town...yet...is lost and homeless in the world of power” (Forrest 274). Secondly, the blues lyrics that Wheatshaw is singing in the beginning of the exchange illuminate many of the aspects of the blues tradition that align themselves with humorous incongruity. In this example, Wheatshaw sings of a woman with “feet like a monkey/Legs like a frog,” who is apparently a remarkable lover, for “when she starts to loving me/I holler Whooo” (173). Drawing similes between a woman and monkeys or frogs while still claiming that your love for her overshadows all other (“Cause I loves my baabay, /Better than I do myself”) certainly is incongruous in more ways than one, and the lyrics are humorous for this reason (173). Speaking more generally, incongruity of this grain is characteristic of the entire Blues Aesthetic that I discussed in the previous chapter. Instead of relating that which is upsetting in a literal way, a bluesman finds a way to express everything through a lighter, funnier voice.

The construct of incongruity in the novel results in instances of ironic humor. Invisible man’s epiphany that the world runs on “contradiction” sets the framework for a number of situations that contain *incongruous* elements, often leaving space for irony in the comedic sense.

A concrete example of irony occurs when the narrator is told to carefully add drops of a black substance to make it whiter. Dichotomies (namely, black/white and dark/light) are deliberately left unsettled. Incongruity not only spawns comedy in *Invisible Man* but also develops as a quintessential motif. The coupling of violence and laughter is one such example.

As a comedic sensibility, incongruity seems particularly interesting for the protagonist. The ironic humor in *Invisible Man* recapitulates the use of irony in the Jazz tradition. Musicologist Ingrid Monson says “In asserting a musical ‘superiority’ even when measured against the (white) hegemonic standard, musicians make ironic the presumption of racist inferiority” (Monson 299). She explains how Coltrane’s version of the Broadway hit “My favorite things” ironically takes the overtly populist, musically simple melody and “inverts the song at nearly every level” (297). Similarly she quotes jazz clarinetist Don Byron who, when asked about the most important elements in African-American musical aesthetics said that, “There’s irony all over... It’s definitely that balance... between totally opposing aesthetics... the conflict between being serious and savant, and just playing shit.” Through use of incongruity,

Irony was certainly a key element in the 1950s Bebop movement, in which songs that with astounding technical complexity were given silly, childlike names, much like the name of Bebop itself. Ellison himself was conscious of this incongruity, complaining that the “most inadequate” use of the word “bop” to describe Bebop “throws up its hands in clownish self-deprecation before all the complexity of sound and rhythm and self-assertive passion which it pretends to name” (Ellison qtd. in DeVeaux 1). This kind of “clownish self-deprecation” could be said to be intentional. Perhaps Beboppers wanted to make their music, however complex, seem more fun than avant-garde. The tradition of silly and simplistic names seeped into the music itself. Dizzy Gillespie’s “Salt Peanuts” is a well-known example. The song vacillates

between a large, jazz band playing a complicated riff that spans a myriad of notes and an extremely simple riff, consisting of an octave riff, at times merely sung by Gillette himself. “Salt Peanuts, salt peanuts,” Gillette sings, providing a frivolous lyric to the three-note phrase, hence stressing its simplicity. The riff is meant to contrast with what comes before and after it, and this incongruity makes any listening or performance of the song comic.

This is the exact kind of comic sensibility one sees in *Invisible Man*. Episodes like the Yams Episode, provide us with blatant laughter (a play on yams), and incongruity (humor emerging from a world of violence and injustice), all the while flipping the assumed racial superiority on its head and providing, if nothing else, a kind of relief. *Invisible Man* posits himself against characters like Ras the Destroyer, who has formed a unique identity but surrounded it in violence, and created a new mode of self-expression that leaves room for the artistic, the realistic, and especially the comic within himself.

Conclusion

An understanding of “double consciousness” and The Blues Aesthetic allows us to unfold how humor functions in Ralph Ellison’s *Invisible Man*. A large part of this involves incompatible elements, or “contradictions” which are synthesized into something that not only makes a good story, but seems funny in some way. This tactic enables readers to relieve their discomfort when considering just how racist and offensive the treatment of African-Americans really has been. Ellison once said that “America is a land of masking jokesters” (*Shadow and Act* 55). The narrator of *Invisible Man* finds a way to utilize humor, often through “comic deformity.” His characters were described as grotesque, deformed, violent, and even nonsensical, and the episodes were ironic and strange. Yet the very act of writing put the narrator in control of his life, and allowed him to form his own identity thereby rejecting the various identities that others have attempted to impose onto him.

It is simply not the case that Ellison’s use of humor rejects the Greco-Roman Motivational Theories of Humor. In fact, incongruity is a large part of the humor in the novel and the narrator’s use of humor does indeed seem to enforce his superiority in some sense. At the same time, just about any use of laughter or comedy can be said to indicate relief, and although Ellison advocated for complete acceptance of “troubling stimuli,” it is still undoubtedly true that the comedy within the novel serves to abate the uncomfortable topics that the content may invoke. *Invisible Man* develops its own aesthetic, for sure, yet this aesthetic is not in direct conflict with the Philosophical views of humor that precede it.

While it would be a much larger task to attempt to show how this sensibility is constructed in twentieth century American art forms, I have briefly shown that Ellison was not

alone in the way he used humor in the expression of something that was difficult, upsetting, and, above all, complicated. It is a running contraction. The incongruity becomes the message, I think. *Invisible Man* is a reification of a sensibility that was already prevalent in African-American culture, specifically in music. It is for that reason that I have gestured towards Louis Armstrong and towards the Bebop movement as they pose some of the most popular examples of the coupling of humor with serious artistry. Ellison saw that the pain and injustice of American history could not be ignored, yet it must be negotiated in some way. He wrote of a narrator who becomes disillusioned, and through that disillusionment finds a way to personal enlightenment. Comedy is a major element in this enlightenment, “for when American’s can no longer laugh at each other, they have to fight one another” (Ellison, taken from Address to the Harvard College Alumni, Class of 1949).

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