COMIC ELEMENTS IN SELECTED PROSE WORKS BY JAMES BALDWIN, RALPH ELLISON, AND LANGSTON HUGHES

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CHAPTER I

COMEDY AND COMIC ELEMENTS

Black critics have often stated that there are many comic elements in black literature. The titles of books like Not Without Laughter and Laughing to Keep from Crying would seem to bear this fact out. Yet in a recent article in Satire Newsletter (Fall 1969), one writer makes the statement: "Baldwin, Wright, and Ellison all suffer from the lack of humor in any of their major works."[1] Allan Morrison might partially explain such a statement, if made by a white critic, by saying that the interpretation is based on a lack of understanding of the subtleties of the black man's humor. He says:

> Not all of the humor of the Negro has been heard by white men and much of its meaning is missed by them.... More than any other single medium, television has made white Americans aware of the peculiar humor of the Negro, its origins, growth and present trends.[2]

All of the humor in black literature, however, is not subtle, or at least not too subtle to be understood readily by the general populace.

In this dissertation I shall analyze the comic elements and subtle humor in selected prose works by James Baldwin, Ralph Ellison, and Langston Hughes, three of the best known contemporary black writers. In order to make the analysis, let us first examine traditional white attitudes toward Negro humor, including the minstrels; then we can attack the problem of defining black humor and identifying the comic elements that apply to it.

Generally black writers have termed the traditional white attitudes toward Negro humor as false, and even deplorable. Many white authors have projected the image of black people as all being happy, contented, and laughing. Sterling Brown explains it:

> In pro-slavery fiction the authors seemed to agree on the two aspects of the comic Negro--that he was ludicrous to others and forever laughing himself.... To introduce comic relief, perhaps, in stories that might defeat their own purposes if confined only to the harrowing details of slavery, anti-slavery authors had their comic characters. Topsy is the classic example: it is noteworthy that in contemporary acting versions of "Uncle Lom's Cabin," Topsy and the minstrel-show note, if not dominant, are at least of equal importance to the melodrama of Eliza and the bloodhounds.[3]

The use of this "comic relief" helped lead to the development of the stereotype of the "comic Negro" in reconstruction literature. Black writers, other than Brown, have endeavored to show that the portrait of the "always happy Negro" is merely a stereotype, a traditional white attitude toward the black man. The works under study will reveal this.

Another stereotype of black humor--and the term "black humor" in this study is never to be confused with macabre, "graveyard" humor, but instead always means humor of the blacks--which is the expression of a traditional white attitude is reflected by the minstrels. Constance Rourke, in her book American Humor, discusses "That Long-Tail'd Blue," and she traces the development of humorous characters in America following the Revolution. She points out that Dutchmen, Frenchmen, and Irishmen became foils for the Yankee. Having noted that the transplanted Irishman was the most frequently attempted of all these figures, she says that the most insistent figure was the Negro.[4] She explains:

> Among the shadowy group there was one powerful exception, one type destined to capture the popular fancy: the Negro. "The blacks," said a traveler in 1795, "are the great humorists of the nation.... Climate, music, kind treatment act upon them

> like electricity." Negroes were remembered fiddling before a play at Maryland tavern or in their cabins strumming banjos made of flat gourds strung with horsehair.[5]

Both Rourke[6] and Brown[7] point out that in the 1830's, when the Yankee and the backwoodsman leapt to full stature on the stage, the Negro was pictured in firm, enduring outlines. These outlines, however, were white attitudes toward black humor. Negroes did sing and they did play homemade instruments, but all their lyrics were not joyful and all their melodies were not gay.

In explaining the minstrel routine, Rourke says that J. D. Rice had heard an old crippled Negro hostler singing in a stableyard as he rubbed down the horses, and had seen him dancing an odd limping dance as he worked--"rockin' de heel."[8] Having studied the dance and learned the song, Rice, in blackface, did the number in the red and white striped trousers and long blue coat of the Yankee, and the minstrel was born. It was the white man's idea of humor, not the black man's. (The fact that Negroes have been known to produce minstrel shows imitative of the white minstrels does not affect this statement.)

Brown summarizes the traditional attitudes held by whites toward black humor as follows:

> The "comic Negro" came into his own in the present century, and brought his creators into theirs. Octavius Cohen, who looks upon the idea of Negro doctors and lawyers and society belles as the height of the ridiculous, served such clienteles as that of The Saturday Evening Post for a time with the antics of Florian Slappey. His work is amusing at best, but is pseudo-Negro.... Trusting to most motheaten devices of farce, and interlarding a Negro dialect never heard on land or sea...he has proved to the whites that all along they have known the real Negro--"Isn't he funny, now!"--and has shown to Negroes what whites wanted them to resemble.[9]

It is obvious, therefore, that the portraiture of the "comic Negro" is a stereotype; also that the minstrels are white humor, generally portray-

ing the Negro as whites wished him to be seen. This study should reveal a true picture of black humor, especially since the prose works under study are by black writers. As Brown has accused white writers of using a dialect for Negroes "never heard on land or sea," it will be interesting to note whether black writers use a true dialect and whether they ever use it for comic purposes.[10]

Having described what black humor is not, we now turn to the problem of defining it or deciding what it really is. What are the comic elements which comprise black humor? It would seem reasonable to expect that black humor has some aspects of classical distinctions. Paul Lauter, in his edition of Theories of Comedy, presents scholarly essays on Old Comedy, Middle Comedy, and New Comedy. Although Lauter points out that Aristotle's lectures on the comic have disappeared, he brings out the fact that Aristotle believed that the chief effect of comedy is its ability to promote pleasure, of which laughter is the signal.[11] He says: "Certainly most critics, whatever else they regarded as the aims of comedy, have assumed laughter to be somewhere among them."[12] We will expect to find, then, identifiable elements in black humor which cause laughter and may be categorized as comic elements. At the same time, we can take into account the fact that some critics, outstanding among them being L. J. Potts, have insisted that it is very doubtful that the end of comedy is to produce laughter. Therefore, there will be comic elements, in all probability, which may cause only a smile or less. Lauter does not neglect the development of this aspect of comedy.

Lauter's statements, however, are general and give only limited help in specifically defining black humor or in listing its qualities.

Fabio, a black writer, agrees that black works have classical qualities. She notes:

> The Language of the Negro is classical in the sense that it never gets too far from concrete realities, from the "thingy" quality of objects, persons, places, matter perceived in all its immediacy by the senses and not through oblique references and artificially created allusory illuminations.
>
> "Negro", if anything, is a language--largely unassimilated and unlettered--which cuts through, penetrates things as they are reflected in spirituals, blues or jazz lyrics to a core of meaning eliciting a soulful response, to a moment of realization of what it means to be a human being in a world with a stranglehold on this awareness.[13]

Although Fabio's statement is not specifically concerned with humor, it does give insight into black humor by explaining the "thingy" quality of Negro Language and the fact that it never gets "too far from concrete realities."

Looking again at various theories of comedy, I find that August Wilhelm von Schlegel, in a series of lectures, reviews three periods of comedy and lucidly describes the third, New Comedy. It is in this category that black humor seems to fit most neatly. Von Schlegel says:

> The New Comedy must be a true picture of the manners of the day, and its tone must be local and national; and even if we should see comedies of other times, and other nations brought upon the stage, we shall still be able to trace and be pleased with this resemblance. By portrait-like truthfulness I do not mean that the comic characters must be altogether individual. The most striking features of different individuals of a class may be combined together in a certain completeness, provided they are clothed with a sufficient degree of peculiarity to have an individual life....[14]

Black writers comically describe the manners of the day, the local and national customs which seem laughable. Deploring the use of stereotypes, these writers approve the use of striking features of different individuals of a class.

Similar to von Schlegel's statement that New Comedy must be a true picture of the manners of the day is Meredith's statement that comedy should reflect upon social life and customs. He says:

> Comedy is a game played to throw reflections upon social life, and it deals with human nature in the drawing-room of civilized men and women, where we have no dust of the struggling outer world, no mire, no violent crashes, to make the representation convincing.[15]

Black humor, too, throws reflections upon social life; it is here that the black man frequently laughs most heartily at himself. He also laughs, sometimes with tears in his eyes, at customs and institutions. Feibleman points out that nothing actual is wholly logical:

> It is a notorious historical observation that customs and institutions rarely enjoy more than a comparatively brief life; and yet while they are the accepted fashion they come to be regarded as brute givens, as irreducible facts, which may be depended upon with perfect security.
>
> All finite categories, the theories and practices of actuality, are always compromises. They are the best possible settlements which can be made in the effort to achieve perfection, given the limitations of the historical order of events. Thus the categories of actuality are always what they have to be and seldom what they ought to be. It is the task of comedy to make this plain. Thus comedy ridicules new customs, new institutions for being insufficiently inclusive; but even more effectively makes fun of old ones which have outlived their usefulness and have come to stand in the way of further progress.[16]

Black writers have capitalized upon the use of comedy to ridicule customs and institutions, especially those in the South, which not only hurt Negro people, but also have been overly costly to those in power insisting upon them.

Since the foregoing statements by von Schlegel and Feibleman concerning the use of comedy are interrelated and pertinent to black humor, let us call the first element of black humor the scenic representations which reveal the comedy of manners, social life, human weaknesses, and

customs. A recent scholarly study entitled "The Comic Elements in the Fiction of William Dean Howells" gives an important position to little comic sketches which the author says "reflect human weaknesses and do a lot toward producing comic tone."[17] These kinds of sketches are abundant in the works under analysis, and likewise produce a comic tone. Rather than call comic tone an element of black humor, however, it seems more expedient to say that comic tone usually results from most elements of black humor.

Another element of black humor, which is reflected in von Schlegel's discussion of New Comedy, is the pathos behind the laughter, or paradoxically, the tragedy-related comedy, which might be called tragi-comedy. Having taught a number of years at a predominantly black college, I have seen many audiences of black students at movies and plays. At first I was dismayed when they frequently laughed at scenes which ordinarily would bring tears. I asked the late Melvin B. Tolson, a colleague, for his explanation of this behavior, and he called it a preservative technique, a "laughing to keep from crying" reaction by which oppressed peoples have been able to survive extreme hardships. I received further insight into this explanation reading von Schlegel's statement:

> As we have pronounced the New Comedy to be a mixed species, formed out of comic and tragic, poetic and prosaic elements, it is evident that this species may comprise several subordinate kinds, according to the preponderance of one or other of the ingredients.[18]

Black humor is often a mixed species. The reader is motivated to laugh and cry. A significant element of black humor, then, will be the use of a mixed species, which will be called the "tragi-comic" element. Although von Schlegel says, "Comic misfortunes--must not go beyond an embarrassment, which is to be set right at last, or at most, a deserved

humiliation...."[19] black humor may tend to go beyond this point, but still bring smiles or laughter, because black writers frequently describe the "laughing to keep from crying" aspects of the black man's life.

A third element of black humor as used by writers of fiction is based on a social theme or plot structure. It is described by Northrup Frye in his essay on New Comedy as follows:

> As the hero gets closer to the heroine and opposition is overcome, all the right-thinking people come over to his side. Thus a new social unit is formed on the stage, and the moment that this social unit crystallizes is the moment of comic resolution. In the last scene, when the dramatist usually tries to get all his characters on the stage at once, the audience witnesses the birth of a renewed sense of social integration.
>
> The essential comic resolution, therefore, is an individual release which is also a social reconciliation. The normal individual is freed from the bonds of a humorous society, and a normal society is freed from the bonds imposed on it by humorous individuals.[20]

Frye also points out that the traditional comic plot is one in which the young man finally overcomes all obstacles and gets the girl of his choice and lives happily ever after. The humor of blacks, again, falls under this explanation of New Comedy, as there are traditional comic plots. A very important part of this study deals with the heroes of Baldwin, Ellison, and Hughes. The conflicts separating them from a comic inclusion in their society and the resolution of these conflicts will be significant. This third element may be called "comic structure of black humor" with the understanding that the structure is based on a social theme.

Not only the New Comedy but Wit, generally, may be used to shed light on black humor. Dr. D. Judson Milburn skillfully analyzes the term "Wit" and pinpoints the period 1650-1750 as "The Age of Wit." He makes clear that "Wit in itself is a subject which causes confu-

sion...."[21] In answering the question as to just what is wit, Milburn quotes a seventeenth-century divine Dr. Isaac Barrows:

> Sometimes it lieth in pat allusion to a known story, or in seasonable application of a trivial saying, or in forging an apposite tale; sometimes it playeth in words and phrases, taking advantage from the ambiguity of their sense, or the affinity of their sound: sometimes it lurketh under an odd similitude: sometimes it is logged in a sly question, in a smart answer, in a quirkish reason, in a shrewd intimation, in cunning diverting, or cleverly retorting an objection; sometimes it is couched in a bold scheme of speech, in a tart irony, in a lusty hyperbole, in a startling metaphor, in a plausible reconciling of contradictions, or an acute nonsense; sometimes a scenical representation of persons or things, a counterfiet speech, a mimical look or gesture passeth for it; sometimes an affected simplicity, sometimes a presumptuous bluntness giveth it being; sometimes it riseth from a lucky hitting upon what is strange, sometimes from a crafty wrestling obvious matter to the purpose.[22]

It might seem that Barrow had black humor in mind when he gave the foregoing description. Having already noted the "scenical representation of persons or things" as an element of black humor, I find that it is indeed in the rhetoric of black writers that much black humor is displayed. There are tart ironies, lusty hyperboles, startling metaphors, plausible reconciling of contradictions, which may be called paradox, etc. It seems justifiable to call a fourth element of black humor by the term "Comic Figurative Speech."

Comic figurative speech will include counterfeit speeches, tall tales, and humorous oratory, all of which are discussed by Rourke in American Humor.[23] Both Ellison and Baldwin have included orations and sermons in their works; Hughes favors the tall tale. Concerning speeches, Rourke says:

> The American people relished oratory. With the beginnings of the Jacksonian democracy public speech burst forth in a never-ending flood. "And how, sir, shall I speak of him," said a member from Mississippi of Calhoun in 1840--"he who is so justly esteemed the wonder of the world, the astonisher of mankind?"[24]

Rourke goes on to point out that the eloquent and flowery phrases of much oratory was really "buncombe." She says: "The thunderous echoes were heard in New England, and the Yankee as well as the backwoodsman learned the art of comic oratory. Barnum enjoyed it in his early years. Dickens regarded it with indignation."[25] More significantly she points out that serious oratory rose and fell in similar cascades, but so far-reaching was the burlesque that it was often impossible to tell one from the other without a wide context of knowledge as to the subject and the speakers. An analysis, therefore, of the prose works of black writers must not overlook the orations and sermons, as possible counterfeit speeches or bombast. (The most outstanding early black leaders like Frederick Douglass and Booker T. Washington were noted orators of the serious category, but they did not neglect humor and jests.)

A fifth element of black humor involves subtlety, including references which are not readily interpreted outside the black community. The "sly questions" mentioned in Barrow's statement above (page 9) may be part of the subtlety. Milburn carefully points out in his discussion of the enigma of wit that several of the various contexts are separate yet closely related;[26] the same may be said in explaining subtle black humor. For example, there is subtle naming of characters which involves more than giving the person a name merely to identify him, or denote one of his main qualities. Funny figures of speech or other rhetorical devices may be used in this naming process. The playing of "The Dozens," in which a character's mother or other close relative is irreverently brought into the conversation, is not readily understood by those outside the black community. "What is so funny about that?" they are likely to ask on hearing the use of this subtle technique. Not always taken as

funny, however, "The Dozens" may cause hilarious laughter or a riot, depending upon the total situation. Also in being subtle, the black man may use symbols to evoke laughter which would provoke only the most intense anger if he heard them used by members of other races. Who manipulates the symbol makes all the difference.

During the present time much criticism of religion has taken the form of satire, a sixth element of black humor. James Feibleman's book In Praise of Comedy represents comedy as satiric criticism of the present limited historical order. Humorous "digs" at the Negro's conversion to Christianity as practiced in America and at emotional aspects of it may be classified as comedy, even though such satire may or may not cause laughter. Such satire has not only been directed at religion but also at those blacks accused of "thinking white." The term "thinking white" simply means the process of thinking that because a majority race holds certain beliefs and acts in certain ways, then these are the beliefs and the actions which are right and best.

"Thinking white" might also be called the satire of inversion, if it were expedient to divide this sixth element of black humor into parts. Bergson states that the essence of the comic consists in the mechanization of life, an effect which can be obtained by the process of inversion:

> Picture to yourself certain characteristics in a certain situation; if you reverse the situation and invert the roles you obtain a comic scene.... There is necessity, however, for both the identical scenes to be played before us. We may be shown only one, provided the other is really in our minds. The plot of the villain who is the victim of his own villainy, or the cheat cheated, forms the stock-in-trade of a good many plays.[27]

The heroes and villains of these black writers may be comic if they fit

into Bergson's concept of inversion, and subtly so if they "think white." More than one of the six elements of black humor discussed may be used in their portrayal.

Summarizing, the traits which best distinguish black humor are as follows:

1. Scenic representations and sketches revealing manners, social life, human weaknesses, and customs;

2. A mixed species, containing comic and tragic aspects depending to a certain degree on one's point of view, called tragi-comic;

3. Comic plot structure portraying heroes and villains separated from inclusion in their society, with some reconciliation at the end;

4. Comical figurative speech mainly of a "thingy quality" which includes humorous similes, lusty metaphors, paradox, sudden twists, acute nonsense, and the like;

5. Subtleties to be found in naming practices, name calling, playing "The Dozens" and having fun with racially hated symbols;

6. Satire, especially that used in criticizing religion and the supposedly irrevelance of white ideas and practices in various situations.

Many American novelists noted for humor in their works have at some time or other expressed their great admiration for Don Quixote and Huckleberry Finn. For example, William Dean Howells wrote about Cervantes' works:

> This novel which was called Don Quixote, is perhaps the greatest work of human wit. Very well; the same Cervantes, mischievously influenced afterwards by the ideas of the vulgar, who were then what they are now and always will be, attempted to please them by a work giving a lively proof of his inventive talent, and wrote the Persiles and Sigismunda, where the strange incidents, the vivid complications, the surprises, the

> pathetic scenes, succeed one another so rapidly and constantly that it really fatigues you....[28]

Langston Hughes says in one of his autobiographical works that he was influenced from reading Don Quixote:

> One of the first things I did when I got to Mexico City was to get a tutor, a young woman friend of the Patinosm and began to read Don Quixote in the original, a great reading experience that possibly helped me to develop many years later in my own books a character called Simple.[29]

Ralph Ellison, in refuting the idea that a novel can not be both art and protest, also makes reference to Don Quixote:

> Dostoievsky's Notes from Underground is, among other things, a protest against the limitations of nineteenth-century rationalism; Don Quixote, Man's Fate, Odipus [sic] Rex, The Trial--all these embody protest, even against the limitation of human life itself.[30]

I bring this point up here to make clear that there will be no quarrel in this study with those critics who argue that a novel can not be both art and protest. It seems safe to say that most critics agree that Don Quixote has many comic elements. The fact that it embodies some protest seems, also, to be undeniable. Therefore, the assumption that the prose works under discussion may be both protest and comedy is logical.

Furthermore, it is good to be aware of the comic influences on the writers. Ralph Ellison not only speaks of Don Quixote as an influence on the development of his writing technique, but in a discussion entitled "Twentieth Century Fiction and the Black Mask of Humanity" he refers significantly to Huckleberry Finn and quotes Hemingway's statement: "All modern American writing springs from Huckleberry Finn."[31] Any resemblance between black picaresque heroes and the protagonists of these classic works will be of at least passing interest. Ralph Ellison stated at a luncheon meeting of writers of Oklahoma State University in April of 1970 (See Appendix) that "A great deal of the style of American

humor came out of the black experience...." (A second study showing the influence of black elements of humor on works by white authors might be an interesting result of the present study.)

The following chapters will examine the use of the elements of black humor in the selected prose works by James Baldwin, Ralph Ellison, and Langston Hughes. Baldwin's works will be his first novel Go Tell It on the Mountain (1953) and the more recent Tell Me How Long the Train's Been Gone (1968); Ellison's works will include his only novel Invisible Man (1952) and an often anthologized short story "Flying Home" (1944); prose works selected from Langston Hughes' prolific writings will be his first novel Not Without Laughter (1930) and an autobiographical work I Wonder as I Wander (1956).

Chapter II purports to give adequate samplings of scenic representations and little sketches revealing human weaknesses; it includes light satire directed at customs and institutions. The next chapter examines the use of comic structure as the characterizations of comic heroes and villains are analyzed in the stories. It suggests that with the changing attitudes of the present time, especially black attitudes, characters which might have been considered praiseworthy at the time of their creation now show villainous traits and are fit subjects for ridicule. The fourth chapter works with the subtleties of black humor. It seeks to show double meanings in the fun making, revealing insinuations and communications that might be overlooked outside the black community. The brief fifth chapter deals with the comical aspects of religion, as pictured in the works. This does not mean that religion is really a comedy for the black man; it does mean that there are comic elements in it, such as paradox, and that the writers have taken pains to show this.

The final chapter summarizes the principal ideas from the earlier chapters. Also, the conclusion will give an opinion concerning the contrast or difference to be found in the emphases among the writers.

NOTES

CHAPTER I

[1]Harry L. Jones, "Black Humor and the American Way of Life," Satire Newsletter, VII (Fall, 1969), p. 1.

[2]Allan Morrison, "Negro Humor: An Answer to Anguish," Ebony, XXII (May, 1967), p. 99.

[3]"Negro Character as Seen by White Authors," Dark Symphony, eds. James A. Emanuel and Theodore L. Gross (New York, 1968), p. 152.

[4]Constance Rourke, American Humor (New York, 1931), p. 71.

[5]Ibid.

[6]Ibid., p. 72.

[7]Sterling Brown, p. 152.

[8]Rourke, p. 72.

[9]Brown, p. 153.

[10]The first black writer to be acclaimed by an outstanding white critic was Paul Laurence Dunbar whom William Howells hailed for his poems written in dialect. Dunbar also wrote in standard English and wished to be known more as a poet of standard English. Black critics call the dialect used by Dunbar a "phony dialect." It does add a comic tone to his poems, however, and most of the poems written in dialect are about parties, entertainment, and relaxation--not serious matters. (See Dark Symphony, pp. 2-11.)

[11]Paul Lauter, "Ancient and Medieval," Theories of Comedy (New York, 1964), p. 4.

[12]Ibid., xvi.

[13]Sarah Webster Fabio, "Who Speaks Negro?" Black Expression, ed. Addison Gayle, Jr. (New York, 1969), p. 116.

[14]"Lecture XIII," Lectures on Dramatic Art and Literature in Theories of Comedy, ed. Paul Lauter, p. 340.

[15]George Meredith, "The Egoist," Theories of Comedy, p. 391.

[16]James K. Feibleman, "Aesthetics," Theories of Comedy, p. 391.

[17]George Ellis Fortenberry, "The Comic Elements in the Fiction of William Dean Howells," an unpublished dissertation (The University of Arkansas, 1967), pp. 61-111.

[18]August Wilhelm von Schlegel, p. 342.

[19]Ibid., p. 348.

[20]"The Argument of Comedy," Theories of Comedy, pp. 451-452.

[21]The Age of Wit 1650-1750 (New York, 1966), p. 11.

[22]Milburn, p. 30.

[23]Constance Rourke, pp. 56-58.

[24]Ibid., p. 59.

[25]Ibid., p. 60.

[26]Milburn, p. 34.

[27]Henri Bergson, Laughter, An Essay on the Meaning of the Comic, trans. by C. Brerton and F. Rothwell (London, 1911), p. 95.

[28]My Literary Passions (New York, 1910), p. 226.

[29]I Wonder as I Wander (New York, 1956), p. 291.

[30]Shadow and Act (New York, 1966), pp. 170-171.

[31]Ibid., p. 51.

CHAPTER II

COMIC SCENES AND CUSTOMS

In an interview, Ralph Ellison was questioned concerning the love affairs in Invisible Man. He pointed out that his protagonist in one scene, having made a speech about the Place of the Woman in Our Society, was utterly surprised to learn that a woman who sought him out afterwards was not interested in the Brotherhood, but rather wanted to discuss brother-and-sisterhood. Then he said, "Look, didn't you find the book at all funny?"[1] Other readers and critics seemingly have not found the comedy in black books. Harry Jones says that "Baldwin, Wright, and Ellison all suffer from the lack of humor in any of their major works."[2]

This chapter will serve as a general refutation of statements or implications that Baldwin, Ellison, and Hughes are lacking in humor. In an address at Oklahoma State University in March of 1970, Ellison said specifically that he wrote Invisible Man to be a comical novel. David Madden has pointed out that humor is a literary device for interpreting the real world.[3] If these black writers were interpreting the real world (as critics like Kenneth Burke insist all literature purports to do), a search for comic elements, in this instance scenes and customs, seems a logical one.

It is the purpose of this chapter, then, to give adequate samplings of the comic scenes, which are usually little sketches revealing human weaknesses, and the humorous references to customs found in the selected

prose works of James Baldwin, Ralph Ellison, and Langston Hughes. In giving these samplings, notice will be made of the style of writing used by the authors to see if it seems suited to a comic intent.

A succinct but rather general definition of the term "style" is that it is "the way an author conveys his total meaning, both referential and expressive."[4] Most critics go along with the idea that there exists what may be called a style suited to comedy. Potts says:

> It is in the style of a play or novel that we first recognize comedy; and that is probably a surer touchstone than any theory. To say this is not to give more weight to style in comedy than in other forms of art; the proposition that style is art would not be far wide of the mark. But since its subject matter tends toward the commonplace, comedy is bound to rely mainly on style for producing its generic effect.[5]

A cursory examination of Go Tell It on the Mountain, Tell Me How Long the Train's Been Gone, Invisible Man, "Flying Home," (a short story by Ellison chosen because he has written only one novel), Not Without Laughter, and I Wonder as I Wander reveals that these works all deal with the commonplace: the protagonists are not emperors or rulers making earth-shaking decisions, nor are they millionaires living on the French Riviera searching endlessly for ways to entertain themselves; instead, they are ordinary people seeking first for moderate financial security, and next to satisfy modest ambitions, like owning a home, or educating their children, or becoming successful performing artists.

In showing that there is not a uniform style for comedy, Potts seems to make clear that there are some distinguishable factors, however:

> But there is not one uniform style for comedy, any more than for tragedy. In the comic novel there is a particular reason for this, which does not apply to the tragic novel, or not to the same extent. As the comic writer is more detached from his characters...so his narrative style will tend to differentiate itself more from the dialogue. And the better the artist, the more clearly it will do so.[6]

In sampling the humor in the scenic representations and references to customs, we shall note how detached the writers are from their characters; and we will also note whether the narrative style differentiates itself more from the dialogue. We will find that the authors have often relied on comic figures of speech--lusty metaphors, sudden twists, paradox, inversion, and smile provoking similes--to convey their total meaning, both referential and expressive.

The protagonist in James Baldwin's first novel Go Tell It on the Mountain is John, a fourteen-year-old boy. Baldwin does not seem to be nearly as detached from John, who is involved in little comedy, as he is from the other main characters: Gabriel, Florence, and Esther. Baldwin uses inner monologue in giving the flashbacks relating to each of these people. The story is of a day in the life of the characters. As we witness a saga of three generations, including comic dramatic scenes, we enter the thoughts, the very mind, of John almost as though by extra-sensory perception. Speaking of John sitting in church, the narrator says: "Tonight, his mind was awash with visions: nothing remained. He was ill with doubt and searching."[7] Again we are told: "There was an awful silence at the bottom of John's mind, a dreadful weight, a dreadful speculation" (89). Frequently we are informed that Gabriel or Florence or Esther knew a certain fact, but more often we are told what John thought. This evidence seems to show that Baldwin is using a style suited for comedy: he is more detached from the characters around whom the comic scenes presented revolve.

Gabriel is a central figure in each of the flashbacks. The typical scenes involving humor concerning Gabriel range from comic, especially incongruity, to tragi-comic. He is a wayward youth who becomes a minis-

ter, falls into sin, and is far from having a pure heart at the end, although he constantly preaches love and salvation. In describing the baptism of Gabriel, the author writes:

> At last, Gabriel dressed in an old white shirt and short linen pants, stood on the edge of the water. Then he was slowly led into the river, where he had splashed naked, until he reached the preacher. And the moment that the preacher threw him down, crying out the words of John the Baptist, Gabriel began to kick and sputter, nearly throwing the preacher off balance; and though at first they thought that it was the power of the Lord that worked in him, they realized as he rose, still kicking and with his eyes tightly shut, that it was only fury, and too much water in his nose (82).

This scene is comical because it shows the contrast between what is supposed to be taking place in a serious religious ritual and what is actually taking place. We would be justified in identifying it as light satire, for Schiller has said: "The poet is satirist when he takes as subject the distance at which things are from nature, and the contrast between reality and the ideal...."[8] In explaining the concepts of wit during the seventeenth century, Milburn points out that it was sometimes a combination of both judgment and imagination.[9] The narrator projects the wit in this situation; doubting Gabriel's sincerity, she uses imagination based on a knowledge of Gabriel to tell the exact reason for Gabriel's reaction in the water. The image of the preacher about to be immersed instead of being the immerser is comical and obviously needs no explanation (being an illustration of Bergson's well known theory of the comedy of inversion).

Florence, through whose mind the scenic representation is given, does not like Gabriel. Before the baptism ceremony is described, the author tells us: "She [the mother] asked Florence to pray, too, but in her heart Florence never prayed. She hoped that Gabriel would break his neck" (80). The term "break his neck" is a comical metaphor. Had the

author, instead, selected the phrase "get killed," the reaction would be more of shock than laughter. Perhaps, this might partially be explained as comedy based on the rhyme in "break his neck" and partially in the fact that the term, in the jargon of the street, refers to making a mistake in judgment or to taking an unnecessary chance and losing.

Another comical scene involving the same characters takes place several years after the baptism. Gabriel, despite his conversion, continues to vex his mother by staying out late and drinking. Florence, being twenty-six, decides to leave home and go north to find a husband, although her mother is bedfast. Gabriel, as often before, has been out all night drinking, and has not fully sobered up when the following scene takes place the next morning. Forence, his sister, is speaking:

> "I'm going," she said, "to New York. I got my ticket."
>
> And her mother watched her. For a moment no one said a word. Then Gabriel, in a changed and frightened voice asked:
>
> "And when you done decide that?"
>
> She did not look at him, nor answer his question. She continued to watch her mother. "I got my ticket," she replied. "I'm going on the morning train."
>
> "Girl," asked her mother, quietly, "is you sure you know what you's doing?"
>
> She stiffened, seeing in her mother's eyes a mocking pity.
>
> "I'm a woman grown," she said. "I know what I'm doing."
>
> "And you going," cried Gabriel, "this morning--just like that? And you going to walk off and leave your mother--just like that?"
>
> "You hush," she said, turning to him for the first time, "she got you, ain't she?" (85)

The inebriated person, like the man slipping on a banana peel, has always been a subject for laughter, and the scenic representation is comic. The fact that Gabriel is a heavy drinker and is, at the time,

not completely sober makes Florence's statement: "she got you, ain't she?" one for smiles if not loud laughter. A drunk can do little for himself and less for someone else. From the mother's point of view, however, the scene is tragi-comic.

Although it is not within the province of this study to mention the rhythm of tragedy and the rhythm of comedy (subjects which to my knowledge are largely unexplored by language scholars), black studies groups have found a close correlation between the rhythm of Baldwin's language and that of certain blues and spirituals.[10] Gabriel's repetition of the phrase "just like that" is definitely reminiscent of the blues. Ralph Ellison has compared the blues with tragedy saying that it is really an admixture of both tragedy and comedy.[11] Considering this passage tragi-comedy, it may be further stated that the author suited his rhythm in parts of the passage to the mood of the passage.

Most of the scenes surrounding Esther, the third important character in the story, are tragi-comic. Gabriel, having become a preacher and having married unattractive Deborah, seeks to convert Esther to the faith. She is the comely cook working at the place where Gabriel serves as handy man. Gabriel one evening finds himself alone with Esther in the kitchen of their employer's home and says:

> I just don't want to see you go down girl, I don't want to wake up one fine morning sorry for all the sin you done, old, and all by yourself, with nobody to respect you (141).

Before the evening passes, he has become the cause of her downfall, although he certainly had not planned it and was, to all appearances, sincere in his speech. Later, still an incongruous figure, Gabriel is not willing to take full blame for his actions in discussing the problem of Esther's pregnancy:

> "Yes," he answered, rising and turning away, "Satan tempted me and I fell. I ain't the first man been made to fall on account of a wicked woman."
>
> "You be careful," said Esther, "how you talks to me. I ain't the first girl's been ruined by a holy man, neither" (149).

Here we have humor brought by ironic inversion. One might expect a wicked woman to cause a man's fall; one would not expect this of a holy man.

There is universal comedy in the fact that human beings can live with people every day and seemingly be unaware of their peculiarities, their likes and dislikes. The evaluation of such comedy, however, depends on the perspective of the viewer and illustrates Walpole's statement that the world is a comedy to those who think and a tragedy to those who feel.[12] Baldwin demonstrates this in a little scene which takes place after Florence has gone north and married Frank, who sang the blues and drank too much. Reminiscing over the ten years of their marriage, Florence remembers:

> He would come home on Saturday afternoons, already half drunk, with some useless object, such as a vase, which it had occurred to him, she would like to fill with flowers--she who never noticed flowers and who would certainly never have bought any (93).

The comedy of Frank's buying his wife flowers, although she never noticed flowers, is paralleled in another scene by his unawareness of her dislike of certain names:

> Sometimes from the parlor where he and his visitor sat he would call her:
>
> "Hey, Flo'!"
>
> And she would not answer. She hated to be called "Flo," but he never remembered (94).

There is, of course, a certain pathos in the comedy of these scenes, the pathos of one human being's inability or failure to know what a close associate feels and wants. Such dialogue frequently ends on comical television shows with the question: "What did I do?" We are reminded of Meredith's statement: "Concerning pathos, no ship can now sail without pathos...."[13]

Other samplings from comic scenes in this first work by Baldwin reveal that he uses a frequent play-on-words, parody, and other rhetorical devices to make various sketches funny. For example, in the flashback which relates Elizabeth's story, we are told how Elizabeth's aunt got her away from her father, who loved Elizabeth but ran a sporting house:

> And she would, she swore, move Heaven and earth before she would let her sister's daughter grow up with such a man. Without, however, so much as looking at Heaven, and without troubling any more of the earth than that part of it which held the courthouse, she won the day: Like a clap of thunder, or like a magic spell, like light one moment and darkness the next, Elizabeth's life had changed. Her mother was dead, her father banished, and she lived in the shadow of her aunt (176).

The play on "moving Heaven and earth" gives the comical parody in this explanation: the aunt only troubled the part of the earth on which the courthouse stood. The old cliché "moving Heaven and earth" might be considered a lusty hyperbole which people often use to prove that they are super-saturated with exuberance about some matter.

A somewhat similar play on words occurs where Elizabeth defends her boyfriend Richard, whom the aunt says waits on people as though he hopes the food they buy will poison them. The sketch proceeds:

> "He sure don't like working in that store," Elizabeth once observed to her aunt.
>
> "He don't like working," said her aunt scornfully. "He just like you" (180).

This dialogue sounds like the typical joke, told for its own sake to bring laughter.

The humor in these little dramatic scenes points up human weaknesses and also seems to show a detachment of the author from the characters. Yet, as stated earlier, the scenes of comedy do not revolve around John nearly as much as around the other characters, from whom the writer was quite detached. Some critics feel that John, the protagonist in the story, is, at least part of the time, really Baldwin himself.[14] If the author is really relating events from his personal life, it would stand to reason that he might not be able to show the same detachment from the character who represents himself as from those who do not. The fact, however, that he shows detachment from the other characters would fit in with Potts' statement: "the comic writer is more detached from his characters...."[15]

Before leaving the comic scenes in Go Tell It on the Mountain, I must say that I do not believe Baldwin wrote this book to be mainly funny. Elizabeth, the protagonist's mother, is really a tragic figure. Florence nor Gabriel reach a happy resolution of their problems. John, the protagonist, does seem to have made a wise decision and decided to embrace the store-front church. Not on a religious theme, Tell Me How Long the Train's Been Gone seems more like a protest work than Go Tell It on the Mountain. The author seems far enough detached from the characters to introduce humor or comedy, and even when he may not seem detached, he has the ability to laugh at himself or his feelings. For example, Baldwin is described as having very large eyes in a rather unattractive face; whenever he makes allusions to his protagonist's eyes, one wonders if this is not laughing at himself, especially if he refers

to eyes humorously. In the book we are now leaving, John looks into the mirror and we are told:

> He stared at his face as though it were, as indeed it soon appeared to be, the face of a stranger, a stranger who held secrets that John could never know. And, having thought of it as the face of a stranger, he tried to look at it as a stranger might, and tried to discover what other people saw. But he saw only details: two great eyes, and a broad low forehead, and the triangle of his nose, and his enormous mouth, and the barely perceptible cleft in his chin, which was, his father said, the mark of the devil's little finger (28).

Later Gabriel looks at John's eyes, when John is being converted:

> Gabriel had never seen such a look on John's face before; Satan, at that moment, stared out of John's eyes while the Spirit spoke; and yet John's staring eyes tonight reminded Gabriel of other eyes: of his mother's eyes when she beat him, of Florence's eyes when she mocked him, of Deborah's eyes when she prayed for him, of Esther's eyes and Royal's eyes, and Elizabeth's eyes tonight before Roy cursed him, and of Roy's eyes when Roy said: "You black bastard" (171).

Eyes play an important role in these scenes, although they are not all illustrations of comedy. Yet, the sketch of a young boy looking at himself in the mirror trying to see what other people saw is worthy of smiles. The second description of eyes might be categorized as satire: Gabriel, a holy man, is remembering these eyes, all of which in some fashion are accusing him of sin.

Our attention is called to the protagonist's eyes early in Tell Me How Long the Train's Been Gone. The story, again, is told through flashbacks, this time on the part of Leo, a successful actor who has had a heart attack. Lying in the hospital, he remembers one night when as a child he was visiting his brother Caleb's friends. He remembers Miss Mildred feeding him and saying:

> "Go on, now, eat. Foolish me. You know I had a little boy like you? And I don't know where he's gone to. He had the same big eyes like you and a dimple right here"--she touched the corner of her lip--"when he smiled...."

In the meantime a party is in progress, filled with fun making and frivolity; when Leo and his brother get ready to leave, another reference is made to Leo's eyes:

> Than Caleb's hand was on my neck. Dolores stood in the doorway, smiling. "You stuffed yourself enough, little brother? Because we got to get out of here now." I stood up. "Wipe your mouth," said Caleb, "you ain't civilized at all."
>
> "Don't you pay him no mind," said Miss Mildred. "He's just evil because Dolores thinks you got prettier eyes than him" (42).

Whether these scenes give evidence that both the protagonists in these two books are to a certain extent Baldwin himself can not be proven. Again, however, it may be noted that the author is less detached from these main characters, and the comic scenes and sketches seem to revolve more around others.

Although there is much pathos in this story, the author emphasizes the fun and humor, too. He particularly tells about Caleb's laughter and describes Caleb in the following scene:

> ...Caleb always looked absolutely helpless when he laughed. He laughed with all his body, perhaps touching his shoulder against yours, or putting his head on your chest for a moment, and then careening off you, halfway across the room, or down the block. I will always hear his laughter. He was always happy on such days, too (19).

Such a description reminds one of the old saying that laughter is catching and causes others to laugh too. Certainly Caleb is a humorous figure here, even though we know not what he is laughing about.

The name of the protagonist's family in this second novel might be called a lusty metaphor: it is Proudhammer. The name gives extra cause for smiles and laughter when we see Mrs. Proudhammer buying the week's groceries from a grocer to whom she already owes a big bill. She says proudly and forcefully (perhaps in a hammering tone--insistently--):

> "Evening, Mr. Shapiro. Let me have some of them red beans there."
>
> "Evening. You know, you folks been running up quite a little bill here."
>
> "I'm going to give you something on it right now. I need some cornmeal and flour and some rice" (16).

The firmness of Mrs. Proudhammer's statement (a cash paying customer could be no less positive) plus the fact that she is adding three more items in the face of owing quite a back bill has a comical side. The grocer replies:

> "You know, I got my bills to meet too, Mrs. Proudhammer."
>
> "Didn't I just tell you I was going to pay? I don't know why you don't listen, you must be getting old. I want some cornflakes, too, and some milk" (16).

By attacking the grocer--his age, lack of hearing ability, etc.--Mrs. Proudhammer makes the grocer appear ludicrous rather than lose face or pride and look ludicrous herself. Moreover, she accomplishes her purpose for the amount she will pay on her back bill is less than what she is adding to the bill. Later, in the scene, she chastises the grocer by saying that he acts as though she is moving away. Yet, she has, at the moment, an eviction notice in her purse from the landlord because the rent is past due. No, she is not going to move, but she may be evicted. The latter verb is in the passive voice whereas the former is active. Baldwin produces humor by a little play on words: the literal meaning is true; the figurative meaning is false. The scene illustrates rhetorical comedy.

There is also subtlety in this wit which will be further discussed in another chapter. A. Russell Brooks discusses it in "The Comic Spirit and the Negro's New Look" explaining how Brer Rabbitt in slave stories was by turn a practical joker, a braggart, a wit, a glutton, a lady's

man and a trickster. "But his essential characteristic was his ability to get the better of bigger and stronger animals."[17] By using such subtlety, the impoverished black man in the ghetto is able to hammer a livelihood and survive despite his low wages and the higher prices he is charged for food. Such incidents are not void of humor: the happy ending is comic.

As Leo Proudhammer relives various experiences in his imagination, his inner monologues are frequently satirical and funny. In explaining a protest rally at City Hall in downtown New York, Leo explains:

> We were there to protest the outrages taking place in the city (and also in the nation) against those who, already poor and defenseless, were rendered even more so by the apathy and corruption of the municipality, and by the facts of their ancestry, or color. The rally was guarded by the police, whom we were in fact, attacking. They were there to make certain that none of the damage which we asserted was being done to the city's morals would so far transform itself as to become damage to the city's property (83).

The absurdity of being protected by the ones they were attacking is at least smile provoking. The satire in this observation, however, occurs in the last sentence: the police are much more concerned about the city's property than the city's morals. There are many such inner monologues through the novel which have overtones of comedy. They do not forward the narration of the story, yet they are pertinent parts of the flashbacks.

Humor is projected in the novel also through dialogues between various characters. One which well illustrates the black man's penchant for laughing at himself for being black (although at the time this novel was written, he might fight if a member of another race called him black) is as follows: Leo remembers a conversation with his older

brother during the time when Leo was dreaming of being a great actor. He explains:

> We came to Broadway, and the great marquees. "You going to have your name up there in lights, Little Leo?" Caleb asked with a smile.
>
> "Yes," I said. "You wait and see."
>
> "Little Leo," said Caleb, "on the great white way."
>
> "It won't be so white," I said, "when I get through with it."
>
> Caleb threw back his head and laughed (174).

Leo is dark and he is thinking of his blackness in relation to the brilliance of Broadway known as "The Great White Way."

An illustration of paradoxical humor is found in a scene where Barbara, the friend and actress who plays with Leo, and Leo are talking. Barbara begins:

> "What shall we do when the summer is over, Leo?"
>
> "Why--we'll go back to the city. What were you thinking of doing?"
>
> "Shall we go back to Paradise Alley?"
>
> "God, I don't know. I've got to get some kind of job--you know."
>
> "Yes. So must I."
>
> "I'll probably get a job as a waiter. So I can eat till I get paid."
>
> "Except that those jobs always take away your appetite" (274).

Perhaps there is a road or a path to Paradise, but the alley brings up other connotations. Were Barbara not white, one might place it in the category of subtle black humor; yet, she did not give the place its name. Frequently the Negro has had to go down the alley to attend movie houses segregated in the South. Rather than read in subtle humor where

there may be only the obvious comedy that some people like the alleys better than the main roads, let us notice the laughable paradox in the last statement: it is paradoxical that the method one might use to earn bread can within itself destroy the desire for bread.

Illustrative of humor derived from a play on words, or the various meanings of words--rhetorical humor--is a dialogue between Leo and boys he is serving. The boys begin:

> "Hi. Can we eat?"
>
> "If you can't, you won't live very long. How about this table?" (285)

This joke, emphasizing the difference between "may" and "can" has been used in a variety of ways by comedians throughout the ages. Today it is common usage to make no differentiation between the two words.

Baldwin uses the "sudden twist" which Ellison says is a specific contribution of the black man to American humor. It, too, falls under rhetorical humor. A sample of this takes place while Leo is talking with his brother Caleb, who having served time in prison has become a preacher. Leo has observed through inner monologue, speaking of Caleb: "He still looked like my brother--big and black--the transforming power of the Holy Ghost leaves some elements untouched" (296). This is another illustration of the black man's tendency to laugh about his blackness, possibly because he has suffered so much because of the color of his skin. (The point will be discussed in depth, especially pertaining to Baldwin's use of it, in the chapter on subtle humor.) The dialogue after Leo's observation follows:

> "Leo," he asked me, after a moment, "can you tell me what it is--an artist? What's it all about? What does an artist <u>really</u> do?"

> I had never known Caleb to be cruel, and so I couldn't believe that he was baiting me. I stared at him. "What do you mean, what does an artist do? He--he creates--"
>
> He stared at me with a little smile, saying nothing.
>
> "You know," I said, "paintings, poems, books, plays. Music."
>
> "These are all creations," he said, still with that smile.
>
> "Well, yes. Not all of them are <u>good</u>."
>
> "But those that are good--what do they do? Why are they good, when they're good?"
>
> "They make you--feel more alive," I said. But I did not really trust this answer.
>
> "That's what drunkards say about their whiskey," he said, and he nodded in the direction of my wine (297).

The sudden twist where the effectiveness of art is compared with the effectiveness of whiskey, a totally unprepared for comparison, brings the smiles or laughter. Caleb goes on to point out that many artists are lonely and very mal-adjusted; he wonders how these kinds of people can help others, since they so badly need help themselves. Leo assures him that they can help and that they do. Literature explains life. (The fact that the Ernest Hemingways commit suicide and the Thomas DeQuinceys eat opium is beside the point. Perhaps the author is really pondering these facts himself, the irony in it that those who write to picture life clearly for others can not fully perceive it for themselves.)

Showing that people who act parts on the stage can be so different from what they seem, Leo describes a party he attended, really by accident, when Barbara's escort Jerry fails to appear. His description of the party, customary for movie people, is really comic:

> There were, I am sure, hundreds of people there, and both Barbara and I, in our bright blue, dull dark fashions, were intimidated by them all. They glittered, they flashed, they

> resounded; they had that air, inimitable absolutely, of those who have succeeded. We recognized many of them, for many of them were famous. I think Sylvia Sidney was there, she was doing a play in New York then; and Franchot Tone; and Bette Davis..... Yes, we were dazzled, dazzled indeed. In the long, high room, this elegant room--elegant if one bears in mind that elegance is scarcely permissible in America--they seemed different, both younger and older--for one saw the faces, off-guard in life.... One saw that so-and-so's teeth, for example, were a little crooked; and this one had bowlegs; this one was very drunk and was clearly intending to become drunker. One very famous actress struck me as having very narrowly missed being a dwarf; but she had seemed very tall in her regal robes, when I had seen her on the stage as the queen of all the Russias... (63).

The distant at which things and people are from where they are thought to be is comic.

Most of the humor concerning customs presented by Baldwin has to do with personal relations between whites and blacks, usually between males and females. Leo describes the first time he danced with Barbara and says:

> We were there for a long time, and we got quite drunk. Barbara and Jerry danced. Barbara and Matthew danced. Fowler danced with Madeleine. I was afraid to dance. This realization came as a shock, for I had never been afraid to dance before. But I had never danced with a white woman (148).

The fact that this incident, or scene, is being related in flashback after Leo has become famous and he and Barbara have become common-law man and wife, causes ironic amusement.

Another good illustration of Baldwin's humor pointed toward customs is to be found in a scene where he is arrested because he is seen leaving a white residential area early one morning. His white friends rescue him just in the nick of time he feels, because he senses that the policemen are getting ready to beat him. After upbraiding the officers and calling them Nazis, Madeleine, the friend Leo was visiting, says:

> "What do you mean," shouted Madeleine, "indiscreet! Leo left my house in broad..Sunday daylight, and went to <u>his</u>

> house--and the cops dragged him to the police station, because he's been to my house. Now, what...are you talking about?"
>
> "We've worked in this town every summer for a long time, Madeleine," Saul said. "We know the people and the people know us and we've never had any trouble. You have to realize that this is a small town and the people here are not very sophisticated--they're not bad people. You just have to understand their limits. That's how you manage to play a character on the stage, by understanding the character's limits. That's the only way you can play Hedda Gabler, for instance--by understanding Hedda's limits. I don't think that's so unreasonable."
>
> "I'm not Hedda Gabler," Madeleine said, "but if I ever get a chance to play her, I'll certainly pretend that she's living in this town. But what this town could really use is a couple of Negro cooks, named Lady Macbeth and Medea" (201-202).

The humor, here, is a kind of inversion: although the black actor, Leo, has been taken to the police station, his host and hostess realize that the custom of the races not mixing socially is also a restriction of their freedom. The reference to the cooks is subtle humor reminiscent of slavery days and the reported demise of cruel slave masters, under mysterious circumstances.

These samplings illustrate the comic scenes, many revealing human weaknesses, and little sketches which bring smiles and laughter which James Baldwin presents in his two novels, Go Tell It on the Mountain and Tell Me How Long the Train's Been Gone. There is a detachment from characters who definitely depict humor; the dialogue usually differentiates itself from the narration (a comic style according to Potts) and contains witty statements. The scenes and sketches are spiced with witty rhetoric including paradox, play on words, inversions, lusty metaphors, and satire.

The next writer, Ralph Ellison, has stated that a great deal of the style of American humor came out of the black experience (See Appendix,

page 146). His Invisible Man has comical elements, many of which seem to have been overlooked by critics. Ellison admits that he wrote the book to be funny, and he has emphasized on many occasions that the book is not autobiographical. Therefore, in analyzing his comic scenes or sketches revealing human weaknesses, it will be interesting to note the detachment he has from his characters. A slow and careful craftsman, Ellison, has in all probability, adapted his rhetoric to his purpose and there will be humorous figurative speech to make clear the meaning of the sketches.

Early in the novel, the nameless protagonist describes the Founder's Day scene his junior year in college. The passage seems lightly satirical. The protagonist explains:

> The grass did grow and the green leaves appeared on the trees and filled the avenues with shadow and shade as sure as the millionaires descended from the North on Founders' Day each spring. And how they arrived! Came smiling, inspecting, encouraging, conversing in whispers, speechmaking into the wide-open ears of our black and yellow faces--and each leaving a sizeable check as he departed. I'm convinced it was the product of a subtle magic, the alchemy of moonlight, the school of a flower studded wasteland, the rocks sunken, the dry winds hidden, the lost crickets chirping to yellow butterflies.[18]

To get the above passage just the way he wanted it (funny) probably took many writings and many revisions: to me it seems to be true comic art, if there is such a phrase. A comic tone is set immediately by the light satire, the reversion in the first sentence: one would ordinarily expect the sentence to begin, "As surely as the grass did grow and the green leaves appeared on the trees, the millionaires came to the campus in the spring." Instead we get the twist that the grass grew and the green leaves appeared as surely as the millionaires came. The next imagery is really laugh provoking because the millionaires are subtly portrayed like ants silently moving about, or insects inspecting the

plants. They even leave deposits--no--they leave sizeable checks as they depart. Then to climax it all, Ellison makes the students appear in butterfly imagery--"speechmaking into the wide-open ears of our black and yellow faces." "Black and tan faces" would not have done nearly as well. One cannot miss the satire in the T. S. Eliot image of "The school of a flower studded wasteland...." The explanation is not in the form of dialogue and advances the narration. The Romantic poet wrote: "If winter comes, can spring be far behind?" He was not having fun. Ellison is.

Like Baldwin, Ellison has many little dramatic scenes which show human weaknesses. Having driven one of the trustees through a Negro section of the college town, the protagonist sees that the trustee has had a minor heart attack. The man says he must have a drink. Frightened, the protagonist takes him to a Negro tavern called the Golden Day. The scene in the Golden Day is hilarious. The protagonist says simply: "The Golden Day was in an uproar. Half-dressed women appeared from the rooms off the balcony. Men hooted and yelled as at a football game" (64). There is comedy in the dialogue which really does not tell the story (in line with Potts' definition of comic style). For example, an attendant named Supercargo (a lusty metaphor for a name) speaks:

> "I WANT ORDER!" the giant shouted as he sent a man flying down the flight of stairs.
>
> "THEY Throwing Bottles of Liquor!" a woman screamed. "REAL LIQUOR!"
>
> "That's a order he don't want," someone said (64).

This appears to be a joke told for its own sake. It does not advance the narration, but it does help depict the atmosphere of the Golden Day, where black people drink and laugh at themselves. This particular day

the scene is more comic because a group of war veterans, suffering from various kinds of hallucinations, is visiting the place.

Ellison has fun with status symbols and the black man's regard for them in a society that has determined his position by the color of his skin. During the looting in the latter part of the story, one man is seen wearing three hats. Dupre asks the man what kind of hats they are. The man responds: "With all them hats in there and I'm going to come out with anything but a Dobbs? Man, are you mad?" American advertising often appeals to a citizen's desire to rise socially by calling a product the _____ for the man of distinction. People rush out to buy the product so that they may appear to be in the elite category. The man in this scene is aware not only that he and his black brothers would like to rise socially; even in the excitement of a riot, he takes time to choose an elite brand name. The absurdity is truly comic.

Sampling of the many comic scenes in Invisible Man reveals that the author uses most of the comical figures of speech already referred to as the rhetoric of black comedy. During the Harlem riot referred to in the last incident, a scene is depicted where a beer store has been entered and a man is drinking and selling the beer. In discussing the night's events, an unnamed character asks another:

> "Where the hell was you, man?"
>
> "Me? I'm over on the side where some stud done broke in a store and is selling cold beer out the window--Done gone into business, man," the voice laughed (425).

The phrase "Done gone into business, man," has an abvious double meaning and brings laughter. In another scene while eating delicious yams cooked in the southern style, the story teller decides he must have another yam. He tells the seller: "They're my birthmark! I yam what I am"

(201). The remark is another illustration of Ellison's puns. Popeye, the sailor man, expresses the knowledge of his identity: "I yam what I yam." The protagonist becomes aware of his.

Not only does Ellison use puns, but he also has many amusing similes. In referring to the old folks' dream book during an oration, the protagonist says: "It's all cataracted like a cross eyed carpenter and it doesn't saw straight" (212). Mankind seems to laugh at cross eyes, reminding us of Aristotle's description of the ludicrous as consisting of some defect or ugliness which is not painful or destructive; cross eyes fit the category. The use of the word "saw" is also a comical pun, if the grammarian will forget for a moment that "saw" is the past tense of "see" and not the present. The carpenter does not saw straight, nor do cross eyes.

Satire, a bit more direct than that related in the first scene, appears often in the book. The protagonist never calls the Brotherhood the underworld, but he attempts to secure secret information about the Brotherhood from a girl named Sybil (390)--as Aeneas consulted the sibyl before he entered the underground. A second example of satire, Clifton speaks of Ras and says to the narrator:

> "That poor, misguided son of a bitch," he said.
>
> "He thinks a lot of you too," I said (284).

Perhaps the most significant illustration of satire in the novel concerns the character Rinehart. Having been mistaken for Rinehart, the protagonist is fascinated to learn the many roles that Rinehart plays: numbers man, ladies man, and, absurdly enough, preacher man. Meeting two of Rinehart's church members, he is addressed as Rever'n Rinehart and thinks to himself: "They were motherly old women of the southern type and I

suddenly felt a nameless despair. I wanted to tell them that Rinehart was a fraud, but now there came a shout from inside the church and I heard a burst of music" (375).

As to the comedy in customs, Ellison's best illustration takes place in the beginning of the story, the incident which causes the protagonist to begin his picaresque adventures (resembling to some extent Don Quixote and Malcolm).[19] When the white trustees visited the school, where the protagonist at this time is a junior, it was customary to show them certain things, to let them hear the black chorus sing and hear the preacher deliver a sermon; it was not customary to let them see how the blacks not connected with the school lived, including their run-down shacks, half naked children, and escape taken at the Golden Day. The protagonist goes against this custom when he carries Mr. Norton into the black community and accidently ends up with him at the Golden Day. The error of the episode is summarized in one statement the furious Dr. Bledsoe makes to the protagonist before dismissing him:

> "Ordered you?" he said. "He ordered you. Dammit, white folk are always giving orders, it's a habit with them. Why didn't you make an excuse? Couldn't you say they had sickness--small pox--or picked another cabin? Why that Trueblood shack? My God, boy! You're black and living in the South--did you forget to lie?"
>
> "Lie, sir? Lie to him, lie to a trustee, sir? Me?"
>
> He shook his head with a king of anguish. "And me thinking I'd picked a boy with brain," he said (107).

Later in the conversation, Bledsoe says: "Nigger, this isn't the time to lie. I'm no white man. Tell me the truth" (107). It is clear that it is a well understood custom, at least with the Bledsoes, that the black community, in order to survive, must tell the white community only what it wants, or what it thinks the white community wants, to hear.

The protagonist does not understand this custom. Ellison points out the absurdity of the custom as he begins the wanderings and experiences of his protagonist, who has much to learn of other customs in the world in which he lives. (This episode, to a certain extent, reminds us of the Houyhnhnm's bewilderment at the Yahoos' custom of lying, although language was supposedly for the purpose of communicating the truth.)

Ellison has not completed a second novel; therefore, to get a broader vision of his use of comic elements, and, perhaps, a comic style, I have chosen one of his most well-acclaimed short stories for analysis: "Flying Home." Discussing American humor, both Rourke[20] and Ellison[21] point out the importance of the tall tale in its development. In "Flying Home" Ellison juxtaposes the situation of a fallen Negro flyer with the humorous story--really a tall tale--of a Negro exceeding the speed limit in heaven by flying on one wing. (A slightly different version of this tall tale may be found in "Jokes and Jive," a chapter of The Book of Negro Humor by Langston Hughes.)[22] Jefferson, an elderly Negro, finding the flyer and his disabled plane in a field, tells the story to entertain him and help him forget his pain until help comes. After telling of an imaginary experience in heaven, in which he was forced to wear a harness (humor directed at jimcrow laws harnessing the black man on earth), Jefferson completes the story:

> This time I was restin' my old broken arm and got to flyin' fast enough to shame the devil. I was comin' so fast Lawd, I got myself called befo' ole Saint Peter again. He said, "Jeff, didn't I warn you 'bout that speedin'? 'Yessuh,' I says, 'but it was an accident." He looked at me sad-like and shook his head and I knowed I was gone. He said, 'Jeff, you and that speedin' is a danger to the heavenly community. If I was to let you keep on flyin', heaven wouldn't be nothin' but uproar. Jeff, you got to go!' Son, I argued and pleaded with that old white man, but it didn't do a bit of good. They rushed me straight to them pearly gates and gimme a parachute and a map of the state of Alabama....'[23]

The state of Alabama, here, represents more than Jefferson's home; it represents "worst than Hell" where a fallen angel might be expected to go. This tall tale which takes up much space in the story does not advance the narration. It is comedy found in the dialogue. The comedy, however, does serve a dual purpose because it arouses resentment in the flyer toward the old Negro man telling it, and it causes the flyer to resent the fact that in some respects he knows he is like the old man.

It would seem, then, that the thesis of this chapter is well supported by this analysis of samplings from two of Ralph Ellison's prose works. There are comic scenes interestingly presented by the use of rhetorical devices including puns, inversion, twists, comical similes, and inversion. Satire is lightly directed at customs and human weaknesses. The style seems to be one that Potts would call appropriate to comedy: the author is detached from his characters and presents much of the comedy in the dialogue, rather than in the regular narration.

A third writer, about whom there has been little or no controversy as to his use of comedy or comic elements in his writing, is Langston Hughes. The titles of two books by Hughes to be analyzed hint that the material is comic: Not Without Laughter and I Wonder as I Wander, the latter being autobiographical. James A. Emanuel, one of the editors of Dark Symphony, a popular anthology of black literature, has pointed out that Langston Hughes as an innovator has just begun to attract scholarly study. He says:

> Literary criticism, whether inspired by an awakening in the Establishment or by careful nurturing of Black Aestheticism, should closely examine Hughes's stylistic experiments, especially in his plays, his humorous prose [italics mine], his short stories, and his poetry.[24]

Hughes has used the words "laughter" and "laughing" in the titles of

several of his novels and stories. He seems to emphasize the fact that in order for oppressed people to survive they must be able to laugh, both at the situation in which they find themselves and at themselves.

As the omniscient teller of Not Without Laughter, Hughes makes the statement near the end of the book: "No matter how hard life might be, it was not without laughter."[25] The hardness of life is frequently represented by tragi-comedy: Sandy, the protagonist, loses his beloved grandmother who dies "all washed out" (26). The phrase "all washed up" is common in the black community and usually refers to plans that have gone wrong. Hughes's use of "all washed out" is an innovation on the phrase and might be called tragi-comic. Another quip that might be overlooked, although it is not exactly subtle, is made by the narrator in discussing humor. He says: "It was all great fun, and innocent fun except when one stopped to think, as white folks did, that some of the blues lines had, not only double but triple meanings..." (54). The comic interest here is not so much in "triple meanings" (which refers directly to subtleties in black humor) as to "stopped to think, as white folks did." Hughes could be laughing at the fact that Negroes do not bother to think and therefore find themselves in tragi-comic predicaments.

Early in the novel, Hughes points out the difference between white humor and black humor. Sandy, Hager's grandson, who might be considered the main character, hears a man sing the following lines, accompanying himself on his banjo:

> An Ah can't be satisfied
> 'Cause all Ah love has
> Done laid down an' died.

The narrator explains: "The song seemed sad to Sandy--'but the white people around him laughed" (116). For the first time in this disserta-

tion, we have an illustration of humor that brings laughter from one race, but a feeling of sadness from the members of another. Perhaps this is one of the innovations in Hughes's humor which Emanuel refers to above. It is particularly important to note that this is seen through the eyes of a child, in all innocence and sincerity.

Like Baldwin and Ellison, Hughes has comic scenes which depend to certain extent on rhetoric. His use of rhetoric goes beyond that of the other two writers, however, in that he seems to show that sometimes mispronunciations are more apt(?) than dictionary-approved pronunciations. In the following dialogue, Hughes is doing more than describing a comic scene where the mother is neglecting her home. Hager begins:

> "They tells me, Sister Johnson, that Seth Jones beat up his wife something terrible."
>
> "He did, and he oughter! She was always stayin' way from home an settin' up in de church, not even cookin' his meals, and de chillens runnin' ragged in de streets."
>
> "She's a religious frantic, ain't she?" said Hager (147).

Hager's substitution of "frantic" for "fanatic" brings smiles, because both terms would be appropriate in this context. Perhaps the black woman, finding no solution to her earthly problems, becomes frantic and looks to religion for a hiding place. It should be noted that these bits of comedy appear in the dialogue.

Hughes seems to deal more directly with the subject of humor, and has his characters make direct observations about it. For example, a particularly interesting philosophy concerning humor is related in reference to Sandy, Hager's little grandson. The narrator says: "He had discovered already, though, that so called jokes are often not really jokes at all, but rather unpleasant realities that hurt unless you can think of something equally funny and unpleasant to say in return" (199). We

remember that Milburn, after explaining that satire was allied with wit early in the age, notes that raillery was also associated with wit at an early date. Describing raillery, he says: "It had always been a light and pleasant form of satire which usually appeared in the form of banter, jest, or good humor and was directed most at individuals."[26] This latter seems to be the kind of humor or jokes that Sandy is referring to: the unpleasant realities that hurt unless you (the individual) can think of something equally funny and unpleasant to say in return.

Some of the funniest satire in Not Without Laughter revolves around Sandy's Aunt Tempy who takes him in when his grandmother Hager dies. Tempy will be treated in the chapter "Heroes and Villains." To the modern black militant Tempy is the most comical (ludicrous is the better word) figure in the book. Yet, when the book was published, Tempy was probably idealized as the most sensible or respectable character in the novel. She surrounded herself with respectability, white respectability, that is.

It is after Sandy goes to live with his Aunt Tempy that, feeling "fenced in," he begins to visit the pool hall, where tall tales are always the order of the day. The narrator says that often arguments would begin--boastings, proving and fending; or telling of exploits with guns, knives, and razors, with cops and detectives, with evil women and wicked men; out-bragging and out-lying one another, all talking at once (267). It is interesting to note that most of the tall tales are told in dialect (although, of course, characters use dialect at other times, too). Uncle Dan, who is described as the world's champion liar with an unending flow of fabulous reminiscences, tells the tall tale of a horse which he and another boy supposedly stole from ole massas's barn after massa was

asleep. Dan says:

> When we git to de dance, long 'bout midnight we jump off dis hoss an' ties him to a post an' goes in de cabin whar de music were--an' de function were gwine on big. Man! We grab ourselves a gal an' dance till de moon riz, kickin' up our heels an' callin figgers an' jest havin' a scrumptious time. Ay, Lawd! We sho did dance!.....Well, come 'long 'bout two o'clock in de mawnin', niggers all leavin', an' we goes out in de yard to git on dis hoss what we had left standin' at de post.... An' Lawd have mercy--de hoss were dead! Yes, sah! He done fell down right whar he were tied, eyeballs rolled back, mouth a-foamin', an' were stone-dead!...Well, we ain't knowed how we gwine git home ner what we gwine do 'bout massas's hoss--an' we was skeered, Lawdy! 'Cause we know he beat us to death if he find out we done rid his best hoss anyhow--let lone ridin' de crittur to death.... An' all de low-down Macon niggers what was at de party was whaw-whawin' fit to kill, laughin' cuse it were so funny to see us gittin' ready to git on our hoss an' de hoss were dead!...Well, sah, me an' ma buddy ain't wasted no time. We took dat animule up by de hind legs an' we drug him all de way home to massa's plantation befo' day! We sho did! Uphill an' down holler, sixteen miles! Yes, sah! An' put dat hoss back in massa's barn like he war befor we left (270).

There are many comic elements in this tall tale. We are reminded of Fabio's statement concerning the "thingy quality" of Negro language. I must add that I have always considered certain words in Negro dialect applicable only to comedy. Such words are "crittur" and "animule." The words, I believe, were created specifically for fun making. A close relative of mine, fun loving and ever telling jokes, created comical words as he went along, and his audiences rarely failed to get the meaning. For example, an animule might be any animal that is stubborn, even a human animal. My dictionary reveals that the word "sumptious" is of French origin, but "scrumptious"--well, now--no derivation is given, but it sounds like one of those delightfully funny words coined in the black community.[27] Comic inversion is also demonstrated in the tale: two boys carry the horse instead of the horse carrying the boys.

The best illustration of satire directed at customs is the scene

Hughes describes when he relates Hager's funeral. Funerals in general have been criticized during the 1960's. Hughes describes Hager's thus:

> On the afternoon of the funeral it was cold and rainy. The little Baptist Church was packed with people. The sisters of the lodge came in full regalia, with banners and insignia, and the brothers turned out with them. Hager's coffin was banked with flowers (246).

At the close of the ceremony, where people wept and fainted and the services seemed interminable, the long drive to the segregated cemetery takes place. As the coffin is lowered, Harriett, who has visited her old mother very rarely, is heard:

> "That's all right, mama," Harriett sobbed to the body in the long, black box. "You won't get lonesome out here. Harrie'll come back tomorrow. Harrie'll come every day and bring you flowers. You won't get lonesome, mama" (247).

With no disrespect to Memorial Day nor to the American custom of funeral rituals, it seems expedient to say that Walpole may not have realized the great depth of his statement: "Life is a comedy to those who think and a tragedy to those who feel."

As Langston Hughes travels around the world, many years after he wrote his first novel Not Without Laughter, he finds much to laugh about, much to satirize, and much to describe in humorous fashion. He does this in an autobiographical work I Wonder as I Wander. Hughes is very cognizant of color and its significance in the world, long before the color television sets were ever designed. For example, Hughes tells of a trip he and twenty-one other Negroes make to Russia, supposedly to produce a movie. There they meet a Negro woman, Emma, who entertains them royally. He concludes: "Emma added a big dash of color all her own to the greyness of Moscow."[28] Hughes has previously described Emma as being a very large dark woman. The humor in his "big dash of color

all her own" illustrates the black man's habit of laughing at himself, at his color.

In a very serious article, Ralph Ellison speaks of color in answering the question "What would America have been without the Negro?" He says:

> If we can cease approaching American social reality in terms of such false concepts as white and nonwhite, black culture and white culture, and think of these apparently unthinkable matters in the realistic manner of Western pioneers confronting the unknown prairie, perhaps we can begin to imagine what the U. S. would have been, or not been, had there been no blacks to give it--if I may be bold as to say --color.[29]

Hughes demonstrates this in many of his comic scenes and sketches. Having left Russia, he tells of coming to Tashkent, the regional center of Soviet Asia: "As we pulled into the depot, there stood a young Negro resplendant in a stiff white shirt and black tuxedo. Having since been around the world, I have learned that there is at least one Negro everywhere" (104). Whether there is at least one member of every race everywhere is not known, but evidently the fact can be established about the Negro, Hughes is saying, because of his color.

Ellison goes on to point out in his article that it is not only color which the Negro has added, but humor, also, in the form of tall tales and sudden twists which are funny. He says:

> In other words, had there been no blacks, certain creative tensions arising from the cross-purposes of whites and blacks would also not have existed. Not only would there have been no Faulkner; there would have been no Stephen Crane, who found certain basic themes of his writing in the Civil War. Thus, also, there would have been no Hemingway, who took Crane as a source and guide. Without the presence of Negro American style, our jokes, our tall tales, even our sports would be lacking in the sudden turns, the shocks, the swift changes of pace (all jazz shaped) that serve to remind us that the world is ever unexplored.[30]

As Hughes explores and wanders around the world, he presents jokes and

tall tales, most of them racially oriented. In one scene, which would be tragic, he illustrates human weakness by the twist at the end. Hughes writes:

> It is night. Snow. Across the Siberian border the soldier-provocateurs of Manchuria are firing into the Soviet defenses where Red Army men stand guard. The scene changes to the inside of the Soviet barracks. Officers and men are shown fraternizing together, laughing, shaving, playing cards. Suddenly the door opens and a man from the front is carried in dead. His body is placed in a bunk and the sheet drawn over him. A young Russian soldier, fists doubled, rises from his card game and begins to curse those slant-eyed bastards who have killed his comrade. Quietly, an officer goes toward the body, draws back the sheet so that the Russian boy may see the still, brown face there, and says simply, "Our comrade's eyes are slant eyes, too" (174).

This dramatic scene is told for its own worth. It does not progress the narrative or move the story along.

Yet, the best comedy in I Wonder as I Wander seems to revolve around customs and social ideals. As Hughes wanders around the world, he seems to ever keep in mind Feibleman's statement about comedy: "Thus comedy ridicules new customs, new institutions, for being insufficiently inclusive; but even more effectively makes fun of old ones which have outlived their usefulness and have come to stand in the way of further progress."[31] Possibly the most poignant illustration of ridiculing an old custom is contained in the scene in Russia Hughes describes involving a pregnant unmarried American girl. Like the light satire directed at funeral rituals, the satire here has nothing to do with race.

The narrator explains that although it is a disgrace to have a child out of wedlock in America and the innocent child is made to suffer, there is no stigma attached to the mother or child in Russia. Having been summoned by his nearest American neighbor in a Russian hotel, he goes down the hall to a room where the hysterical American girl is cry-

ing. She says:

> "But I haven't got any money, only a few dollars left. And I have no ticket back--and even if I did, I wouldn't go home. I'm going to stay here. I have to stay here, where my child can be born with no mark upon it, no stigma. My baby! I have to stay here--the only country I know in the world where people don't care if a woman isn't married when she has a child. Don't the Russians understand!" (206).

This dialogue has the humor of irony, but not without pathos. If a rose is a rose is a rose, then a baby is a baby is a baby. But only man's customs, his unique ways of viewing various situations, cause the differences.

The narrator points up the irony of situations in many parts of the world. He describes a comic scene in Shanghai and notes the "impudence" of white foreigners in drawing a color line against the Chinese in China itself (249). In contrast, however, he admits that he received his roughest treatment in Japan, and says: "I, a colored man, had lately been all around the world, but only in Japan, a colored country, had I been subjected to police interrogation and told to go home and not return" (277).

Back in America, the narrator finds humor in southern customs and tells of an experience in Georgia (still wondering as he is wandering):

> In Savannah I learned that the Times might be purchased at a newsstand in one of the railway stations, so I walked down to the station one afternoon to secure a copy. In the colored waiting room there was no newsstand, so I went outside on the sidewalk and around into the white waiting room where I bought the Sunday Times without incident. But, coming out of the station, just at the door, a white policeman stopped me.
>
> He yelled, "You can't come in and out this door."
>
> "There's no newsstand in the colored waiting room," I explained.
>
> "I don't care nothing about that!" he barked. "You can't come in this door. This is for white folks."

> "Oh," I said, "I am going out now."
>
> "You can't go out this way neither," said the cop as I started through the door.
>
> This puzzled me, as there was no other way out of the station except through the train sheds. "I just came in this way," I said.
>
> "Well, you can't go out this way," barked the cop. "Niggers can't use this door."
>
> "How do I get out then?" I asked.
>
> "Only way I see," said the cop seriously, "is for you to walk the tracks" (53).

Hughes then explains how he walked the tracks to the nearest crossing to reach the street. He says: "I had never experienced anything so absurd before. The seriousness of that white policeman and the utter stupidity of being at a door, but not permitted to go through it, made me burst out laughing..." (53).

One final example of humor concerning customs, in which race is involved, is as follows:

> In El Paso it was strange to find that just by stepping across an invisible line into Mexico, a Negro could buy beer in any bar, sit anywhere in the movies, or eat in any restaurant, so suddenly did Jim Crow disappear, and Americans visiting Juarez, who would not drink beside a Negro in Texas, did so in Mexico. Funny people, Southerners (63).

These and many other comic scenes and sketches in I Wonder as I Wander point up the inconsistencies of people and customs. Although the narrator concludes the foregoing incident with the phrase "Funny people, Southerners," many of the humorous incidents have a universality with which all people can identify.

What might seem like a variation of the tall tale, since there is a certain superstition connected with it, is a story Hughes tells concerning two important celebrations in Moscow: May First and November Sev-

enth. Most people have said at some time in their lives, "It never fails...." The completion of the statement, ironically enough, goes on to prove that the best laid plans of man often go astray. Hughes says:

> Americans who had been in residence in Moscow for several years and had seen a number of November Seventh and May Day celebrations, told me that almost always something went wrong right in front of Stalin. The year before I was there, they said that the largest of the Soviet jumbo tanks, one of the showpieces of the parade, conked out in front of Lenin's tomb. The roaring armored tank came speeding into the Red Square with a great rumbling clatter, gun turrents swirling--then sputtered, backfired, gasped and stalled, dead in front of Stalin! The rest of the parade had to circle around the moribund tank, stuck there until a number of little tanks pulled it away. Emma said she was sure the captain of this tank "sedit" the rest of his life.
>
> The May Day on which I saw the parade, a similar thing happened to another piece of military equipment. All the papers had been heralding the new streamlined Soviet fieldpieces the Red Calvary would display--long sleek guns that could shoot a great distance. When the Parade Marshall wished especially to accent something in the line of march, the rest of the parade would be temporarily halted at the entrance to the Square. This time, while the remaining units were held back, proudly into the Square, drawn by four beautiful white horses, with an arrow-straight driver mounted on the swivel gun carriage, came the longest, sleekest, steel-grey cannon I have ever seen, that looked as though it could shoot at lightning speed for miles. The driver sat straighter than ever as his handsome piece of field artillery approached the dictators of the Soviet Union. Nearing Lenin's tomb, even the horses seemed to sense that they were passing Stalin, Kalipin and Molitov, for they pulled steadily and proudly to cross the Square. But without the gun! Just in front of the great dignitaries, the gun became detached from the gun carriage on which the driver was riding, and the nose of the artillery piece on its two detached wheels swooped down to the cobblestones. The proud soldier drove on unawares, leaving his deserted fieldpiece behind him in the middle of the Square. The groans of consternation and the cries of the crowd, the soldier thought were cheers, as out of Red Square he disappeared, never looking back--with no gun at all following him (220-21).

The really comic figure here is the soldier who is unaware of the difference between what is supposed to be taking place and what actually is. We Americans get actually more fun from the scene because in our thinking is Kruschev's statement that the Russians will bury us. "Not

like this," we are saying while laughing. After relating this incident, the narrator says: "But I rather expect the masters of the Kremlin laughed at these contretemps, too, for most Russians seemed to have a great sense of humor" (221).

The fact that Hughes selected so many humorous scenes and sketches to present in his latter book is certainly significant. Many of these sketches do not move the story along, but seem to be told as jokes are told--for fun. Although there is pathos, there is also the ability to laugh at oneself, whether it is a black man in Georgia or Texas, segregated and penalized because of the color of his skin, a Japanese in China, or a Russian standing in front of the tomb of a great Russian patriot. Satire is directed, humorously, at many customs which may have once served a useful purpose, but no longer seem to make sense.

In conclusion, the thesis of this chapter seems well substantiated: James Baldwin, Ralph Ellison, and Langston Hughes use what Potts would consider a style appropriate for comedy in the selected prose works. Most of the comic scenes and sketches are told in the dialogue. The authors, except, of course, in the latter work, which is autobiographical, are detached from the characters. The many little comic scenes reveal human weaknesses, and in presenting them the writers use many humorous rhetorical devices including, puns, lusty metaphors, amusing similes, paradox, and inversion. Light satire and irony are also present. The tall tale is not neglected.

NOTES

CHAPTER II

[1]"The Art of Fiction: An Interview," Shadow and Act (New York, 1966), p. 180.

[2]"Black Humor and the American Way of Life," Satire Newsletter, VII (Fall 1969), p. 1.

[3]"Humor, a Literary Device for Interpreting the Read World," an unpublished lecture given during a creative writers' workshop at Oklahoma State University in 1970.

[4]Donald Ross Jr., "The Style of Thoreau's Walden," an unpublished dissertation (University of Michigan, 1963), p. 6.

[5]L. J. Potts, Comedy (London, 1957), p. 64.

[6]Ibid., p. 67.

[7]James Baldwin, Go Tell It On the Mountain (New York, 1953), p. 82. Subsequent quotations will be taken from this edition, and the page number will be listed parenthetically in the text.

[8]Friedrich Schiller, "On Simple and Sentimental Poetry" (1795), Theories of Comedy, ed. Paul Lauter (New York, 1964), p. 307.

[9]D. Judson Milburn, The Age of Wit (New York, 1966), p. 194.

[10]"Blueprint for a Viable English Class," a pamphlet of the Curriculum Resources Group, Institutions for Services to Education (June 5, 1970), p. 21.

[11]"Remembering Jimmy," Shadow and Act, p. 239. Ellison reiterated this statement in a telelecture to a class in contemporary literature studying humor in literature at Langston University in March of 1970.

[12]Milburn, p. 189.

[13]George Meredith, "The Egoist" Theories of Comedy, p. 391.

[14]James Baldwin, Notes of a Native Son (Boston, 1955), pp. 58-59.

[15]Potts, p. 67.

[16]James Baldwin, Tell Me How Long the Train's Been Gone (New York, 1968), p. 41. Subsequent quotations will be taken from this edition, and page numbers will appear parenthetically in the text.

[17]CLA Journal, VI (September 1962), p. xl.

[18]Ralph Ellison, Invisible Man (New York, 1952), p. 29. Subsequent quotations from Invisible Man will be taken from this edition, and page numbers will be listed parenthetically in the text.

[19]It has already been noted in Chapter I that Ralph Ellison says he has been greatly influenced in his writings by Don Quixote. Several critics have called Invisible Man a picaresque novel, among them being L. L. Lee in an article "The Proper Self: Ralph Ellison's Invisible Man," Descant, X (Winter, 1966), pp. 38-48.

[20]Constance Rourke, American Humor (New York, 1931), p. 62.

[21]Ralph Ellison, Address at Oklahoma State University in 1970.

[22]This is the first tale in a section called "In-Jokes" and appears on page 12 of the book which was published in New York in 1966. The fact that Ellison uses it shows that members of the black community liked to tell tall tales, many of which had an element of the supernatural in them, and many of which showed the black man laughing at himself.

[23]Ralph Ellison, "Flying Home," The Best Stories by Negro Writers, ed. Langston Hughes (Boston, 1967), p. 1960. This story was published in 1944 in Cross Section.

[24]"The Literary Experiments of Langston Hughes," CLA Journal, XI (June 1968), p. 335.

[25]Langston Hughes, Not Without Laughter (New York, 1945), p. 267. Subsequent quotations and references will be taken from this edition, and page numbers will appear parenthetically in the text.

[26]Milburn, p. 194.

[27]Paul Laurence Dunbar, in his fun-filled poem "The Party" concludes with the lines: "Y' ought to been dah, fu' I tell you evahthing was rich an prime/An'dey ain't no use in talkin', we jes had one scrumptious [italics mine] time." This poem was written sometime between 1895 and 1900.

[28]Langston Hughes, I Wonder as I Wander (New York, 1956), p. 86. Subsequent quotations and references will be taken from this edition, and page numbers will appear parenthetically in the text.

[29]"What Would America Be Like Without Blacks," Time, 95 (April 6, 1970), p. 55.

[30]Ibid.

[31]James K. Feibleman, "The Meaning of Comedy," Theories of Comedy, p. 461.

CHAPTER III

COMIC HEROES AND COMIC VILLAINS

Perhaps no writer on the American scene has depicted the black man's heroic capacity to endure as successfully as has William Faulkner. Noting the relation of this capacity to comedy, Robert W. Corrigan says that while tragedy deals with the rebellious spirit of man and shows a nobility of the rebellious spirit, comedy "celebrates man's capacity to endure; such capacity is ultimately conserving in spirit and quality."[1]

It is not only in their capacity to endure, however, that we may classify comic heroes and villains in the works under study. We may also classify them as comic if they adjust to society or cause society to come over to their side, to adjust to them. The comic hero may be recognized or categorized on the basis of his success in overcoming obstacles and achieving goals. Northrop Frye says:

> The action of comedy moves toward a deliverance from something which, if absurd, is by no means invariably harmless. We notice too frequently a comic dramatist tries to bring his action as close to catastrophic overthrow of the hero as he can get it, and then reverses the action as quickly as possible.[2]

The heroes in these works under study have varying goals, but, in general, they move toward deliverance from discrimination, ghetto barricades and poverty. Most seek to grapple with and change the conditions which hold them back educationally, socially, and economically. Also, they seek identity.

The term "comic villain" seems to be relatively new, but, neverthe-

less, it is useful in identifying the comic character who is not admired or respected for his goal setting nor achievement of aims.[3] For example, to the young black militant and his white friends, the "Uncle Toms" in our society today are villains: they are black people who "think white," that is, the black people, who, being thoroughly brain washed and convinced that color alone is a significant quality, seek to imitate merely for the sake of imitation, rather than because they see definite inherent value in a particular act or practice. The comic villains are those who appear successful in their imitations.

The "comic villain" may be further defined, for purposes of this study, as a character who, though not really bad (certainly not criminal), is satisfied to attain social and economic goals even if it means rejecting the people--his parents and relatives--who can not attain these goals along with him. For example, again, the black man in the ghetto often looks upon the middle-class black as being more of a villain than the middle-class white. The former is his soul-brother and should be more aware of his pain and ever willing to aid him, leaving off the irrevelent imitations--big cars, fine furs, and Bimini week-ends. He is comic if he appears to believe that these things have changed his blackness, his isolation in the mainstream. He is a villain when he concentrates all of his attention on these things and turns a deaf ear, a zippered purse, and a cold eye to his people in the ghetto.

This chapter dealing with the comic hero and the comic villain will show the results of a study of a limited number of characters, analyzing female characters first. The writer's intent, in each instance, will be our main concern. Some characters may show qualities which mark them as both hero and villain.

One of the most interesting female characters in the works under study is Tempy in Not Without Laughter. We get two views of Tempy from a conversation between Hager, her mother, and Harriett, her sister. Hager, upbraiding Harriett for being wild, says:

> "Now, there's Annjee, ain't a better chile livin'--if she warn't crazy 'bout Jimboy. An' Tempy married an' doin' well, an' respected ever' where...."
>
> "Tempy?" Harriett sneered suddenly, pricked by this comparison. "So respectable you can't touch her with a ten-foot pole, that's Tempy!...Annjee's all right, working herself to death at Mrs. Rice's, but don't tell me about Tempy. Just because she's married a mail-clerk with a little property, she won't even see her own family any more. When niggers get up in the world, they act just like white folks--don't pay you no mind. And Tempy's that kind of a nigger--she's up in the world now!"[4]

It is clear that Langston Hughes is depicting Tempy as heroine to her mother but villain to her sister.

Tempy's ambivalence, both a comic heroine and a comic villain, is obvious in many ways. Tempy is a comic villain to a James Sledd who defends a child's use of his dialect and states emphatically: "Reject the dialect and reject the child."[5] Having taken Sandy to live with her after Hager dies, Tempy constantly corrects his grammar. For example, having been questioned about a hanging pants-leg, Sandy says:

> "It don't stay fastened."
>
> "It doesn't James! I'll buy you some more pants tomorrow...."

This gentle correction seems quite natural for a person helping to educate a child, but the comic motive appears in the next example when Tempy asks Sandy if he has a comb and brush of his own:

> "No'm, I ain't," said Sandy.
>
> "I haven't," she corrected him. I certainly don't want my white neighbors to hear you saying 'ain't.... You've come to live with me now and you must talk like a gentleman."[6]

The narrator again makes clear that Tempy may be viewed two ways. She is not mainly concerned that Sandy speak standard English because, thereby, he will communicate clearly and effectively and adjust to society. If such were the case she would be heroic. But the ironic fact is that she wants to impress her white neighbors. She is showing the trait of the comic villain, "thinking white." The author's intent seems to coincide with the point of view of young militants who denounce the irrelevance of black middle class values along with white ideas. Tempy looks upon standard English as the language of white supremacy (as Sledd puts it), and she wants her nephew to speak this language as a status symbol. Taking the Higgins' point of view, however, one might argue that Tempy has a practical motive, that by speaking the standard language her nephew, like Eliza Doolittle, will get a better position in life, live better and eat better.

Other characteristics which mark Tempy as a villain are to be noted. Having married a mail carrier and moved upward in the social strata, Tempy does not visit her mother who is a common wash woman. Hager explains her oldest child to a friend:

> ...Now, my Tempy, she's married and doin' well. Got a fine home, an' her husband's a mail clerk in de civil service makin' good money. They don't 'sociate no mo' with none but de high-toned colored folks, like Dr. Mitchell, an' Mis' Ada Walls, an' Madam C. Frances Smith. Course Tempy don't come to see me much 'cause I still earns ma livin' with ma arms in de tub.[7]

Tempy, having been delivered from a servant role, seems to be living happily ever after--the true comic structure, and her successful adjustment might mark her as a comic hero. The narrator makes it crystal clear, however, that she refuses to visit her mother because she "still earns ma livin' with ma arms in de tub." It would be bad enough if Tempy kept too busy doing charity work or church work to visit often; but

the fact that she does not want her new status to be jeopardized by associating with her mother who is decidedly of the lowest status marks her a comic villain.

The fact that much of Tempy's new culture is pseudo (comic) is reflected in the following statement of the narrator:

> At Aunt Hager's house there had been no books, anyway, except the Bible and the few fairytales that he [Sandy] had been given at Christmas; but Tempy had a case full of dusty volumes that were used to give dignity to her sitting room: a row of English classics bound in red, an Encyclopedia of World Knowledge, in twelve volumes, a book on household medicine full of queer drawings, and some modern novels--The Rosary, The Little Shepherd of Kingdom Come, the newest Harold Bell Wright, and all that had ever been written by Gene Stratton Porter, Tempy's favorite author. The Negro was represented by Chestnut's House Behind the Cedars, and the Complete Poems of Paul Lawrence Dunbar, who Tempy tolerated on account of his fame, but condemned because he had written so much in dialect and so often of the lower classes of colored people.[8]

The fact that a person would fill a room with books that he can not or plans not to read is within itself comical. When the narrator tells us that Tempy's book on household medicine was "full of queer drawings," we immediately suspect that he is laughing at Tempy. But the statement that does more than any other to show the author's intent to mark Tempy as a snob is the one that she tolerated Dunbar because he was famous but disliked his writing about the lower classes.

Yet, there is much in Tempy's philosophy to be admired, even by modern thinking black students. The most militant reader would agree with her belief in DuBois. When Sandy asks her who the author of the Crisis is, she replies:

> "Dr. William Edward Burghardt Du Bois,"..."And he is a great man."
>
> "Great like Booker T. Washington?" asked Sandy.
>
> "Teaching Negroes to be servants, that's all Washington did!" Tempy snorted in so acid a tone that Sandy was silent.

> "Du Bois wants our rights. He wants us to be real men and women. He believes in social equality. But Washington--huh!"[9]

To the extent that Tempy approves deliverance for all of her people, she is the comic heroine, at least in that she helps Sandy, the protagonist, move in this direction. Here she shows herself embracing the philosophy which supposedly guides the revolutionary movement among black people today.

When Hughes tells us that Tempy never bought a watermelon,[10] perhaps she was seeking to wipe out the stereotype of the black man as a lover of fried chicken and watermelon and to present the image of him as a human being with varying food dislikes and likes similar to all other human beings. Certainly her stand on education is sound. She insisted that Sandy attend school and she taught him that hard work pays off. Furthermore, she never complained for having to take him when her sister, his mother, was unable to do so. In that she represents deliverance for Sandy, she is a comic heroine. Her strongest points, however, tend to isolate her. She strives to be superior to her world. In the end she finds the pull of her nephew's early environment to be too great, and he leaves to join his mother, who has never sought to follow Tempy's example.

In analyzing Stephen Hero, Klug points out that the very powers which made him a hero also isolate him:

> It is Joyce's full attempt to solve a most difficult task, that of creating a hero with superior powers and bringing him into comic harmony with his world. The problem is not one that Joyce alone faced. How can a comic hero fit into a society of debased and helpless men when the very powers that make him a hero also isolate him?[11]

An analogous situation somewhat may be seen in viewing Tempy.

Hager, Tempy's mother, is depicted as the long enduring kind of

character, and she reminds us of Faulkner's Dilsey. Unlike Dilsey, who endures to the end of The Sound and the Fury, however, Hager becomes all washed out physically, but like Dilsey her spirit stays high. An admirable figure, Hager shows her ability to withstand hardship along with a great sense of humor following a terrific storm at the beginning of the story:

> "...It might've been worse, Sister Willaims! It might've been much more calamitouser! As it is, I lost nothin! more'n a chimney and two wash-tubs which was settin' in the back yard. A few trees broke down don't mount to nothin'. We's livin', ain't we? And we's more importanter than trees is any day!" Her gold teeth sparkled in the moonlight.[12]

Hager hints that she is of the enduring kind: she not only adjusts to hardships, but she even laughs about them. Learning that a white couple has perished in the storm, Hager rushes to help the grief-stricken niece of the couple, and we are told: "All the neighborhood, white or colored, called his [Sandy's] grandmother when something happened."[13] She is the heroine of the neighborhood, rising to the occasion when trouble, sickness, or death occurs.

To determine how well Hager fits the description of a comic heroine we may note the life she lives and her own evaluation of it. She is a wash woman and her pay is small. The narrator describes her typical day as beginning at sunrise. We are told:

> On Thursdays she did the Reinharts' washing, on Fridays she ironed it, and on Saturdays she sent it home clean and beautifully white, and received as pay the sum of seventy-five cents.[14]

Like so many Negro women in the South, Hager has had to carry most of the responsibility of her home and children alone, for her husband has been dead ten years when the story opens. She summarizes her life and accomplishments in a conversation with Sis Johnson, who asks how long

she has lived in her house:

> "Fo' nigh on forty years, even sence Cudge an' me come here from Montgomery. An' I been washin' fo' white folks ever' week de Lawd sent sence I been here, too. Bought this house washin', and made as many payments myself as Cudge come near; an' raised ma chillens washin'; an' when Cudge taken sick an' laid on his back for mo'n a year, I taken care o' him washin'; an' when he died, paid de funeral bill washin', cause he ain't belonged to no lodge. Sent Tempy through de high school and edicated Annjee til she marry that onery pup of a Jimboy, an' Harriett till she left home. Yes, sir. Washin', an' here I is with me arms still in de tub!"[15]

Hager has adjusted to the situation; she does not relate the facts with bitterness. There seems to be a kind of pride that she has endured and managed to accomplish so much.

Another accomplishment or rather proof of her endurance capabilities is demonstrated when she accepts the responsibility of rearing Sandy when her daughter Annjee decides to go to Detroit to join her weak husband, Jimboy. This, also, is a recurring pattern, seemingly in the black community: grown children using the excuse that they can not find employment at home leave their children on their already tired parents. The money they promise to send to take care of the children never, or seldom, arrives. (Annjee can not even be located when Hager dies.) But Hager seems to welcome the opportunity to make something of Sandy, to deliver him from becoming a neglected, hopeless nobody. She says to Sis Williams: "But they's one mo' got to go through school yet, an' that's ma little Sandy."[16]

In explaining why modern novelists frequently do not end their works of comedy happily because such endings would lack realism, Klug says:

> The main reason for this comparative disuse is clearly that the structure of this most traditional kind of comedy is at odds with realism. The comic novelists of our period have had to modify the conventional comic action with its full, triumphant resolution in order to bring their work into a closer harmony with reality. In adapting this traditional comic

> structure to realism they obviously had to transform those elements that they found to be most unrealistic. Thus they reduced the stature of the hero by giving him a measure of faults to leaven his virtues and by diminishing his power of action in his combat against the absurd or evil part of his environment.[17]

Whether Hughes is following this philosophy, we can not be certain, but Hager does succumb to all of the work she has undertaken and the impositions placed on her by her children. She does succeed in gaining the respect and admiration of her society. When she dies, "all washed out," the Daily Leader carries the following announcement of her death in small type:

> Hager Williams, aged colored laundress of 419 Cypress Street, passed away at her home last night. She was known and respected by many white families in the community. Three daughters and a grandson survive.[18]

Hager is a comic heroine. She has taught her children to love and not to hate. Her hard life has been not without laughter.

Although Harriett is not the forceful character that Hager or Tempy is, she deserves special consideration as a comic heroine. Harriett, like so many of her race, finds success in the entertainment world. As already noted, she disapproves of her sister Tempy because she regards Tempy as a snob who "thinks white." Harriett has been reared mostly without a father, because he died when she was a small girl. She likes parties and fun rather than church attendance. She is arrested when she takes up a life that seemingly involves the world's oldest profession. But she never loses hope. She has fight and retorts to her mother's reproof when she says she hates white people:

> "I don't care if He [the Lord] does hear me mama! You and Annjee are too easy. You just take whatever white folks give you--coon to your face and nigger behind your backs--and don't say nothing. You run to some white person's back door for every job you get, and then they pay you one dollar for

> five dollars' worth of work, and fire you whenever they get ready."[19]

These lines mark Harriett as a person who wants to do something to change her society. At least she is thinking that a change should be made and that her people should not be "too easy." She runs away from home, joins a show group, and changes her name to Harrietta. At the conclusion of the story, she shows that she is mature and wise and repudiates her sister Annjee, who desires that Sandy keep his job as elevator boy, in order to help her (having done little or nothing for him). We are told:

> But Harriett ignored Billy's interjection as well as her sister's open mouth. "Running an elevator for fourteen dollars a week and losing your education!" she cried. "Good Lord! Annjee, you ought to be ashamed, wanting him to keep that up. This boy's gotta get ahead--all of us niggers are too far back in this white man's country to let any brains go to waste! Don't you realize that?...You and me was foolish all right, breaking mama's heart, leaving school, but Sandy can't do like me. He's gotta be what his grandma Hager wanted him to be--able to help the whole black race, Annjee! You hear me? Help the whole race."[20]

Harriett's speech seems to echo Northrop Frye's statement that the action of comedy moves toward a deliverance from something which, if absurd, is by no means invariably harmless. Harriett pens the deliverance of the black race on faith in education. Insisting that Sandy not be satisfied with a job running an elevator which has no future, she gives him money for his school books. Somewhat reluctantly the members of her family come over to her way of thinking; at least they begin to question the customs and practices they have been taking for granted.

These female characters may be taken as symbols, to a certain extent of the classes they represent in the black community. It seems clearly the intent of Langston Hughes, who created them, to represent three important segments of black society. He presents the thinking and

situation of each segment: the unskilled laboring class, the professionals, and in-betweens, including those of the entertainment world. These characters, symbolizing respective classes, go through reverses and dangers and move toward deliverance. Racial oppression is the general over-all "something" in this story, but there are separate reverses, such as Hager's when her husband lies sick for a year and when Annjee must stop work, too, because of illness. Hager's clothes lines grow longer as she waits for a deliverance. We are reminded of Sisyphus ceaselessly rolling a rock to the top of a mountain, whence the stone would fall back of its own weight. But Camus takes the stand that Sisyphys had the joy of the struggle. He says:

> I leave Sisyphus at the foot of the mountain! One always finds one's burden again. But Sisyphus teaches the higher fidelity that negates the gods and raises rocks. He too concludes that all is well. This universe henceforth without a master seems to him neither sterile nor futile. Each atom of that stone, each mineral flake of that night-filled mountain, in itself, forms a world. The struggle itself toward the heights is enough to fill a man's heart. One must imagine Sisyphus happy.[21]

One may also imagine Hager and those she symbolizes, happy as she struggles toward the heights. She never loses hope. Harriett, whom Bone says Hughes "might better have written the novel around,"[22] emerges from a life of prostitution to become "Princess of the Blues," and symbolizes the young black person who finding few or no opportunities in a small town faces hardship and danger in the city and survives.

Being delivered herself, Harriett gives a helping hand to Sandy and delivers him from being boxed in an elevator the rest of his life. Thus, we arrive at the traditional comic ending, with Sandy symbolizing hope of deliverance for the entire Negro race. Tempy, on the other hand, symbolized the middle class which in many instances desires to help

without soiling its own hands. She obviously falls short of a comic resolution: she can not change the world for her people, including her mother, and she is too good to fit into it. She prefers to impress her white neighbors that she is really not one of them.

Although we saw Tempy both in the role of heroine and villain, Baldwin's character Florence seems to fit only the latter role. Bone succinctly summarizes her actions in Go Tell It on the Mountain:

> ...Aunt Florence has been brought to the evening prayer meeting by her fear of death. She is dying of cancer, and in her extremity humbles herself before God, asking forgiveness of her sins. These have consisted of a driving ambition and a ruthless hardening of heart. Early in her adult life, she left her dying mother to come North, in hopes of bettering her lot. Later, she drove from her side a husband whom she loved: "It had not been her fault that Frank was the way he was, determined to live and die a common nigger".... All her deeper feelings have been sacrificed to a futile striving for "whiteness" and respectability. Now she contemplates the wages of her virtue: an agonizing death in a lonely furnished room.[23]

It seems that futile striving for "whiteness" is the basic motivating force which puts Florence in the role of villain. She is comic, of course, only in the sense that we define the term to mean the black person who "thinks white" for the sake of thinking white.

Elizabeth, on the other hand, may be termed a comic heroine. For as Bone again says: "Elizabeth, as she conceives her life, has experienced both the fall and the redemption. Through Richard, she has brought an illegitimate child into the world, but through Gabriel, her error is retrieved."[24] In other words, or in line with Frye's description of the action of comedy, Elizabeth moves toward a deliverance. She has the satisfaction of seeing John, the illegitimate child, converted. Her path is not easy nor "harmless."

Elizabeth's isolation comes when her mother dies. We are told in Part Two of Go Tell It on the Mountain:

> For when her [Elizabeth's] mother died, the world fell down; her aunt, her mother's older sister, arrived, and stood appalled at Elizabeth's vanity and uselessness; and decided, immediately, that her father was no fit person to raise a child, especially, as she darkly said, an innocent little girl. And it was this decision on the part of her aunt, for which Elizabeth did not forgive her for many years, that precipitated the third disaster, the separation of herself from her father--from all that she loved on earth.[25]

Elizabeth never accepts life with her aunt, and we are told: "As the years went on, her aunt seemed to gauge in a look the icy distances that Elizabeth had put between them, and that would certainly never be conquered now."[26]

Elizabeth meets Richard in a store where he works. Richard takes her out of her aunt's house and out of the South, and he fills her life until, having been arrested for robbing a store he did not rob, he commits suicide. He does not know that Elizabeth is pregnant. After the child, John, is born, Elizabeth meets Gabriel, Florence's brother, and sees deliverance in him. Gabriel proposes and promises to love John, but years later he resents the fact that John seeks God and his son by Elizabeth does not. Elizabeth does not obtain the comic resolution (which might not have been realistic) she sought. The narrator says:

> She thought of that far-off day when John had come into the world--that moment, the beginning of her life and death. Down she had gone that day, alone, a heaviness intolerable at her waist, a secret in her loins, down into the darkness, weeping, and groaning and cursing God. How long she had bled, and sweated, and cried, no language on earth could tell-how long she had crawled through darkness she would never, never know. There, her beginning, and she fought through darkness still; toward that moment when she would make her peace with God, when she would hear Him speak, and He would wipe all tears from her eyes; as, in that other darkness, after eternity, she had heard John cry.[27]

The words, "and she fought through darkness still," mean that Elizabeth still seeks deliverance; also, that she has hope, which is a requirement of every hero or heroine.

The words of Gabriel, when he assured her that he had seen a sign, and that her marriage to him would bring a "happy ending" for her (comic resolution) turn out to be ironic, it is true. For Gabriel has proclaimed:

> "Well," he said, "I done come, and it was the hand of the Lord what sent me. He brought us together for a sign. You fall on your knees and see if that ain't so--you fall down and ask Him to speak to you tonight."
>
> Yes, a sign, she thought, a sign of His mercy, a sign of His forgiveness.[28]

The sign has turned out to be a false sign, it seems: Gabriel constantly reminds her of her error; he does not forget nor forgive. But John profits; the sight of him on the threshing floor, deciding to give his life to righteous living, causes Elizabeth to smile. Going home later, after the conversion, the following scene takes place:

> John moved up to the short, stone step, smiling a little, looking down on them. His mother passed him, and started into the house.
>
> "You better come on upstairs," she said, still smiling, "and take off them wet clothes. Don't want you catching cold."
>
> And her smile remained unreadable; he could not tell what it hid. And to escape her eyes, he kissed her, saying: "Yes, Mama. I'm coming."[29]

Elizabeth's unreadable smile may be both pathos and humor. Certainly she is triumphant that her illegitimate son has chosen the right path. This may be taken as a sign of God's forgiveness, which she has so passionately wanted. It is a realistic kind of comic resolution. Elizabeth's marriage has made deliverance possible for her son, and it has given her respectability if not happiness (deliverance from the stigma of being an unwed mother).

We have looked at five female characters selected from the works being studied. It is important to point out here that the women in

Invisible Man are rather sketchily drawn and play rather insignificant roles. Mary, the woman with whom the protagonist lives between his work in the paint plant and his joining The Brotherhood, merely serves as the provider of a home for him. He admits that he knows not her problems. Although Mrs. Proudhammer, the mother of Baldwin's protagonist in Tell Me How Long the Train's Been Gone, appears in the first and last part of the book, she reminds us of Elizabeth (also having a secret smile) and is very much like her. Let us turn, then, to selected male characters beginning with the unnamed protagonist in Invisible Man; following the discussion of this character as a comic hero, we may juxtapose him with two colorful villains in the same book: Ras and Rhinehart.

Critics, black and white, seem to have paid more attention to Ellison's protagonist than to any other single male character in a Negro novel. One writer says that Ellison's analysis of the blues "as a tragicomic form was to contribute a great deal to Invisible Man, for this is precisely the stance that the hero takes when he explains his invisibility to us."[30] This writer also makes a comparison between Joyce's hero in Portrait of an Artist as a Young Man and Ellison's hero. She says:

> Like Joyce's Portrait of an Artist as a Young Man, a book which has greatly influenced Ellison's work, Invisible Man has been called the story of a young man's search for his identity. Both heroes must escape from the illusions and limitations of their environments in order to find themselves. Joyce's Stephen has to confront his Irish, Catholic, and family traditions. Ellison's hero has to penetrate the illusions built around the fact that he is black....[31]

Having found his identity when the story opens, the protagonist, like Stephen, is a comic hero: he is no longer estranged from society, living underground, but has found a deliverance from being "so black and blue," among other things.

Singleton finds the action of the protagonist in line with the

action of comedy, and he states that Ellison's major strategy is to tell of his hero's mis-adventures at the hands of numerous exponents of distorted variants of Booker T. Washington's beliefs. Emphasizing this fact, he says:

> The first half of Invisible Man is a tour de force sequence which sees the narrator, before his faith is finally shaken, take more pratfalls on behalf of the Horatio Alger dream than any fictional character since Lemuel Pitkin, the anti-hero of Nathanael West's A Cool Million.[32]

Singleton sees the critics of the Booker T. Washington philosophy to be those who point up the comedy of the hero. For example, the hero feels pathos because of the fact that the freed Negroes were told that they were free, united with others of our country, but in everything social, separate like the fingers of the hand. The super irony was that they believed it. We are reminded of Tempy's scathing denunciation of Booker T. Washington and her praise of W. E. B. DuBois, the latter being the one who denounced the "separate like the fingers of the hand" philosophy pronounced by the former. Singleton, like others, notes also that the hero's first deep insight into conventional power and its possibilities occurs during his attendance at the Tuskeegee-like college.[33] The college president, Dr. Bledsoe, fills with outward plausibility the outlines of the dedicated Booker T. Washington type of leader.

Singleton also notes that the protagonist is involved in oratory throughout the book. He says that oratory, when on street corner, in pulpit, or on rostrum, remains a vital part of Negro culture; and the hero's progress from nonage to philosophical independence is mirrored in his public utterances. We have already noted that Constance Rourke, in describing American humor, points out the part oratory, which often

is mere bombast, has played. In the novel's Prologue the hero identifies himself as "an orator rabble rouser."

Ellison has seemed surprised, even disappointed, because few critics have noted the comic aspects of his protagonist. He stated in a telelecture to students at Langston University and also in a speech at Oklahoma State University, both in the spring of 1970, that he wrote Invisible Man to be funny. Although Singleton does not come out and say that the protagonist is a comic hero, he does note that he uses what he terms as "muffled humor":

> Whatever the cultural source of the Negro stereotypes in Invisible Man, when the narrator is himself pressed into one of the molds, his reaction typically is muffled humor.[34]

This writer concludes, however, that much of what appears to the white outsider as zesty hedonism is more truly fatalism.

A black critic who is well respected in academic circles, Nick Aaron Ford, seems puzzled in his analysis of the hero. He says that although in the beginning Ellison creates considerable sympathy for and emotional identification with the hero, in the latter half of the book this earlier empathy (despite the hero's personal passions) "dwindles almost to the point of disappearance as the action becomes more and more dissociated from realistic experience."[35] (We remember that comedy deals with the commonplace, and modern novelists tend to be more realistic.) Ford seems to found this criticism on the fact that the protagonist is living in a hole underground at the conclusion of the book, and that this is a distortion of reality. However, we must not overlook the prologue to the book which states:

> The point is that I found a home--or a hole in the ground as you will. Now don't jump to the conclusion that because I call my home a "hole" it is damp and cold like a grave; there are cold holes and warm holes. Mine is a warm hole. And

> remember, a bear retires to his hole for the winter and lives until spring; then he comes strolling out like the Easter chick breaking from its shell. I say all this to assure you that it is incorrect to assume that, because I'm invisible and live in a hole, I am dead. I an neither dead nor in a state of suspended animation. Call me Jack-the-Bear, for I am in a state of hibernation.[26]

Ellison's novel, however, does not end with the tortuous dream which keeps him in his hole. Christian explains it neatly:

> If Ellison's novel had ended with that dream, it would fall into the well-known category of the absurd along with the French existentialists of the '40's.... But that mind won't leave the hero be. He has progressed from being blind to being invisible. He has traveled a long way.[37]

The story is not unrealistic, as Ford thinks, nor is it a distortion of reality.

Bone is one of the few critics who decide that Ellison's narrator is a nonhero. He compares him with Dostoevsky's main character in Notes From Underground and says:

> The two protagonists, moreover, have much in common: both are anonymous victims (nonheroes), and both address the reader in the first person with a certain ironic familiarity. Both are dealers in paradox and ambiguity, and both have known a shame so intense that in recalling it their venom turns to jest.[38]

Although these are surface similarities, Ellison's protagonist insists that he is not a victim:

> The fact is that you carry part of your sickness within you, at least I do as an invisible man. I carried my sickness and though for a long time I tried to place it in the outside world, the attempt to write it down shows me that at least half of it lay within me (434).

Also finding proof that the protagonist is not a victim, Jackson writes:

> ...Ralph Ellison's protagonist comes to reject the vision of himself as a victim, and wills instead to assume responsibility.... Ellison's "I" moves in paradoxical motion: backward into despair--and, by the same token, forward in ascent to the beginning of knowledge, freedom, and visibility.[39]

Add to this the fact that the unnamed protagonist passes through situa-

tions which are not harmless and arrives at the beginning of knowledge, etc., he is justifiably categorized as a comic hero. I am sure Frye would agree. The narrator, at least, is beginning the resolution of his problem.

A review of the main dangers and adventures which the protagonist passes through will help to show his growth, his maturing insight. The idea that he is to be a comic figure seems prophesied in a dream he has following the successful presentation of an oration on graduation from highschool. The narrator explains:

> That night I dreamed I was at a circus with him [his grandfather] and that he refused to laugh at the clowns no matter what they did. Then later he told me to open my brief case and read what was inside and I did, finding an official envelope stamped with the state seal; and inside the envelope I found another and another, endlessly, and I thought I would fall of weariness. "Them's years," he said. "Now open that one." And I did and in it I found an engraved document containing a short message in letters of gold. "Read it," my grandfather said. "Out loud!"
>
> "To Whom It May Concern," I intoned. "Keep This Nigger-Boy Running."
>
> I awoke with the old man's laughter ringing in my ears.[40]

The dream seems to hint that the hero will be kept running.

The next few chapters concern an incident which occurs in his junior year of college. Assigned as a driver to one of the visiting white trustees, he commits the unpardonable sin of taking him away from the campus into the back country. This trustee is a banker, a Bostonian, a bearer of the white man's burden, who feels that the destiny of the Negro people is somehow bound up with his own. What the trustee, Mr. Norton, discovers back in the quarters is that a colored sharecropper has had incestuous relations with his daughter. One gets the feeling that Mr. Norton finds this information arousing a sense of guilt within

himself: he has the Oedipal (or Electra) attachment to his own daughter. He gives the man a gift of a hundred dollars. Feeling as though he is having a heart attack, Mr. Norton asks for a drink, and the protagonist carries him to the Golden Day.

When the president of the college learns where the protagonist has taken this trustee, he expells him from the college, giving him several letters which supposedly are letters of introduction to prospective employers in the North. At this point the protagonist begins running (obviously in the fashion predicted by the grandfather in the dream) and shows his lack of knowledge concerning the facts of the world. Bledsoe, the college president, says that had the protagonist been more aware of the truth about things, he could not possibly have made the error he made at college. Christian points out:

> The dream-world college is built on a lie. Bledsoe knows it, he assumes every Negro does; but our narrator naively believes that he is telling the truth when in fact he has not even found it. Bledsoe lives the doctrine of the grandfather. He is the first of the long line of yes-ers in the book, of people who are used by and use white people and who know exactly where it's at. He represents for the invisible man his first concrete glimpse into the real world and the narrator never forgives him for it.[41]

Seemingly, up to this point, the protagonist has not taken too seriously the advice he says his grandfather gave his father: "I want you to overcome 'em with yeses, undermine 'em with grins, agree 'em to death and destruction...."[42] As he goes north he still is unaware of the way the world is.

Arriving in the North he makes the rounds with his letters. But somehow he finds himself being turned away by first one prospective employer and then another. It never occurs to him that the letters might be other than recommendations. At last he learns the truth from a dis-

illusioned younger son, who decides to tell the youth what is in the letters. The instructions are, in effect, to "keep this nigger-boy running."

He finally secures work at the Liberty Paint Company. Here he unwittingly dopes the paint with concentrated remover. Shortly he is sent to the basement to work for a colored foreman named Lucius Brockway, who seems to represent the skilled stratum of Negro labor. Brockway has made himself indispensable, for it is he who mixes the base of the paint, and yet lives in constant dread of being replaced by skilled whites. The protagonist is caught in a crossfire between Brockway and the union, for each party suspects him of harboring sympathies for the enemy. He strikes out at the new worker, and while they are arguing the pressure gauges get too high and an explosion occurs.

The hero, therefore, is definitely passing through situations that are not harmless. He is rushed to the hospital. On being asked his name, he can not answer: he knows not his identity. The conversation going on above the patient seems very significant in evaluating his position:

> "But what of his psychology?"
>
> "Absolutely of no importance!" the voice said. "The patient will live as he has to live, and with absolute integrity. Who could ask more? He'll experience no major conflict of motives, and what is even better society will suffer no traumata on his account."[43]

Had this prediction come true, our protagonist would not be a hero; but society does suffer a degree of traumata on his account, at least a part of it does, as we proceed to Part II of the book which deals with his joining the Brotherhood of the Communist Party.

The Brotherhood is attracted to the protagonist because of an ora-

tion he gives to a crowd, assembled because a poor couple is being evicted for not paying rent. Again our attention is called to oratory. The protagonist is very sincere in making this speech, but the Brotherhood sees him as a useful tool. They sign him up and proceed to run him about over New York City: to Harlem, from Harlem, and back to Harlem. He never questions these orders and rushes to carry them out. Bone notes this fact also and writes:

> In an organization which is proud of its willingness to sacrifice the individual on the altar of history, the protagonist remains as invisible as ever. His loss of individuality is felt most keenly when his sense of responsibility collides with the iron discipline of the Brotherhood. Eventually he realizes that behind the facade of party discipline Brother Jack has been "running" him no less cynically than Norton or Bledsoe. It is then that he takes to the cellar, in order to renew his sense of self.[44]

When Ellison was questioned as to whether the protagonist came out of the cellar, he assured the students that he did; he added that the novel he writes is the resolution.[45]

In the Epilogue, the protagonist makes clear the fact that he has gained insight and understanding, although he has not exactly changed the world. He says:

> No, indeed, the world is just as concrete, ornery, vile and sublimely wonderful as before, only now I better understand my relation to it and it to me. I've come a long way from those days when, full of illusion, I lived a public life and attempted to function under the assumption that the world was solid and all the relationships therein.[46]

The protagonist is a comic hero: he has passed through adventures and experiences, which Ellison calls moving "between the horrible and the comic." Also, he has survived these experiences and gained positive growth. In explaining why he went underground, he points out that everyone should not conform; he also states that the very act of going underground was valuable:

> In going underground, I whipped it all except the mind, the mind. And the mind that has conceived a plan of living must never lose sight of the chaos against which that pattern was conceived. That goes for societies as well as for individuals. Thus, having tried to give pattern to the chaos which lives within the pattern of your certainties, I must come out, I must emerge.[47]

He decides to end his hibernation, "since ther's a possibility that even an invisible man has a socially responsible role to play."

Thus, the protagonist is a comic hero: he has better understanding of the world and elects to play a socially responsible role in it. Furthermore, he believes, that by telling his story, he speaks "on the lower frequencies" for all people.[48]

Fortenberry has said that "The term 'comic villain' does not seem to exist in all theory about comedy."[49] Nevertheless, he finds it applicable to several Howells' characters. Similarly, we used the term in describing the ambivalence of Tempy, and now it will prove useful in describing two lesser characters in Invisible Man: Ras and Rhinehart.

The narrator first sees Ras on his arrival in New York, but he does not know who Ras is at the time. He hears Ras say "We gine chase 'em out." He describes him thus:

> And I saw the squat man shake his fist angrily over the uplifted faces, yelling something in a staccato West Indian accent, at which the crowd yelled threateningly. It was as though a riot would break any minute, against whom I didn't know. I was puzzled, both by the effect of his voice upon me and by the obvious anger of the crowd. I had never seen so many black men angry in public before....[50]

The narrator is made aware of who this person is after he joins the Brotherhood. Brother Jack has just remarked that most of the leaders are against them. The protagonist suggests that they use street oratory, and mentions the man he heard making a speech from a ladder when he first arrived. Brother Jack speaks:

> "So you <u>have</u> met him," he said, suddenly grinning. "Well Ras the Exhorter has had a monopoly in Harlem. But now that we are larger we might give it a try. What the committee wants is results!"[51]

They plan a street meeting, and just as the protagonist yells to the crowd that it is time for action, a colleague named Clifton yells that Ras the Exhorter has arrived with his cohorts to make trouble for them.

Ras does not like to see black and white people together. One big woman has noted that "His hoodlums would attack and denounce the white meat of a roasted chicken."[52] Ras is a very colorful figure, a comic figure. He is not without pathos, because he becomes so worked up that he cries. He tells the protagonist, after attacking him for speaking for white people:

> You young and intelligent. You black and beautiful--don't let 'em tell you different! You wasn't them t'ings you be dead, mahn. Dead! I'd have killed you, mahn. Ras the Exhorter raised up his knife and tried to do it, but he could not do it. Why don't you do it? I ask myself. I will do it now, I say; but somet'ng tell me 'No, no! You might be killing your black king!'[53]

Later because the protagonist nor Clifton will join him, Ras tells them that they have a corrupt ideology and that they can take it and eat out their "own guts like a laughing hyena."

Ras teaches and preaches hate and not love. Of course, the protagonist at this point does not realize that he, too, is a comic figure being run about by the Brotherhood for the Brotherhood's advantage. But he does tell Ras that all men want a brotherly world, to which Ras responds: "Don't be stupid, mahn. They <u>white</u>, they don't have to be allies with no black people." Thus ends the scene above.

Ras seems to duplicate the Marcus Garvey imagery. Singleton says that his downfall is as much destined by his reversionary credo as by his outlandish African costume.[54] The costume definitely makes him look

funny. At the end of the story it is Ras who chases the protagonist into his hole. During the riot Ras is described by a bystander:

> "You think you seen something? Hell, you ought to been over on Lenox about two hours ago. You know that stud Ras the Destroyer? Well, man, he was spitting blood."
>
> "That crazy guy?"
>
> "Hell, yes, man, he had him a big black hoss and a fur cap and some kind of old lion skin or something over his shoulders and he was raising hell. Goddam if he wasn't a sight, riding up and down on this ole hoss, you know, one of the kind that pulls vegetable wagons, and he got him a cowboy saddle and some big spurs."[55]

Later more humor is added to the description of Ras as he is described as carrying a shield with a spike in the middle of it, running the horse at break-neck speed, and shouting in his West Indian language.

We do not have to wonder about the author's intent to make Ras a comical figure. Hearing how Ras behaved and looked during the riot, the protagonist says:

> They were laughing outside the hedge and leaving and I lay in a cramp, wanting to laugh and yet knowing that Ras was not funny, or not only funny, but dangerous as well, wrong but justified, crazy and yet coldly sane...Why did they make it seem funny, only funny? I thought. And yet knowing that it was. It was funny and dangerous and sad.[56]

The predicate adjectives "funny," "dangerous," and "sad" are indicative that Ras is a comic villain.

The second comic villain, Rinehart, is revealed when the protagonist puts on dark glasses to escape Ras's men. In a matter of minutes, a woman says, "Rinehart, baby, is that you?' She asks him where his new hat is, giving the protagonist the idea to buy a hat and complete his disguise. Before the evening is over, the protagonist has been mistaken for Rinehart again and again, causing him to learn of the many roles Rinehart plays. He is puzzled:

> It was too much for me. I removed my glasses and tucked the white hat carefully beneath my arm and walked away. Can it be, I thought, can it actually be? And I knew that it was. I had heard of it before but I'd never come so close. Still, could he be all of them: Rine the runner and Rine the gambler and Rine the briber and Rine the lover and Rinehart the Reverend? Could he himself be both rind and heart? What is real anyway? But how could I doubt it? He was a broad man, a man of parts who got around. Rinehart the rounder. It was true as I was true. His world was possibility and he knew it. He was years ahead of me and I was a fool. I must have been crazy and blind. The world in which we lived was without boundaries. A vast seething, hot world of fluidity, and Rine the rascal was at home. Perhaps only Rine the rascal was at home in it.[57]

In a moment of disillusionment the protagonist wonders if Rinehart, the rascal, is not really the comic hero: he is at home in the world, adjusted and happy.

Yet, in a discussion with one leader of the Brotherhood later the protagonist says to himself: "He had been my teacher during my period of indoctrination and now I realized I shouldn't have come. Hambro's lawyer's mind was too narrowly logical. He'd see Rinehart simply as a criminal...."[58] This statement implies that the protagonist does not view Rinehart simply as a criminal. In explaining how he chose the name for Rinehart, Ellison says that "Rinehart" was a call used by Harvard students when they prepared to riot, a call to chaos.[59] It is his name for the personification of chaos. The character he is depicting has lived so long with chaos that he knows how to manipulate it. Therefore, it seems justifiable to call him a comic villain.

Shortly after the protagonist learned of Rinehart, he learned that the Brotherhood was not sincerely committed to helping his black brothers. Deciding to launch a two-pronged attack against the Brotherhood, he decides: "They were forcing me to Rinehart methods, so bring on the scientists!"[60] He feels that these methods will be successful in combat-

ing an evil, although they are not the methods he would ordinarily use. In discussing Rinehart, Marcus Klein says:

> Rinehart is the climax of the progress up from slavery. Chaos is his freedom. He moves easily in it. He secures his living from it.... He has made chaos a base of political action. He is a thief, a rascal, an underground man engaged in the subversion of society."[61]

In that Rinehart is successful in dealing with his environment by engaging in the subversion (rather than the uplifting) of society, Klein seems to be agreeing that Rinehart is a comic villain. He agrees that Rinehart is a pun for chaos. It seems definitely to be the intent and accomplishment of Ellison to make this character a comic villain.

Leaving Ellison's novel, let us turn to the protagonist in Baldwin's Tell Me How Long the Train's Been Gone, Leo Proudhammer. Not the controversial figure that Ellison's protagonist tends to be, Leo has seldom been analyzed. The book was reviewed in many ways ranging from John Thompson's statement that it was a masterpiece to Mario Puzo's calling it a one-dimensional novel with mostly cardboard characters.[62] Leo Proudhammer, the protagonist, is more than a cardboard character, however.

In discussing Baldwin's earlier works, Scott wrote in 1967 that the author tended to concentrate so much on original sin that no salvation was envisioned.[63] The next year Tell Me How Long the Train's Been Gone was published, and in it, Leo Proudhammer accomplishes his main dream: to be a successful actor.

As the story begins, the protagonist is thirty-nine years old, at the height of his career, and he is being stricken by a heart attack. As he lies in the hospital, he recalls his childhood in Harlem. It was then that his role playing began. Frequently his older brother Caleb

would leave him to fend for himself, although their parents thought they were attending a picture together. Having trouble getting into the movie alone or riding the subway, he explains: "It was best to sit between two...people, for, then, each would automatically assume that I was with the other."[64] It was also during this period in his life that he decided to become an actor and have his name in lights on Broadway.

Lying in the hospital, Leo Proudhammer recalls his family, especially his brother Caleb whom he adored. He recalls his struggles as a youth, his love affair with Barbara King, who, like Leo, goes on to become a great figure on the stage, and who is acting with him when he has the attack. Up to this point, then, it seems very justifiable to call Leo a comic hero. He has obtained his goal, at least vocationally: he is a successful actor, despite handicaps both financial and racial. More than that he is famous. Philosophying concerning his work, Leo thinks in the hospital:

> There is a truth in the theater and there is a truth in life--they meet, but they are not the same, for life, God help us, is the truth. And those disguises which an artist wears are his means, not of fleeing from the truth, but of attempting to approach it. Who, after all, could believe a word spoken by Prince Hamlet or Ophelia should one encounter this unhappy couple at a cocktail party? Yet, the reason that one would certainly never make the error of inviting them back again is that their story is true--and not only for the Prince and his mad lady; is true, is true, unbearable, unanswerable: and one's disguises are designed to make the truth a quantity with which one can live--or from which one can hope, by the effort of living, to be delivered.[65]

It is obvious that Leo sees the actor as an artist and the play as a means of delivering mankind from falsehood to truth. Certainly such work is heroic.

Remembering his first successful play when he was twenty-six years of age, a play which had ten black speaking roles, he says to himself:

> I palyed that scene for all that was in it, for all that was in me, and for all the colored kids in the audience--who held their breath, they really did, it was the unmistakable silence in which you and the audience re-create each other--and for the vanished Little Leo.... For the very first time, I realized the fabulous extent of my luck: I could, I could, if I kept the faith, transform my sorrow into life and joy. I might live in pain and sorrow forever, but, if I kept the faith, I would never be useless. If I kept the faith, I could do for others what I felt had not been done for me, and if I could do that, if I could give, I could live.[66]

That the play was a great success is remembered as Leo relives the scene following the final curtain:

> They were standing and cheering. Bunny and I bowed together and the curtain fell and Bunny went off and then the curtain rose again and I was out there by myself. And all the nearly twenty-six years of terror and trembling, were worth it at that moment.[67]

The play Leo refers to is The Corn Is Green. The reviews the next morning were very favorable, and certainly, at this point if not also later, Leo Proudhammer is a comic hero: his dreams of being a famous actor and of helping his people have been realized. He was doing for others what had not been done for him.

As Leo's remembering comes closer to the present, to the time of his heart attack, we get a little different picture, however. He is reviewing a party he attended many years following his first successful play. Here he met Christopher, who races to his side when hearing of the heart attack. Arriving at the party he was almost too tired to attend, he says he was "flattered, as always, chilled, as always." He adds:

> People who achieve any eminence whatever are driven to do so; and there is always something terribly vulnerable about such people. They very soon discover that their eminence makes of them an incitement and a target--it does not cause them to be loved. They are trapped on their hill. They cannot come down. They cannot bear obscurity as some organisms cannot bear light--death is what awaits them when they come down from the hill.[68]

This analysis seems to reveal that the protagonist realizes the ironic position of the successful actor or any other professional. Happy endings are unreal because they simply do not exist: death awaits every man. Happy endings are also comic, which takes us back to our original definitions of comedy and comic heroes, in the first chapter.

We can not leave Leo Proudhammer, however, without seeing that to some readers he has attributes of the comic villain. Eldridge Cleaver would probably so categorize him for two reasons: he is a homosexual and he depicts black imagery in statements that might be questioned. In discussing Baldwin's heroes generally Cleaver says:

> The racial death-wish is manifested as the driving force in James Baldwin. His hatred for blacks, even as he pleads what he conceives as their cause, makes him the apotheosis of the dilemma in the ethos of the black bourgeoisie who have completely rejected their African heritage....[68]

Since homosexuals usually do not have children, Cleaver feels that they are expressing a "racial death-wish," especially if they are black. Leo Proudhammer is with Black Christopher at the end of Tell Me How Long the Train's Been Gone. He has parted from his girl friend of more than twenty years, Barbara King. At one point he thinks what it might have been to have a child:

> I usually left Christopher and his friends alone. I didn't want to bug them. They had to be part of my concern, for I was their elder; but there was no real reason for me to be a part of their concern. . . . . I was happy watching Christopher's bright, black face, happy to know that I could be what he was. It was, I must say, very beautiful, and it made up for a lot: Christopher, lying flat on his belly, reading all the long afternoon, Christopher keeping me awake all night with his sweeping statements and halting questions, Christopher ruthlessly dominanting his friends, instructing them in everything from terrorism to sex, or Christopher and his friends, boys and girls, dancing to the hi-fi set. They were teaching me a great deal; made me wonder where I'd been so long; made me wonder what it would have been like to have had children.[69]

Cleaver would say of this passage as he has said of all of Baldwin's other works: "There is a decisive quirk in Baldwin's vision which corresponds to his relationship to black people and to masculinity."[70] Although Leo seems to have found the first true love of his life in Christopher, he always seems to stress his blackness, and in a way which Cleaver also might find shows Baldwin's dislike of blackness. At a meeting where a little Negro girl is singing, Leo remembers:

> I watched Christopher's face as the song ended, his big white teeth in his big black face and watched him clap his big black hands.[71]

Whenever Christopher is referred to, Leo always describes his blackness and seems to emphasize it.

Since Leo loves Christopher, it seems difficult to agree with Cleaver that Leo (like Baldwin) is showing a dislike of blackness. The fact that he chooses the homosexual arrangement rather than the heterosexual one, however, would illustrate the fact that Leo, the comic hero as successful actor, has also some qualities which mark him as Leo, the comic villain. He is at least to be categorized as a villain to the Eldridge Cleavers who say: "I, for one do not think homosexuality is the latest advance over heterosexuality on the scale of human evolution. Homosexuality is a sickness...."[72]

In conclusion, the characters discussed as comic heroes and villains do not display extreme traits, but they follow closely the actions of people as they go about routine affairs. Their actions are very probable and they are commonplace. Ellison's protagonist, not having a name and being invisible, may appear to be less probable than the others, but when the reader considers the reason Ellison did not name him--in order that a name would not interfere with the concept of his invisibility--he

remains quite probable, so probable that many critics first thought he was Ellison, himself.

The fact that these characters have the double handicap of poverty and blackness means that they could easily have been tragic figures. But the endings of the stories tend more to joy than to sadness, to hope than to despair. The characters, even those showing attributes of villains, are predominantly comic figures.

NOTES

CHAPTER III

[1]"Aristophanic Comedy: The Conscience of a Conservative," Comedy: Meaning and Form, ed. Robert Corrigan (San Francisco, 1965), p. 353.

[2]Anatomy of Criticism (Princeton, New Jersey, 1957), p. 178.

[3]Michael Anthony Klug, "Comic Structure in the Early Fiction of James Joyce," an unpublished dissertation (University of Illinois, 1967), p. 60.

[4]Langston Hughes, Not Without Laughter (New York, 1945), p. 45.

[5]James Sledd stated in his polemic lecture, "Bi-Dialectalism: The Linguistics of White Supremacy" at the National Council of Teachers of English convention in Washington, D. C., in November of 1969 that the only reason black children must abandon their dialects and speak standard English is mainly because of the supremacy of white prejudice. He says in an article of the same title published in the English Journal of December, 1969 (pp. 1307-1315) that teachers should accept the dialect of their students for what it is, one form of oral communication.

[6]Hughes, p. 257.

[7]Ibid., p. 145.

[8]Ibid., pp. 258-259.

[9]Ibid., p. 259.

[10]Ibid., p. 255.

[11]Klug, p. 60.

[12]Hughes, p. 7.

[13]Ibid., p. 10.

[14]Ibid., p. 38.

[15]Ibid., p. 145.

[16]Ibid.

[17]Klug, p. 10.

[18]Hughes, p. 246.

[19]Hughes, p. 81.

[20]Ibid., p. 325.

[21]Albert Camus, The Myth of Sisyphus, trans. Justin O' Brien (New York, 1955), p. 91.

[22]Robert A. Bone, The Negro Novel in America (New Haven, 1958), p. 77.

[23]Ibid., p. 221.

[24]Ibid.

[25]James Baldwin, Go Tell It on the Mountain (New York, 1953) p. 176.

[26]Ibid., p. 178.

[27]Ibid., p. 216.

[28]Ibid., p. 214.

[29]Ibid., p. 252.

[30]Barbara Christian, "Ralph Ellison: A Critical Study," Black Expression, ed. Addison Gayle, Jr. (New York, 1969), p. 356.

[31]Ibid., p. 357.

[32]M. K. Singleton, "Leadership Mirages As Antagonists in Invisible Man," Arizona Quarterly, XXII (Summer, 1966), pp. 159-160.

[33]Ibid., p. 160.

[34]Ibid., p. 158.

[35]Nick Aaron Ford, "Negro Novelists," Phylon, XV (First Quarter, 1954), p. 36.

[36]Ralph Ellison, Invisible Man (New York, 1952), p. 5.

[37]Christain, p. 364.

[38]Bone, pp. 202-203.

[39]Ester Merle Jackson, "The American Negro and the Absurd," Phylon, XIII (Winter, 1962), p. 370.

[40]Ellison, p. 26. Ellison has stated in lectures, one at Oklahoma State University and one by telelecture to a class at Langston University, both in 1970, that he planned that the hero would be funny, a comical figure.

[41]Christian, p. 360.

[42]Ellison, p. 13.

[43]Ibid., p. 180.

[44]Bone, p. 208.

[45]This statement was made in a telelecture on Contemporary American literature in March of 1970, broadcast to six colleges including Langston University, Langston, Oklahoma.

[46]Ellison, p. 435.

[47]Ibid., p. 438.

[48]Ibid., p. 439.

[49]George Ellis Fortenberry, "The Comic Elements in the Fiction of William Dean Howells," an unpublished dissertation (The University of Arkansas, 1967), p. 166.

[50]Ellison, p. 122.

[51]Ibid., p. 276.

[52]Ibid.

[53]Ibid., p. 282.

[54]Singleton, p. 169.

[55]Ellison, p. 424.

[56]Ibid., p. 426.

[57]Ibid., p. 376.

[58]Ibid., p. 378.

[59]Ellison, Shadow and Act (Signet, 1966), p. 181.

[60]Ellison, Invisible Man, p. 387.

[61]Marcus Klein, "Ralph Ellison's Invisible Man," The Images of the Negro in American Literature, eds. Gross and Hardy (Chicago, 1966), p. 261.

[62]New York Times Book Review (June 23, 1968), p. 5.

[63]Nathan A. Scott, "Judgment Marked by a Cellar: The American Negro Writer and the Dialectic of Despair," Denver Quarterly (Summer, 1967), p. 5.

[64]James Baldwin, Tell Me How Long the Train's Been Gone (New York, 1969), p. 26.

[65]Ibid., p. 86.

[66]Ibid., p. 332.

[67]Ibid., p. 333.

[68]Eldridge Cleaver, "Notes on a Native Son," Black Expression, ed. Addison Gayle, Jr. (New York, 1969), p. 344.

[69]Baldwin, Tell Me How Long the Train's Been Gone, p. 349.

[70]Cleaver, p. 345.

[71]Baldwin, Tell Me How Long the Train's Been Gone, p. 86.

[72]Cleaver, p. 349.

CHAPTER IV

THE SUBTLETY OF BLACK HUMOR

Sly allusions to objects, ideas, or beliefs of the black community, many of which are unknown or not understood outside of it, have often been passed over by the general populace. During the past decade, however, the free and unabashed quipping by Negro comics concerning racial subjects before mixed audiences has revealed some of the subtlety in black humor.

In 1947 Glicksberg pointed out the need for black writers to subtly satirize stereotypes and language practices of whites. He wrote:

> Instead of concealing from himself the extent to which such vicious stereotypes poison the mind of whites, the Negro writer should examine them realistically, with a kind of masochistic relish, and then proceed to hoist the whites with their own petard. Let him cultivate the savage wit and devastating satire of a Jonathan Swift.[1]

Much of Swift's wit, of course, was misunderstood, and some of his subtleties were overlooked. Yet, black writers have sought to emulate his wit and satire.

In this chapter I shall make three rather artibrary divisions of the subtlety in black humor to be found in the prose works being studied. The first will be naming; the second The Dozens; and the third jests about color (black and white), habits attributed to Negroes, and white rascist practices. Some illustrations may tend to overlap, but these will be pointed out as possibly belonging to two categories as set up.

There is a little rhyme which the black man in America has found

himself repeating to himself often: sticks and stones may break my bones but names will never hurt me. He is reacting to two kinds of naming practices: being called names denoting disrespect and lack of dignity, and being denied titles like Mister, Miss or Mistress which denote respect and dignity. Therefore, naming has become an important practice in the black community, a subtle device to accomplish aims.

It is not merely chance nor careless choice when a black child in the South is named Colonel, Commodore, Lady or Princess. Nor is it always just the desire for a catchy or euphonious name when a musician, for example, chooses to be Duke or Count or King. One very wealthy black physician in Texas named his daughter Lady James because he was determined that whites, refusing to call her Miss when she became of age, would address her with respect. In a very interesting essay, Ralph Ellison points out:

> I know, too, that the Negro Community is deadly in its ability to create nicknames and to spot all that is ludicrous in an unlikely name or that which is incongrous in conduct.[2]

Much of the subtlety of the black man's humor revolves around names and nicknames, and it is this humor which we shall now analyze.

Many of Baldwin's characters have names which seem to serve more than the primary purpose of identifying them. The name of the protagonist's family in Go Tell It on the Mountain is Grimes. This is at least ironic, because the family has been forced to live with grime and fight dirt all of its life. Bone notes the significance of the name "Grimes" and says it reflects the Negro's unending struggle with blackness.[3] A description of the room in which John Grimes finds himself on his fourteenth birthday is as follows:

> The room was narrow and dirty; nothing could alter its dimensions, no labor could ever make it clean. Dirt was in the

> walls and the floorboards, and triumphed beneath the sink where roaches spawned; was in the fine ridges of the pots and pans, scoured daily, burnt black on the bottom, hanging above the stove; was in the wall against which they hung, and revealed itself where the paint had cracked and leaned outward in stiff squares and fragments, the paper-thin underside webbed with black. Dirt was in every corner, angle, crevice of the monstrous stove....[4]

Although this description might be termed tragi-comic, if an actor spoke it in the right tone and hung around his neck a card reading JOHN GRIMES, in all likelihood it would bring gales of laughter from a black audience. Perhaps it would be a laughing-to-keep-from-crying kind of reaction, but it would be motivated by subtle humor of naming.

The protagonist's family name in Baldwin's other novel, Tell Me How Long the Train's Been Gone, is equally significant and subtly smile provoking. Leo Proudhammer's family, although poor and living in the ghetto, has great pride and hammers diligently. Mother Proudhammer manages to get her groceries from a groceryman to whom she already owes a big bill by slyly ridiculing him while forcefully "hammering" out the list of items she needs. Playing the role of Brer Rabbit, a weaker animal, she manages to take advantage of a stronger animal by her strategy. Likewise Father Proudhammer demonstrates his pride and determination. The protagonist explains:

> We as a family had never gone to church for my father could not bear the sight of people on their knees. But I thought, suddenly, for the first time and for no reason, that he must surely have gone to church in the islands.[5]

Considering that Mr. Proudhammer is a poor black man, who has never really been "on his feet," the idea that he cannot bear the sight of people on their knees, even in church, is subtly humorous.

Frequently Baldwin has emphasized the blackness of his characters. In one instance the name seems to make it more predominant. I refer to

one of the preaching praying saints in Go Tell It on the Mountain, Sister McCandless. A candle-less person might be thought of as one without light, or in the dark, or ignorant. Ignoring the fact that Baldwin seems to present anti-church views in both of his novels, we begin to find a relationship between this woman's name and her appearance when we read her description:

> She was an enormous woman, one of the biggest and blackest God had ever made, and He had blessed her with a mighty voice with which to sing and preach.[6]

We are sure that Baldwin is using subtle humor when he juxtaposes this woman with a much lighter skinned church member called Sister Price who is described: "Her voice was mild, her skin was copper."[7] The naming practice here seems to be subtly used to refer to color and characteristics allied with color.

Because the English language has operated to give the word "black" about sixty connotations meaning bad and to give the word "white" only ten or eleven of a negative kind (See "The Language of White Racism" by Haig A. Bosmajian in College English, December 1969), the Negro has previously denounced the use of the word "black" to describe himself racially. Only recently has the term "black" or "blacks" been preferred as a distinguishing reference. Baldwin's stories, however, predate the choice of this kind of usage, and his naming practices reflecting color are subtly humorous. Baldwin would probably have more characters given subtly humorous names were it not for the fact that he decided to name most of the characters in Go Tell It on the Mountain--Gabriel, Esther, Elisha, and John--for Biblical people.

Ralph Ellison, however, had no such limitations, and a careful analysis reveals that the practice of naming and nicknaming to get

across double meanings, many of them humorous, is very prevalent in Invisible Man.

Shortly after we are introduced to the president of the protagonist's college, Dr. Bledsoe, we realize that he has not bled so much as he pretends. Lying is his hobby and bleeding others is his "thing." Bledsoe bows low to the visiting trustees, cleverly scheming to bleed them rather than to be bled by them. After harshly upbraiding the protagonist for taking Mr. Norton (Mr. Northerner) to the wrong part of town to meet the incestuous Mr. Trueblood (also subtly humorous), Bledsoe sneers:

> "Tell anyone you like," he said. "I don't care. I wouldn't raise my little finger to stop you. Because I don't owe anyone a thing, son. Who, Negroes? Negroes don't control this school or much of anything else--haven't you learned even that? No, sir, they don't control this school, nor white folk either. True, they support it, but I control it. I's big and black and I say "Yes, suh" as loudly as any burrhead when it's convenient, but I'm still the king down here. I don't care how much it appears otherwise.[8]

The president's name juxtaposed with the way he really feels about the situation creates the subtle humor: Dr. Bledsoe is a bleeder of others, a king.

One of the most subtly humorous characters in all the book, not without pathos but almost overlooked by critics, is Reverend Homer A. Barbee. The Reverend delivers a long impassioned sermon in which he glowingly praises and remembers the last days of the Founder of the college. Some lines which vividly describe the delivery of this sermon include the following:

> I watched Barbee pace in a semi-circle, his lips compressed, his face working with emotion, his palms meeting but making no sound.....
>
> I listened to his voice fall to a whisper; his hands outspread as though he were leading an orchestra into a profound

> and final diminuendo. Then his voice rose again, crisply almost matter-of-factly, accelerated.[9]

Then later, describing the dramatic continuation of the sermon in which Reverend Barbee describes the black sky and the moon the night the Founder died, the protagonist explains:

> As his "mooo-o-on" echoed over the chapel, he drew his chin against his chest until his white collar disappeared, leaving him a figure of balanced unbroken blackness, and I could hear the rasp of air as he inhaled.[10]

If we did not know before, we know now that the Reverend is role playing; he is putting on his best act for the visitors. We have only to learn a few paragraphs later that the speaker is blind to solve the puzzle of how Ellison chose the name. Writing it "Homer, a Bar Bee," we see the significance: like those drinkers who sit around bars waiting for some one to say "Set 'em up, boys," in order to get a free drink, Reverend Homer A. Barbee puts on his impassioned act so that Dr. Bledsoe will keep him on the payroll. Blind, he can do little else. Perhaps he earns his entire salary at this one event. By the time that Barbee has placed the stricken Founder in his black draped coffin, there is not a dry eye in the chapel, and every trustee is reaching for his check book, feeling that in some way he is responsible for the Founder's death. Truly, the assonance and alliteration in one part of Barbee's sermon would put a poetical con man to shame:

> Black, black, black! Black people in blacker mourning, the funeral drape hung upon their naked hearts; singing unashamedly their black folk's songs of sorrow, moving painfully, overflowing the curving walks, weeping and wailing beneath the drooping trees and their low murmuring voices like the moans of winds in a wilderness. And finally they gathered on the hill slope and as far as the tear-wet eyes could see, they stood with their heads bowed, singing.[11]

The sermon, in epic style, is not without pathos. But it is humor of a subtle kind which would easily be overlooked, if the reader does not

note carefully the speaker's name--Homer (blind Homer), a bar bee, not a bar fly.

Ellison hints that the names are significant in his book. We find the following dialogue between Clifton and the protagonist in which they are discussing Ras, the Exhorter:

> "Where'd he get that name?" I said.
>
> "He gave it to himself, I guess he did. Ras is a title of respect in the East...."[12]

Whereas Ras has taken his own name to depict respect, Ellison has named other characters, like Bledsoe and Barbee, for subtly humorous purposes. Among these are Supercargo (Superego--responsible for maintaining order and double order when white folks are present);[13] Rinehart (both outside and inside--a numbers man, runner man, and lover man outside, but a preacher man inside); Brockway (blocking the way of the unions, maintaining that optic white is real white); Brother Wrestrum (rest room--the man gave the protagonist trouble with the Brotherhood because of a magazine article praising him); and Hambro (the Brotherhood's instructor for new members, who turns out to be a ham brother, not real nor sincere).

It might be argued that writers of all races often use names in significant ways, as has the author of By Love Possessed who creates Arthur Winner, a successful lawyer. But usually the practice is not for the purpose of humor. The selection of such names is to give apt descriptions of a character trait, or perhaps to add a symbolic meaning to the story.

Langston Hughes also uses the naming device to create humor. Annjee's immature husband in Not Without Laughter is Jimboy. The practice in the South of referring to adult black men, even aged ones, as "boy"

is greatly resented. It is subtle humor when Hughes decides to name a character JimBOY, accentuating his refusal to accept responsibilities for a wife and family. Hughes also points up the Negro's belief in the importance of names when he has Harriet change her name to Harrietta after leaving home.[14] This practice is much laughed about in the black community, because blacks leaving home and finding success often change their first names: Mary becomes Marie; Evelyn becomes Eve Lynn. Willie-Mae wanted to become Willetta-Mayola, to her mother's disgust.[15]

A second category of subtle black humor which is somewhat similar to the naming category is known as The Dozens. Richard Wright, a noted black writer, defines the practice:

> Lower-class Negroes cannot be accused of possessing repressions or inhibitions! Out of the folk songs of the migrant Negro there has come one form of Negro folklore that makes even Negroes blush a little among themselves when it is mentioned. These songs, sung by more adult Negroes than would willingly admit it, sum up the mood of despairing rebellion. They are called The Dirty Dozens. Their origin is obscure but their intent is plain and unmistakable. They jeer at life; they leer at what is decent, holy, just, wise, straight, right, and uplifting. I think that it is because, from the Negro's point of view, it is the right, the holy, the just, that crush him in America.[16]

Anyone seeing the 1970 presentation of the Broadway musical "Hair" and listening to the laughter provoked by the satirical thrusts at every facet of American civilization can understand the humor in The Dirty Dozens whether he approves of them or not.

The Dozens are used to produce only light subtle humor in the works under study, or so it seems. For example, Ellison's protagonist is tempted to use ("play" is usually the verb chosen in this context) The Dozens in the following scene:

> "His personal responsibility." Brother Jack said. "Did you hear that, Brothers? Did I hear him correctly? Where

> did you get it Brother?" he said. "This is astounding, where did you get it?"
>
> "From you ma--" I started and caught myself in time. "From the committee," I said.[17]

The protagonist stops in time, but what he obviously was about to say is "I got it from your mama." By referring to Brother Jack's mother in this fashion, the protagonist would be "playing The Dozens," and he would have brought howls of laughter from an audience recognizing this form of subtle satirical humor.

Having spared no detail in describing Ras as a comical figure in the riot scene, Ellison subtly includes The Dozens in the following passage:

> And you know what, when ole Ras saw he was too close to spear him a cop he wheeled that hoss around and rode off a bit and did him a quick round-about-face and charged 'em again--out for blood, man! Only this time the cops got tired of that bullshit and one of 'em started shooting. And <u>that</u> was the lick! Ole Ras didn't have time to git his gun so he let fly with that spear and you could hear him grunt and say something 'bout that cop's kinfolks and then him and that hoss shot up the street....[18]

The reference to the cop's "kinfolks" is not given, but the statement may be categorized as a form of The Dozens. (The term is also expressed in lower case.)

Langston Hughes demonstrates the fact that both youngsters and grown-ups play the dozens. Sandy witnesses an argument between two boys:

> And the short boy replied: "I'm your match, long skinny! Strike me an' see if you don't get burnt up!" And then they started to play the dozens, and Sandy, standing by, learned several new and very vulgar words to use when talking about other peoples' mothers.[19]

The men also enjoyed the pastime, for we are told:

> But the men who patronized Pete Scott's barber-shop seldom grew angry at the hard pleasantries that passed for humor,

> and they could play the dozens for hours without anger, unless the parties concerned became serious, when they were invited to take it on the outside. And even at that a fight was fun, too.[20]

Although playing the dozens could cause fights, it was mainly considered fun.

Much of subtle black humor involves situations in which the black man laughs at himself, because of his color and habits, or he laughs at white rascist practices he deplores by using them himself to be funny. Therefore, we shall label this third division of subtle black humor "sly digs at color, Negro habits, and white rascist practices which bring laughter." Even though the Negro has fought against the stereotypes drawn of him, he has frequently generalized and concluded observations with the statement, "Isn't that just like a Negro?"

There is much subtle humor in the works being studied directed at the color white, depicting race and things. Uncle Toms are described in the black community as those Negroes who believe that "white is right." Gwendolyn Brooks in several of her poems seems to deplore the practice of Negroes showing prejudice themselves and favoring light-skinned (called yellow) members of the race. Ellison subtly illustrates this when his protagonist has trouble discarding a small bank. Each time he throws it away, someone, thinking he has lost it or is trying to clutter up the property, returns it to him. One time a "short yellow woman with a pince-nez on a chain"[21] sees him. He answers her complaining comment:

> "What does it matter, Miss?" I called up to her. When the collectors come, garbage is garbage. I just don't want to throw it into the street. I didn't know that some kinds of garbage were better than others."
>
> "Never mind your impertinence," she said. "I'm sick and tired of having you southern Negroes mess up things for the rest of us!"

Seeing that the protagonist has got his clothes dirty retrieving the package, she continues:

> "It serves you right," the little woman called from the stoop.
>
> And I turned and started upward. "That's enough out of you, you piece of yellow gone-to-waste."[22]

The subtle humor here, well understood in the black community, is "you piece of yellow gone-to-waste." The fact that the woman obviously has mixed blood but has not done anymore than others of her race carries the implication that "her yellow" has gone to waste. It is poking fun at the belief in white superiority that the Negro deplores, while seeming to accept it.

Ellison makes many other allusions to the significance of white. Lucius Brockway mixing the paint demands, not only that it be white, but also that it must be optic white. The protagonist tells: "If it's optic white, it's the right white, I repeated."[23] A few moments later the pressure rises dangerously and the protagonist excitedly asks which valve to turn. Brockway shouts: "The white one, fool, the white one!" The subtle humor is the implication that he should have known the valve needed to save the situation would be white. Bone says that Ellison displays a true comic genius in his sly descriptions that are subtly humorous. He particularly notes another reference to white in which the protagonist describes a belligerent bartender and says: "He sliced the white heads off of a couple of beers with an ivory paddle."[24]

Langston Hughes, too, refers to white in subtly humorous ways. Discussing a good friend named Elsie, he tells us that she decided to pass for white because of discrimination shown colored play directors and technicians. He explains:

> When I got back to the United States, Elsie had disappeared into the white world. None of her friends saw her any more, nor did I. But every Christmas for several years she sent me a carefully chosen little present--with no return address on the packet.[25]

The irony here reminds the reader of the millions of Negroes who pass for white, and are fearful of having Negro freinds who will reveal the fact.

A different play on "white" is revealed in Not Without Laughter. Hager Williams, a laundress, spends her lifetime keeping clothes white for white people. The narrator says that when Cristmas time came, "Sandy bought Hager white handkerchiefs."[26] When Hager becomes ill, a white doctor hastens to her bedside. And the night she dies, "A sleepy young white boy was driving the undertaker's wagon, and the horse that pulled it was white."[27]

Baldwin, who prefers black imagery, also makes subtle statements about white. Fowler, a minor character in Tell Me How Long the Train's Been Gone, discusses his job and says of his employer: "Sometime that man get on my back like white on rice...."[28] This phrase, "like white on rice," is a cliché in the black community; it is similar to another humorous simile, "like a fly in the buttermilk." (This usually refers to one black man in the midst of many whites). Such phrases or figures of speech, used by Negroes, are funny.

In his book about Negro humor, Langston Hughes illustrates the jokes with which Negroes regale each other (pertaining to habits, vices, etc.) but seldom tell white people because they are hardly complimentary to themselves. In discussing them he says:

> Jokes relating to tardiness are among them. Some such jokes even go so far as to blame the blackness of the race upon a lack of punctuality on a long-ago morning in the dawning of creation when the Lord called upon mankind to wash in

> the River of Life. They say that everybody promptly went down to the water to wash--except Negroes. The Negroes lingered and loitered along the way, dallied and played, and took their own good time getting to the river. When they got there, the other folks had already bathed to emerge whiter than snow. In the slimy river bed, after so much washing, the Negroes found left only a little mud. Into the mud they waded with their bare feet and, in their desperation, they bent down and put the palms of their hands in the mud, too. These came out white.[29]

Criticizing the tendency to tardiness, people in the black community laughingly use the term "c.p. time" which means colored people's time. Ellison refers to this saying when he describes his protagonist's arrival in New York City. Having spread his letters from Bledsoe on the dresser, the protagonist says:

> Then I began to map my campaign for the next day. First, I would have a shower, then get breakfast. All this very early. I'd have to move fast. With important men like that you had to be on time. If you made an appointment with one of them, you couldn't bring any slow c. p. (colored people's) time.

The parenthetical material spells out the abbreviation, but it does not explain the subtle humor surrounding the abbreviation.

James Baldwin, very very subtly, seems to laugh at the strong voices (loudness) of black people. (Displeased with such laughter, Eldridge Cleaver accuses Baldwin of hating blacks in an essay entitled "Notes on a Native Son," Baldwin being the native son.) We have already noted Baldwin's description of Sister McCandless as an enormous black woman with a mighty voice. But Sister Price is described in the same scene as being of copper skin and mild voice.[31] Leo Proudhammer in the later Tell Me How Long the Train's Been Gone is at a church meeting and relates the following:

> There was a little black girl on the platform, she was part of a junior choir from a Brooklyn church..... .....They were singing a song about deliverance; she had a heavy, black, huge voice.

Rarely will one find the description of a voice that includes color. Perhaps it may be low or high, heavy or light, but black and huge--that is something else again. The creator of the descriptions of Sister McCandless and the little girl seems to be implying that black people have strong huge voices, and perhaps that they are loud. He is using subtle humor. Langston Hughes, however, uses a different tone when he describes Emma as "perhaps sixty, very dark, very talkative and very much alive."[33] Having a huge voice and being very much alive are, at least connotatively, not exactly the same. With different degrees of subtlety, however, both writers may be humorously saying the same thing.

Not considered a characteristic but rather a practice which black people regale each other frequently for is conspicuous consumption--placing emphasis on fine clothes and expensive cars. Ellison's protagonist calls this the practice of disillusioned dreamers who are still unaware that they dream. The same subtle humor directed at Tempy and her dusty books is directed by the invisible man at various kinds of dreams:

> I now felt a contempt such as only a disillusioned dreamer feels for those still unaware that they dream--the business students from southern colleges, for whom business was a vague, abstract game with rules as obsolete as Noah's Ark but who yet were drunk on finance. Yes, and that older group with similar aspirations, the "fundamentalists," the "actors" who sought to achieve the status of brokers through imagination alone, a group of janitors and messengers who spent most of their wages on clothing such as was fashionable among Wall Street brokers, with their Brooks Brothers suits and bowler hats, English umbrellas, black calfskin shoes and yellow gloves....[34]

The subtle humor here prepares us for that in the riot scene later when a man loots a store and gets three Dobbs hats: "With all them hats in there and I'm going to come out with anything but a Dobbs?" he asks.[35]

Hughes subtly points up the humor in a similar, though reversed,

situation in the Carmel Highlands of California, where he knew many movie stars and other famous people. He relates:

> Dynamic young Mrs. Steffens, Ella Winter--whom her friends called Peter--then working on a book, would often welcome guests in an elegant housecoat of red velvet with a sable border, slipped on quickly over an old sweatshirt and blue jeans.[36]

Rather than pretending, Ella Winter is dressing the way she feels her guests expect her to look. Role playing or pretending seems to always sound a humorous note. The contrast between the fact and false performance brings the laughter, sly laughter in cases where one might offend the pretender (dreamer).

Subtle humor is also directed at the hasty generalizations made about Negroes by those outside the black community. Hughes says that "Europeans as well as Americans seem to be victims of that old cliché that all Negroes just naturally sing--without effort."[37] He goes on to point out that of a group of twenty-two actors and actresses in Russia, all Negroes, only three could carry a tune.

Most generalizations concerning the Negro race, however, work negatively, it is felt: if one Negro acts in an unbecoming manner, people seem to generalize more than usual--that all Negroes do thus and so. Because of this, Negroes have a slogan: "Do not disgrace the race." Hughes makes several references to this slogan in his works. For example, in explaining why he took Emma home from a party in Russia after she had announced about three A. M. that she could no longer stay on her feet, he says:

> Since Emma was colored and I was colored, and there were no other colored people left at the party, my race demanded that I take Emma home. (I did not want her to "disgrace the race.")[38]

There are others at the party who also have drunk more than their

"quota," but Hughes is laughing at the overworked practice of generalizing about Negroes.

Most racial groups have suffered by being called epithets, such as nigger, honkey, dago, chink, and the like. Among the epithets which the Negro despises is the word "shine" (used as a noun). Before the battle royal scene in Invisible Man and amidst the drinking and carousing by the town's leading business men, the school superintendent calls out, "Bring up the shines, gentlemen! Bring up the little shines!"[39] He is referring to the protagonist, who is to give an oration, and several Negro boys hired as part of the evening's entertainment, and, of course, he means to speak of them in a derogatory fashion. When and if a Negro uses the term however, it is for subtle humor--laughing at a disliked practice. One example of such use occurs in a scene where Leo Proudhammer is waiting table and noting the kinds of people who come to the restaurant:

> Here they came: a blond girl, say with very long hair, svelte, an uptown girl, in snooty black. Her beau, crewcutted, gabardined. They are slumming and they more or less know it, but, nevertheless, they look rather hard at me. For very dissimilar reasons, I look rather hard at them. But, as they are now in my territory, and my mother raised me right, I close my book and rise and smile--I almost said, rise and shine.[40]

The humor in the last six words would be lost on the reader who did not know that Baldwin is referring to the use of the word "shine" in reference to Negroes by whites.

Following the emotional oratory at Tod Clifton's funeral, Ellison's protagonist makes a subtle reference (pun) to the word "shine":

> I crept along, walking a southern walk in southern weather, closing my eyes from time to time against the dazzling reds, yellows and greens of cheap sport shirts and summer dresses. The crowd boiled, sweated, heaved; women with shopping bags, men with highly polished shoes. Even down South they'd always

> shined their shoes. "Shined shoes, shoed shines," it rang in my head.

If we change the spelling of the verb "shoed" to "shooed" we have no difficulty getting the subtle humor in the neat inversion.

The subtle humor in these prose works by Baldwin, Ellison, and Hughes which includes naming practices, The Dozens, habits and practices for which Negroes regale each other, and allusions to generalizations and epithets used by whites in reference to Negroes seem to echo Glicksberg[42] and Barksdale.[43] Glicksberg pointed out:

> The Negroes are not unmindful of the potency of humor, ... its cathartic, liberating function; only it is a folk possession, not yet the property of the writers.[44]

This statement was made before any of our works were published. Barksdale, writing about the uses of comedy in relation to the Negro situation, says:

> Essentially, the Negro, moving from calamitous disorder to the promise of order, is moving toward social goals which are compatible with America's most valued social ideals and purposes. Hence, the Southern Negro is involved in comedy, not tragedy. Concerned as he is with the ultimate alleviation or eradication of certain social inadequacies, the Southern Negro is inevitably forced to take the comic view and appraise his progress and achievements with the objectivity and disciplined detachment inherent in modern comedy. For it is the proper function of comedy, in its modern socio-psychic connotation, to scrutinize the inadequacies of the human condition, and make perceptive comment bearing on the alleviation or eradication of these inadequacies....[45]

Modern black writers are saying over and over that rather than write protest literature, they must have communication within the black community. It seems that the main purpose of subtle black humor has always been in line with this purpose: it is humor written by blacks for blacks in accord with the proper function of comedy.

NOTES

CHAPTER IV

[1]Charles Glicksberg, "For Negro Literature: The Catharsis of Laughter," Forum, CVII (May 1947), p. 451.

[2]Ralph Ellison, Shadow and Act, (New York, 1964), p. 150.

[3]Robert A. Bone, The Negro Novel in America (New Haven, 1958), p. 223.

[4]James Baldwin, Go Tell It on the Mountain (New York, 1963), p. 21.

[5]James Baldwin, Tell Me How Long the Train's Been Gone (New York, 1969), p. 170.

[6]James Baldwin, Go Tell It on the Mountain, p. 63.

[7]Ibid.

[8]Ellison, Invisible Man (New York, 1952), p. 109.

[9]Ibid., p. 98.

[10]Ibid., p. 99.

[11]Ibid., p. 102.

[12]Ibid., p. 284.

[13]Bone, p. 205.

[14]Langston Hughes, Not Without Laughter (New York, 1945), p. 265.

[15]Ibid., p. 299.

[16]"Negro Literature in the United States," Black Expression, ed. Addison Gayle, Jr. (New York, 1969), p. 215.

[17]Ellison, Invisible Man, p. 350.

[18]Ibid., p. 426.

[19]Hughes, p. 123.

[20]Hughes, p. 200.

[21]Ellison, Invisible Man, pp. 248-9.

[22]Ibid., p. 249.

[23]Ibid., p. 165.

[24]Bone, p. 199.

[25]Hughes, I Wonder as I Wander, p. 329.

[26]Hughes, Not Without Laughter, p. 225.

[27]Ibid., p. 245.

[28]Baldwin, Tell Me How Long the Train's Been Gone, p. 138.

[29]Langston Hughes, The Book of Negro Humor.

[30]Ellison, Invisible Man, p. 125.

[31]Baldwin, Go Tell It on the Mountain, p. 63.

[32]Baldwin, Tell Me How Long the Train's Been Gone, p. 84.

[33]Hughes, I Wonder as I Wander, p. 82.

[34]Ellison, Invisible Man, p. 195. (The reference to southern colleges pertains to southern black colleges. Ellison is subtly referring to the fact that these colleges offer courses in business, but the instructors have only limited preparation because Negroes simply do not have the capital to go into business. Their knowledge is all "book learning" not practical experience.)

[35]Ibid., p. 407.

[36]Hughes, I Wonder as I Wander, p. 283.

[37]Ibid., p. 80.

[38]Ibid., p. 229.

[39]Ellison, Invisible Man, p. 15.

[40]Baldwin, Tell Me How Long the Train's Been Gone, p. 284.

[41]Ellison, Invisible Man, p. 347.

[42]Glicksberg, pp. 450-456.

[43]Richard K. Barksdale, "White Tragedy--Black Comedy," Phylon, 22 (Fall 1961), pp. 226-233.

[44]Glicksberg, p. 452.

[45]Barksdale, p. 229.

CHAPTER V

SATIRE AND PARADOX IN RELIGION

As the ability to laugh in the face of hardships may be a saving grace of a persecuted and enslaved people, so also may be the belief in a religion and a hereafter, where the good will be rewarded and the wicked be renounced. Yet, if such a belief causes a people to accept what should not be accepted, to stand back when they should fight, it may operate to their detriment. For this reason many black writers, particularly authors of protest literature, satirize the Negro's conversion to the Christian religion, as practiced in America.

Attempts to convert the slaves to Christianity seem to have begun early. Nathan Hare denounces the practice of explorers to use religion as a means to take land and exploit people:

> It seems custom, as recorded history bears out, that white conquerors supplemented more deadly weaponry by falling back on ideological warfare in confrontations with other races in the lands they "explored." Guns were used, as in Hawaii, for example, but not guns alone. Explorers, trailed by missionaries and other warriors, first sought to convert "natives" to the Christian religion. Then failing to "save" the pagan chief, they merely proceeded to convert a "commoner" and provide him guns with which to overthrow the chief.[1]

Hare concludes that once the black man in Africa had only the land; then the white man came and brought him the Bible. Now the black man has the Bible and the white man has the land.

Black comedians have frequently used the above statement to bring

laughter from audiences. We must remember, however, that not all satire brings laughter.

Baldwin, Ellison, and Hughes satirize the Negro's complete dedication to and great emotionalism concerning religion. They joke about it, and, in some instances, scathingly denounce it.

Eysenck, in discussing national stereotypes, points out that the Negro is categorized as being overly religious.[2] One example of the black man's dedication to the tenets of his religion was interestingly revealed in a recent Daily Oklahoman news feature. Working on a doctoral dissertation at the University of Oklahoma, a former chaplain in the United States Army decided to dress as a bum to see how he would be treated at various churches in Norman, Oklahoma, and in Oklahoma City, according to the reporter. He found that most of the churches he visited turned a deaf ear to his troubles. He was looked upon with suspicion and animosity. Hungry, he was not offered even a cup of coffee at one of the more affluent churches, although a meal was in progress at the time he arrived. The reporter concludes the story:

> Ironically, the white chaplain, who holds the Bachelor of Divinity degree from Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary, Fort Worth, Tex., felt the greatest acceptance and concern for his needs from a Negro minister, the pastor of an eastside Oklahoma City Seventh Day Adventist church.
>
> In fact, the Negro church was the lone exception to a rejection and lack of respect for his personal worth in the churches that he visited.[3]

This incident is representative of the seriousness with which black people have taken their religion. Such dedication, however, is looked upon as both good and bad. Paradoxically, black critics feel that the thing the black man has looked to as a saving force has often been just

the opposite: the force which has kept him from fighting for rights and privileges in the here and now.

In this chapter I shall analyze the satirical and other comical references to religion in the prose works by Ralph Ellison, Langston Hughes, and James Baldwin. The latter seems to strike out most noticeably at storefront churches.

Hughes pictures through Sandy's mind the way Negroes imagine God to look. During a wind storm one night, Sandy thinks of God and Jesus as white and wearing long white robes and of his pastor Reverend Braswell being black as ink:

> God didn't care if people were black, did He?...What was God? Was He a man or a lamb or what? Buster's mother said God was a light, but Aunt Hager said He was a King and had a throne and wore a crown--she intended to sit down by His side by and by....[4]

Harriett, a teen-ager, expresses her ideas and says that she does not want to join church:

> "Aw, the church has made a lot of you old Negroes act like Salvation Army people," the girl returned, throwing the dried knives and forks on the table. "Afraid to even laugh on Sundays, afraid for a girl and boy to look at one another, or for people to go to dances. Your old Jesus is white, I guess, that's why! He's white and stiff and don't like niggers!" (45)

This statement shocks Aunt Hager, but later one of her friends makes a comment denouncing the black church and the religion. Retorting to Harriett's declamation, she says:

> "An', chile, I can't blame you much"..."De way dese churches done got now'days.... Sandy, run in de house an' ask yo' pappy fo' a match to light ma pipe.... It ain't 'Come to Jesus' no mo' a-tall. Ministers dese days an' times don't care nothin' 'bout po' Jesus. 'Stead o' dat it's rally dis an' collection dat, an' de aisle wants a new carpet, an' de pastor needs a 'lectric fan fer his red-hot self." The old sister spat into the yard. "Money! That's all 'tis! An' white folkses religion--Lawd help! 'Taint no use in mentionin' them" (84)

During this conversation both Harriet and Jimboy point out that Negroes take religion too seriously, not having any fun on Sundays just sitting in church. Harriet concludes:

> "Jimboy's right,"..."Darkies do like the church too much, but white folks don't care nothing about it at all. They're too busy getting theirs out of this world, not from God" (75).

Hughes makes clear that the older generations have embraced the church most strongly and that the younger generations are rebelling concerning the appearance of God and also the practices of the church, both white and black.

When a carnival comes to town, Hughes notes that "Between the tent of Christ and the tents of sin there stretched scarcely a half-mile" (107). Sandy sticks a nail in his foot and cries and refuses to eat. Jimboy says that if he will only hush hollering he will take him to the carnival. The dialogue proceeds:

> "Yes, take de rascal," said Aunt Hager. "He ain't doin' no good at de services, wiggling and squirming so's we can't hardly hear de sermon. He ain't got religion in his heart, that chile!"
>
> "I hope he ain't," said his father yawning (108).

Thus the old people go to the revival and the young people head for the carnival.

Hughes gently satirizes the over dedication to religion in a conversation between Hager and her friend:

> "They tells me, Sister Johnson, that Seth Jones done beat up his wife something terrible."
>
> "He did, an' he oughter! She was always stayin' way from home an' settin' up in de church, not even cookin' his meals, an' de chillens runnin' ragged in de street."
>
> "She's a religious frantic, ain't she?" said Hager (147).

Hughes also points out humorously that in some black churches, often

those of the lower classes, shouting is popular, but not in the middle class churches. Hager discusses her daughter Tempy's choice of a church:

> Last time I seed Tempy, she told me she couldn't stand de Baptist no mo'--too many low niggers belonging, she say, so she's gonna join Father Hill's church, where de best people go.... I told her I didn't think much of joinin' a church so far away from God that they didn't want nothin' but yaller niggers for members, an' so full o' forms an' fashions that a good Christian couldn't shout--but she went on an' joined. It's de stylish temple, that's why, so I ain't said no mo'. Tempy's goin' on thirty-five now, she's ma oldest chile, an' I reckon she knows how she wants to act."
>
> "Yes, I reckon she do.... But there ain't no church like de Baptist, praise God! Is there, Sister? If you ain't been dipped in that water an' half drowned, you ain't saved. Tempy don't know like we do. No, sir, she don't know (24, 25).

The statement about being baptized and "half drowned" reminds us of the many jokes supposedly between the Methodist and Baptist concerning the importance of a certain form of baptism.

Hughes seems to summarize his satire and joking about religion by means of an inner monologue on the part of Sandy. Sandy reflects on a statement by Mr. Siles that Negroes are "Clowns, jazzers, just a band of dancers--that's why they never have anything. Never be anything but servants to the white people" (313). Sandy reflects:

> Clowns! Jazzers! Band of dancers!.... Harriett! Jimboy! Aunt Hager!.... A band of dancers!...Sandy remembered his grandmother whirling around in front of the altar at revival meetings in the midst of the other sisters, her face shining with light, arms outstretched as though all the cares of the world had been cast away; Harriett in the back yard under the apple-tree, eagle-rocking in the summer evenings to the tunes of the guitar; Jimboy singing.... But was that why Negroes were poor, because they were dancers, jazzers, clowns? ...The other way round would be better: dancers because of their poverty; singers because they suffered; laughing all the time because they must forget.... It's more like that, thought Sandy (313).

Therefore, when Hughes says "And now the revival and the carnival widened the breach between the Christians and the sinners in Aunt Hager's

little household," we wonder if he is not speaking somewhat with tongue in cheek.

Hughes mentions the Negro's dedication to religion in I Wonder as I Wander when he tells about Sylvia, an American folk-song star, who sings on the Moscow radio. He says that in doing spirituals they wouldn't let her sing "God," "Lord," or "Jesus" on the air.[5] He explains the situation:

> At that time in Moscow, although some churches were open and one occasionally saw a cassocked priest on the street, there was an official anti-religious campaign under way. The radio belonged to the Soviet state, so religious songs were taboo on the air. An exception was made, however, of the spirituals--as examples of great Negro folk art--with the provision that when these songs were sung, the words God, Lord, Christ or Jesus were not to be used (82).

Later when Sylvia becomes tired of having to change her songs, using words like "soul" and "mike" in place of the deity, she plans a solution:

> One day Sylvia said, "Them Russians don't understand English, and I'm tired of faking. I'm gonna get God into my program today."
>
> "How?" we asked.
>
> "Just wait and see," she said.
>
> "All of us had our ears glued to the radio receivers in the Grand Hotel when Sylvia came on the air that night. She opened with, "Oh, rise and shine and give God the glory." Only what she actually sang was:
>
> Rise and shine
> And give Dog the glory! Glory!
> Rise and shine!
> Give Dog the glory...
>
> "Ah-ha!" we said with glee when Sylvia got back to the hotel, "you didn't get away with it, did you?"
>
> "What do you mean, I didn't get away with it?" cried Sylvia. "God was in my songs tonight."
>
> "Where?" I asked.

> "Where He ought to be," said Sylvia. "What is d-o-g but God spelled backwards?" (82).

The humor here is directed at the Russians' disbelief in God as well as at the black man's faith in God.

Ralph Ellison satirizes practices of religion a bit more subtly than does Langston Hughes, but he gets his points across very clearly. Having compared the "wild emotion of the crude preachers most of us knew in our home towns and of whom we were deeply ashamed,"[6] with the logical appeals made with multisyllabic words by the college minister, Ellison's protagonist in Invisible Man notes that the services in college are a "vast" and formal ritual:

> Here upon this stage the black rite of Horatio Alger was performed to God's own acting script, with millionaires come down to portray themselves, not merely acting out the myth of their goodness, and wealth and success and power and benevolence and authority in cardboard masks, but themselves, these virtues concretely! Not the wafer and the wine, but the flesh and the blood, vibrant and alive, and vibrant even when stooped, ancient and withered. (And who, in face of this, would not believe? Could even doubt?) (87).

The mockery which the protagonist finds in religion and religious rituals he reviews in inner monologue as he sits waiting for the chapel exercises to beign:

> Ha! to the grey-haired matron in the final row. Ha! Miss Susie, Miss Susie Gresham, back there looking at that co-ed smiling at that he-ed--listen to me, the bungling bugler of words, imitating the trumpet and the trombone's timbre, playing thematic variations like a baritone horn. Hey! old connoisseur of voice sounds, of voices without messages, of newsless winds, listen to the vowel sounds and the crackling dentals, to the low harsh gutturals of empty anguish, now riding the curve of a preacher's rhythm I heard long ago in a Baptist church, stripped now of its imagery: No suns having hemorrhages, no moons weeping tears, no earthworms refusing the sacred flesh and dancing in the earth on Easter morn. Ha! singing achievement, Ha! booming success, intoning, Ha! acceptance Ha! a river of word-sounds filled with drowned passions, floating, Ha! with wrecks of unachievable ambitions and stillborn revolts, sweeping their ears...(88).

Written in the style of a sermon preached by a Baptist minister, who punctuates his phrases with a rasping "Ha!" for effect, Ellison implies that such sermons are sound and fury, signifying nothing. They are "a river of word-sounds" filled with "wrecks of unachievable ambitions." Yet, he seems to be saying that people (especially black people like those who attended his church at home) flock each Sunday to ride upon the wings of such sermons. In all probability, Constance Rourke would classify such sermons as bombast, as she has classified some oratory and sermons in her book on American humor.

When the protagonist finds the old couple being dispossessed in New York, their belongings strewn over the sidewalk, permission is asked for them to go back in the building to pray. Speaking on behalf of the eighty-seven year old man and his wife, the protagonist inflames the crowd with his speech:

> These old ones are out in the snow, but we're here with them. Look at their stuff, not a pit to hiss in, nor a window to shout the news and us right with them. Look at them, not a shack to pray in or an alley to sing the blues! They're facing a gun and we're facing it with them. They don't want the world, but only Jesus. They only want Jesus, just fifteen minutes of Jesus on the rug-bare floor...How about it, Mr. Law? Do we get our fifteen minutes worth of Jesus? You got the world, can we have our Jesus?" (211).

The impassioned remarks seem to echo Hare's statement that the black man gained the Bible and the white man gained the land.

Later at Tod Clifton's funeral, the protagonist is again the speaker and says that Clifton's religion is unknown--probably born Baptist (345). It is still estimated that the largest number of Negroes are of the Baptist faith.[7] The popular choice has already been humorously reflected by Hughes, when he has Sister Johnson say to Hager that it is better to be baptized by nearly drowning.

James Baldwin seems to direct more attention to religion, especially the storefront churches in the ghetto, than does either Hughes or Ellison. Most of his attention is ironic or satiric. Baldwin's concern with religion is not surprising if we take the biographical approach and note that he was a minister at the age of fourteen and continued to preach until he was seventeen.[8] The main plot of Go Tell It on the Mountain is centered around the protagonist's decision whether to choose the world or the church, the storefront church where his mother, father, and close relatives are members.

The attitude of the author in this story seems to be clearly the one he expresses in an autobiographical work:

> It is axiomatic that the Negro is religious, which is to say that he stands in fear of the God our ancestors gave us and before whom we all tremble yet. There are probably more churches in Harlem than in any other ghetto in this city and they are going full blast every night and some are filled with praying people every day. This, supposedly, exemplifies the Negro's essential simplicity and good-will; but it is actually a fairly desperate business.[9]

John senses this "desperate business" as he stands on the summit of a hill on his fourteenth birthday:

> And still, on the summit of that hill he paused. He remembered the people he had seen in that city, whose eyes held no love for him. And he thought of their feet so swift and brutal, and the dark gray clothes they wore, and how when they passed they did not see him.... And how their lights, unceasing, crashed on and off above him, and how he was a stranger there. Then he remembered his father and his mother, and all the arms stretched out to hold him back, to save him from this city where, they said, his soul would find perdition.
>
> And certainly perdition sucked at the feet of the people who walked there; and cried in the lights, in the gigantic towers; the marks of Satan could be found in the faces of the people who waited at the doors of movie houses; his words were printed on the great movie posters that invited people to sin.[10]

Considering the life of the world and the life his parents seek to have

him choose, the narrow way, John analyzes the latter:

> But he did not long for the narrow way, where all his people walked; where the houses did not rise, piercing, as it seemed, the unchanging clouds, but huddled, flat, ignoble, close to the filthy ground, where the streets and the hallways and the rooms were dark, and where the unconquerable odor was of dust, and sweat, and urine, and homemade gin. In the narrow way, the way of the cross, there awaited him only humiliation forever; there awaited him, one day, a house like his father's house, and a church like his father's, and a job like his father's, where he would grow old.... The way of the cross had given him a belly filled with wind and had bent his mother's back...(36).

Yet, at the end of the story, John lies on the threshing floor; he has accepted the store front church religion and been converted. All the praying saints, including his mother, are proud and happy that little Johnny is saved.

During the flashbacks on the part of Gabriel, Florence, and Elizabeth, however, Baldwin subtly satirizes aspects of religion. For example, Sister Price praises John for helping clean the church the day before his conversion:

> "Yes," said Sister Price, with her gently smile, "He says that he that is faithful in little things shall be made chief over many."
>
> John smiled back at her, a smile that, despite the shy gratitude it was meant to convey, did not escape being ironic or even malicious. But Sister Price did not see this, which deepened John's hidden scorn (63).

John is obviously thinking that Sister Price, a woman who proudly states she has never known a man, has been faithful in some things but is obviously not chief over anything but her beliefs.

In describing a church revival (similar to the one Langston Hughes compares with the carnival in Not Without Laughter), Baldwin calls it a "monster" revival. The pun is obvious: not only is the revival large (monstrous) but it is run by monsters, ministers who do not practice

what they preach. This fact is revealed shortly after Gabriel has preached one of his first sermons and is congratulated by older members of the ministry. Then he is shocked to hear them joke about Deborah, an unfortunate young woman who has been sexually molested by a group of white men at the age of sixteen:

> When the Sunday came, and he found himself once more among the elders, about to go to the table, Gabriel felt a drop in his happy, proud anticipation. He was not comfortable with these men--that was it--it was difficult for him to accept them as his elders and betters in the faith. They seemed to him so lax, so nearly worldly; they were not like those holy prophets of old who grew thin and naked in the service of the Lord. These, God's ministers, had indeed grown fat, and their dress was rich and various (119).

Gabriel concludes that "they spoke jokingly, of the comparative number of souls each of them had saved, as though they were keeping score in a pool room..." (119). The choice of simile, juxtaposing the minister with score keeper of a pool room, is satirical humor--scathing to the religious, funny to the non-religious.

The fact that the revival is held in a lodge hall where a dance has taken place the night before is subtly mentioned by the narrator. When Gabriel discusses sin in his sermon, he notes that "sin...keeps the table bare, sends our children, dressed in rags, out into the whorehouses and dance halls of the world" (116). Yet, the only place where the revival could be held, the store front churches being too small, is a place which really is a dance hall. This is ironic.

Not only does Baldwin satirize the minister, but the members as well. Gabriel, having become a minister, learns that the sisters within the church have characteristics like Esther, an unsaved sinner, outside the church:

> He was made to remember that though he was holy he was yet young; the women who had wanted him wanted him still; he

> had but to stretch out his hand and take what he wanted--even sisters in the church (144).

Perhaps Gabriel's disillusionment with both the elders and the members has something to do with his own hardness in the latter part of the novel, when he completely rejects John and shows no joy when he is converted.

Baldwin makes two references to the irony of the fact that people often do get what they pray for--to their regret. Florence, being disgusted with her husband's coming home drunk, thinks: "Lord, wouldn't it be a blessing if he didn't never come back no more." The narrator then explains that the Lord gave her what she said she wanted, "as was often, she had found, His bewildering method of answering prayer. Frank never did come back" (91). Deborah makes a similar discovering, having married Gabriel and found him unfaithful. When he asks her one day what she has been thinking, we are told:

> She smiled, "I been thinking," she said, "how you better commence to tremble when the Lord, He gives you your heart's desire." She paused, "I'd been wanting you since I wanted anything. And then I got you" (170).

Baldwin's references to religion in Tell Me How Long the Train's Been Gone are not as many but in similar vein to those in the first novel. In refuting the belief in the black community that the theater is evil and the church is good, Baldwin's protagonist Leo, an actor, reminds his brother Caleb, a minister, that the theater originated in the church:

> The fact that he was a Reverend and I was trying to become an actor made no difference at all, no difference whatever. They knew, without knowing that they knew it, simply by having watched it, by having paid for it, what nearly no one can afford to remember: that the theater began in the church. We were both performers...(323).

Defending acting in the theater as a means of attempting to approach

the truth, Leo notes bitterly that the deliverance black people seek has not arrived by means of the church. Remembering a large meeting he attended with Christopher where a little black girl was singing in her huge voice "Deliverance will come," an inner monologue follows:

> "Deliverance will come" Leo thinks wryly: "Deliverance will come; it had not come for my mother and father, it had not come for Caleb, it had not come for Christopher...and it had not come for all these thousands who were listening to her song (85).

Leo clearly wonders about penning hopes in passiveness, and watching the little girl eat her chicken dinner he thinks: "Maybe I should have given her a dinner which would cause her to overthrow the table and burn down the house" (87).

Leo's bitterest feelings are described as the author juxtaposes his profession with that of Caleb--the ministry. Caleb is determined to convert his brother from his way of life:

> But I <u>have</u> to keep on at you. It's a charge I have to keep. You're young, and the world has got you so confused you don't know if you're coming or going. You're a very unhappy boy, Leo, it sticks out all over you, and it hurts me to see it. But you haven't <u>got</u> to be unhappy and the light's going to come to you one day, just like it came to me. You're going to see that you, and all your friends, are going to <u>have</u> to be unhappy just as long as you fight the love of God.[11]

Leo notes that a stern and mighty beauty enters his brother's face as he continues:

> "You're fighting now. I know. I know how <u>I</u> fought. You're going to have to learn how <u>not</u> to fight, not to insist on <u>your</u> will but to surrender your will and find yourself in the great will, the universal will, the will of God, which created the heavens and earth and everything that is, <u>and</u>"--he leaned forward and tapped me on the brow--"created you." He smiled, "That's right, little brother. You."
>
> He smiled, and he made me smile. I didn't have any great objections to being God's handiwork. But I felt that he might possibly have supplied us with a manual which would have given us some idea of how we worked (293).

Leo feels that his brother's concepts are not practical. He shows a feeling of ambivalence, to say the least, toward the deity.

Leo frequently makes statements that God knows this or God knows that. For example, when noting that both the theater and life have truth, he concludes "they meet, but they are not the same, for life, God help us, is the truth" (86). Thus, God is a helper. Later, however, thinking of life as it exists in American and of Christopher, "whose destiny was as tied to this desolation as my own" (255), Leo says:

> But, in fact it seemed to me that Christopher's options and possibilities could change only when the actual framework changed: and the metamorphosis of the framework into which we had been born would almost certainly be so violent as to blow Christopher, and me, and all of us, away. And then--how does the Bible put it? Caleb would know--perhaps God would raise up a people who could understand. But God's batting average failing to inspire confidence, I committed myself to Christopher's possibilities. Perhaps God would join us later, when He was convinced that we were on the winning side. Then heaven would pass a civil-rights bill and all of the angels would be equal and all God's children have shoes (255).

The satire in this latter statement is sharp and biting.

Leo's bitterest statement is made when he remembers going home one Thursday when his mother is ill. Irritated at his brother Caleb's determination to "convert" him, he tells us:

> I knew that Caleb would never see the case as I saw it--no one would ever see my case, and so I would not waste breath presenting it. But I knew what I was going to do. I was alone all right; for God had taken my brother away from me; and I was never going to forgive Him for that. As far as the salvation of my own soul was concerned, Caleb was God's least promising missionary. God was not going to do to me what He had done to Caleb. Never. Not to me (312).

Whether Leo is thinking of a white God or the God of the white man's religion one can not be sure. Yet, critics like Bone have expressed the belief that Baldwin is constantly striking at the historical betrayal of the Negro church. Bone writes that Baldwin demonstrates that "In ex-

change for the power of the Word, the Negro trades away the personal power of his sex and the social power of his people."[12] Leo declares in the latter passage that this will never happen to him.

Thus, Langston Hughes, Ralph Ellison, and James Baldwin satirize various aspects of black religion, including the picture of God as white, the church as a whole, and its various segments and practices. The three authors express the idea that black people have, by embracing the Christian religion as practiced in America, exchanged rights and privileges on this earth for the hope of a bright shiny existence in the after life--eternity. The church has been used by nations and others from without to gain land and wealth. It has been used by unorthodox ministers and others from within to achieve their own material gain, while they have carried the membership along on waves of emotionalism. Or so it seems to the writers.

NOTES

CHAPTER V

[1]Nathan Hare, "Brainwashing Black Men's Minds," Black Fire: An Afro-American Writing, eds. LeRoi Jones and Larry Neal (New York, 1968), p. 178.

[2]H. J. Eysenck, Uses and Abuses of Psychology (Baltimore, 1953), p. 246.

[3]Joan Harrison, "Down and Out--and the Church Turns a Deaf Ear," Oklahoma's Orbit (March 15, 1970), p. 6.

[4]Langston Hughes, Not Without Laughter (New York, 1945), p. 185. Subsequent quotations will come from this edition and page numbers will appear parenthetically in the text.

[5]Langston Hughes, I Wonder as I Wander (New York, 1956), p. 81. Subsequent quotations will come from this edition and page numbers will appear parenthetically in the text.

[6]Ralph Ellison, Invisible Man (New York, 1952), p. 86. Subsequent quotations will come from this edition and page numbers will appear parenthetically in the text.

[7]E. Franklin Frazier, The Negro Church in America (New York, 1963), p. 50.

[8]James Baldwin, Notes of a Native Son (New York, 1963), p. 7.

[9]Ibid., p. 58.

[10]James Baldwin, Go Tell It on the Mountain (New York, 1953), p. 36. Subsequent quotations will come from this edition and page numbers will appear parenthetically in the text.

[11]James Baldwin, Tell Me How Long the Train's Been Gone (New York, 1969), p. 293.

[12]Robert A. Bone, The Negro Novel in America (New Haven, 1958), p. 220.

CHAPTER VI

SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS

This thesis identifies and analyzes the comic elements in selected prose works by James Baldwin, Ralph Ellison, and Langston Hughes. Although various critics have stated that these writers are lacking in humor, they have not only favored a comic structure, as decribed by L. J. Potts, but they have also used many comic devices including scenic representations and sketches revealing human weaknesses and illogical customs, mixed species called tragi-comic, laugh-provoking figures of speech, subtleties, and paradox. Especially have they used irony and satire to portray the black man as a practicer and a victim of religion and religious rituals.

This study confines itself to James Baldwin's first, and possibly best, novel, Go Tell It on the Mountain (1953) and Tell Me How Long the Train's Been Gone (1968); Ralph Ellison's novel Invisible Man (1952) and short story "Flying Home" (1944); and Langston Hughes' first novel Not Without Laughter (1930) and autobiographical work I Wonder as I Wander (1956). Both Ellison's Invisible Man and Hughes' I Wonder as I Wander have elements of the picaresque tale and probably show influence of Cervantes' Don Quixote, which both writers have studied assiduously.

The introductory chapter points out a basic thesis developed throughout the study that these authors all use comic elements and that they use subtle humor that is frequently overlooked or not understood by

those living outside the black community. The writers' comedy referred to throughout the study as black humor is not to be confused with the term as used by some modernists to mean macabre humor or graveyard humor. Black humor herein means simply the humor of blacks.

The first chapter also makes clear that humor of blacks or black humor is not to be confused with the old minstrels which portrayed the Negro as whites appear to have wished him to be seen--always laughing, happy, shuffling, and carefree. True black humor may make fun of the stereotypes or it may be seen as a laughing-to-keep-from-crying technique, but it is not the end product of the eternally comic character.

Black humor, like classical comedy as defined by Aristotle, frequently causes laughter. It often ridicules social life and customs, as von Schlegel and Feibleman note that New Comedy does.[1]

The structure of the works places them in the category of comedy in that major characters and protagonists are commonplace people who obtain, if not a fairy tale kind of happy ending, at least a realistic resolution or deliverance from frustrating situations. Their trials and tribulations are not harmless.

Chapter II deals with all of the prose works selected for study. In every instance the writers have chosen a style of writing, according to L. J. Potts' description of comic style,[2] suited for a comic work: the authors are detached from their characters and much of the humor is depicted in the dialogue; instead of moving the narration along, it is fun for fun's sake or fun to ridicule human weaknesses and social customs.

Baldwin's descriptions and dialogue reveal man's inability to communicate successfully which causes reactions ranging from pathos to

hearty laughter. For example, Frank in Go Tell It on the Mountain can never remember that his wife Florence hates to be called Flo. Baldwin's comical figures of speech include puns, inversion, and the "sudden twist" which Ellison says is a specific contribution of the black man to American humor. He satirizes customs which restrict the white man's freedom as well as the black man's. Leo, the black protagonist in Tell Me How Long the Train's Been Gone, is arrested and taken to the police station for questioning when he is seen leaving an all-white neighborhood, where he has been the invited guest of his white friends. He, also, must remind his religious family that their disapproval of the theater is not logical in that, paradoxically, the theater began in the church.

Ralph Ellison's comic scenes depict the black man's love for status symbols, and they also satirize customs. For example, during a riot one man remains calm enough to choose only Dobbs hats, a brand supposedly preferred by the upper class. Another man, having broken into a beer store, begins drinking and selling the beer. A bystander laughs, "He done gone into business." A popular tall tale concerning a black man flying around in heaven (and the tall tale is a significant element in American humor according to Constance Rourke) is given a prominent place in Ellison's short story "Flying Home." The story satirizes the custom of degrading the black man and the brain washing which has caused him to hate himself.

The heartiest laughter is evoked by Langston Hughes in his works. In Not Without Laughter he also has little sketches revealing human weaknesses, and he gently pokes fun at various customs, including Negro dialect which has a "thingy" quality and often seems more apt than stan-

dard English in communicating feelings and emotions. He particularly satirizes social class structures. Laughing at customs in I Wonder as I Wander, Hughes notes that a foreigner without papers can neither leave nor remain in Russia; also, that being a colored man who had recently traveled almost around the world, he was never ordered to leave any country until he arrived in Japan, a country mainly populated with colored people. One concludes that the humor in human weaknesses and customs is the main reason why the traveler wonders as he wanders.

The third chapter deals with selected comic heroes and comic villains in the works, the latter term referring to characters who are not really bad but who appear to be successful in behavior disapproved of by blacks: they are overly anxious to impress white people. They strive to imitate the majority race ("think white") even though such imitation may not have been logical for the originators.

Every work has at least one comic hero, a character who seeks deliverance from some condition and obtains a significant degree of success. For example, Leo is the comic hero of Tell Me How Long the Train's Been Gone; he succeeds as an actor although he must overcome family objections and racial prejudice. His ability to see humor in trying situations helps him achieve his deliverance. When he is most downcast or even bitter, he can make a funny remark about the circumstances. Hager and Harriett receive the accolades for heroism in Not Without Laughter. Hager sees in her long lines of snowy washings, never ending though they are, the education and deliverance of her children. She finds time to be a good neighbor, cheering the weary and the sick, and she dies with the staff still in her hand. Harriett rebells at a young age against the hardships her elders accept as their lot; running away

from home to face dangers and trouble, she becomes successful in the entertainment world and reaches a helping hand to Sandy, who is about to be swallowed up in the hopeless world of unskilled labor.

Ellison's protagonist, considered a picaresque hero by many critics, is finding his identity at the end of Invisible Man. He has come out from his hole in the ground and the resolution is the telling of the story, which he says on some frequencies may speak for all men. He has learned much about the world and his place in it because of his comical exploitation at the hands of various people and groups. He has managed to endure many perilous situations and survive them.

The comic villains add much to the realism of these prose works. There is Tempy in Not Without Laughter who has characteristics of both the hero and the villain as the latter has been defined. Although she helps Sandy to find deliverance from the ghetto, she is overly concerned with status symbols and seeking to impress her white neighbors. In other words, she "thinks white" because she believes "white is right." Also she is portrayed as a snob who looks down on her closest relatives who have not been as fortunate as she in escaping the ghetto: she rarely ever visits her mother, because Hager is a common wash woman. Gabriel is the prime example of comic villain in Go Tell It on the Mountain. Disillusioned as a young minister by the callous remarks and secretive actions of his elders in the church, he becomes equally disillusioning at the end of the novel, when he shows no joy that his stepson joins the church. There is a great distance between what he preaches and what he practices. Bledsoe, Ras, and Rinehart all play the role of comic villain as they put the protagonist in Invisible Man through various difficult situations. Bledsoe sends him to the North into strange territory.

with letters that will hurt his chances of finding employment, although he tells him they are letters of recommendation. Ras is the colorful lion-skin-wearing character who tells him black is beautiful, but when he refuses to join him, Ras chases him underground. And Rinehart is the unbelievable numbers man, lover man, and preacher man with whom the protagonist is mistakenly identified.

In the fourth chapter the subtlety of black humor in the works is identified and analyzed. This subtlety is categorized as naming, The Dozens, and jests about color, habits attributed to Negroes, and white rascist practices. Baldwin, Ellison, and Hughes have named various characters in their works in subtly humorous ways. For example, Sister McCandleless in Go Tell It on the Mountain is described as one of the biggest and blackest women God ever made. The blind minister in Invisible Man is named Homer Barbee. Although the adult Negro man has had to face and fight insults in the South, prime of which is being called "Boy" long after he reaches maturity, Hughes names Annjee's immature husband in his first novel Jimboy.

The Dozens is a form of humor in the black community which may cause anything from light laughter to a riot: it is the practice, deplored by many blacks, of involving an adversary's relatives--kinfolks--in disparaging remarks. Ellison's Ras, for example, talks about the cop's kinfolks when the cop seeks to restrain him in the Harlem riot. Even the protagonist is tempted to say something about "a brother's old mama" when he is being exploited by the Brotherhood.

There are many subtle jests concerning color, both black and white. Such jests have often been overlooked in black writing, but recently when Flip Wilson on a television show had a dancing chicken and quipped,

"These black chickens really got the best rhythm," the whole audience got the point (the dancing chicken was jet black). Baldwin makes humorously subtle references to the loudness attributed to the black man and speaks of a very black little girl with a huge black voice in Tell Me How Long the Train's Been Gone. Hughes' character Hager keeps white clothes white for white people, and she is carried away in a white wagon driven by a sleepy white boy who directs a white horse on the night she leaves this world. Ellison's protagonist tells a light-skinned Negro woman that she is "yellow gone to waste" when she reprimands him; he is referring subtly to the black man's own tendency in the past to favor lighter shades of skin.

Much subtle humor is directed at the jokes with which Negroes regale each other pertaining to habits and vices. Among these is the reference to c. p. time, which means "colored people's time"--not the time set, but later. The black man's penchant for engaging in conspicuous spending of money also comes in for laughter. Ellison's protagonist summarizes it best by calling the extravagant buyer a disillusioned dreamer who is still unaware that he dreams. He mentions particularly a group of janitors and messengers who dress in fashionable clothing suited to Wall Street brokers with Brooks Brothers suits and bowler hats, English umbrellas, black calfskin shoes and yellow gloves. The subtle comedy lies in the fact that unknowingly they are role playing.

Since most generalizations concerning Negroes are felt to be derogatory, the authors make subtle references to these generalizations and note how the black man is aware that a single act may "disgrace the race." For example, Hughes tells that he felt obligated to take home Emma, the only black woman at a party where everyone was becoming

inebriated, because if she showed signs of having drunk too much it would "disgrace the race."

Subtly humorous references are also made to the epithets Negroes are called like "nigger" and "shine." Blacks use them, always with the understanding that they are disapproved of coming from members of other races. They are not to be used by blacks where whites can hear them. Leo catches himself in time before inadvertently using the word "shine" in a racially mixed situation.

In the fifth chapter the irony of religion as presented in the works is noted. James Baldwin directs more attention to religion, especially the store front churches, their organization and impact on the black community, than does Ellison or Hughes. He finds the end result to be sinister, because the black man embracing religion finds his greatest joy on earth in the religious rituals and waits to go to heaven to receive his reward. John, the protagonist of Go Tell It on the Mountain, deliberates on his fourteenth birthday trying to make up his mind to turn his back on the church's offerings and escape the ghetto. When one of the praying saints reminds him that he who is faithful over a few things will be made ruler over many, he looks at her with quiet disgust. Yet, he finds himself on the threshing floor at the end. Leo, the protagonist of Tell Me How Long the Train's Been Gone rejects the church outright, and when the little black girl sings "Deliverance Will Come," he thinks how it has not come at all for many people he knows, and for others it did not come in time. In short, both of Baldwin's novels carry the implication that the Christian religion as practiced in America has, paradoxically, been an obstacle rather than a help for the black man. His satire is sharp and clear.

Ellison describes the impassioned sermon of Reverend Homer Barbee in terms which mark it as bombast, the kind of oratory Constance Rourke lists as a form of American humor. Also, Ellison notes that the white man has taken the land and left the black man the Bible (a maneuver which many black comics have used in television script): the old couple being put out of their apartment ask if they may keep the Savior, although they must give up their quarters.

Hughes, however, refers to the religion of blacks with the lightest and most humorous touch of all. He has Hager in his first novel describe one of her friends, who spends time in the church she should spend taking care of her family, as being a "religious frantic." Harriett notes that the church people are not realistic, and when Jimboy is warned that without proper guidance his son may not be converted, Jimboy remarks, "I hope he ain't." Hughes juxtaposes the tents of the carnival with the seats of the church, and one gets the idea that perhaps the difference is not so great as one might first believe.

Noting the many references in these works to religion and noting that there is much irony, satire, and subtle humor directed to the churches--the practices of the preachers and the end results--one is not surprised that LeRoi Jones recently made the statement that a new religion is needed for the black man.[3]

In conclusion, these prose works by black writers James Baldwin, Ralph Ellison, and Langston Hughes have many comic elements. They show that the black experience in America has been one of hardship and persecution but it has been not without laughter. They joke about stereotypes demonstrating the falseness of these generalizations. Furthermore,

these works show that man's customs and weaknesses, regardless of race, are fertile sources for fun-making, jokes, and jests.

There is subtle humor in the works which may not be readily understood by those living outside the black community; yet, the increasing number of black comics on television and radio shows is beginning to reveal subtleties to the general populace.

Realizing that satire, considered a form of humor by many critics, frequently reveals man to himself when other techniques fail, the writers have satirized the paradoxes in the black man's social values, religion, and religious rituals. They have also satirized the white man's treatment of his darker brother. From Hughes' gentle quips to Baldwin's sharp jabs, one gets the idea that these black writers are using comedy for one of its vital purposes, to get people to take a second look at themselves, their strengths and their weaknesses.

Thus, Baldwin, Ellison, and Hughes use many comic elements. Using comical figures of speech they bring laughter; they satirize customs; they spotlight the humor in human weaknesses; they depict characters who find a comic resolution to their problems in ways that meet the approval or the disapproval of the black community; they are subtle; and they point up the irony and paradox in religious matters as well as in social ones.

NOTES

CHAPTER VI

[1]James K. Feibleman, "Aesthetics," Theories of Comedy, ed. Paul Lauter (New York, 1964), p. 461.

[2]L. J. Potts, Comedy (London, 1957), p. 64.

[3]LeRoi Jones and Larry Neal, eds. Black Fire: An Anthology of Afro-American Writing (New York, 1968), pp. 67-68. Ossie Davis, the author of "Purlie Victorious" and the producer of Cotton Comes to Harlem, repeated Jones' statement in a lecture at Harvard University during the summer of 1970. Malcolm X, also, has criticized the Negro's conversion to Christianity, because it failed to help his black brothers and sisters on this earth.

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APPENDIX

AMERICAN HUMOR

An Address by Ralph Ellison
Oklahoma State University
April 11, 1970

This is a time when the subject and the weather and the occasion have chosen me to be the speaker. Life is such that one never knows; do one? That is not original; that's Fats Waller. But it does say something about that sudden twist, the disjuncture, the pause and then the fall into rational absurdity which is so typical of American humor. I like to think that this has something to do with the very circumstances out of which this nation was founded.

Flip Wilson has this story, which you have perhaps heard, about Columbus coming close to the American continent, and there is this little Indian girl who says: "What 'chall doing over there?" You know what kind of Indian she was. "I'm coming to discover America," says Columbus. She replies: "Well, you can go on back where you come from. We don't want to be discovered."

Columbus discovered America, however, and then we found ourselves on a continent that didn't seem to want to be discovered either. The natives were hostile; the weather was not the weather of England or of Europe; the plants were not these plants. We didn't know what to do. But we were filled with an impressive sense of the uncertainty of reality. I suppose it was this disjuncture between the rationalized world

of Europe and the absolutely irrational, in European terms, of the new world that really began the quest for secession and revolution. Now we want to talk a little bit about humor.

Like any of the major human escapes, entertainments and instruction, humor is a discipline. And one of the basic functions of American humor, as it began to emerge--and it didn't emerge out of the thin air: it emerged through adaptation, through gradual applicants of new turns on the old human stories--out of this emergence we began to prepare ourselves for the unexpected You no longer had the 1, 2, 3, 4 beat or the 1, 2, 3--1, 2, 3 beat of any of the old patterns. Nature was not going to act like the English country side: the crops were not going to be the same crops; the insects were not going to be the same insects. All sorts of strange things happened. And so we began to tell the stories which emphasize the uncertain nature of existence in the new world, and as we did so, we allowed ourselves some relief from the pain of discovering that our bright hopes were going to be frustrated.

Americans are a group of people who always try to anticipate the unexpected. This is necessary because the traditional links had been severed. This is necessary, finally, because we grew to like the change. What did you have? You had not a world bound by tradition. You didn't have a world which was ordered by old and established religious rituals. We brought religious rituals, but they sometimes competed with those already found here, and clashed with the various groups which had come with their various faiths from Europe. We had very little. We didn't even have a system of roadways which was dependable--I'm speaking of colonial America, of course. We didn't even have systems of government which would really deal with the broad expanse of the land

and that possibility of mobility--the sociologists have given us the term--that opportunity to move; the opportunity to rise in the social hierarchy; the opportunity to lose a given identity and to achieve, earn, steal, beg or borrow another identity. And, of course, there was the ever present possibility of moving westward, of pulling up stakes heading out to the new territory or the Indian territory, putting down new roots, trying it, failing and going on.

This sense of the uncertainty plus the possibility afforded by this country, by its natural wealth, and by its growing, by the diversity of its region and of its people, made for the need of a humor which would, first, allow us to deal with the unexpected; and, second, allow us to adjust to one another in our diversity. The northerner found the southerner strange. The southerner found the northerner despicable. The blacks found the whites peculiar. The whites found the blacks ridiculous. And you know how it goes. Some agency had to be adopted which would allow us to live with one another without destroying one another, and the agency was laughter--was humor. American humor helped us also to project these unformed images or at least to project the emerging American character in terms of life which we could all accept, because they were larger than life and because they were humorous.

If you can laugh at me, you don't have to kill me. If I can laugh at you, I don't have to kill you. You might not like, and I might not like, the content of the laughter as projected in stereotypes and distortions and reductions, but this kind of humor, for all its crudeness, in some instances allowed the American people to come together on some sort of workable basis.

It's no accident that ethnic humor has been an abiding part of our

tradition. It was, I suppose, the Britisher, the upper-class Britisher, who first became the butt of American humor. We were ambivalent about him. He was our cousin and we wanted to get rid of him. We got rid of him, but we couldn't get rid of his language; we couldn't get rid of his tradition; we couldn't get rid of many of those values which he represented and which represented the essence of civilization in many ways, but we knew that somehow these definitions of the human predicament, these compediums of style no longer served for the reality we were living. And one way of breaking the hold of the British, the English, tradition upon ourselves was to reduce it, to put a distance between it and us, and we did this with humor. So we have humor working in complex ways in order to release us to a sense of who we were and that sense of who we were and what we were was a function of our ability to negate the continuity of history and tradition of style from Europe.

Laughter and humor played such an important role in this that, say, by the time our sophisticated literature began to emerge in the nineteenth century, humor was one of our most important modes. It is no accident that Mark Twain, who found a way of making colloquial speech, American colloquial speech, eloquent, a subtle medium for literature, was a stand-up talk comedian, if you want to reduce him a little bit. But he first was an oral story teller who drew great audiences. The tradition of story telling--I listened to Mr. Madden this morning, but I must say he told more stories than he read, and he was restricted by his novel, but you could see a tradition well and alive in Oklahoma--is a tradition which goes back to the time when written literature did not convey the American reality. Formal literature was still recapitulating the literature of Europe and of the British Isles, but as we began to

define ourselves, and I fall back on Kenneth Burke's definition that literature is equipment for living, as we equipped ourselves for living on this continent, we projected ourselves. We projected the processes of American lives; we projected the climate and region orally. And as we did this, we told the tall tales; we told those lies which allowed us to deal with the truth. We told those exaggerations which made the absolutely absurd nature of what became the United States approachable.

We speak of the existential after the French had undergone the horrors of an occupation during the 40's and coined or rather made it fashionable philosophically. It was rather ironic for me to see this development, for we had developed the art of the absurd much earlier in our tall tales, in our folk humor, in the blues, and in Huckleberry Finn and such works. Huckleberry Finn is an existentialist novel, if you want a fancy term for it. And I say this, that it came out of the American predicament, for it was here in the strangeness of the land, in the presence of an indigenous people, who did not like to be discovered and were sometimes violently opposed to it; it was here in a land where we brought our God with us, a land which seemed to frustrate even God, that we found the need for reducing man, our conception of man to very practical terms. You knew that if you went out there to those woods and you ate the wrong thing, that you were going to die. You knew that if you stepped behind the wrong tree, someone might bury a tomahawk in your head; you knew that if you picked up that piece of gold, it just might turn out to be a turtle.

Let's make a leap and see how this thing worked. Out here as a boy during the dust bowl period, there was a story which went around about an easterner who had hard times in the East, but who was notified that

an uncle, who had a farm in western Oklahoma, had died and left him all of the property. Well, when he had last seen the property, it was miles of wheat and cattle and everything was wonderful--fine equipment. When this fellow, got out, he found carcasses, skeletons of the herd lying around, the barns going to pieces. He went in one barn and the leather had dried out. The farm equipment had rusted: everything was terrible. He said, "Well, I've had it bad before, and this is something for free anyway." He goes out and he looks where the orchard was and he sees a bee hive. He says, "Well, at least there are bees; I have something to get started on." He goes to the bee hive and, lo and behold, the queen bee had married a doodle bug. It's a callous type of humor, and yet, the motive is to prepare you for the worst, and to prepare you for the worst in a land which guaranteed many more possibilities than existed in Europe. But one had always to be reminded that it might not work out; that it might explode in your face. It is no accident that we are the practical joking people.

If you remember having heard, if you did hear Orson Well's broadcast of the landing of men from Mars, you know what that did. Well, that was in the great tradition of American tall tales and practical joking. But after all, we did get men on the moon; the moon men didn't come down here. So you see the twists and turns are always with us. It's that sense of the unexpected that makes the humor so necessary. But there's another aspect to American humor, the fact that it was a political instrumentality, a political process; indeed the essence of the political process in this country had been strongly influenced by humor. The projections of humorous stereotypes helped to define hierarchical roles for Americans. It also helped us to attack Kant, to

attack the pompous and the foolish which operated in our own society. Most ethnic groups, at some time, had been the subject of humorous assault. The Irish, who were not always presidential timber, during the days of the 1840's and as late as the 1880's were homesteading in Central Park in New York, while a few great Irish politicians, the bosses, were having a good time in the city. Nevertheless, the bulk of Irishmen were considered humorous or comic. On the other hand, and this was marvelous the way it worked, some of the most perceptive political comics were Irishmen, the Mr. Dooleys, and so on. And so as the nation accommodated itself to the presence of the Irish, the Irish as humorists were helping us adapt ourselves to the fact that the country was going to continue to grow and that we were going to continue to be bothered with the diversification of ethnic backgrounds.

The Negro, as we know, was the butt of much of this; so was the Jew. And in each instance, the humorists, the comics, turned out to have far more influence on the general society through the agency of humor than anyone really suspected, as he approached it directly. The nation told Negro jokes, used Negro slang, turns of phrase, and danced Negro comic dances from its very beginning. This is the way this strange country operated. And this is one of the secrets of the power of humor, a cementing factor. It's a humanizing factor, which sometimes humanized by reducing the outsider, or the opponent, to the level of the ridiculous.

But there is something else about humor which makes it very very tricky. It tends to make us identify with the one laughed at despite ourselves. It seems that in order to have the insight to isolate the comic defect or the aspect within the other person, you have to make the

human identification. This makes for a great deal of confusion and bad feeling because we don't like to be laughed at. It became very much an irritation to black Americans when it was found out that their humorous counter attacks and attacks against white Americans were not admissable in the usual way, because of the fact of race. So it had to come to the general public in a distorted form in the agency of the Two Black Crows and in the radio version of Amos 'n Andy, and so on. And you could go right back to the 18th century and find these substitute types. And yet, we recall what happened during the '30's. The drying up of ethnic humor did something quite negative to this country, I think. You remember during the 1930's and '40's everyone became very very serious and sensitive to the existence of ethnic humor. I wrote some pieces attacking stereotypes, myself. But what was overlooked was the fact that when Americans can no longer laugh at one another, then they have to fight with one another. The humanizing factor gets lost, and we lose our resiliency, our ability to bend a little bit and to adapt.

Much of the attack against ethnic humor, a very unhumorous attack, I would say, was led by the left and by some of our own black organizations. I began very early to feel that this was a mistake, because although we were laughed at, we had the privilege of laughing back. And I feel that Negro ethnic humor is as sharp in its ability to cut to the comic as any other. Indeed, it is part of the mainstream of American humor, precisely because there is no one who sees the absurd anymore than the person who has lived closest to it. A great deal of the style of American humor came out of the black experience, as they like to say now. It came because we could not escape the absurdity, the philosophical absurdity of the racial arrangements within the society. But there

was no escape from it: we couldn't go to Africa; we couldn't go anywhere, except maybe to Oklahoma, but that was absurd too. My parents did it. We couldn't escape, so we developed a style of humor which recognized the basic artificiality, the irrationality, of the social arrangement, as it struck us.

We were forced to recognize that we were men, we were human, and in some ways not bad human quality; but by the hierarchical structuring of the society, we were always judged as being below the human. I won't say always, but in the general sense, we were. So that double knowledge of knowing the reality of a society that had the power to treat you as though you were actually inferior, but knowing within yourself that you were not, you were thrown into a position in which you were either going to develop a sense of humor or you were going to die of frustration, of a sense of the irrational. So much of the comedy of the absurd, which is native to the United States, at least comes out of the black community. That was where the society became most irrational, and most absurd, and that was where the people lived who had to deal with this every day.

You know the kind of absurd thing where you play with a white kid as you grow up, and then in a few years he becomes mister and you become boy. Or you get the imposition of a formal social pattern and pose which blots out the past, which severs the old fraternal patterns of conduct as completely as Adam and Eve were severed of their innocence after the little get-together in the garden. This sense of the thrust forward, the good time which suddenly goes bad, is built into the society and was certainly built into our part of it. The '30's, as I said, interrupted the political functioning of ethnic humor. So much so that by the time I finished Invisible Man in the early '50's, I had

white friends, sensitive readers, people who knew much of the world's literature, reading my novel, which has quite a number of comic situations in it, and reacting as though it were against the law and in utter bad taste for a white reader to laugh at a black character in a ridiculous situation. Only one or two critics were free of this involvement to say, "Well, this is very funny." I intended it to be funny. Of course, my sense of the comic comes out of the tradition of my own people here, their own variation on the American theme of comedy.

Some of the absurd situations are painful, but it is precisely because they are so painful that they have to be comic. The situations call forth the comedy, out of the need not to be destroyed. So just what I am saying in general is that as the nation has moved to moments of painful confrontation with its ideals and with its difficulties, we get new groups coming forth attempting to exploit the absurdity and the comic as it exists. Everyone knows about it. Everyone experiences it. And it must be paid some recognition. It is no accident that we had the development of talk comedians, who expressed things in public which were once expressed only among men in their private gatherings or women in beauty parlors, I suppose. It's no accident that as the political forces in the nation changed during the '50's and as the legal structuring or interpretation of the constitution was changed, that you had the emergence of a group of new American humorists who were Negro Americans, nor is it an accident that some of the old blackface comedians, the Pigmeat Markhams, and so on, who had fallen into disrepute because they were considered Uncle Toms, were resuscitated and seen in a new light. Pigmeat Markham's humor is as close to Shakespeare as anything you find in the United States in American literature, even in the uses of the blad-

der. I wish some critic would make a study of this, because Pigmeat Markham has always been a black comedian for black people. And the existence of these traditional devices says something about how American the humor was that you got in Negro vaudeville houses. The other thing to say about this is that there was an ambivalence, and there still is an ambivalence about the older Negro American humor. What a black-faced comedian--a black-faced comedian who might be light skinned--was doing and the effect that he created before a black audience was quite different from the effect he created when the audience was white. The same skits were used; the same jokes were told; but the interpretation was different. That is, the audience's response was different, precisely because built into the black face was a primitive notion of the comic which was white. We, living behind the black faces, saw something altogether different. If it was necessary for us to be able to laugh at the American situation generally and at our racial predicament, specifically, it was also necessary that we laugh at ourselves--at ourselves as human, at ourselves as American, at ourselves as ineffectual, at ourselves as vain people, at ourselves as people who despite reverses would rise again, would triumph.

I don't know quite what this will do as a way of suggesting subjects for your later conference on humor. I hope it's done some good. I will close by suggesting this: that because of the structuring of the American experience, one does not have to go out and seek to become comic. I suspect that the comic mode is imposed upon us by the way the society is strung together. One of our great masters, Henry James, was quite a comic writer. With his subtlety, his involutions, he was a sly rib

tickler. I imagine that he wanted to write tragedy, like most of us. But comedy seems to be the basic American mode in literature.

VITA

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