

THE BLUES SONG

Form

AAB blues format— the first two lines in the verse being the same and the third, different; the A line presents an issue, while the B line presents the conclusion.

I'm going to leave baby, ain't going to say goodbye
I'm going to leave baby, ain't going to say goodbye
But I'll write you and tell you the reason why

Refer to:

- B.B. King's "Three O'Clock Blues"

Call & Response format— The traditional form of blues called "call-and-response," in which the first line is repeated as the "call" for help, and the final line is the "response" or the answer to the problem at hand. The last word of each line rhymes within each verse.

The black crewleader on railroad gang or in a cotton field would issue the "call," chanting a phrase to which the crew members would answer with their "response," all to a strong beat applied by stepping or stomping, shovel and dirt, hammer and stone, or the like. The crew leader would often call at least partly in the "blue note," which gave rise to tension that was relieved by the response of the crew. The slaves used these chants to pass the time and generate community spirit in order to survive in extremely difficult conditions. Blues music grew directly from these black work chants and retained their key characteristics, as listed above. Work songs gradually became "**field hollers**," solo calls that were comparatively free in form but close to blues in feeling.

Refer to:

- Robert Johnson's "Stones in My Passway," and "If I Had Possession Over Judgment Day"

Lyrics

Floating verses—the same lyrics or phrases used in more than one blues song—are very common in blues music.

Refer to:

- Robert Johnson's "I Believe I'll Dust My Broom" (1936)
- Elmore James' "Dust My Broom" (1951)

Oral Tradition/Storytelling—When slavery took Africans from their land, they were separated from the rich musical and oral traditions native to each country and region. While working as slaves, Africans found they had two places where they could use these musical traditions freely: the fields where they labored and the churches where they prayed. The field hollers, spirituals, and work songs they invented were designed to lighten the load of the task. They were also a means of telling stories, passing along news, plotting escapes, and releasing frustrations. The early blues carried on the tradition of voicing black aspirations and experiences.

Refer to:

- B.B. King's "Three O'Clock Blues"
- Sonny Terry & Brownie McGhee's "John Henry" and Mississippi John Hurt "Stack O' Lee"

Blues Elements —

- 1) subject matter: often intensely personal subjects such as pain of betrayal, desertion, and unrequited love or with unhappy situations such as being jobless, hungry, broke, away from home, lonely, or downhearted because of an unfaithful lover; oppression and alienation are also common subjects
- 2) the search for identity
- 3) honors blues singers, places, and instruments
- 4) capture issues, incidents, and struggles important to the black community
 - Tommy Johnson’s “Canned Heat Blues” (substance addiction)
 - Billie Holiday’s “Strange Fruit” (lynching)
 - Charley Patton’s “High Water Everywhere” (the 1927 Mississippi River flood)
 - Bob Dylan’s “Hurricane” (racist police force)
 - Lenny Kravitz’s “Mr. Cab Driver” (racial profiling)
 - Chris Thomas King’s “Da Thrill Is Gone From Here” (life in inner-city America)
- 5) incorporates the rhythm and music of African American vernacular speech

Refer to:

- Langston Hughes—”Weary Blues,” “To Midnight at Leroy’s,” “Blues Fantasy,” and “Po’ Boy Blues”

Writer Zora Neale Hurston, in reflecting upon African American folklore as a whole, remarked that it represented “the greatest cultural wealth of the continent.”

Poetic Devices:

Figurative Language

A wealth of poetic devices appears in blues songs—many common devices: alliteration, imagery, metaphor, personification, simile, rhyme, repetition, apostrophe, echo, allusion, hyperbole, euphemism, and paradox.

- “Sometimes I feel like a motherless child” (simile)
- “Sun going down, dark gonna catch me here” (personification, imagery)
- “They got me accused of forgery and I can’t even write my name” (paradox)
- “You’ve got a good cotton crop, but it’s just like shootin’ dice” (simile, paradox)
- “I had religion this very day, but the whiskey and women would not let me pray” (internal rhyme, personification)
- “I can hear the Delta calling by the light of a distant star” (personification, imagery)
- “Woke up this morning with the jinx all around my bed” (metaphor)
- “Go down, old Hannah; don’t you rise no more. If you rise in the morning, bring judgment sure” (personification, apostrophe)

Refer to:

- Robert Johnson’s “Cross Road Blues”

Signifying

Signifying refers to the act of using secret or double meanings of words to either communicate multiple meanings to different audiences, or to trick them. To the leader and chorus of a work song, for example, the term “captain” may be used to indicate discontent, while the overseer of the work simultaneously thinks it’s being used as a matter of respect.

African American slang functions similarly to students’ own slang as both a source of aesthetic pleasure and social power. African American slang has its roots in the trickster figure of many West African cultures, an animal that would escape tough situations through doubletalk and wit. The trickster came to be important in slave culture, because the Black Codes instituted in Southern states after 1640 increasingly limited slaves’ ability to communicate with each other and with whites. In order to express their pain and to resist without retribution from white masters, African Americans used inventive double-entendres as well as metaphors and similes—ways of “signifying”—in their conversations, stories, and songs. Language play soon became a highly valued component of African American culture. When oppressive conditions persisted in the 20th century and African Americans were expected to be deferential toward whites or risk punishment or even lynching, blacks continued the tradition of signifying. This was especially true of the blues.

Refer to:

- Skip James, “Hard Time Killin’ Floor Blues”
 - Killin’ floor—the place where cows are killed in Chicago slaughterhouses
 - Driftin’ door-to-door—homeless and jobless
 - Can’t find no heaven—can’t find any happiness or rest
- Muddy Waters, “Mannish Boy”
 - Full-grown man—reference to male sexuality
 - Rollin’ stone—a ladies man, moving from one woman to the next
 - Hoochie-coochie man—a man obsessed with booze and women
 - The line I shoot will never miss—boasting of his sexual prowess

Some recurring **motifs** (and their symbolic meanings) include:

- Relationships between men and women (metaphor for relationships between blacks and whites)
- Travel, “leavin’,” trains (travel as freedom and independence, or longing for escape from harsh conditions)
- Graves, suicide, death (harshness of conditions, loss of hope)
- Manhood (referring to both sexuality and social status in segregated society)
- Crossroads (meeting place, the devil, going in a new direction)
- The devil, evil (importance of the church in black life)
- Water, rivers (referring to the Mississippi Delta, as well as baptism and travel)
- Floods and storms (referring to helplessness in face of greater forces)
- Waking up in the morning (many poor blacks lived day to day, unsure of when tragedy might befall them)

Mascon Imagery—Stephen Henderson coined the term: words or phrases that contain “a massive concentration of Black experiential energy...[and] cut across areas of experience usually thought of as separate, but ...[whose] meanings overlap and wash into each other on some undifferentiated level of common experience.”

- Such words—like “blue,” “cool,” “funk,” or “soul”—are frequently used to evoke collective black experience and historical consciousness
- “the bee” an oppositional image found in many blues—articulates multiplicity—both the pain (the sting) and the pleasure (the honey)
- “the mule” also embodies opposition and multiplicity—suggests the unequal power relationships between 1) work animal and human worker, 2) black worker and white bossman, and 3) woman and man

Refer to:

- Memphis Minnie’s “New Bumble Bee”

Assignments

- a) **Blues Song:** Select a prominent theme in society today or in your life and write a blues song about it. Be sure to incorporate the blues characteristics listed on this handout. For the non-songwriters in the class, use one of the songs/poems on the Blues Lyric handout as a model and either make a “copy change” song/poem or use the models for floating verses.
- b) **Essay:** Discuss the ways in which *Invisible Man* reflects the blues tradition in music and its function as a unifying motif in the novel.