From Dream to Despair: The Ironies of the Great Migration in William Attaway's *Blood on the Forge*

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Abstract

Often assimilated to «urban realism» of the 1940s, William Attaway's *Blood on the Forge* resists such a classification. Unlike the violent modes of protest literature wherein the individual confronts headlong the white racist system, Attaway uses irony to subvert the racist determination of African American subjectivity. The novel dramatizes the trauma of racism and segregation with which the Moss brothers are confronted. In their attempt to escape from the sharecropping system and its economic and racial oppression, Attaway's protagonists leave rural Kentucky (South) for the steel mill town in the North. Instead of the better future such a move might imply, Attaway's characters suffer and they are either crippled or killed at the end of the novel. This article argues that the condition of the characters is ironic in that they lose in the North the human qualities they brought with them from the South. The purpose of this study is not so much to break new ground but rather to promote a productive reading of Attaway and give him the place he deserves in African American literature.

Key words: trauma, irony, violence, North/ South, subjectivity

Introduction

The 2000 US census shows that an increasing number of African Americans have been settling down in the South, where, less than a century ago, generations of black people had fled to escape the Jim Crow laws[1] (1876-1965). Hurricane Katrina, which devastated New Orleans in 2005, confirmed the presence of a large concentration of black populations in the South. This tragic event also brought to the fore the old demons of racial prejudice. The slowness of the authorities to bring rescue and relief, and the presence of heavily armed police, lent the stage for sharp criticism from many black activists and political leaders alike. The latest migration of African Americans to the South has intrigued a number of historians and sociologists.

Triggered in part by new economic opportunities and accelerated by a South where lynching and racial tension have tremendously subsided, urban black populations settle in the South to reconnect with their roots. This recent influx of northern African American population into the South reverses the past trajectory set by the nineteenth century slave narratives, which Robert Stepto and other literary critiques have termed the ascenting movement[2]. Primarily used to designate the escape of slaves from the South to

[1] Known as the Jim Crow laws, the segregation laws had put in place a number of laws separating white and black population in the US. These laws were violently enforced, leading to mob justice and lynching of mostly black males. The 1920s witnessed the peak of public lynching, which drew great crowd.

[2] In *Behind the Veil*, Robert Stepto organizes nineteenth slave narratives around two trajectories

the North, ascent also maps out the trip of the sharecroppers from the rural South to the industrial North. In William Attaway's reconstruction of African American striving in *Blood on the Forge* (*BF*), he captures the Great Migration, a pivotal period in African American history.

Dismissed by many critics for its narrative structure and loosely linear plot, Attaway's novel is unique in the ways in which it dramatizes the Great Migration of the black people which occurred at the beginning of the twentieth century. Often overshadowed by the flamboyant side of the Harlem Renaissance of the 1920s, this northward migration of rural African Americans has rarely been the main focus of a fictional work. In the steel mills of the North, the newcomers known as "green men" are metaphorically crashed by giant machines. Alienated from their old way of life, the main characters of Attaway's novel, the Moss brothers, become totally inarticulate, isolated, and more vulnerable in the new world dominated by the lifeless steel and monster machines.

Drawing primarily from Soren Kierkegaard's definition of irony as a determination of subjectivity[3], it is my argument that Attaway uses irony to subvert the ideology of white racism, which constructs and fixes black subjectivity. In using irony, Attaway tries to undermine white racist ideology as well as its response, that is, protest literature. As a matter of fact, Attaway uses «irony [as] the antidote of ideology» (2005: 20) to paraphrase Sery Bailly's words. In this paper, I will explore how Attaway uses irony to challenge the racist determination of black subjectivity. In so doing, he ultimately subverts the self-destructive and violent discourse of «urban realism» (Bone 1958; Whitlow 1974) or the «Wright school» (Bell 1987), which posits anger/protest and violence as the bases of resistance to racial politics. Contrary to Wright's *Native Son* (1940), which is a representation of the modern black consciousness in relation to the white institution of racial segregation through anger and protest, Attaway's *Blood on the Forge* develops as a counterdiscourse to the Wrightian tradition of head-on confrontation with stereotypes and emotions generated by racism. Writing against both the grain of protest literature and racism, Attaway adopts a process of distancing which is a necessary prerequisite of irony. By juxtaposing and underlying tension between urban and rural life, he presents how his characters are caught in ironic situations.

1. Irony as a struggle concept

African American scholars and literary critiques have approached irony from different angles. According to Bernard Bell (1987: 138), «narrative irony is the result of a disparity of viewpoints among characters, narrator and reader, and in more sophisticated works of structural irony, between narrator and author». In his argument about the survival of African cultures in the Americas, Henry Louis Gates Jr. underlines «signifying as a form of irony» (90) and points to the «ironies of the speakerly text» (Gates 1988: 215). Through signifying, a «rhetorical self-defense» and «a clever inversion of situation», the weak outsmarts the powerful. One of the wonderful illustrations of such ironic situations is Charles W. Chesnutt's *The Conjure Woman*

«ascent» (North) and «descent» (South) which mapped out the route of the protagonists going either North or South.

[3] This idea is borrowed from Soren Kierkegaard who distinguishes between different forms of irony and humor. For Kierkegaard, Socratic irony indicates a selfish love of Socrates for his disciples. Romantic irony points to nature making fun of man's dead-end dreams. Humor, however, shows a disdain for other humans. While Kierkegaard posits irony as a determination of subjectivity, I perceive it as a mode of subversion of what is fixed or constructed.

(1899), which describes the master/slave relationship during the Civil War period. Contemporary writer, Ishmael Reeds uses the «trickster hero» and «voodoo aesthetics» in *Flight to Canada* (1976) to empower the slaves in their struggle against oppression. Signifying and the trickster hero abound in plantation stories and slave narratives because, as distinct African American responses to confrontation with western modernity, they are the markers of irony and self-empowerment.

One of the most elaborate and complex studies of African American modernism is Houston Baker's *Modernism and the Harlem Renaissance,* wherein he defines African American modernism through the blues matrix and the dual play on «the mastery of form» and the «deformation of mastery» (Baker 1987: xvi). Situating African American modernism at the turn of the century, Baker centers on «sounding» as the shifting ground of African American consciousness. Building on sounding and reframing it through W. E. B. Du Bois's concept of double consciousness, Baker breaks away from the individual torn between two extremes to construct a unified folk character. In so doing, he celebrates the intricate process of collective appropriation (mastery of form) and self-refashioning (deformation of mastery). By the same token, Attaway shifts from the previous «logic of opposition»[4] (protest literature) for a «dialogics of the oppressed»[5] by underlining the African American capacity to survive in a constantly changing world and against all odds. In response to the challenging African American situation and the shock or rupture that urban life implied for the sharecroppers, Attaway proposes, as a historical analyst, irony to transcend all the limitations his characters have to overcome. The novel creates an ironic contrast between their noble purposes and the sordid situations in which they are enclosed.

2. Shifting Paradigms: From Protest to Irony

Largely concerned with southern history, *Blood on the Forge* shows the disenchantment of sharecroppers in the South and the traumatic experience of the newcomers or "green men" in the urban jungles of the North. At the time of the publication of this novel, the African American literary world was shaken by the violent, rhetorical rage of the protest novel spearheaded by Richard Wright's *Native Son* (1940). Unlike Wright's novel which is set in the city where African American populations are confined to ill-paying jobs and a violent social environment, *Blood on Forge* presents the plight of the illiterate, rural population. Instead of being locked up in a prison of despair, Attaway's characters strive for social progress as they leave their pastoral world for urban life. As in most naturalist novels, the environment is important in shaping the spirit and consciousness of the protagonists. More importantly, the constant struggle of the Moss brothers, which is indicative of their constructive sense of agency, is equally important.

As in Ann Petry's *The Street* (1946), the protagonists of *Blood on the Forge* never openly rebel against the oppressive social system they live in. Instead, they try to work their way out of it because Attaway's vision of social change starts with selffashioning. Rarely anthologized, the novel has received a lukewarm reception by the literary community of the time. Simply because the novel failed to play out the stereotypes of the

[4] It is a strategic process wherein white people are almost always opposed to Native Americans or Blacks.

[5] I borrowed this concept from Peter Hitchcock's *The Dialogic of the Oppressed* (1996) wherein it refers to Otherness and oppression. For Hitchcock resistance leads to self-empowerment when it opens a dialectic channel between oppressor and oppressed.

moment, it «did not quite fit the "uplift" formula of the day, it was ignored and relegated to the dustbin of the ideologically confused» (Margolies 1968: 49). In *Historicism Once More*, Roy Harvey Pearce warns us against the attitude which consists in generalizing the artistic consciousness of the novel with catch phrases or generalizing ideas. He writes:

> When we come to try to understand our literature in our history and our history in our literature…, we have to be ready to see new forms, new modes, new styles emerging and to realize how all that is new results from a particular confrontation of [one's] culture made by a particular [person] at a particular time (1969: 59).

Attaway's novel seems to fit this perspective in that he swims against the tides of racial uplift of the time. While protest literature projected individual struggle and the violent smashing of the contradictions of the racist American society, Attaway builds a composite African American folk hero, composed of three rural men, who fail to make it in the new urban world. Battling against the invisible institutions of racial oppression, the novel subverts the White/Black oppositions by opposing the subtleties of irony. In parting with the racist dichotomies, which cement race relations in American society, he offers, instead, to illuminate the hidden truth about his characters' psychology and their dream for a better future.

Fleeing the overseer's wreath, the Moss brothers board the next boxcar for a northern town. Upon their arrival, they gradually discover their new and strange world «lined with mountains of red ore, yellow limestone and black coke. None of this was good to the eyes of men accustomed to the pattern of fields» (*BF*, 43). The green hills of Kentucky, symbol of life, are replaced by a desolate landscape made of rust. This polluted atmosphere signals death, the dying and decaying state of modern society. Like the black prostitute whose rotten breast can be smelt miles away and the incestuous relationship between the children of European immigrants, the mill community is eaten up by a cancer from inside out. In this context dominated by the collapse of moral values and rigged by all types of frustrations, Melody has sex with Anna, Big Mat's girlfriend. While Anna, who dreams of petty things like red shoes, sees in Big Mat the incarnation of manhood, Big Mat and the other men feel trapped in a world of violence, despair and failure. Constantly threatened by the hazardous explosion of machines, their manhood is transferred on dog fights and sadistic violence. Similarly, Big Mat's is unable to preach the words babbling inside him, Melody loses his musical skills and Chinatown his sight. Unlike the South where escape was possible, the North is conducive to death and destruction.

3. The ironies of southern history

Blood on the Forge opens with the sad story of the violent death, plow in hands, of the mother of the Moss brothers. Old and overworked, Maw, as she is called by her children, collapses and is dragged to death by the plow mule. This traumatic event brings to the fore the image of the black woman as the mule. In her short story «Sweat», anthropologist and novelist, Zora Neale Hurston declares that the black woman is the mule of the world[6]. The similarities between the black woman and the mule are constructed in their association with work and their role of beast of burden in the

[6] Zora Neale Hurston, *I Love Myself When I Am Laughing*, New York, The Feminist Press, 1979, pp. 197-207.

patriarchal society. Both Maw and the mule suffer similar fates, which points to the racial and gender of oppression the black woman. While Maw dies of the wounds of her lacerated body, the enraged Big Mat «took a piece of flint rock and tore the life out of that mule, so that even the hide wasn't fit to sell» (*BF*, 7). Although the circumstances of their death are ironic occurrences which show their fate and suffering are alike, women fight back.

During a hot exchange between Chinatown and Hattie, Big Matt's wife, often beaten but never tamed, she verbally attacks Melody for his laziness and Chinatown's frivolous attachment to a gold tooth while they were starving. Using her wit, she threatens Chinatown that Big Mat will knock out his gold tooth out of his mouth. In the same breath, she scolds Melody for being a parasite. In response to her insults, Melody sings the hungry blues refrain which sets the tone of the novel:

> *Hungry blues done got me listenin' to my*
> *Love one cry...*
> *Put some vittles in my belly, or yo' honey*
> *Gonna lay down and die…* (*BF*, 3)

Melody's song describes the harsh living conditions and the ironic grain of the sharecropper's status. Despite his hard labor, the sharecropper is unable to feed his family and he constantly asks the white landowner favors: «*Mister Bossman, Mister Bossman, /Lemme mark in the book once mo'…* The «mellow, like the sound of hound dogs baying across a river» (*BF*, 3) music produced by Melody's guitar comes as a summary to Hattie's call and Chinatown's response. Commenting on the function of music, Bonnie Barthold writes that, «For Melody, his guitar provides a substitute for words» (1981: 165). In using the blues to express his thoughts, Melody avoids a direct confrontation with Hattie, and temporarily "slicks" away the hunger that is literally punching them. Similarly, the blues plays the role of mediation between the past and the future in which there will be no more hunger.

Building upon Robert Bone's argument, Melvin and Margaret Wade perceive not the blues, but rather a jazz form as a predominant structure of the novel. They argued that Attaway's novel has «a jazz structure» in which «man's struggle for survival and fulfillment in an industrialized society follows counterpoint patterns suggestive of a jazzman's attempt to play a melody»[7]. In Bonnie Barthold's analysis, however, the «jazzlike use of images of fragmentation […] carry the thematic burden of the novel and provide a solution to the problem of characterization in a novel whose characters are largely inarticulate, incapable of verbal expression» (1981: 165). Although the jazz and its modernizing influence on the novel's form is undeniable, the blues appears, historically speaking, as the most appropriate expression of sadness, suffering and pain as the individual strives against all odds. As a musical form that developed as a response to the traumatic black experience, the blues, contrary to the festive mode of the jazz, alleviates suffering and despair.

Caught in an exploitative labor system, the Moss brothers always owe the white landowner, Mr. Johnston, more money at the end of each harvest. As a result, they survive thanks to the leftovers he is willing to throw on them. Midway through the novel, Melody, Chinatown and Hattie are anxiously waiting for the return of Big Mat who went to butcher «them ailin' hogs for Mr. Johnston» (*BF*, 3) in return for some guts. The

[7] Melvin Wade and Margaret Wade. "The Black Aesthetic in the Black Novel", «Journal of Black Studies», June (1972), p. 395.

slaves of king cotton, but the main producers of agricultural products in the South, the sharecropper is, ironically, on the verge of starvation. Barely getting enough food to eat, the Moss brothers stubbornly hang on to their pastoral way of life. For Melody, however, the solution to their plight is to abandon sharecropping system altogether: «We jest niggers, makin' the white man crop for him. Leave him make his own crop, then we don't end up owin' him money every season» (*BF*, 5). The only solution to the debasing position of the Moss brothers is to flee away from the South. While the North has been idealized in the slave narratives, the journey up North symbolically replays the Middle Passage whereby black captives were introduced to a new form of life.

4. Trauma: exploration in memory

The Middle Passage or the crossing of the Atlantic onboard slave ships has been a perilous trip for millions of African slaves. In contemporary African American literature, the Middle Passage recalls the liminal passage from Africa to the New World with the unimaginable «horrors and suffering experienced by the slaves» (Diedrich 1999: 6). In chains, hungry, sick and shaken by the waves in the dark hold of the sailing boats, they either survived or died during the terrifying voyage. Many African American writers have tried to capture this defining moment in their fictional accounts. Paule Marshall's *Praisesong for the Widow* (1983) and Toni Morrison's *Beloved* (1986) try to reconstruct the unspeakable, traumatic and fetid conditions of the Middle Passage. While in the first novel, a wealthy middle class black woman goes through the suffocating experience of the Middle Passage in her hotel room, in *Beloved*, the title character narrates the violent and unspeakable trip endured by the slaves. In Morrison's novel this traumatic moment is signaled by the fragmentation in the narration showing to the collapse of language, marked by the lack of punctuations. In *Blood on the Forge* the physical and moral disintegration of a northern steel mill community operates through the violent eruption of the furnaces resulting in the death of some workers. This sudden eruption is also characteristic of the violence of modern life and the deadly nature of the steel industry in its infancy.

Following Big Mat's beating of the overseer who made disrespectful comments about his dead mother and threatened that he might gather a lynching mob against him, Big Mat and his brothers headed for the northern steel mills. Earlier that very day, Melody, Hattie and Chinatown received the visit of a white "jacklegger" who handed them a ten dollar bill and promised them a trip to the steel mills where they could make more money than they had ever dreamed of. Seizing this opportunity, the Moss brothers board the boxcar of the freight train on which they soon experience the suffocating, stinking stench, dark conditions similar to the Middle Passage. Arguing that the trip in the boxcar is a mimetic reflection of the Middle Passage, Bernard Bell observes that the «Symbolic description of the trip North in sealed boxcar trains, reveals Attaway's mythic vision of the black experience as he conjures up the helplessness, darkness, stench, congestion, misery and fear of the Middle Passage from Africa to the New World» (1987: 169).

As they emerge from the dark world of the boxcar train, the newcomers are symbolically born again in a strange world of giant steel machines. The green landscapes and sunny climate of Kentucky are replaced by heaps of ore and grey, hazy atmosphere. Their trip from the South up North mimics the Middle Passage or the trip in the hold of the slave boat. In Part Two of his novel, Attaway describes the horrible conditions in which black men are transported like hogs bond for the market or the slaughterhouse:

> Squatted on the straw-spread floor of a boxcar, bunched up like hogs headed for market, riding in the dark for what might have been years, knowing time only as dippers of warm water gulped whenever they were awake, helpless and drooping because they were headed into the unknown and there was no sun, they forgot even that they had eyes in their heads and crawled around in the boxcar, as though it were a solid thing of blackness.
>
> There were so many men in the car that for a long time Big Mat was lost from his brother […] warm urine began to flow into the corner where he sat. He did not move. [...] The air was, fetid with man smell and nervous sweat, the pounding of the wheels shaking the car and its prisoners like a gourd full of peas, the piercing scream of the wheels fighting the rails on a curve, the uniform dark—those things were common to all… [...] the wheels seemed to be saying crazy things, laughing crazy laughs, trying to draw him [Melody] into the present, trying to make him crazy like they were. Whatever came into his head was copied by the wheels (*BF*, 39-40).

In the pitch darkness of the boxcar, the singularities of the travelers are dissolved into a homogeneous mass and stench. As a result, the strong Big Mat «could not defend his identity against the pack» (*BF*, 39). He is totally disempowered in the sense that his physical strength does not help him in this context. Unable to move in the overcrowded boxcar, «a solid thing of darkness» (*BF*, 38), his helplessness is shown as he seats in another man's urines. While his misery is expressive of the breakdown of hygiene, Chinatown is haunted by the fear of losing his gold tooth. The rattling and shaking movements of the train grounds his tooth and it prevents him from sleeping and it threatens to knock out his treasured gold teeth out of his mouth. Melody's fear of losing what he cherishes most is a recurrent motive in American literature. In slave narratives, the journey across the Atlantic is literally a journey through physical and symbolic death indicated by the loss of folk culture.

5. The ironic contrasts in African American experience

The northward migration of African Americans delineates, according to Robert Stepto, an ascenting movement, which signifies the quest for freedom. In slave narratives such as, Frederick Douglass's *The Narrative of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave, Written by Himself* (1845) or William Wells Brown's *Narrative of the Life and Escape of William Wells Brown* (1852), this ritual journey maps out the escape from the oppressive South for the "Promised Land." Traditionally perceived as a dynamic and uplifting moment for the black race from slavery to freedom, the northern migration is reversed, pointing to the disillusionment of Attaway's characters. They are confronted with a strange landscape, a gloom atmosphere and are also threatened with violent death on a daily basis. The constant exposure of African American workers to the most dangerous activities is underlined by the historian of the blues, Paul Oliver who reports that, «In the steel factories many of the jobs were restricted, but the "open hearth" sections offered ready employment for Negroes; few others would work under the almost insufferable heat from the furnaces» (1970: 97).

Historically speaking, southern sharecroppers lacked experience into factory work and union struggles had made them the easy preys of a violent and exploitative system. In fact «the folk culture of the Southern migrants poorly prepared them for the industrialized North and for casting their lot with European immigrants against the industrial magnates» (Bell, 1987: 168). Routinely hired to break strike and unions composed mainly of European immigrants, black newcomers were exposed to violence and retaliation. A black co-worker of the Moss Brothers, Bo, was savagely beaten by the Slav and Italian workers for the active role he plays in discouraging his African American co-workers from joining the union. The recurrence of violent acts between black and western immigrant workers, and the hysterical reaction of their women when

Chinatown and Melody unintentionally run into them at the well, show the prevailing interracial tension. By the novel's end, Big Mat meets his tragic death. Deputized by the sheriff to help break a strike, he spread terror among the strikers as a sign of his manhood and power over white immigrants. In this temporary reversal of roles, Big Mat becomes the perpetrator of violence for the interest of white business owners. Throughout the novel, he is engaged into three acts of utter violence. In the first case he kills a mule to avenge his mother's death. In the second case, he saves the fighting dogs from men's sadistic games and in the third case he participates in breaking a strike. Through Big Mat's death, Attaway projects the image of an innocent man, untouched by history. By the same token, he deconstructs the idealized image of the benevolent North, the symbol of freedom and well-being in opposition to the South, which often stands for oppression. Despite all this, the human qualities and values embodied by the Moss brothers derive from their southern experience. As a matter of fact, the Moss brothers are ironically mutilated, traumatized, or killed in pursuit of the American Dream, which turns into a nightmare. Their stay in the North though dynamic and rich in events compared to their monotonous life in the South, it is also a reversal of the agricultural metaphor of seed and growth.

As a metaphor of barrenness, decay marked by violence and moral collapse, the North is the place of all types of vices and gross immorality. As Smothers, an old man and keeper of time at the mill plant warns, the digging of the earth is a violation. In the agricultural South, the land is not overused. Both sharecroppers and white plantation owners are fettered by king cotton, the cash crop. In a conversation with Mr. Johnston, the white landowner, Big Mat complains about the eroded and rocky soil which cannot produce anymore:

> It ain't jest the mule, suh. It's everythin'. Wind and rain comin'outen the heavens ever'season, takin' the good dirt down to the bottoms. Last season over the big hill the plow don't go six inches in the dirt afore it strike hard rock. Stuff jest don't come up like it use to. Us'll have a hard time makin' it on our share, mule or no—a hard time." (*BF*, 14)

Like the soil which cannot produce crops, Big Mat's wife cannot bear children. «Six springs, Hattie was big but she dropped her babies before they got together enough to be human» (*BF*, 21). For the deeply religious Big Mat, he is the «child of curse» that is why Hattie loses her babies and the land fails to produce. Mat's life in the South and in the North is a perpetual repetition. Like Sisyphus in the Greek myth, life is a constant beginning. Unlike Sisyphus, Big Mat's attempt to be in the oppressor shoes leads to his violent death. In joining with the forces of oppression, Big Mat separates himself from his community and rushes his spiritual death. With his new responsibility and the illusion of having power, he undermines the true sense of manhood, which for African Americans rings with standing up against the oppressors.

Conclusion

Attaway's «proletarian novel» is replete with, on the one hand, disenchantment and irony, on the other hand. Despite their innocence and goodwill, Attaway's characters are unable to overcome the limitations of their environment. Not only do they lose the idiosyncrasies which define and humanize them, but all their actions seem futile and doomed to fail. As they leave behind their oppressive pastoral lives in Kentucky farms for the brutal, violent, noisy steel-mill of Pittsburg in the North, the Moss brothers try to shade their old agricultural way of life for a new one. Submerged in a world not fertile breeding ground for creativity, the protagonists, the eldest brother, the virile and strong

Big Mat, the born musician and gifted guitar player, Melody and Chinatown who is sensitive to bright colors and adores pop-red lose their human qualities. The choice of the names of the protagonists and the ironic overtones of their fate does not obscure them. Using his characters as the objects of irony, Attaway transforms them into a vehicle for the criticism of racism. Taken individually, the Moss brothers are doomed to fail because individualism is ahistorical in the African American, wherein communal bonds are very strong. In his analysis of the three brothers in *Native Sons*, Edward Margolies points out that:

> together suggest a composite Negro folk personality. Melody, who will manage best in the ordeal ahead, is sensitive and poetic. He is so named because he is capable of articulating in song the folk life of the peasant. Chinatown is simple, lazy, sensual and hedonistic. He lives by towards symbols; his greatest source of pride is his gold tooth, because, as he puts it later, it shines and smiles at him. Mat, the dominant figure of the group, is huge, brooding and sullen. All his life he has suffered insults and humiliation at the hands of Whites, but he has managed for the most part to suppress his rage and adopt a glazed expression when he is most hurt (1968: 54).

Unlike the three legendary musketeers whose individual weaknesses are compensated by their collective strength, the human qualities of the Moss brothers do not add up or strengthen them as a group. Although they rely on one another to survive, their venture into an unknown world with different rules and realities, make them vulnerable. In fact, the Moss brothers fail to unite into an organic set to fight against the perils that beset them in the racist American society.

The ironic connotations of the ending of *Blood on the Forge* project the redemptive and resistant qualities of folk character as a response to the violent and destructive environment of the steel mills. In writing his novel, Attaway directed it to readers of mature imagination, capable of absorbing its multidimensional meaning, of which irony is one dimension.

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