THE NIGHTMARE OF INVISIBILITY

A STUDY OF THE RELATIONSHIP OF THEME AND STRUCTURE IN RALPH ELLISON'S

INVISIBLE MAN

A Thesis

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by

Alma Freeman Haskins, B.S.

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Approved by

[Signature]

Adviser

Department of English
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Invisible Man takes place, for the most part, in the uncharted spaces between the conscious and the subconscious, in the semi-lit darkness where nightmare verges on reality and the external world has all the aspects of a disturbing dream . . . .

[It is] set in a dimly familiar nightmare landscape called the United States . . . .

Jonathan Raumbach, "Nightmare of a Native Son"
CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

I. INVISIBILITY AND THE NIGHTMARE

"Who knows but that, on the lower frequencies, I speak for you?"

_Invisible Man_

Ralph Ellison has written but one novel to date—_Invisible Man_, 1952. (His second novel, _And Hickman Arrives_, is soon to be published.) Yet, this single novel has established him as a writer of enduring stature in American fiction.

_Invisible Man_ has been hailed as a "monumental novel"—the best of American Negro novels; a novel that can well be called an "epic of modern American Negro life."^1^ But _Invisible Man_ is not just a novel by a Negro about Negroes. Harvey Curtis Webster refers to it as "a work of art any contemporary writer could point to with pride"^2^; and Jonathan Baumbach says of it: "Ellison's novel is a kind of modern gothic... Ellison's world is... our world viewed in its essentials rather than its externals. The protagonist of _Invisible Man_ is... in Ellison's rendering, profoundly all of us."^3^ Thus, despite the special slant that Negroes may have upon it, _Invisible Man_ is truly a novel about being a human being, any human being and all human beings.

Ellison has thus gotten hold of a classic novelistic theme—
the search for identity in a confused and chaotic world: the
quest of the innocent hero for knowledge of reality, self, and
society. To convey this theme, Ellison has created his own personal
metaphor—"invisibility." The hero of *Invisible Man*, a complex and
intelligent young Negro man, aspires toward a reality that is, in
essence, only a dream: he desires to be recognized as a unique
individual apart from the expectations of society. At first he be-
lieves that he is seen and appreciated as a person. Despite warnings
and despite obstacles placed in his path, he continues to strive,
blind and dreaming, with naive faith that he can attain the best of
all possible worlds—and enjoy it. He seeks to make his dream a
reality. But, torn between contradictory factions operating in
society, he finds that his dream becomes a nightmare. Through his
nightmare experiences, he discovers the meaning of his own being
and the nature of his reality. He learns that he is an "invisible"
man because people refuse to see him. He exists only in the night-
marish fantasy of other people's minds. He, in fact, has been in-
visible all his life: he has never been seen as a human being and
as a unique individual. Indeed, the worth of the novel lies in its
perception—a perception of what rests at the heart of the difficulties
inherent in human relationships: the failure of men to see each other
as individuals; and further, the failure of men to exert themselves
and "run the risk of humanity."

"Invisibility" is Ellison's symbol for this loss of self.

Concerning this idea, he has been quoted as saying:
It is a concept I have played around with just to nail down certain tendencies which I have found in society. Invisibility has to do with the failure of most of us to regard the individual we contact as a human being. We resort to stereotypes, sometimes they are innocuous, sometimes they are dramatic. On the other hand, you have the failure of the individual to exert himself, to be mature, to run the risk of humanity—and so he contributes to his own invisibility.

This, Ellison's basic metaphor, carries the real weight of meaning in the novel.

Invisible Man is thickly endowed with symbols complementing this major metaphor. The novel draws heavily on Negro folk culture and, aside from its more complex structural elements, its composition is highly influenced by musical forms. These elements combine to present a nightmare touch that asserts itself at the beginning and grows as the story unfolds. The details of life are real and actual, but through Ellison's imagination they acquire a sense of the fantastic, the monstrous, the distorted; they expand to the grotesque proportions of a nightmare. This nightmare of invisibility is the life of the Negro in America which Ellison, through his artistic powers and profound vision of life, universalizes as the central dilemma of modern man.

The purpose of this study is to analyze Invisible Man, set in a world that has all the aspects of a disturbing dream, as it develops its central theme—the search for identity—around the basic metaphor of invisibility.
II. RALPH ELLISON: TOWARD INVISIBLE MAN

Negro writers... have their own task of contributing to the total image of the American by depicting the experience of their... group... Theirs is the task of defining Negro humanity.

Ralph Ellison, *Shadow and Act*

In telling his story of contemporary American life, Ellison has plunged into the center of the American experience. More forcefully, however, he has delved into the heart of the Negro experience and he explores with great artistic skill his profound vision of the Negro's anomalous position in American society. Obviously the experiences of the Negro--slavery, the continuing fight for full citizenship since emancipation, the stigma of color, segregation or enforced alienation which constantly cuts off his natural identification with his country--have not been those of other Americans. Thus the Negro experience involves matters that only the Negro author can explore and articulate because he knows and others do not and because he is an instrument of the Negro community. "A people must define itself" says Ellison in *Shadow and Act*. Hence it becomes the task of the Negro writer to attempt to assert the essential humanity of his group--to dissipate the shadow that obscures personality, to burst the stereotype that imprisons humanity--and define his group's experience as a "part of the composite image which is that of the still forming American people."5

This is the task that Ellison has set for himself in *Invisible Man*. He seeks to treat Negro culture, not as separate and distinct,
but as one of the many sub-cultures that help to make America what it is--a land of great diversity. To appreciate the importance of *Invisible Man*, it is useful to review some forces that helped to shape Ellison's fiction; namely, the peculiar historical experience of the American people which Ellison shares, the treatment of the Negro in American fiction which Ellison finds deceptive, and finally Ellison's move toward shaping *Invisible Man*—toward defining his group's experience and describing its relationship to America.

America, in a sense, is unique. Other nations grew; the United States was created. America became a nation through the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution, together with the Bill of Rights. The principles expounded in these documents comprise the idea on which America is based, and unite all Americans though they differ in nationality, in race, and in religion. These principles have further prompted the formulation of the American dream for a better, richer, and happier life for all American citizens. Perhaps it is this conscious creation of an American ideal that accounts for the essential dilemma that Americans face. For, as Ellison writes in "Society, Morality, and the Novel," "out of the consciously experimental... origins of the country has grown the obsession with defining the American experience..." This obsession has taken the form of a search for identity, "and who and what is American are still perplexing questions even today." It is therefore a basic fact that the American, in general, is not quite sure of his own identity. Commenting on this in *Shadow and Act*, Ellison writes:
... despite the impact of the American idea upon the world, the American himself has not been finally defined... the struggle between Americans as to what the American is to be is part of that democratic process through which the nation works to achieve itself. Out of this conflict the ideal American character—a type truly great enough to possess the greatness of the land, a delicately poised unity of divergencies—is slowly being born?

America, then, is a land of great diversity; we are a people desiring identity. The identity that we seek is one which will truly define us in all our variousness and amid all the turbulent change through which we have gone and will continue to go.

This need for identity is not so keenly felt in other nations because people in older civilizations have behind them centuries of a settled and defined culture. This offers them a mirror of their own identity. But America, as we know, is made up of immigrant stocks; hence, the many cultures and varying interests. Therefore, the transplanted American, tied to his ancestral past, yet alienated from it, is unable to take its identity upon himself. He is an adventurer seeking to establish his own culture and civilization in a new, evolving, fluid society. Desperately seeking his identity in the American future, he struggles to break away from his ancestral past. But still, the past remains. Every American is, then, in some sense, an outsider.

For the Negro American, however, the past has receded much farther than for any other group. Consequently, he faces the possibilities of American life more nakedly than the rest. Because of his peculiar experiences in American society, the Negro exists as the outsider and the stranger in the midst of American life. Hence, he
is a prototype experiencing the national problem of alienation and isolation. Remember in primitive societies the scapegoat was sacrificed to expiate the sins of the group. By taking the sins of others upon himself, the scapegoat experienced their guilt for them; he, the outcast, expressed the deeper and darker parts of their souls. This primitive concept can well be applied to the life of the Negro in America. For, as one critic writes, "more than others, the Negro runs the risk of anonymity, invisibility, of disappearance into stereotypes..." Thus it is not unusual for him to experience a sensation that he does not exist in the real world at all; rather he seems to exist in the nightmarish fantasy of the white American mind. If seen at all, he is seen only in terms of his category. Although the Negro is a passionate believer in democracy and identifies himself with the broader American ideals, his sense of reality derives primarily from an American experience which most white men have not had, and, therefore, with which they are reluctant to identify, even in imaginative forms.

In 1937 Sterling Brown noted that "the treatment of the Negro in American fiction, since it parallels his treatment in American life, has been naturally noted for injustice"; and Ellison indicates that "what white authors present as the Negro isn't even human." Instead it is "an image drained of humanity." Indeed the most persistent images of the Negro in American fiction appear as stereotypes, or as symbols of the white man's guilt which he compounds when, instead of suffering himself, he crucifies the black man. Hence, while the symbolic values of other characters are not direct results
of their race, the important trait of the Negro character is the fact that he is a Negro. Even such characters as Mark Twain's Nigger Jim, and Faulkner's Dilsey—as much as they differ and as deeply as the authors seem to understand them, their most significant characteristic is that they are Negroes. Joanna Burden in Faulkner's Light in August sees Negroes "not as people but as a thing, a shadow in which I lived, we lived, all white people"; and Quentin Compson says of the Negro: "A nigger is not a person so much as... a sort of obverse reflection of the white people he lives among."

This same attitude can be seen working in most representative novels by American Negroes. These writers may use the traditional images in a more controlled manner; nevertheless, use them they do. Seemingly, the Negro novelist's view of Negroes has been immensely affected by how he thinks white people see them. His greatest difficulty has been in presenting what he truly feels. Instead he depicts what Negroes are supposed to feel or are encouraged to feel. He tends to interpret the world and all its devices in terms of race. For example, the importance of race in the lives of Richard Wright's characters is quite obvious, although it seems to Cross Damon of The Outsider that the essential reality of his life is not his race but his being "an outsider." There is no doubt, however, that his alienation stems from his color. In view of these facts, when twentieth century fiction is presented as "American reality" the Negro American tends to reflect on what has been left out; but most of all he recognizes that what has been depicted as the Negro is devoid of humanity. In Invisible Man Ellison wanted to avoid this
approach by grappling with the whole inner problem of the Negro as a human person, rather than as a mere social abstraction symbolizing an exploited class.

Ellison is a Negro; he is an American, but more important he is a writer who believes that "good fiction is made of that which is real." In view of this belief, he could not avoid writing about the basic realities of American life. He consciously devotes himself to the task of shaping an artistic fiction from these realities which he has experienced. Ellison is not concerned, as he says, with "injustice, but with art." Using race symbolically to depict a specific circumstance, he reaches the universal in his novel. He compels identification on a deeper human level. As one critic says, "though the particular events of this story are the kind of thing that could have happened only to a Negro, I, as a white, was able to identify myself completely with the hero's frantic search."[11

Through his artistic concern, Ellison is able to expand the treatment of his subject to present a richly comic and deeply tragic soul-searching story that reveals profound insight into the baffling experiences of every man's struggle on the road to self-discovery. Indeed, Ellison's invisible man speaks in an obvious way for everyone. But first of all he speaks for the artist seeking definition through his art.

Very early in his career, Ellison was faced with the problem of finding the most desirable means for defining himself. Always a musician at heart and coming from a background in which music played a significant role, he firmly believed that his real self was destined
to be fulfilled through music. But always an avid reader as well, he soon came to devote as much time to reading and writing as to music. Through the act of reading he became acquainted with other possible selves than those formulas through which other writers, Negro and white, had sought to depict his group's identity. His developing awareness of reality taught him to reject bias while appreciating the truth revealed by achieved art. He thus rejected all negative definitions imposed upon him by others and fiction became the agency through which he would seek to find personal fulfillment and to assert his essential humanity. In his search to relate himself to American life through literature, he found that his greatest difficulty, like that of other Negro writers, would be in revealing what he truly felt and,

linked to this was the difficulty, based upon our long habit of deception and evasion, of depicting what really happened within our own areas of American life, and putting down with honesty and without bowing to ideological expediencies the attitudes and values which give Negro life its sense of wholeness and which render it bearable and human and, when measured by our own terms, desirable.\textsuperscript{12}

In view of this, he resolved to search for those relationships and values fundamental to the individual. Through fiction he would answer the questions: "... Who am I, and what am I, how did I come to be?... What does American society mean when regarded out of my own eyes, when informed by my own sense of the past and viewed by my own sense of the present?"\textsuperscript{13} He felt that much Negro fiction fails precisely because the writer refuses "to achieve a vision of life and resourcefulness of craft commensurate with the complexity of his situation."\textsuperscript{14} Too often he refuses to abandon race for art.
Ellison's latent interest in writing serious literature was aroused in 1935 with a reading of T.S. Eliot's *The Waste Land* which, he says, moved and intrigued him but defied his literary powers of analysis, and he wondered why he had never read anything of equal intensity and sensibility by an American Negro writer. He later came under the influence of Richard Wright and began publishing in Wright's magazine *The New Challenge* in 1937. In succeeding years he contributed book reviews, short stories, and essays to a number of magazines, among which were the *New Masses* and the *Negro Quarterly*. Much of his early production is dedicated to shocked outrage at obvious injustices and reflects the same frustrations that Wright saw as the first conditions of Negro life. A story of 1940, "The Birthmark," moves swiftly beyond the fact of a lynching to a violent apprehension of the guilt, the historical determinations, and the fear that have their issue in the crime.

In these years, however, Ellison moved in a literary world, and read much criticism and fiction not devoted to the question of Civil Rights. He continued to write and studied Hemingway, Malraux, James Joyce, T.S. Eliot, and Dostoevsky, among others. He read Hemingway especially to learn sentence structure and to learn how to organize a story. Hemingway, he says, had discovered the patterns of modern American speech and had thus broadened his stylistic appeal. But he felt that technique was, for Hemingway, an end in itself; he gave to the act of writing priority over public morality. Ellison, on the other hand, believed fiction to be by nature socially engaged. He thus discovered what Hemingway did not offer him. However, he was
intrigued by Malraux's *Man's Fate* and indicates that the book lives because of its larger concern with the tragic struggle of humanity. In T.S. Eliot and James Joyce Ellison saw a defining in literature of myth, nationality, and folklore. And he describes in an interview his gradual realization "That the myths and rites which we find functioning in our everyday lives could be used in the same way" as "ancient myth and ritual" were used by Joyce and Eliot. He saw folklore as the clue to defining a group's humanity, for it offers the first drawings of a group's character:

It describes those rites, manners, customs, and so forth, which insure the good life, or destroy it; and it describes those boundaries of feeling, thought and action which that particular group has found to be the limitation of the human condition. It projects this wisdom in symbols which express the group's will to survive; it embodies those values by which the group lives and dies.17

And he viewed Negro folklore as "an important segment of the larger American experience—not lying at the bottom of it, but intertwined, diffused in its very texture":

It announced the Negro's willingness to trust his own experience, his own sensibilities as to the definition of reality, rather than allow his masters to define these crucial matters for him. His experience is that of America and the West, and is as rich a body of experience as one would find anywhere.18

Ellison's concern with Negro folklore and ritual brought him face to face with the Negro problem from a different angle than before. In this period he seems to have become less interested in racial injustice and more concerned with finding a new definition of Negro culture and with the problem of acceptance of a Negro folk identity. Two stories of this period evince his growing concern
with Negro culture and reveal some features that went into the shaping of *Invisible Man*.

"Mr. Toussan" (1941)\(^1\) shows Ellison's direction in shaping a story in which Negro folk patterns might be discovered. The story invents two Negro boys, Riley and Buster, who have robbed the cherry trees of a white neighbor. They have been shoed away with a shotgun, and as they sit and loll on Riley's porch watching the mockingbirds freely attacking the orchard, Riley is reminded of a school lesson and he recites his interpretation of the story of Mr. Toussan. In this respect there seems to be the intention of making a folk hero for the Negro masses. Much emphasis is placed on the freedom of the mockingbirds and the boys' speculation on flight take the form of a Negro wishing game. Watching a pigeon escape from an automobile, the boys think that if they had wings they would fly a zillion miles away, maybe to Chicago, "or anywhere else colored is free." The significant point about Riley and Buster is that they act and especially talk like Negroes. The dialect has its own music, and it sounds authentic. The Toussaint story takes the form of a chant and the entire story is fitted into the pattern of a Negro slave tale ending with a purely formal rhyme. This story especially reveals, as Ellison has said, that he had trouble in adapting myth and ritual to his work. The manner and the purported subject of the story have little to do with each other.

Two years later, Ellison again uses Riley and Buster in another story, "That I Had the Wings."\(^2\) Here the symbolism of birds
and flight is quite obvious—a symbolism repeated in other stories and in *Invisible Man*. It is Riley's wanting to be able to fly that provides the occasion for the story. Riley and Buster try to teach some baby chicks to fly by dropping them from the roof of the barn. But chicks don't fly and these are murdered in the process. The story is lighthearted and comical, but its intention is more serious. The application of folk character, the chanting, the rhyming, the musical conversation, the mythicizing of folk heroes—in this case Louis Armstrong—the comic rebellious nature of Riley ("Amazin grace how sweet the sound. A bullfrog slapped his gramma down.")—these exemplify an effort to create a pattern of Negro initiation and inevitable failure. The conflict in the story lies in Riley's opposition to his Aunt Kate and all she represents "born way back in slavery times." He is a part of her. The songs he sings, the rhymes he uses, are all parodies of hers. At the same time her songs, her religion, her slave-mindedness, her concern that he learn his place in the white world—are emasculating for Riley. While he is concerned with learning the secret of flight—with teaching the chicks to fly—he exemplifies an energetic attempt to assert himself beyond his prescribed place. But he turns to answer Aunt Kate when he should have been catching the chicks, and his ironic initiation occurs. The chicks are killed. The old rooster charges Riley and wounds him. When he becomes involved with his own history, with his Negro-ness, his possibilities snap closed. This pattern of initiation and inevitable failure is a main feature of *Invisible Man*.

The war seems to have forced on Ellison the immediate problem
of identity—the problem of the Negro-ness and the American-ness of Negroes. War, Ellison has said, forced many Negroes to face their feelings for their country for the first time. They discovered that regardless of second class citizenship, they were Americans and America was the country they loved.

"In a Strange Country," a story published in 1944, takes its hero, an American Negro sailor, to a town in Wales. As he leaves the ship he is attacked by a gang of white American sailors and he is rescued and befriended by some local Welshmen. For these men color does not exist. Yet, ironically enough, they regard him as a black Yank. The sailor reflects that the beating he has just received is part of a family quarrel, which Welshmen cannot understand—that America is his only country, that he is a black Yank. As the Welshmen gather to sing a national hymn, he finds himself singing "The Star Spangled Banner."

The war probably led Ellison to his discovery that the American democratic idea was the proper idea for the American novelist. He thus turned to the nineteenth century American Novelists who, he has said, gave him the spirit of moral assertion with which he wrote

Invisible Man:

... I felt that, except for the work of William Faulkner, something vital had gone out of American prose after Mark Twain. I came to believe that the writers of that period took a much greater responsibility for the condition of democracy, that they still possessed the frontiersman's awareness that the country, while great with promise, was still unknown and mysterious, and I came to believe as well that they truly believed in democracy and that, indeed, their works were imaginative projections of the conflicts within the human heart which arose when the sacred principles of the
Constitution and the Bill of Rights clashed with the practical exigencies of human greed and fear, hate and love.  

A final story, "King of the Bingo Game," published in 1944, provides an excellent lead into further artistic shapings of Invisible Man. The story presents an anonymous Negro who is unemployed and cannot get work because he has no birth certificate. His wife is going to die because he has no money to get her to a doctor. As he sits in a movie theater waiting for the bingo game, he has a sense that the wheel and all fate is fixed, fixed against him. When the game begins, he feels a sheer hopelessness. He does win, but he stumbles into a sort of nightmare. He is told that as a further reward he will be allowed to press the button that spins the wheel. If the wheel comes to rest at double-zero, he will win the jackpot. He presses the button and continues to press it; he can't let go. He realizes suddenly that so long as he presses the button, he has mastered the wheel. It crosses his mind that he has forgotten his name, but no matter, he has been reborn. He is now the-man-who-pressed-the-button-who-held-the-prize-who-was-the-King-of-Bingo. Through the struggles of two policemen, the button is finally taken away from him. Without surprise he watches the wheel come to rest at double-zero. He has learned the secret. He will receive what all winners receive. But he receives a blow from behind and feels only the pain exploding in his skull. His last thought is that his luck has run out on the stage.

The story is set in a world of flickering, mocking perspectives,
in a movie theater. The only naturalistic element in it is the fact that the hero is unemployed. His world is a movie theater, a cave of muffled noises and shadowy images, presentiments of reality. His madness, his journey out of the world is just the experience of the hero of *Invisible Man*. He, too, inhabits a world that seems fixed, and that enlarges into nightmarish distortions of reality.
FOOTNOTES


18 Ibid., p. 173.


21 Tomorrow, III (July, 1944), pp. 41-44.


23 Tomorrow, IV (November, 1944), pp. 29-33.
CHAPTER TWO

THE ENDING IS IN THE BEGINNING

"... That (by contradiction, I mean) is how the world moves: Not like an arrow, but a boomerang."

Invisible Man

In Invisible Man, Ellison has endeavored to give a form to his vision of the contradictions and conflicts inherent in modern society. He has also attempted to conceive, against these, a suitable plan or pattern for living. In his speech accepting the National Book Award in 1953, Ellison presents interesting sidelights on his quest for an adequate literary mode that would enable him to effectively perform this task.

Because he views American society as fluid, free, and rapidly changing, Ellison states that to portray his attitude toward American life, he "was to dream of a prose which was flexible, and swift as American change was swift, confronting the inequalities of our society forthrightly, but yet thrusting forth its images of hope, human fraternity, and individual self-realization." He was to seek an effective method that would allow him to describe his vision of the limitations imposed by society on individual assertion; and, at the same time enable him to express his belief that beneath its confusion, this society is filled with possibility. Ellison, however, apprehends this confusion through a particular cultural
screen. The pre-condition of his work is the conscious experience of Negro culture as one of the highly developed sub-cultures existing in America. Thus Ellison's vision of the limitations and possibilities of Negro American life greatly influenced his search for a means of artistic expression. His style, like that of any good writer, flows from his view of reality, and this in turn flows from his experience as a Negro. His unique experience, Ellison insists, requires unique literary forms. In his search, he therefore found the forms employed by many twentieth century novelists inadequate for his purposes:

After the usual apprenticeship of imitation and seeking with extreme delight to examine my experience through the discipline of the novel, I became gradually aware that the forms of so many of the works which impressed me were too restricted to contain the experience which I knew." Ellison felt that "the diversity of American life with its extreme fluidity and openness" was "too vital and alive to be caught for more than the briefest instant in the tight well-made Jamesian novel, which was, for all its artistic perfection, too concerned with 'good taste' and stable areas." Neither could he safely employ the forms of the "hard-boiled" novel. A major problem in adopting this "hard-boiled" idiom lay in the language and the dialogue. Although, Ellison asserts, its "hard-boiled stance and its monosyllabic utterance" represent "shining achievements" in twentieth century American writing, he found that, for him, it would not produce desirable effects:

For despite the notion that its rhythms were those of everyday speech, I found that when compared with the rich babel of
idiomatic expression around me, a language full of imagery and gesture and rhetorical caniness, it was embarrassingly austere. Our speech I found resounding with an alive language swirling with over three hundred years of American living, a mixture of the folk, the Biblical, the scientific and the political. Slangy in one instance, academic in another, loaded poetically with imagery at one moment, mathematically bare of imagery in the next.  

Ellison was also dissatisfied with the picture of reality presented in these works:

As for the rather rigid concepts of reality which informed a number of the works which impressed me and to which I owe a great deal, I was forced to conclude that reality was far more mysterious and uncertain, and more exciting, and still, despite its raw violence and capriciousness, more promising. . . . To attempt to express that American experience which has carried one back and forth and up and down the land and across . . . from contact with slavery to contact with a world of advanced scholarship . . . is simply to burst such neatly understated forms of the novel asunder.  

Ellison insists that he needed a novelistic form whose "range was both broader and deeper"; therefore, he turned to the nineteenth century American novelists such as Mark Twain and Herman Melville, among others. As a Negro, he says, he was naturally attracted to these writers, for

Whatever they thought of my people per se, in their imaginative economy the Negro symbolized both the man lowest down and the mysterious, underground aspect of human personality. In a sense the Negro was the gauge of the human condition as it waxed and waned in our democracy. These writers were willing to confront the broad complexities of American life. . . .  

Since Ellison was seeking as well to give voice to his vision of the perplexity that the American Negro inherits, and to give to this the complex dignity of art, he was forced, as he indicates, to conceive of a novel "unburdened by the narrow naturalism" of so much current fiction. This novel would use the richness of Negro American speech,
the idiomatic expressions and the rhetorical flourishes from past periods which are still alive in the American society. Ellison believed that a fiction must be possible which, "leaving sociology to the scientists, can arrive at the truth about the human condition, here and now, with all the bright magic of a fairy tale." 7

In repudiating naturalism, Ellison turned to the broad tradition established by James Joyce and William Faulkner, among others. Like them, he found the shattered forms of post-impressionism most effective in portraying his vision of the dissension in the modern world.

_Invisible Man_, resembling in theme such novels as J.D. Salinger's _The Catcher in the Rye_ and Saul Bellow's _The Adventures of Augie March_, chronicles a series of initiatory experiences through which its naive hero learns, to his disillusion and horror, the way of the world. It is a novel about innocence and human error, a struggle through illusion to reality. Unlike these other novels of passage, _Invisible Man_, often satirical and at times cartooned, depicts a world both real and surreal, comic and tragic, grotesque and normal—a world that achieves all the aspects of a nightmare.

This phantasmagoria of fact and fiction is projected in picaresque form. The picaresque movement is geographical and intellectual—from South to North, from innocence to knowledge. Episodic in nature, the novel explores a broad range of Negro American life and folk culture. It contains sermons, speeches, jokes, rites, myths, puns, and a particularly comic undercutting of the white man's stereotype of the Negro. It employs a background of musical accompaniment,
mainly jazz and the blues. Ellison's formal knowledge of jazz has greatly influenced the composition of the novel. Drawing upon the American joke and the Negro blues, Ellison exploits the resources of irony. The novel is charged with ironic contradictions; it is neither comic nor tragic. These structural elements are skillfully woven together by strands of complex symbolism. As suggested by the title, _Invisible Man_, vision and the lack of vision provide the key symbols and images in terms of which Ellison constructs his novel. These symbols and images function to complement and to reinforce the basic metaphor of invisibility which emerges as the focal point of the novel. This negative metaphor, created through the novel, effectively holds together, for a moment, the long experience of strife that has met Ellison's vision. Indeed, the prologue introduces this central metaphor around which the events of the narrative revolve.

In the prologue, the reader first encounters Ellison's invisible man, like a bear, by his own admission, hibernating, unknown to anyone in a Harlem tenement basement. Here he reflects on his past experiences and writes his memoirs recounting episodes in his life attempting to show how, he, all of his life has been invisible—a fact that he had to learn through experience. He is invisible first of all because people do not see him as an individual. Instead they see him only in terms of the roles that they project onto him. But his invisibility is not only in the fact that others do not recognize his individual humanity. It is also in the very nature of his being, his existence, that he is invisible. All of his life, he says at the
beginning of his memoir, he had been looking for himself and asking everyone except himself questions which only he could answer. Only after much painful boomeranging of his expectations did he finally realize that he was no one except himself. But first he had to learn who he was. He had to discover that he was an invisible man. It is the process of boomeranging that moves the invisible man through his adventures from illusion to reality and proves his essential invisibility. For, all of his acts and expectations return upon him simply because he fails to assert his own individual personality, but accepts the roles that others project onto him.

A profitable method of dealing with *Invisible Man* is to see the action as a circular voyage, consisting of several prominent adventures, ending precisely where it began. The action proper is contained between the prologue and the epilogue. The narrator begins his story in the prologue in time present. Here, exiled in his underground home, he acknowledges his invisibility, and in a flashback, relates the experiences that led to his descent. The flashback comprises the hero's adventures as he struggles through illusion to reality. The narration of these adventures begins in the South and traces the career of the promising youth, with his illusions about becoming a new Booker T. Washington, as he passes from high school, to a Negro college, to Harlem; then, as he finds his way into and out of industry and politics. Finally, the epilogue brings the hero back to his present condition as an underground, but incipiently emergent man. Here he discovers what he had not learned throughout the course of his adventures.
The narrative moves in a series of circles. The hero's adventures, though they vary in character, scope, and intensity, revolve around a common center. Each travels back to the same meaning; each is, in a sense, a repetition of each of the others. Together they constitute a single dramatic action and take the form of initiatory episodes; the pattern is a quest for identity denied the hero by both society and himself. Others see him only as a social category, and the hero himself passes from stage to stage accepting new definitions of his identity, or the social role that he is to play as defined for him by others. He refuses to make his own decisions, to think for himself—"to run the risk of his own humanity." This is the specific form of his invisibility. The major flaw in the hero's character is his unquestioning willingness to do what is required of him by others as a way to success. He goes where he is told to go and does what he is told to do. This is the specific form of his innocence. In each adventure an accident occurs that moves the hero along to the next adventure. The accident, resulting from his innocence, is always an unavoidable lapse from the propriety he struggles to maintain, and functions to reveal to him that he is not a person in his relations to others but a role. It further reveals the kind of role he plays. It is always the same. The hero does not fully perceive the lesson in these accidents until he nears the end of his last adventure. Thus each episode functions to advance the hero's journey from innocence to knowledge; and, further, to confirm the fact that this young man is condemned to an unremitting and fruitless struggle to achieve an identity. His experiences, devoted
to this one perpetual struggle, all return to the same meaning: that he refuses to assert his own humanity and that others see him as anything and everything except himself. He is an invisible man, but he does not know it.

Lacking perception, he is plunged through a series of violent events and ends where he began, as an invisible man. In the end, however, there is one difference. He is no longer innocent and blind but has gained knowledge and perception. He now knows that he is invisible. In this sense, the entire novel is an initiation rite carrying its hero through a series of initiatory stages and groups of identification. The hero passes from one stage to another acting out his various and conflicting sub-personalities. At each stage he is still innocent and blind, but gradually receiving enlightenment. Maximum insight comes only in the final episode where the hero, underground in a cellar, discovers the ways of the world. Here, through reflection, he learns that before he can have some voice in his own destiny, he must discard all identities imposed on him by others. He must learn to think for himself and make his own decisions. He must assert and achieve his own humanity.

_Invisible Man_ thus sets out to gain clarity. Its task is just the perception of the obvious which is not seen. Its end is in its beginning. At each stage the novel clarifies and reinforces the hero's dilemma and thereby illuminates various conflicting tendencies inherent in the over-all human condition.

Meanwhile, the reader can understand symbolically one of the hero's preoccupations while in hibernation. Around him in the dark
basement, he has rigged electric fixtures. He has tapped a power line and is currently stealing the electricity that illuminates his underground home. On the ceiling and walls there are now 1,369 lighted bulbs. Such enlightenment metaphorically sets the tone of the novel. The hero's story reveals the growth of his consciousness from ignorance to knowledge, from darkness to light. Symbolically, the hero illuminates the walls and ceiling of the basement and as he adds more light, his perception increases. His hibernation, however, must come to an end, for, as he says, "a hibernation is a covert preparation for a more overt action." Yet, for the time—and for the emphasis of the novel—his past disillusioning experiences must be narrated. The means of his discovery he must now make plain to the world. He must seek to organize his perception of reality and devise, for an invisible man, some appropriate means of living in a society torn by contradictions, a society blind to his existence as a human being, a society in which he has encountered only dissension.

Because the mode of narration is impressionistic, Ellison conveys a large part of the novel's meaning through an imaginative range of symbols and images. The hero's adventures represent a journey from darkness to light, from blindness to perception, from invisibility to visibility. His greatest need is to see. His foremost desire is to be seen. Thus, the dominant symbols and images in the novel have to do with light and darkness, vision and the lack of vision. The hero is invisible not because he lacks substance, but because others refuse to see him. But this invisibility is not peculiar to him:
That invisibility to which I refer occurs because of a peculiar disposition of the eyes of those with whom I come in contact. A matter of the construction of their inner eyes, those eyes with which they look through their physical eyes upon reality. 9

Thus, the concept of invisibility implies sightlessness in others. In the battle royal scene, the hero is literally blindfolded to fight in the ring; throughout the rest of the story he remains blinded by his own ambitions. The metaphor of blindness thus serves to reinforce the metaphor of invisibility. Certain characters are described in various ways as blind and there is constant allusion to eyes and much punning on vision. Some characters have "empty," "blank," or "closed" eyes. The Reverend Homer Barbee who eulogizes the "empty-eyed" Founder is totally blind, and Brother Jack of the Brotherhood has a glass eye. The paint produced by the Liberty Paint Company is called "Optic White." In the hospital, the hero is troubled by the bulging eyes of the doctor, and a "bright third eye" which he cannot rationally explain. Then there is the darkness of the coal cellar which comes to symbolize a means of escape for the hero and finally a home flooded with light. Only through a close, detailed examination of the symbolism of Invisible Man can one ascertain how skillfully Ellison weaves these symbols and images into the warp and woof of his fiction.

Ellison's perception of the confusion and contradiction implicit in American life, as seen from the perspective of the Negro community, has largely determined the style that he adopted for Invisible Man. To fulfill the task of asserting the essential humanity of his group, defining its experience and relating this experience to American life, Ellison draws heavily upon the raw materials of the
Negro folk tradition and the idea of the "American Joke." With these elements, he provides substance for the body of his fiction and thereby enhances the formal patterns of his novel. He thus fills in the bare outlines of the invisible hero's faltering journey toward self-definition. Through his hero's adventures, Ellison attempts to explore a broad range of the Negro American experience. He depicts the concrete richness of Negro culture convincingly and with unapologetic relish. This "American Negro culture" Ellison defines as being "expressed in a body of folklore, in the musical forms of the spirituals, the blues and jazz; an idiomatic version of American speech . . . a cuisine; a body of dance forms. . . ."

But what indeed does this folk tradition have to offer the human experience which is literature? Ellison states that

Taken as a whole, its spirituals along with its blues, jazz and folk tales, it has . . . much to tell us of the faith, humor and adaptability to reality necessary to live in a world which has taken on so much of the insecurity and blues-like absurdity known to those who brought it into being. For those who are able to translate its meanings into wider, more precise vocabularies it has much to offer indeed."

What stylistic resources, then, can the folk culture offer the creative writer? Consider, for example, the language of the American Negro: the rich babel of idiomatic expressions, the richness of imagery and gesture; or the rhetorical skill of the American Negro, whose verbal expression, under slavery, was necessarily oral. The revival meeting, the funeral sermon, the graduation address, the political speech are all effectively employed by Ellison in Invisible Man. Then there are the sonorous Biblical phrases which season the
dialogue, along with the spicier ingredients of jive. The following random examples present evidence of the many kinds of speech that Ellison transcribes:

A Harlem sharpster:

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; I was drinking me some budweiser and diggin' the doings—When here comes the cop up the street, riding like cowboys, man... 12

A preacher at a Negro college:

Picture it, my friends: the clouds of darkness all over the land, black folk and white folk full of fear and hate, wanting to go forward, but each fearful of the other... All this... had been told and retold throughout the land, inspiring a humble but fast rising people. 13

A West Indian African Nationalist:

Don't deny you'self! It took a billion gallons of black blood to make you. Recognize you'self inside and you wan the kings among men! A mahn knows he's a mahn when he got not'ing when he's naked—nobody have to tell him that. 14

One of the nuances of Negro speech exploited by Ellison is the sheer delight in verbal play, in pure sound. For example:

"Then came the squad of drum majorettes... who pranced and twirled and just plain girled in the enthusiastic interest of Brotherhood." 15 And closer to its folk origin is this bit of dialogue: "I'll verse you but I won't curse you—My name is Peter Wheatstraw, I'm the Devil's son-in-law, so roll 'em! You a Southern boy ain't you?" 16 Intellectualized once more: a college professor, lecturing on Joyce remarks, "Stephen's problem, like ours, was not actually one of creating the uncreated conscience of his race, but of creating the uncreated features of his face." 17
There are also certain themes, images, and symbols in the novel based on folk material. For example, there is the old saying among Negroes that if you're black, stay back; if you're brown, stick around; if you're white, you're right. This, the "white-is-right" theme, threads its way throughout *Invisible Man*. There is also the line of imagery based upon the folklore motif of Brer Bear and Brer Rabbit. Then too there is the joke Negroes tell on themselves about their being so black they can't be seen in the dark. This idea is directly related to the concept of invisibility and is played out when, at the end of the novel, the hero falls into a coal bin. Ellison merges this sort of thing with the traditional American and Western European symbology of black and white, good and evil, ignorance and knowledge.

Jazz and the blues form an important part of Ellison's consciousness and, consequently, of his style. Jazz forms influence the composition of the novel. Something is always going on in the background of Ellison's prose—something not quite heard at first, but nevertheless insistent which produces a feeling of depth and resonance when finally perceived. The circling, diving, plummeting pigeons hovering in the background during Tod Clifton's shooting will serve to illustrate the point:

They were coming my way, passing a newsstand, and I saw the rails in the asphalt and a fire plug at the curb and the flying birds . . . just as the cop pushed him, jolting him forward and Clifton trying to keep the box from swinging against his leg and saying something over his shoulder and going forward as one of the pigeons swung down into the street and up again, leaving a feather floating white in the dazzling backlight of the sun . . . and somewhere between the dull roar of traffic and the subway vibrating underground I heard rapid
explosions and saw each pigeon diving wildly as though black-jacked by the sound, and the cop sitting up straight now, and rising to his knees looking steadily at Clifton, and the pigeons plummeting swiftly into the trees, and Clifton still facing the cop and suddenly crumpling.18

Ellison seems to write a thematic line and then orchestrate it; that is, he arranges and combines certain elements and thereby achieves a maximum effect. The Blue Mood is introduced in the prologue with Louis Armstrong's not so innocent question, "What did I do to be so black and blue?" The blue note is sustained throughout the novel by occasional snatches of blues lyrics. Thus, with the formal sense of a jazz musician and the instinct of a singer of blues, Ellison, in Invisible Man, enhances the fluidity of his style and gives form and meaning to his sense of chaos and confusion.

Invisible Man, as Ellison has insisted in rebuttal to those critics who would treat the novel as fictionalized sociology, or a dramatization of archetypal images, is an artist's attempt to create a form. Speaking of the improvisations of jazz musicians, Ellison indicates that he learned from them "the discipline and devotion of his art required of the artist":

Their driving motivation was . . . the will to achieve the most eloquent expression of idea-emotions through the technical mastery of their instruments . . . the end of all this discipline and technical mastery was the desire to express an affirmative way of life through its musical tradition and this tradition insisted that each artist achieve his creativity within its frame. He must learn the best of the past, and add to it his personal vision. Life could be harsh, loud and wrong if it wished . . . and when they expressed their attitude toward the world it was with a fluid style that reduced the chaos to living form.19

Referring again to the jazzman, Ellison explicitly describes what
he means by form: Form "represents a definition of his identity; as a member of the collectivity, and as a link in the chain of tradition. . . ."20 Because of its very pursuit of the uniqueness of individuality, the successful definition of an individual demands individual assertion within and against the group; hence, it must be individually exclusive and mutually contradictory on any logical terms. Contradiction, then, is a part of man's attempt at self-definition; it is inherent in man's existence. Since art seeks to reveal the mysteries of human life, contradiction is implicit in the art form itself, and is therefore the moving force of the invisible man's search for identity.

For Ellison, the blues is the meaning of man's existence and in the end is also the meaning of Invisible Man. Ellison's interpretations of the blues might well be taken as explanations of what he intends in his novel. Ellison defines the blues as

... an impulse to keep the painful details and episodes of a brutal experience alive in one's aching consciousness, to finger its jagged grain, and to transcend it, not by the consolation of philosophy but by squeezing from it a near-tragic, near-comic lyricism.21

An "art of ambiguity," the blues is a symbolic expression of the human condition:

... an assertion of the irrepressibly human over-all circumstance, whether created by others or by one's own human failings. They are the only consistent art in the United States which constantly remind us of our limitations while encouraging us to see how far we can actually go. When understood in their more profound implications, they are a corrective, an attempt to draw a line upon man's own limitless assertion.22

The blues express all the ambiguities, contradictions, possibilities,
hopes, and limitations that lie in the human circumstance: "Their attraction lies in this, that they at once express both the agony of life and the possibility of conquering it through sheer toughness of spirit." Invisible Man possesses the spirit of the blues, for, indeed, this is the genuine over-all expression of the narrator's story. The hero of Invisible Man, in telling his tale, sings his own blues, and by singing the blues, discovers his own being and the nature of his own reality.

At the core of the meaning of the blues lie all the ambivalences, hopes, freedoms, limitations, possibilities, and mysteries that lie beneath the surface of what man calls reality. At this same core, then, lies the American joke of contradiction; that is, the mystery of idealistic hope and demonic limitation. The American joke, as Ellison perceives it, is born of cultural contradictions; it is a child of diversity. In an essay, Ellison has described those ambiguous and conflicting forces of American life which the American writer must confront:

For the ex-colonials, the declaration of an American identity meant the assumption of a mask, and it imposed not only the discipline of national self-consciousness, it gave Americans an ironic awareness of the joke that always lies between appearance and reality, between the discontinuity of social tradition and that sense of the past which clings to the mind. And perhaps even an awareness of the joke that society is man's creation, not God's. The joke and the blues find their common ground in the attempt to reconcile opposites: ". . . there is a mystery in the whiteness of blackness, the innocence of evil, and the evil of innocence, though being initiates, Negroes express the joke of it in the Blues."
The pain of it, however, seems to lie in the joke and that is what is meant by irony—the mediation between poles of awareness. Ellison thus merges the idea of the joke and the feeling of the blues and thereby exhibits an ironic awareness of the pains inherent in the human condition, and of the possibility of transcending these pains.

Thus, the form of the invisible man's initiation is the form irony takes—the novel is neither comic nor tragic. It pivots on the ironic fulcrum of the blues theme. It also presents a tragi-comedy of people whom now we see and now we don't see. It depicts hysteria, violence, nightmare, and pain. At the same time, it employs slapstick, absurdity, grotesque laughter, and puns. The framework provided by the prologue and the epilogue places the events in a double perspective. The narrator speaks in the first person and he must be actor and spectator, defender and judge. Then there are certain passages, or jazz-like improvisations in italics which enable the narrator to remove himself from the action, extending his consciousness back and forth over the whole sweep of his life, standing, as it were, in disembodied fashion outside of it all. In their spoken idiom, a people may betray their innermost thoughts and feelings. The things they laugh at may equally reveal their innermost values. With this heritage of laughter-to-keep-from-crying, Ellison balances adroitly on the thin line that divides comedy from tragedy, and this double vision, this ability to perceive events as at once poignant and faintly ridiculous, introduces a subtle emotional tension into the novel. The solvent for this tension is a pervasive irony through which the author achieves a satisfactory distance from his experience.
The narrator, and the novel's central character, never identifies himself by name. Throughout the story he exists to the reader as a man without an identity—an invisible "I"—who, in the end, retires to his home underground, writes his memoirs, and prepares to be reborn for action. He will ultimately emerge because the act of thinking and writing has necessitated it. The element of confession in the first person narration of the story suggests its function as a cathartic. The narrator tells his story from the cellar attempting to give some form to the chaos that he has encountered in society and to devise some plan for living so that he may emerge for action at the end. This is to say that the end of Invisible Man is the beginning of another novel, one that will draw the complicated and positive engagement of the hero in this life, particularly this American life.
FOOTNOTES


2. Ibid., p. 111.

3. Ibid., pp. 111-112.

4. Ibid., p. 112.

5. Ibid.

6. Ibid., p. 113.

7. Ibid.


11. Ralph Ellison, "Change the Joke and Slip the Yoke," Shadow and Act, p. 73.


13. Ibid., p. 108.


15. Ibid., p. 329.

16. Ibid., p. 155.

17. Ibid., p. 307.


22 Ralph Ellison, "Remembering Jimmy," *Shadow and Act*, p. 239.

23 Ralph Ellison, "Richard Wright's Blues," p. 104.

24 Ralph Ellison, "Change the Joke and Slip the Yoke," p. 68.

25 Ibid.
CHAPTER THREE

THE REALITY AND THE DREAM

... All men possess the tendency to dream and the compulsion to make their dreams reality...

Ralph Ellison, *Shadow and Act*

The creative and significant center of *Invisible Man* is the hero's mind—the development of his individual consciousness. However, since the novel depicts the growth into awareness of a nameless young Negro, many steps in his maturation naturally involve lessons in racial realism, the rules for survival in a white man's world. Thus Ellison's young hero starts his life in the South where these rules are explicitly defined and where the acceptance of tradition plays a major part in individual success. Here the hero, a docile innocent, dreams of becoming educated and doing honor to his people within the rigid limits set for them. He, like his parents before him, has been brought up to work hard, be humble, and stay in his place. Anxious to please the white community, he strives diligently and in earnest to conform to the folkways and traditions of the white majority, thus repressing his individual humanity. He firmly believes that through humility and strict conformity he can achieve the kind of success that will make him happy. With this same success ideology intact, the hero eventually travels North where he confronts a different environment, but experiences the same inability
to achieve human recognition. The narrative relates how, through an increasingly intense series of experiences, the hero is eventually expelled from his world of illusion. The substance of the story amounts to an education through disillusionment.

The trouble began, the hero tells us, with his grandfather, an old guy, born a slave, whom he resembles. Though the meekest of men, his grandfather, on his deathbed, spoke of his meekness as a dangerous activity:

I never told you, but our life is a war and I have been a traitor all my born days, a spy in the enemy's country ever since I gave up my gun back in the Reconstruction. Live with your head in the lion's mouth. I want you to overcome 'em with yesses, undermine 'em with grins, agree 'em to death and destruction, let 'em swaller you till they vomit or bust wide open.

It is the hero's attempt to understand his grandfather's advice, to at once affirm and deny it, that moves him in the dual direction that he follows throughout the novel. In each episode the hero is torn between his implicit commitment to his grandfather's position and the primal instinct of self-assertion. Though at the time he only imperfectly understands the old man's ambiguous creed, the hero recognizes that it is somehow his heritage. He thus suffers a sense of guilt when he is praised by the most "lily-white" men of the town for conduct defined by his grandfather as treachery. Ironically though, he also feels guilty for deceiving the white enemy, for he has "agreed 'em" not to death and destruction, but to renewed complacency:

And whenever things went well for me I remembered my grandfather and felt guilty and uncomfortable. It was as though I was carrying out his advice in spite of myself. And to
make it worse, everyone loved me for it. I was praised by the most lily-white men of the town. I was considered an example of desirable conduct—just as my grandfather had been. And what puzzled me was that the old man had defined it as treachery. When I was praised for my conduct I felt a guilt that in some way I was doing something against the wishes of the white folks, that if they had understood they would have desired me to act the opposite, that I should be sulky and mean, and that that really would have been what they wanted, even though they were fooled and thought they wanted me to act as I did. (20)

The meaning of the grandfather's riddle thus poses key problems for the hero. He goes into the world applying the "agree 'em to death" principle attempting to understand its import through discovering its effectiveness. But his obsequiousness has self-destructive consequences.

The hero's first disillusioning experience occurs about the time of his graduation from high school. He has made a valedictory speech and has been invited by the superintendent of schools to deliver the same speech at a white businessmen's smoker. Once there, however, he learns that before he can deliver his speech, he must take part in a battle royal to be fought by some of his school mates. At the outset, the hero exhibits his unswerving ambition and an extreme sense of self-interest. He even feels superior to the other boys. Consequently, the sense of division between members of the Negro community found throughout the novel becomes evident:

I had some misgivings over the battle royal, by the way. Not from a distaste for fighting, but because I didn't care too much for the other fellows. . . . And besides, I suspected that fighting a battle royal might detract from the dignity of my speech. . . . But the other fellows didn't care too much for me either, and there were nine of them. I felt superior to them in my own way, and I didn't like the manner in which we were all crowded into the servant's elevator. (21)
In these "previsible days," the hero says, he "visualized" himself as a "potential Booker T. Washington" (21). He believed that humility was the secret, the very essence of progress for the Negro. In the nightmarish scenes that occur at the smoker, however, he is to be taught, though he doesn't learn, that humility is not a technique of progress, but a means of self-subjugation and the key to the world of repressed respectability.

In the first scene of this episode, the boys are confronted with a "stark-naked blond" bearing an American flag tattoo on her stomach. They are threatened equally by the men if they look and if they avert their eyes. This scene, expressing in sexual terms the basic ambivalence of Negro life, is followed by the battle royal where, blindfolded, the boys are made to fight each other in a boxing ring. Symbolically, the battle royal scene depicts how Negroes are goaded into blindly fighting one another out of envy or for the petty rewards of the white community. This division is seen in closer perspective when the hero tries to make a deal with Tatlock to end the fight:

... as we clinched, I whispered, "Fake like I knocked you out, you can have the prize."
"I'll break your behind," he whispered hoarsely.
"For them?"
"For me... ." (27)

Here also the hero is initially blinded by his own ambitions. Despite the pounding blows received from one or the other of the boys, and despite the threats heard from the men, the hero still concentrates on his speech: "The harder we fought the more threatening the men
became. And yet, I had begun to worry about my speech again. How would it go? Would they recognize my ability? What would they give me? (26)? He will endure anything to deliver his speech because he feels that only the white men can truly judge his ability.

Through Ellison's surrealistic rendering, the reader can sense the nightmare quality of the hero's experience as he sees his world and all that he is fighting for being shattered:

. . . Tatlock spun me half around with a blow, and as a joggled camera sweeps in a reeling scene, I saw the howling red faces crouching tense beneath the cloud of blue-gray smoke. For a moment the world wavered, unraveled, flowed, then my head cleared . . . I wanted to deliver my speech more than anything else in the world . . . and this stupid clown was ruining my chances. . . . (28)

After the battle, the boys, compelled to retrieve their prize money from an electrified rug, receive punishment for what they think is their reward. Here the hero exhibits his first unconscious attempt at self-assertion. At one point in his scrambling, he unwittingly rebels. He discovers himself trying to topple a drunken white man from his chair:

I feared the rug more than I did the drunk, so I held on, surprising myself for a moment by trying to topple him upon the rug. It was such an enormous idea that I found myself actually carrying it out. (30)

This initial attempt, however, ends in failure as the hero is immediately kicked back into his place.

Interesting to note at this point is that these incidents represent the first in a series of myths, rites, and traditions about the Negro that Ellison employs. The blackness of the Negro bears the burden of what the white man fears might be evil in his own soul. In
an essay Ellison discusses this idea:

Being "highly pigmented" as the sociologists say, it
was our Negro "misfortune" to be caught up associatively
in the negative side of this basic dualism of the white
folk mind, and to be shackled to almost everything it
would repress from conscience and consciousness . . .
Because these things are bound up with their notion of
chaos it is almost impossible for many whites to consider
questions of sex, women, economic opportunity, national
identity, historic change, social justice . . . without
summoning malignant images of black men into consciousness.2

That the fight and the electrification follow the blond dancer in
the course of an evening of stag entertainment for tired white
businessmen indicates the obscene prurience underlying the vic-
timizers' treatment of their victims. These men, in a drunken
orgy are releasing their suppressed desires and transferring their
guilt to the boys who incarnate for them all the things they wish to
suppress. They make the boys do what they would not do. Together,
then, these scenes constitute a ritual in the preservation of
caste lines and initiate the recurring pattern of scapegoating found
in the novel. Ironically, however, the boys are paid to perform the
scapegoat role. Thus this episode also initiates the reversal pattern
found throughout the novel.

In spite of the humiliation and the degradation experienced
in the preceding scenes, the hero, swallowing his blood, delivers
his address. It is a Booker T. Washington type speech emphasizing
the importance of friendly relations with the southern white man.
The drunken men, however, pay no attention to him until, bemused by
the noise, and the smoke, and in the process of gulping blood, he
speaks the words "social equality" instead of "social responsibility."
Again the hero unconsciously defies the white man's code. At this moment of triumph, he is suddenly crowded back into the dark from which, by his academic prowess and show of humility, he has sought to escape. Rebuffed for his slip of the tongue, the hero is told: "We mean to do right by you, but you've got to know your place at all times" (33). Humility, then, is not a technique of progress, but a means of subjugation. After his speech, however, the young man receives thunderous applause and a gleaming calfskin briefcase containing a scholarship to a Negro college. Along with this he receives the superintendent's advice:

"Boy," he said, addressing me, "take this prize and keep it well. Consider it a badge of office. Prize it, Keep developing as you are and someday it will be filled with important papers that will help shape the destiny of your people." (34)

Summed up, this only amounts to: stay in your place, work hard, do what is expected of you, and you will get ahead. You will be the new Booker T. Washington. In effect, this briefcase contains his destiny. The irony is pointed at the articles he will continue collecting in it--definitions of his identity, symbols of his disillusionment.

The same night, following his series of nightmarish incidents at the smoker, the hero has a real nightmare. He dreams that his grandfather tells him to open his briefcase:

... 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." (35)

During the rest of the story, the hero never stops running. His is an unending journey toward a self. Everyone he meets, black and white alike, seems to deny him the chance to achieve the minimal—human recognition.

This first episode represents the crucial initiatory experience of the hero's boyhood. Here, he is introduced to the conflicts and to the customs prevalent in his society. Diligently trying to conform, he begins his search for self-definition by attempting to fit into a traditional pattern, to accept and perform the role laid out for him. Hence, he innocently accepts all that occurs at the smoker, for he is extremely anxious to please. His action in such a situation, however, is normal. Unaware of any other alternative, he succumbs in innocence to the only means he knows of making his dream a reality—of becoming the traditional educator and leader of his people. His blindness and his dream are tied together, for his perception of himself and his perception of reality are fused. He is defined by his place; he exists only in relation to the external world. In effect, the individual does not exist, only a complex of external relationships. The hero's unwitting attempts at self-assertion are all undercut, and he meekly accepts whatever is thrust upon him. This same pattern can be seen operating in succeeding episodes. Throughout the novel, authority figures consistently play the role of subjugating the hero, punishing or reproaching him for asserting his humanity and he succumbs to the techniques of their subjugation.
Furthermore, this episode begins the pattern of emotional ambivalence found throughout the novel. The hero is constantly torn between submission and rebellion. Then too, as the hero proceeds through his adventures, he is caught up in explosive conflicts and struggles with members of his own race as well as with members of the white community. He travels through the novel swinging back and forth between black and white. Thus, in a sense, this episode contains the hero's fate. His experience in succeeding episodes are echoes of the nightmarish conflicts encountered in this first boyhood experience.

Aspiring to be an educator, the hero arrives at the green college campus. Here, determined to achieve a place for himself in the world, he identifies with Negroes like Dr. Bledsoe, the president of the college. Bledsoe knows how to wield and retain power. His vestments of power are ingenuously extorted from northern millionaires while he works underground ruthlessly betraying white and black alike. A seemingly unctuous servant, he is in truth deadly aggressive. He scorns those below him and manipulates those above him. Despite power and prestige, white friends and cadillacs, he manages to arrange his pants so they will sag at the knees and to shuffle his feet in order to depict the long-suffering Uncle Tom. Nevertheless, he controls the school. As he later tells the hero, white folk may "support" it, but he "controls" it. Students and teachers alike stand in awe of Dr. Bledsoe; his benign smile and swift glance carry a threat for them all. He is the "coal-black daddy" whom they all fear.
The first variation on the hero's grandfather's advice, Bledsoe says "yes" on the surface while he controls underneath. He assumes the mask of humility to cover his drive for power. For power he will say "yes" and aid the white community in subjugating his people. Bledsoe, however, is not the answer to the grandfather's words, for he affirms power over his people not for them, and he denies dignity and pride. The grandfather made no claim to rule. He simply allowed himself to be swallowed so as to choke the white man. It is the role of the Dr. Bledsoe that the hero now aspires to play. But Dr. Bledsoe gives the hero his first insight into appearance and reality. The events leading to the hero's discovery of Bledsoe's insincerity, selfishness, and lack of integrity and his shameless betrayal of his people constitute another stage in the hero's disillusionment.

To the young man, in his blindness, the green college campus seems a dream become reality. With an air of otherworldliness, it appears to be a symbolic garden of paradise:

The buildings were old and covered with vines and the roads gracefully winding, lined with hedges and wild roses that dazzled the eyes in the summer sun. Honeysuckle and purple wisteria hung heavy from the trees and white magnolias mixed with their scents in the bee-humming air... the grass turned green in the spring... the mocking birds fluttered their tails and sang... the moon shone down on the buildings... the bell in the chapel rang out the precious short-lived hours... the girls in bright summer dresses promenaded the grassy lawn... (36)

In the spring the campus is beautifully in bloom; yet beneath the appearance of life and fecundity is the stark reality of death. A forbidden road runs through this paradise on "past the buildings,
with the Southern verandas half-a-city-block long, to the sudden forking, barren of buildings, birds, or grass, where the road turns off to the insane asylum" (36). "Why is it," the hero asks, "that I can recall in all that island of greenness no fountain but one that was broken, corroded, and dry" (38)? Appearance hides reality, and the reality that the hero discovers in this seeming Garden of Eden is quite the opposite of what his dream embodies.

The hero's fall from this college paradise occurs in his junior year when the president assigns him the role of chauffering one of the wealthy northern trustees, Mr. Norton. "A Bostonian, smoker of cigars, teller of polite Negro stories, shrewd banker, skilled scientist, director, philanthropist, forty years a bearer of the white man's burden, and for sixty a symbol of the Great Traditions" (38-39), Mr. Norton prides himself on his ability to organize human life for others. He thinks of the Negro as an abstract extension of his destiny. He tells the hero:

"... as you develop you must remember that I am dependent upon you to learn my fate. Through you and your fellow students I become, let us say, three hundred teachers, seven hundred trained mechanics, eight hundred skilled farmers, and so on. That way I can observe in terms of living personalities to what extent my money, my time and my hopes have been fruitfully invested." (45-46)

Dr. Bledsoe strives to preserve this god-subject relationship between Norton and the Negro. The hero, however, destroys this when he inadvertently shows Norton the seamy side of Negro life—the realities down the forbidden road beyond the Utopian college campus. Reluctantly, the young man allows Norton to hear from a Negro sharecropper, whose existence is a source of continued disgrace and em-
barrassment to the progressive college community, the story of his incestuous relations with his own daughter. Finally, against his better judgement, the hero steers Norton into a bedlam of Negro veterans. This is not what the northern philanthropist, despite all his protests, wants to see. The northern white man, like the southern white man, has his own image of the Negro which he cannot allow anyone to challenge.

These scenes reveal further illustrations of contradicted conventions and of Ellison's use of the scapegoat myth. They also provide important lessons for the hero, who, blind and dreaming, fails to grasp their significance. Mr. Norton, when he learns of Trueblood's incestuous act, is anxious to hear his story. He thus immediately accosts the sharecropper prodding him to relate how he had done such a monstrous thing and survived:

"You did and are unharmed!" he shouted, his blue eyes blazing into the black face with something like envy and indignation.
"You have looked upon chaos and are not destroyed!" . . .
"You feel no inner turmoil . . ." (51)

As Trueblood relates a vividly detailed account of how he was induced by a dream into having physical relations with his daughter, Norton listens intensely, captivated. The hero has previously described Trueblood as "one who told the old stories with a sense of humor and a magic that made them come alive" (47). Trueblood makes this story essentially "come alive" for Norton.

In a sense, Norton bears close resemblance to Trueblood. The overtones of Trueblood's dream-drenched narration of his act of sin are heightened by the suggestion of a vicarious experience
indicated in Norton's rapt attention. Earlier, Norton has covertly expressed a dream-wish in his idealistic picture of his daughter where he speaks of her unearthly charms and of his guilty feeling for her death:

"She was a being more rare, more beautiful, purer, more perfect, and more delicate than the wildest dream of a poet. I could never believe her to be my own flesh and blood. Her beauty was a well-spring of purest water-of-life, and to look upon her was to drink and drink again . . . She was rare, a perfect creation, a delicate flower that bloomed in the liquid light of the moon . . . ."

"I have never forgiven myself. Everything I've done since her passing has been a monument to her memory." (43-44)

Trueblood's dream-sin, then, parallels Mr. Norton's dream-wish; for Trueblood has committed the very sin that Norton, in the dark recesses of his heart, impotently coveted. Trueblood's story provides for Norton a catharsis of his own dream-wish. Norton participates vicariously in Trueblood's experience, has his own quiescent desires fulfilled while exempted, since Trueblood has acted for him, from the stigma of the act. Here, then, the image of the Negro as an instinctive animal is clearly the transference of the forbidden onto the scapegoat people. The end of this ritual is effectively revealed in the hero's description after Trueblood finishes his story:

But now as the voice ended I sat looking down at Mr. Norton's feet. Out in the yard a woman's hoarse contralto intoned a hymn. Children's voices were raised in playful chatter. I sat bent over, smelling the sharp dry odor of wood burning in the hot sunlight. I stared at the two pairs of shoes before me. Mr. Norton's were white, trimmed in black. They were custom made and there beside the cheap tan brogues of the farmer they had the elegantly slender well-bred appearance of fine gloves . . . I looked up to see Mr. Norton staring silently into Jim Trueblood's eyes. I was startled. His face
had drained of color. With his bright eyes burning into Trueblood's black face, he looked ghostly. (65)

When Trueblood finishes his story, Norton feels compelled to pay him just as the white citizens pay the boxers in the battle royal. Again the Negro is paid for his scapegoat function. In addition to this, the members of the white community treat Trueblood as something of a local celebrity:

"And the white folks took to coming out here to see us and talk with us. Some of 'em was big white folks, too, from the big school way across the State. Asked me lots 'bout what I thought 'bout things, and 'bout my folks and the kids, and wrote it all down in a book." (52)

Instead of being punished, Trueblood is now rewarded for what is normally called sin while he had only poverty before his act of incest when he acted with what is normally called merit:

"... I went to see the white folks and they gave me help. That's what I don't understand. I done the worse thing a man could ever do in his family and instead of chasin' me out of the country, they gimme more help than they ever give any other colored man, no matter how good a nigguh he was. Except that my wife an' daughter won't speak to me, I'm better off than I ever been before." (64-65)

This further adds to Trueblood's performing on the surface the scapegoat function. Interesting to note, however, is what happens to the myth of the sin of incest. Convention labels incest as sinful, and one who commits such a sin is destined to face chaos and destruction. He must be punished. That Trueblood is rewarded instead of punished for his act of incest removes the name of sin from the act and thereby reverses and destroys the myth. More important is what happens to Trueblood who has looked upon and survived what the world calls sin. After his crime, Trueblood waits for his
punishment, but nothing happens. Feeling that something dreadful is in store for him, he moves into exile. He tries to pray but cannot. And one night he begins to sing a church song and ends up singing the blues:

"I thinks and thinks, until I thinks my brain go'n bust, 'bout how I'm guilty and how I ain't guilty. I don't eat nothin' and ca'n't sleep at night. Finally one night, way early in the mornin', I looks up and sees the stars and I starts singin'. I don't mean to, I didn't think 'bout it, just start singin'. I don't know what it was, some kinda church song, I guess. All I know is I ends up singin' the blues. I sings me some blues that night ain't never been sung before, and while I'm singin' them blues I makes up my mind that I ain't nobody but myself and ain't nothin' I can do but let whatever is gonna happen, happen. I made up my mind that I was goin' back home and face Kate; yeah, and face Matty Lou too." (63)

In singing the blues, Trueblood has intuitively recognized the ambivalences and contradictions both in himself and in his reality—a self that commits a sin that is a dream and not really a sin, and a reality that calls that dream that is not a sin by the name of sin. He has accepted the nature of his own identity, his humanity, and the similar nature of his reality, and has decided to have the courage to accept his responsibility, face it, and continue to act, and it turns out rather well for him.

Here, the hero could have learned a significant lesson. But too blind to see all of this, he passes it off. Still deluded and thinking only of himself, his only concern is to escape from this embarrassing predicament and get Mr. Norton safely back to campus without offending him and without angering Dr. Bledsoe.

Affected by the catharsis of his dream-wish and by the destruction of a conventional absolute, Mr. Norton stumbles into the
car and requests that the young man drive him to find a stimulant, a little whiskey. The following scene takes place at the Golden Day where Mr. Norton has a second encounter with chaos. The Golden Day, like Trueblood, is shunned by the respectable college community: "The school had tried to make the Golden Day respectable but the local white folks had a hand in it somehow, and they got nowhere" (69). Unfortunately, this is the day when the veterans from the local hospital visit the girls at the Golden Day. Mr. Norton is carried into this roadhouse and brothel and, as he enters, the madmen overwhelm him with madness, violence, and confusion. They use him for their own purposes of vengeance.

These veterans are all members of the Negro middle class and have held positions in society toward which the hero aspires:

Many of the men had been doctors, lawyers, teachers, Civil service workers, there were several cooks, a preacher, a politician, and an artist. One very witty one had been a psychiatrist. They were supposed to be members of the professions toward which at various times I vaguely aspired myself, and even though they never seemed to see me I could never believe that they were really patients. (70)

Having risen far beyond slavery, they are the end products of the promise of freedom and they are all crazy, or so it seems. The concept presented in this episode is repression: the hospital attendant Supercargo (superego) is responsible for maintaining order, and double order with white folks present. But Supercargo is symbolically drunk upstairs, and "when he was upstairs they had absolutely no inhibitions" (71). When Supercargo does emerge, he has lost control and is swamped by the veterans. A wild brawl ensues with the attendant as the main target of its fury. The Negro middle
class has internalized white bourgeois values while at the same time resenting them. Supercargo represents this internalization (order against chaos). He is beaten, knocked unconscious, and chaos rules. Amid the comic scramble, Mr. Norton is shuffled about like an aged rag doll when out of the turmoil steps one of the veterans, a former surgeon who was dragged from his home and beaten for saving a human life. He is able to help Norton and sane enough to throw thematic statements at the blind hero:

"... he has eyes and ears and a good distended African nose, but he fails to understand the facts of life ... Already he's learned to repress not only his emotions but his humanity. He's invisible, a walking personification of the Negative ..." (86)

Referring again to the hero, the veteran tells Mr. Norton:

"... neither of you can see the other. To you he is a mark on the score-card of your achievement, a thing and not a man; a child, or even less—a black amorphous thing. And you, for all your power, are not a man to him but a God, a force—"

"... He believes in that great false wisdom taught slaves and pragmatist alike, that white is right ... He'll do your bidding, and for that his blindness is his chief asset." (87)

Still blind and dreaming, the hero fails to see what the veteran is trying to reveal to him. He fails to understand that striving to attain a definition of self by accepting a place ascribed to him by others is really a negation of self; that aspiring to a place makes one repress not only his emotions, but his humanity as well. Thus, the unenlightened hero, worried only about whether or not Mr. Norton is angry, drives back to the college campus to face his fate. Having innocently accepted reality by exposing Mr. Norton to Trueblood and the Golden Day, he experiences a sense
of growing separation between himself and his dream:

Here within this quiet greenness I possessed the only identity I had ever known, and I was losing it. In this brief moment of passage I became aware of the connection between these lawns and buildings and my hopes and dreams.

(91)

Through the Trueblood and the Golden Day incidents, the irony of the college's existence is revealed. Its function is not just to educate, but to indoctrinate with a myth. This myth is presented in all of its splendor in the chapel address of the Reverend Homer A. Barbee who delivers a sermon on the history of the Founder of the school. It is the "black rite of Horatio Alger" (101), calling for success by exemplary living, heroic deeds, and struggle against odds; preaching hope, teaching aspiration, and expounding faith. The method of fulfillment is to forever know your place and do what you are told—to adopt the white man's success formula. Barbee's slogan is "We are a humble, but fast rising people." Again the hero is taught that humility is the secret and the essence of progress for the Negro. To this sermon the hero responds with desperate conviction, for the alternative of bitterness, of revenge, or of racial conflict seems hopelessly destructive. At the end of the speech, however, the hero discovers that Homer A. Barbee is blind. Preaching dream for reality, symbolically the blind Barbee illustrates his inability to perceive the reality of existence. He, too, preaches the negation of self. By taking Norton behind the scenes, the hero has betrayed the myth, for "any act that endangered the continuity of the dream was an act of treason" (121), and he must therefore be punished.
For his crime, the acceptance of reality and an unconscious revolt against yessing the white man, Dr. Bledsoe expels the hero from school. Before his expulsion, however, the hero exhibits a spark of personality and Dr. Bledsoe gives him a lesson in cynicism, duplicity, the pragmatic way of survival—another means of distorting the human thing in man. Once more the hero is reproached for asserting his humanity; he is again torn between submission and rebellion; and he is once more told to stay in his place. Dr. Bledsoe suspends the hero from college but proposes that he seek employment in the North and return to school in the fall. As a gesture of reconciliation, he furnishes the young man with letters of introduction to several wealthy patrons of the school. Before the hero leaves, however, he demonstrates his first semblance of insight. Sensing his innocence, the hero feels haunted by his grandfather's curse. The reader, through Ellison's surrealistc rendering, can sense the nightmare reality of the hero's experience:

How had I come to this? I had kept unswervingly to the path before me, had tried to be exactly what I was expected to be, had done exactly what I was expected to do—yet, instead of winning the expected reward, here I was stumbling along, holding on desperately to one of my eyes in order to keep from bursting out my brain against some familiar object swerved into my path by my distorted vision. And now to drive me wild I felt suddenly that my grandfather was hovering over me, grinning triumphantly out of the dark. (131)

Although he firmly believes he is innocent, the hero accepts the responsibility for what happened to Mr. Norton and faces his expulsion:

I was so completely a part of that existence that in the end I had to make my peace. It was either that or admit that my grandfather had made sense. Which was impossible, for though
I still believed myself innocent, I saw that the only alternative to permanently facing the world of Trueblood and the Golden Day was to accept the responsibility for what had happened. Somehow, I convinced myself, I had violated a code and thus would have to submit to punishment. (131)

Characteristic of his blindness, however, the hero also accepts the direction that Bledsoe lays out for him and believes the vague promise that he will return. Bledsoe's letters prove to be the second piece of paper, identifying the hero in terms of place, that he carries in his briefcase.

As the hero leaves the college never to return, he notices a snake crossing the highway. Though the myth is inverted, the loss of his old identity is worked out in terms of the Fall. As the hero travels North in search of a new identity, the southern part of the story and the obsequious persona of the hero comes to an end.

It is significant to note that almost all the hero is to learn has already been revealed to him before leaving the South, all bits of advice that go unheeded and that become truths when illuminated later by perception. On the bus en route to New York, the hero is again treated to bits of advice. The veteran who assisted Mr. Norton at the Golden Day is also on the bus. Dr. Bledsoe, through his power and influence, has had the veteran transferred because, like the innocent hero, the not so innocent veteran is a threat to the "continuity of the dream." The veteran tells the young man that New York is not a place but a dream and that he is running "out of the fire into the melting pot" (136). He advises him to "learn to look beneath the surface" (137), and to remember that one does not have to be a
complete fool in order to succeed. He also tells him that there is an element of crime in freedom, and that the world is full of possibility if only he would discover it.

Nevertheless, the hero leaves the South still blind and still headed toward a dream. In the South the hero knows his place; he tries to fit into a traditional pattern. Hence, his sense of certainty is not challenged. Consequently, the hero's initiation in the first part of the narrative is merely submission to the accepted order of things. He therefore exhibits no development toward perception, only a nostalgic awareness that something has gone wrong somewhere to interrupt the realization of his dream. In this his first encounter with the world, the hero tries to conform thus repressing his individual instinct for action. As he struggles to say "yes," however, he also manages to say "no." He rebels. The punishment for rebellion is banishment. Thus the hero is expelled from the accepted order of southern society. But his journey cannot end, for he is still a captive of his illusions. Not yet capable of distinguishing his private self from the public world, he has not learned that he is an individual separate from society as well as a part of it. Thus the ritual of his initiation must continue, for only through experience can he gain knowledge and insight enough to perceive truth, to separate the reality from the dream.
FOOTNOTES

1Ralph Ellison, Invisible Man, (New York, 1952), p. 19. All succeeding references to Invisible Man will be contained in the text of the paper.


CHAPTER FOUR

THE DREAM BECOME NIGHTMARE

It is only when the individual, whether white or black, rejects the pattern that he awakens to the nightmare of his life... For the penalty of wakefulness is to encounter ever more violence and horror than the sensibilities can sustain unless translated into some form of social action.

Ralph Ellison, Shadow and Act

His attempts at conformity having ended in failure, Ellison's young hero travels North to the expectation of greater freedom and the second chapter of his life begins. As he passes from the South to the North, from the relatively stable to the swiftly changing, the hero finds that his place is no longer fixed, that he must seek a place for himself. Thus he loses his sense of certainty and develops a feeling of doubt, fear, and insecurity. As a result, the hero soon becomes conscious of a separation between himself and his reality, his world. His sense of certitude lost, his identity gone, the hero eventually experiences a growing feeling of alienation. He develops a new surliness, becomes belligerent, and conscious rebellion begins. Searching for a new identity, he soon dreams a new dream—a dream that becomes a nightmare.

Despite his escape by geography, however, the hero remains
invisible. In the North as in the South he is seen only in terms of a social category. He is again dealt with by others as though he were a commodity. Once more he is the victim of other's pursuits. His attempts at self-assertion continue to end in failure as he goes on trying to adopt the opinions of others. Finally, however, after attempting to go in everyone's way but his own, he decides to act on his own initiative. It is this final form of rebellion that reveals to the hero the nature of his existence in relation to the world. And he finally learns that he is an invisible man.

Thus the North, though it appears to provide a greater promise of freedom, offers the hero the same basic limitations as the South. Upon his arrival in New York, the hero is immediately impressed by the close contact between black and white. He walks the streets and sits in the subway with whites. He eats with them in the same cafeterias. These novel experiences give him a new feeling of freedom. But he also gains a new fear of the impersonal atmosphere. Though these people are formally polite and friendly, they hardly see him. Nevertheless, here, a new world of possibility faintly suggests itself to him. As the hero arrives in Harlem, the first figure that he comes across is Ras the Exhorter, a black nationalist ardently concerned with the distinctions between the races, urging the destruction of the whites. A conflict is thus established between the apparent limitations of race and the sense of freedom and possibility caused by the mixing of black and white. As the novel progresses, the hero swings back and forth between the poles of the conflict.

During his first days in New York, the hero, dreaming of a
great future, continues to pattern himself on the old college ideal. Armed with Dr. Bledsoe's letters of introduction, he feels a new sense of self-importance as he sets out to redeem himself. Thinking only in terms of how he appears to the public, he rejects pork chops and grits for a breakfast of orange juice, toast, and coffee; he remembers to deodorize his armpits well so "they" won't think "all of us smell bad" (145). He even imagines himself as a younger version of Dr. Bledsoe, only more suave and better dressed. One of Dr. Bledsoe's letters, the hero feels, will bring him success. Six out of the seven having failed him, he is overcome by a sense of fear and doubt. Finally, he receives a response from the seventh and he remarks that "the last had been first" (152). And indeed it had, for this proves to be the letter his grandfather had shown him in his dream—the letter saying in essence "Keep this nigger boy running."

The hero thus discovers that Dr. Bledsoe, the man he admired and wished to emulate, his only source of identity, has ruthlessly betrayed him. Yet, he gains almost no insight into his relation to himself or to reality. Instead he calls the incident a joke and, recalling an old blues song about a "bare-rumped" robin, he sees himself as a sacrificial scapegoat, the pin cushion for others' failures.

Innocent of mind, the hero is thus unable to accept the responsibilities for his failure. He does not recognize his guilt, instead he blames others. His very innocence, however, forms the substance of his guilt. His innocent acceptance and his lack of perception lead him to the guilt of ignorance and inaction. With
the singing of the blues, there is the joke, the contradiction,
the innocence of guilt and the guilt of innocence. The hero knows
the song and he recognizes the joke, but he is unable to understand
its implications. Still blind and dreaming, he develops only a
sense of anger that grows as the novel progresses. By thus smashing
the hero's dream, Dr. Bledsoe has started him on his journey toward
the stripping away of his illusions. This incident, then, carries
the hero into the episodes in this chapter of his life that further
contribute to his final disillusionment.

The first of these is a densely symbolic episode rich in its
thematic implications and highly allegorical in its significance.
This episode concludes Ellison's portrayal of the hero in a stable,
fixed world and initiates him into the larger realms of modern
American society. Here, under the bludgeoning of experience, the
hero symbolically suffers a complete loss of identity.

Following a job lead, the hero hires out as an unskilled
laborer to Liberty Paint Company where he is initiated into modern
industrial society. To the hero, seeing the building from a distance
is "like watching some vast patriotic ceremony" (172). Flags
flutter around the sign bearing the company's advertising message,
KEEP AMERICA PURE WITH LIBERTY PAINTS. A large industrial plant
whose best selling product is "optic white" (suggesting a visual
illusion), its trademark is a screaming eagle and its slogan is
"If It's Optic White, It's the Right White" (an allusion to the
Negro adage, "If you're white you're right," an attitude that has
dominated the hero's actions to this point.)
Here the hero is put to work under the "terrible" Mr. Kimbro who makes it clear that he is to follow instructions, to do what he is told and not think about it. The hero is to work on a batch of paint headed for a national monument. His task is quite a puzzling one. Kimbro tells him to measure ten drops of black liquid into each bucket of white paint and stir until the black becomes invisible and the white becomes whiter. In effect, the paint is nothing more than whitewash, but by using the black liquid as a base, the company has arrived at a national formula of which it is justly proud. The hero is told: "That's it, as white as George Washington's Sunday-go-to-meetin' wig and as sound as the almighty dollar! That's paint that'll cover anything" (177)?

Unfortunately, the foreman, in his haste, neglects to tell the hero where to find black liquid to replenish his supply. Thus later, looking for a refill, the hero accidentally draws on an unmarked tank of concentrated paint remover that looks and smells like the liquid he has used. He mixes this with the whitewash. But when applied to the sample wooden board, the paint is no longer white. Instead it has a thin gray tinge which clearly shows the wood grain underneath. Thus, again the hero has unwittingly rendered black visible. As in the Norton incident, he has unconsciously exposed the reality that has been so shrewdly concealed. Acting of his own accord, he unconsciously rebels and blindly accepts reality. Yet, when the foreman returns and furiously chastises him for being so stupid and shows him the correct liquid to use, he reverts to another alternative. Kimbro has not told him what to do with the
spoiled paint. The hero, therefore, adds the black liquid to this paint which already contains the black paint remover. The mixture appears gray to him, but it passes in Kimbro's eyes. This act symbolically carries out his grandfather's advice. This is the role of conscious deception. The hero remarks, "Well . . . as long as he's satisfied . . ." (180), but he wonders, as Kimbro allows the paint to be shipped out, whether he has been the deceiver or the deceived. He suspects, when Kimbro dismisses him, that he has somehow been the dupe.

Sent to the basement to work with a belligerent white-haired Negro foreman, Lucius Brockway, the hero is caught in a conflict between Brockway and the union. To the union he is the company's fink, while to Brockway he is an educated Negro who doesn't know his place and who probably belongs to the union. Thus the hero remains unseen to those about him who see only what they need to see or want to see. To the company, Brockway has become an indispensable commodity. Only he knows the correct method for making the black base for the paint. He says he is the one who makes the paint white. Yet, he constantly fears being replaced by skilled and educated men. Therefore, he is a loyal worker, frantically anti-union, and a devout Uncle Tom. He maintains his invisibility, going underground and worshipping the boss and white supremacy. It was he who created the company's slogan.4

The hero's first act of revolt is his unconscious inability to make white paint. Implicit in his failure is the overthrow of Lucius Brockway. He is a threat to Brockway as he was a threat to
Dr. Bledsoe. The hero's act of rebellion culminates when, caught in the crossfire between Brockway and the union, Brockway, feeling an insane need to protect his place, threatens to kill the hero. In the course of their fight, both fail to watch the pressure gauge on the furnace and the scene climaxes in an explosion. The hero, trapped by the machinery, is thrown back and forth between light and darkness. He loses consciousness, and again his act of revolt ends in symbolic failure. This loss of consciousness functions as the symbolic death of the initiate, and he finds himself in the factory hospital. A part of his personality blasted away, he suffers a complete loss of identity.

In the hospital, the hero undergoes a symbolic rebirth as he struggles for consciousness and for self. This transitional scene serves to prepare the reader for the hero's new life and new identity in the Brotherhood. At the same time, however, it initiates him into still another phase of modern American society—the coldness and impersonality of contemporary life. The ruthless efficiency of the hospital personnel, their detachment, and the helplessness of the patient are brilliantly evoked as representative of the modern era in which feelings and emotions are dispensed with for the sake of efficiency. The abstract and scientific diction used immensely enhances this effect.

Knocked unconscious by the explosion of one machine, the hero is placed in another and treated by the doctors as though he is a piece of machinery that has to be repaired. Encased in a coffin-like electrified box so that he can be, as one of the doctors remarks,
"started again," the hero is subjected to severely painful electrical shock treatments. Like most of the episodes in the novel, this is a superficially comic scene. Surrealistically rendered and greatly magnified in intensity, it harks back to the electrified rug incident at the town smoker. During the mock shock therapy, the hero appears as a ludicrous dancing minstrel darkly, a harmless silly fellow who amuses the hospital attendants. With the implications of castration and lobotomy, however, the scene plunges into the depths of an unpleasant nightmare. Confused and barely conscious, the hero hears two doctors debating the proper procedure for treating his case. One is in favor of surgery; the other is in favor of the machine. Treated as the object of a scientific experiment, the hero is almost visibly invisible. The doctors discuss him impersonally in his presence as though he were not there:

"The machine will produce the results of a prefrontal lobotomy without the negative effects of the knife," the voice said. "You see, instead of severing the prefrontal lobe, a single lobe, that is, we apply pressure in the proper degrees to the major centers of nerve control . . . and the result is as complete a change of personality as you'll find in your famous fairy-tale cases of criminals transformed into amiable fellows after all that blood business of a brain operation. And what's more . . . the patient is both physically and neurally whole."

"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 for more? He'll experience no major conflict of motives, and what is even better society will suffer no traumatia on his account."

There was a pause. A pen scratched upon paper. Then, "Why not castration, doctor?" a voice asked waggishly, causing me to start, a pain tearing through me:

"There goes your love of blood again," the first voice laughed. "What's that definition of a surgeon, 'A butcher with a bad conscience'?" (206-207)
Clearly, as this passage indicates, the hero has reached a stage in his journey where he is to be pressured into conforming to the dictates of society instead of rebelling as he had done on previous occasions. When blasted with a charge of electricity, he instinctively screams in agonized protest only to be harshly told, "Hush, goddamit... We're trying to get you started again. Now shut up!" (203) Again society seeks to destroy the human things in him leaving him no individual instincts for action. The operation, however, does not secure the intended results. The hero cannot recall his name, and he has no memory of his mother. Because he has lost his past, he has relinquished all claims to individuality. All identity has been taken away; therefore he is considered cured. But when asked, "Who was Buckeye the rabbit?" he stares in "wide-eyed amazement" and begins to laugh:

Why should he think of that? ... I laughed, deep, deep inside me, giddy with the delight of self-discovery and the desire to hide it. Somehow I was Buckeye the Rabbit... or had been when, as children we danced and sang barefoot in the dusty streets...

Yet, I could not bring myself to admit it, it was too dangerous. It was annoying that he had hit upon an old identity and I shook my head, seeing him purse his lips and eye me sharply. (211)

The hero is thus made aware of an individual identity—an identity rooted in the folk facts of Negro culture, that culture which he has previously tried to deny. Therefore, instead of killing the individual instinct for action—the individual motive—and giving birth to the desire to conform, the operation, performed on an individual who had already moved toward conformity, instills in the hero a conscious awareness of an individual identity, and a "criminal"
motive—a desire for freedom—emerges:

I lay fretting over my identity . . . I fell to plotting ways of short-circuiting the machine . . . [but] I had no desire to destroy myself, even if it destroyed the machine; I wanted freedom not destruction . . . I could no more escape than I could think of my identity. Perhaps, I thought, the two things are involved with each other. When I discover who I am, I'll be free. (212)

The hero is not fully aware of the meaning of what he is saying, but this passage initiates a new movement in the novel, the movement toward identity. With the literal cutting of the cord tied from the machine to the hero's stomach, the delivery is complete and the hero is reborn out of the machine. His old personality dead, he emerges a new individual. Caught in the conflict between old and new, the hero, as he prepares to leave the hospital, describes himself in terms of a disassociated personality: "I had the feeling . . . that I was in the grip of some alien personality lodged deep within me." (217) And he remarks, "We, he, him—my mind and I—were no longer getting around in the same circles. Nor my body either." (218) From this point on the hero becomes conscious of a separation between himself and his reality. He becomes aware of a necessity to define himself as one thing and the world as another. He realizes the need to affirm an individual identity. Although he has succeeded in determining a private and a public self, he is still blind and his reality is still a dream, or a dream become nightmare. Therefore, he continues to look for a definition of his private self as determined by the place that his public self assumes. But there is a difference in his search. His place no longer fixed, he must seek a place.

The hero's sense of separation between himself and his reality
soon grows into a feeling of alienation. At this stage of his disillusionment, he begins to gain primary insight into the ways of society and his sense of alienation increases as the narrative progresses. At the end of this episode, the hero becomes aware that he has been used by others, but having gained only partial insight, he expresses this in terms of the scapegoat theme when he again mentions "Poor Robin." The invisible man is now at the beginning of perception and is about to continue his journey into the meaning of his existence.

Released from the hospital, the hero returns to Harlem. Deeply wounded by society, he develops a sense of anger, a new distrust, and a desire for revenge. The first person to experience his distrust is, ironically, the one person that he has met worthy of trust. When he faints in the street, Mary Rambo picks him up and gives him aid. Later he awakes in her home and wonders if she has searched his pockets. Eventually, however, the hero starts his new life in Harlem mothered by Mary Rambo. Mary is his only friend, and she is also the only person who sees him for what he may be: an individual seeking to make himself recognized. She is a reminder of the past, stable and comforting, but she demands some notable achievement that will benefit the race.

While recuperating and looking for a job, the hero gains a series of primary insights. His past illusions boomeranged out of his head, he no longer has any hopes of returning to college. His sense of isolation and his awareness of a separate identity from his old dream fill him with new problems of contradiction and resentment:
... the obsession with my identity which I had developed in the factory hospital returned with a vengeance. Who was I, how had I come to be? Certainly I couldn't help being different from when I left the campus; but now a new, painful, contradictory voice had grown up within me, and between its demands for revengeful action and Mary's silent pressure I throbbed with guilt and puzzlement. I wanted peace and quiet, tranquility, but was too much aboil inside. (226)

Soon the hero gains his first insight into the meaning of freedom. While boldly eating yams on the street (something he would not have dared do previously), he realizes that he can do what he wants; what would have appeared criminal to him before is really a kind of freedom. Freedom is doing what one wants to do, not what is expected of him. The hero now realizes his mistakes of the past:

What and how much I had lost by trying to do only what was expected of me instead of what I myself had wished to do? What a waste, what a senseless waste! But what of those things which you actually didn't like, not because you were not supposed to like them, not because to dislike them was considered a mark of refinement and education—but because you actually found them distasteful? 231)

He realizes that he had accepted the accepted attitudes, and this had made life seem simple. Acknowledging his new concept of freedom, the hero, in a characteristic pun, declares, "I yam what I am." (231) But he continues to identify freedom with the external reality which he feels is a fixed order, an order that he must fight to find a place. Symbolically, his insight turns bitter as he bites into the outside of the yam and finds that it is frost bitten. The external world is ordered against him. But, for the moment, he has perceived the significance of the veteran's words about an element of crime in freedom. The hero thus accepts his true identity symbolized by the acceptance of Negro food. This together with his new realizations
about freedom enable him to deliver a speech that wins him a position in the Brotherhood.

On seeing an old Negro couple being evicted in the midst of a snowstorm, the hero recognizes the disparity between what is law and what he feels is right. The disparity, combined with his sense of isolation, his anger, and his identifying with the couple, moves him to deliver a long, fiery, impromptu speech on dispossession. In essence, he says to the crowd: We are dispossessed of our past, of our hopes, of a place, and of God; and the law is in perpetual conflict with human desires. The thematic reversals of conventions that started back with the battle royal culminates at this point in the hero's perception that he has been dispossessed of all that he was ever sure of. Though he warns the crowd against violence, the hero uses irony so devastatingly that a riot breaks out. He has thus swung from one extreme to another—from innocent passivity and inaction to innocent anger and action. Though he is still blind, his dream is shifting. His search for identity together with his search for freedom and the perception of some criminal element in freedom arouses his private self enough to incite a crowd to action. The hero has thus made his first descent into understanding. As a result of this display of his capacity for leadership, he attracts the attention of the Brotherhood and is recruited into this organization.6

The hero's experiences in the Brotherhood represent the climax of his social experiences; for the freedom he now seeks is a freedom in the social system. This organization represents a society that is
completely rational and scientific, a society in which the irrationality of race warfare should disappear. The hero perceives opportunity here because it appears to make the Negro's cause its own. Seemingly, the Brotherhood is the answer to the hero's needs. It offers him not only a job, a cause, and social equality, but also leadership, spokesmanship, and a chance to affirm an identity. But the hero soon discovers that the Brotherhood is not brotherly at all, for it is using him to manipulate Negroes to its own ends of sabotage and disruption. This society also exploits the Negro for reasons of its own sake.

Even as he is drawn into the Brotherhood, the hero suspects that they only wish to use him for something; and he senses that somehow he has been through it all before. Indeed he has, for his experiences here, in various ways, round back to his previous adventures. At a gathering, a drunken member wants him to sing because "all colored people sing," (260) and another member wonders if he shouldn't be a little blacker for their purposes. Even here, then, the hero is still invisible. Color distinctions play an important part and he is seen only in terms of the role he is hired to play. Yet, in innocence, he plays his role. He submits, and again he finds himself and his people to be scapegoats, only this time he knows the fault to be his. Thus the hero's long journey through the Brotherhood turns out to be another stage in his disillusionment. His ultimate adventure in self-definition, the Brotherhood episode elaborately prepares the hero for his descent back to himself. Through the diissension encountered here, the hero gains maximum insight into the nightmare of
his invisibility. He discovers that he is, and always has been, an invisible man.

With his entrance into the Brotherhood, the hero is given another piece of paper with his identity written on it in terms of place. He is told that he must put aside his past. With his new identification comes new clothes, new living quarters, and new associates. Once more, then, the hero accepts his identity in terms of a place ordained for him by others only to find in the end that this is the third piece of paper bearing the identity that kept "the nigger boy running."

Thus undergoing another transformation, the hero leaves Mary, the only person who has been brotherly to him to seek brotherhood. He carries with him his briefcase of past memories with one new addition: a bank in the form of a very black, red-lipped-wide-mouthed Negro. Its face an enormous grin, this self-mocking image bears on its chest the legend FEED ME in a curve of white iron letters. The hero, on several occasions, tries to rid himself of this figure, but he cannot lose it. A personification of his grandfather's yes 'em to death creed which continues to haunt the hero throughout his adventures, and a symbol of his Negro identity which he unsuccessfully tries to repudiate, the bank keeps coming back to him. Eventually he gives up and decides to keep it. This incident foreshadows the hero's experiences in the Brotherhood. Though he is told that he must forget his past, that his "old agrarian self" is dead and he must shed his old identity, and though he struggles to do so, his trials are all in vain. For throughout his engagement
with the Brotherhood, the hero has a persistent consciousness of a self within him that is not dead, that his new identity does not incorporate, that it always costs him a great effort to suppress. He calls it "the dissenting voice, my grandfather part; the cynical, disbelieving part—the traitor self that always threatened internal discord." (261)

Having gained only partial insight into the nature of his existence and into the meaning of his reality, the hero reverts to his previous hopes and aspirations. The equilibrium of his newly acquired sense of freedom and self-acceptance is immediately upset by an irresistible hope that through the Brotherhood he can become as great as the Founder of his college. Thinking of Dr. Bledsoe and Mr. Norton, the hero remarks that they, by kicking him in the dark, had shown him the possibility of achieving something greater and more important than he had ever dreamed. For the first time, he says, he could "glimpse the possibility of being more than a member of a race." (308) So deluded, the hero strives toward his old identification even at the price of submission. Again, he becomes passive and fails to think for himself, to act and to accept responsibility. Dreaming once more of a great future, the hero soon identifies with Frederick Douglass. Douglass, he says, came North to escape, and, like him, had taken another name; and it was by this name (Douglass) that he became famous. Perhaps, the hero remarks, something of the kind is happening to him. Thus though the hero is aware of a private self, he strives for self-definition through the role that his public self plays. And everything goes well for him until he receives an anonymous letter
telling him in effect that he is getting too "big," that this is a white man's world—telling him in other words to stay in his place.

The hero's crime in the Brotherhood is that of asserting his individuality over the unity of the organization. This, the Brotherhood calls striving for personal power. As a result of his popularity in Harlem, the hero incurs the jealousy of some of his brothers, particularly Brother Wrestrum, an opportunistic Uncle Tom, who accuses the hero of opportunism. Taken out of Harlem and sent downtown to another branch of the organization, the hero becomes disenchanted. His disillusionment begins to culminate with the betrayal and sacrifice of Tod Clifton, who ultimately comes to the forefront as Ellison's symbol of a tragically divided personality and as an objectification of the hero's internal struggles.

Together, the hero and Tod have previously contended with Ras the Exhorter who, exhorting them to leave the Brotherhood and join his racist movement, engages Tod in a street fight. Winning the upper hand over Tod, Ras is unable to kill him because they are brothers:

"You my brother, mahn. Brothers are the same color; how hell you call these white men brother?" "... we sons of Mama Africa, you done forgot? You black, BLACK! You-- Godahm, mahn!" he said, swinging the knife for emphasis, "You got bad hair! You got thick lips! They say you stink! They hate you, mahn. You African. AFRICAN! Why you with them? Leave that shit, mahn. They sell you out. That shit is old-fashioned. They enslave us--you forget that? How can they mean a black man any good? How they going to be your brother? (321-322)

Eloquently pleading for black nationalism, Ras shows his great
strength through his precise appraisal of the white race and most of all the Brotherhood. Though he rejects Ras, Tod is moved by his enemy's crude exhortation. Too civilized to accept Ras's method, he sees the Brotherhood as an effective agency through which the Negro can make his protest. As they leave, the hero discovers that Tod has tears in his eyes, and Tod tells the hero that it is "on the inside" that Ras is strong and dangerous.

This scene anticipates Tod's defection from the Brotherhood when, as Ras predicts, the organization betrays the Negro struggle. Tod cracks under the strain, and the hero finds him downtown peddling a self-mocking image, "Sambo the Dancing Doll." Torn by the conflicting tendencies within him, Tod takes on the responsibility for the Brotherhood's betrayal of the Negro when he gives himself up to be brutally shot by a policeman while resisting arrest for a minor misdemeanor. Earlier, the hero has in outrage spat at one of Tod's dancing dolls knocking it "lifeless." He has thus performed what the policeman actually does to Tod. As Tod in selling the dolls has been mocking himself, the hero in spitting at the doll has attacked himself as well as Tod, but without the benefit of awareness. Only after his showdown with the Brotherhood does he realize, though not fully, that he has been performing all along as though he were, in life-size, the dancing doll manipulated by an invisible string.

A sleepwalker in a world never real enough for him to believe in, the hero soon experiences a succession of wakings-up, only to find himself participating in still another level of nightmare. Feeling responsible for Tod's death, the hero, acting of his own volition,
takes the responsibility of arranging a funeral for his friend. The Brotherhood, however, resents his tactics, for he has accepted a personal responsibility and ignored his obligation to the Brotherhood. With their reaction, the hero realizes that they do not care for his cause. He discovers that the leader, Brother Jack, has a glass eye that he got, he says, indiscipline to the organization. Even they do not see beyond their own ends and the price of discipline is blindness. Like Tod, the hero is threatened by destruction from his own nationalist impulses, and running from them, he discovers his true identity—he discovers invisibility.

Tension mounts in Harlem after Tod's funeral and in the concluding chapters, the hero stands between the opposing forces of the Brotherhood and Ras the Exhorter, now turned Destroyer. Both sides see him as a traitor. To escape, his initial move into his ultimate invisibility is the disguise of dark glasses and a wide-brimmed hat. In this costume, the hero makes a discovery of identity. He learns the secret of a certain Mr. Rinhart and gains a new insight into his past experiences. Everyone mistakes the hero for Rinhart, and he plays along as the instances of mistaken identities proliferate. B.P. (B for "bliss" and P for "Proteus")? Rinhart has no positive identity, only a shifting appearance. A grinning, yessing mask, the person behind which might be anything or nothing, Rinhart is in truth invisible. Everyone knows him, yet, since he is so easily mistaken, he is known by no one—he is never seen. A minister, a numbers runner, a lover, a gambler, a briber, the envy of one class of Negroes and the terror of another, Rinhart is an American virtuoso of identity thriving on conflict,
confusion, and swift change. His masquerade is motivated by money as well as by the sheer bliss of impersonation. Ellison points to Rinehart as his name for the personification of chaos, and a representation of America and change. Rinehart, he says, "has lived so long with chaos that he knows how to manipulate it . . . he is a figure in a country with no solid past or stable class lines; therefore, he is able to move about easily from one to the other." Rinehart's role in the formal structure of the novel is to suggest to the hero a mode of escape from Ras and a means of applying in still another form his grandfather's advice.

In his disguise the hero senses that he is on the brink of a great discovery. Excitedly he asks, "Could he be all of them: Rine the rummer and Rine the gambler and Rine the briber and Rine the lover and Rinehart the Reverend?" (430) As he pursues the implications of his discovery, the hero makes his second descent into the depths of insight. The dark glasses provide a point of departure for his speculations. Through their green lenses the world appears as a merging fluidity of forms. "What on earth is hiding behind the face of things?" (426) the hero wonders. How can one distinguish the outer from the inner, the rind from the heart? Rinehart's multiple personality seems to suggest a solution to the hero's problem: "Could he himself be both rind and heart?" the hero asks. "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." (430) With this fluid conception of reality, the hero now perceives the external world as possibility and freedom. In such a world, he says, nothing is impossible. Freedom is the recognition not only of necessity, but also of possibility.

Later, Brother Hambro informs the hero that the members of the Harlem Brotherhood must be sacrificed for the benefit of the "larger plan" and that his role has changed from agitator to pacifier. Sensing his likeness to Rinehart, the hero sees himself as invisible, for no one has truly seen him in his life; they have only seen the place he is in. "I was and yet I was invisible, that was the fundamental contradiction. I was and yet I was unseen," (438) he reflects. But the hero has not yet learned the truth. He has not discovered that there has been no "him," that there has been only a place, and that his invisibility is not only because people fail to see him, but also because he has failed to establish any personal identity. At this point, however, he is fascinated with Rinehart, with the possibility of being invisible. With this new revelation comes another frightening world of possibilities. The hero sees another means of applying his grandfather's advice. He thinks that this at last is what his grandfather meant. He realizes that he can agree with the Brotherhood without agreeing, and that in Harlem he too could use Rinehartian tactics. He fails to see, however, that behind Rinehart's masks, behind the invisible man, there is no identity. Thus the hero's mask betrays him and results in his helping the Brotherhood to precipitate a wild riot in Harlem to be used in their campaigns.
The final chapter of *Invisible Man* ends with the riot. Freely distorted and surrealistically rendered, this chapter resolves the major conflicts of the novel. Fleeing through the streets from Ras and his men, the hero experiences the deaths of his various identities. Rinehartism, to begin with, must be destroyed. As Ras approaches, the hero searches for his "Rineharts," his dark glasses, only to "see the crushed lenses fall to the street. "Rinehart, I thought, Rinehart!"" (481) as if he had just witnessed Rinehart himself--his Rinehart self--collapse before him.. Ras, astride a great black horse and dressed in the costume of an Abyssinian Warrior, complete with shield and spear, is out to convert the riot into a race war. Ras or race has thus become a destroyer. To reconcile Ras and stop the riots, the hero disclaims his connections with the Brotherhood, killing in effect his Brotherhood self. But as he is invisible, he is unheard. In self-protection, the hero impales Ras who is, in a sense, the deepest of his identities. He then experiences the illusion of death and rebirth: "It was as though for a moment I had surrendered my life and begun to live again." (484)

Continuously running in the stripping away of his illusion, the hero is chased again, this time by some white men who wish to find out what he carries in his briefcase. The "nigger boy" is still running from both black and white. In his attempt to escape, the hero falls into an open manhole and finds himself in a coal cellar. Unable to find an exit, he must literally and symbolically burn the contents of his briefcase--various papers of his past (his high school diploma, the Sambo doll, his Brotherhood card, the scholarship, etc.)--
to light his way out. Without his paper symbols, the hero has no past and consequently no home and no identity. In the process of burning the papers, he learns of a recent betrayal. He finds that Brother Jack had written the paper with the Brotherhood identity on it and the anonymous warning letter that he had received. With this revelation, the hero knocks himself out in anger and dreams his final dream. He dreams that he has been castrated.

Throughout the novel the hero is disciplined for asserting his identity. In each episode he rebels and such rebellion is punishable by castration. The figures in white in the factory hospital are the castrators while in this concluding dream, the hero sees Brother Jack, Mr. Norton, Dr. Bledsoe, the school superintendent and Ras castrate him because he will not return to their domination. In both cases castration is equated with the dispelling of illusion. Thus stripped now of illusion, the hero lies in the darkness that is his illumination, the lowest depths that bring him at last to his greatest heights.

The hero decides to maintain his residence underground and from there, "the end was in the beginning." (494) His expectations have boomeranged, and he himself has, like a boomerang, come back upon himself. The hero’s progress has been a series of boomeranging reversals. With his fall into the coal cellar, he comes to the most final reversal of all. In each of his adventures when he thought he was moving upward, he was in truth moving down. His expulsion from the college paradise, though he was an innocent, was like a fall from
Eden. At the factory, he was sent underground to work with Brockway. He attended the Brotherhood's social events at an apartment house called the Chthonian Club (the underground world) where he made his first descent underground into a kind of criminality. This and his attempt to secure information about the Brotherhood from a girl named Sybil—as Aeneas consulted the sibyl before he entered the underworld—foreshadows his final fall. Thus the hero's progress all along has been a descent. Now, a demonic figure in his underground home, his normal activities are violence and revenge. He restricts himself to the subversion of Monopolated Light and Power. He dines on his favorite dessert of vanilla ice cream and sloe gin—white, presumably seeping blood. Once, with little direct provocation, he had beaten and almost killed a white man. Thus, in his cellar home, the invisible man is a thief, a rascal, an underground man engaged in the subversion of society.

The hero's movement downward is, however, a process of rising to an understanding of his human condition. A black man in a coal cellar, he is invisible; but now he also recognizes the nature of his invisibility. The hero has gone out into the world repeatedly, and he has been frustrated repeatedly. His adventures have gone to prove to him first of all that he is black, and that black is invisible in the white American society. The "Blackness of Blackness," the text offered by the preacher in the prologue has been the lesson that he has had to learn. In the prologue the hero indicated that he had to illuminate the blackness of his invisibility. Blackness is a cause of
his persecution. But blackness is also the dark secrets in his persecution, all the myths and taboos that he has encountered. In the end he embraces the blackness of blackness, that fate which was ordained for him from the beginning.

More important, however, is his perception of a truth applicable to man in general. The hero now perceives that his invisibility is not only because others do not see him, but also because he has failed to assert himself and achieve his individual humanity—to think and act for himself. When the individual is concerned only with a place in the external world, with conformity and the mechanizations of his impulses, he is invisible. He must first accept his own humanity and then act according to his own discretion, for it is this that gives him his place and defines his reality. The world is defined by man, and once it is shorn of its myths and conventions, its enforced illusions and traditions, it is chaos—it is without form. What then are man's alternatives? He may live blind in a world of conformity or illusion (as indicated by Ellison's use of blind, half blind and stereotyped characters); if he gains perception, then he may live in chaos (as Rinehart does); or he may go underground into the recesses of his imagination (as the hero does). In any case he is an invisible man. Man in general, then, tends toward invisibility.

Thus through the hero's illumination, his initiation by experience, Ellison presents the perception of one individual and of his reality. Each of the hero's adventures has served to clarify
and reinforce the nature of his invisibility and further to illu-
minate certain conflicting tendencies inherent in society and in the
overall human condition. Ellison, in fact, has been put to a greater
effort at the end of each episode to make the next one more intense,
and more thoroughly revealing of what has already been largely re-
vealed. The novel’s movement is to confirm again and again that
the hero doesn’t exist. Ellison’s difficulty is, in a sense, to
resurrect the hero for each succeeding adventure as he journeys
through illusion to reality. Each episode is made to carry a burden
of implication beyond that generated by its particular experience.
Consequently, the weight of the novel, its profound seriousness,
resides primarily in conception rather than in rendering. Neverthe-
less, one senses that the novel, for all its picaresque variety of in-
cident, its surrealistic scenes and allegorical extensions, has a
particularly static quality. This is not necessarily because the
scenes are similar, but because they all convey the same meaning;
they all travel back to the same idea. But what of the grandfather’s
advice which remains an unsolved riddle throughout the hero’s story?

In the epilogue, the hero comes to see in his grandfather’s
advice a seemingly greater affirmation than anything in the novel
suggests that his grandfather meant. He discovers in it assent to
the great principle on which the country was built: "... we must
affirm the principle on which the country was built and not the men,
or at least not the men who did the violence." (496) The American
must affirm both the great principle of freedom, hope, and possibility
and recognize and accept the limitations of humanity. He must live with his aspirations guided by these principles, but live also with a perceptive awareness of how far short of these principles man falls. The acceptance of humanity is the recognition that there is both possibility and limitation. The curious note in this almost neat equation, however, is the stronger emphasis given the idea of limitation. Ellison at this point seems somewhat unsure about a positive outlook. The epilogue is less effectively written than the rest of the novel and the reader feels that the author searches for something positive but is undercut by doubt. Significantly, almost all the writing in the epilogue is qualified or framed as questions. This presents a curious sense of doubt that would deny affirmation. Nevertheless, the novel ends with a paradox of acceptance-rejection in which the world becomes one of infinite possibility.

In an essay Ellison discusses the ways through which the Negro confronts his American destiny. He may choose invisibility and accept the role created for him by the white world, resolving his conflicts in the hope and catharsis of Negro religion. In repressing Jim Crow social relations and striving for a middle way of respectability, he consciously or unconsciously becomes the accomplice in oppressing his brothers. The alternative is to reject the situation—the stereotype—and become the criminal, the revolutionary, carrying on a constant psychological, often physical, battle against the white world. 8 Through his varied roles, the hero of *Invisible Man*
has acted out these opposing strategies of being for society or against it, and he has encountered only confusion, violence, and horror. The new vision born of his conflicts with society seems to be an attitude of emotional ambivalence that allows him to embrace the complexity of his life and retain a hope that he, as an individual, as a human being, can take an active part in this society. By translating his experiences into artistic expression, he has made a commitment; he has assumed a social responsibility. He has told his story in an attempt to spread a perception of the nature of modern illusion with the hope that man will perceive the nature of his own identity and his own world.

Though protected from the pain of disillusion while isolated from the brutal, absurd world that he loves and in spite of himself hates, the hero plans some day to emerge from his underground home, for he realizes that individuality is worthwhile only when it takes part in the group. But the final modest triumph of the invisible man comes, not because he decides to emerge, but because he will come out of hibernation with a realistic acceptance of the limitations of society ("... for all life seen from the hole of invisibility is absurd," (501) and his own role ("... and humanity is won by continuing to play in face of certain defeat." (499) He triumphs also because, prompted by intelligence ("In going underground, I whipped it all except the mind, the mind. And the mind that has conceived a plan for living must never lose sight of the chaos against which that pattern was conceived." (502), he gives to his life the form
which only imagination can give to chaos. His most affirmative act, then, is the ironic expression of art itself.

Ellison in *Invisible Man* presents another kind of portrait of the artist, the making of an exile, whose art is born from the conflicts of his quest for self-definition. In the process, however, Ellison neither rises above nor renounces his racial identity, but uses it symbolically to encompass the central dilemma of modern man. Indeed, in *Invisible Man*, race becomes a metaphor through which larger meanings are conveyed. Like other artists, Ellison achieves the universal through a sensitive interpretation of his own culture. As an American Negro, however, Ellison has carried a double burden, for he has two cultures to interpret corresponding to the double environment in which he lives. He has proved conversant with Western culture as a whole, and especially with the traditions of English literature. At the same time he has affirmed a Negro quality in his experience, exploiting his heritage as a legitimate contribution to the larger culture. Thus Ellison has not allowed his culture duality to segregate him as an artist. His art cuts deep enough to prove the Negro world liberating rather than confining. Ellison has made it his problem to identify the Negro culture and preserve it in literature. Indeed, *Invisible Man* is a novel that comes directly out of the Negro's peculiar experience in America, and, as a work of art, becomes a part of the literature of man.
FOOTNOTES


2 The song "They Picked Poor Robin" is an old scapegoat joke. Ellison, in "On Bird, Bird-Watching, and Jazz," Shadow and Act, pp. 226-227, calls it a "jazz community joke," a "melodic naming of a recurring human situation": "Our defeats and failures were loaded upon his back and given ironic significance and thus made more bearable."

3 Baumbach indicates that the ten drops are analogous to the ten boys in the battle royal. Here as in that episode, the white becomes whiter by absorbing the potency of the black. Jonathan Baumbach, "Nightmare of a Native Son," The Landscape of Nightmare: Studies in the Contemporary American Novel, (New York, 1955), p. 74.

4 This episode, Bone says, recapitulates the Negro's historic experience in American industry. Brockway represents the skilled strata of Negro labor which has been entrenched in American industry from the beginning, the black base on which industry was reared. Robert Bone, The Negro Novel in America, (New Haven, 1958), p. 206.

5 Baumbach quotes this passage to show the incisiveness of Ellison's satire. The attitude of the psychologist, he says, suggests the Northern white position toward the Negro as opposed to the butcher-surgeon who represents the more overtly Southern position. The ends are the same, only the means differ. Baumbach, p. 76.

6 Critics agree that this part of the novel is at bottom a projection of the author's involvement with the Communist Party, an experience which he survived and mastered artistically.

7 Ralph Ellison, "Change the Joke and Slip the Yoke," Shadow and Act, p. 71.


9 Ralph Ellison, "Richard Wright's Blues," Shadow and Act, p. 94.
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