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The meaning of freedom in Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man*

by

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When Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man* was published in 1952, it was immediately received with much acclaim and subsequently, in 1953, received the National Book Award. In 1965, "Book Week" conducted a poll of prominent authors and critics, and *Invisible Man* was voted "the most distinguished single work published in the last twenty years." However, many black authors and critics have been unimpressed with either the novel or the author. In a poll taken by the *Negro Digest* in 1968, it was Richard Wright, not Ralph Ellison, who was proclaimed the "most important black writer of all time."

Part of this disdain for Ellison has stemmed from the way in which the Black Nationalist movement (with Ras the Exhorter as its leader) was treated in *Invisible Man*, but much of the contempt has resulted from the change in the attitudes of the black populace since Ellison's novel first appeared in 1952—"two years before the Supreme Court outlawed segregation in the public schools, and three years before Mrs. Rosa Parks refused to give up her seat to a white man on a crowded Alabama bus."

Allegations have been made that Ellison has betrayed his black heritage by not writing more "protest" literature, and his accusers have called him an "Uncle Tom," citing as proof not only the anti-nationalism in his novel, but his refusal to lend active support to any of the militant black movements of the 1960's. This militant "transformation in the self-image of the American blacks" has caused Ralph Ellison to be subjected to much criticism, but he has continued to assert that his Negro heritage is also an American heritage, and that he will deny neither of the two. In defense of his
novel, he claims that *Invisible Man* was not meant primarily to be "protest," but "art."^2

When examined artistically, *Invisible Man* is certainly a brilliant novel, and as the critics have turned the jewel this way and that, new facets have been revealed under each new analytical ray. Each critic sees the novel from a different perspective. John Reilly has defined it as a "universal" and Esther Jackson as a "philosophical" novel; Earl Rovit has declared it to be "profoundly comic," while Ralph Rupp describes it as "festive" and Jonathan Baumbach as a "nightmare."^3 Some have seen it as a modern *Huckleberry Finn*, an initiation novel dealing with the themes of illusion and reality.^4 Many critics have used archetypal patterns (including Odysseus, Prometheus and the Furies, Campbell’s archetype of the hero, the current anti-hero and absurd hero types, and folkloric and mythic elements) as basic approaches to the novel's meaning.\(^5\) Music, notably jazz and the Blues, has been duly noted as an integral part of its structure.\(^6\) Recently, William Walling compared *Invisible Man*'s basic structure to a "Wagnerian orchestration of leitmotifs," identifying three motifs central to the novel: 1) the burden of the past upon the individual, 2) illusion versus reality, and 3) the true source of power behind the facade of social life.\(^7\) Many other critics have explored the novel's prominent metaphors and images, such as invisibility, masking, vision, the running man, and the underground man.\(^8\) It is a paean to the mastery of Ralph Ellison that the succeeding years continue to enhance this novel's artistic brilliance.

But is *Invisible Man* merely "art"? Is it not "protest," too? It may
be true that in today's climate of black identity the literary artistry of the novel leaves the black man on the street "with a sense of instinctive resentment," as Walling claims, yet Walling himself concludes that it is both "art" and "protest." Thomas Vogler has also shown that, although the protest is on a more socially aware basis than the protest literature of the thirties, it is still a protest novel, albeit more "universal" than "Negro." Vogler's "universal" assertion may be correct, yet the reader is never allowed to lose sight of the race of the novel's narrator. Throughout the novel the narrator struggles to attain freedom against various barriers put in his way, and every barrier is, first of all, racially constructed. Indeed, these barriers isolate and alienate the black man from the main institutions of American life. Ralph Ellison has explained that the Negro is placed in a precarious position because of such alienation:

> When Negroes are barred from participating in the main institutional life of society they lose far more than economic privileges or the satisfaction of saluting the flag with unmixed emotions. They lose the bulwarks which men place between themselves and the constant threat of chaos. For whatever the assigned function of social institutions, their psychological function is to protect the citizen against the irrational, incalculable forces that hover about the edges of human life like cosmic destruction lurking within an atomic stockpile...without institutions to give him direction, and lacking a clear explanation of his predicament...the individual feels that his world and his personality are out of key....

In *Invisible Man* the narrator encounters these American social institutions, discovering the hindrances to freedom in each one, beginning with the "community" and its restrictions (the Southern white community), then, in order, the institutions of education (the Negro college community),
economics (the Northern industrial community), and politics (the community of the Brotherhood), experiencing the restraints of each as they are imposed upon the black man.

These restraints emanate from both the Negro's position and his identity as they are defined by the dominant white society. Thus, the black man finds himself in Ellison's "predicament": constantly under the threat of "chaos," or those irrational and violent forces against which he has no protection; and unable to assert his individual identity, because his concept of himself and of the world is limited by the identity imposed upon him by those in power in his community. He is caught in a duality of existence, as explained by DuBois:

...the Negro is a sort of seventh son, born with a veil, and gifted with second sight in this American world--a world which yields him no true self-consciousness, but only lets him see himself through the revelation of the other world. It is a peculiar sensation, this double-consciousness, this sense of always looking at one's self through the eyes of others, of measuring one's soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity. One ever feels his twoness--an American, a Negro....

Not being able to see himself except through someone else's eyes is one major problem to be overcome by the narrator of Invisible Man; closely allied with this identity problem is the problem of freedom. ("Perhaps, I thought, the two things are involved with each other. When I discover who I am, I'll be free." What the young hero discovers is that every institution defines him in its own terms and wants him to fulfill only the roles assigned to him. If he decides to make choices for himself (which is one's ultimate freedom), he finds himself threatened by that institution.
The experiences of Ellison's narrator in the four communities of society, education, economics and politics constitute the greater part of the novel. Each community is increasingly complex, yet the same conditions which threaten his freedom are always present in some form: the condition of "chaos," represented by images of violence and sex; the condition of "imposed order," represented by images of puppetry (or any "doll" image) and limited vision. Out of chaos and role-playing grows the young man's gradual enlightenment. Thus, Ellison's novel speaks of two conditions which the black man must understand: one, the "limitations" against which he must function in all societies; the other, the "possibilities" that exist for blacks even within these limitations when they become aware of their own identities. When a Negro understands who he is, and when he becomes cognizant of the limitations of his existence, then he can begin to understand the possibilities of acting from personal choice. He then can become what the existentialist calls a "being of action," not a "being acted upon." This is the definition of true freedom in Ellison's novel: the ability to make a choice and act upon that choice based on the individual's own attitude or his own personal desire.

American society, however, has never allowed this kind of individuality to the Negro. William Grier and Price Cobbs, two black psychiatrists, point out that "the ultimate power is the freedom to understand and alter one's life. It is this power, both individually and collectively, which has been denied the black man." Beginning with slavery, the black child has had to learn that any individuality on his part may bring violent forces down upon him. Part of the function of the Negro family in the South,
particularly the mother's role, has been to help the child adjust to this violence or restrictiveness which may be directed at him. Grier and Cobbs have explained the mother's role in society:

Every mother, of whatever color and degree of proficiency, knows what the society in which she lives will require of her children. Her basic job is to prepare the child for this. Because of the institutionalization of barriers, the black mother knows even more surely what society requires of her children.... She must intuitively cut off and blunt the boy's masculine assertiveness and aggression lest these put the boy's life in jeopardy.... The child must know that the white world is dangerous, and that if he does not understand its rules it may kill him.

To this Ralph Ellison adds his own perception of the family's role:

It has a dual task: to protect the Negro from whirling away from the undifferentiated mass of his people into the unknown, symbolized in its most abstract form by insanity, and most concretely by lynching; and to protect him from those unknown forces within himself which might urge him to reach out for that social and human equality which the white South says he cannot have.

The force within the individual which urges him to reach for equality in both social and human terms must be suppressed in the Negro, for the penalty for desiring it is chaos—in its concrete form of physical violence or its abstract form of insanity. In Invisible Man Ellison graphically illustrates the chaos of the unknown through violence and sex imagery, then links those images with illustrations of puppetry and limited vision, beginning in the prologue and continuing through the battle royal scene, the Golden Day, the Liberty Paint factory, and the Harlem riot. Each scene illustrates a different phase of the chaos which threatens the black man.

Sex as an image of chaos has its roots in the slave heritage of the Negro. In the prologue of Invisible Man, the narrator dreams of seeing a young black girl "pleading in a voice like my mother's as she stood before
a group of slave owners who bid for her naked body." (p. 12) Through associating his mother's voice with the body of the slave girl, Ellison achieves an identification of his hero with his slave heritage and the chaotic conditions which existed for the black woman. Grier and Cobb have commented:

It has been said that beauty is a curse to a subject woman. From the time black people arrived in this country up to the very recent years black women have been sexually available to any white man who felt so inclined. They were not protected by the laws and their men stood in jeopardy of life if a hand was raised in their defense. For the slave or subject woman, youth and beauty meant arousing the interest of the oppressor and exposure to sexual exploitation....Even now, the pressures on the pretty girl of the ghetto are great and it requires a special heroism for her to avoid the identity of an anonymous sexual object.18

Ellison further expands these images of sex and violence, associating them with the notion of freedom, by linking his hero to the "old singer of spirituals," who explains that she dearly loved her master and has borne him several sons. Now he is dead, and her sons are laughing and rejoicing over his death:

"He promised to set us free, but he never could bring himself to do it. Still I loved him..."
"Loved him? You mean..."
"Oh, yes, but I loved something else even more."
"What more?"
"Freedom."
"Freedom," I said. "Maybe freedom lies in hating."
"Naw, son, it's in loving. I loved him and give him the poison and he withered away like a frost-bit apple. Them boys woulda tore him to pieces with they homemade knives." (pp. 13-14)

Throughout the novel these images of sex and violence are closely associated.

Violence, however, in the life of the black man is not limited to sexual experiences, but is a pervasive threat to any assertions he may make
concerning his identity. Black literature emphasizes violence as a condition in the black experience, as Stephen Bennett and William Nichols point out:

Much Afro-American fiction is soaked in blood; it flatly states that the black experience in America is inevitably a violent one. They go on to show that America's best-known writers of fiction have emphasized the horrors of violence:

They have tended to identify violence with chaos. Frederick J. Hoffman sees this as a theme in most literature since World War II, and he comments: "This literature seems written on wager: life is possible if violence does not dispose of it." ...Life is essentially a struggle to salvage some minimal order from...chaos.

This struggle in Invisible Man is prefigured in the prologue when the young narrator accidentally bumps into a white man on a street corner at night. The white man calls him an insulting name, so the young Negro jumps at him, grabs his lapels, and demands that he apologize. When the white man responds by refusing to recognize even the existence of the black man, he is almost killed. Later, the narrator rejects overt violence against the whites, saying, "I learned in time that it is possible to carry on a fight against them without their realizing it." (p. 9) The violence associated here with "name-calling" is a foreshadow of the many identity crises which occur throughout the novel as the narrator faces his "imposed identity" in each of the American institutions of society, education, economics and politics.

The institution of society: the battle royal

The first personal experience the young hero has with direct violence
occurs at the white men's "smoker" to which he has been invited to give his high school graduation speech on "humility." What the white community is confirming is that he has learned to play his role of humble servant in their community. This young man proves he has learned his lesson well—time after time he overlooks what is happening to him and thinks only about that forthcoming speech: "I wanted to give my speech more than anything else in the world, because I felt that only these men could judge truly my ability." (p. 28) He has attributed to these men exactly the qualities of omnipotence they wish him to recognize.

However, he must be tested as to the veracity of his humility, so the white men put the young Negro through a series of humiliating experiences, all having to do with the white's own stereotyped images of the black man. Ellison claims that these images come from the need of the white man to feel at home in the chaos of the unknown:

...it is here in the realm of the irrational that, impervious to science, the stereotype grows. We see that the Negro stereotype is really an image of the unorganized, irrational forces of American life, forces through which, by projecting them in forms of images of an easily dominated minority, the white individual seeks to be at home in the vast unknown world of America. Perhaps the object of the stereotype is not so much to crush the Negro as to console the white man.21

The order that the white man has conceived and imposed upon the Negro springs from the irrational, chaotic, violent, sexual forces in the white man's world over which he has no control. When he can control them in the person of the black man he feels safe from that "whirling off into the unknown" Ellison spoke of. In the battle royal scene all these forces are interrelated through the images.

The first threat of violence is in connection with the sex role of
the black man in the southern white community. The young blacks are "treated" to an obscene dance by a nude white woman, and are alternately threatened, first if they look, then if they don't. The boys must learn that the white woman is as the rabbit's "carrot," held out to tantalize, but always withdrawn and forbidden to be tasted. The narrator learns later on that the white woman is always a factor in any dealings he has with the white man. He comments:

Why did they have to mix their women into everything? Between us and everything we wanted to change in the world they placed a woman: socially, politically, economically... why did they insist on confusing the...struggle, debasing both us and them...? (p. 362)

Ellison attributes this attitude to the deep-seated guilt feelings harbored by the white men because of their own sexual behavior toward black women from the time of slavery until now. To assuage these feelings of guilt, the white man has projected them onto the black man; then the scapegoat black can be punished and the guilt paid for. To justify the punishment, the white society must be convinced that the Negro is at heart a "big, black rapist" who desires white women above all. It is no wonder, then, that these young boys at the smoker must be made to feel guilty about their physical reactions to the white dancer--this is part of the role designated by the white community of the south. Ellison goes on to explain that this is all part of the negative image the white man has concocted of the Negro:

Being "highly pigmented" as the sociologists say, it was our Negro "misfortune" to be caught up associatively on 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. The physical hardships and
indignities of slavery were benign compared with this continuing debasement of our image. Because these things were bound up with their notion of chaos, it is almost impossible for many whites to consider the questions of sex, women, economic opportunity, the national identity, historic change, social justice—even the "criminality" implicit in the broadening of freedom itself—without summoning malignant images of black men into consciousness.22

Another role the blacks must assume is that of "entertainer" for the whites. In this first scene at the battle royal, the violence is first threatened (involving the white woman), then controlled by making the young man a puppet, placing him blindfolded in a ring and making him fight other black boys. Violence, when it is controlled by the white man, becomes a spectator sport in which the whites direct the blacks in violent action against each other.

After the battle the narrator discovers the violence becoming more personal. The boys are expected to grab for coins on an electrically charged rug (the coins later turn out to be fake). The young hero finds himself being forcibly rolled onto the rug, and, as the electricity surges through his body, he is described as "dancing" like a doll. This "doll" image occurs throughout the novel as the narrator relates his experiences in each of the communities.

However, this puppet is not yet finished—he must still give his speech on humility and must mouth the words and phrases that assure the white audience he knows his designated role in their society. When he stumbles over the phrase "social responsibility" and says "social equal-ity," the men again become threatening, insisting that he repeat what he said. He assures them that it is a genuine mistake, occurring only because he is still "swallowing blood" from the preceding battle. When
they are convinced of his "humility," they reward him with a scholarship to a Negro college. That night, however, the narrator dreams that he opens the briefcase and finds, not the scholarship, but a letter which reads, "Keep this nigger-boy running."

The institution of education: the Golden Day

The apparent function of the college to which the narrator is sent is only to confirm the roles for the blacks already determined by the whites. On the college grounds the young hero observes the founder's statue,

...his hands outstretched in the breathtaking gesture of lifting a veil that flutters in hard, metallic folds above the face of a kneeling slave; and I am standing puzzled, unable to decide whether the veil is really being lifted, or lowered more firmly in place; whether I am witnessing a revelation or a more efficient blinding. (p. 37)

Ellison claims that it is a blinding, and that the blinding of the black man in the educational system of America has been planned by the white society:

One of the great failures of education for Negroes in the United States is its failure to prepare the Negro student to understand the functioning of the larger American society. This was more or less planned right from the Reconstruction when the colleges were built. For one way of dealing with the Negro problem was to prepare Negroes to accept the status quo. This has changed, of course, over the years, but it's [still] possible for a Negro student to grow up in the United States without having a real feeling of how the society outside of the Negro community operates.23

Not only blinding, but puppetry imagery is very vividly illustrated in this section of Invisible Man. The narrator remembers the students marching to chapel, "uniforms pressed, shoes shined, minds laced up, eyes blind like those of robots to visitors and officials on the low, whitewashed reviewing stand." (p. 37) That this young robot is the product
of the white "trustees" is illustrated first by Mr. Norton's explanation of what he means when he declares, "You are my fate, young man...I mean that upon you depends the outcome of the years I have spent in helping your school. That has been my life's work...my first-hand organizing of human life." (pp. 42-43) A later illustration is seen in the Golden Day, as the veteran doctor tries to explain the workings of the "real" society to the young narrator. When there is no response of understanding, the doctor turns to Mr. Norton:

You see, he has eyes and ears and a good distended African nose, but he fails to understand the simple facts of life. Understand? It's worse than that. He registers with his senses but short-circuits his brain. Nothing has meaning. He takes it in but he doesn't digest it. Already he is--well, bless my soul! Behold! A walking zombie! Already he's learned to repress not only his emotions but his humanity. He's invisible, a walking personification of the Negative, the most perfect achievement of your dreams, sir! The mechanical man!...you both fail to understand what is happening to you...the boy, this automaton, he was made of the very mud of the region and he sees far less than you. ...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 ....He believes in you...in that great false wisdom taught slaves and pragmatists alike, that white is right....He'll do your bidding, and for that his blindness is his chief asset. (pp. 86-87)

The blindness and robotism of Negro education demonstrated in this section is linked to the forces of chaos in two scenes: the Trueblood cabin and the Golden Day.

Trueblood is the "primitive" Negro stereotype, hated by the educated blacks and encouraged by the whites. The alternative to education, as suggested here, appears to be primitivism which, to the young hero of the novel, is also a form of chaos--to live like the lower class blacks in the run-down shacks, picking up odd jobs here and there. "How all of us at the college hated the black-belt people, the 'peasants,' during those
days!" (p. 47) One of those sharecropper "peasants" was Trueblood, a man who worked hard and took good care of his family. Sometimes the college administrators would invite him to sing some of the "primitive spirituals" (the entertainment image again) for the chapel service. The students were embarrassed by the earthy harmonies they sang, but since the visitors were awed we dared not laugh at the crude, high, plaintively animal sounds Jim Trueblood made as he led the quartet. (p. 47) The white visitors are "awed" by the "animal sounds" made by this primitive black man. He is fulfilling the "less than human" stereotype whites have of uneducated blacks. However, his greatest role fulfillment is that of a surrogate father for the repressed, chaotic sexual desires of white fathers for their daughters.

As Mr. Norton is being chauffeured by the narrator he begins to tell the young man about his dead daughter, showing him her picture, describing her beauty as "a well-spring of purest water-of-life, and to look upon her was to drink and drink and drink again...." (p. 43) When they pass Trueblood's cabin, Norton, interested in its "primitive" construction, orders the car stopped. When he discovers that Trueblood has impregnated both his wife and daughter, Norton sits by the cabin, fascinated and amazed, listening to the sordid details of the black man's "dream" in which he commits incest with his grown daughter: "You have looked upon chaos and are not destroyed!" When Norton leaves he is pale and shaken, and hands Trueblood a hundred dollar bill. The black man doesn't understand his sudden fortune:

The niggers up at the school come down to chase me off and that made me mad. I went to see the white folks then 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 nigger he was. (pp. 64-65)
What he doesn't understand is explained by Selma Fraiberg:

Mr. Trueblood's dream-sin is the white man's dream-sin and... Trueblood is rewarded for offering himself as a symbol and taking the white man's sin on himself.24

The implied pun in the Trueblood name is that the white man is also paying for the black to take the responsibility for "fouling" the blood lines of the blacks through many decades of slave owner-slave girl relationships.

Violence is a part of this episode as well. Trueblood carries an open sore that refuses to heal, caused by an axe blow to the head delivered by his wife. She had meant to kill him, but at the last minute he had turned his head, catching the blade on his cheek. This violence-sex-role playing image is the concrete example of a more abstract form of chaos that is pictured in the Golden Day scene.

To the Golden Day, a local bar and brothel, the young narrator takes Mr. Norton for a stimulant after his collapse at Trueblood's cabin. Fraiberg graphically depicts the episode:

Mr. Norton...lies serenely unconscious in the midst of brawling and whoring while the lunatics speak unquieting truths about the white man's sickness and the black man's sickness. They are not heard. And when Norton is revived by a lucid madman...everyone works quickly to put Mr. Norton together again, to shore up the fictions and pretenses, to tell him what he wants to hear and show him what he wants to see.25

The "lucid madman" is a veteran physician who has been through the "education" of the Negro in the south; in fact, he is an alumnus of the school attended by the narrator. When the veteran correctly diagnoses Norton's ailment, the white man is very surprised; finding out that this inmate was once a prominent international surgeon, Norton asks what happened to him. The vet explains that he came back from France, where he
had been a practicing physician after completing medical school, and wanted to settle down in an American community, but he had forgotten some "fundamentals" of living here:

Ten men in masks drove me out from the city at midnight and beat me with whips for saving a human life. And I was forced to the utmost degradation because I possessed skilled hands and the belief that my knowledge could bring me dignity—not wealth, only dignity—and other men health! (p. 86)

For being educated and not "accepting the status quo" of the Negro, the doctor must live his life in a mental institution. While he, at least, is sane, many other blacks have gone into that "abstract chaos" of insanity because of the pressures of the white society. Grier and Cobb state:

Black men have stood so long in such peculiar jeopardy in America that a black norm has developed—a suspiciousness of one's environment which is necessary for survival. Black people, to a degree that approaches paranoia, must be ever alert to danger from their white fellow citizens. It is a cultural phenomenon peculiar to black Americans. And it is a posture so close to paranoid thinking that the mental disorder into which black people most frequently fall is paranoid psychosis.

Can we say that white men have driven black men mad?26

The entire Golden Day episode is an illustration of the "madness" that threatens the black man. Supercargo (superego), a "giant of a man," is the attendant for the inmates. His cry for order is answered by flying bottles and the rush of the men. Soon he is beaten and kicked into unconsciousness by the screaming, fighting mob. When Supercargo is unconscious there is no order and chaos results:

With Supercargo lying helpless upon the bar, the men whirled about like maniacs. The excitement seemed to have tilted some of the more delicately balanced ones too far. Some made hostile speeches at the top of their voices against the hospital, the state and the universe....One of the most educated ones touched my arm. He was a former chemist who was never seen
without his shining Phi Beta Kappa key. "The men have lost control," he said through the uproar. "I think you'd better leave." (p. 79)

Apparently not even the most astute mind and extensive education can protect a black man from the chaos of insanity and its concomitant violence.

Ironically, however, it is only the "insane" doctor who is able to interpret correctly the realities of society, while both the narrator and Norton live in a world of their own imaginations. When they leave the Golden Day, Norton retreats to his benevolent trustee role and the young man resumes his mechanical man posture, even accepting punishment for the incidents of the day:

...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 the code and thus would have to submit to punishment. (p. 131)

The punishment, which turns out to be expulsion from college, for violating an educational code he doesn't understand is preferable to facing the chaotic conditions of either primitivism or insanity.

The next morning the narrator leaves for New York, ostensibly to look for a job that will allow him to come back to school next term, but, in actuality, to be led on a blind path, not knowing he has been expelled and not realizing that the letters of introduction given him by Dr. Bledsoe are really instruments to prevent his return. Ironically, on the bus he meets the veteran doctor from the Golden Day, who slyly points out that this "freedom" the young man is experiencing is more symbolic than actual:

...think of what this means for the young fellow. He's going free in the broad daylight and alone. I can remember when
young fellows like him had first to commit a crime, or be accused of one, before they tried such a thing. Instead of leaving in the light of morning, they went in dark of night...there's always an element of crime in freedom...of course, he's only going to be there a few months. Most of the time he'll be working, and so much of his freedom will have to be symbolic. And what will be his or any man's most easily accessible symbol of freedom? Why, a woman, of course. (pp. 138, 136)

This young man doesn't understand that instead of actually having freedom he is acting out a role written by those in power in the educational community, but the doctor understands, and tries to give him some advice:

...learn to look beneath the surface....Play the game, but don't believe in it--that much you owe to yourself. Even if it lands you in a strait jacket or a padded cell....Play the game, but play it your own way....You're hidden right out in the open--that is, you would be if you only realized it. They wouldn't see you because they don't expect you to know anything, since they believe they've taken care of that....(p. 137)

Who is this they you're talking about? he is asked.

They? Why the same they we always mean, the white folks, authority, the gods, fate, circumstances--the force that pulls your strings until you refuse to be pulled any more. (p. 137)

The institution of economics: the Liberty Paint factory

The forces pulling the strings of Ellison's young hero extend from the southern college to the industrial community of the north. Mr. Emerson's son acts as the agent through which the strings are made visible when he allows the young man to read Bledsoe's letter of introduction which specifies that he is expelled and should only be encouraged to hope, but the hope that he will return to school will never be fulfilled. In effect he is saying, "Keep this nigger-boy running." Bitterly, the young narrator reflects that "everyone seemed to have plans for me, and beneath
that some more secret plan." (p. 170) He considers that he is like "poor Robin" of the folk song who was "picked clean." In the midst of his self-mockery and laughter he decides to act--to go back to the college and kill Dr. Bledsoe:

And the boldness of the idea and the anger behind it made me move with decision. I had to have a job...I called the plant young Emerson had mentioned, and it worked. I was told to report the following morning. It happened so quickly and with such ease that for a moment I felt turned around. Had they planned it this way? But no, they wouldn't catch me again. This time I had made the move. (p. 171)

This decision marks the first time he has made his own choice in determining his next action. Though significant for him, it ends in futility; he has not yet learned that as a black man in the economic institution, he has only moved from the role of a legalized slave to that of an economic pawn. At the Liberty Paint factory he begins to learn his economic position in America.

The factory is a microcosm of the American economic system. Patriotism is everywhere displayed, beginning with the neon sign outside the factory which announces "Keep America pure with Liberty Paints," and is surrounded by fluttering flags. Inside is a small city where Kimbro rules and directs the operation of making "optic white" paint, sold to the government to paint national monuments, in drums labeled with the company trademark, the screaming eagle. The association of this very American institution, the northern factory, with the Southern plantation system is achieved by calling Kimbro "the Colonel," and referring to him as an "old slave driver." (p. 182)

The economic position of the black is carefully sketched in this epi-
sode. "Invisible," just as the black liquid dropped into the white paint disappears when it is well-stirred (making it the "right" white--"optic white"), he is also the "sweetener" of the "nauseating stench" of an untreated can of the white paint ("Them machines just do the cooking, these here hands right here do the sweeting. Yes, sir!...I dips my fingers in and sweets it!" p. 191). The Negro, as Brockway puts it, is the "machine within the machine," the one whose labors keep the system going but who never gets his just compensation for his contribution. The narrator recalls a man he knew who,

employed as a janitor at the Water Works, was the only one who knew the location of all the water mains...He actually functioned as an engineer, though he drew a janitor's pay. (p. 185)

One black writer has made the claim that "America has waxed rich and powerful in large measure on the backs of black laborers." At the Liberty Paint factory, Brockway functions as the engineer (he wears an engineer's cap), but the economic reality is that he is merely the owner's pawn, living a myth, as evidenced in his image of a diminutive Tar Baby, "looking as though he had been dipped in pitch" and later on, "covered with goo." (pp. 182, 198)

Probably the most graphic illustration that the black man is merely a pawn is the incident involving the narrator, the union, and Brockway. When the narrator stumbles into a union meeting in the locker room, he becomes the center of a controversy. Should he be allowed to stay for the union meeting, or is he a company "fink" ("The hoarsely voiced word grated my ears like 'nigger' in an angry southern mouth..." p. 192)? Before he realizes what is going on, they have voted to exclude him from the "demo-
cratic" union to which he has never applied for membership. The reader is taken back to the puppetry of the battle royal and the Negro college by the narrator's reaction to this new injustice:

My face stung as though it had been slapped. They had made their decision without giving me a chance to speak for myself. I felt that every man present looked upon me with hostility; and though I had lived with hostility all my life, now for the first time it seemed to reach me, as though I had expected more from these men than of others—even though I had not known of their existence. (p. 195)

What he had expected from them as a democratic institution was foretold in their first greeting to him, "Brother," a prefigure of the political Brotherhood later on.

Ironically, when the young man leaves the "brotherhood" of the union meeting and returns to the basement, Brockway accuses him of being a union man, one of those "educated blacks" who are not properly grateful to the white man, a play on puppets controlling puppets pulled by white strings:

Here the white man done give 'em jobs....He done give 'em good jobs, too, and they so ungrateful they goes and joins up with that backbiting union! I never seen such a no-good ungrateful bunch. All they doing is making things bad for the rest of us! (p. 200)

The ensuing battle between Brockway and the narrator (the battle royal again, with blacks fighting blacks) culminates in an explosion that sends the young man to the hospital. He comments that the needle on the white gauge is now "like a beacon gone out of control." Where control is lost, chaos is the result, just as it was in the Golden Day. In the hospital this young man experiences both the abstract form of chaos (irrationality) and the concrete form (physical violence), reminding the reader of the madhouse scenes from the Golden Day.
As the electrically charged rug provided the physical violence image in the battle royal scene, so is physical violence contained in the electric shock treatments given the narrator in the hospital. At first he is relieved to be there:

I was in a hospital. They would care for me. It was all geared toward the easing of pain. I felt thankful....But the people were so remote, the pain so immediate. (p. 203)

As he slips in and out of consciousness, the young man discovers that instead of easing his pain they are performing a lobotomy on him, electrically rather than surgically:

"The machine will produce the results of a prefrontal lobotomy without the negative effects of the knife...and the result is as complete a change of personality as you'll find....And what's more...the patient is both physically and neurally whole."

"But what of his psychology?"

"Absolutely of no importance!...The patient will experience no major conflict of motives, and what is even better, society will suffer no traumata on his account." (pp. 206-207)

Society, then, would be better off were the Negro without a functioning mind; he could be controlled at will, for he would have no "major conflict of motives." Turning him into a vegetable or a living robot is the aim of these hospital doctors. When one doctor asks of another, "Why not castration, doctor?" they administer more current, and the narrator steels himself for the shock,

but [I] was blasted, nevertheless. The pulse came swift and staccato, increasing gradually until I fairly danced between the nodes. My teeth chattered. I closed my eyes and bit my lips to smother my screams. Warm blood filled my mouth...

"Look, he's dancing," someone called...

"They really do have rhythm, don't they? Get hot, boy! Get hot!"...suddenly I wanted to be angry, murderously angry. But
...something had been disconnected...I was beyond anger. I was only bewildered. (pp. 207-208)

This hospital scene explains the ways in which the northern society handles the "Negro problem." In the south the colleges are programmed to make the black accept the "status quo," and the men are threatened with lynching or castration for any deviation from the "norms" of sexual behavior required of southern blacks. In the north the violence is more "refined," with doctors using "bloodless" surgery, but the results are the same: a sexless, living automaton, one whose physical strength is not impaired, who becomes an "amiable fellow" willing to do the bidding of the white society, but whose sanity or insanity is of no importance.

To test whether or not they have really created a living puppet, the scientists and doctors begin to question him as to his identity:

WHAT IS YOUR NAME?

A tremor shook me; it was as though he had suddenly given a name to, had organized the vagueness that drifted through my head, and I was overcome with swift shame. I realized that I no longer knew my own name. (p. 209)

When a man does not know his name, he knows neither himself nor his position in the world. Ellison explains:

Let Tar Baby...stand for the world. He leans, black and gleaming, against the wall of life utterly noncommittal under our scrutiny....Then we touch him playfully and...we find ourselves stuck. Our playful investigations become a labor, a fearful struggle, an agon. Slowly we perceive that our task is to learn the proper way of freeing ourselves...[he] holds on, demanding that we perceive the necessity of calling him by his true name as the price of our freedom. It is unfortunate that he has so many, many "true names"--all spelling chaos; and in order to discover even one of these we must first come into the possession of our own names. For it is through our names that we first place ourselves in the world. Our names, being the gift of others, must be made our own.28
In the hospital, the young man is asked again and again about his identity:

...Try to think of your name.

I tried, thinking vainly of many names, but none seemed to fit, and yet it was as though I was somehow a part of all of them, had become submerged within them and lost. (p. 210)

The white men seem pleased with the narrator's inability to know his name. They believe they have succeeded in placing him under their control by giving him a new identity and erasing the old one.

There is a power, almost a "magic" in naming, says Ellison, pointing out that Adam's first creative act was to name the animals, thereby acquiring power over them:

And when we are reminded so constantly that we bear, as Negroes, names originally possessed by those who owned our enslaved grandparents...so charged with emotion does this concern become for some of us, that we have discarded the original names in rejection of the bloodstained, the brutal, the sinful images of the past. Thus [some] would declare new identities...and destroy the verbal evidence of a willed and ritualized discontinuity of blood and human intercourse....Perhaps [for those of us who choose to keep] our European names, they represent a certain triumph of the spirit, speaking to us of those who rallied, reassembled and transformed themselves and who under dismembering pressures refused to die.29

Part of that "dismembering pressure" is what Robert Bone calls the misnaming of the black man:

Misnaming has its origin in negation, in the white man's hypocritical denial of his kinship ties. For the African slaves received from their Christian masters not only European names but a massive infusion of European blood, under circumstances so brutal and degrading as to have been virtually expunged from the national consciousness. At once guilty and proud, the white man has resorted to a systematic misnaming in an effort to conceal his crime....Thus the insulting epithets which deny not merely kinship but humanity.

In some obscene rite of exorcism, the white man says "nigger" when he should say "cousin."30
Ellison's young narrator in *Invisible Man* leaves the hospital with a new identity, but he finds himself removed from the labor force. He is told that he isn't "ready for the rigors of industry." The lobotomy is the northern method of removing competition—an educated black would be an economic threat to the northern skilled and semi-skilled worker. The solution, obviously, is to alter his mind to make him another menial laborer, for whom there is no longer a need in this American economy. Grier and Cobb explain it in these terms:

With the passing need for black laborers, black people have become useless; they are a drag on the market. There are not enough menial jobs. They live in a nation which has evolved a work force of skilled and semi-skilled workmen. A nation which chooses simultaneously to exclude all black men from this favored labor force and to deny them the one thing America has offered every other group—unlimited growth with a ceiling set only by one's native gifts.31

The young man asks the doctor how he is supposed to live.

"Live?" his eyebrows raised and lowered. "Take another job," he said. "Something easier, quieter. Something for which you're better prepared."
"Prepared?" I looked at him, thinking, Is he in on it, too?... Then I heard myself say, "Do you know him?" my voice rising.
"Who?"
"Mr. Norton," I said. "Mr. Norton!"
"Oh, why, no."...
He frowned and I laughed. "They picked poor Robin clean," I said. "Do you happen to know Bled?" (pp. 215-216)

The hero's mind goes back to his previous experiences with the barriers placed before him in other institutions, and makes the connection to this one as well. That he is able to see the connection is a sign that the young man is beginning to understand how these institutions operate. As he leaves the office, he has a strange feeling that this time everything is different. He feels like a different person, "in the grip of some
alien personality lodged deep within me," and he wonders if he is just acting out a scene from a movie,

Or perhaps I was catching up with myself and had put into words feelings which I had hitherto suppressed. Or was it, I thought, ...that I was no longer afraid? I stopped...I was no longer afraid. Not of important men, not of trustees and such; for knowing now that there was nothing which I could expect from them, there was no reason to be afraid. (pp. 217-218)

Even as this young man sheds the old skin of expectations, he dons another. There is a transitional phase of living with Mary Rambo and learning of the expectations of the blacks in between his newfound knowledge of his economic plight and his entrance into the institution of politics as defined by the Brotherhood.

The institution of politics: the Brotherhood

The narrator's entrance into the Brotherhood involves economics also, for it is his financial situation rather than his ideology that sends him into the Brotherhood. First, however, his own people, represented by Mary Rambo, teach him of their expectations of him. It is an ironic play upon puppetry that his fellow blacks also want to define him in their terms.

Mary talks constantly about "leadership and responsibility" (p. 225), the only thing that mars his "pleasant" relationship with her. Yet, in spite of her expectations of him, he recognizes her as a part of himself, perhaps that "mother" that keeps the young black from the threat of chaos:

[I did not] think of Mary as a "friend"; she was something more--a force, a stable, familiar force like something out of my past which kept me from whirling off into some unknown which I dared not face. (p. 225)

When he is under this "force from the past," in the episode of the yam vendor, the narrator makes his peace with his own southern Negro heri-
tage, his individual identity. Here he realizes that he can make a choice; he can act from his own volition:

I walked along, munching the yam, suddenly overcome by an intense feeling of freedom—simply because I was eating while walking along the street. It was exhilarating. I no longer had to worry about who saw me or about what was proper...What a group of people we were, I thought. Why, you could cause us the greatest humiliation simply by confronting us with something we liked. (pp. 229-230)

The realization creates in him a wild fantasy: shaking chitterlings in the face of Bledsoe, accusing him of indulging in a filthy habit, suffering the consequences for liking such obvious Negro things. Claiming that he himself was through with being ashamed of what he liked, the narrator reflects on his past attitude and this new understanding:

...now that I no longer felt ashamed of the things I had always loved, I probably could no longer digest very many of them.

What and how much had I 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...? How could you know? It involved a problem of choice. I would have to weigh many things carefully before deciding and there would be some things that would cause quite a bit of trouble, simply because I had never formed a personal attitude toward so much. I had accepted the accepted attitudes and it had made life seem simple... (pp. 231-232)

The "problem of choice" mentioned by the young hero, basic to his acquisition of freedom, is the dilemma of the modern day existentialist, for existentialist freedom is grounded in the awareness of universal contingency and of [man's] agonizing responsibility for choosing between complex alternatives concerning his existence...[Existentialists] reject the vague notion that it is a privilege that somehow renders life easier and happier. Rather, they assert its difficulty. 32

Making choices will not simplify this young man's life, since that action will also involve rejecting those choices made for him by the different American societies. However, it is the only pathway to freedom, for it
is in the assertion of one's identity and one's right to choose that freedom becomes a personal possession.

The young man's first real choice comes at the eviction of an old Negro couple, yet there is still an element of puppetry in this choice. The blacks who are gathered there, as well as the old woman herself, keep repeating Mary's "responsibility" themes. Because of their expectations and the surfacing of his suppressed emotions, the young narrator begins to identify with their dispossession. Suddenly he finds himself speaking, and it is this speech which wins him a position in the Brotherhood. What he doesn't yet realize is that the Brotherhood is another puppet role for him to play—an imposed political identity. The young man must be disillusioned by this final American institution of politics before he is able to assert his own identity.

The first hint of the political puppetry involved in the Brotherhood occurs at his meeting with Brother Jack after the eviction scene. Jack tells him,

"I'm an admirer."
"Admirer of what?"
"Of your speech," he said. "I was listening."
He smiled knowingly. "I can see that you've been well trained..." (p. 250)

When this "well trained" young man enters the Brotherhood he finds the barriers in this political system as formidable as those in any other American institution, but better hidden, since the ostensible ideology is that of "brotherhood." That he was chosen to fulfill a specific role in this institution is hinted at when Emma whispers to Jack, "But don't
you think he should be a little blacker?" (p. 263) and again when a drunk member is rebuked and disciplined for asking the "black brother" to sing one of the old spirituals, reminding the reader of the expectations of the white chapel visitors at the Negro college. Here, because in the Brotherhood everyone is supposed to be equal, his request creates tension which the narrator succeeds in dispelling with a self-mocking laughter, comparing this drunk's action with his own fantasies of hitting Bledsoe with a string of chitterlings. Later he somberly asks himself, "Shouldn't the short man have the right to make a mistake without his motives being considered consciously or unconsciously malicious?" (p. 272) What the young man doesn't yet comprehend is this system's set of rules and roles. When he leads Emma out to the dance floor, he begins to think "of the vet's prediction" about the symbolism of freedom contained in a white woman, and how he has never really been prepared for the situation now facing him:

I felt that I could never allow myself to show surprise or upset--even when confronted with situations furthest from my experience. ...I felt that somehow they expected me to perform even those tasks for which nothing in my experience...had prepared me. Still it was nothing new, white folks seemed always to expect you to know those things which they'd done everything they could think of to prevent you from knowing. (p. 273)

That night, as the young man undresses for bed, he notices his "outworn clothes" and realizes that he will have to shed them. "Certainly it is time." (p. 273) It is time for him to shed his old ideas as well, Ellison is saying. He is given new clothes, new living quarters, a new name and a new identity as the spokesman for the Brotherhood in the Harlem community, yet he is not yet a new man, only a new puppet.
His first assignment is to speak to those who have heard of his part in preventing the eviction of the old couple. As he sits in the sports arena waiting for his entrance on the podium, the young man becomes vaguely confused as to his identity and worries that he might forget his new name, or worse, that that remote self within him, "the dissenting voice...the traitor self that always threatened internal discord," (p. 291) would rise up and send him off into an irrationality, a chaos of the mind. "I would have to take that part of myself that looked on with remote eyes and keep it always at the distance of the campus, the hospital machine, the battle royal...Whatever it was, I knew that I'd have to keep it pressed down." (p. 291)

The arena speech recalls the battle royal in several ways: first, rather than a speech on humility in the midst of humiliation, this is a speech on dispossession by a man who has just been dispossessed of his own identity. Similarly, as the men at the smoker became threatening over his choice of words, so the committee from the brotherhood receives his speech with a coldness reminiscent of that other community. Their solution is not to send the young narrator to a Negro college, but to a Negro brother for further training while they, of course, pay all the bills. The young man is so blinded by his apparent success, just as he was at the battle royal, that he again fantasizes the importance of his reward:

I thought of Bledsoe and Norton and what they had done. By kicking me into the dark they'd made me see the possibility of achieving something greater and more important than I'd ever dreamed. Here was a way that didn't lead through the back door, a way not limited by black and white, but a way which...could lead to the highest possible rewards. Here was a way to have part in making the big decisions, of seeing
through the mystery of how the country, the world, really operated. For the first time, lying there in the dark, I could glimpse the possibility of being more than a member of a race. (p. 308)

However, as he himself says in his arena speech, "They've dispossessed us each of one eye from the day we're born," (p. 298) and this one-eyed young man is seeing through the blindfold of the Brotherhood. Later on, a black brother, Wrestrum, accuses him of "individualism" and they begin to battle each other, only this time with words instead of fists. The narrator left the room and went into a vacant office, boiling with anger and disgust. Wrestrum had snatched me back to the South in the midst of one of the top Brotherhood committees and I felt naked. I could have throttled him—forcing me to take part in a childish dispute before the others. Yet, I had to fight him as I could, in terms he understood, even though we sounded like characters in a razor-slinging vaudeville skit. (p. 349)

The author again connects the battle between the two black men to an entertainment image, even in the Brotherhood.

The individualism charge is, however, serious enough to warrant discipline. The committee sends him "downtown" (instead of "up north") to answer the Woman Question. In tones sounding strangely like his attitude toward his college expulsion the narrator says:

I felt suddenly empty; there was a logic in what he said which I felt compelled to accept. They were wrong, but they had the obligation to discover their mistake. Let them go ahead, they'd find that none of the charges were true and I'd be vindicated....Up to now I had felt a wholeness about my work and direction such as I'd never known; not even in my mistaken college days....I felt a blighting hurt which prevented me from trying further to defend myself. (p. 351)

Forgetting the vet's advice that the white woman was merely a symbol of freedom and not freedom itself, the narrator consoles himself with the
thought that

by selecting me to speak with its authority on a subject which elsewhere in our society I'd have found taboo, weren't they reaffirming their belief both in me and in the principles of Brotherhood, proving that they drew no lines even when it came to women? (p. 353)

What he finds, however, is that the women are more concerned with the biological than the ideological. Though he tried to keep the two apart,

[it] wasn't always easy, for it was as though many of the sisters were agreed among themselves (and assumed that I accepted it) that the ideological was merely a superfluous veil for the real concerns of life. (p. 363)

In addition to the biological, sexual disputations concerning the black man, the threat of violence is another "real concern of life." In Harlem, the primary threat of violence to the brothers and to the Brotherhood comes from Ras the Exhorter and his black nationalist followers. In one scene the narrator and his "first lieutenant," Tod Clifton, get into a fight with Ras and his gang when they try to break up the soap-box oratory of the Brotherhood. Ras pulls a knife on Tod, but can't bring himself to use it, crying that he cannot kill a black who reminds him of an African king:

Still moving forward, I saw his face gleam with red angry tears as he stood above Clifton with the still innocent knife and the tears red in the glow of the window sign. "You my brother, mahn. Brothers are the same color; how you call these white men brother?" (p. 321)

The narrator urges Clifton to leave, saying that Ras is nothing but a crazy man. Ras answers:

Me crazy, mahn? You call me crazy? Look at you two and look at me—is this sanity?...three black men fighting in the street because of the white enslaver?

..."Let's go," I said, listening and remembering and suddenly alive in the dark with the horror of the battle royal, but
Clifton looked at Ras with a tight, fascinated expression, pulling away from me. (pp. 322-323)

Clifton is pulling away from not only the narrator, but from the community of the Brotherhood. When the narrator is sent to the women, Clifton comes to an understanding of the position of the individual in the party, and suddenly disappears. When the narrator finds him, he has become a seller of two-faced "dancing dolls," whose two faces are both smiling a painted smile, whose substance is but flimsy paper, dancing because of an invisible string attached to their bodies, but leading to the hand of the manipulator. The doll reflects the true position of the Negro in the Brotherhood. Robert Bone sums it up in these words:

His sense of self has in fact been threatened all along by the position of the Negro in the Communist movement. On the one hand, he is constantly reminded of his Negro heritage and encouraged to embrace it; on the other, he is warned against the dangers of black chauvinism and offered all the inducements of universal brotherhood.

The narrator is still devoid of Clifton's enlightenment, and when he chances upon Tod Clifton giving his spiel he feels "betrayed":

What had happened to Clifton? It was all wrong, so unexpected. How on earth could he drop from Brotherhood to this in so short a time?...he knew that only in the Brotherhood could we make ourselves known, could we avoid being empty Sambo dolls. Such an obscene flouncing of everything human! (p. 376)

As a policeman approaches to arrest Clifton for selling without a license, the narrator walks away, deciding he cannot face Tod again. However, within a few short blocks he sees Tod in a tableau with the arresting officer. He thinks to himself that he will follow and pay Clifton's fine. Then something happens: the cop gives Clifton a shove and Clifton answers something over his shoulder.
I could see the cop push Clifton again, stepping solidly forward in his black shirt, his arm shooting out stiffly, sending him in a head-snapping forward stumble until he caught himself, saying something over his shoulder again, the two moving in a kind of march that I'd seen many times, but never with anyone like Clifton. I could see the cop bark a command and lunge forward, thrusting out his arm and missing, thrown off balance as suddenly Clifton spun on his toes like a dancer and swung his right arm over and around in a short, jolting arc...his left arm followed through in a floating uppercut that sent the cop...his feet flying, to drop him hard, rocking from left to right on the walk as Clifton kicked the box thudding aside and crouched, his left foot forward, his hands high, waiting. (p. 377)

As Clifton waits, the policeman struggles to recover his senses, unsheathes his gun, takes careful aim, and shoots the unarmed man. In a brilliant comparison to Clifton's decision of action, Ellison depicts his narrator in an absurd position of inaction, one leg in the street and the other raised above the curb, "I couldn't set my foot down...I couldn't take the step that would raise me up to the walk." (p. 377)

When he is finally able to move, his thoughts torment him. Why did Clifton make this choice? It was a choice; he had been arrested before and knew what to expect. "Why did he choose to plunge into nothingness, into the void of faceless faces, of soundless voices....(p. 379)

One answer is supplied by the narrator's own thoughts--the "plunge into nothingness," the existentialist idea that "death is the one certain reality in man's life" and that the confrontation with death "humanizes the being."

Nevertheless, because it opens up the terrible possibility of the existence of the irrational, the possibility that life ends meaninglessly and is absorbed into the void of Nothingness, most men obsessively refuse to acknowledge the reality of death. 34

But Clifton has made the choice to be killed, also answered by the existentialist:
...there is implied in this search for the true nature of self, the implication of choice; and the most significant choice that a man can make is his choice of death, for nothing reveals the true nature of a man as the manner of his dying—witness Socrates and Christ.35

This philosophy is echoed by Bennett and Nichols who, in their analysis of Afro-American literature, call self-destruction "creative violence":

Acts of self-destruction in Afro-American fiction can often be understood as final, desperate efforts to salvage dignity in the face of dehumanizing oppression. If Clifton lashed out at his oppressor in his last act, his aggression is more symbolic than real. The decision to sell Sambo dolls suggests that he has come to accept as inevitable the dehumanization and exploitation of black men. However, Clifton's suicidal defiance of police power moves closer...to Sartre's "man recreating himself."...In Afro-American fiction there is a kind of violence in which a character...redisCOVERS his humanity.36

There is, within the black experience, some basis for interpreting Clifton's act as an existentialist act of defining his humanity. Ellison describes how violence and oppression by the white society have forced the blacks in America to become existential in their viewpoint:

Our social mobility was strictly, and violently, limited—...As the sociologists say, we were indeed disadvantaged, both by law and by custom. And yet, our actual position was ambiguous. For although we were outside the social compact, we were existentially right in the middle of the social drama....We were forced to define and act out our own idea of the heights and depths of the human condition. Because human beings cannot live in a situation where violence can be visited upon them without any concern for justice—and in many instances without possibility of redress—without developing a very intense sense of the precariousness of all human life, not to mention the frailty and arbitrariness of human institutions. So you were forced to be existential in your outlook.37

Ellison's young narrator, however, gives up trying to decipher the meaning of the incident, saying, "I was no detective, and politically, individuals were without meaning." (p. 387) He makes plans to rally Harlem by controlling Tod's funeral, but finds an old black singer and a
young man with a horn controlling him and the crowd by stirring their emotions through an old slave song as the crowd marches down the street, the coffin held high. He wonders what it is that has touched him:

It was not the words, for they were all the same old slave-borne words; it was as though he'd changed the emotion beneath the words while yet the old longing, resigned, transcendent emotion still sounded above, now deepened by that something for which the theory of Brotherhood had given me no name. (p. 392)

Ideology can make puppets out of men, but when that ideology fails to give a name to his feelings, the narrator must speak from his own understanding and experience. He looks at Clifton's coffin, and "all I could remember was the sound of his name." (p. 392) It is no accident that his name is Tod, the German word for death. The young man takes the name and begins his speech by presenting the bare facts, "His name was Clifton and they shot him down." (p. 393) Then building upon those facts in subsequent statements, he presents Tod's various identities: his racial identity, his Brotherhood identity, his "good citizen" identity, his lack of religious or geographical identity, his biological identity, and in each one, his humanity. Whereas the narrator had desired to end his oration in a way that would rally the crowd to the political ideology of the Brotherhood, he feels helpless to do so; instead he makes the association to the Harlem they all know: a "box" with rats and roaches, where policemen carry guns with triggers and are looking for a rhyming word. When he looks at the crowd as they move on to bury Clifton, he sees not a mass of people to be controlled, but "the set faces of individual men and women." (p. 397)

Here is an important turning point in the novel, for here the narrator begins to see himself and others as individuals, not simply masses to be
controlled. The Brotherhood committee, however, remains blind to the needs of either the individual or the masses of the Negro people. At the narrator's meeting with them more of his own blindfold is stripped away; he comes to realize that they are not interested in Clifton's humanity—only in the fact that to them, he was "undisciplined." When Jack reveals to the narrator that he has paid a price for discipline—a glass eye, the narrator's own eyes are opened. "So that is the meaning of discipline, I thought, sacrifice...yes, and blindness; he doesn't see me." (p. 411)

The narrator now finds himself in a state of ambiguity. He is disillusioned with the Brotherhood, yet the people of Harlem connect him with the Brotherhood and when he goes out on the streets, Ras challenges him to tell the people what the Brotherhood is going to do about Tod's death. The narrator is able to talk his way around the crowd; then, in looking for a way to escape Ras's men, he spots a group of men in sunglasses and decides to escape detection by donning a pair. It works better than he could ever have planned, for when he puts on the glasses he is mistaken for another person—Rinehart. But Rinehart is more than just a person; he is a man of multiple personalities, from a numbers runner to a Reverend. He is, as stated by Ellison, "the personification of chaos."

After many encounters with the chaotic existence of Rinehart, the narrator philosophizes about him:

...could he be all of them: Rine the runner and Rine the gambler and Rine the briber and Rine the lover and Rinehart the Reverend? Could he himself be both rind and heart? What is real anyway?...His world was possibility and I 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
yast seething hot world of fluidity, and Rine; the rascal was at home. Perhaps only Rine; the rascal was at home in it. (p. 430)

The narrator decides to go to Hambro and find out what he should do about Rinehart and about the Brotherhood's decision on Harlem, but what he discovers at Hambro's unnerves him--Hambro is as blind as Jack in his evaluation of the situation in Harlem. Hambro is willing to sacrifice the people of Harlem for a "larger community." The Negroes, he says, "must be slowed down for their own good." (p. 435) After that, he says, the narrator will be their teacher.

"I don't think I can," I said..."I'd feel like Rinehart...a charlatan..."
"I thought you had learned about that, Brother...that it's impossible not to take advantage of the people."
"That's Rinehartism...cynicism..."
"Not cynicism--realism. The trick is to take advantage of them in their own best interest."
"But who is to judge? Jack? The committee?"
"We judge through cultivating scientific objectivity," he said with a voice that had a smile in it, and suddenly I saw the hospital machine.... (p. 436)

With this final disillusionment of the Brotherhood, the young man makes plans to "Rinehart" them:

because they were blind they would destroy themselves and I'd help them. I laughed. Here I had thought they accepted me because they felt that color made no difference, when in reality it made no difference because they didn't see either color or men...I was simply a material, a natural resource to be used. I had switched from the arrogant absurdity of Norton and Emerson to that of Jack and the Brotherhood, and it all came out the same--except I now recognized my invisibility.... I sensed another world of possibilities. For now I saw that I could agree with Jack without agreeing...I'd have to do a Rinehart. (pp. 439, 438)

The narrator just gets a good start on "Rineharting" the Brotherhood when Harlem erupts into a full-scale riot. All the images of chaos are present, beginning with Sybil's pseudo-rape by the mythic "big, black..."
rapist," or "Santa Claus." The lynching images are present, too. Some are false lynchings:

Ahead of me the body hung, white, naked, and horribly feminine from a lamppost...seven, all hanging before a gutted storefront...I stumbled, hearing the cracking of bones underfoot and saw a physician's skeleton shattered on the street....They were mannequins--"Dummies!" I said aloud. Hairless, bald, and sterile-ly feminine....But are they unreal, I thought; are they? What if one, even one is real--is...Sybil? I hugged my brief case, backing away, and ran... (p. 481)

while others are real threats made by Ras, no longer the Exhorter, but the Destroyer, personification of irrationality and insanity. The narrator tries to reason with him and the crowd, tries to strip away their blindfolds by showing them that when their violence is directed toward each other it is fulfilling the plans of the white man:

"It's simple, you've known it a long time. It goes, 'Use a nigger to catch a nigger.'" "Hang the lying traitor," Ras shouted. (p. 483)

The narrator throws a spear, catching Ras through both cheeks, then begins to run from Ras's men:

...if they'd fired they could have had me, but it was important to them that they hang me, lynch me even....I should die by hanging alone, as though only hanging would settle things, even the score. (p. 484)

In his flight the narrator comes at last to the realization of his true identity:

knowing now who I was and where I was and knowing too that I had no longer to run for or from the Jacks and the Emersons and the Bledsoes and Nortons, but only from their confusion, impatience, and refusal to recognize the beautiful absurdity of their American identity and mine....I was invisible, and hanging would not bring me to visibility, even to their eyes....better to live out one's own absurdity than to die for that of others, whether for Ras's or Jack's. (pp. 483-484)
He makes a decision: he will go to Jack's and make him as physically blind as he is in all other ways. However, he never gets there; instead he falls into an uncovered manhole, another image of his invisibility--a "nigger in a coal pile," there but unseen.

The next day he begins by burning what William Schafer has called his "cancelled identity cards," all the papers in his briefcase, accumulated from his experiences. In resolving his own identity, he must reject all those identities imposed upon him. Ellison has stated:

I rejected all negative definitions imposed upon me by others; there was nothing to do but search for those relationships which were fundamental...
I feel to embrace uncritically values which are extended to us by others is to reject the validity, even the sacredness of our own experience. It is also to forget that the small share of reality which each of our diverse groups is able to snatch from the whirling chaos of history belongs not to the group alone, but to all of us.

The young man now begins to see the possibilities that exist for him in the American society:

...now the world seemed to flow before my eyes. All boundaries down, freedom was not only the recognition of necessity, it was the recognition of possibility. And sitting there trembling I caught a brief glimpse of the possibilities posed by Rinehart's multiple personalities and turned away. (p. 431)

Rinehartism must be rejected because it is neither reality nor order, but chaos. Violence, too, is chaos, and for this reason it must be rejected as well, whether it be directed toward other blacks, whites, or the self. For if one identifies himself through a force of chaos, he is in danger of losing his identity rather than arriving at self-identity. Each of the identities imposed on the narrator by the institutions of society, education, economics and politics must likewise be rejected. He cannot
be anyone's puppet nor can he allow any group to swallow him until he is no longer an individual. He must reject each expectation that does not conform to his own reality of identity. Richard Lehan has stated:

The narrator...rejects Jack and the Brotherhood because he realizes that to Jack he is only an economic pawn to be thought of in terms of a dialectical process of history. He rejects Ras the Exhorter, a black nationalist, whose belief in Negro racial superiority fires Ras to violence. He rejects Mary, the prototypical mother, who wants him to be careful, to conform, to succeed in the white man's world. He rejects Lucius Brockway, a Negro who wants to see other Negroes kept in their place so they will be no threat to him.40

However, he is not left, as Lehan claims, "without anything more to reject--and without anything to affirm; he ends alone, abandoned, on an underground coal pile."41 The narrator has learned, not only what he is not, but what he is, as he states it, "I'm invisible, not blind." (p. 498) He has also learned that there are two conditions in society: limitations and possibilities. He looks at the world optimistically, "Until some gang succeeds in putting the world in a strait jacket, its definition is possibility." (p. 498)

As it does for every man, freedom exists for the black man, but it is individually won when a man asserts his individuality. Howe correctly states that "freedom can be fought for, but it cannot be willed or asserted into existence."42 Ellison agrees:

Negro writers [have the task] of defining Negro humanity...this can no more be accomplished by others than freedom, which must be won again and again each day, can be conferred upon another.43

Freedom is an individual act, and although Howe states that "to define one's individuality is to stumble upon social barriers which stand in the way,"44
Ellison answers that

simply to take down a barrier doesn't make a man free. He can only free himself, and as he learns how to operate within the broader society, he learns how to detect the unwritten rules of the game, and so on. But that is what any provincial does; this is what any white provincial has to learn. It's just been easier for him to learn, that's all. Why shouldn't it be easier for the Negro? The reason is because it's political...there's economic power involved, there's fear involved.... Should it be changed? Yes. When? Today. The question is how. 45

Ellison's hero, then, will not stay in the hole, but he will make a decision of action and come out to assert his identity. He has learned how to operate within the American society, learning that within all the limitations, possibilities exist. He must draw from his self-knowledge and experience the power to assert his identity in the face of those institutions which would seek to crush him. At the same time, however, these institutions provide a framework within which he can make choices, within which he can find expression of freedom. It is analogous to the improvisationist's finding his solo technique against the boundaries of the group, as Ellison explains:

...after the jazzman has learned the fundamentals of his instrument and the traditional techniques of jazz...he must then "find himself," must be reborn, must find, as it were, his soul. All this through achieving that subtle identification between his instrument and his deepest drives which will allow him to express his own unique ideas and his own unique voice. He must achieve, in short, his self-determined identity. 46

Since the black man must function within the limitations of the white society, the solution to the problem of the American Negro and democracy lies, says Ellison,

partially in the white man's free will. Its full solution will lie in the creation of a democracy in which the Negro will be free to define himself for what he is and, within the large
framework of democracy, for what he desires to be. 47

This definition by the Negro is not merely rejection, however. Ellison goes on to explain that while it is true that Negroes turn away from white patterns because they are refused participation, it is equally true that

there is much of great value, of richness, which, because it has been secreted by living and has made their lives more meaningful, Negroes will not willingly disregard...In Negro culture there is much of value for America as a whole. What is needed are Negroes to take it and create of it "the uncreated consciousness of their race." 48

Perhaps that's what the narrator had in mind when he decided that it was time for him to come out of his hole, that perhaps "even an invisible man has a socially responsible role to play." (p. 503) America needs to learn that there is freedom in diversity, not conformity. Perhaps what the invisible man will teach us is, as Ellison says, that when the black man wins a struggle to assert his freedom, "each of our victories increases the area of freedom for all Americans, regardless of color." 49 That the Negro has a beauty and universality of culture to add to the American heritage is attested to by the fact "that the descendants of the very men who enslaved us can now sing the spirituals and find in the singing an exaltation of their own humanity." 50

The message is clear: the freedom of the black to make choices is also the freedom of the white to make choices. We can all be swallowed by our institutions or we can choose to become individuals who look for the possibilities within those limitations. As the narrator himself put it, "Who knows but that, on the lower frequencies, I speak for you?"
FOOTNOTES

1. William Walling, "'Art' and 'Protest': Ralph Ellison's Invisible Man Twenty Years After," Phylon 34 (1973), p. 121. For a thorough discussion of the changing attitudes of black artists and writers, and of Ellison's response to them, the reader is directed to this article on pages 120-34 and to the first of Walling's articles, "Ralph Ellison's Invisible Man: 'It Goes a Long Way Back, Some Twenty Years,'" pp. 4-16 of the same issue.


6. Robert A. Bone, "Ralph Ellison and the Uses of the Imagination," Ralph Ellison: A Collection of Critical Essays, pp. 95-114. There are also numerous instances in Shadow and Act where Ellison refers to the parallelism between music, either jazz or the Blues, and the act of writing a novel from the black experience.


8. In addition to those already referred to in preceding footnotes: Charles I. Glicksberg, "The Symbolism of Vision," Twentieth Century Interpretations of Invisible Man, pp. 48-55; Ernest Kaiser, "Negro Images in American Writing," Twentieth Century Interpretations of Invisible Man,

9Walling, p. 121.


11Shadow and Act, pp. 299-300.


13Ralph Ellison, Invisible Man (New York: Random House, Signet Edition, 1952), p. 212. All quotations from the novel are from this edition, and subsequent references will be noted with the page number in the thesis text.

14Wesley Barnes, The Philosophy and Literature of Existentialism (Woodbury, N. Y.: Barron's Education Series, Inc., 1968), p. 69. This is Gabriel Marcel's philosophy as analyzed by Barnes.


16Black Rage, pp. 51-52.

17Shadow and Act, p. 90.

18Black Rage, p. 41.


20Ibid.

21Shadow and Act, p. 41.
22 Shadow and Act, p. 48.

23 Shadow and Act, p. 168.


25 Ibid.

26 Black Rage, p. 173.

27 Black Rage, p. 172.

28 Shadow and Act, p. 147.

29 Shadow and Act, p. 149.


31 Black Rage, p. 172.


33 The Negro Novel in America, p. 209.

34 Spanos, op. cit.


36 Bennett and Nichols, pp. 172-74.

37 Shadow and Act, pp. 16-17.

38 Schafer, p. 91.

39 Shadow and Act, p. 166.

41 Lehan, op. cit., p. 41.

42 Irving Howe, "Black Boys and Native Sons," Twentieth Century Interpretations of Invisible Man, p. 102.

43 Shadow and Act, pp. 43-44.

44 Howe, op. cit.


46 Shadow and Act, pp. 208-09.

47 Shadow and Act, p. 304.

48 Shadow and Act, pp. 316-17.

49 Shadow and Act, p. 271.

50 Shadow and Act, p. 172.
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"Ralph Ellison's Invisible Man: 'It Goes a Long Way Back, Some Twenty Years.'" Phylon 34 (1973), 4-16.

