

## “Optic White” Society: a Discussion of “Mask” in Ralph Ellison’s Works

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After the publication of his first novel, *Invisible Man*, in 1952, Ralph Ellison (1914-1994) became one of the resonant writers in the history of literature. In this novel, he describes a black man who has undergone a transformation through a series of conflicts, changing from an innocent southern college student into an enlightened being hibernating in the underground of New York City. The book has engaged a great number of readers because of its theme of self-discovery, the suggestive power of which captures the situation of not only black, but also white Americans, and ultimately human beings as a whole. Ellison has also written substantial essays, in which he explores his understanding of racism in the United States, as well as the role of art and culture. Among his several concerns, these works reveal his persisting assertion of the interdependence between blacks and whites in American society, as well as in its culture. In his speech at Harvard in 1973, he said that all “of us are part white, and all of y’all are part colored” (Introduction, xiii). This essential idea of Ellison also appears in *Invisible Man* as an underlying motif. The color imagery of black and white paint at Liberty Paint enforces his idea of the mutual relationship between blacks and whites in American society; moreover, the theory of making “Optic White” paint presents the ultimate goal of racially integrated society.

In the Liberty Paint episode, the Invisible Man attains his first job at Liberty Paint where he is assigned to mix ten drops of black liquid into each bucket of white paint in order to make it

“optic white.” This mixing theory perplexes him because he does not understand how adding black drops can make white paint whiter. In spite of his hesitation, the black drops make the paint optic white, which his boss, Kimbro, describes “as white as George Washington’s sunday-go-to-meetin’wig and as sound as the all-mighty dollar!... That’s paint that’ll cover just about anything” (196). The factory produces much of the paint for the government, and this purest white paint, according to Kimbro, is heading for a “national monument.” Going down into the basement of the factory, the Invisible Man’s confusion is even more intensified by meeting a seemingly crazy old man, Lucius Brockway, who claims to be the real operator of the factory and the real creator of optic white paint. Brockway says that his white managers need him because he is the only one who knows “the location of each and every pipe and switch and cable and wire and everything else” (212). Moreover, the factory manages to produce a good paint precisely because of the way he “puts the pressure on them oils and resins before they even leaves the tanks” (214). He has even created the slogan for the factory which states, “If it’s Optic White, It’s the Right White” (213).

The making of this “Optic White” paint presents two mysteries: the mystery of mixing black drops to make paint whiter and the power structure in the Liberty Paint factory as stated by Brockway. The first mystery is further illustrated by two important characters of the novel, Dr. Bledsoe, the president of the southern black college where the Invisible Man attended, and Jim Trueblood, a sharecropper living in the slavery-quarter section of the town. The white-painted college of Bledsoe depends entirely on the white trustees, such as Mr. Norton. These trustees seem to believe that helping black people is their destiny. Mr. Norton describes the college as a part of his life and calls the Invisible Man his fate. Yet, behind their concerns for the college, they conceal their sense of guilt toward slavery

and the segregation of blacks. Therefore, the real motivation of their philanthropic gestures lie in their self-interests; their contributions make themselves, and ultimately American society, morally pure. Thus, Mr. Norton cannot stand going to a place like Golden Day, where the white paint has been left untouched and become gray, which suggests a place beyond the reach of white influence. The vet at Golden Day, a brilliant crazy man, points out this paradox by calling the Invisible Man, who still believes in the legend of the white trustees, "invisible, a walking personification of the Negative, the most perfect achievement of [white people's] dream, sir! The mechanical man" (92).

On the other hand, a black man like Trueblood also makes the white society whiter. He often goes to the college and tells the old stories and sings the blues because the white trustees appreciate his performance as "their primitive spirituals," while it embarrasses black students (46). Furthermore, having committed incest, he receives better treatment from white people, whereas black people consider him a disgrace to the entire community and try to expel him. What Trueblood represents for the white people is the primitiveness of the black race; he emphasizes the distinction between whites and blacks: the civilized and the uncivilized. His incest also emphasizes the stereotype of black sexuality as "a symbol of unconstrained force that white men contradictory envy and seek to destroy" (Baker 330). The image of castration appears several places in the novel; in the Battle Royal scene, one of the black boys feels tremendous guilt and fear because he is sexually aroused looking at a blond naked woman in front of the white spectators. In addition, in the factory hospital scene, one of the doctors suggests castration in treating the injured Invisible Man (330-331). Thus, white people regard Trueblood as an important specimen who intensifies the spiritual and moral purity of the white race insofar as his behavior suggests black people's incapability for civiliza-

tion, which justifies the segregation of them.

White people's requirement that black people make them as well as the society pure white leads them to dehumanize blacks. Ellison often expresses his concern about this issue. In his essay "Change the Joke and Slip the Yoke" (1958), he writes that "a ritual mask -- the identical mask and role taken on by white minstrel men when they depicted comic Negro" may be important for the national iconography because "Negro [is] too real for easy fantasy, too serious to be dealt with anything less than a national art" (1543). However, the function of the mask is also to "veil the humanity of Negroes thus reduced to a sign, and to repress the white audience's awareness of its moral identification with its own act and with the human ambiguities pushed behind the mask" (1543). His discussion of "mask" is extended to the role of American cinema. In his essay "Shadow and Act" (1949), describing the film, *The Birth of Nation*, as "a further instrument in the dehumanization of the Negro", he says that in "the struggle against Negro freedom, motion pictures have been one of the strongest instruments for justifying some white Americans' anti Negro attitudes and practices" (275).

Ellison describes the dehumanized black American as a scapegoat for American democracy; because of the American creed of every individual having equality, white Americans have to deny the humanity of blacks in order to practice this creed. Therefore, *The Birth of Nation* is not a film "about Negroes at all; [it is] about what whites think and feel about Negroes." Furthermore, such a film is well appreciated because of "an audience obsessed with an inner psychological need to view Negroes as less than men" (276). Ellison also recognizes the same psychological need in the readers of American novels. In twenties century American literary discourse, prominent writers, in writing on the American experiences, recognize the significance of the experiences of black Americans. Yet, as Ellison

points out, Hemingway and Steinbeck ignore them, and early Faulkner has “distorted Negro humanity to fit his personal version of Southern myth, [these writers] seldom conceive Negro characters possessing the full, complex ambiguity of the human. Too often what is presented as the American Negro (a most complex example of Western man) emerges an oversimplified clown, a beast or an angel” (Ellison, “Twenty-Century Fiction” 25-26). Thus, Ellison explores this paradox as follows:

... on the moral level I propose that we view the whole of American life as a drama acted out upon the body of a Negro giant, who lying trussed up like Gulliver, forms the stage and the scene upon which and within which the action upholds. ... For then the Negro's body was exploited as amorally as the soil and climates. It was later, when white men drew up a plan for a democratic way of life, that the Negro began slowly to exert an influence upon America's moral consciousness.

Gradually, he was recognized as the human factor placed outside the democratic master plan, a human “natural” resource who, so that white men could become more human, was elected to undergo a process of institutionalized dehumanization. (28-29)

Ellison apparently decided to go against the tradition of the protest novel of Richard Wright (1908-1960) because of its tendency to dehumanize blacks. His debate with Irving Howe over the role of black writers and of their novels illustrates his understanding of the role of the writer. Howe, in his essay “Black Boys and Native Sons” (1963), analyzes James Baldwin (1924-1987) and Ellison, considering them as Richard Wright's followers, and criticizes their rejection of the protest tradition since, for Howe, it remains “a rational and politically formidable

form of black writing” (Watts 66). In response to Howe, Ellison expresses his uneasiness toward his view in his essay “The World and the Jug” (1963,1964) that one “unfamiliar with what Howe stands for would get the impression that when he looks at a Negro he sees not a human being but an abstract embodiment of living hell” (1552). Dissenting from Howe’s belief that true Negro writers should be ferocious because of their unrelieved suffering, Ellison expresses his view of writer’s role as follows;

But there is also an American Negro tradition which teaches one to deflect racial provocation and to master and contain pain. It is a tradition which abhors as obscene any trading on one’s own anguish for gain or sympathy; which springs not from a desire to deny the harshness of existence but from will to deal with it as men at their best have always done. It takes fortitude to be a man and no less to be an artist. If so, there are no exemptions. It would seem to me, therefore, that the question of how the “sociology of his existence” presses upon a Negro writer’s work depends upon how much of his life the individual writer is able to transform into art. What moves a writer to eloquence is less meaningful than what he makes of it. How much, by the way, do we know of Sophocles’ wound? (1552)

Wright and Howe, engaged as they are in political activities and in economical concerns, fail to recognize black people’s interests in life in general rather than their predicament. Jerry Watts continues, asking why “would a Negro man be concerned about whether or not his suit was pressed properly when he could not attend school? Because, as Ellison knows, he just might have a date that evening with a woman he desires. It is these occurrences, the tribulations and torments of self-creation in everyday

life, that Ellison highlights for Howe who may not have appreciated how little time many blacks spent pondering their oppression" (76).

In *Invisible Man*, the hero experiences dehumanization by having a mask imposed on him. In the Battle Royal scene, the black boys are ordered to participate in the entertainment for the white men in the town. First, they are to look at a naked body of "a magnificent blond" with a tattoo of the American flag on her belly. Secondly, they are blindfolded and told to fight each other. The white men enjoy watching these "darky" entertainers being sexually aroused and fighting each other blindly. They call the boys Sambo, suggesting the image of a manipulated doll which echoes the piggy bank of Mary, "a very black, red-lipped and wide-mouthed Negro, his face an enormous grin, his single large black hand held palm up before his chest" (312). It also resonates to the sambo doll of Tod Clifton moving "up and down in a loose-jointed, shoulder-shaking, infuriatingly sensuous motion, a dance that [is] completely detached from the black, mask-like face" (424). This Battle Royal represents a ritual which Ellison describes as a "preservation of caste lines, a keeping of taboo to appease the gods and ward off bad luck. It is also the initiation ritual to which all greenhorns are subjected" ("The Seer and the Seen" 174). Thus, the boys learn the power structure of the society in which blacks do what they are told to do. They also recognize another racial line in that, despite their desires, they cannot touch a white woman, and her American tattoo ultimately suggests blacks' inability to possess America.

Through this ritual, the boys undergo a process of dehumanization by being forced to wear a racial "mask." However, Ellison suggests the other functions of the mask. He writes:

Very Often, however, the Negro's masking is motivated not so much by fear as by a profound rejection of the

image created to usurp his identity. Sometimes it is for the sheer joy of the joke; sometimes to challenge those who presume, across the psychological distance created by race manners, to know his identity. . . . Here the “darky” act makes brothers of us all. America is a land of masking jokes. We wear the mask for purpose of aggression as well as for defense; when we are projecting the future and preserving the past. In short, the motives hidden behind the mask are as numerous as the ambiguities the mask conceals. (“Change the Yoke” 1547)

The Invisible Man in the Battle Royal, naive and terrified as he is, seems to recognize the other functions of the mask. After the fight, the boys are told to collect the coins being spread on an electric rug. Without knowing it, he starts laughing, ignoring the pain he is subjected to on the rug, and realizes that he can “contain the electricity -- a contradiction, but it works” (28). Now, everyone starts laughing, despite the differences of race and status of observer and of observed. In this frenzied atmosphere, the Invisible Man even dares to pull one of the white drunkards on the rug. He describes the situation as follows;

. . . 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. I tried not to be obvious, yet when I grabbed his leg, trying to tumble him out of the chair, he raised up roaring with laughter, and, looking at me with soberness dead in the eye, kicked me viciously in the chest. (28)

In a later chapter, the Invisible Man falls into a similar situation, in which he is asked by a white man to sing. This



occurs in the bar where he goes to attend a Brotherhood meeting. The request enrages Brother Jack, who says that this "is an outrageous example of unconscious racial chauvinism!" (305) However, the Invisible Man starts laughing and makes a joke, which eventually leads everyone in the room to join in his laughter. Referring to this scene, Robert O'Meally writes:

Despite the typically Ellisonian storm cloud over this comic scene, the laughter here has a positive side. Significantly, the racial stereotype and Invisible Man's invitation, by his own laughter, of the whites to laugh at it induce a rare moment of shared closeness in the interracial group. The whites are relieved and grateful that the black guest takes no general offense at the broad man's aggressive racial remark. If they do not pound his back or shake his hand, they at least balance their terror with a smile in his direction for not losing his humorous perspective on what has happened and for not thus stirring their guilt. (In a recent interview, Ellison observed wryly that white Americans depend upon blacks' ability to retain an optimistic, or comic, view of life; if blacks can stay optimistic, how bad can things be for everybody else?) (14-15)

Thus, as the Invisible Man's laughter reveals, this type of mask provides blacks not only with the dehumanized stereotype, but also with a means for survival insofar as it conceals the feeling of terror or rage which may provoke whites. Moreover, by helping blacks play the role assigned, the mask leads them to achieve an intimate moment with whites as well as other blacks by transcending the differences of life experiences.

This positive side of the mask explains the second mystery of "Optic White" paint: Brockway's theory of power structure at

Liberty Paint. Although he boasts about his significance in the factory to the Invisible Man, his attitude toward the white managers remains humble. He makes a slogan for "Optic White" paint which says, "If It's Optic White, It's the Right White." This slogan sounds like "If You are White, You are Right," which is probably the reason why his white boss likes it, so much so that he even gives a three hundred dollar bonus to Brockway. Yet, this slogan actually comes from the old joke among blacks: "If you're white, you're right. If you're brown, step around. If you're black, get back!" (O'Meally 11). Thus, Brockway makes the slogan from sheer joy and humor. He seems to know that his white boss will like it because of its suggestive compliment to whites. Yet, behind his mask of a lowly old engineer, Brockway reveals his mocking attitude toward them. This is also his means for survival, since he knows that making this slogan is "another reason why the Old Man ain't goin' to let nobody come down here messing with me" (*Invisible Man* 213).

Similarly, Bledsoe's mask provides him with a means for survival. Since he knows that he is able to maintain the college as long as he satisfies the white trustees, he plays the role of a humble servant, concealing his rage with the mask of "the nigger." Accusing the Invisible Man of endangering the life of the college by taking Mr. Norton to the slavery-quarter and Golden Day, Bledsoe blames him, saying that "the only way to please a white man is to tell him a lie! What kind of education is [he] getting around here?" (137) Bledsoe recognizes the motivation of the white trustees' contributions as the manifestation of their guilt. He takes advantage of it, and, by wearing a mask, he manages to maintain his status as president of the college and to provide an education for black youths. He explains:

True [whites] support [the college], but I control it.

I' big and black and I say 'Yes'suh' as loudly as any burrhead when it's convenient, but I'm still the king down here. I don't care how much it appears otherwise. Power doesn't have to show off. Power is confident, self-assuring, self-starting and self-stopping, self-warning and self-justifying. When you have it, you know it. . . . This is power set-up, son, and I'm at the controls. You think about that. When you buck against me, you're bucking against power, rich white folk's power, the nation's power -- which means government power! . . . If there weren't men like me running schools like this, there'd be no South. Nor North, either. No, and there'd be no country -- not as it is today. (140)

The college episode also illustrates one of the underlying motifs of the novel: the blindness of the whites. The trustee Barbee is literally blind, and he needs Bledsoe's hand to walk down from the stage after his speech. Moreover, the statue of the Founder whose eyes look upon the world is blindfolded with bird-soil. Because of their blindness, the whites cannot see the human face under the mask, nor the real power of Bledsoe controlling them.

In this seemingly serious picture of the masked black and the blind white, Ellison does not fail to convey a touch of comedy insofar as their farfetched public performance presents a whimsical sense of humor. Barbee makes a long speech to commemorate the Founder and to pay a tribute to Bledsoe. Referring to his extravagant speech, Robert B. Stepto describes Barbee and Bledsoe as "quite a team, more than likely one of the most extraordinary comedy teams in Afro-American narrative literature. Evidently they have made a long joke out of the long black song of the Founder's long black train" ("Literary" 374). Furthermore, this performance presents a reversal of drama between whites and blacks. Barbee appears as a manipulated

performer, whereas Bledsoe, managing himself as humble despite the elegance of his appearance, presents himself as a manipulator; the more Barbee becomes self-conscious, the more profit Bledsoe obtains. The Invisible Man recognizes Bledsoe's suppressed dignity by saying that in spite of "the array of important men besides him, and despite the posture of humility and meekness which [has] made him seem smaller than others (although he [is] physically larger), Dr. Bledsoe [has] made his presence felt by us with a far greater impact" (113). In this picture of reversal, Bledsoe shares a commonality with Brockway, since they, situating themselves at the bottom, hold the actual power over their seeming superiors.

The mask of Trueblood also presents a theatrical performance in which he, starting out as the manipulated, eventually becomes the manipulator. On one hand, his story of incest suggests the black primitiveness, yet, on the other, his narration of the story, which implies the capacity for overcoming his predicament, arouses a feeling of awe in its listeners. His narration is often thought to have originated in the folk tradition of black culture. Ellison often talks about the importance of folk culture in American society as a whole. He says that folklore represents for blacks "the specific form of humanity," and he continues that:

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. These drawings may be crude but they are nonetheless profound in that they represent the group's attempt to humanize the world. ("The Art" 171)

*Invisible Man* presents a scene in which the Invisible Man remembers abruptly the old story of Poor Robin after having found out Bledsoe's conspiracy against him. For the first time, he reflects upon himself:

What was the who-what-when-why-where of poor old Robin? What had he done and who had tied him and why had they plucked him and why had we sung of his fate? It was for a laugh, for a laugh, all the kids had laughed and laughed, and the droll tuba player of the old Elk's band had rendered it solo on his helical horn; with comical flourishes and doleful phrasing, "Boo boo boo boooo, poor Robin clean" -- a mock funeral dirge. . . But who was Robin and for what had he been hurt and humiliated. Suddenly O lay shaking with anger. It was no good. I thought of young Emerson. What if he'd lied out of some ulterior motive of his own? Everyone seemed to have some plan for me, and beneath that some more secret plan. What was young Emerson's plan -- and why should it have included me? Who was I anyway? (190)

Ellison believes that great world literature -- that of Russia or France, and the art of Picasso, for example -- are also based on folklore. For Ellison, black folklore represents not merely black culture but also American culture, perhaps even Western culture, insofar as the building of the United States came through the process of slavery; the formation of American culture incorporates Negro culture at a basic level. He says that folklore announces "the Negro's willingness to trust his own experience, his own sensibilities as to the definition of reality, rather than allow his master 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" ("The Art" 172).

This illustrates the nature of Trueblood's storytelling. Trueblood shows his talent in storytelling in that he tells "the old story with a sense of humor and a magic that [makes] them come alive" (*Invisible Man* 46). In telling the story of his incest to Mr. Norton, while he embarrasses the Invisible Man, he also fascinates him. Mr. Norton, moreover, is awestruck, being drawn into his narration. Trueblood's story represents the predicament of all the individuals overcome by irrational human desire. For those who are used to the *sublimation* of instinctual aims, as Freud argues in *Civilization and its Discontents*, especially for Mr. Norton, whose love for his deceased daughter seems too passionate, Trueblood's survival appears incredible. Thus, his storytelling transcends the boundary of race and arouses admiration in all the listeners to the extent that it shows his capacity to overcome human agony through self-confrontation, which leads him to say, "I ain't nobody but myself" (66).

Furthermore, Trueblood's narration presents to the white audience a performance in which he plays a role of "darker" entertainer, whose optimistic attitude enables him to cope with the most sinful, as well as sorrowful, incident in his life. When Mr. Norton approaches him implying his interest in the story of incest, Trueblood seems to realize his intention instantly. Yet, knowing how he is supposed to act as a story teller, Trueblood conceals that expectation. However, as he begins his story, he reveals his professionalism by clearing "his throat, his eyes gleaming and his voice taking on a deep, incantatory quality, as though he told the story many, many times" (53). When Mr. Norton rejects the Invisible Man's suggestion to leave him, he seems "to smile at [the Invisible Man] behind his eyes as he look[s] from the white man to [him]" (60) as if he were suggesting to the Invisible Man his power of manipulation. Trueblood's one-man show presents the white audience with an inhuman situation, and the enormous energy of self-assurance one

can ever imagine attaining. He starts by describing the hardship of being a poor black: "You see, suh, it was cold and us didn't have much fire" (53), which eventually leads to the most sinful crime of incest he has committed, and ends by the most optimistic remarks: "I'm better off than I ever been before" (67). At the end of the performance, it successfully brings the whites to say, "if blacks can stay optimistic, how bad can things be for everybody else?" By continuing his performance wearing the mask of a cheerful "darky" by saying, "I feels fine" (52), and "We ain't doing so bad" (52), he manages to move the whites and obtain their support in the end.

As these characters reveal, Ellison presents blacks who manage to maintain their sense of self against the force of dehumanization, the racial mask, imposed on them. Moreover, they understand their interdependency with whites in society insofar as they have found a way to cooperate with whites without losing their own humanity. They simply must conceal themselves under the mask. Ellison presents his view of American society being built on the mutual relationship between blacks and whites by saying, "I believe in diversity, and I think that the real death of the United States will come when everyone is just alike" ("That Same Pain" 23). The final realization of the Invisible Man also enforces this view. He realizes that he has been manipulated all the time because of his unwillingness to recognize his own humanity and to be accountable for himself. This recognition leads him to achieve a new vision:

Let man keep his many parts and you'll have no tyrant states. Why if they follow this conformity business they'll end up by forcing me, an invisible man, to become white, which is not a color but the lack of one. Must I strive towards colorlessness? But seriously, and without snobbery, think of what the world would lose if

that should happen. America is woven of many strands; I would recognize them and let it so remain. It's "winner take nothing" that is the great truth of our country or of any country. Life is to be lived, not controlled; and humanity is won by continuing to play in face of certain defeat. Our fate is to become one, and yet many -- this is not prophesy, but description. Thus one of the greatest jokes in the world is the spectacle of the whites busy escaping blackness and becoming blacker every day, and the blacks striving towards whiteness, becoming quite dull and gray. None of us seems to know who he is or where he's going. (567-568)

This is the vision of American society the mysteries of the "Optic White" paint illustrate. The final goal for the paint is to be optic, therefore it needs to be mixed with the black drops. In the same manner, the ultimate achievement of American society will be to become one like the optic white paint in which the black drops function variously as Brockway, Bledsoe and Trueblood contribute to the society in different ways.

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