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## Richard Wright and Ralph Ellison: Master and protege

Emmett P. Cribbs

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RICHARD WRIGHT AND RALPH ELLISON:  
MASTER AND PROTÉGÉ

A Thesis  
Presented to the  
Department of English  
and the  
Faculty of the College of Graduate Studies  
University of Nebraska  
at Omaha

In Partial Fulfillment  
of the Requirements for the Degree  
Master of Arts

by  
Emmett P. Cribbs

March 1969

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Accepted for the faculty of the College of Graduate Studies  
of the University of Nebraska at Omaha, in partial fulfillment of  
the requirements for the degree Master of Arts.

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## PREFACE

Negroes from Africa have been in America since 1620 when twenty Africans were sold to the white settlement of Jamestown, Virginia. Since that date, Negroes have made a contribution to American history through their blood and sweat, their songs, and their cultural heritage. Yet, a peculiar institution of slavery arose on American soil, and black men and women were subjected to a subservient, second-class status.

The Negro as an individual ceased to exist. Instead, myths and stereotypes were created about him--in part to allow white society a means of rationalizing the moral consequences of slavery as good and virtuous. Such myths and stereotypes clouded the true accomplishments and contributions of the Negro. Excluding jazz and the spirituals--distinctive American contributions to world culture--the Negro's contribution in other areas has been shown truly only in more recent times.

Certainly, such a statement is true concerning the Negro's accomplishments and contributions to American literature. "Until recently Americans have viewed the Negro through the eyes of white authors."<sup>1</sup> Perhaps presenting the Negro as a simple-minded, humorous, caricature helped underscore the myths and stereotypes already held by white society about Negroes. Much of Negro literature suffered indirectly. Many non-Negro readers felt the Negro was not capable of writing literature, or if he could, the publishers and readers forced him to maintain the character stereotype created by white writers.

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<sup>1</sup>James A. Emanuel and Theodore L. Gross, eds., Dark Symphony: Negro Literature in America (New York, 1968), p. ix.

However, this is no longer a true assessment of Negro literature.

. . . whenever we read about the Negro as conceived by our traditional writers, we sense that his dialect, his laughter, his sorrow, his life style--so often close to caricature, so often touching upon fantasy--obscure his complexity, diversity, and essential humanity.<sup>2</sup>

Lately, there has been much controversy about Negro writers and their literature. Many intellectual and literary critics have tried to make a valid assessment of both, but they frequently tend to feel that Negro writers are more often propagandists than serious literary artists.

But almost any literary work, without exception, is a form of propaganda to a greater or lesser degree if the reader accepts the definition of propaganda as an attempt to persuade or indoctrinate. Yet, it is this writer's view that propaganda is not the true reason for the condemnation of Negro writers and their literature. Dostoevski's Crime and Punishment, Voltaire's Candide, Milton's Paradise Lost, Shakespeare's King Henry IV, or The Bible--these are forms of propaganda as defined above. Certainly critics do not hesitate to call these great works of literature.

If propaganda per se is not the determining guideline that critics use in evaluating Negro writers and their literature, perhaps it is the subject matter of the propaganda. Possibly when Negroes propagandize about Negroes--whether in written or spoken form--they confine themselves only to articulating the injustices of race without any conscious attempt at style, tone, or form. In such a case, this literature is indeed at the bottom of the genre hierarchy. However, if a work

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<sup>2</sup>Ibid., p. ix.

has much artistic merit to recommend it--regardless of subject matter--then indeed it rightfully deserves to be called literature. But notable Negro artists have been ignored, although their writing deserves a place in American literary anthologies. What accounts for ignoring such contributions to the American literary scene?

Perhaps the answer lies in the psychological framework in which white critics and readers have approached Negro literature. White critics and readers have felt unjustly that Negroes have created good literature only rarely and accidentally. Even then, there have been many who refused to accept the true merits of it. Therefore, it is important that non-Negro readers begin reading and reassessing Negro literature. Richard Wright and Ralph Ellison are good examples of Negro writers who consciously work at perfecting their art--their novels--to a point where it has influenced contemporary writers.

Who else can speak for the Negro? The Negro problem in America is such an obsession of Negro authors that it seems hardly possible that they would attempt any literary creation whose subject matter would be apart from race. They feel their job is to present Negro life with all of its happiness and despair and to make it a permanent transplant in the minds of the readers, especially white readers. The Negro writer wants to communicate his blackness to the shores of an alien white society.

Wright and Ellison have produced more than works of art. Their novels help the reader define more specifically the history, the tradition, and horrors of Negro life in America. Until the racial scene becomes more harmonious, Negro writers will continue--as they have since



the first Negro literature in 1760---to play the role of America's social and moral conscience.

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## CHAPTER I - TWO LIVES

### Richard Wright

On September 4, 1908, Richard Wright was born on a plantation near Natchez, Mississippi, in a crude, rustic shack which stood over him in mocking tribute. He was born into a world of hatred, where Negro men, women, and children bowed their heads in humbleness and suffered the indignities of American white society. He was born into a race whose only salvation lay in the belief that some cold, Christian white God would descend from Heaven to caress tear-stained black faces to his breast. In time he would realize the nightmare of being born black. However, a young Richard--somewhat sensitive and devilish--did not yet realize the burdens that American Negroes had to bear. For him life was happiness and mirth, laughter and gaiety.

In 1914, Richard and his family moved to Memphis, Tennessee, where they lived happily at first in their small apartment just off Beale Street. But happiness was only a momentary experience. Cramped in the Negro ghetto, the family became disunited. Tensions and frustrations, typical of ghetto environments, became an integral part of the family life. Finally, the inevitable happened. Richard's father, Nathan Wright, deserted the family to live with a woman he had met at a local saloon.<sup>3</sup> Ella Wright was forced to work as a cook to support herself and her sons. Often left to themselves all day, Richard and his brother Alan roamed the neighborhood, and many evenings Ella had to search the streets for them. She disliked the effect ghetto life was

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<sup>3</sup>Constance Webb, Richard Wright: A Biography (New York, 1968), p. 29. This book is the basic source of the biographical material on Wright contained in this chapter.

having on her boys. Yet, she was powerless to rectify the situation.

On the brink of extreme poverty and unable to properly care for her sons, Ella kept Alan but placed Richard in a settlement home supported by the C.M.E. Church.<sup>4</sup> He hated living under the harsh and tyrannical rule of a Miss Simon, the head mistress, and envied his younger brother, who remained at home with Ella. Now he wished he was home. Life would have been such a contrast to the constant fight for survival against the other children at the settlement home.

But finally, the great day arrived when Ella came to see him and informed him that the entire family was moving to Elaine, Arkansas, to live with her sister, Maggie. Moreover, Ella informed Richard, the family would visit her mother and father first. "Trembling with excitement, Richard ran about gathering his ragged clothes."<sup>5</sup>

When Richard arrived at his grandparents' home in Jackson, Mississippi, he was so happy that he failed to notice the austere atmosphere that permeated the Wilson home. Like many Negro women, Richard's grandmother reflected the severity of religious fanaticism. Religion gave her something that white society denied her, especially in the South. It gave her a sense of racial pride and dignity in being capable of bearing her cross among her enemies. Extremely harsh and stern in her religious fervor, she made her life a continual purgation of the soul. When the family left to continue their trip to Elaine, Arkansas, Richard vowed he would never embrace any religion which would make such demands on his life.

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<sup>4</sup>Ibid., p. 32.

<sup>5</sup>Ibid., p. 33.

In Elaine, Richard loved his Aunt Maggie, his mother's younger sister. In contrast to Mrs. Wilson, Maggie was warm and friendly. He liked her husband, Fred Hoskins, a big, stout, black man who had a strong sense of pride and courage. Richard loved him and adopted him as a substitute father.

Fred owned a saloon in the town's Negro ghetto. He made quite a profit from it according to Negro opinion. But his pride, courage, and profits from the saloon made him many white enemies who were extremely envious of him. They hated Fred Hoskins bitterly. Because he knew himself to be in constant danger, he never allowed any of the family to come near the saloon. He always carried a pistol with him when he left to work there. One night tragedy struck. Its effect on Richard is remembered years later in his autobiographical novel, Black Boy:

One morning [Richard] awakened to learn that Uncle Hoskins had not come home from the saloon. Aunt Maggie fretted and worried. She wanted to visit the saloon and find out what had happened, but Uncle Hoskins had forbidden her to come to the place. The day wore on and dinnertime came.

"I'm going to find out if anything's happened," Aunt Maggie said.

"Maybe you oughtn't," [Ella] said. "Maybe it's dangerous."

The food was kept hot on the stove and Aunt Maggie stood on the front porch staring into the deepening dusk. Again she declared that she was going to the saloon, but [Ella] dissuaded her once more. It grew dark and still he had not come. Aunt Maggie was silent and restless.

"I hope to God the white people didn't bother him," she said.

.....  
 An hour later there was the sound of heavy footsteps on the front porch and a loud knock came. Aunt Maggie ran to the door and flung it open. A tall black boy stood sweating, panting, and shaking his head. He pulled off his cap.

"Mr. Hoskins . . . he done been shot. Done been shot by a white man," the boy gasped. "Mrs. Hoskins, he dead."<sup>6</sup>

In fear and terror, Ella, her two sons, and Maggie fled to Jackson to live for four months with the Wilsons. The white people did not allow Maggie to claim her husband's body or inherit any of his estate.

Richard was angry at what he thought his mother's and aunt's refusal to revenge themselves for the grave injustices those white people in Elaine had done to them. His mother tried patiently to explain that any recourse was useless since white justice was often one-sided in favor of the white man. However, Richard did not believe her excuse. Years later, he wondered if underneath his mother's explanation there were not years of fear and anxiety induced by a peculiar American tradition.

Such fear is part of the fear-hate-fear syndrome. Negroes through fear of whites allow themselves to be oppressed. As the fear increases, so does Negro hatred of Negro social conditions created in part by white society. When the negative psychic impulses within the Id outweigh the suppression of them by the Superego, Negroes retaliate against white society with anger and violence. Yet, such action causes stronger retaliation by white society. Therefore, Negroes like Ella and Maggie, fearing tragic consequences, suppress their hatred.

Negroes in such a condition tend to channel their negative psychic impulses into physical action which will not endanger them. They develop the striking ability to laugh easily, dance, believe in illusions that one day conditions will be better if they just endure, accept religion

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<sup>6</sup>Richard Wright, Black Boy (New York, 1945), pp. 47-48.

which will help them endure certain trials and tribulations in this world and finally, exploit sex for what momentary happiness and release of negative psychic impulses they can achieve. The only alternative is to keep the impulses confined within. Such persons are extremely irritable and maladjusted. They release their anger on their family, friends, or themselves. In either case, the Negro suffers a neurological breakdown. This neurosis, a breakdown of personality, is a basic and integral part of the American Negro tradition.<sup>7</sup>

Nevertheless, the intensity of feeling caused by Fred Hoskins's death subsided. Tired and overcome by Mrs. Wilson's continuous tirades, Ella and Maggie searched for a home of their own. They found one in West Helena, Mississippi. "The neighborhood swarmed with rats, cats, dogs, fortunetellers, cripples, blind men, whores, seamen, rent collectors and children."<sup>8</sup> Across the street was a locomotive roundhouse. Richard often had thrilling adventures while sitting in the cab of these locomotives. Also, this roundhouse marked the territorial border between Negro and white boys. Any boy on the wrong side of the roundhouse was pelted with rocks and cinders. Many times, Richard's mother spanked him for entering into fights with white boys. He thought this unfair, but his mother always claimed that she spanked him out of fear and love.

By the time Richard was eleven, the first World War was in progress. At this time Maggie began seeing a Professor Matthews. "Matthews

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<sup>7</sup>The theory is the writer's own based upon his exposure to psychology in specified classes and experience from psychological interpretation of literature.

<sup>8</sup>Wright, Black Boy, p. 52.

was an austere, tall man with thin lips and eyelids that never seemed to blink. He wore dark suits, shirts with high, stiff snow-white collars and cuffs, and rimless octagonal-shaped glasses.<sup>9</sup> His personality was not unlike that of a Calvinist minister. Richard did not like him. One night Maggie slipped away with this stranger to Detroit. Richard hated losing his second mother, but what could he do?

The next day, the sheriff came and questioned the Wright family about Professor Matthews. He had been accused of breaking racial taboos by keeping company with a white woman. When she heard that he was planning to marry Maggie and go to Detroit, this woman claimed that Matthews had raped her.<sup>10</sup>

Although Richard had had no physical contact with the brutalities or injustices of white men, he nurtured, nevertheless, a hatred of them. To him, these people remained undesirable, invisible forces which determined his life.

In 1920 the social conditions of Negro life began taking their toll upon the Wright family. Ella suffered the first of recurring heart attacks. At this time Richard was twelve and his brother, Alan, was two years younger. Returning to Jackson with the family, Richard was forced to work after school to help support his mother and grandparents. However, the jobs after school did not deter his increasing desire to learn. Professor Lanier, one of Richard's teachers, remarked that he was a bright and industrious young man.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>9</sup>Webb, p. 40.

<sup>10</sup>Ibid., pp. 40-41.

<sup>11</sup>Ibid., p. 62.



In spite of his busy schedule, Richard found time to associate with his new friends--Joe Brown, Conky Booker, Biggy Thomas (who was to become the Bigger Thomas of Native Son), Biggy's brother William, and Frank Newsome, to name just a few.<sup>12</sup> Unlike most teenagers who are curious about sex and sex taboos in Negro-white relationships, these young boys in their probing questions and discussions of such questions showed an underlying fear. Therefore, it is not surprising that much of their conversations about sex was permeated with vindictive remarks about white society which they felt suppressed Negroes.

Richard neared the end of the ninth grade--his last year in school--and found himself class valedictorian. "One morning he was summoned into the office of Professor Cobbins, whom he had nicknamed 'Peanut Head' and 'Goober Head' because the young assistant principal wore his hair shaved close to the scalp and two small cowlicks made lumpy impressions above his forehead."<sup>13</sup> Professor Cobbins told him that he had a speech already prepared for memorization, but Richard, always stubborn and forceful, said he had his own speech which he wanted to present on graduation night. Cobbins gave him an ultimatum: either the speech or no graduation. Richard gave the speech and finally, graduated.

After grammar school, Richard sought full-time employment. He migrated from job to job. On each, "no matter how often Richard watched his employers' behavior toward Negroes, he could not see it [an act of white superiority] without becoming enraged. Afraid that his white boss

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<sup>12</sup>Ibid., p. 60.

<sup>13</sup>Ibid., p. 65.

would see his anger, he kept nervously on edge trying to hide his emotions."<sup>14</sup> Afraid of his emotions, he knew he must leave the South. With friends, he produced neighborhood talent shows and salvaged what money he could from such endeavors and his job. Finally, he had enough money to purchase a ticket to Memphis. ". . . he walked down the hallway to his mother's room. Ella cried; told him to take care of himself and to send for her as soon as he could."<sup>15</sup>

On a Sunday morning in November, 1925, Richard, now seventeen, arrived in Memphis. He found an apartment close to Beale Street, where he had lived as a small boy. The landlady, Mrs. Moss, was perhaps the friendliest person he had known. In a few months, Mrs. Moss encouraged Richard's affections for her daughter, Bess (who was to become the Bessie Smith of Native Son), but Richard stopped short of marriage because he was not sure of his emotions and did not have any future to offer Bess.

Becoming more capable of handling his emotions, Richard began patronizing secondhand bookstores and discovered periodicals like Harper's Magazine, the Atlantic Monthly, and the American Mercury.<sup>16</sup>

One morning he read an editorial attack in the Commercial Appeal against H. L. Mencken. The name was familiar to him as the editor of the American Mercury, but he had not read any of Mencken's writings. "The article was a furious denunciation of Mencken, concluding with one, hot, short sentence: 'Mencken is a fool.'" Richard wondered what Mencken had done to call the wrath of the South down upon his head; he knew he was a white man but the editorial cursed him as if he were black. Were there, then, people other than Negroes who criticized the South? Richard's sympathies and curiosity were aroused.

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<sup>14</sup>Ibid., p. 68.

<sup>15</sup>Ibid., p. 74.

<sup>16</sup>Ibid., p. 77.

How could he get hold of books by or about Mencken? He had often gone to the library for white men at work but it was segregated and there were no facilities for black men.<sup>17</sup>

However, one of the white workers was sympathetic toward Richard and loaned him a library card. With it, Richard checked out books as if he were doing an errand for one of his white co-workers. However, once he obtained the books, he read them himself. He entered a new world. He read Anatole France, Joseph Conrad, Sinclair Lewis, Sherwood Anderson, Dostoevski, Tolstoy, Twain, T.S. Eliot, Thomas Mann, Dumas, Poe, Dreiser, and others.<sup>18</sup> Later, he said, "all my life had shaped me for the realism, the naturalism of the modern novel, and I could not read enough of them."<sup>19</sup> These authors wrote of society's shame and dishonor in the world, especially America's shame and dishonor. They called for social changes. They wanted a newer and better society which would seek all men's equality with one another. It is little wonder that Richard felt a kinship to such thought.

But within his heart Richard wondered if such a realization were possible in the South as long as there were those few who refused to destroy the social barriers between Negro and white. With reflections of what life promised to be but was not in reality, Wright went north. He thought that Chicago might possibly be the best place to go. After all, his Aunt Maggie was living there. It would be like going home to his second mother. In Chicago, life would be different than in the South. Perhaps, through his fictionalized persona Richard in Black Boy, Wright

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<sup>17</sup>Ibid.

<sup>18</sup>Ibid., p. 79.

<sup>19</sup>Wright, Black Boy, p. 219.

expresses his feelings about the white South.<sup>20</sup>

The white South said that it knew "niggers," and I was what the white South called a "nigger." Well, the white South had never known me--never known what I thought, what I felt. The white South said that I had a "place" in life. Well, I had never felt my "place"; or, rather, my deepest instincts had always made me reject the "place" to which the white South had assigned me. It had never occurred to me that I was in any way an inferior being. And no word that I had ever heard fall from the lips of southern white men had ever made me really doubt the worth of my own humanity . . .

Not only had the southern whites not known me, but, more important still, as I had lived in the South I had not had the chance to learn who I was. The pressure of southern living kept me from being the kind of person that I might have been. I had been what my surroundings had demanded, what my family--conforming to the dictates of the whites above them--had exacted of me, and what the whites had said that I must be. Never being fully able to be myself, I had slowly learned that the South could recognize but a part of the man, could accept but a fragment of his personality, and all the rest--the best and deepest things of heart and mind--were tossed away in blind ignorance and hate.<sup>21</sup>

Somewhat the invisible man, seen and not seen, Wright glimpsed Chicago and was dismayed. Chicago's South Side was no better economically and physically for the Negro than cities in the South. Even in this northern city, he found himself subjected to acts of white superiority. But such acts did not deter him from striving to improve himself in life. Shortly after his arrival in Chicago, Wright took Civil Service Exams hoping that they would secure him a job.

In time Wright learned that life was not bad in Chicago, and at times he was somewhat surprised to find that in spite of certain social

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<sup>20</sup>Although Wright's critics and his biographer, Constance Webb, have provided evidence that portions of Black Boy are fictionalized, there are many true biographical parallels between the Richard of Black Boy and the author. Therefore, it is possible that the hero of Black Boy expresses the true sentiments of the author.

<sup>21</sup>Wright, Black Boy, pp. 227-228.

and economic problems, the racial barriers that he had expected were not obvious at all. Negro and white rode the streetcars, walked the streets, used public facilities, and even talked and visited in each other's homes together. But Wright was puzzled. For all its seeming liberalism, Chicago still had a deplorable Negro ghetto on its South Side. Wright wondered how people could live in such deplorable conditions and still have pride.

He was distraught that Negroes exploited themselves for money and profit. As an insurance agent for his cousin's burial service, Wright often saw the more dismal side of Negro life.<sup>22</sup> Many of his customers, especially his women customers, were unable to pay their premium when it was due. Instead, they made their sex available to Wright if he would consider the premium paid. At first he resisted, but finally he succumbed to their offers. Afterwards, he questioned the integrity of Negro dignity and pride. Where was the glowing hope to end this terrible nightmare?

Wright found such hope in the Communist Party. During 1929-30, he was introduced to Party activities by Jan Wittenber (Jan of Native Son), who was a member of the John Reed Club, a Communist affiliate for painters and writers. He met this Canadian Jew while attending a joint meeting of the John Reed Club and the Community Center in Chicago's South Side. Wright liked Jan whom he found sympathetic toward the Negro's cause of emancipation and equality. For once, he believed that there "did exist in this world an organized search for the truth of the lives of the oppressed and the isolated. . . . It was being done in one-sixth

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<sup>22</sup>Webb, p. 98.

of the earth already."<sup>23</sup> After learning more about the doctrines and policies of the Communist Party, Wright summed up his feelings as follows:

It was not the economics of Communism, nor the great power of the trade unions, nor the excitement of underground politics that claimed me; my attention was caught by the similarity of the experiences of workers in other lands, by the possibility of uniting scattered but kindred people into a whole. It seemed to me that here at last, in the realm of revolutionary expression, Negro experience could find a home, a functioning value and role. Out of the magazines I read came a passionate call for the experiences of the disinherited [a major reason for Wright's becoming an author], and there was none of the lame lispings of the missionary in it. It did not say: "Be like us and we will like you, maybe." It said: "If you possess enough courage to speak out what you are, you will find that you are not alone." It urged life to believe in life.<sup>24</sup>

Wright read avidly all the Communist literature he could obtain. One day his mother entered his bedroom and inquired about the magazines her son was reading. On the cover of one of them she saw a cartoon of a Negro worker clad in ragged overalls and holding a red banner. The man's eyes bulged, his mouth gaped open showing his teeth, and the muscles of his face were like ropes. Following him were non-distinct individuals.<sup>25</sup> Ella Wright, somewhat aghast at such a monstrosity on a magazine cover, demanded who these Communists were and what were they trying to do. Her son tried answering her, but his attempts were poor. "That picture's enough to drive a body crazy," Ella said as she left the room.<sup>26</sup>

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<sup>23</sup>Ibid., p. 119.

<sup>24</sup>Essay by Richard Wright, The God That Failed, ed., Richard Grossman (New York, 1950), p. 118.

<sup>25</sup>Webb, p. 120.

<sup>26</sup>Ibid.

Wright, defeated by his inability to answer his mother satisfactorily, thought carefully of her questions. Slowly, he realized that much of her misunderstanding of the Communists resulted from her inability to react positively to the gross distortion of Negroes represented on the cover, although she would have been in sympathy with the Party's goals.

Wright realized that if the Communists were going to communicate with black people, their methods must be more realistic. The Communists had conceived of black people too abstractly. Wright felt that he, as a Negro, could synthesize Negro life with the idealism, the self-sacrifice, and the hope for a future of equality promised by Communism.<sup>27</sup>

With mounting enthusiasm, Wright became an integral part of the John Reed Club. Although much of his early writing--mostly poetry--lacked the polish and finesse of a more accomplished writer, his material did have an energy and freshness about it. The editor of Left Front, a Communist magazine, accepted much of this early poetry ("Rest for the Weary," "A Red Love Note," and "Everywhere Burning Waters Rise"). Left Front published the three poems during 1934. "Everywhere Burning Waters Rise" captures the spirit of Wright's emotional intensity during its peak.

Everywhere,  
 on tall and smokeless stackpipes,  
 on empty silos of deserted farms,  
 on the rusty blade of the logger's axe,  
 on the sooty girders of unfinished skyscrapers,

the cold dense clammy fog  
 of discontent is settling . . . .

Everywhere,  
 on tenemented mountains of hunger,  
 in ghetto swamps of suffering,

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<sup>27</sup>Ibid., p. 121.

in breadlined forests of despair,  
on peonized plains of hopelessness

the red moisture of revolt  
is condensing on the cold stones of human  
need . . . .

Everywhere,  
men are gathering in groups talking, talking, tiny  
red pools are forming:  
hundreds are joining protest parades marching,  
marching,  
small red rills are trickling;  
thousands are surrounding food-stores storming,  
storming, rising red rivers are flowing  
till on the lowlands of starvation meeting  
and swelling to a roaring torrential tide  
and becoming strangely transformed into waters  
of fire  
and blazing their way to the foaming sea of rev-  
olution . . . .

Sweep on, O red stream of molten anger!  
Surge and seethe like liquid lava  
into every nook and cranny of this greed-reared  
temple  
and blister the rotting walls with your hot  
cleansing breath!  
Lick and lap with your tongues of flame  
at its golden pillars of oppressive privilege,  
lick and lap until they melt,  
melt from the fury of your heat!  
Shower and sprinkle the foul air with sparks of  
white hate and sterilize this hellishly in-  
fected floor  
until the last germ of decadence is dead!  
Eat with your fiery teeth  
at beams and rafters of exploitation,  
eat, eat until they crumble to powdered black ashes!  
Burn and burn and burn quickly!  
Burn,  
for a chafing multitude is waiting,  
is waiting to build on the cleared and conquered  
grounds!<sup>28</sup>

However, Wright's enthusiasm for the Communist Party was short  
lived. Soon after joining the John Reed Club, he noticed a bitter feud

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<sup>28</sup>Richard Wright, "Everywhere Burning Waters Rise," Left Front,  
No. 4 (May-June, 1934), p. 9.



between the painters and the writers within the club. The writers did not wish to be actual members of the Communist Party, while many of the painters were Communists who tried to dictate club policies in line with those of the Communist Party itself. Knowing that one would not vote against a Negro, the writers nominated Richard Wright for club secretary. He won the office and for a while succeeded in easing the growing tensions between the painters and writers. But tensions reappeared. The Communist Party--somewhat apprehensive of the writers anyway--decided to curtail the writers' freedom of expression. But the writers resisted. Finally, the Party voted to abolish the John Reed Club. Wright, who strongly supported the club, opposed such drastic measures. But his arguments were futile.

Wright was despondent that black authors now had no organization supporting their literary endeavors. Saddened as he was, he vowed that he would continue his quest alone. "During summer and fall Richard worked on a series of short stories he had begun and on a novel about the post office workers. He was certain that the Party would not approve of an honest portrayal of Negroes--they had to be heroes, not human beings. Working all day and writing at night brought on a serious illness. [. . .] He was forced to stay in bed for several weeks, for he had worried and worked himself into pneumonia."<sup>29</sup>

By the end of September, 1935, his chest had healed, and the New Masses, a Communist magazine, asked him to write an article about the upcoming Joe Louis--Max Baer fight. When Joe Louis knocked out Max Baer on September 24, 1935, black people were in ecstasy.

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<sup>29</sup>Webb, p. 135.

The celebrations following the Louis victory were not only tributes to the man who the celebrants believed had proved Negroes are not inferiors; they were also demonstrations against the whole system of white chauvinism. Anything that tends to widen the breach between the Negro and white masses is, of course, dangerous, but the group-solidarity felt by Negroes cannot be wished out of existence. They are not only workers, they are black workers--hence doubly exploited. The Negroes are a people, a nation within this nation, and this cannot, must not, be overlooked. It must be taken into account and the burden of removing this distrust felt by Negroes for whites must be borne chiefly by the latter. The Communist Party, consisting of Negroes as well as whites, had made valiant beginnings. . . . It is apparent too that if the feelings vented by Negroes after the Louis triumph can be directed against their real enemies, the Bourbons of North as well as South, they will prove valuable in the common struggles of all oppressed, white and black, that lie ahead.<sup>30</sup>

Although Wright admired this new spirit in black man and captured it literally in his article in much the same tone as the editors did in their preface, he was still dismayed by the Communists' attempt to attract thousands of Negroes by creating an atmosphere of hero worship around Joe Louis. Finally, Wright wanted to be free of the Communist Party. He wanted to be free to write in his own style and through his own methods achieve a realization of Negroes as human individuals. During 1937-38, Richard Wright ceased association with the Communist Party. It did not officially disown him until 1943 because during the 1937-38 period, public conflict with a Negro as noteworthy as Wright would have damaged the Communists' image with Negroes.

During the Fall of 1937, Wright began to devote much time to questions concerning the role of Negro writers in America. As a result, he formulated the "Blueprint for Negro Writing" which defined his thoughts concerning the Negro writers' role. In effect, he said that most Negro

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<sup>30</sup>Editorial Preface to Richard Wright's "Joe Louis Uncovers Dynamite," New Masses, Vol. XVII (Oct. 8, 1935), 18.

writers had risen from the Negro bourgeoisie. As such, these writers felt themselves a privileged sect and allied themselves with the standards of a white society rather than a black one. They failed sadly in not writing to a Negro audience or depicting the reality of black life. They did not tell of the humanity of their proletarian black brothers nor the injustices done to them.

Wright saw that the new Negro writer had to re-evaluate himself and his role in society. In short, he needed to realize his own cultural heritage as manifested in the Negro church and the folklore of his people. From the black religion, which made black people capable of tolerating white injustices, to the folklore with its superstitions, blues and spirituals, and tales, the Negro writer had vast resources from which to create his literature. Wright felt that Negro writing should present the Negro as he was in reality without any restrictions.

He claimed that the purpose of the Negro author was to present the social, political, and economic themes inherent in Negro life and reflected directly or indirectly in the religion and folklore of the Negro. The black writer must act as America's social consciousness. He must remind Americans of the dichotomy that exists between black and white citizens, and he must do it in such a way that the readers could not cry and then feel happy afterwards. The readers must respond to Negro literature in such a way that they feel themselves a part of the guilt and shame of American injustices to the Negro. "By his [the Negro author's] ability to fuse and make articulate the experiences of men, because his writing possesses the potential cunning to steal into the inmost recesses of the human heart, because he creates the myths and

symbols that inspire a faith in life, he may expect either to be consigned to oblivion, or to be recognized for the valued agent he is."<sup>31</sup>

Said Wright: "Hence, it is through a Marxist conception of reality and society [realistic understanding of the proletariat] that the maximum degree of freedom in thought and feeling can be gained for the Negro writer. Further, this dramatic Marxist vision, when consciously applied, endows the writer with a sense of dignity which no other vision can give. Ultimately, it restores to the writer his lost heritage, that is, his role as a creator of the world in which he lives, and as a creator of himself."<sup>32</sup>

Wright felt that the Negro writer, having assimilated the blueprint for himself, need only be aware of maintaining good, balanced perspective. The Negro author must not veer too close to or too far away from his subject material. He must use emotionalism, but he must subject it to a rational, calm objectivity, keeping theme in focus always.

He followed his own advice as he thought of various themes for a new novel he would write. Somehow, he was filled with growing enthusiasm at the challenge of a novel concerning black life. As pregnant thoughts began to crystallize in a crude way within his mind, he nervously worked at his typewriter day and night trying to deliver his creative product onto paper. Finally, in 1939, he had finished the rough draft of Native Son. Little did he dream that its main character, Bigger Thomas, would thrust him to the forefront of American writers and gain for him the acclaim of critics and the reading public—both black and white.

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<sup>31</sup>Richard Wright, "Blueprint For Negro Writing," New Challenge, Vol. II (Fall, 1937), 59.

<sup>32</sup>Ibid., p. 60.

## Ralph Ellison

In contrast to Richard Wright's views and experiences, Ralph Ellison's views and experiences stem from the urban environment of Oklahoma City where the conflicts between Negro and white men were not so sharply distinguished. Although segregation existed, it was muted and subtle. Therefore, it is not surprising that one of young Ralph's best friends was a white boy named Hoolie.<sup>33</sup> This boy loved dismantling and rebuilding home radio sets. Thrilled by his friend's mastery over such complexity of parts, Ralph eagerly watched, listened, and learned from Hoolie how to dismantle and rebuild radio sets. In time Ralph was as capable as his teacher.

Such an endeavor led eventually to Ralph's interest in building his own crystal radio sets, which were then a novelty for a boy aged nine. In addition, Ralph (born 1914) read the discarded books and listened to the records his mother, a domestic, brought home. Ellison said years later that "these magazines and recordings and the discarded books my mother brought home to my brother and me spoke to me of a life which was broader and more interesting, and although it was not really a part of my own life, I never thought they were not for me simply because I happened to be a Negro."<sup>34</sup>

Ralph wanted to be a part of what was America. His parents, who arrived in Oklahoma City at the same time white settlers arrived,

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<sup>33</sup>Ralph Ellison, *Shadow and Act* (New York, 1964), p. 4. This book is the basic source of the biographical material on Ellison contained in this chapter.

<sup>34</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 5.

refused to be subjected to segregation. They fought stubbornly against segregation and instilled a strong sense of pride and courage in Ralph.

Ralph's father, who died when the author was only three, named him Ralph Waldo Ellison after the famous Ralph Waldo Emerson. Ralph's father loved reading, and in time Ellison understood " . . . the connection between [his] name and [his] father's love for reading."<sup>35</sup> Later, Ellison suspected that his father " . . . was aware of the suggestive powers of names and of the magic involved in naming."<sup>36</sup>

Ralph loved Oklahoma City and his Negro friends. He loved the childhood jokes he and his friends told each other. Sometimes, some of his friends went south during the summer months to work in the cotton fields. When they returned, Ralph was one of the first eagerly awaiting the news of their experiences in the fields. He enjoyed their stories. The world of his friends was much more real to him than " . . . the Negro middle-class values which were taught in school."<sup>37</sup> Ralph received his primary and secondary education at the Frederick Douglass School, a well known Negro school in Oklahoma City.

It was there he first came in contact with any formalized study of music. Against the wishes of his parents, teachers, and minister, his growing interests in music created an interest in the emerging jazz artists of the Blue Devils Orchestra, the forerunner of the Count Basie band. Jimmy Rushing, who became one of the band's famous singers, was an extremely good friend to Ralph. The more he heard jazz, the more

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<sup>35</sup>Ibid., p. 151.

<sup>36</sup>Ibid.

<sup>37</sup>Ibid., p. 8.

desirous he was to create it. As his awareness of the classical music in school became infused with the jazz of his friends who played on the street corners and in the local night spots, Ellison became an active jazz musician, although he was far from being a professional.

When I reached high school I knew Dr. Ludwig Hebestreit, a conductor who formed the nucleus of what became the Oklahoma Symphony—a German for whom I used to cut grass in exchange for trumpet lessons. But these lessons were about everything else. He'd talk to me about all that lay behind music, and after I'd performed my trumpet lesson and been corrected he'd say, "You like such and such a composition, don't you?" And I'd say, "Yes," and he'd sit down at the piano with a piece of scoring paper and in a few minutes he would have written out passages of the orchestration and show me bar by bar how the sounds were blended.<sup>38</sup>

As Ralph grew older, he found his world an ever increasing one. New opportunities were constantly opening up for him. More and more, he had further opportunities to read books, among them the *Malden* Julius Blue Books, the syndicated columns of O. O. McIntyre, and copies of Vanity Fair and the Literary Digest.<sup>39</sup> He also had the influence of his adopted grandfather, J. D. Randolph, custodian of the law library of the Oklahoma State Capitol. Through him, Ralph saw many of the white legislators of Oklahoma who came to discuss points of law with Mr. Randolph.<sup>40</sup> About this time he had the opportunity to read ". . . Shaw and Maupassant, [his] first Harvard Classics in the home of a friend whose parents were products of that stream of New England education which had been brought to Negroes by the young and enthusiastic

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<sup>38</sup>Ibid., p. 13.

<sup>39</sup>Ibid., p. 155.

<sup>40</sup>Ibid., p. 156.

white teachers who staffed the schools set up for the freedmen after the Civil War."<sup>41</sup>

Ellison said later that there was a rich oral literature of ". . . the churches, the schoolyards, the barbershops, the cotton-picking camps; places where folklore and gossip thrived. . . long before I thought of writing, I was claimed by weather, by speech rhythms, by Negro voices and their different idioms, by husky male voices and by the high shrill singing voices of certain Negro women, by music; by tight spaces and wide spaces in which the eyes could wander. . . ."<sup>42</sup>

While in high school, he read additional literature under the direction of his grade school teacher, Mrs. L. C. McFarland.<sup>43</sup> He learned of the Harlem Renaissance, Langston Hughes, Countee Cullen, Claude McKay, James Weldon Johnson and others.

Although he loved literature, music was still his first love. After graduating from high school, Ralph, now nineteen, wanted to continue his musical education at college. In 1933, the year the Scottsboro boys were retried,<sup>44</sup> Ellison began his study of music at Tuskegee Institute in Alabama, where he arrived after being thrown off a freight train in Macon County. By 1936 he had become an outstanding music major,

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<sup>41</sup>Ibid., pp. 156-57.

<sup>42</sup>Ibid., p. 157.

<sup>43</sup>Ibid., p. 159.

<sup>44</sup>The Scottsboro boys were seven brothers who were tried for the supposed rape of two young white women of dubious reputation. Much of the evidence was false and invalid. Nevertheless, the boys were convicted and retried again in 1933. Psychological tests proved that some of the brothers were mentally retarded and incapable emotionally of committing rape.



with a definite interest in composing. Accidentally he came across T. S. Eliot's "The Wasteland," which sparked his passion for writing and changed the direction of his life: "Eliot said something to my sensibilities that I couldn't find in Negro poets who wrote of experiences I myself had gone through."<sup>45</sup> Soon he was reading all he could find by and about Eliot. Eventually, he read other works, including ". . . Pound and Ford Madox Ford, Sherwood Anderson and Gertrude Stein, Hemingway and Fitzgerald . . . Melville and Twain."<sup>46</sup> But due to a financial problem--loss of his scholarship due to low grades--during his junior year, Ellison left Tuskegee and went north to get a job. Later, he planned to return and complete his education.

In 1936 he went to New York, hoping at least to continue his interest in music and sculpture, a new interest. There, he worked for a time as counterman at a YMCA and as clerk and receptionist for psychiatrist Harry Stack Sullivan.<sup>47</sup> Because Ellison failed to earn enough money to return to Tuskegee, he remained in New York and supported himself as a professional photographer, another of his various capabilities.<sup>48</sup>

One day he happened to read a poem by Richard Wright which had certain striking similarities to "The Wasteland." The poem so inspired him that he had to get in touch with Wright, which he managed thanks to

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<sup>45</sup>Eloise Perry, Saturday Review, April 6, 1952, p. 22.

<sup>46</sup>Ellison, Shadow and Act, p. 160.

<sup>47</sup>Rochelle Girson, "Sidelights on Invisibility," Saturday Review, March 7, 1953, p. 20.

<sup>48</sup>Ibid.

Langston Hughes, whom he had met on the steps of the Harlem YMCA. Hughes was a good friend of Wright's and when he heard of Ellison's interest in meeting Wright, he made the necessary arrangements.<sup>49</sup> When they met in 1937, they liked each other immediately. Wright thought Ellison an intriguing young man. He encouraged Ellison to read the works of Joseph Conrad, the letters of Dostoevski and the prefaces of Henry James.<sup>50</sup> As he said later in life, ". . . I practiced writing and studied Joyce, Dostolevsky [sic], Stein and Hemingway. Especially Hemingway; I read him to learn his sentence structure and how to organize a story."<sup>51</sup> The two became good friends and later they assisted each other as they jointly published a magazine called New Challenge which published Ellison's first review.<sup>52</sup> As Ellison's confidence grew, Wright encouraged him to write short stories.

In a very short time Ralph handed a short story to Richard while they were having coffee in a café. Circlets of shadows drooped under his sensitively wary eyes and Richard believed that the handsome youngster was between anguish and joy--a state where he could as easily tear the story to shreds or exult that it was approved. Richard put the story away in his briefcase to read later and he kept it for two months. When Richard finally read "Hymies Bull," an imaginative story in the style of Hemingway, he was very satisfied and warmly enthusiastic.<sup>53</sup>

Wright responded favorably to the story. Ellison was at last given the encouragement which he needed to launch him on a successful literary career.

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<sup>49</sup>John Corry, "An American Novelist Who Sometimes Teaches," New York Times Magazine, Nov. 20, 1966, p. 181.

<sup>50</sup>Ibid.

<sup>51</sup>Ellison, Shadow and Act, p. 168.

<sup>52</sup>Webb, p. 146.

<sup>53</sup>Ibid.

In time, Ellison formulated his own theory of art. Although he was influenced during the Depression by certain social philosophers like Marx, he adhered rather to Malraux, whom he thought more of a humanist than many of the Marxist writers of the period. In his Shadow and Act, a collection of essays published in 1955, he noted that "most of the social realists of the period [the Depression] were concerned less with tragedy than with injustice."<sup>54</sup> Protests, Ellison believed, simply presented the consequences of human actions without portraying what is dramatic and universal in them. Tragedy is dramatic, and Ralph Ellison wanted to portray the universal significance of tragedy. He said, ". . . I felt it important to explore the full range of American Negro humanity and to affirm those qualities which are of value beyond any question of segregation, economics or previous condition of servitude."<sup>55</sup>

Yet, when he sought Negro characters in twentieth century American literature as models, he was dependent on what he found. He said, "after Twain's compelling image of black and white fraternity, the Negro generally disappears from fiction as a rounded human being. And if already in Twain's time a novel which was optimistic concerning a democracy which could include all men could not escape being banned from public libraries, by our day his great drama of inter-racial fraternity had become, for most Americans at least, an amusing boy's story and nothing more."<sup>56</sup> Ellison felt that by the time William Faulkner emerged upon the literary scene, ". . . the Negro, both as man and as symbol of

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<sup>54</sup> Ellison, Shadow and Act, p. 169.

<sup>55</sup> Ibid., p. 17.

<sup>56</sup> Ibid., p. 33.

men, [had] been pushed into the underground of the American conscienc[;] that Hemingway missed completely the structural, symbolic and moral necessity for that part of the plot in which the boys rescue Jim. Yet it is precisely this part which gives the novel its significance. Without it, except as a boy's tale, the novel is meaningless."<sup>57</sup>

For Ellison, Negro characters were far too stereotyped and represented the extremely limited and narrow expression of just the author's viewpoint of reality. The larger reality, the universality of a character's life was lacking. This was the flaw of the "lost generation" writers. They failed to transcend their own personal problems of guilt and shame of the Negro American society. Ellison saw a failure in authors writing about the American dream of democracy. Ellison said:

The major difference between nineteenth- and twentieth-century writers is not in the latter's lack of personal rituals—a property of all fiction worthy of being termed literature—but in the social effect aroused within their respective readers. Melville's ritual (and his rhetoric) was based upon materials that were more easily available, say, than Hemingway's. They represented a blending of his personal myth with universal myths as traditional as any used by Shakespeare or the Bible, while until For Whom the Bell Tolls Hemingway's was weighted on the personal side. The difference in terms of perspective of belief is that Melville's belief could still find a public object. Whatever else his works are "about" they also managed to be about democracy. But by our day the democratic dream had become too shaky a structure to support the furious pressures of the artist's doubt.<sup>58</sup>

But before Ellison had originated his literary theories or was capable of verbalizing them by appropriate rhetoric, he had the basic ideas of his theory in mind even while under Wright's influence. He

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<sup>57</sup>Ibid., p. 34.

<sup>58</sup>Ibid., pp. 40-41.

realized that folklore had literary value. He realized the cultural dualism in his life--living one life as a social stereotype and the other as a quest for self-identity.<sup>59</sup> However, he did not know how to put these ideas into any literary, artistic expression.

It was Richard Wright who taught him how to do so by showing him the styles and techniques of various authors. Wright said, "you must read so-and-so."<sup>60</sup> When Ellison handed Wright a second short story, Wright was somewhat reluctant to read it, but Ellison insisted. Wright had read almost half-way through the story before he ". . . realized what was wrong and had an impulse to stop and explain. Instead he went through to the end and then raised his eyes. 'Ralph,' he exploded, 'this is my story, my style. You have copied my ideas, my words and my structure! You must find your own symbols--you must tap the content of your own unconscious and use it! You must dig it out of yourself and not duplicate someone else!'"<sup>61</sup>

Ellison accepted the reprimand without bitterness. He determined to remain with Wright and conscientiously learn techniques to become a good writer. When Ellison was asked what he thought of Wright during the first years of their friendship, Ellison said that he did not consciously criticize Wright. He said:

I was too amazed with watching the process of creation. I didn't understand quite what was going on, but by this time I had talked with Wright a lot and he was very conscious

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<sup>59</sup>Ibid., p. 58.

<sup>60</sup>Webb, p. 146.

<sup>61</sup>Ibid.

of technique. He talked about it not in terms of mystification but as writing know-how.

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 [Wright said:] You have to go about learning to write consciously. People have talked about such and such a problem and have written about it. You must learn how Conrad, Joyce, Dostoevsky [sic] get their effects . . .

.....  
 Of course I knew that my own feelings about the world, about life, were different, but this was not even a matter of question. Wright knew what he was about, what he wanted to do, while I hadn't even discovered myself. I knew only that what I would want to express would not be an imitation of his kind of thing.<sup>62</sup>

Ellison learned much from Wright's guidance through the virtues and flaws in the best of literature. Also, Wright had expressed his own concepts about Negro writing and allowed Ellison to read chapters of his works as they came from the typewriter. It is not surprising that Ellison later said, "all novels are about certain minorities: the individual is a minority. The universal in the novel--and isn't that what we're all clamoring for these days?--is reached only through the depiction of the specific man in a specific circumstance."<sup>63</sup> Ellison felt the Negro writer had to be an artist who, through his ability to relate to the Negro group, its traditions, culture, history, and myths, could explore one aspect of that which is America. Through understanding themselves in terms of their heritage, the Negro writer's characters become America's metaphors.

I feel that with my decision to devote myself to the novel I took on one of the responsibilities inherited by those who practice the craft in the United States: that of describing for all that fragment of the huge diverse American experience which I know best, and which offers me the

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<sup>62</sup>Ellison, Shadow and Act, p. 15.

<sup>63</sup>Ibid., p. 170.

possibility of contributing not only to the growth of the literature but to the shaping of the culture as I should like it to be. The American novel is in this sense a conquest of the frontier; as it describes our experience, it creates it.<sup>64</sup>

Both Wright and Ellison emerged extremely good friends after their meeting in 1937. In 1938 Richard Wright (age 30) confessed to Ralph Ellison (age 24) that he wanted to marry a young white woman named Ellen Poplar. He claimed that she was the only woman he could truly love.<sup>65</sup> However, she was debating whether or not to marry Wright at the cost of being alienated from her family. Wright told Ellison: "She's a confused child who doesn't know her own mind."<sup>66</sup> Finally irritated by Ellen's indecision, Wright broke off all relations with her. Then he met another white woman, an actress and dancer known as Dhima. He fell in love with her almost on first sight. Soon he proposed, and she accepted. Ralph Ellison served as Wright's best man. But in time Dhima's flamboyant personality irritated Wright extremely. While in Mexico during 1940, Wright decided to leave her. After all, leaving would be no problem since neither was happy with the other, and any attempt to keep the marriage together was futile. While Dhima was despondent over the dis-integrating marriage, Wright flew to New York.

When Ralph and Rose Ellison, his first wife, heard of the dilemma, they attempted to save the marriage by giving their apartment to Dhima so that she could achieve a reconciliation with Wright. Yet, when

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<sup>64</sup>Ibid., p. 183.

<sup>65</sup>Webb, p. 183.

<sup>66</sup>Ibid.

Wright arrived at the apartment, "the estrangement from Dhima had been growing for many months and by the time he reached New York he was utterly disinterested and in a mood to be critical of anyone who had made an arrangement with a person who had become a stranger to him."<sup>67</sup>

After a brief stay, Wright stormed out of the apartment to visit Jane Newton, a close friend. While talking with Jane Newton at her apartment, he was pleasantly surprised by the arrival of Ellen Poplar. Wright had never ceased loving her. Yet, he was cool as he deduced her reaction toward him. When she responded favorably, Wright had the encouragement he wanted. Soon after obtaining a divorce from Dhima, he proposed to Ellen. Ellen accepted his proposal and married him in a civil ceremony at Coytesville, New Jersey.<sup>68</sup> The ceremony was simple, short, and secret. Wright had not told even his best friend Ralph Ellison of the marriage plans. Wright was in one of his secretive periods.

Wright was happily married to Ellen Poplar. He had already published Native Son (1940). However, on April 13, 1942, Richard Wright was anxious about his wife's condition. She was rushed to the hospital in extreme pain. Wright remained at her side and held "her hand when she had pains but she labored on and on and by the end of the twenty-third hour she sent Richard out to eat something. When he returned he beamed at his wife and handed her a present."<sup>69</sup> Afterwards, he went with his wife into the delivery room and watched the birth of "his big,

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<sup>67</sup>Ibid., p. 408. Reference is to footnote 22.

<sup>68</sup>Ibid., p. 191.

<sup>69</sup>Ibid., p. 193.



eight-pound two-ounce, baby girl."<sup>70</sup> He named her Julia. Life could not have been more perfect. He was a successful writer presently working on his autobiography, Black Boy. He had a wonderful family and an increasing group of friends. He still maintained his close relationship with Ralph Ellison.

Life seemed just perfect for Wright until he received word of Ellison's induction into the Merchant Marine, effective January 22, 1945. He contacted Ellison and told him that he would see what he could do to keep him out of service. But think as he might, Wright could not conceive of a feasible, workable plan. Then he had an idea. Ellison could pretend to be psychologically disturbed. "If there were justifiable cause, he might be able to get him [Ralph Ellison] a 'psychiatric out' through his friend Dr. Frederic Wertham."<sup>71</sup> Ellison agreed to the plan and submitted to an examination. While examined, Ellison acted very peculiar. Dr. Wertham wrote that Ellison was not mentally fit for military induction. However, the report did not reach the Defense Department in time to keep Ellison from serving a tour of duty. But the tour of duty was shortened, and Ellison returned to civilian life. Both he and Wright suspected that their plan had worked successfully after all.

One day Wright was surprised to find a government agent calling to inquire about Ralph Ellison's activities with the Communist Party and its affiliates. Wright suspected that the agent was inquiring into Ellison's background in connection with Dr. Wertham's report which had been sent to the Defense Department. When asked questions about his

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<sup>70</sup>Ibid., p. 193.

<sup>71</sup>Ibid., p. 228.

friend Ellison, Wright told the truth.<sup>72</sup> Soon the man left, and Wright never heard from him again. Ellison, now free of the Armed Forces and having a Rosenwald Fellowship from the previous winter, thanked Wright for his assistance and left with his wife for Vermont to begin work on his first novel, The Invisible Man. Meanwhile, Wright published Black Boy, his autobiography.

The next time both men saw each other was later the same year aboard the liner S. S. United States. Wright had decided that conditions in the United States made it impossible for him to remain as a Negro individual and a writer. Therefore, he was leaving with his family for Paris to live in exile. Ellison wished his friend good luck and success.<sup>73</sup> Ellison returned to Vermont to continue his novel while Wright sailed to France.

On January 17, 1949, Ellison received word that Richard Wright was the father of a " . . . small, seven-and-one-quarter-pound, baby . . ." <sup>74</sup> Wright named her Rachael. Ellison cabled congratulations. While Wright was enjoying the European climate and mellowing from his bitterness about Negro-white relationships in the United States, Ellison was completing his novel. Wright cabled congratulations from Paris when Ellison's Invisible Man, published in 1952, became the best seller of the year and established Ellison as a major writer and critic in America. In fact, many critics thought Ellison a better writer and craftsman than Wright. However, neither let such critical comparisons

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<sup>72</sup>Ibid., pp. 230-31.

<sup>73</sup>Ibid., p. 263.

<sup>74</sup>Ibid., p. 291.

interrupt or destroy their close friendship. While Ellison wrote and published essays and criticism, Wright began touring the European continent. Now he was not concerned primarily with the injustices of racial-conflicts, but with an understanding of various peoples and their cultures over the world. Perhaps the best representative works of this period were his non-fictional Black Power (1954) and Pagan Spain (1956). The two books, one dealing with the social role of the twentieth century African and the other the social condition of Spain, reflected a new, more mellowed Richard Wright.

Then one day Ralph Ellison received a telegram. Curiously, he opened it and read the shocking message: Richard Wright had died November 28, 1960.<sup>75</sup> To Ellison, Wright's death was a personal loss. "On a gray and steadily drizzling December 3, 1960, [Wright's] body was cremated at the Pere Lachaise crematory. Next to his body as it slid into the flames lay a copy of Black Boy."<sup>76</sup> Later that day while in her father's study, Julia wrote these words commemorating her father's death.

Burning out its time,  
And timing its own burning,  
One lonely candle.<sup>77</sup>

Mr. Ellison, now a world renowned scholar and lecturer on American Negro literature, never forgot Wright and the debt he owed him. Presently a visiting professor at the University of New York, he seldom has an interview without being asked about his friendship with Richard Wright. Currently working on his second novel, Mr. Ellison usually

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<sup>75</sup>Ibid., p. 399.

<sup>76</sup>Ibid., p. 400.

<sup>77</sup>Ibid.

responds with favorable and memorable comments about Wright. Perhaps the greatest tribute Ellison gave Wright emerged during a discussion about Wright's Native Son and its main character, Bigger Thomas. Ellison said, "I found it disturbing that Bigger Thomas had none of the finer qualities of Richard Wright, none of the imagination, none of the sense of poetry, none of the gaiety. . . . I preferred Richard Wright to Bigger Thomas."<sup>78</sup>

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<sup>78</sup>Ellison, p. 16.

## CHAPTER II

### AN ANALYSIS OF NATIVE SON

For more than three hundred years, the American advocates of the racial doctrine of white supremacy pointed to the sexual and social conduct of the American Negro as justification for their policies of discrimination and segregation. Until recently those who sought to refute these doctrines had to appeal to religious or liberal ideals; now, however, with the emergence of Negro social scientists, there has been established a vast body of fact relating to the conditions under which Negroes were transported to the New World, the rigors of their slave lives, the shattering of the tribal structure of their existence, and the new, painful adjustments they were forced to make in order to survive in America. These facts, rather than any mysterious inherent propensities of race, account for the Negro in American life. In short, the way the Negro has behaved in America is the way in which any like group would have behaved in similar circumstances. The reactions of the Negro, despite all the heated assertions to the contrary, were simply in the language of Nietzsche, "Human-All-Too-Human", and a scientific examination of this humanity sheds light not only upon the Negro in America, but upon how man in general has lived under varying kinds of social pressure.<sup>1</sup>

Native Son is Richard Wright's attempt at showing this black man's humanity to reveal how the Negro has managed to survive under the most undesirable social conditions which plague America. Wright sees the Negro's complete emancipation only through Marxism. Wright was an adherent of the nineteenth century philosopher Karl Marx, whose doctrines are incorporated into Native Son.

Marx's philosophy can be separated into three distinct classes--metaphysical, economic, and ethical theory.<sup>2</sup> Professor Barnett Savary

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<sup>1</sup>Richard Wright, "Preface" to Human, All Too Human by E. Franklin Frazier, Presence Africaine, No. 6 (January-March, 1949), p. 47.

<sup>2</sup>Richard H. Popkin and Avrum Stroll, Philosophy Made Simple (New York, 1956), p. 64.

explains Marx's metaphysics very clearly and concisely.

The Marxists explain the doctrine of opposites in the following way: Everything contains two main opposing forces, one is called the thesis, the other is called the antithesis. These two forces destroy each other, but from the destruction arises a new situation which is called a synthesis. Eventually, this synthesis breaks down into its opposites--and we have a new thesis and a new antithesis. And then out of these opposing forces arises a new synthesis--and so on. The Marxists . . . make use of this idea in order to demonstrate that communism, as a society, is ethically superior to all previous existing societies.

The historical King-state societies, according to the Marxists, broke down into its [sic] opposites--the King ruler; on the one hand, and the dispossessed and slaves on the other hand. From the struggle between these opposites, a synthesis was formed, and the feudalistic society came into being. Feudalism, then, broke down into its opposing forces, the lords and the serfs; and this struggle was synthesized and modern capitalism was born. And, now, the Marxists claim that capitalism has broken down into its opposites; the employers, on the one hand, and the employees, on the other hand. The new society, according to the Marxists, will be Marxian socialism. The Marxists argue that each new society is ethically superior to the society that existed before.<sup>3</sup>

The first part of Marx's philosophy, called the metaphysics, rests upon the concept that all change takes place through conflict. The second part of his philosophy is the economic.

In it, Marx claims that ". . . all class relationships are independent of men's wills, and in fact are really determined by the prevailing economic system."<sup>4</sup> The class to which a person belongs will depend largely upon his relevance to material production and personal income. Since this economic relationship follows an historical pattern or dialectic, it will--in time--generate its own opposition. This will cause a major dichotomy in which a few wealthy citizens will control the

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<sup>3</sup>Ibid., p. 66.

<sup>4</sup>Ibid.

material production and personal income of the worker. The worker will possess nothing (economically or spiritually) and will be exploited more and more by the powerful elite who monopolize power and manipulate him.

As the dichotomy becomes more pronounced, the middle-class will virtually disappear, being more or less absorbed into one of the two extremes above, with the final result being a social revolution and reorganization of the social structure by the worker or proletariat for the benefit of all.

In the last part, the ethic, Marx claims that capitalism causes the decay and destruction of humanity. Humanity in man is replaced by an inhuman craving for power and material profits. Marx maintains " . . . that industry and technological discoveries develop much more rapidly than do the techniques for controlling them [and more rapidly than techniques for maintaining a humanistic consciousness in society, especially in the socially elite]."<sup>5</sup> In a capitalistic society, men become islands isolated from each other. Class struggles result, and only Marxist socialism offers a solution to these capitalistic flaws.

In presenting the black man's humanity in Native Son, Richard Wright, more through implication than overt statement, calls for such changes as Marx described in his philosophy. Bigger Thomas, the novel's hero, lives in a world dominated by white capitalists. Exploited and frustrated, denied the economic and spiritual avenues of success available to white American youths, Bigger wants social changes which will allow him to be an American rather than a Negro American. Wright makes

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<sup>5</sup>Ibid., p. 68.

Bigger a living example of the problems of capitalism and the possibilities of overcoming them. Only through the Marxist's principles of social conflict which results in change can the hero achieve economic prosperity and cultural assimilation into the mainstream of American life. Only then are the ill effects of industrial and technological tyrants of a capitalistic society destroyed. Wright, through his hero Bigger Thomas, shows himself a romanticist at heart. Seeing Marxism as a possibility on a darkling, nightmarish plain where there was "neither joy nor peace nor certitude . . .,"<sup>6</sup> Wright reaffirms the individual as the center of his art, thus making Native Son not only an expression of his unique feelings and attitudes, but also a representation of the experiences of a particular race.

From these items [events in Chicago] I drew my first political conclusions about Bigger: I felt that Bigger, an American product, a native son of this land, carried within the potentialities of either communism or fascism. I don't mean to say that the Negro boy I depicted in "Native Son" is either a Communist or a Fascist. He is neither. But he is a product of a dislocated society; he is a dispossessed and disinherited man; he is all of this and he lives amid the greatest possible plenty on earth and he is looking and feeling for a way out. Whether he'll follow some gaudy, hysterical leader who'll promise rashly to fill the void in him, or whether he'll come to an understanding with the millions of his kindred fellow workers under the trade union or revolutionary guidance depends upon the future drift of events in America. But, granting the emotional state, the intensity, the fear, the hate, the impatience, the sense of exclusion, the ache for violent action, the emotional and cultural hunger, Bigger's conditioned cynicism will not become an ardent, or even a lukewarm, supporter of the status quo.<sup>7</sup>

In the novel, Bigger Thomas is basically an existential hero

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<sup>6</sup>Matthew Arnold, "Dover Beach," Walter Houghton and G. Robert Strange, eds., Victorian Poetry and Poetics (Boston, 1959), p. 470.

<sup>7</sup>Richard Wright, "How 'Bigger' Was Born," Saturday Review of Literature, June 1, 1940, p. 17.



forced to define for himself his world of nightmare. Bigger knows that he has as much freedom as he decides to take. But, he also knows that this freedom is a relative one depending upon the definitions of black life he accepts and uses to give his life meaning and purpose. In short, inherent conflicts in Native Son arise when the definitions of the word Negro by black and white are opposed.

Yet, Bigger achieves self-definition in spite of conflicts within his environment. He represents that hero of Kierkegaard's philosophy who would say: "We are confronted with our 'dreadful freedom,' recognizing that we are completely free to choose our world-view, our way of living in the world. Moreover, since we are completely free, there is no way in which we can find guides for our choice, no way we can avoid making a choice, and no way of escaping from the consequences of the choices--our basic decisions."<sup>8</sup>

Although Wright vindictively indicts the white society for making Bigger the murderous monster that he becomes, the author does not fall into the trap of a lesser artist by allowing the hero to escape the moral and ethical consequences of his actions. Such an oversight would produce only a melodramatic hero victimized by a particular segment of society. The hero would be unrealistic if held guiltless for his actions. Also, the white reader would react negatively to a portrayal of white society as the villain who creates Bigger if he did not share the built.

Therefore, Wright makes Bigger realistic by giving him some responsibility for his crimes. But Wright also arranges his novel and its theme in such a way that the reader, especially the white reader,

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<sup>8</sup>Popkin and Stroll, Philosophy Made Simple, p. 190.

shares in Bigger's crime and guilt.

The movement of the novel's three books is epic. Not only does Bigger become representative of the Negro race in manners and speech, but in his desire for complete social emancipation. When confronted by certain limitations, Bigger, like Satan, refuses to be chained to a burning lake of second class citizenship. In his pain or neurosis, Bigger challenges the Universe to be free. He is an epic hero fighting against overwhelming odds.

Structurally, the novel is divided into three books: "Fear," "Flight," and "Fate." Within the novel's first pages, Wright has started the reader on a journey into Bigger's psyche. Through subtlety of expression, Wright presents the psychological conflicts or neurosis of Bigger Thomas. In Book I, "Fear," the true Bigger Thomas retreats from life and white society, a dominant force within his life.

Soon, Bigger is thrust into circumstances (illustrated later) wherein his actions underscore his neurosis. In a neurotic state he murders Mary Dalton accidentally and Bessie Smith deliberately. Afraid and fearful after the first murder, he feels exhilarated and powerful after the second. By then he has established his identity or at least part of it.

After his flight, he is apprehended. In jail and awaiting his death sentence by the jury, Bigger reflects on the sum total of his life and tries to establish his true identity in a world of chaos.

The seeds for Bigger's creation were the crystallizations of many of Wright's direct or indirect experiences with black and white men and women, especially in the South. Wright was a keen observer and

listener. His detail is presented clearly and sharply, although there is much emotionalism. Wright said, "the birth of Bigger Thomas goes back to my childhood, and there was not just one Bigger, but many of them, more than I could count and more than you suspect."<sup>9</sup>

Bigger No. 1 was a bully who often terrorized Richard while both attended school in Mississippi. Bigger No. 2 was about seventeen, a couple of years older than Richard. This Bigger had a hardness about him which directed itself against the white society. "He bought clothes and food on credit and would not pay for them. He lived in the dingy shacks of the white landlords and refused to pay rent."<sup>10</sup> Bigger No. 3 was a daring black boy who loved to taunt white people. One day he was killed while delivering liquor to a customer. Later, it was learned that a white policeman had killed him.

Bigger No. 4 knew the Jim Crow laws of the South, but he did not pay allegiance to them. This Bigger often fluctuated between elation and despair. He found life full of dichotomies which he tried to reconcile. "Ofttimes I [Richard Wright] would find him [Bigger No. 4] reading a book; he would stop and in a joking, wistful, and cynical manner ape the antics of white folks."<sup>11</sup> Later, he was sent to an asylum for the insane. Bigger No. 5 rode the streetcars in the South. He was proud to be black and refused the indignities of second class citizenship.

All these Biggers became concepts and abstractions which Wright's

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<sup>9</sup>Wright, "How 'Bigger' Was Born," p. 3.

<sup>10</sup>Ibid.

<sup>11</sup>Ibid., p. 4.

mind fused into the creation of Bigger Thomas. Living in Chicago, Wright began to realize Bigger "as a meaningful and prophetic symbol. First, being free of the daily pressures of the Dixie environment, I [Richard Wright] was able to come into possession of my own feelings. Second, my contact with the labor movement and its ideology made me see Bigger clearly and feel what he meant [in terms of Marxist socialism]."12

Although on one level Bigger represents everyman in conflict with social institutions, on another level, his psychological relationship to white society is akin to that which Leslie Fiedler expresses in "Come Back to The Raft Huck Honey."<sup>13</sup> Fiedler claims that the relationship between Huck and the Nigger Jim is a homosexual one in terms of psychology.

In Huck's homosexual embrace of Jim, he comes at last to such a synthesis of conflicts. Huck finds his humanity and individuality in accepting Jim as an individual. Psychological homogeneity results for Huck. Yet, to imply that Fiedler or Twain is speaking strictly in terms of a particular racial issue would be a misinterpretation. Neither Fiedler nor Twain is dealing so much with a particular social phenomenon of race in the South as with a unique representation of mythical and archetypal conflicts within the white psyche as it seeks self-identity. Both writers are trying to understand certain patterns of Western culture through a very specific representation of it. In Twain's South, white

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<sup>12</sup>Ibid.

<sup>13</sup>Marcus Klein, "Ralph Ellison's Invisible Man," S. L. Gross, ed., Images of the Negro in American Literature (Chicago, 1966), p. 259.

citizens denied Negroes their culture and propagated upon them unjustified myths. Although white society knew it was committing an injustice, this society--due to guilt, shame, envy, or contempt--abused Negroes by forcing them into mythical and archetypal roles. Negroes became the scapegoats for all the negative thoughts and desires within the white psyche concerning sex, social status, and religious doctrine.

Yet the Negro endured. Apart from the discussions in Fiedler's essay, the Negro endured the injustices. He became something of a Christ-like figure. In him, many white people saw glimpses of the salvation of their own humanity. If the Southern white man hated the Negro, there were moments when he loved him--spiritually or physically. But the desire to love was not enough to outweigh the desire to hate. In many cases the Negro was forced to endure the Southern white man's sadism.

As Fiedler expresses quite clearly, Huck is not the traditional Southerner. A boy, he is innocent of the hatred Southern white society has for the Negro. His basic desire is for friendship with Jim. This desire for friendship and Jim's acceptance of it reflect the possibility for racial harmony in the South. To achieve such a state, Huck has to question and understand himself. Huck's dilemma is to find a synthesis of opposing conflicts within his psyche. Tradition demands that he hate Jim, but his heart desires the opposite. Symbolically, Huck and Jim represent the possibility for social synthesis of opposing classes.

Although Wright is speaking in terms of race and is indicting white society for its treatment of the Negro, he too, is exploring certain cultural patterns inherent in Western culture. But he does so through the black psyche rather than the white one. Yet, the universal under-

standing of the self revealed in both cases goes beyond just racial significance in that the Negro becomes America's metaphor. America's metaphor in that the problems (the injustices) he encounters reflect certain ills whose effects are not just detrimental only to the Negro-- a particular race--but to America as a nation.

White characters in the novel--the Daltons, Jan, and Max--assume roles akin to Huck's. Each tries to find himself through gratuitous acts towards Bigger. But they fail because their acts, unlike Huck's, are not altruistically of the heart. They do not consider their actions in terms of benefit to Bigger, but in terms of benefit only to themselves. Bigger senses this. That is why he cannot have a growing relationship with them. The incapability of establishing relationships with others is in part a factor which contributes to Bigger's world of chaos. If chaos makes Bigger a monster, then the characters, especially the white ones, must share Bigger's crime and guilt because they, in part, are responsible for it. The same is true of those white characters who make Henry, a Negro handyman, a monster in Stephen Crane's short story, "The Monster."

Through identification with white characters who share in creating Bigger, the monster, the white reader finds his own identity on questionable ground. Although he cannot deny the validity of the implications about himself in the novel, he cannot accept them either because doing so will force him to accept unfavorable interpretations of himself.

Wright made Bigger a rebel because his environment demanded that he be such. "It was not that Chicago segregated Negroes more than the South, but that Chicago had more to offer, that Chicago's physical

aspect--noisy, crowded, filled with a sense of power and fulfillment-- did so much more to dazzle the mind with a taunting sense of possible achievement that the segregation it did impose brought forth from Bigger a reaction more obstreperous than in the South."<sup>14</sup> Then segregation becomes not a localized or regionalized issue but a reflection of the entire nation.

If interpreting Negro life had been the primary reason for Wright's creation of Native Son, then the reception of his earlier work Uncle Tom's Children was the second. Wright says:

I had written a book of stories which was published under the title of "Uncle Tom's Children." When the reviews of that book began to appear, I realized that I had made an awful naive mistake. I found that I had written a book which even bankers' daughters could read and weep over and feel good. I swore to myself that if I ever wrote another book, no one would weep over it; that it would be so hard and deep that they would have to face it without the consolation of tears. It was this that made me get to work in dead earnest.<sup>15</sup>

Wright knew what he wanted to say in his content, but how would he end his novel? It would not be enough just to indict white society for creating Bigger without probing the morals, the ethical consequences of all the participants and their action in the novel, and the effect that their action bears upon the entirety of Bigger's life. At first Wright could not resolve an ending for the novel. Finally, he said, "At last I found out how to end the book; I ended it just as I had begun it, showing Bigger living dangerously, taking his life into his hands,

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<sup>14</sup>Wright, "How 'Bigger' Was Born," p. 17.

<sup>15</sup>Ibid., p. 19.

accepting what life had made him. The lawyer, Max, was placed in Bigger's cell at the end of the novel to register the moral--or what I felt was the moral--horror of Negro life in the United States."<sup>16</sup> The Communistic scenes bear peculiarly strong autobiographical parallels to Wright's own experiences in the Communist movement in America.

In the novel, the hero represents all black men caught in the environment of white injustices. Wright in his theme and naturalistic technique echoes much of John Steinbeck and James Farrell in that the hero of the novel fights against the restraints of social institutions which threaten his humanity and individuality. All three authors have heroes whose identities emerge from semi-violent or violent action.

Wright constructs the novel so that the reader sees that Bigger is aware of American ideals and hopes, but knows that he can never realize them. The reader is immediately drawn into the course of events through Bigger's eyes and is forced to accept Bigger's psychological viewpoint of the world. Bigger is aware of such a paradox of the American system as he stands talking with his friend Gus. In a moment of anger, Bigger says:

"Goddammit!"  
 "What's the matter?"  
 "They don't let us do nothing."  
 "Who?"  
 "The white folks."  
 "You talk like you just now finding that out," Gus said.  
 "Naw. But I just can't get used to it," Bigger said.  
 "I swear to God I can't. I know I oughtn't think about it, but I can't help it. Every time I think about it I feel like somebody's poking a red-hot iron down my throat. Goddammit, look! We live here and they live there. We black and they white. They got things and we ain't. They

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<sup>16</sup>Ibid., p. 20.



do things and we can't. It's just like living in jail. Half the time I feel like I'm on the outside of the world peeping in through a knothole in the fence. . . ."17

James Baldwin says, "When he [the Negro] violates this image [the white concept that Negroes have certain attributes and social roles in society], therefore, he stands in the greatest danger (sensing which, we [white people] uneasily suspect that he is very often playing a part for our benefit); and, what is not always so apparent but is equally true, we are then in some danger ourselves--hence our retreat or our blind and immediate retaliation."18

The novel's outline is simple. It begins with Book I, entitled "Fear." It is morning in a rat-infested tenement on the South Side of Chicago. In one room, Mrs. Thomas, whose husband was killed in Mississippi, is arousing her children from their morning slumber. She tells them to prepare themselves for school or work. In the room are Mrs. Thomas, Bigger, Vera, and Buddy.

While all are dressing, a sickly looking rat enters the room and causes a few minutes of panic, especially for Mrs. Thomas and Vera. The following scene is extremely violent, and Wright's descriptions of the rat approach grotesqueness.

"Hit 'im, Bigger!" Buddy shouted.

"Kill 'im!" the woman screamed.

The rat's belly pulsed with fear. Bigger advanced a step and the rat emitted a long thin song of defiance, its black beady eyes glittering, its tiny forefeet pawing the air restlessly. Bigger swung the skillet; it skidded over the floor, missing the rat, and clattered to a stop against a wall.

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<sup>17</sup>Wright, Native Son, p. 17.

<sup>18</sup>James Baldwin, "Many Thousands Gone: Richard Wright's Native Son," Images of the Negro in American Literature, p. 234.

"Goddamn!"

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 "Gimme that skillet, Buddy," he asked quietly, not taking his eyes from the rat.

Buddy extended his hand. Bigger caught the skillet and lifted it high in the air. The rat scuttled across the floor and stopped again at the box and searched quickly for the hole; then it reared once more and bared long yellow fangs, piping shrilly, belly quivering.

Bigger aimed and let the skillet fly with a grunt. There was a shattering of wood as the box caved in. The woman screamed and hid her face in her hands. Bigger tiptoed forward and peeped.

"I got 'im," he muttered, his clenched teeth bared in a smile. "By God, I got 'im."

He kicked the splintered box out of the way and the flat black body of the rat lay exposed, its two long yellow tusks showing distinctly. Bigger took a shoe and pounded the rat's head, crushing it, cursing hysterically:

"You sonofabitch!"<sup>19</sup>

This violent scene is a metaphorical microcosm of the more violent one in which Bigger Thomas, like the rat, seems monstrous and is crushed by white society. This society does not understand him and fears him as he feared the rat. The rat, grotesquely described, symbolizes Bigger in his state of neurosis.

After breakfast Bigger leaves to interview for a job with the Daltons, a white philanthropic family who want to hire him as chauffeur for their daughter, Mary. On the way he meets his friends, Gus and Jack. All three discuss a plan to rob a white owned store in the neighborhood. They make tentative plans as to the time and method of their robbery. Since they have a free afternoon--the robbery will not take place until later that evening--they decide to attend a local theatre showing "The Gay Woman," a film depicting the grandeur of America's wealth and prestige, which is denied black men. As they watch,

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<sup>19</sup>Wright, Native Son, pp. 5-6.

the boys realize that here is an America that they will never share with white people.

At the appointed time, Gus fails to show up. Bigger, pretending to be furious, suggests that they go to Doc's pool hall since their plans for the robbery have been ruined. While the two are there, Gus enters. Bigger, covering up his own fears about the robbery, initiates a fight with Gus.

"Quit, Bigger!" Gus spluttered, choking, sinking to his knees.

"Don't tell me to quit!"

The muscles of his body gave a tightening lunge and he saw his fist come down on the side of Gus's head; he had struck him really before he was conscious of doing so.

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He stopped again and placed a knife at Gus's throat. Gus did not move and his large black eyes looked pleadingly. Bigger was not satisfied; he felt his muscles tightening again.

"Get up! I ain't going to ask you no more!"

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He put the tip of the blade in Gus's shirt and then made an arc with his arm, as though cutting a circle.

"How would you like me to cut your belly button out?"

Gus did not answer. Sweat trickled down his temples. His lips hung wide, loose.

"Shut them liver lips of yours!"

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Gus shut his mouth. Doc laughed. Jack and G. H. laughed. Then Bigger stepped back and looked at Gus with a smile.<sup>20</sup>

In abusing Gus, Bigger seeks to annihilate the fear within himself. The anger he releases becomes self-destructive. Also, Bigger enjoys the temporary power that he has over Gus. The hero enjoys taunting Gus because it makes him important for a brief moment or two. Like some god, Bigger has achieved briefly an identity through violence.

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<sup>20</sup>Ibid., pp. 32-34.

Only through negative, violent, exploitive actions can Bigger's life take on purpose and meaning.

After the incident, Bigger reports to the Dalton home where he is awed by the lavishness and richness. This is a world as foreign to him as that depicted in "The Gay Women." He is apprehensive of Mr. and Mrs. Dalton and their unceasing questions. He is especially frightened of their daughter, Mary, who taunts him in front of her parents. He has never been face-to-face with white people before this evening, and he feels extremely insecure as he faces them, the Daltons, symbols of America's wealth, prestige, and power.

His fear leads him to hate these people. Suspecting such a reaction from Bigger, the Daltons try to put him at ease by insisting on the sincerity of their desires to help black people overcome the devastating influences of the ghetto.

But Bigger instinctively does not trust their declamations. Later, he has justification. He learns that Mr. Dalton, a real-estate agent, owns many buildings and tenements in Chicago's South Side. The Negroes living there are starving, and the tenements are in desperate need of repairs. Yet, Mr. Dalton charges high rent to the Negroes living there. This white man ignores the plight of these unfortunate poor, but he thinks he is helping the Negroes by offering just one of them a job as chauffeur for his daughter. Although Bigger resents the job, it is better than no job at all.

Bigger's assignment on his first evening as chauffeur is to drive Mary to class at a local college. On the way, she tells him to drive to an old, dilapidated house where she meets her Communist boyfriend,

Jan, who welcomes the opportunity to meet Bigger and tells him of the Communists' support for the emancipation of Negroes throughout America. But Bigger, when urged to join the Communist organization, is reluctant, reserved, and shy.

Desiring to convince Bigger of their sincerity, Mary and Jan suggest that all three eat at a Negro restaurant. Bigger wonders if they are not trying too hard to appear sincere in their treatment of Negroes as equals. As he drives them into the Negro section, he is defensive toward them. To him, all white people represent death. To trust them is to strip away all defenses of survival.

In the cafe, Bigger's friends give him cold, icy glances as he sits with Mary and Jan. Bigger feels like a traitor to his people. But the two white people are completely oblivious to the reaction their presence with Bigger is causing. To them, this evening is novel and romantic.

On the return trip, Bigger stops the limousine, and Jan leaves Mary. Then Bigger continues driving to the Dalton home. When he arrives, he has to carry Mary to her room because she has been drinking and is too intoxicated to walk. While they are there together, Mrs. Dalton, who is blind, comes to the door. Afraid that she will enter the room, Bigger tries to keep Mary quiet by placing a pillow over her face. Perhaps Mrs. Dalton will think her daughter asleep and leave.

In the few seconds of agony that Bigger undergoes, an eternity of sexual myths and their consequences for Negro men overwhelm him. He knows that discovery with Mary in her bedroom would bring envy and hatred of his supposed sexual prowess. He knows that the white women

must not be violated or even threatened or else there is nothing but death for the Negro male.

Although he does not have sexual intercourse with Mary, he realizes that circumstances would be enough to convict him if he were discovered. Finally, Mrs. Dalton leaves. Like a cornered rat, Bigger reacts instinctively to his fear. With the pressure released, he is capable of reasoning again. But to his horror, he discovers that he has accidentally smothered Mary. She lies before him dead.

He has smothered a white girl, a white virgin who, perhaps like her Biblical counterpart, remains unviolated. She had offered Bigger the hand of friendship from an alien shore, but Bigger had mistrusted such friendship. Perhaps unconsciously, he wanted to kill Mary--such was his fear of white society. In any case, he is not sure of anything now. Yet, there is double irony. Although Mary's death precipitates a series of actions which eventually lead to Bigger's annihilation at the novel's end, it is precisely the consequences of her death that give Bigger's life a new meaning and purpose. In this nightmarish world of chaos, Bigger finds himself (gives himself identity) only through asserting himself. Ironically, in his ghetto environment, his assertion takes on the form of violence--the result of the emotional release of the anger and frustration within him.

When questioned about Mary's strange disappearance, Bigger cunningly places the blame on Jan, and circumstantial evidence seems to support Bigger's accusation. When Jan hears the accusation against him, he confronts Bigger and demands to know why he lied. However, his efforts to obtain the truth from Bigger are futile. Bigger's story is accepted.

as truth because the white people believe in their false stereotypes of Negroes. Such beliefs do not allow them to picture a Negro as shrewd enough to successfully complete such a bold deception. Bigger's awareness of this white blindness helps him to give himself order and identity amid chaos. At last, he is learning the possibilities of identity in his naturalistic environment.

Book I dramatizes Bigger's fear and his violent reaction to it, which results when he is placed in a fear-producing environment. Beginning with the opening rat scene, increasing during his fight with Gus, and culminating in Mary's murder, Bigger's violence is an attempt to annihilate the source of his fear, yet at the same time to give himself identity. Relying primarily on instinct, Bigger can reason the sum total and significance of his life in retrospect. In short, Bigger becomes a synthesis between the cunning irrationality of the animal (the rat) and the rational control of man (in this case the hipster, the con man).

Therefore, what critics have often taken as Wright's weakness in presenting a Satanic hero whose environment would not allow him to see himself in such grand, epic magnitude as he does is completely fallacious. Perhaps the ordered presentation of thought and dialogue are more in keeping with Wright's sophisticated background rather than the hero's limited one, but the desires, the hopes, and the frustrations are those of any man living in an environment of dichotomies. Wright was forced to use an ordered presentation to intellectualize the philosophical significance of Bigger's life in order to make that life more meaningful to the reader.

In Book II, Bigger is again contrasted to his family and friends

as was the case in Book I. However, the relationship has changed. In Book II, Bigger is now a money earner, his job has a certain prestige, and he has found that he has possibilities amid chaos. Feeling the respect of his family and friends and knowing that at last he has an identity, Bigger is more dynamic. He is human because he has polarities of personality. He has virtues and faults which make him human.

After Mary's disappearance, the Daltons have Detective Britton investigate the circumstances surrounding her absence. The private detective questions Bigger, but is convinced in his blindness that Bigger could not be capable of committing such an atrocious act and then feigning innocence of it so cunningly and successfully.

But if Bigger feels a momentary sense of power and exhilaration in revenge, he also feels an unshakeable gnawing fear that at any moment his crime will be discovered. As the hours pass, he becomes an extremely striking parallel to Milton's Satan in Paradise Lost. The basement, shrouded in darkness, seems a nightmarish Hell where Mary's body is slowly consumed by the furnace; Bigger's guilt forces him to shovel coal into the red glowing furnace whose thirst for blood seems unquenchable.

One day, the detectives, visiting the Dalton home, poke into the furnace ashes while Bigger is present. When they find bits of bone, Bigger flees the scene in wild desperation once his self-composure is gone. Again, he relies upon instinct and cunning to survive. Alone and desperate, he wants someone to share his fear and guilt, so he flees to his sweetheart, Bessie, and forces her to become his accomplice. He takes her and hides in some vacant apartment buildings in the Negro section.



Symbolically, Bessie functions as a possible soul symbol. Like the Bessie Smith in Edward Albee's The Death of Bessie Smith, this Bessie reflects the sadness, the melancholy, the loneliness inherent in black life. She becomes an extension of Bigger--what he is, what he loves, and what he hates within himself--in short, the "blues." In the violent and passionate love scene where he brutally makes love to her, Bigger attempts to communicate with his soul. He attempts to resolve the conflicting tensions within himself.

In the cold, wintry, vacated apartment where they lie on skimpy bed clothing which they brought with them when they fled the police, Bigger's need for Bessie overwhelms them both.

He flung the cover back, ignoring the cold, and not knowing that he did it. Bessie's hands were on his chest, her fingers spreading protestingly open, pushing him away. He heard her give a soft moan that seemed not to end even when she breathed in or out; a moan which he heard, too, from far away and without heeding. He had to now. Imperiously driven, he rode roughshod over her whimpering protests, feeling acutely sorry for her as he galloped a frenzied horse down a steep hill in the face of a resisting wind. don't don't don't Bigger. And the wind became so strong that it lifted him into the dark air, turning him, twisting him, hurling him; faintly, over the wind's howl, he heard: don't Bigger don't don't at a moment he could not remember, he had fallen; and now he lay, spent, his lips parted.<sup>21</sup>

Bessie whimpers afterwards and complains about the circumstances Bigger has forced her to accept. She knows that Bigger is using her. But she does not know that he is using her as a means for coming to grips with his own internal conflicts. However, Bigger does not find his soul through Bessie. Bigger is still exactly what he was before--a boy/man searching for identity.

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<sup>21</sup>Ibid., pp. 198.

Suspecting that Bessie might threaten his escape through some inadvertent clumsiness, Bigger murders her brutally by crushing her head with a brick found inside the apartment. After all, Bessie no longer has any usefulness to him as a woman or symbolically as a means of finding his soul, his identity. In her failure to help Bigger find himself, she reminds him of all that is negative and stagnant in his life, in himself. He must get rid of her. The murder is cold and deliberate. Whereas the reader's sympathy was with Bigger when he accidentally killed Mary Dalton, the same sympathy is destroyed when he kills Bessie. Wright, of course, deliberately inserted this scene. Instead of presenting a sentimental, stereotyped, Christ-like hero, as would be the case if Bigger had murdered only Mary Dalton, Wright presents an individual who can obtain the reader's sympathy one moment and the next arouse his hatred. Bigger can love, but he can hate. He can kill. Wright makes Bigger human by presenting him with extremes of potentials. Yet, the reader cannot love or hate Bigger without feeling responsible for contributing to and sharing in his creation. Viewing this metaphorical microcosm of a peculiar American social scene, the reader (especially the white reader) senses a reflection of his own soul.

It is ironic that a hero who seeks so desperately for love and security finds both so hard to establish in his chaos. Rather than love, Bigger hates because hate is a by-product of his environment. He has no devotion, loyalty, or trust because these qualities only make him vulnerable to more pain. Even religion, which offers love (symbolized in the old colored preacher who visits Bigger in jail) also offers violence (depicted when the white people burn a cross outside Bigger's cell).

Again, the hero must face conflicting tensions. The Christian religion which has made Negroes humble and docile has allowed for white society's aggressiveness and brutality towards Negroes in the name of righteousness. In love's absence, the hero experiences only fear, insecurity, and frustration. How can a boy forced into manhood by the pitiless circumstances of his environment respond to others with compassion? Echoing what the environment has made him, Bigger responds to others with just as much hate and brutality as he receives from them.

After a frenzied chase at the close of Book II, Bigger is captured and taken to jail to await trial. His brief period of self identity is disrupted. Again, his world becomes chaotic and he must search for a new identity.

Throughout Books I and II, many symbols have emphasized the difficulty and desperation of Bigger's search. Black, for example, has become an adjective symbolic of Bigger and the hopelessness, frustration, death, and decay which he confronts throughout the novel. An even more powerful symbol is the rat--grotesque, sickly, and fighting against annihilation. The rat causes fear and panic in the Thomases just as Bigger's crime--his blackness of skin and self assertion rather than his actual crimes of murder--cause fear in white society. In ignorance and fear, this society attempts to annihilate him rather than re-examine their false and mythical concepts regarding Negro-white roles in society.

In such conditions, the family unit has gone sour and is on the edge of complete disunity except for a carnivorous dependence which holds it together by the thinnest threads. The religion which Mrs. Thomas, like the colored preacher in Bigger's cell, verbalizes becomes an ironic

symbol of corruption and exploitation when its use by Negroes and whites is for the sole purpose of keeping Negroes humble and docile.

In Bessie, Bigger seeks a soul symbol. In her, Bigger hopes to find himself. He hopes to find a spiritual substance which will make him whole as Heathcliffe hoped to find wholeness in yielding himself to Catherine in Wuthering Heights. In both novels, if the hero is a man full of passions, then the woman he loves becomes an extension of himself, the spiritual essence which allows the hero to transcend the mortality of the flesh. But in both cases, the woman fails her calling, especially in Bigger's case. In "making love" to Bessie, Bigger finds only temporary physical elation and satisfaction in sexual intercourse. Sex simply becomes another means of human exploitation in this dog-eat-dog world. Again, the Negro's potency becomes a self-destructive, exploitive force.

Other effective symbols are the white characters who become symbols of death, decay, and stoicism. Literally, non-living, non-changing creatures in their attitudes and viewpoints towards Negroes, they (the exception being Mary, Jan, and Max) offer black people only a darkling plain like that in Arnold's "Dover Beach." They, too, are exploiters of Negro will and desire.

Mary Dalton (perhaps a symbolic Virgin Mary) becomes a symbol of hope and salvation in a negative manner in offering to befriend Bigger and lead him to Jan (Jesus?) Perhaps Jan's role is a Christ-like one. He shows compassion toward the hero and forgives Bigger for accusing him of Mary's disappearance earlier. He also succeeds in obtaining legal aid for Bigger. Jan turns the Biblical other-cheek to Bigger.

Max, a Michael after the sin of Eden, is a synthesis of two cultures in that he--as a Jew--has experienced life as a white person capable of obtaining economically the living standards of the average white person in America, yet, he has been culturally segregated like the Negro from the mainstream of American life. Viewing life realistically, he is able to deliver a powerful speech of truth--Bigger is a product of his environment--which falls on deaf and alien ears in the white courtroom filled to capacity with white people who demand Bigger's annihilation.

However, as much as these people offer Bigger friendship--and however much he wishes it--he cannot accept friendship. Warped by the environment in which he lives, Bigger believes whiteness is a symbol of his enemies. He rejects all white people, even Mary, Jan, and Max. Nevertheless, these people have allowed Bigger to realize a small part of himself which he did not know was within him.

The colors black and white are extremely effective symbols. Traditionally, black represents evil and white, good. But Wright through his presentation shows the irony in such a traditional concept. There is as much evil in white as good in black. Bigger and his environment are always shrouded in blackness. Thus, blackness is effective in creating the imagery of despair, frustration, and death. Bigger is black, and so are his friends and family. In fact, the entire ghetto is permeated by black people who live in black, dirty tenements. There, the atmosphere of life is dismal and for all practical purposes, black. Black like Satan, Bigger's guilt makes him a living inhabitant of the Dalton basement (Hell?). In this dark Hell, he shovels black coal into

a fiery red furnace. He has driven Mary earlier in a black limousine in which she drank and became intoxicated. It is this car that brings Mary home in a state which precipitates her death. The description of the long, black, somber, hearse-like automobile seems in itself prophetic of impending doom. In her bedroom, Bigger murders Mary in darkness--blackness. Yet, it is blackness (Bigger) reacting to whiteness (white society) which is the basic issue here. If white is good, it is also an evil corrupting force. Symbolically, these white people represent death for Bigger Thomas.

Also, there is the recurring imagery of blindness, represented in the novel by Mrs. Dalton, who is physically blind. She is a physical embodiment of the blindness to reality manifested in the most sympathetic of white characters in the novel. So deep are the roots of this blindness that it has not failed to have its effect upon Negroes themselves. Therefore, Negroes in the novel fail to see the true significance of Bigger's actions as he awaits trial and punishment. If they have conceptions of the significance of Bigger's actions, they refuse to acknowledge them because they will place their own standards, values, and myths in conflict with white society and initiate their own chaos. If the security of oneself and one's family must be maintained by living a lie, then that is what they will do. For many, the lie has been lived for such a long time that it has indeed become the reality.

Book III consists of a series of attempts by Bigger to find his true identity. Although he has had various alternatives to help him realize his identity, they have failed him. He rejects his family, fellow

prisoners, race leaders, ministers, and religion.<sup>22</sup> He rejects them because he cannot relate to them. But of all the people he must reject, he finds it hardest to reject Jan and Max. These two come closest to understanding Bigger and his aims in life. They come closest to representing for Bigger spiritual salvation. Bigger realizes that they are the last symbols of relatedness to which he clings as he stands in chaos desperately extending his hand into darkness hoping that someone will be waiting there to grasp his hand in return. The main conflict of the novel occurs between his need to accept them and his deepest experience as a Negro--his distrust of whites, his Negro nationalism.<sup>23</sup>

Perhaps Max's speech sums up Bigger's life quite appropriately:

This Negro boy's entire attitude toward life is a crime! The hate and fear which we have inspired in him, woven by our civilization into the very structure of his consciousness, into his blood and bones, into the hourly functioning of his personality, have become the justification of his existence.

Every time he comes in contact with us, he kills! It is a physiological and psychological reaction, embedded in his being. Every thought he thinks is potential murder. Excluded from, and unassimilated in our society, yet longing to gratify impulses akin to our own but denied the objects and channels evolved through long centuries for their social expression, every sunrise and sunset make him guilty of subversive actions. Every movement of his body is an unconscious protest. Every desire, every dream, no matter how intimate or personal, is a plot or a conspiracy. Every hope is a plan for insurrection. Every glance of his eye is a threat.<sup>24</sup>

In his grim thesis, Richard Wright--using much detail and symbolism which reflects his own personal experiences and viewpoints--implies that any black man or white man in the same environmental

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<sup>22</sup>Robert A Bone, The Negro Novel in America (New Haven, 1958), p. 149.

<sup>23</sup>Ibid.

<sup>24</sup>Wright, Native Son, pp. 335-36.

conditions as Bigger might travel the same path. Finally, Bigger must accept at the novel's end what life has made him. In the closing pages, he accepts being a murderer--his heritage, his identity. Although lacking the technical mastery of his protégé, Ralph Ellison, Wright made his thesis so captivating that his technical flaws are noticeable only in retrospect. Even then, they seem minor, for they are outweighed by the thematic merits of the novel.



### CHAPTER III

#### AN ANALYSIS OF INVISIBLE MAN

The title of Mr. Ellison's novel is appropriate because it expresses the novel's theme. "Ralph Ellison's invisible man speaks first of all for himself, a Negro whose career, because he is a Negro, has been a search for a primary, existential sense of himself."<sup>1</sup> The hero, a black youth, travels through the novel's pages from naiveté in the South to awareness and self-definition in the North. He is invisible because white people see him with a distorted vision. Any attempt he makes to refute the vision is quenched by white violence. Yet, under tyranny and suppression, there are a few individuals who, like the hero, achieve self-assertion.

Yet, Ralph Ellison's novel is not one concerning just Negro life, although the main characters and plot concern primarily Negroes. The novel, like Richard Wright's Native Son, transcends being just a novel that indicts white society for its treatment of Negroes. The novel explores various situations whereby the hero tries to assert his self and his individuality. In searching for it, the hero destroys in the process the illusions and distortions that many have of him and Negro life. He destroys much that is part of the American tradition, the American dream. Although many of his endeavors end in violence, the hero comes to a full realization of his own existential definition of life by the novel's end. "He is removed into nightmare not because it may be that in the ordinary ways of being, men are inevitably determined,

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<sup>1</sup>Klein, p. 249.

nor because there may be no such thing as an existential self, nor because the gratuitous act may be really gratuitous and without sense except in dreams."<sup>2</sup> He is removed into nightmare because in achieving his individuality, he fails to realize until the novel's completion just how much freedom for self-definition he has. By the end of the novel, the hero asserts his self, but he does it subversively. Step-by-step, he learns to project a false delusive image of himself.

He brings his grandfather's curse (the mask of appearance) upon white people. To clarify the hero's invisibility, the novel explores traditional history, racial taboos, and sociological and psychological rituals in the arena of black and white life. "Invisible Man, then, is a stubborn affirmation of the worth and dignity of the individual in the face of forces which conspire to render him invisible. The novel is dedicated in spirit to the suffering, mangled, helpless, plucked victim of Authority, whose only defense against power is his own humanity."<sup>3</sup>

Basically, the novel travels a circular path. From the ritual of the hero's initiation, a test of his masculinity, to his final awareness of himself and white society, the hero's progression is very much like that of a boomerang. The end of the novel is really the beginning. Each episode serves to reinforce the hero's invisibility. Invisibility becomes a resounding metaphor throughout the novel.

An understanding of jazz composition yields a vital key to the reader's full understanding of the novel. "Every jazz musician must strike a balance between tradition and experimentation, for 'jazz finds its

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<sup>2</sup>Ibid.

<sup>3</sup>Bone, The Negro Novel in America, p. 197.

very life in an endless improvisation upon traditional materials.' It follows that no jazzman is free to repudiate the past. The jam session, where he must display a knowledge of traditional techniques, will see to that. He must master 'the intonations, the mute work, the manipulation of timbre, the body of traditional styles' before he can presume to speak in his own voice. 'The path, in short, to self-expression lies through what is given, what has gone before.'<sup>4</sup> Mr. Ellison, like the jazzmen, relies on the past. However, it is a particular past of Negro folk tradition. He combined this tradition with the wider literary culture which exposed him to an extremely wide range of literary genres, styles, and techniques of authors.<sup>5</sup> He " . . . appropriates folkloristic elements from Negro culture, embroiders on them, adapts them to his literary aims, and lifts them to a level of conscious art."<sup>6</sup>

The struggle the jazzman experiences is the same as the hero's struggle in the novel. Both are struggles for identification. Within the confinements of the melodic patterns of a score, the jazzman expresses his freedom of improvisation. Through his instrument he expresses his uniqueness of the melody yet conforms to and underscores the melodic pattern in harmony with the other instruments. The struggle is basically one of yoking together opposites. Within confinement, there is freedom of expression, yet this freedom is expressed so subtly that it blends into the whole. When a jazzman plays the blues, he is expressing a haunting tension " . . . between circumstance and possibility. The firm

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<sup>4</sup>Robert A Bone, "Ralph Ellison and The Uses of Imagination," Herbert Hill, ed., Anger, and Beyond (New York, 1966), p. 90.

<sup>5</sup>Ibid.

<sup>6</sup>Ibid.

reality that gives them [blues] birth bespeaks the limits and restrictions, the barriers and thwartings, which the universe opposes to the human will. But the tough response that is the blues bespeaks a moral courage, a spiritual freedom, a sense of human possibility, which more than balances the scales."<sup>7</sup>

Ellison's hero becomes more than just a protest character. A protest character in a protest novel merely manifests his condition. He is simply the victim of agents outside his control. Therefore, any existential definition of life is futile. But Ellison's hero is an adventurer. He, by realizing his potential in spite of society's attempt to define his limitations, becomes a picaresque hero full of the grandeur of a flesh-and-blood man who tests " . . . the complexity of the known and the given."<sup>8</sup>

Mr. Ellison further says that the blues is basically an attempt to neutralize one emotion with its opposite. "It is not a question of laughing away one's troubles in any superficial sense, but of gazing steadily at pain while perceiving its comic aspect. Ellison regards this tragicomic sensibility as the most precious feature of his Negro heritage. From it stems his lyrical intensity and the complex interplay of tragic and comic elements which is the distinguishing mark of his fiction."<sup>9</sup>

The hero is first a high-school student in a Southern town, next a college student, then a laborer in a Northern factory, a leader in

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<sup>7</sup>Ibid., p. 91.

<sup>8</sup>Ibid., p. 92.

<sup>9</sup>Ibid., p. 93.

the Brotherhood (the Communist Party), and finally, a dweller in an underground cavern beneath the earth. In the beginning of the novel, he claims that he must have light. Without it, he believes he is not only invisible but without form. He must have illumination if he is to define and give dimension to himself.

Between his grandfather's curse at the beginning and his acceptance of it in the Epilogue, the hero explores the relationships between Negroes and whites. The relationship between these two racial groups, although it may seem superficially complacent, is extremely charged with energy. The slightest provocation may cause extreme violence between them.

In high school the unnamed hero is valedictorian of his class. He is asked to give a speech for a white audience composed of the prominent male citizens of a small Southern town. The hero decides to speak on humility and progress for Negroes who feel themselves part of the American society. However, when he arrives, he is virtually stripped nude, made to wear boxing shorts, and taken to the front of the auditorium. Here, he is joined by other black youths and made to watch the provocative movements of a nude white woman. The all-male audience taunts him and the other youths if they do or do not look at the nude woman. One of the boys cannot control the stiffening of his sex organ. He knows that discovery of his enlarged penis protruding within his boxing shorts would bring violent repercussions upon him, so he tries desperately to hide his erection with his boxing gloves. His sexual prowess is encouraged, yet in its peak of intensity, the white audience forces this boy to suppress his normal responses. He is forced to yoke

together opposing emotions which leave him numb and neutralized. In this state, the youth suffers the pain of the blues, yet he manages to endure the first of many initiation rites into life.

Later, the hero is told that he must grapple with the other boys for money placed on an electrified rug. As the boys battle each other for possession of the money, they are shocked. The hero realizes, amid the turmoil, that the white audience is forcing Negroes to destroy themselves for the audience's perverted sense of entertainment. This is the same desire that caused the audience to force these boys to fight each other in the boxing match.

Benumbed by the entire experience, his first with white people per se, the hero accidentally says "social equality" instead of "social responsibility."<sup>10</sup> For a terrible instant, the silence of the room underscores the violence that is about to erupt from the audience. "Social equality" implies equality where Negroes and whites enjoy the same privileges regardless of color of skin pigment. This, according to white opinion, is deadly for white society. Cultural and historical patterns distinguishing the two races would be destroyed and obliterated much to the disadvantage of the white race. Therefore, the hero is forced to quickly correct his error by saying "social responsibility" which is ambiguous. The statement is a relative one depending upon the interpretation of the individual involved. Although the hero sees "social responsibility" as his duty to progress toward the standards of white society and eventually, to be equal, the white audience sees his "social responsibility" as his remaining on an inferior social stratum and

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<sup>10</sup>Ellison, Invisible Man, pp. 24-25.

upholding the illusions of the American dream. He is forced to assume the ambivalence inherent in Negro life.

- At college, Ellison's hero is a very intelligent and eager youth, and is among the top students. As a result, he is given a job as chauffeur for a visiting Northern trustee, Mr. Norton, who feels that his destiny is reflected in the Negroes who attend the college. Indeed it is, for the college is another means of continuing Mr. Norton's dream. The Negroes there manifest the dream. The Negroes support the dream that America's political and social system is without blemish. However, the hero inadvertently destroys the illusion. He makes Norton's destiny a darkling plain because he undercuts Norton's illusory view of the Negro condition.

As chauffeur, the hero takes Mr. Norton to a crude, rustic shack outside the limits of the college and its campus. There, Jim Trueblood, being true to his blood and to nature, reveals an incestuous story concerning a very eventful night when he had sexual intercourse with his daughter. Mr. Norton, like other white males, experiences Trueblood's sexual prowess vicariously. But unlike the commencement audience, Norton makes no attempt to emasculate Jim as the audience did the hero and the other black boys in the auditorium. However, Trueblood has already been emasculated literally by his wife's stroke of the axe. After his sin, Trueblood waits, perhaps like Oedipus, for the hand of punishment--death.<sup>11</sup> At the last moment, he decides that he is not quite ready for the grave. Having removed himself from society into exile, his "true blood" tells

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<sup>11</sup>Selma Fraiberg, "Two Modern Incest Stories," Partisan Review, Nos. 5 & 6 (1961), p. 657.

him to return home to give chaos order and to make his loss gain and assertion. Here again is an echoing of Ralph Ellison's blues.

Jim has faced reality--his chaos--and prospered by committing an incestuous rape. Previously, Mr. Norton described his own daughter in a manner that makes the reader wonder if he does not want to participate actively in the same experience physically that he experiences vicariously through Trueblood. Mr. Norton, after demanding to hear Trueblood's story and marvelling that Trueblood has sinned and survived--endured--leaves in a state of shock. Norton is affected because ". . . the myth reversal also functions by removing the name of chaos from what convention calls sin and attaching it to the convention itself."<sup>12</sup>

Before returning to college, the hero knows that he must do something for Mr. Norton, who has suffered a heart attack after hearing Trueblood's story. The hero knows that he cannot return Mr. Norton to the college in his present condition. Therefore, the unnamed hero takes Mr. Norton to a local saloon which this day is entertaining Negro veterans from a local madhouse. While the hero and Mr. Norton are there, a riot erupts. The attendant, Supercargo, a large black man who suppresses the actions of the Negroes as the superego of the mind suppresses negative psychic impulses, is brutally kicked and beaten by the Negro customers. Free of any restrictions at last, they go on a rampage. Mr. Norton finds himself the victim of a nightmare. However, the hero is able to get Mr. Norton upstairs to safety. There a Negro veteran with medical experience administers to Norton's wounds.

When Norton awakes, the Negro veteran plays a cat-and-mouse game

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<sup>12</sup>Raymond M. Olderman, "Blues and Invisible Man," Wisconsin Studies in Contemporary Literature, Vol. VII (June, 1966), p. 146.



with him. He bluntly tells Norton the truth of Negro-white relationships. Thus, he destroys the illusions Norton has concerning such relationships. The Negro veteran is a spokesman for all those Negroes downstairs in the Golden Day.

They are emblematic of the repressed Negro middle class; their spokesman is a former surgeon who was dragged from his home and beaten with whips for saving a human life. It is thus (Trueblood-in-reverse) that the white South rewards genuine accomplishment.

In the light--or perhaps one should say the darkness--of Trueblood and the Golden Day, the irony of the Southern Negro college, the irony of its very existence, is revealed. Its function is not to educate but to indoctrinate with a myth. This is why the vet calls Norton "a trustee of consciousness," "a lyncher of souls."<sup>13</sup>

By driving Mr. Norton beyond the college campus, the hero has betrayed a myth by exposing Norton to truth and thus initiating chaos. When the pragmatic Dr. Bledsoe, President of the Negro college, hears of this incident, he has the hero expelled. Bledsoe is a reincarnation of the hero's grandfather, but in a different form. Bledsoe does overcome white people with yeses, but not in asserting his own individuality and self. Instead, he overcomes them to obtain a false sense of power over black people. "He possesses power without dignity, though the trappings of dignity are in ample evidence. It is the only kind of power available to the black man in the Deep South."<sup>14</sup>

Like all black men disillusioned with Southern society, the hero migrates to the North. He obtains a laboring job in a paint factory. There he finds that because he is a Negro, he is a scab, and as such a catalyst again to violence. The hero has visited, previously, influential

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<sup>13</sup> Bone, The Negro Novel in America, p. 205.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid., p. 206.

persons upon the recommendation of Dr. Bledsoe, who claimed that he would still try to help the hero obtain jobs in spite of the Norton incident. However, the hero learns in an interview with a Mr. Emerson that Dr. Bledsoe has betrayed him. The letter of recommendation says in effect to "keep this nigger running." Mr. Emerson hates the tyrannical rule of people like his father and Dr. Bledsoe, who literally keep people running. He pities the hero and tries to help him see reality.

However, the hero thinks, most impudently, that life will be different at the paint factory because Dr. Bledsoe and his letters of recommendation will have no negative influences there. Little does he realize that the paint factory in the North--in fact, most industries in the North--represent only the promise of economic equality to the great masses of Negroes from the South. Yet, the depiction of industrial exploitation goes further than that of race. It also pertains to particular classes. In industry, the social elite control the businesses and monopolize power while those on the bottom of the class hierarchy must labor and be exploited.

Ellison's revival of the picaresque reflects his group's belated access to the basic conditions of bourgeois existence. These consist economically of the freedom to rise and psychologically of "the right and opportunity to dilate, deepen, and enrich sensibility." The Southern Negro who was taught from childhood to "know his place" is denied these basic freedoms. He is deprived of individuality as thoroughly as any serf: "The pre-individualistic black community discourages individuality out of self-defense. . . . Within the ambit of the black family this takes the form of training the child away from curiosity and adventure, against reaching out for those activities lying beyond the borders."<sup>15</sup>

The unnamed hero is hired because he, as a Negro, will not have

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<sup>15</sup>Bone, "Ralph Ellison and The Uses of Imagination," p. 95.

to be paid regular wages. The fellow union members within the paint factory want to unionize him in order to use him as a tool against the company's demand for lower wages. Each episode, although different, underscores the hero's invisibility due to his blackness. Each episode shows the violence inherent in the social condition wherein the Negro may bring repercussions upon himself by asserting his individuality. Hired by Liberty Paints, the hero is ordered to put ten drops of "black dope" into containers of "optic" white paint. This act makes the white paint seem whiter as the ten boys earlier in the auditorium made the white audience seem whiter and better by comparison.

Mr. Ellison is saying symbolically that the Negro ("black dope") helps to create the illusions that perfection is the mainstay of America. The white society absorbs the Negro's vitality in such a manner that while it may be there, it is never seen.

When the vat runs dry, the hero is told to try one of seven (lucky seven?) vats. Again, the hero, through his naïveté, makes the wrong choice. The vat he chooses contains a black substance, paint remover, which when added to the white paint, makes it appear gray. The paint is not completely pure now. This episode parallels previous ones where the hero inadvertently and unconsciously unmasked illusions and showed the truth symbolically. Although he does not comprehend the full implication of his actions thus far, the hero is becoming more and more cognizant of the symbolic implications of his actions. Left on his own, he has once again asserted his individuality, although he does so inadvertently and at least in part unconsciously.

However, what individuality he asserts is suppressed when

Mr. Kimbro, his boss, orders him to rectify the error. Therefore, the hero experiments with alternatives to correcting the existing buckets of paint rather than making new ones. He soon discovers that by adding " . . . the black drops to the paint which already contains the black remover, though the mixture appears gray to him, it passes for white in Kimbro's eyes. This is, in symbol, the role of subterfuge and infiltration--his grandfather's legacy and curse."<sup>16</sup> However, the hero has not reached the point where he comprehends the full significance of his actions.

Finally, he is sent into the basement to help Lucius (the Devil?) Brockway. Lucius, like Bledsoe, is carrying on his own particular subterfuge. He has made himself such an asset to Liberty Paints that his absence would cause chaos. As a symbol, Lucius plays the traditional role of the Negro now subjected not to white Southern prejudices but Northern ones. His subterfuge, like Bledsoe's, is for personal security at the cost of that of his fellow Negro friends. It is not surprising that he is justifiably apprehensive of the hero. Later, he misconstrues certain circumstances--the hero's being with white union members--as proof of the hero's attempt to get him banished from Liberty Paints. He initiates a fight with the hero which ends in a violent explosion because the vat machines are left completely unattended. Again, Negroes, left to themselves, will release their potency. They will initiate chaos in attempting to assert themselves.

In the explosion the hero is injured and placed in a glass box (a coffin?) which will presumably cure him. Ironically, the box is

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<sup>16</sup>Jonathan Baumbach, "Nightmare of A Native Son," The Landscape of Nightmare (New York, 1965), p. 75.

another method of emasculating and neutralizing him. In a sense, again white society attempts to create a docile, submissive Negro who is in a living death. The electrified coffin-like box and shocks surrealistically rendered recall the electrification of the rug in the auditorium scene at the beginning of the book. On the surface a comic scene, "in its implications (lobotomy and castration) it is a singularly unpleasant nightmare."<sup>17</sup>

As in the preceding scenes, the hero's survival at the hospital is symbolic of the protagonist's rebirth with a new image of himself after each succeeding wave of events which change and modify him. Such episodes prepare the reader for the following episodes--the Brotherhood and life in the underground cavern. The hero constantly ponders his identity in relation to his immediate environment. Without consciously realizing it, the hero has been involved in violent circumstances which demand that he know himself in order to survive. So far, he has failed to truly know himself, and his survival has been achieved only accidentally through the blindness of his antagonists who failed to see him realistically. He still fluctuates in a chaos where he can establish no order.

Until now, he has felt alienated from other Negroes, their customs, manners, and habits. They have presented a reality that he has not known--thanks to the seclusion of that Southern college he attended earlier. Still numbed by the incident at the factory hospital, the hero leaves the hospital and encounters an elderly Negro couple being evicted from their apartment because they cannot pay their rent. Obviously,

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<sup>17</sup>Ibid.

they represent the dispossessed people. In an emotional outburst, the hero incites the Negro crowd gathered at the scene to riot in defense of the elderly couple. Members of the Brotherhood see him and think that he could be of service to their organization. They offer him false friendship and compassion. Ellison's protagonist thinks he has at last found himself--his identity. But he learns later--to his horror--that as an agent, he is a tool used to incite Negroes to violence only to leave them prey to their own misdirected violence which becomes self-destructive and causes repercussions toward Negroes by white society.

As part of the Brotherhood, the hero learns that he must reject his past, especially the warm hospitality of Mary, his landlady in Harlem. Mary (Virgin Mary?) has been a second mother and a guiding light for the hero in an alien environment. It is she who gives him the courage to achieve his potential (complete self-identity) in life. Like Christ, he seeks his destiny amid the trials and tribulations that await him. "Mary is a reminder of his past, stable and comforting, but she demands some notable achievement that will benefit the race. As Mary's son he must seek his appointed role. Now he can accept his true identity symbolized in the acceptance of Negro food. . . . This realization, in turn, enables him to deliver the eviction speech (in echo of Antony's address to the Romans) that wins him a position in the Brotherhood."<sup>18</sup>

A member of the Brotherhood, the hero is asked to speak on the Negro problem at a rally. The core of his speech is blindness, and it becomes pertinent to the hero's invisibility incorporated within the imagery of black and white which echoes throughout Ellison's novel. In

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<sup>18</sup>Ellen Horowitz, "Ralph Ellison," Richard Kostelanetz, ed., On Contemporary Literature (New York, 1964), p. 341.

the arena of light, the hero is blinded by the light (symbolic of white society) and sees only a black pit. The hero tells the audience that under the Brotherhood's leadership the one-eyed men will join, and the blind will lead the blind. The irony of the statement is no less emphatic than the speech Reverend Homer (Blind Homer?) Barbee gave to the hero the night of his college graduation. Reverend Barbee told the Negro audience to cast down their buckets into society and reap the harvest of plenty. Based upon Booker T. Washington sentiments, the basic premise of the speech was completely unrealistic in view of the Negro's role in American society. Reverend Barbee was mentally blind, a fact emphasized symbolically by his being physically blind.

Like Barbee, the hero is blind. Little does he realize that he is just a stereotype not only to the audience per se but to the Brotherhood and its leader, Brother Jack. It is not until a later meeting with Jack that the hero discovers that Jack has only one eye. The hero has spoken in his speech far greater truth than he knows. The Brotherhood promulgates blindness. After finishing the speech, the hero claims that next time he will wear glasses because the light in the auditorium was so blinding. Unlike Reverend Barbee, who wore dark glasses which hid his physical blindness--symbolically, his mental imperception of reality--the hero will wear them so that he can see reality and manipulate it by assuming various identities. In short, his glasses will become a mask.

Meanwhile, a favorite of the Brotherhood, he works very closely with a young, black Negro named Tod Clifton. It seems that Clifton is youth coordinator for the Brotherhood. He has had several encounters with Ras (Race?), the destroyer. The hero, while with Clifton one night,

encounters Ras. In a violent fight, the hero stops Ras from killing Clifton. Ras, realizing that Negroes destroy their own potency for the white man's benefit, pleads with Clifton to leave the Brotherhood and join him. Verbalizing Marcus Garvey's racism, Ras tells Clifton that the latter is black and beautiful. In Africa, Ras says such qualities would have made Clifton a prince. But Clifton rejects such propaganda and warns Ras that any further encounters will initiate further violence.

Clifton is sympathetic to Ras's motives, but he is nevertheless too civilized to accept his methods. The Brotherhood, then, with its cant of "historic necessity," represents to Clifton the enlightened alternative to racist violence through which the Negro can effect his protest. Entrapped by the Brotherhood through the commitment imposed by his integrity, Clifton becomes even more than the narrator, a victim of the Brotherhood's betrayal. Like the implicit suicide of Conrad's Lord Jim, Clifton's death (he provokes a policeman into shooting him) is a sacrifice to a culpability too egregious to be redeemed in any other way, and, at the same time, a final if gratuitous act of heroism. In giving himself up to be murdered, Clifton takes on the whole responsibility for the Brotherhood's betrayal of the Negro.<sup>19</sup>

Because Clifton was an extremely likeable fellow and an admirable worker in the Brotherhood, the hero thinks nothing would be more notable for the Brotherhood than to honor one of its dead. In sponsoring Clifton's funeral, the protagonist thinks the Brotherhood can firmly establish itself as a friend of the Negro. On his own initiative, the hero arranges Tod Clifton's funeral much to the dissatisfaction of the Brotherhood. They claim that the hero is asserting his own individuality to the detriment of the Brotherhood. Slowly, the hero begins to realize how blind the organization is to the real problems of the Negro and his striving for individuality. Realizing that Clifton had to "plunge" outside history

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<sup>19</sup>Baumbach, p. 80.



in order to find his identity, the hero ponders to himself the significance of Clifton's death.

The hero reflects upon his actions toward Clifton when the latter had broken with the party. The hero had found Clifton one day selling dancing puppets which seemed nothing more than Sambo dolls. The hero recalled the close similarity between these dolls and the grinning "nigger" bank he had when he stayed at Mary's house. Both objects remind the hero of his past and his heritage which have haunted and mocked him up until the present. They are parts of his life that he wants to forget but cannot. Whether he likes it or not, he must endure his past.

Angry when he saw Clifton selling the dolls, the hero ". . . spat at one of Clifton's dancing puppets, knocking it 'lifeless,' performing symbolically what the policeman does actually--the murder of Clifton. When the hero knocks over the doll, an onlooker laughs at what he thinks is the likeness between the spitter and the spat-on doll. Just as Clifton in selling the obscene doll has been mocking himself, the hero in spitting at the doll has been attacking himself as well as Clifton, though without benefit of awareness."<sup>20</sup>

The accumulative effect of the Brotherhood's betrayal and his own feelings of guilt about Clifton weigh heavily on the hero as he walks the streets. Inadvertently, he reads a handbill lying on the street and goes to hear a Reverend Rinehart (rind--the superficial covering; heart--the soul of the individual?).

Rinehart is what his [the hero's] history comes to, and he is its hero. He is the climax of the progress up from slavery. Chaos is his freedom. He moves easily in it. He secures his living from it, and if he has been

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<sup>20</sup>Ibid., p. 82.

condemned to it, he takes from it also the implements of his revenge. He has made chaos a base of political action. He is a thief, a rascal, an underground man engaged in the subversion of society. Like Melville's hero, he undermines confidence, and thereby the very foundation of society.<sup>21</sup>

After being mistaken for Rinehart because of his appearance, especially his dark glasses, the hero finally sees himself realistically in relation to society at large. In seeing Rinehart's possibilities, the hero sees his own possibilities. Rinehart, the preacher in the church, hustler on the street, and gambler in the clubs, appears differently in varying circumstances and conditions. Through the limitless range of personalities, Rinehart does secure and control his freedom (self-assertion) amid chaos. The hero realizes that he, too, can be a Rinehart, an invisible man--seen and not seen.

Against a surrealist and distorted version of the Harlem riots which occurred during August of 1943, the hero employs his Rinehartism, his disguise--dark glasses, big smile, and zoot suit. With it, he appears neutral and takes on characteristics depending upon the people he encounters and their apprehension of him. However, during the riot he loses his disguise. Without it, he encounters Ras and his followers and is momentarily defenseless before them. The protagonist pleads with them to stop the rioting and realize that they are invisible men used as pawns to destroy their own potency. However, the crowd does not heed him. Ironically, although the hero and Ras realize that they are destroying themselves--in a sense, they are helpless victims--neither can successfully countermand the riot scene.

Infuriated, Ras is determined to kill Ellison's invisible hero.

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<sup>21</sup>Klein, pp. 260-61.

But the protagonist eludes him by fleeing into a looted store. Ras and his followers pursue the hero, but he escapes them by fleeing out of the back door of the store and hiding behind some shrubbery. There, he overhears two men discussing Ras. They laugh and say Ras is a crazed lunatic. The hero realizes the depth of blindness within human individuals. These Negroes--perhaps the bitter irony of it all--fail to grasp the true significance of their culture, their history, and particularly of the riot now in progress. To them, the riot is simply an opportunity to get some merchandise that they need or can sell to obtain money. They fail to see that the riot is a war for the humanity of the individual. The hero, alone and cold, realizes that white society has known this all along. That is why they encouraged race leaders to blindly lead the blind. This way if white society cannot suppress Negroes overtly themselves, they can do it indirectly through blind, stupid race leaders who in their blindness lead their own people to slaughter.

When the hero tried to capture the truth of reality through overt physical action, he was suppressed by white society (the best example is the Brotherhood scene following Clifton's funeral). He was suppressed because through such overt action--the goal being to achieve emancipation and humanity--the hero was the greatest threat to the lie of white society's American dream. But now having found his self identity, the hero realizes that he must play the game by the rules of the players who created it. He must be a Rinehart; he must assert himself--but it must be done subversively. Feeling completely alone and isolated from the world, he decides to return to Mary's house. There he can perhaps achieve a new perspective, purpose, and direction in keeping with his

newly achieved freedom. However, he never reaches Mary's house. On the way, he encounters two white policemen who approach him. The hero flees them in terror, and they pursue. However, he escapes when he falls accidentally into an open manhole. Underneath the ground, the hero feels that he is indeed literally and symbolically out of the world, isolated, and invisible in the darkness. After a series of boomeranging reversals, he is now an underground man. When he thought he was moving upward in his psychological realization of himself, he was moving down literally into the underworld--that which is underneath the mainstream of life--to become an invisible man.

Such a movement had already been underscored in previous scenes from the hero's job in the paint factory, where he is an underground man with Lucius Brockway, to his meeting of Sibyl at a Communist gathering at the Onthonian. Even the Communist organization itself is an underground one. The hero has been out in life repeatedly, been frustrated beyond endurance, and at last descends into his underground hibernation, perhaps to emerge more capable of surviving and changing in his environment. With the reversal of his life, he becomes metaphysical. He is an invisible man without form in the world. His underground existence, illustrated in the Rinehart episode, proves that he does have an identity and a place. Ironically, it is in the underground. He gives chaos definition and order by tapping heat and light from Monopolated Light & Power. The hero converts all of his losses into assertion and gain. At last he accepts his blackness and uses it in all its advantages to revenge himself upon society by asserting his individuality. The "blackness of blackness," the text offered by Reverend Barbee

earlier is the basic premise of life the hero has had to learn in effect. Blackness is the cause of his persecution, all the totems and taboos that the old Mr. Emersons of this world read about have been thrust upon him. His adventures in lightness and darkness have amounted to the Manicheism of the American racial scene.<sup>22</sup> They have provided him with the lesson that he is Satan, like the Satan of Milton's Paradise Lost, whose residence in the underground is really a residence in chaos. There he must be as lawless and as cunning as Dionysus when it becomes advantageous.

In the manhole he is the embodiment of psychological conflicts in the darkness and the negative hidden just behind the consciousness, felt but not seen, the echo of the "blues." His presence is a metaphysical, twisting force that disrupts the illusions of American history, tradition, and ritual. His life is a boomerang which scatters through the world's history and comes back again and again. His end is his embrace of his own diabolism. Diabolism is his politics, identity, and history in one. His life must be one of "treason, violence, and revenge."<sup>23</sup>

In the manhole he falls asleep and dreams of Jack, Emerson, and Bledsoe. They demand that he return to them, and when he refuses, they castrate him. They throw his bloody sex organs over a bridge, but they catch on the apex of the giant bridge. Slowly, the bridge metamorphoses into a walking robot clanking the death knell of a false American history. The hero cries out realizing that the bridge is clanking his own destruction also.

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<sup>22</sup>Ibid., p. 262.

<sup>23</sup>Ibid., p. 263.

In short, Invisible Man is a union of the chief elements of Negro folk culture (blues, jazz, religion, folk spirituals and folk tales). Mr. Ellison has also borrowed from noted white authors like Joyce and Eliot and their themes dealing with Western culture.<sup>24</sup> Like them, Ellison was and is concerned with tradition, myth, and taboos, ranging from the pagan to the sophisticated elements in society. Like Eliot, Ellison is concerned with the use of pagan ritual as an objective correlative for his experience. He may also have been influenced in part by Joyce in the usage of the initiatory experience as related to the sense of the artist as exile. His hero, like Stephen Dedalus, is the rejected, isolated figure on the border of human activity who must pass through several stages and survive various tests before winning the freedom to create. He is the modern hero, the alienated passive hero in a non-personalized world who must become an exile first in order to find himself.

Like Joyce, Ellison seems to have an almost paranoid sense of deception and betrayal. The hero is like a bird in flight. For both authors, flight is underscored. Flight is equated with Dedalus, the mythic figure of the artist whose craftsmanship is potentially the source of his freedom. The same is true of the hero in Invisible Man.

The spirit of the novel is that of the blues, which Ellison has elsewhere defined as the impulse to keep painful details alive, to rub the sore, and to transcend it not only by philosophy but by obtaining from it near-tragic, near-comic lyricism. In what almost becomes Greek

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<sup>24</sup>Bone, "Ralph Ellison and The Uses of Imagination," pp. 96-97.

tragedy, Ellison explores what it means to be Negro. The half-tragic, half-comic quality of the blues is reflected in the tone of the emotional ambivalence in the novel. Through his hero's varied roles or identities, the author has acted out the opposing strategies offered the Negro. The new vision born out of the hero's conflict seems to be an attitude of comic ambivalence that allows him to embrace the complexity. The hero emerges neither black nor white, but invisible, in a world that is a mixture of extremes.

## CHAPTER IV

### A COMPARISON OF NATIVE SON AND INVISIBLE MAN

The idea of a protagonist who is virtually invisible and who seeks to establish an identity was not completely original with either Wright or Ellison. Previous to writing Native Son, Wright had read Dostoevski's Notes From Underground whose hero writes of his alienation from nineteenth century Russian society. "For Dostoevsky [sic], the tawdry liberalism that resulted from these ideas [nineteenth century philosophy which said man could perfect himself and achieve a utopia on earth] led inevitably to the most barren form of utopian socialism founded on man's reason, on his ostensible goodness and nobility."<sup>1</sup>

Dostoevski's hero is discouraged with man, who has become a human vegetable feeling smug and secure in his environment. In short, man sought only the mechanical perfection of reality in the hope that this would give him a world with a rational meaning. The Russian author felt that man is not basically good nor does he seek to obtain utopia for himself and his brothers. Dostoevski felt that man is corruptible and will take any means necessary to exploit and subject others to slavery. This is the theme Dostoevski's hero in Notes From Underground reiterates again and again.

The protagonist manifests the Russian author's belief that actuality takes place in the mind (psyche) not outside it in the tangible, external environment. For the hero, reality is the emotional screen

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<sup>1</sup>Ralph E. Matlaw, trans., Fyodor Dostoevsky, Notes From Underground (New York, 1960), p. xii.



through which external objects are perceived. Therefore, the protagonist, "striving for a vague ideal, surrendering to pleasant meditations and feelings, seeking refuge in a supersensory realm . . . [achieves] the blunting of immediate reactions and responses to actual things, and escapes into daydreaming, meditation, fancy, rejects the artificial, stoic reality in favor of reactionary change in order to establish his identity."<sup>2</sup> "The narrator's desperate solution is to refine the realization of [his] despicability to such a pitch that the anguish it induces becomes an outright pleasure."<sup>3</sup> The only solution of the hero's dilemma is the Christian love of Liza that reconciles him to the abuses of his society. But even Liza's Christian love cannot help the hero overcome the abuses of reality. ". . . for the narrator, petty motives of vanity, self-revenge, or psychological illness, coupled with the moral illness that, for all its rejection of reason, cannot in the final analysis accept the non-rational theory of religion, all these things now assert themselves and render Liza's offer unacceptable."<sup>4</sup> The hero accepts his anguish, finds some pleasure in it, and desires to be an individual always in a state of change. He never accepts stoicism. This is the only way that he can find his identity and attempt to give his world meaning and purpose as do Wright's and Ellison's protagonists.

Wright borrowed the idea of a hero in flight from society from Dostoevski. In a short story entitled "The Man Who Lived Underground" (1937), the hero is a black man who has eluded the police because he

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<sup>2</sup>Ibid., p. xiv.

<sup>3</sup>Ibid., p. xv.

<sup>4</sup>Ibid., p. xix.

shot a man. Having crawled into a manhole, he finds an underground cavern. From this location, he is able to survive by pillaging and looting the neighboring buildings: a church, a store, and a bank. Soon, his underground existence becomes a game. He likes committing robberies while remaining undiscovered. He is pleased that his actions leave a visible effect upon conditions and people. By attempting to give his life meaning, by illuminating his underground cavern with stolen gems so that their light will give him form, the hero attempts to establish his identity. The outside world does not define his reality so much as the hero himself. Like Dostoevski's hero, Wright's resists permanency by living existentially.

However, Wright's conclusion differs from Dostoevski's. The Russian author presented a hero who accepted his underground existence and wanted to remain a permanent recluse from society unless it developed into one that lived ideas (mental reality) rather than illusions of tangible concepts (laws and physical properties of objects which can be seen and supposedly given rationality) and developed a dissatisfaction with permanency. In contrast, Wright's hero tires of his existence because he cannot remain indefinitely alienated from the world.

Therefore, the protagonist of "The Man Who Lived Underground" goes to the police station and turns himself in to the police. When they hear of his experiences, they think him completely neurotic. But the hero recounts details which make it quite clear that he is the murderer who shot and killed a man. Meanwhile, an innocent man has been convicted of the crime and executed. Realizing that this black hero could turn their world into chaos, the police jokingly ask the protagonist

to show them where he has been hiding underneath the ground. When they arrive at the manhole and the hero descends the ladder into it, one of the policemen shoots him and lets his body fall into the sewer to be washed away into oblivion. When the hero stripped away his mask (presented his symbolic habitation underground), he made himself vulnerable to destruction by white society.

However, Wright felt that this early endeavor seemed too narrow to contain the thematic possibilities he desired. This short story simply attacked white society in terms of only Negro-white relationships without accompanying philosophical, psychological, or socio-political explorations of society like those Dostoevski had presented. The darkling conclusion emanating from the short story was that black man who, like the hero, ceased asserting their individuality subversively (hidden from the mainstream of life) made themselves vulnerable to white destruction. Such a conclusion failed to extend beyond just a specific incident of race.

Therefore, when Wright began Native Son, he was determined to broaden his theme. Like Dostoevski, Wright did make his hero a recluse from society because the hero (Bigger Thomas) cannot accept society and its rejection of folk culture, religion, or socio-political trends inherent in Negro-white conflicts. Although Bigger does have the consolation temporarily of various alternatives to life in the underground, he rejects them--living at home, being a chauffeur in the Dalton home, living in jail hoping that Max can free him--because such conditions will not allow him to relate to society in a meaningful manner. These alternatives demand an obedience and permanency which limit and deny Bigger

change and possibility of achieving self-realization. Like Dostoevski's hero, Bigger accepts the moral consequences of his actions, but Wright continues where Dostoevski stops.

Dostoevski's hero is really a reactionist of the intellect only. But Wright's protagonist reacts not so much of his intellect, although he certainly uses it, but through physical assertion and aggressiveness. When Bigger faces the possibility of a death sentence, he realizes that such a sentence will be made in blind white hatred and prejudice. The emphasis of the conclusion is made more vehement and more emphatic than in "The Man Who Lived Underground" or Dostoevski's Notes From Underground because in neither were the psychological realms of cause-effect presented realistically and in depth in the relationships of an outcast in opposition to society. Therefore, simply the implication--whether overt or subtle--that society is responsible for the hero's character is weak.

However limited the above works may be, they became models for Ralph Ellison's Invisible Man (1952). Although he had been led by Wright to Dostoevski's Notes From Underground, he found more impact and vitality in Wright's technique and manner of expression than in Dostoevski's.

The direct influence of Wright's works is quite apparent. Basically, the plot of Ellison's novel is that of "The Man Who Lived Underground" with additions and modifications of plot and theme. The invisible hero through his actions becomes inadvertently a rebel against society. In effect, he carries out his grandfather's curse of subterfuge by undermining the white society and its illusions of reality concerning Negroes--a manifestation of Western culture. When the hero tries to

make himself known through overt action or verbalization of his needs and desires (those of all men), he is suppressed by white violence which creates for him a kinship with the heroes of Wright's two works. The invisible hero's progression leads him to existence in the underground cavern, but unlike the hero of "The Man Who Lived Underground," this protagonist progresses beyond just a literal death. Seeing the possibilities of self-definition as Bigger Thomas does in Native Son, Ellison's protagonist reflects upon the sum total of his life. After realizing that his self-definition lies in his being adaptable in life, he makes a firm commitment to emerge from his underground existence--his habitation--to play a vital role in society. As the hero says:

In going underground, I whipped it all except the mind, the mind. And the mind that has conceived a plan of living must never lose sight of the chaos against which that pattern was conceived. That goes for societies as well as for individuals. Thus, having tried to give pattern to the chaos which lives within the pattern of your certainties, I must come out, I must emerge.

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I'm shaking off the old skin and I'll leave it here in the hole. I'm coming out, no less invisible without it, but coming out nevertheless. And I suppose it's damn well time. Even hibernations can be overdone, come to think of it. Perhaps that's my greatest social crime, I've overstayed my hibernation, since there's a possibility that even an invisible man has a socially responsible role to play.<sup>5</sup>

There are additional similarities between Native Son and Invisible Man that demand some attention. Since Wright allowed Ellison to read the manuscripts of Eight Men and Native Son and led him to the best in literature, it is not surprising that there is a notable similarity between Wright's Bigger Thomas and Ellison's invisible hero. Each of the novelists presents an existential hero who is forced to define for himself his

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<sup>5</sup>Ellison, Invisible Man, pp. 438-39.

world of nightmare. He knows that his freedom is a relative one depending upon the definitions of life he will accept and use to give his life meaning and purpose. Both heroes are in conflict with white society whose influences are manifested even through certain Negro characters within the novels. Both protagonists manifest what Ellison defines as the "blues."

But Wright's protagonist is more aware of the realities of life. Having lived in the slums for nineteen years, Bigger has no illusions about life; to him life is a living Hell. The harsh and brutal conditions of Chicago's South Side have destroyed all but the strong who endured somehow. Bigger is one of them, and at best, he can only reflect upon the "ifs" of life. If he were white, he could realize the American dream or certainly the opportunity to attain it. Yet, as conditions exist, this would mean giving up his blackness, which he does not want to do. If social conditions were more liberal, he could still attain the American dream, although he is black.

Wright's hero knows that the American dream and its false promises are only illusions for him. Therefore, when the philanthropic Daltons give him a job as chauffeur for their daughter Mary, Bigger is extremely apprehensive. He knows that white people do not act with benevolence toward Negroes unless there is some motive other than kindness underlying the gratuitous act. Ghetto life has taught him this. It is not surprising that he is as cautious as the caged, sickly rat he killed at the beginning of Native Son.

However, from the depths of despair and frustration, Bigger clings to anything which offers the hope of change as manifested in his job as chauffeur. Bigger clings to this hope--this dream. According to the

Greeks, a man must have a dream or else he dies. But Bigger accidentally murders Mary Dalton, thus destroying his dream. In fear he realizes the consequence of his act--death.

When finally apprehended, he has committed another murder, this time of his Negro girlfriend, Bessie. Again Bigger is offered another hope, another pipe dream manifested in Max, the Communist lawyer who understands and defends the hero in court. Of all the people in his life, Bigger thinks Max the most capable of understanding him as an individual. However, Max fails at his task. At the end of the novel, Bigger faces a death sentence, or at least the implication. He is left to accept what his life has been and has made him. He realizes that he must die a murderer--the sum total of his life.

In contrast, Ellison's hero is less aware of the realities of life. This protagonist has had a good education in high school and college--at least from the Negro viewpoint. But at college, he has been thoroughly indoctrinated with the belief that all a Negro need do is cast down his bucket into white society to succeed in America.

If Wright's hero is destroyed by reality, Ellison's protagonist is almost destroyed by illusions. Ellison's invisible man is an educated Bigger Thomas who desperately clings to illusions because they are literally his reality. This statement seems like double-talk, but in fact it is very true. Although his life has been an illusion, to the hero it has been his reality. It has given him an identity. Now suddenly to have that illusion destroyed is to destroy the hero's sense of identity. His life as particular individual designated as invisible man or any other proper noun has no permanency. Each set of circumstances will give him a new identity. He will be living in chaos which will be a living death.

At first, Ellison's protagonist seems unreal when in view of his experiences which expose the illusions of his life as shams, he understands the implications of his experiences but is just as ready to accept the illusions of the next set of circumstances as real. Seemingly, he fails to make associations and connections between one set of circumstances and the next. There are two answers for such seeming naïveté.

First, the hero has been indoctrinated that the American scene is the best of all possible social conditions. If he encounters any discrepancy between his illusions and reality, he does not consider the universal implications such conditions may have for his identity. At best he considers only the literal implications of the illusions as they influence the reactions of those with whom he has daily contact. However, by the novel's end, the hero begins to fathom the underlying implications of discrepancies between the illusions and reality. Only then does he understand the universal implications of the various conditions in which he finds himself as he searches for identity.

Second, even though the hero begins making associations and he understands the discrepancies between illusions and reality, he still deludes himself. He does so unconsciously to thwart the threat of his search for identity ending in chaos. Without a stable identity, the hero cannot exist. When the totality of his life follows him into the underground sewer, he finds that it is necessary to tap light, heat, and power from Monopolated Light & Power to give himself form. At least through form he can establish at least a superficial identity.

The basic problem which both Bigger and the invisible man encounter is suppression and denial of their identity. Both heroes are



estranged from the religion and folk culture of their race because neither religion nor folk culture represents their reality--neither gives them a basis for establishing a meaningful identity. In the end, both see the promises and the potentials of the dominant white race, yet both know that they will be denied these goals because their skin is black.

Yet, this blackness becomes a protective shield which makes them invisible, seen but not seen, understood (stereotyped) yet not understood (not realized as individuals). From their experiences, both heroes learn to manipulate blacks and whites by their deceptions in being, yet not being--the appearance, not the reality. In short, the heroes act out the stereotyped images demanded by white society while they subversively assert their individuality. However, the denial of reality or the destruction of it, if overtly asserted, becomes a raw, infested sore which must be soothed. But in the process, they encounter resistance from American white society, north and south, and at times from other Negroes who feel themselves threatened by the protagonists' search for identity.

Historically, American white citizens denied black people their culture and foisted upon them unjustified myths. In their deeper consciousness, however, white people knew what they did was wrong. Out of guilt and shame, and out of envy and contempt for the mythical attributes of Negroes, white citizens abused the Negro. All the negative impulses white men hated within themselves were attributed to Negroes in such a manner and over such a period of time that even Negroes themselves accepted such concepts as true. As a result, Negroes developed their own

neurosis. They attempted to annihilate themselves, other Negroes, and finally, the white citizens whom they felt responsible for their condition.

One of the myths prevalent among whites stereotyped the Negro as socially inferior. As long as he remained at the bottom of the social hierarchy and did not try to climb the ladder to escape his stereotyped image (which humbled and humiliated him), he was tolerated within the community. Since the Negro's black skin was associated with evil, sin, inferiority, and sexual lust emanating from the Bible and God's condemnation of Ham, whites felt that they had a justifiable reason, based in part on religion, to support their certainty of racial superiority. Yet, this certainty was not a conclusion based on fact, but an emotional reaction to a particular race. So often, white people have had a psychological neurosis of their own which prevented them from pursuing a path of truth in their relationships with the Negro. Such blindness has prevented them from conceiving of the Negro as anything other than a particular stereotype. Unfortunately, many whites are not willing or able to admit the existence of such blindness.

Native Son and Invisible Man manifest four dominant themes of white exploitation of Negroes--the economic, the political, the religious, and the sexual--which are the results of historical conditions. In Native Son the following excerpts illustrate such themes.

Because they are black, Bigger and other Negroes are prime targets of economic exploitation. The moral and physical descriptions of the ghetto in Native Son testify to such a fact.

Directly below him . . . through a window without shades, he [Bigger] saw a room in which were two small iron beds

with sheets dirty and crumpled. In one bed sat three naked black children looking across the room to the other bed on which lay a man and woman, both naked and black in the sunlight. There were quick, jerky movements on the bed where the man and woman lay, and the three children were watching. It was familiar; he had seen things like that when he was a little boy sleeping five in a room.<sup>6</sup>

Certainly, the implication of economic exploitation in the previous passage is stated quite clearly in the following:

The girl came close to him [Bigger] and stopped just opposite his chair.

"Bigger, do you belong to a union?" she asked.

"Now, Mary!" said Mr. Dalton frowning.

.....  
"I'm just asking him a question, Father!"

.....  
"We can settle about the union later, Mary," said Mr. Dalton.

"But you wouldn't mind belonging to a union, would you?" the girl asked.

"I don't know, Ma'm," Bigger said.

"Now, Mary, you can see that the boy is new," said Mr. Dalton. "Leave him alone."

The girl turned and poked out a red tongue at him.

"All right, Mr. Capitalist!" She turned again to Bigger. "Isn't he a capitalist, Bigger?"

Bigger looked at the floor and did not answer. He did not know what a capitalist was.<sup>7</sup>

Perhaps Mary realizes the truth of the relationship between her father and Bigger as she teases the hero. When Mary asks Bigger if he would like to be part of the union, the protagonist is not sure if he would or would not because such an idea is alien to him. He has been separated from his fellow black brothers and made vulnerable to economic exploitation for a long period. He cannot unite (unionize) his people into any effective organization to combat the ill effects of economic exploitation because the Mr. Daltons of this world have made their positions secure by denying

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<sup>6</sup>Wright, Native Son, p. 209.

<sup>7</sup>Ibid., p. 45.

Negroes the true avenues of learning and opportunity to advance in American society. Also, any attempts of Negroes to organize themselves into a political body would be suppressed by white capitalists.

At best, such capitalists hold out only limited tokens of success to Negroes. No wonder Mary, who is somewhat a radical fighting against the ethics her father represents, sticks out her red (communist?) tongue at her father as she tries to befriend Bigger. Although Bigger does not understand the definition of the word capitalist, he does realize the economic discrepancy between the lavishness of the Dalton home and his in the ghetto.

He looked round the room; it was lit by dim lights glowing from a hidden source. He tried to find them by roving his eyes, but could not. He had not expected anything like this; he had not thought that this world would be so utterly different from his own that it would intimidate him.<sup>8</sup>

The richness of the Dalton home and the poverty of the tenements where Bigger lives reinforce more emphatically the economic discrepancy between white and black citizens.

Ellison presents a similar viewpoint. His hero, the invisible man, leaves the college at the insistence of Dr. Bledsoe, who expels him from the institution because he exposes Mr. Norton to the truth of Negro-white relationships. In New York, the hero lives in Harlem's ghetto which reflects again economic exploitation of the Negro. As a non-union worker at Liberty Paints, he is manipulated by the white union members and the owners of the factory in such a way that he helps make financial gain for his employers, yet none for himself.<sup>9</sup> So thoroughly have white

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<sup>8</sup>Ibid., p. 39.

<sup>9</sup>See Thesis p. 72.

capitalists exploited and separated Negroes that it is not surprising that Lucius suspects the hero of subversion and initiates a fight with the hero. In short, Negroes like Lucius in an unstable environment will trust no one, especially other Negroes whose fight for survival make them extremely dangerous to one's security.

But perhaps another incident which better emphasizes economic exploitation in *Invisible Man* is the scene in which an elderly Negro couple are being evicted from their apartment. Literally, they are the dispossessed Southerners, economically exploited like the hero. Unable to pay the extremely high rents, they are forced into the streets by the greedy white landlords.<sup>10</sup> But the hero temporarily overcomes such exploitation when he gives a speech on behalf of the elderly couple which spurs a Negro crowd to the couple's defense. The speech is not a defense per se of the couple to remain in the apartment as much as of their right to a fair economic, political, and social atmosphere in which all Negroes can subsist as Americans.

Such a form of exploitation presented in the novels shows that both protagonists are scapegoats for American white society. Both are denied the dreams, hopes, and aspirations of America. Both are economically deprived and forced to battle themselves for survival. Such conditions make these protagonists incapable of achieving their goal of emancipation and social equality overtly.

Politically, Wright's Native Son makes a direct attack on another form of white exploitation in America--not only the Communist Party, but also the American political structure in general. The only political

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<sup>10</sup>See Thesis p. 75.

possibilities of equality which are seemingly feasible to Bigger would be his acceptance of the friendship and equality offered him by Mary and Jan, who is a member of the Communist Party. Yet, Bigger cannot accept Communism as symbolized in Jan because the young communist is white and the friendship offered by him is an alien relationship to Bigger in view of past experiences with white people. Such an attitude explains why Bigger rejects Max, the Communist lawyer, who comes closest of all characters in the novel to understanding Bigger's humanity. When Bigger kills Mary Dalton accidentally, he knows that in the American political structure legal recourse is futile in a society where white citizens dominate. The white people who judge him are conscious only that he is black and that black is evil and should be punished. Bigger lacks power, and without it in the arena of hatred, prejudice, and stereotypes which distort the Negro's humanity, he is nothing. Therefore, if Bigger accepts Max's friendship and aid, he would be embracing false hopes of freedom and friendship which would leave him vulnerable to the jury's crushing verdict of death. Then indeed, the hero would be very tragic. Therefore, Bigger takes the initiative and pronounces a sentence of guilty on himself. In short, he accepts the fact that he is a murderer and steels himself to meet the consequences of his acts. Seemingly, he controls his chaotic world and escapes the plight of a tragic hero destroyed at the novel's end. Yet, the description makes him seem more the tragic hero in view that conditions are such that he seems to know and judge himself a murderer--a conclusion only a tragic hero would achieve in keeping with circumstances.

Similarly, Ellison's Invisible Man presents white political

exploitation, and his hero too becomes involved with the Communist Party. Dr. Bledsoe, who maintains control over Negroes by being an "Uncle Tom" for the Mr. Nortons, the capitalistic bigots of America, uses his position as a political sword to destroy those Negroes who threaten his security. In many respects, Dr. Bledsoe is an educated Lucius Brockway. Being expelled from college, the hero goes north.

This theme is illustrated most effectively in the Communist sections of the novel. Affiliated with Brother Jack, a leader in the Communist Party, the hero is forced to exploit his fellow blacks for the benefit of the party image, the party line. Although the hero believes that the Party should seek to enhance the Negro's status, the organization is interested only in furthering its own goals, not those of the Negroes.<sup>11</sup> Politically, the Party so exploits and divides the hero and his black brothers (already divided) that, by the end of the novel, they themselves fail to realize just what they are doing or where they are going.

Jack, unlike Jan or Max in Native Son, represents the villainous side of the Communist Party. Whereas Wright's characters, especially Jan, represent Christ-like figures who have a well intended but distorted view of the hero, Ellison's Jack is thoroughly evil and vindictive. Both artists are satirizing Communism and religion simultaneously by equating the two, for both protagonists at some point see Communism as the only hope for life on a darkling plain. Such concentrated emphasis on Communist exploitation represents American exploitation generally. However, Ellison explores the politics of the Party in more depth than does Wright.

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<sup>11</sup>See Thesis p. 76.

In presenting the religious theme, Wright deals more explicitly with it than does Ellison. Accidentally, Bigger smothered Mary, a white virgin, who like her Biblical namesake, remains really unviolated. Yet, if she has Biblical connotations, Wright does not fail to make her humanly acceptable to the environment of the story. Mary can be coy, cute, and deceptive when necessary. But, she can be kind, gentle, and interested, as seen when she attempts to befriend Bigger and help him achieve social emancipation. If she does poke out her red tongue at her capitalistic father, it is not the red tongue of the evil serpent but the tongue of virtue. She and Jan offer Bigger hope and salvation. Ironically, such hope and salvation are alien to Bigger and fail to help him achieve harmony within his environment.

This theme is illustrated in additional scenes in Native Son. Outside his cell window, Bigger sees the flaming cross and realizes that it is burned by the same people who implore him to accept traditional religion and its false hopes of love and salvation.<sup>12</sup> He realizes that he cannot reconcile such dichotomies. When the old colored preacher comes to his cell and implores him to accept God in his final hours, Bigger has only contempt and pity for the old man who has failed to see that religion is just a means of blinding him to his reality as a Negro and as a man.<sup>13</sup> Such people as the preacher repel Bigger because the religion they exemplify shows an inherent weakness. Such religion advocates a particular strength only through suffering. Underlying such a tendency is a fear that other alternatives may end in violence. While in

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<sup>12</sup>See Thesis p. 76.

<sup>13</sup>See Thesis p. 76.



jail, Bigger wonders if he has a soul. He questions whether he has an entity which is immortal. He questions the ethics of his soul; however, he rejects any definition of such ethics except on his own terms. Bigger, the exploited, accepts the fact that he is an exploiter. He exploits others in his attempt to find himself. The most exploited character in the novel is Bigger as seen in the apartment scene where he kills Bessie. Bessie in a sense is Bigger's ultra-self, his soul. In destroying her, Bigger literally destroys himself.<sup>14</sup> Like Satan, he condemns himself to eternal damnation, yet within this hell, he like Milton's Satan finds strength and solace.

In Invisible Man the idea of religious exploitation gets a somewhat different treatment. The hero hears the Reverend Homer A. Homer blindly advocate Booker T. Washington sentiments during a commencement exercise. In effect, Ellison satirizes the economic doctrines of Washington's "Cast Down Your Bucket," which implies that Negroes should stay in their place and " . . . learn to dignify and glorify common labor and put brains and skill into the common occupations of life. . . ." <sup>15</sup> The protagonist has the same problems in accepting religion which Bigger has in Native Son. The unpragmatic doctrines manifested in religion cannot and do not have any relevance to either protagonist.

The other major usage of a religious symbol in Invisible Man occurs when the hero reads a handbill telling of a sermon to be given by Reverend Rinehart. Again, the hero becomes aware that religion is a device for deception. Reverend Rinehart, like Dr. Bledsoe, uses a

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<sup>14</sup>See Thesis p. 58.

<sup>15</sup>Booker T. Washington, "Cast Down Your Bucket," in Randall E. Decker, Patterns of Exposition (Boston, 1966), p. 74.

particular disguise to feed carnivorously on his black brothers. But if religion fails to allow Bigger a chance at finding himself, at least it offers a temporary solution for the invisible man because he can try on the illusion temporarily in hopes that he can at last find his identity.

Strikingly, Ellison uses the names Mary and Jack as religious symbols. Like Wright's Mary Dalton, Ellison's Mary, the invisible hero's landlady, becomes another Virgin Mary symbol whose guidance can help the hero obtain an alternative to going underground. Such a point is underscored when the hero, while fleeing from his pursuers during the Harlem riots, decides that he will be secure if he can reach Mary's house. There, he can find security. Mary becomes a second mother to him.

The final extension of the religious theme is the symbolization of Hell as depicted by both authors. Wright illustrates this extremely well when he presents Bigger in the Dalton's basement shoveling coal into the open door of the furnace. The basement is dim and dark, and the air is stale and thick. The only source of light stems from the furnace door. Bigger stands guard like Lucifer in Hell hoping that no one will discover his crime. In effect, he becomes an underground man. Similarly, Ellison's treatment of his hero underscores the same point. At Liberty Paints, the hero works with Lucius (the devil?) Brockway in the basement. Lucius himself illustrates the game of deception. He has deceived his employers. He has arranged his job in such a manner that should he be absent, Liberty Paints would be incapable of producing "optic white" paint. He tells the hero that his life is one of subterfuge. However, Lucius fails to see that this subterfuge is a form of Uncle Tomism which, instead of allowing him to discover his identity, robs him of it. At the

novel's end, the invisible hero recognizes that the only way he can survive is by becoming an underground man--a black Lucifer. However, this subterfuge unlike Brockway's will allow the hero to assert his individuality.

Both protagonists are Satanic heroes who are forced to assume their individuality through negative methods such as violence. This is the only alternative the heroes have. They have seen their lives surrounded by illusions created by white society which has labeled them and kept them in their place. These two heroes have seen that when they tried asserting their individuality, they encountered violence. Realizing that they must mute their assertion, they become underground men.

Both authors present themes of sexual exploitation. However, Ralph Ellison comes more directly to grips with the taboos inherent in the problem than does Richard Wright. Basically, both authors concern themselves with the origins of racial taboos in the South. Historically, white men imported black Africans to this country as slaves. Yet the conscience of these men plagued them. To ease their guilt, they invented biological fantasies to support theories of the Negro's natural inferiority. Reducing him to subhuman status, white men could subject him to subhuman acts while rationalizing the reality of such social deprivation. As a deviation of this condition, many Southern white men consciously elevated themselves morally. Their Southern white women became the epitome of chastity and virtue. They were equated with the Virgin Mother herself. Lustful or sensuous desires became a sin undesirable publicly, but a virtue privately cherished. Since white men could not indulge themselves in sexual lust openly, they perpetrated upon blacks the sexual

taboos which they could not express themselves. In time, white men of the South developed a penis complex. Jealous and angry that their women might be attracted by the supposed sexual prowess of the black male, Southern white men threatened Negro males with death if they looked at white women or tempted them to commit sexual acts. The Negro male became a scapegoat for the negative impulses the Southern white man did not publicly admit.

Jealous of the Negro male, the white man desired to prove himself a man by competing sexually with the Negro male for the black female. In short, there originated two sets of ethics: one for the white society and another for the black one. Since the relationship between the Negro male and the white woman was taboo, forbidden, this increased the desire of the Negro male and the white woman for each other not only in the South but in all of America. As their curiosity and sexual desire for each other increased, taboos were broken. Wright and Ellison treat the conflicts of sexual-racial taboos.<sup>16</sup>

Frustrated and denied the promises of the American dream, Bigger, like an animal whose guidance is instinctual, finds comfort only in having sexual intercourse with Bessie as both flee from the police.<sup>17</sup> Perhaps in having intercourse with her, the hero attempts to regress symbolically into the womb of his mother where there is warmth, protection, and self-knowledge. Yet, conditions of life make it impossible for Bigger to find security. In the end, he accepts the ethical and moral consequences of his acts.

In Invisible Man the hero is forced to exhibit himself in front

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<sup>16</sup>The author's own theory.

<sup>17</sup>See Thesis p. 58.

of a white audience.<sup>18</sup> Figuratively, the audience emasculates him. The same theme is illustrated again when he has to box the other boys then grapple for money placed on an electrified rug. The hero is left numb, sterile, and confused--a fact underscored when he undergoes electrical shock in the coffin-like box in the hospital at Liberty Paints.<sup>19</sup>

But perhaps the most striking presentation of sexual myths is in the Trueblood-Norton episode. Norton is amazed that Trueblood has experienced his own daughter sexually and survived. Trueblood explains that he has sinned and is willing to leave home and wander through the backwoods. However, he decided that this was not what God wanted. He knew that he must not let his life degenerate into chaos, but must make a firm commitment to live and prosper. Actually, his incest becomes his financial prosperity. From loss of respect he makes financial gain and assertion which, ironically, gives him a peculiar respect. Norton, who has repressed his desire for his own daughter, experiences his lust and desire through listening to Trueblood's story. Exploring the traditional roles of Negro and white male in terms of the sexual myths originating in the South, Ellison underscores the hypocrisy and irony of them.

At a party given in honor of Jack's birthday, the hero is propositioned by the beautiful Sybil, who has certain romantic but stereotyped pictures of the Negro male as an oversexed black buck.

"Come on, dear," she said coyly. "I want to ask you something."  
"What is it?" the invisible hero said, handing her a glass and hoping the fresh drink would discourage any new ideas.  
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<sup>18</sup>See Thesis p. 67.  
<sup>19</sup>See Thesis p. 74.

I sat and her lips came close to my ear. And suddenly she had drained the starch out of me. I pulled away. There was something almost prim about the way she sat there, and yet she had just made a modest proposal that I join her in a very revolting ritual.<sup>20</sup>

The hero is enticed to play the sex game with her. But the prospect of sexual union with Sybil is repulsive to the hero. After Sybil becomes intoxicated and falls asleep, the hero tells her afterwards that he did commit sexual intercourse with her, but that she was too intoxicated to remember it.

Thus through all four themes, the basic conflict is best summed up in the word exploitation. American white society whether economically, politically, religiously, or sexually tries to maintain and enforce social segregation to the detriment of the Negro. Although both authors deal with the issues in different yet similar form, there is no doubt that their net conclusions are in many respects the same. They feel that the Negro has suffered many injustices. The true America can only be understood through a thorough knowledge of its minorities and the universal significance of their conditions in life.

To reinforce their common themes both authors turn perhaps inevitably to the symbolic use of the adjectives black and white. Traditionally in literature, black symbolizes all that is evil, low, or despised while white symbolizes all that is good, virtuous, and pure. Therefore, the color black associated with the two protagonists suggests evil and all the inherent qualities which emanate from such a label. Their environment is dirty, filthy, and despised by them and white people. Their acts are underground acts, which are executed primarily in darkness and violence.

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<sup>20</sup>Ellison, Invisible Man, p. 391.

Both authors treat their traditional concepts of black and white satirically. Like Shakespeare does in Othello, both authors underscore that biological coloration of the skin should not be used as an absolute to determine the nature of a person's self. Rather than black suggesting evil, white suggests evil--a concept which Herman Melville uses effectively in Moby Dick. Whiteness for the heroes becomes a symbol of death. The protagonists seem stifled in white society. They symbolically feel themselves being destroyed. Whiteness becomes a corrupting, destroying force!

Stylistically, Wright is a naturalist. He tends to select and organize materials which represent a particular structuring of the novel patterns of ideas which illustrate his viewpoint toward America. Almost scientifically, Wright places Bigger in a particular environment like a laboratory rat where he can test the validity of his particular hypothesis about the nature and operation of forces which work upon the hero. The novel tends to emphasize the animal nature of Bigger Thomas, particularly during emotional stress. Bigger, like an animal, is engaged in an endless and brutal struggle for survival. Subtly, the author underscores the socio-economic determinism whereby Bigger is portrayed as the victim of environmental forces beyond his control. Although the novel is extremely emotional, Wright does maintain objectivity while injecting human characteristics into his hero.

In contrast, Ralph Ellison is a surrealist. Surrealism deals with dreams: those impulses which expose themselves while one is asleep. During the waking hours, the Id is prevented from asserting itself by the Superego with its stern ideas of morality, and by the Ego with its realization of what consequences may follow unwise or imprudent gratification

of impulses. However, during sleep, the Ego relaxes its repressions and the impulses in it are allowed to come forth. The contents of the Id are freed from strict control. However, the Superego still stands guard, and its effects of suppression are still felt as the Id tries to assert itself. Even during sleep, the Id must still conceal truth in a disguised form so that the dream is rarely direct.<sup>21</sup>

In Invisible Man, Ellison tends to emphasize the distorted, timeless quality of dreams whether literally or symbolically. For the invisible hero, his life is permeated by nightmarish dream episodes which reveal symbolically the reality of life as in the scene of the factory hospital.<sup>22</sup> The hero believes that people are good natured. However, in distorted, nightmarish scenes like the one at the hospital where he is numbed and sterilized in a coffin-like box, the scene underscores the systematic emasculation of the Negro's assertions. The hero fails to understand the significance of the scene until he has gone outside and memory of the past slowly returns to him. Even then, he must undergo other initiation rites into white society before he begins to have any true understanding of such scenes as that one mentioned above. Ironically, it is the hero's reality which is truly nightmarish and without order, while his dreams which seem chaotic reveal symbolically a truer and more ordered reality. Yet, the hero overcomes the plight of the tragic hero who dies pitifully at the end. The invisible hero has endured his past with the prospect that he will emerge into society a much better man capable of coping with his own personal chaos.

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<sup>21</sup>Eric Berne, M.D., The Mind In Action (New York, 1947), *passim*.

<sup>22</sup>See Thesis p. 83.



The Negro's life as depicted in the two novels treated in this thesis has not been enviable. The Negro was brought over from Africa in 1619 and sold at Jamestown, Virginia.<sup>23</sup> The Negro was subjected to an inferior status while American white society elevated itself and supposedly, became superior. Therefore, both authors felt that such social conditions, which they saw as a particular derivation of Western culture, should be expressed artistically through literature. Both achieved this goal through mastery of artistic technique. Both have made their contribution to American literature secure.

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<sup>23</sup>Lerone Bennett, Jr., Before the Mayflower (Baltimore, 1966), p. 30.

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