



1974

# Invisibility: A Study of the Works of Toomer, Wright and Ellison

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## Recommended Citation

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INVISIBILITY, A STUDY OF THE WORKS OF  
TOOMER, WRIGHT AND ELLISON

by

Arlene J. Crewdson

A Dissertation Submitted to the Faculty of the Graduate School  
of Loyola University of Chicago in Partial Fulfillment  
of the Requirements for the Degree of  
Doctor of Philosophy

February

1974

### ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I would like to thank Ralph Ellison for his gracious help in aiding me to understand the modern American novel. In addition, I wish also to thank my students at both Crane and Mayfair Colleges for the many insights they have given me. Finally, I would also like to thank the members of my Committee for their tireless help.

## VITA

Arlene Joan Crewdson, born in New York on September 18, 1940, is the daughter of Catherine and Joseph O'Connell.

She obtained her elementary and secondary education in New York, the latter at Mary Louis Academy in Jamaica, New York. She entered the College of New Rochelle in September, 1958 and received her Bachelor of Arts there in 1962. In September, 1962, she attended the University of Chicago and in August, 1963 received the degree of Master of Arts in English literature.

For a period of six months, she then taught English at Carmel Junior High School in New York. Following this experience, she returned to Chicago and was employed by The Chicago City Colleges, Crane College, in September, 1964. She has since continued in the employment of The Chicago City Colleges, teaching also at T. V. College on Channel 11 in 1968, 1969, and 1970. Since September of 1970, she has taught at Mayfair College.

During this time in 1968, she published Study Guide to the Introduction to Fiction in conjunction with T. V. College.

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## CHAPTER I

### INTRODUCTION

The purpose of this thesis is to analyze in detail the novels Cane by Jean Toomer, Native Son by Richard Wright, and Invisible Man by Ralph Ellison. On the basis of this analysis, which will also include a consideration of the authors' critical theories, the works will be compared and contrasted and finally evaluated as to their places in American letters. These three novels were chosen for analysis because they represent various stages of development of the black writer. As Robert Bone states in his classic work The Negro Novel in America, "with the appearance of such novels as Cane, Native Son, and Invisible Man, the reading public has a right to expect no less than the best from the serious Negro artist."<sup>1</sup>

The necessity for a detailed analysis and criticism of the major works of Toomer, Wright, and Ellison is evidenced by the small amount of research that has been done on the three authors. Almost all of the criticism concerning them has been done in a piecemeal manner, and there has been no attempt to analyze in detail the literary relationship of their three

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<sup>1</sup>Robert A. Bone, The Negro Novel in America (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1958), p. 212.

major American novels.

The black author in America has been recognized and, indeed, has been able to publish, to any great extent, only within the last decades. It follows that serious critical study of works by black authors has also lagged behind. In my years of teaching black American novelists, I have been continually made aware of this critical void. This dissertation, therefore, may bridge this gap in a small way by first analysing in detail and then drawing some critical conclusions in relation to the major works of three of America's most talented black writers. My analysis of each of these works will include an examination of its plot; its characterization; its symbolism, which will often include use of setting, folklore, ritual, and myth; its theme; its style, which will include diction and irony; its point of view and the author's aesthetic distance from his work, and his intention and whether or not it succeeds. Thus, Chapter II will involve a detailed analysis of Cane; Chapter III will be an analysis of Native Son; Chapter IV will closely study Invisible Man; Chapter V will include a final comparison of the three novels and will offer criticisms of these novels based on previous analysis.

Toomer's Cane, published in 1923, was chosen for this dissertation because it is the greatest novel that emerged from that period of American development from 1920-1930 known as the Negro Renaissance. Forging beyond naturalism, Toomer created a novel woven from the symbols and rituals of American

life. In doing so, he freed the image of the black writer from the one of being purely a social protester. He demonstrated that black protest could be artistically controlled and raised to the level of true art. He discovered that by using symbols and rituals that had developed as a result of America's struggle with a divided conscience, this reality itself, born of human suffering and injustice, rendered art and protest inevitably one.

But Cane, for all its brilliance, had initially a very narrow following, selling hardly more than five hundred copies the first year of its publication. It was not until Richard Wright that the American black writer came to national prominence. Wright's Native Son, published in 1940, is the culmination of black protest literature and like Toomer's work sowed the seeds for new directions for the black writer.

In the most classic dialectical response Wright's image of the Negro generated its opposite. In Negro literature the reaction against the subhuman Bigger and his meaningless existence led to the recreation of the more human Negro with his redemptive mission. The unfolding of the dialectical process, the reemergence of the more human image of the Negro, began before Bigger Thomas himself appeared; it began when Ralph Ellison read Native Son in manuscript form.<sup>1</sup>

It is in Ralph Ellison's Invisible Man, published in 1952, that the promise in the works of Toomer and Wright is fulfilled. In Invisible Man, the black writer establishes himself as a major American writer in the tradition of Twain,

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<sup>1</sup>S. P. Fullenwider, The Mind and Mood of Black America; 20th Century Thought (Illinois: The Dorsey Press, 1969), p. 193.



Melville, Hemingway and Faulkner.

Cane, Native Son, and Invisible Man are all novels in the American tradition. The major theme of the American novel, according to Ralph Ellison, has always dealt with the question of identity.<sup>1</sup> This question is the very essence of these novels. They capture the waking nightmare underlying the American dream. All three writers view the genre of the novel as reflecting both a very personal struggle with the chaos of black and white America and as a moral indicator " . . . gauging the health of the American promise with depicting the extent to which it is being achieved, being made manifest in our daily conduct."<sup>2</sup>

Thus, the novels deal with the uniquely American problem of black-white race relations and the inhumanity that has resulted from the inability of whites to reconcile the presence of the black man in the great American dream. As Baldwin points out in "Stranger in the Village," this presence has driven the American white of necessity to deny the very humanity of the black man in an attempt to appease his conscience. And the black, who had already been snatched from his historical past, finds that he must again struggle vio-

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<sup>1</sup>Ralph Ellison, Shadow and Act ("A Signet Book"; New York: The New American Library, Inc., 1966), p. 178.

<sup>2</sup>Ralph Ellison and Karl Shapiro, The Writer's Experience, Published for the Library of Congress by the Gertrude Clarke Whittall Poetry and Literature Fund (Washington: The Gertrude Clarke Whittall Poetry and Literature Fund, 1964), p. 14.

lently to create an identity out of chaos. Therefore, the dilemma persists because if the black man acquires an identity, then the moral problem of his humanity can no longer be denied.

This is the struggle that permeates the novels of Toomer, Wright and Ellison. Their fictional characters seek to tear off the mask, the symbolic black face, that has been foisted upon them as part of the ritual that has developed to hide their humanity. They must continually battle to overcome their invisibility as a disease that is destroying all men. Yet, to do this they must first learn their own names; they must learn to see themselves if they would have others see them. Thus, the novels are the record of this search for identity. They are witnesses of man's struggle to order himself a place out of chaos. They are the underground notes recorded by the mad seers of truth which give birth, in violent pain and in the midst of death, to the human and eternal aspirations of man.

Therefore, as the reflections of man's eternal aspirations, these works can be judged in relation to an objective set of criteria for the novel because the novel, indeed, is a pattern of actions having a determined moral quality. It is a form aimed at some specific effect that is elicited from the reader in the form of mental pleasure or pain that results from moral approval or disapproval of the character's actions. Therefore, a novelist's obligations are to strive " . . . for

the broadest range, the discovery and articulation of the most exalted values."<sup>1</sup>

In addition, as a pattern of actions, the novel must, as Aristotle specified, have a wholeness; it must be constructed around some unifying principle. Thus, the plot is composed of a series of incidents unified by some organizing principle. However, not every incident in a work is, therefore, part of the plot; only those incidents in a work that are organized by its unifying principle would thus be in the plot line. For the purpose of analysis, let us stipulate three major types of unifying principles: causal; instructional; descriptive.<sup>2</sup> Although all three may, and often do, appear in a given work, only one principle will dominate the organization of the work. Cause and effect, it will be seen, is the most common type of plot construction. All the incidents in the plot line are causally connected; from the initiating cause each effect in turn becomes a cause until the final effect. Both Native Son and Invisible Man can be said to be organized by cause and effect plots although they involve important descriptive settings and instructional incidents. In the instructional plot, on the other hand, the major incidents are not causally related. Rather, the incidents in the plot line are chosen

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<sup>1</sup>Ibid.

<sup>2</sup>See the discussion of plot by Elder Olson, Tragedy and the Theory of Drama (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1961), pp. 29-54.

because they all teach a specific moral lesson. Cane, therefore, can be viewed as an example of an instructional plot although it also involves some causal actions and important descriptive settings. The plot incidents demonstrate that America, having left her children the inheritance of the sin of slavery, must now grapple with the divided and twisted people it has produced. Finally, in a descriptive plot, the incidents in the plot line are included simply to describe. For example, sections of Cane, such as "Fern," are organized on a descriptive principle, which is possibly due to the divided nature of the work, although the entire work is actually united by its over-all instructional organization.

Thus, as Aristotle noted, the plot is the primary element in fiction and determines the representation, the characters and the setting. Characterization, indeed, flows from plot development. R. S. Crane helpfully distinguishes types of plots in relationship to character development. He states that

there are . . . plots of action, plots of character, and plots of thought. In the first, the synthesizing principle is a completed change, gradual or sudden, in the situation of the protagonist, determined and effected by character and thought . . . ; in the second, the principle is a completed process of change in the moral character of the protagonist, precipitated or molded by action, and made manifest both in it and in thought and feeling . . . ; in the third, the principle is a completed process of change in the thought of the protagonist and consequently in his feelings, conditioned and directed by character and action.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>R. S. Crane, "The Concept of Plot and the Plot of Tom Jones," Critics and Criticism, ed. R. S. Crane, W. R. Keast,

In this respect, Invisible Man is a plot of character as opposed to a plot of action because the change in action is secondary to the change in character; the action of the novel stays essentially the same throughout while it is the protagonist's knowledge of the situation that is eventually changed. The invisible man's self-enlightenment in the darkness of his hole is the final incident of the novel. This very choice of character development has led Marcus Klein to criticize Ellison's novel on the grounds that the action is not progressive, that its end is in its beginning.<sup>1</sup> Klein, however, would limit the artist to only one type of plot-character structure when all three are equally valid. In fact, Ellison's theme depends on the repetition of the initial pattern incident. There has been no change in fortune for the protagonist because he has been blind to the truth of this situation. Thus, it is his knowledge, and through this, his character, that must change (and it does through the writing of the novel as seen in the epilogue) while the action of the incidents remains the same. Self-awareness, self-knowledge, is what the protagonist must learn before his situation can change, and it is only with the telling of his memoirs that he comes to

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Richard McKeon, Norman Maclean, Elder Olson, Bernard Weinberg (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1952), pp. 620-21.

<sup>1</sup>Marcus Klein, "Ralph Ellison's Invisible Man," Images of the Negro in American Literature, ed. Seymour L. Gross and John Edward Hardy (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1966), p. 250.

full self-awareness.

Native Son, on the other hand, is a plot of action. The protagonist's situation changes completely while both his character and his thoughts remain the same. Again Wright's theme depends on this structure. Bigger's tragedy lies in the fact that his character has been so crippled by his environment that his thoughts are incapable of being changed. Max's vision of the human community is too far removed from Bigger's experience to change his view of life. In the conclusion of Native Son, Bigger reaffirms his deeds of violence and chooses to believe in his hatred because this is the only self-expression and creativity that he has experienced. As Max points out in his defense, Bigger's crimes existed long before the actual murders. The murders simply gave concrete objective form to Bigger's inner life, and it is this inner life that he reaffirms in death. Thus, Native Son is a plot of action ending in Bigger's ultimate execution.

With Cane, because of its episodic nature, each tale must be treated separately because the plot-character development depends on the individual protagonists. For example, while "Karintha" is a plot of character ending in Karintha's murder of her baby, "Box Seat" is a plot of thought ending with the death of Dan's love for Muriel. Indeed, one problem with Toomer's writing is that several of the episodes involve little or no change in the protagonist either in action, character or thought. The reason for this is that Toomer

often chooses first person narrators who are outside the protagonist and cannot, therefore, reveal the internal thoughts of the character. Thus, the reader is presented only the external actions of the character with no insight into the thoughts of the protagonist. An example of this lack of change is seen in the character of Fern, whose very tale concerns her static situation. Thus, the action does not change, and the reader has no direct means of evaluating Fern's character or thought.

Finally, in the construction of any novel, the theme evolves from the interworking of the plot and characterization. Thus, of necessity, it is developed from both the incidents that are in the plot line and those that are part of the representation that surrounds and enhances the plot line. Therefore, the theme is rendered not only by the actions of the characters but also by the artistic use of language itself. An artist's individual mode of language is regarded as his style or diction. This would, therefore, include the writer's use of words, puns, images, symbols, signals, myth and folklore. These stylistic devices are used to elicit the reader's response and broaden and deepen the moral values of the novel.

The use of the repetition of individual words to demonstrate a character's vision or lack of it is frequent in Invisible Man. As Ellison states in Shadow and Act, "for if the word has the potency to revive and make us free, it has

also the power to blind, imprison and destroy."<sup>1</sup> An example of this technique is the word "responsibility." The reader first encounters it in the body of the novel in the battle royal episode when the invisible man mistakenly substitutes the word "equality" for it. Here "responsibility" is used ironically to describe an irresponsible act. It is used in a similar manner when the invisible man accepts the "responsibility" for what happened at the Golden Day. As the novel continues, the word "responsibility" is used again and again to show the blindness and lack of responsibility of the characters who use it. Finally, at the end of the epilogue, the invisible man, who had referred to himself as "irresponsible" in the prologue, uses the word accurately to state ". . . I've overstayed my hibernation, since there's a possibility that even an invisible man has a socially responsible role to play."<sup>2</sup>

Symbols are also important to Toomer, Wright and Ellison. Toomer, for example, uses houses, factories, and boxes as symbols of the sterility, confinement, and the dehumanization of modern man. Wright uses the blizzard as the symbol of the overwhelming white power structure. Ellison uses the symbol of invisibility itself. The invisible man is invisible and without a name because others do not see him,

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<sup>1</sup>Ellison, Shadow and Act, p. 42.

<sup>2</sup>Ralph Ellison, Invisible Man ("The Modern Library"; New York: Random House, Inc., 1952), p. 439.



nor does he truly see himself. Thus, there are frequent references to blindness and partial sight, physical blindness always symbolizing spiritual blindness. Another continual symbol is the invisible man's briefcase, which represents the thing that others (as well as he, himself) have made of him.

These symbols and all the many other symbols used throughout the novels function in the same manner. As Arthur Symons says of symbols in general, they are ". . . an attempt to spiritualize literature, to evade the old bondage of rhetoric, the old bondage of exteriority."<sup>1</sup> All three writers, in the strictest sense, cannot be called allegorical writers.

Strict allegory is essentially rationalistic when it exists, faith has passed over into dogma, the department where everything has one and only one name. Even though allegory may co-exist with mysticism, it is, especially as an artistic method, opposed to non-rational experience and battens upon doctrine, or some other codification of experience. Thus to a certain type of mind allegory seems to deal with experience less directly than symbolism . . . .<sup>2</sup>

But these novelists do not believe in the precise codification of experience, nor do they have a static body of doctrine to translate into allegory. This is precisely the artistic problem which they grapple with in their novels. It is for this reason that they are symbolic writers. In symbolism a thing (or the name for it) is utilized to stand not for itself, but

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<sup>1</sup>Arthur Symons, The Symbolist Movement in Literature (New York: E. P. Dutton & Company, 1919), p. 8.

<sup>2</sup>R. W. Short, "Melville as Symbolist," Interpretations of American Literature, ed. Charles Ferdelson, Jr. and Paul Brodtkorb, Jr. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1959), pp. 104-05.

for another entity, which then receives its full attributes. The difference between a symbol and a metaphor is that a symbol

stands as a kind of synecdoche for the metaphors into which it has entered. Synecdoche is not the logical substitution of a part for its whole: the part is not extracted, as if it were a building brick, and used as a sign. Instead, the part retains its organic character as part of a whole.<sup>1</sup>

William York Tindall points out that the symbol may function in different manners:

Some symbols, plainly for a character in the book, are there to carry something to him and by his reaction to enlighten us about him. . . . Beyond these he may use symbols to embody what he cannot think, to discover what he feels or to express it, or . . . to function as elements in a design. Convinced of the inadequacy of discourse for all that lies outside the rational and the prosaic or persuaded that things as they are are not entirely explicable, he may resort to analogical embodiment, which is useful too for supplementing a discursive meaning with overtones, qualities, and implications beyond logical handling.<sup>2</sup>

It is this last function of the symbol that is particularly important in Cane, Native Son, and Invisible Man. Given the chaos and the lack of identity these writers seek to depict, this functioning of symbol is necessary to portray the many different levels of meaning and radiating rings of experience in their novels. This function of symbol emphasizes these radiating relationships and, for the sake of emphasis, it will be referred to in this dissertation as a signal. A

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<sup>1</sup>Charles Feidelson, Symbolism and American Literature (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1953), pp. 64-65.

<sup>2</sup>William York Tindall, The Literary Symbol (New York: Columbia University Press, 1955), p. 15.

signal will stress the use of one entity to call to mind a number of other entities which are not necessarily similar and might be actually opposed to one another. Their only association is their possible interaction within experience. This is what Ellison captures in his epilogue when the invisible man speaks of the possible meanings of his grandfather's "yes." The cane is a signal in Toomer's novel. It represents the sweetness of the black race found even in the vanishing soul of slavery; yet, it also is an ominous sign used for deception, a dark hidden place in the soul, the Cain in man. The black rat at the beginning of Native Son also functions as a signal. It represents not only Bigger but fear, inhumanity, degraded living conditions, and it is a rodent like the rabbit whose roots are in black folklore.

All three novelists in varying degrees make use of folklore and ritual as part of the structure of their novels. Rituals, based as they are in superstitions that have become the stuff of social forms, can be transformed into artistic material by the novelist. The black mask and the loss of identity that are the very basis of the novels involve the black stereotype, which no matter what other social uses it might have

. . . is also a key figure in a magic rite by which the white American seeks to resolve the dilemma arising between his democratic beliefs and certain anti-democratic practices, between his acceptance of the sacred democratic belief that all men are created equal and his treatment of every tenth man as though he were not.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>Ellison, Shadow and Act, pp. 45-46.

Thus, the purpose of the ritual is to blind both the victim and the sacrificers to their loss of humanity, to their dehumanization. Its purpose is to dull the moral responsibilities of both groups for their actions, and it always ironically involves self-humiliation and loss of identity as the price for both victim and victor. Thus, Toomer depicts the atavism of the South through lynching; Wright uses Bigger's flight emphasizing the "running" aspect involved in it; Ellison portrays the fool's journey of the invisible man in terms of the battle royal.

The folklore which grew up around the rituals is also present in the novels. The animal imagery has its roots in the folk figures of Brer Rabbit, High John de Conquer, and Peter Wheatstraw.<sup>1</sup> The black "jokes" connected with the dark, night,

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<sup>1</sup>Langston Hughes and Arna Bontemps point out in The Book of Negro Folklore (New York: Dodd, Mead & Company, 1966) the importance and meaning of Brer Rabbit to the black slave. In his subservient position, he identified with the rabbit's cunning.

The American Negro slave, adopting Brer Rabbit as hero, represented him as the most frightened and helpless of creatures. . . . But the slaves took pains to give Brer Rabbit other significant qualities. He became in their stories by turn, a practical joker, a braggart, a wit, a glutton, a lady's man, and a trickster. But his essential characteristic was his ability to get the better of bigger and stronger animals. To the slave in his condition the theme of weakness overcoming strength through cunning proved endlessly fascinating. (p. IX).

There is also another body of black folklore that was equally as important to the slaves. It emerged from the trickster theme as it related to the slave and was centered around a character called John or Jack who eventually came to be known as Old John or High John de Conquer. At first

running, blindness, invisibility and white "supremacy" are all present. At their broadest range, they are merged with " . . . the meanings which blackness and light have long had in Western mythology: evil and goodness, ignorance and knowledge. . . ." <sup>1</sup> Thus, by the universal yardstick of literature as a whole must the range and value of these novels be analyzed and evaluated finally as to their places in American letters.

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. . . he was a whisper, a will to hope, a wish to find something worthy of laughter and song. Then the whisper, put on flesh. His footsteps sounded across the world in a low but musical rhythm as if the world he walked on was a singing-drum. The black folks had an irresistible impulse to laugh. High John de Conquer was a man in full, and had come to live and work on the plantations, and all the slave folks knew him in the flesh. (p. 93).

Zora Neale Hurston, whom Hughes and Bontemps quote, also states did Massa met our hope-bringer all right, but when did Massa met him, he was not going by his right name. He was traveling, and touring around the plantations as the laugh-provoking Brer Rabbit. . . . And all the time, there was High John de Conquer playing his tricks of making a way out of no-way. (p. 95).

Thus, the ultimate meaning of Brer Rabbit and High John de Conquer is power.

<sup>1</sup>Ellison, Shadow and Act, p. 174.

## CHAPTER II

### JEAN TOOMER

Jean Toomer was born on December 26, 1894, in Washington, D.C., a city he later used for the setting of the middle section of Cane. His parents, he is to maintain, were of mixed blood: "racially, I seem to have (who knows for sure) seven blood mixtures: French, Dutch, Welsh, Negro, German, Jewish and Indian."<sup>1</sup> His maternal grandfather, P.B.S. Pinchback, had been the former Reconstruction lieutenant-governor of Louisiana, but when his fortunes changed, he moved to an all-white section of Washington, D.C. where Jean was born. As the fortunes of the family steadily declined, they moved to the black section of the city. Thus, Toomer is later truly able to say that he lived equally amid the two races, being now black, now white. As the family fell deeper into debt, Jean, who had previously been educated in the public schools in Washington, left home to begin a series of wanderings that were to take him, among other places, to the University of Wisconsin to study agriculture, to Massachusetts College of Agriculture, to a physical training college in Chicago, and to City College of

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<sup>1</sup>Jean Toomer, Cane, introduction by Arna Bontemps ("A Perennial Classic"; New York: Harper & Row, Publishers, 1969), pp. viii.

New York. But, none of these institutions seemed to satisfy him, and he then tried his hand at a variety of odd jobs traveling from New Jersey to Chicago to Georgia. His experience of teaching school in Sparta, Georgia, in 1921 provided much of the background for the rural sections of Cane.

Toomer's novel, Cane, grew out of the chaos of his own experiences as well as the tensions of the Negro Renaissance. During the period between 1916 to 1919 rural blacks moved in large numbers into major cities. There was a renewed interest on the part of black writers to examine their folk past as well as to establish themselves in the modern world. This tension, this search for identity, became the driving force of Cane. This novel, which Robert Bone considers the greatest literary achievement of the Negro Renaissance, was born of Toomer's own personal struggle with the chaos of his times. As he stated in biographical material sent to the editors of the Liberator, Max Eastman and Claude McKay, a year before the publication of Cane

from my own point of view I am naturally and inevitably an American. I have strived for a spiritual fusion analogous to the fact of racial intermingling. Without denying a single element in me, with no desire to subdue one to the other, I have sought to let them function as complements. I have tried to let them live in harmony. Within the last two or three years, however, my growing need for artistic expression has pulled me deeper and deeper into the Negro group. And as my powers of receptivity increased, I found myself loving it in a way that I could never love the other. It has stimulated and fertilized whatever creative talent I may contain within me. A visit to Georgia last fall was the starting point of almost everything of worth that I have done. I heard folk-songs come from the lips of Negro peasants. I saw the rich dusk beauty that I had heard

many false accents about, and of which till then, I was somewhat skeptical. And a deep part of my nature, a part that I had repressed, sprang suddenly to life and responded to them. Now, I cannot conceive of myself as aloof and separated.<sup>1</sup>

This is indeed the struggle depicted in Cane; this quest for identity haunted Toomer until his death. However, although he was to continue writing after the publication of Cane, never again was he able to deal artistically with the tensions that gave Cane its stirring beauty. His later works deal with worlds of absolutes because he was seeking for "an intelligible scheme of things, a sort of whole into which everything fit . . . it was the body, the scheme, the order and inclusion. These evoked and promised to satisfy all in me that had been groping for order from amid the disorder and chaos of my personal experience."<sup>2</sup> To find this whole, Toomer turned first to the mysticism of Gurdjieff and finally to the Society of Friends. Toomer ultimately "solved" the chaos and paradox of his world by denying it. By 1931 he was denying he was of any particular race, and before he died he was to deny that he was black. At the same time, in 1931, he ceased writing extensively, and his address to a group of Quakers in 1949, entitled "The Flavor of Man", shows that his "scheme" had become the Quaker's concept of God: pain was now not redemptive nor beautiful, as in Cane, but merely ignorance of God. Thus, order prevailed, but with

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<sup>1</sup>Ibid., pp. viii-ix.

<sup>2</sup>Jean Toomer, "Outline of Autobiography" (unpublished manuscript, Toomer's papers, Fisk University Library, c 1930), p. 25.



this denial of the value of suffering and the existence of doubt, chaos and the loss of self, Toomer's art was void of the electrifying tensions that made it vibrant and alive. He no longer imitated actions; now, he simply preached about a world of order, perfection and answers, a world where characters were simply mouthpieces of his now static philosophy.

Toomer's novel, Cane, has received little previous critical attention. Robert Bone in 1958 was among the first of recent critics to recognize its merits, claiming Toomer to be the only black writer of the Negro Renaissance to participate " . . . on equal terms in the creation of the modern idiom. . . ." <sup>1</sup> Thus, to appreciate Toomer's achievement and to evaluate the place of Cane in American letters, it is necessary to analyse this novel before offering any critical judgment concerning it, to develop what R.S. Crane refers to as a hypothesis in the interpretation of texts. The problem for the critic, therefore, is to discover the author's intention in presenting the reader with particular incidents, characterizations, imagery and symbolism. The process of interpretation thus involves two distinct actions: first we must draw particular hypotheses in relation to the text, and then we must test these hypotheses. By this method, for example, the critic distinguishes simple imagery from symbolism. Thus, the yardstick for evaluating our judgments is that the author

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<sup>1</sup>Bone, The Negro Novel in America, p. 80.

would have written as he did only if his intention was such-and-such. This "approach", formulated by R.S. Crane, will form the basis for my analysis of Toomer's novel.<sup>1</sup> My textual analysis of the plot structure, characterization, thought and diction of the novel, guided by Crane's principles, will then form the basis for my ultimate critical conclusions concerning Toomer's work.

The plot, being as Aristotle noted the principle element of composition, will be analysed first. Since the characters, although subordinate to the plot, are also organizing principles as related to thought and diction, as R.S. Crane noted in his character-plot theory, they will be analysed in relation to the plot and in relation to the organization of thought and diction. It is only by such an analysis of the interaction of these four elements, plot, character, thought and diction, that any adequate judgment of the success or failure of any fictional work may be determined.

In addition, since the success of the work of art depends on the emotional reactions of its audience to the characters, the work of art is based on a moral system. Thus, for example, we must wish good for a character before we can be expected to feel fear or pity or satisfaction in relation to the character. However, our reactions to the plot at any given

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<sup>1</sup>This formula is based on unpublished material, notes and personal correspondence with R.S. Crane during the year of 1964.

time depend upon our knowledge of the characters and events at that time. Therefore, ". . . we may be said to have grasped the plot in the full artistic sense only when we have analyzed this interplay of desires and expectations sequentially in relation to the incidents by which it is produced."<sup>1</sup> Thus, a work of art may be criticized in relation to its elements of surprise, suspense and probability, and therefore, ultimately by the depths of its ability to move our feelings in a definite manner. In the light of these facts, my criticism of Toomer will be based on an analysis that takes plot as its starting point and

. . . then inquires how far and in what way its peculiar power is maximized by the writer's invention and development of episodes, his step-by-step rendering of the characters of his people, his use of elaboration of thought, his handling of diction and imagery, and his decisions as to the order, method, scale, and point of view of his representation.<sup>2</sup>

The plot of Cane is unique. Inspired by Winesburg, Ohio in its tales of grotesques, it is yet different in its use of poetry to link these narratives and to emphasize their themes. It also differs in the concept of its setting. Unlike Sherwood Anderson's novel, which has one main setting, Toomer's first section is set in the rural South; the middle in the big cities of Washington, D.C., Chicago and New York; the final section again in the rural South. The first section

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<sup>1</sup>R. S. Crane, Critics and Criticism, p. 622.

<sup>2</sup>Ibid., p. 623.

consists of six tales and ten poems; the second consists of three short descriptive narrative pieces, five poems and four tales; the final section is composed of a single tale.

If Cane, therefore, is to be considered a novel, a whole work rather than a collection of separate, individual pieces, it must have, in spite of its unique structure, some unifying principle. Obviously, the unifying principle in this work is not one of cause and effect since the tales are not causally related. Nor can the plot be unified by a descriptive principle such as that of Winesburg, Ohio since the tales are located in different settings. Therefore, it would seem that to be unified, the work must be organized by an instructional principle and that, therefore, the tales and poems must be related and organized on the basis of their instructional themes.

Difficulties associated with this type of plot are inherent in its very structure. As Aristotle noted, episodic plots, that is those in which the incidents have no inevitable connection, tend to be the weakest of all plots. Toomer must, to have a whole work, make everything in the work either directly or indirectly to serve his final end. Since the unifying principle of Cane, by its very structure, cannot be organized by the principles of cause and effect or description, then everything in this work must, therefore, be made to serve the instructional organization of his plot, his final end. Accordingly, the plot as a whole will only be as successful as

each of its parts. Since this is true, only a detailed analysis and criticism of all the individual segments of Cane will provide the basis on which the work as a whole may be criticized and evaluated. Therefore, I will follow Toomer's initial order in offering my analysis and criticism of Cane.

The plot of "Karintha," the first tale, is itself instructional rather than cause and effect or descriptive. Each of its four sections illustrates how Karintha, denied her humanity and seen solely in terms of her sexual desirability, is thus slowly destroyed. Karintha becomes a woman and bears a child that she murders. The inference is, therefore, that a continual denial of humanity will destroy all men. Told in the third person by an implied narrator, Toomer uses both images and symbols which are external to the protagonist to convey her spiritual disintegration. By remaining outside of Karintha's consciousness, Toomer gains the psychological effect of reinforcing her invisibility and isolation. Yet, because of this distance, Toomer must rely on his images and symbols to clearly convey his theme since narrative by the implied narrator is reduced to a minimum. Therefore, he begins with a four line verse that stresses Karintha's external beauty, imploring the reader to see it, using the impersonal pronoun emphasizing the dehumanized view others have of her. Describing her childhood, the implied narrator stresses that men desired even then to "mate" with her in animal fashion, thus ripening a growing "thing" (again not a person but rather

an "it") too soon.

The second section describes Karintha at twelve again in terms of how others do not see her. Here, the pine smoke from the sawmill is said to blind men's eyes, the inference being that modern man in his civilization has blinded his eyes frequently to the humanity of others. Thus, Karintha now is pictured in terms of a black bird, still therefore not human. Once more through imagery and symbolism rather than through narration by the implied narrator, Toomer conveys his theme. This is also the purpose of his repetition of words and phrases which have been previously used. This circular pattern, like Ellison's later use of repeated incidents, also reinforces his instructional plot. In both cases, the reader sees that as time progresses the protagonist's situation remains the same.

For this reason, too, Toomer introduces the song in the third section. By juxtaposing the song to Karintha's murder of her child, Toomer is able to comment on her fate without the use of direct narration, thus giving his prose a stirring economy and a lyrical quality that it might not otherwise possess. The latter is also accomplished by his sentence structure, which is composed mostly of simple sentences or fragments. When Toomer does depart from the simple sentence, he tends to use adverbial dependent clauses rather than a less movable compound sentence structure.<sup>1</sup> The economy of

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<sup>1</sup>For example, Toomer describes the young men in the following manner: "The young fellows counted the time to pass before she would be old enough to mate with them." Toomer, Cane, p. 1.

his style is also aided by his sparse use of adjectives and his almost two to one ratio of nouns to verbs, which also contributes to the contemporary flavor of his swiftly moving prose.<sup>1</sup> Toomer thus replaces the symbol of the dusk, used to express Karintha's beauty in the beginning of the tale, with the again blinding, choking image of smoke which arises from the funeral pyre of her child, and the song thus signifies that at twenty her soul is dead. Therefore, in the last section, Toomer uses the incident of her murder of her child also as a symbol of the death of Karintha's own soul.

Although Toomer clearly establishes his powerful and moving style in this first tale, "Karintha" by its very structure has one inherent weakness. By using an implied narrator almost completely removed from Karintha's own consciousness, Toomer reduces the reader's involvement in Karintha's fate. The tale, told principally in the past tense with a shift at the end to the present tense, also lacks both surprise and suspense since the reader is not swept along with the actions of the protagonist. Although "Karintha" is a plot of character involving a complete change in the moral character of the protagonist molded by action and made manifest by it in the murder of her child, this complete change is insufficiently depicted in her thought and feeling due to Toomer's choice of

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<sup>1</sup>For example, Toomer's first paragraph contains 26 nouns and 12 verbs.

such a remote point of view.<sup>1</sup>

Two poems follow the tale of "Karintha" and join it to "Becky": "Reapers" and "November Cotton Flower." "Reapers" is similar in style to the rural poetry of Robert Frost. The persona describes an incident during the time of reaping; however, the incident is not important for itself but rather for the more universal meaning it symbolically conveys. Its principal images, the sharpened, blood-stained scythes and the bleeding rat, stress the violence and destruction that underlie the action of the reapers. Thus, in the image of the black silent reapers, the violence that lies in the heart of the divided South is pictured. The startlingly violent images are also reinforced by the fact that, except for the line in which these images occur, the constant iambic pentameter rhythm of the poem is otherwise unbroken. In addition, the use of the formalized ending couplet is unusual here. The poem, therefore, succeeds as the startling statement Toomer intends it to be and echoes the violence seen at the end of "Karintha."

"November Cotton Flower" also employs the same iambic pentameter rhythm. In addition, its style is also similar to that of the first poem because it uses simple natural images to symbolize a deep universal truth. Once again, the main

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<sup>1</sup>For example, it is the narrator who must tell the reader at the end of the tale "Karintha is a woman. Men do not know that the soul of her was a growing thing ripened too soon. They will bring their money; they will die not having round it out. . . ." Ibid., p. 4.



incident in the poem, the blooming of the cotton flower, is used as a symbol for which the imagery has prepared the reader. Yet, for all their similarity, Toomer uses this poem to stress an opposite view of the South from its companion poem. This poem tells of the marvelous that springs from out of the very depths of the terrible. It tells of the unexpected beauty that springs from the dead earth at a time when seasons are old, and cotton, which is life, is vanishing. Water, another symbol of life, has dried up and dead birds are found even in deep wells below the earth. Yet, this is the season that the November cotton flower appears, and thus it may be seen as a sign. It becomes, therefore, a symbol for the beauty of the black race seen continually in Cane as a hidden yet still potentially powerful race that will arise from sterile land and sterile time, unafraid. This poem thus succeeds in preparing for the later redeeming characters such as Dan Moore.

From the note of hope of "November Cotton Flower," the novel passes on to the desolation and isolation of "Becky." Once more the reader is shown the terrible. The theme of the tale is contained in the headnote: "Becky was the white woman who had two Negro sons. She's dead; they've gone away. The pines whisper to Jesus. The Bible flaps its leaves with an aimless rustle on her mound."<sup>1</sup> From the implied narrator

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<sup>1</sup>Ibid., p. 8.

and instructional plot of the first story, Toomer now changes to a first person narrator and a cause and effect plot. The tone of the tale is made a more intimate one by having a first person narrator who shares the burden of guilt and denial involved in the rejection of Becky. Therefore, the tale is made to involve the reader more directly in the action thus giving its tensions a more present quality than "Karintha," and thus increasing the suspense and surprise of the narrative as a whole.

The initiating incident in this cause and effect plot is again centered around a birth, the birth of Becky's black son. Again impersonal images are used to convey an impression of a dehumanized society. The impersonal "mouths" of the white townspeople actually create her anew, impregnate her with her new self that is born with a twisted mouth and harsh, vacant, staring eyes. The mouths, both black and white, blame the black man but find it impossible to deal with Becky as a human being. Therefore, they call her insane, and the idea of insanity is used to deny her humanity in a manner that is similar to Ellison's use of the vet in Invisible Man and Max's defense of Bigger in Native Son. So as they pray to God, whom they hold responsible for putting His cross on her, they make her an outcast as was often done with the insane. Therefore, once again Toomer ironically uses an incident of birth to symbolize spiritual death. By this means, Toomer is able to make the character of Becky herself symbolic. Although the

story centers about the physical being of Becky, she is seen only in the beginning and remains invisible but ever present in the rest of the tale. Therefore, by remaining in this tale outside the conscience of the protagonist, Toomer is able to show how her invisible existence affects the townspeople. Here, therefore, his choice of point of view is very successful. Her invisibility is made actually functional in this tale. Yet, at the same time she is made powerfully present to the reader through the guilt of the narrator. While a white woman, she paradoxically becomes the dark sin on the souls of the townspeople. She is their history and their guilt; thus, while she must be hidden, she cannot be denied. So while she lives on the desolate spot between the railroad and the road, they provide for her, denying this truth to one another. And through it all, in their blindness they call on the spirit of Jesus, who in a later tale is said to have once been a leper, cast forth like Becky.

As Toomer uses religion to portray spiritual death, he also uses modern conveniences to portray modern man's dehumanization. These very visible forms of modern life are contrasted to Becky's invisibility. Yet, it is she who makes her presence felt. Ironically, those who heard about her in passing her cabin lying silently, lifelessly between the rumbling railroad and the bustling road, throw prayers at her. Yet, it is her eye-shaped piece of land that sees them and reflects the eyes of their false God. Therefore, although she

is invisible and they are blind to her as a person, and although she has been isolated as Bigger is later in prison and the invisible man is in his hole, it is her sightless eyes that they feel on their souls.

Becky and her children of mixed blood symbolize for the town their sin of slavery, and the physical as well as spiritual linking of the races that cannot be denied while it cannot be admitted. So when Becky has a second child, proving that the first was no mere accident, the town must, to live with its lie, assert " . . . that if there was a Becky, that Becky now was dead."<sup>1</sup> Ironically, Toomer uses the further proof of her humanity to bring forth a denial of her very existence. Once again the incidents themselves become symbolic. So although Becky remains unseen, her presence is now doubly felt.

In the third section, time passes and the boys grow, full of hate for their existence. Still the narrator, whom Toomer uses to represent the town, prays to Jesus asking the intercession of the pines, blindly asking Jesus to come and give sight to others. Her sons, who are only too alive for the town's denial, act out the violence of their lives like Bigger and the invisible man in the prologue. They cut and beat a man who simply mentioned where they live, and again Toomer uses the act to demonstrate that where they live and

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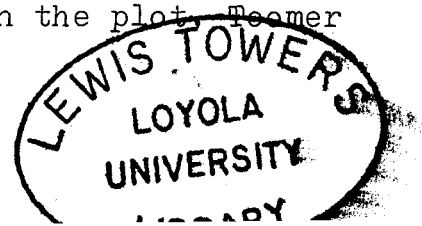
<sup>1</sup>Ibid., p. 10.

who they are, are essentially the same. Whether their victim was white or black, no one knows, least of all themselves, because Toomer wishes to stress that in their nightmarish existence, he was simply a phantom of their own minds. The townspeople could no more accept the boys than they could Becky because to do so would acknowledge their sin and their guilt. Therefore, as they were born in violence they leave in violence cursing both white and black, but like Becky, it is their invisible presence that is still felt by the town.

Smoke, the symbol of evil in the first tale, is used in a similar manner in "Becky." As before, a wraith of smoke signifies evil has been perpetrated, and the trembling ground conveys the image of hell. As the tale comes to a close, the town's sense of guilt becomes an overwhelming fear. The spirit of a dead Becky is fearful, but the possibility of Becky as a living human being is unmentionable. Therefore, ironically, the town's death prayers for Becky are fulfilled on a Sunday. Toomer uses warning signs for both suspense and probability. The bell tolls, and the sun bears down heavily from the sky. There is no wind, and even the pines, usually used as a symbol of beauty, here have the smell of death and decay. In his fear, the narrator prays, and his prayer has the biblical echoes of Faust asking the mountains to hide him from his due damnation. The chimney falls in a mound, leaving Becky underground where, in a sense, she has always been. Thus, once again, Toomer uses an incident itself as a symbol.

Time is out of joint, the narrator senses, and his companion, Barlo, throws his Bible on Becky's grave. The Bible, which remains untouched, is also an ironic symbol of the unredeemed town, condemned by its own prayers, which indeed lies buried with Becky.

Toomer again uses many of the stylistic devices he had developed in "Karintha." Here again, the passage of time is clearly delineated, and once again, it clearly shows how static the actions of the characters are. Here also are his images and symbols used to convey the fate of the characters. But in this tale, Toomer's plot of action succeeds. Since it is a plot of action in which the synthesizing principle is a complete change in the situation of the protagonist, there is less need for the reader to be shown Becky's consciousness for her situation to be understood. In addition, Toomer's use of a first-person narrator, who shares in the town's guilt, increases the reader's awareness of and concern for Becky's fate. Thus, although the entire tale is told in the past tense, the narrator's prayers are dramatically in the present, and the over-all effect achieved is one of a constant pressing sense of the present conveying the universality of the theme. Once again, Toomer, using Becky as a symbol, depicts the dehumanization of all men that results from the racial hatred and blindness of modern civilization. In addition, through the use of more extensive narration and by having Becky's very invisibility functional in the plot, Toomer



avoids the problem created by the point of view in "Karintha."

The two poems that link "Becky" to "Carma" concern death as do the tales. "Face" is a descriptive poem about a face old with years and pain, now near death. It could very well be the unseen face of Becky. This poem differs from Toomer's preceding poems having neither the established rhyme nor meter scheme. Its pattern consists of nouns--hair, brows, eyes, muscles--followed by descriptive phrases that gradually increase in length and intensity and culminate in the final violent and very effective image of flesh ripening but to feed the worms.

"Cotton Song," written in dialect, is a work song sung by the field workers while they are at their task. It compares the Judgment Day to their present life. Unlike the townspeople in "Becky," the workers can't blame God for their actions, but cotton has been made a God, and they don't want to wait for the Judgment Day for freedom. The poem is less successful artistically than "Face," but Toomer seems less concerned with it as a poem than he is that it be an authentic work song in the folk tradition, its biblical tone catching the spirit of this past tradition which is to be used as background for his tales.

"Carma" follows this poem and begins with all the warning signs of future tragedy. Again, Toomer uses verse to introduce his tale, and it tells of the rustling of the cane

and the cries of the chickens. The tale itself contains images of the red dust, the lack of rain, the hammering sun, the smoke from the sawmill, the sad strong song, and the dog baying at the moon, thus echoing the symbolism of "Karintha" and "November Cotton Flower." This sets the tone for the tale of Carma, who is as strong as any man, yet whose childish deception and weakness in dealing with words cause tragedy.

Although Toomer again uses a first person narrator to present the cause and effect plot, and although he again uses a plot of action, "Carma" does not succeed as "Becky" did. Toomer seems to sense this, having his narrator call Carma's tale "the crudest melodrama."<sup>1</sup> It is, indeed, melodrama because the brief action leaves the characters undefined. Bane, hearing of his wife's infidelity, accuses her; she, frightened by his words, takes a gun and seeks refuge in the cane. There she pretends to commit suicide. Bane, finding her unharmed, knows he has been twice deceived; he strikes out blindly in violence, slashing a man, and is sent to the gang.

The incidents of the plot are less interesting in themselves than Toomer's other tales, and they are also less related to Toomer's basic instructional principle. In addition, although the tale is told by a first person narrator, this narrator remains outside of the action and essentially untouched by it; thus, the effect is essentially that of an implied narrator. In addition, since the reader once more re-

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<sup>1</sup>Ibid., p. 18.



mains outside of Carma's consciousness, the involvement in her fate is minimized.

Yet in spite of the plot's weakness, Toomer's images of the South are powerful and moving. The narrator intimately conveys his feelings toward the land and the black folk in terms of his own consciousness. The red dust of the Dixie Pike filters through his vision, and his folk dialect with its natural images--"mangrove-gloomed yellow flower face," smoke that "marvelous web spun by the spider sawdust pile"<sup>1</sup>--makes the scene vividly present. In this physical beauty, the narrator finds the image of God who ". . . has left the Moses--people for the nigger."<sup>2</sup> Thus, the narrator gives the black folk a redemptive mission; they are the underground race that Dan Moore later envisions. And while they have a present and future, they also have strong roots in the past; their purity is that of a race untouched by dehumanized modern civilization: "the Dixie Pike has grown from a goat path in Africa."<sup>3</sup> Because of this, there is hope even in the cane field where time and space are meaningless; the cane field becomes the refuge, the hope of the black man. Although, like Carma, he may seem to be defeated and cornered like a rabbit, the sweet cane is the overpowering image that lingers and remains.

It is this note that is taken up in the poem "Song of the Son" that follows "Carma." The poem is centered around a pun on the word "son." The persona is a son of the South

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<sup>1</sup>Ibid., pp. 16-17.

<sup>2</sup>Ibid., p. 16.

<sup>3</sup>Ibid., p. 18.

who is returning just before the sun of the slaves' era finally sets. As their plaintive songs linger on, he has come back to the land of his past in time to harvest yet an eternal song of what the slaves were, and what, because of them, he is. And through the pain comes beauty and identity.

This is one of Toomer's most successful poems. It is written in iambic pentameter which is varied only occasionally by trochee and spondee feet until the last two stanzas where the interruption becomes more prominent. In addition, the rhyme scheme also changes in the last two stanzas. In the first three stanzas the rhyme scheme is a b b a a, but in the last two stanzas, which are only four lines each, the scheme is a b b a and c c c c. The effect of both techniques, particularly the use of repetition, is to emphasize the slowly dying echo and song-like quality of the poem. It reinforces in its haunting sound the thought that the plaintive soul of the song-touched slave is leaving, soon to be gone. In addition, once more Toomer's natural physical images capture the sense of the warm, living earth. Here the slaves are pictured as dark ripened plums, squeezed and bursting, leaving only one seed which will grow as an eternal echo through the persona's art. The poem also emphasizes Toomer's belief in the redemptive quality of the black race. The song is to be mingled with the elements of the earth, the pine-smoked air, the red soil, the sweet-gum tree, thus also insuring its immortality and stirring natural beauty which are ever earth-rooted.

The next poem, "Georgia Dusk," is also a poem celebrating the black South, seen on a joyous Georgia night, but it lacks the variety and overall purpose of the previous poem. Again the poem is written in iambic pentameter, and the four line stanzas rhyme a b b a. But here there are not the purposeful shifts and pauses of the preceding poem, and the meter tends to become singsong. It is as if Toomer is seeking to unite all the previous images of Cane, the sawmill, the smoke, the African images, Christ, the pines and the cane, and thus this task rather than the individual integrity of the poem is uppermost in his mind. The last two lines emphasize the longing for a redemptive force and prefigure "Calling Jesus."

"Fern" is the tale that follows this poem. It is perhaps for this reason that "Georgia Dusk" stresses Toomer's previous images because an understanding of Fern's fate, to some extent, depends upon the reader's understanding of the protagonists' fate in the preceding tales. This is true because of Toomer's choice of his point of view. "Fern" is told by a first person narrator who, like the narrator in "Becky," takes part in the action and who, like the other first person narrators, remains nameless. The plot, however, is descriptive rather than cause and effect because Fern's situation is unchanged. As the narrator points out, nothing really happens. The narrator cannot change her futureless future. He is merely a talker as the invisible man will be, and like the invisible man, he turns to the reader for understanding, in-

creasing the immediacy of his presence for the reader. Yet, the reader's only information concerning Fern's consciousness is presented by this narrator; therefore, since his sight and understanding of Fern are severely limited by his own blindness and inability to act, Fern remains essentially a symbol rather than a developed, rounded character. Thus, this tale cannot be said to be a plot of action, character or thought because Fern remains both opaque and static.

However, in spite of this fact, it is a great tribute to Toomer's art that, even with this distance, Fern is able to function as a symbol. Thus, given the background of the previous tales and poems as well as Toomer's images within this tale, such as Fern sitting statically still on the railing of her porch, her head tilted slightly to avoid a nail in the porch which she never took the trouble to pull out, Fernie May Rosen emerges as the symbol of a tragically divided personality as are many of the other protagonists in Cane. Like Karantha, Fern is offered sex by men who fail to really see her, and like Becky, she represents the eternal intermingling of the races, and thus she inspires fear. Because she is born of a black mother and a white Jewish father, Fern's pain, too, is the pain of a twisted, racially divided South. Yet, in her sorrow lies still the tragic beauty and hope of the underground races: "God has left the Moses-people for the nigger."<sup>1</sup> In Fern the beauty of the folk song and the Jewish

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<sup>1</sup>Ibid., p. 16.

cantor are joined. Thus, in the articulate inability of the narrator and in the ironic immovability and invisibility of Fern, Toomer is able to depict the tragedy of a static, divided society. Like the invisible man in his hole and Bigger behind his wall, time stands still, leaving the characters caught in the same trap.

The two poems that follow "Fern" and join it to "Esther" are "Nullo" and "Evening Song." "Nullo," a seven-line free verse poem, reflects the mood of "Fern." The pine needles, Toomer's natural symbol of beauty, fall on the dry ground, but the rabbits do not see them, and the forest is untouched by them. Nothing ever really happens just as Fern is left motionless. The static, nullified quality of life is stressed.

The theme of "Evening Song" sets the tone for the next tale, "Esther." It is a romantic poem that pictures love in idyllic terms. The moon is seen as beautiful and protective, the night as calm and peaceful. It is this romantic mood that is ironically contrasted to the tale of "Esther." Like "Georgia Dusk," "Evening Song" is important not for itself, but rather for its place in Cane as a whole. It is to contrast the tone of "Esther"; therefore, its trite romantic images and rhymes--"moon," "soon"--are used for the contrasting mood they create rather than for their intrinsic literary worth. They offer an ironic contrast to Esther's false romantic dreams.

Esther is another tragically divided personality of

mixed blood whose dreams become her reality and whose reality becomes a nightmare. The tale, which is divided into three sections, traces Esther's life from the age of nine until the age of twenty-seven. It is a tale of sexual frustration that results from a repressed personality. It has a descriptive plot, and as Faulkner would later do in "A Rose for Emily," it traces Esther's continual decline.

Toomer changes his point of view in this tale; although he still retains an implied narrator, Esther's consciousness is directly revealed to the reader. Thus, throughout this plot of action, the reader understands how her situation changes and is determined and effected by her character and thought. Therefore, Toomer's portrait of suppression and invisibility is highly effective. Esther is not seen as a woman but rather as a color. Although she is black, her fair skin is what is seen by others who call her a "dictie," a rising class-conscious black. Thus, seen only as a stiff white image, Esther, who is thus cut off from both races, becomes a somnambulist like those who later people the world of the invisible man. Her wishful dreams become her world while reality remains a nightmare.

Toomer uses several images that remain constant throughout the three sections to convey Esther's disintegration. The first sign of her spiritual death is her physical appearance at nine. Her chalk-white face, her premature seriousness, her hair, which would have been beautiful if it but had a gloss

to it, all portray her lack of vitality. To contrast Esther's character and to be used as a yardstick in judging her personality, Toomer introduces the character of King Barlo. King Barlo becomes the object of Esther's dreams because he is the opposite of her negative qualities. He is a powerful, regal, black man, a man whose own dreams move people, who makes things happen. In contrast to her own confused thoughts about God, which are always in the negative terms of sin, Barlo seems a prophet, descended from a line of African Kings. In his creative fire, she sees both a past and a future, and her dreams of him become her only true life. The symbol of her love for him ironically becomes the windows of Mc Gregor's notion shop which seem to her aflame in the evening sun. Thus, Toomer is symbolizing that all her dreams are just false reflections of empty notions.

Barlo appeared previously in Cane as a flat character mentioned as the companion of the narrator of "Becky"; it was Barlo who threw the Bible on Becky's mound. Barlo in "Esther," however, takes on a unique personality which will be used as a symbol in the first section of the novel. Barlo becomes for Toomer a signal for the good and evil that the black race has inherited in the South. He becomes a folk hero like High John de Conquer. As he stands by the spittoon and is literally spit upon by the white men, as the dogs fight as if over a rabbit, he has a vision from Jesus, a vision from deep down. Thus, Toomer connects his vision with the

underground redemptive races, and with the black man's pure African past before he was taken into slavery by "white-ant biddies."<sup>1</sup> Barlo, who as High John de Conquer takes on the outlines of his African image, sees this past of the southern black man, and, as in "Becky," God is viewed as somehow responsible. But Esther is not redeemed by this vision. Her eyes never see the dawning of the light, and her ears never hear his words. She must be told later that at that moment the heavens opened and a great voice was heard, like the noise in "Kabnis" that follows the old slave's words, and angels and devils were let loose on the streets. In addition, a Negress, known as blessed, draws a black madonna on the court-house wall. (This vision was also mentioned in "Fern," and thus Toomer gives it historical validity which aids in establishing Barlo's character.) Thus, Barlo is transfigured for her; in Esther's mind he becomes a black god who will impregnate her in an immaculate conception so that she, too, will become the mother of the son of god.

The second section of the tale concerns Esther's life seven years later at the age of sixteen. Her life has become completely dominated by her sexual dreams that are a mixture of love and hate, desire and fear. She subconsciously seeks the fires of sex, which she connects with Barlo, as a virgin, but in the very immaculate conception of the baby, she sees sin. Yet, her self-fulfilling vision of the black

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<sup>1</sup>Ibid., p. 38.



baby remains with her.

The second section of part two deals with Esther six years later at twenty-two. She is being schooled in the tradition of the separation of business and social manners. In other words, while white is right in the social world, her "good business comes from remembering that the white folks don't divide the niggers, Esther. Be just as black as any man who has a silver dollar."<sup>1</sup> Once again, Toomer stresses the blind materialistic values of this tragically divided society. So just as Esther does not see, all the people in the town being nameless and faceless to her, she in turn is not seen. She is left isolated in her dream world with Barlo's black image, and even her love for him is totally blind. To convey this disintegration, Toomer again uses Esther's physical decline to symbolize her spiritual decay. Five years pass, and her hair, which was almost beautiful at nine, is now thin and dull, and her white face turns a dead gray. She is dead, but with her dreams of life, she doesn't know this, yet.

The third part, when Esther is twenty-seven, deals with her one attempt to impose her dream on reality. Her divided self, the dull dried up woman and the virgin mother, unite for one tragic incident. Barlo has returned, the rich king of cotton. He makes her wish again, but she knows that wishing will just make her restless. Like Fern, she has

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<sup>1</sup>Ibid., p. 42.

learned "emptiness is a thing that grows by being moved."<sup>1</sup> Toomer pictures her desire that affects her fear in terms of heat. The sun bears down as the pale flames of her other self burn all before them. Ironically, Mc Gregor's windows are only a dull flame now in the hour of her burning. Now, at her hour of purpose the town calls her "crazy" as Becky had previously been called. Yet again, Toomer makes it a question of blindness as he has Esther ironically seek Barlo in a brothel to conceive her immaculate child at the magical hour of twelve, moving as she does so with her eyes closed. Toomer pictures her on her journey haunted by the ghosts of her past days, and the shadows she has made of others. Only the monotony of her steps gives her comfort; only in this static repetition of sound, so like her life, does she find the familiar.

Toomer has Esther offer herself to Barlo in the tobacco smoke filled, house, and this incident is reminiscent of the scene at the spittoon and the black baby. Once again, even Barlo only sees her as a color, milk-white, and because she is rebuffed and filled with thoughts of sin, her resolution is frozen as her mind had previously been. As Esther goes down the stairs, the town has vanished, and there is no air. This vanishing is akin to Bigger's later wish to make the world he knows vanish at the wave of his hand, and the invisible man's blindness which actually accomplishes this. Her nightmare world has become her reality; all life has

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<sup>1</sup>Ibid., p. 44.

vanished.

This portrait of invisibility and repression is successfully drawn by Toomer. Once again, he chooses to tell his tale in the present tense, which makes Esther's continual deterioration very immediate to the reader. His occasional use of dialect patterns acts as a chorus, highlighting Esther's fate. Although as a whole his style is composed mainly of simple sentence patterns, his use of fragments is less pronounced while his use of complex sentences is increased to deal with the complexity of Esther's twisted and divided personality. In addition, his imagery also captures this division, Esther's love-hate, desire-fear. For example, Toomer uses the image in Esther's dream of women frightened by the fire, pulling their skirts above their heads revealing ludicrous underclothes while running from the danger zone. The baby is black, unlike Esther's own pale skin, a tobacco-juice baby, reminiscent of Barlo, ugly as sin. Yet, while nursing it, she finds it beautiful. Thus, through Toomer's imagery, and symbolism and through his use of an implied narrator in addition to revealing Esther's own thoughts directly, Toomer makes her character vividly alive to the reader.

The two short poems that join "Esther" to "Blood-Burning Moon" are portraits of what the black man, taken from Africa, has become, and what this change has cost the white man who took him into bondage. The first, "Conversion," is reminiscent of the figure of Barlo. A short eight-line poem in

free verse, it paints a bitter picture of the African guardian of souls who, drunk with rum, yields to a scornful white-faced god and is converted into weakness and death. The varying length of the lines stresses the ironic aspect of this conversion, which ends with a "hosanna" that seals a doom indicated by a previous amen. The present tense verbs stress how permanent and lasting this conversion has been. The entire poem, playing on an idea of conversion related to the black mass, stresses again the part religion has played in the enslaving of the black man. Finally, the poem displays Toomer's use of word play. For example, he rhymes the words cassava, a word of Spanish origin that refers to the fleshy rootstocks cultivated throughout the tropics, and palabra, the Spanish word for word, playing on the previous idea of the African yielding to new words. In addition, the word palabra resembles the word palaver which can refer to a conference among African tribes and thus stresses the fact that these new words are weaker than the old African words.

The second poem, "Portrait in Georgia," is a companion portrait concerning what slavery has done to the South. It is also a short free verse poem having lines that vary in length. The South is described as a female image of the grim reaper. The poem is constructed of nouns--hair, eyes, lips, breath, body--followed by other nouns in apposition--fagots, scars. Only in the last line is the noun not separated from its appositive by a dash because the body is, indeed, completely

one with the burnt black flesh. White Georgia built on black flesh has become like unto death. This portrait of death and burnings sets the tone for the next tale, "Blood-Burning Moon."

In "Blood-Burning Moon" the black-white struggle is moved from the internal struggle in a woman to the external struggle over her by a white man, Bob Stone, and a black man, Tom Burwell. In this tale, the last of the first division of Cane, all the symbols of the previous tales are used in a pattern of repetition, and the violence that has underlain them all comes brutally to the surface. Louisa's love, divided between them, Burwell's black balancing, Stone's white, is the catalyst for death and destruction. The division, of necessity, brings disaster.

As "Esther" had been, "Blood-Burning Moon" is divided into three sections. The first section deals with Louisa's thoughts, the second with Tom's and the third with Bob's, then Tom's, then lastly Louisa's again. As in "Esther," Toomer again uses an implied narrator in combination with this direct revelation of the characters' consciousness. The effect is to present the reader with three viewpoints on the same incident which portray how the characters' self-willed blindness as well as their own invisibility must result in tragedy.

"Blood-Burning Moon," therefore, is a cause and effect plot as well as a plot of action which ends with the deaths of Bob and Tom and the resulting madness of Louisa. It is because of the insensitivity and blindness of the characters' feelings and

thoughts, which Toomer wisely directly reveals to the reader, that this action is precipitated. Once again because of his action, characterization, point of view and diction, Toomer constructs a powerfully moving tale.

The tale begins with symbols that are used in a pattern by Toomer throughout the story. The old rotting pre-war cotton factory, with its skeleton-like stone walls, represents the inheritance of death left by slavery to the South. The black town is called the factory town, and this recalls that the black people themselves had been the cotton machines that kept the country running. Now, the town is left with this mark, and the full moon shines through the great door of the factory on the rotting floor boards prefiguring their final burning.

Following this representation, Louisa is introduced. Louisa is a black woman who is presented as blind to her fate because she fails to understand herself or her lovers. Their struggle is used by Toomer as a symbol for America's struggle, and their hatred is the symbol of America's heritage. They live in her mind as the black and the white man live in the South; separately they have no unusual significance, but when their images blend, as the lives of blacks and whites must, they inevitably must destroy each other through their hatred and blindness. But, Louisa, blind to this fact, believes that she can contain their contradictions, that she can keep them separated in her life. Thus, she ignores the warning

signs, the evil face of the full moon, the howling of the hounds, the cackling of the chickens, the strange stirring inside her all " . . . heralding a weird dawn or some ungodly awakening"<sup>1</sup> which is akin to the black man's previous ungodly conversion. This section ends, as does each section, with a song to blood-burning moon, a call which is both a taunt and a plea for redemption and resurrection ironically asked of the sinner moon which is seen as an evil god.

The second section of the tale, which reveals Tom's individual consciousness to the reader, begins with the representation of the glowing cane stove, which is used both as a symbol and an aspect of the probability of the plot. It is used as the meeting place where both Tom and Bob hear about each other's relationship with Louisa. It also symbolizes the internal heat that rages within each man as he learns he shares his love with a member of the race he dreads. In the deep dusk under the low-hanging heavens with the air heavy with the smell of the cane, each man hears the things he fears the most. Both are caught in the pattern of their lives like the mule who must go round and round the pivot of the grinder to crush the cane. The static unchanging blindness of this divided life in the South is also stressed by Toomer's use of Old David Georgia, who brought sugar sap to Becky, and by Tom's comparison of himself to the prowess of Barlo. Nothing has changed, and the conditions that brought about the tragedies of Becky and

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<sup>1</sup>Ibid., p. 53.

Esther are still the same and are preparing to claim yet other victims as if demanded by some evil god, like the moon, who seeks human sacrifice. Like Louisa, Tom is chilled in the heat by the baying of the dogs and the crowing of the roosters and shudders when he sees the full moon rising toward the cloud bank. Because he threatens to cut Bob Stone, as he has cut two black men, Louisa realizes, as Bigger later does, that it is far more dangerous for a black to cut a white than another black man. Ellison also makes use of this inequality later in the symbol of battle royal. To forget the "rules" of the game is certain death. The section ends with the ominous symbols of the shadows fighting on the gray dust of the road and the song to the blood-burning moon.

The third section begins with Bob Stone's thoughts. His father, who is called old Stone in the tale, was first introduced in "Becky." It was John Stone who in his guilt gave the lumber and bricks used to build Becky's cabin. It is also John Stone whom, ironically, Tom looks to for a farm in the future. Toomer makes the members of the Stone family descendants of the southern plantation. Thus, like the ancient tragic Greek families, they bear the marks of the guilt and cruelty of their heritage. Thus, Bob Stone dreams longingly of the old days of slavery desiring to be a master in control of the slaves. He ironically blindly believes his actions would be more honest compared to his present secretive meetings with Louisa. Through a stylistic device that Toomer uses frequently



in the rest of the novel, Bob's divided selves are portrayed in argument, revealing his psychologically divided and twisted personality.

The twisted relationships between blacks and whites is also symbolized in Bob's very desire for Louisa; it is because she is black that he goes to her. He finds her sweet like the sweetness of boiling cane. It is her connection to the soil, to the underground races that both repels and attracts him. Yet, for all his desire for her blackness, he is aware that he doesn't know or see what blackness really is. For all his dealings with blacks, he is aware that they have somehow escaped him; listening to them he has not heard them; looking at them, he has failed to see them. He is vaguely aware that he has been looking at the mask, not the person. Thus, his blindness gives rise to his fear and guilt and therefore, his hatred of the blacks. It is their humanity that he has failed to acknowledge, and thus it is that he goes to Louisa for her color rather than for herself. Wright and Ellison later also deal with this blind longing that finds its outlet in sexual desire, Wright in his portrait of Mary, Ellison in the invisible man's "lectures" on the Woman Question.

Thus, by the hot stove, as someone prophesies coming "hot times" for the black community because of Tom Burwell's unbending manhood, Bob Stone hears his own name, and in its sound is his fate. In blind heat he plunges furiously down to factory town, cutting his face and lips by a fall in the

cane. He is a marked man, ironically tasting his own blood, as the invisible man and Bigger also do. Unable to beat Tom in a fair fight, he reaches for his knife. As his throat is cut, he has a sweet, sick feeling that is ironically reminiscent of the sweet smell of the cane with which Louisa's blackness has been associated.

White men, like the ants in Barlo's vision, set out in the all too familiar southern hunt with guns, torches, rope and kerosene. Their coming, which Toomer describes as flattening the black community in its wake, is a scene that Wright would later repeat in Native Son in the flight of Bigger. Indeed, even Tom Burwell's nickname, Big Boy, and its ironic overtones will later be used by Wright in Uncle Tom's Children, and his description of Silas' burning, mentioned also in Invisible Man, is reminiscent of Burwell's. Thus, it is white impersonal faces that stop Tom's running flight by their animal brutality. Like Bigger, Tom has violated the taboo and must be destroyed. At first, it is suggested, as always by some nameless man, to burn him over the well to kill him twice--Toomer ironically suggesting two black deaths for one white is another form of southern equality. Yet, they cannot enter by the great door; this entrance is reserved for Tom and the blood-burning moon. In the dead silence, Tom goes silently to his brutal death, his eyes set and stony until they pop. Thus, the first series of tales begin and end with the burning of a human being, a burning which is marked by

black smoke. The prophecy in "Portrait in Georgia" has been fulfilled, and the stench of burning flesh is an ironic reminder of the sweet cane smell associated with the redemptive underground races. The skeleton stone walls of the old factory echo the mob's bloody cry, magnifying it a hundred times, a symbol of the mob's universality. And the ghost of this ancient cry goes out the great door like a dying thing symbolizing the death of humanity for both prey and hunters. Now, Louisa, whose blind eyes open slowly, sees the full moon shining in the great door, which now indeed is in reality the blood-burning moon of Tom's funeral pyre. She retreats into a dream world of her imagination, as Esther had, preferring it to the nightmare of reality.

Once more, Toomer's style is highly successful in conveying his theme. His use of simple sentences and fragments increases as the tale reaches a conclusion, mirroring the furious, vicious, thoughtless act of murder. On the last two pages there are thirty-four simple sentences, nine fragments, and only four sentences that are either complex or compound. His stark style also adds to the inhumanity and impersonality of Tom's murder. The lack of descriptive adjectives underlines the horrible lack of human feelings on the part of the killers: "Stench of burning flesh soaked the air. Tom's eyes popped. His head settled downward. The mob yelled."<sup>1</sup> So as the rural tales began with an unnatural murder, they also end

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<sup>1</sup>Ibid., p. 67.

with one. Toomer once more depicts the inhumanity that has conquered even the sweet land of the cane.

The circular pattern continues in Toomer's next series of tales that deal with black life in the modern cities. By this division Toomer seeks to stress that ". . . love is not a thing like prejudice which can be bettered by changes of town."<sup>1</sup> By this means Toomer shows that modern society has trampled man's humanity and brotherly love even to a greater extent in the cities than in the rural areas as Toomer will demonstrate in this middle section of Cane. Indeed, contrary to the opinion of the blind narrator of "Fern," prejudice is not a thing which can be bettered by changing towns any more than love can be.

Thus, this section begins with a short prose piece, "Seventh Street." This narrative again establishes Toomer's moral judgment of modern man and his "accomplishments." This prose narrative departs from Toomer's previously established pattern. While it is not a poem, neither can it be said to be a tale. Rather, it is a description, which is didactic in purpose, of Seventh Street in Washington. It begins and ends with a four-line verse stressing the corrupting materialistic values of the modern city. Seventh Street in Washington, therefore, is to symbolize the Seventh Street in every modern city. Toomer's use of imagery is given full play in this piece that is built around the unanswered question concerning who is re-

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<sup>1</sup>Ibid., p. 28.

sponsible for the vital red blood life of blacks here in the heart of Washington. His two main images are the black reddish blood which destroys the whitewashed wood of Washington. The vital living blood splits and destroys the dead wood. Thus, the decay of white civilization is symbolized in the decaying process of the wood made soggy by the black blood. This wedge of life, whose creation is unaccounted for, will eventually destroy the white wood that would hold it back. Toomer's fragments powerfully sound the splitting action: "Split it! In two! Again! Shred it! . . . the sun."<sup>1</sup> The sun, as opposed to the moon, is seen as an ally of the black life which is itself equated with love.

Toomer's repetitions of words and phrases such as "crude-boned soft-skinned life," "whitewash" and the question, "Who set you flowing?"<sup>2</sup> stress the continual nature of this love-inspired destruction of modern false gods. He builds on the image of reddish blood proclaiming that even the blood suckers of the War could not swallow and destroy this vitality, this powerful force that has taken root on Seventh Street, that bastard child of Prohibition and the War. Thus, Karinta's destruction of her child in the beginning rural tale is paralleled by this destruction as a blood-red smoke flies in the face of heaven. Even "God" cannot stop this blood flow because a white God who sucked black blood would then have black blood in Him and thus, in the eyes of a white world,

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<sup>1</sup>Ibid., p. 71.

<sup>2</sup>Ibid.

would become a "Nigger God" who would in His shame have to call for the Judgment Day. Therefore, the white man's "Christian" God cannot account for who set the black blood flowing in a whitewashed world.

"Rhobert" like "Seventh Street" differs from Toomer's preceding tales. Though, unlike "Seventh Street," it does have a protagonist; yet, it is a narrative with a strictly instructional plot. The implied narrator describes Rhobert's fate as having already been accomplished by his very act of being. In that sense, it differs radically from Toomer's other tales. Rhobert is his fate; thus the narrator simply describes him in terms of an extended metaphor. Rhobert's house is his helmet and his shield; it is worn atop his head to indicate that his very life processes are directed and controlled by it, symbolizing that materialistic considerations rule his life.

Like "Seventh Street," "Rhobert" is an important piece in Cane. Both set the mood for the urban section, the first describing the living force connected with the underground people, the second describing the dead wood that it is splitting. Both successfully employ an implied narrator whose tone is an ironic one. Yet, because the narrator has an over-view of the things that he is describing, the reader finds him reliable and trusts his judgment. In addition, Toomer's free use of imagery and symbolism, which tends to be surrealistic in these narratives, gives these narrative sections the power-

ful force that Toomer intends them to have as background for his tales and as guide lines for his moral judgments. In addition to breaking with the format of the tale, Toomer's style is more complex in "Rhobert." Although he still retains his frequent use of the simple sentence and the fragment, he now equally frequently uses compound and complex sentences as well. Twenty-three of the forty-seven sentences are either compound or complex, an unusually high ratio for Toomer. This sentence structure suits Toomer's complex images. Through Rhobert, Toomer symbolizes modern man, who is the son and heir to the modern God whom he himself has created; thus, Rhobert is made in His image and likeness. He is a man who, therefore, symbolizes all the hypocrisy and inhumanity that Toomer depicts through the plots of the tales.

This piece is built around the metaphor of Rhobert's helmet house. Rhobert himself is described as a man who had rickets as a child. Toomer is once again using a physical description to symbolize spiritual decadence. The rod-like antennae of Rhobert's house makes him appear as a bug, indeed, a worm like animal sinking in the mud. Thus, he is described as sinking in the mud of his own creation under the weight of his dead house. His materialistic values have become his life, and paradoxically, his life has become his death. This house, his "protection," keeps out the waters of life which would crush him and bring him life. Thus, Toomer reverses the symbols, and life becomes death and death life. So the water

of life is being drawn slowly off, and Rhobert is sinking in the mud. Yet, the dead house is stuffed, and the stuffing is alive. The man is described as dead, but his mechanical insides still function. The ironic narrator proclaims that to live otherwise would indeed be sinful. It would cave in the house and its animal-like antennae, and strew the stuffing, the shredded life-pulp, into the life-giving water.

Thus, in his dedication to his dead house, the narrator puns that Rhobert, who is sinking down, is ironically called an "upright" man, a child of His God, Who has created the house by blowing His breath into the stuffing. This is Toomer's vision of the modern creation of man. Firm in his convictions, Rhobert cares not when the water is drawn off. He believes in his materialistic values because the pressure they exert convinces him their practicality is infinite. They are indeed his God, and in their light, he neither sees nor cares for men. He is the apex of modern dehumanized man who is drowning in his own materialistic values. And so he sinks. Other modern men will soon call him all powerful and great when the water is finally drawn off. They will build a monument in his honor of hewn oak " . . . carved in nigger-heads."<sup>1</sup> And the narrator ironically suggests that as Rhobert sinks in the mud, all sing "Deep River" to the God-fearing man who lives without water and is drowning in his own muck. With this powerful portrait of modern man as background, conveyed with

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<sup>1</sup>Ibid., p. 75.



brutal force by his ironic implied narrator, Toomer is now ready to begin his urban tales.

"Avey," the first of Toomer's urban tales, is similar in both style and theme to "Fern." Again the story is told by a first person narrator who is part of the descriptive plot of action. The tale also concerns a woman who is neither seen nor understood as a person, and as Toomer had done in the tale "Karintha," the various sections trace the growth unto death of a black woman. However, the difference lies in the fact that the protagonist of the tale is really the unnamed narrator rather than Avey. She is seen only in a limited way through his blind eyes. Her role resembles that of May Bart-ram in Henry James' short story "The Beast in the Jungle." Avey's main function in the tale is to point out the protagonist's faults and to clearly portray his final fate.

Toomer, aware of the pitfalls of having a first person narrator who is an untrustworthy narrator, carefully builds into the plot, as Ellison will also, images and symbols that portray the narrator's blindness. Thus, once again, Toomer makes his narrator's distance functional in the tale, reinforcing his blindness and Avey's invisibility.

The tale begins with the narrator's childish love for Avey, whom he blindly sees as going through life as lazy and indolent. He immaturely envies her affair with another and dreams of his great as yet unspoken love for her. He sees himself and Avey as like the young trees held in and stunted by

their boxes on the Washington streets, but although the narrator may hack at the boxes, he can never free the trees.

Through a series of incidents, the narrator describes Avey's indifference to him and to all others. She is always isolated and untouched. The narrator feels in retrospect that he might have touched her, but like many of Toomer's narrators, he is given to dallying, dreaming and rhetoric like the invisible man. Thus, in his inability, Avey assumes a mothering role for his helplessness, and the brilliance of the white moon, as always an evil omen, the stale drift of seaweed and his own silence highlight his inadequacy.

Again Toomer uses a division to indicate the passing of time and to emphasize the static thought of the characters during this period. Thus, a year later, the scene is repeated. Once more the nameless narrator talks, and Avey is silent as the trains, which Toomer pictures as modern man's invention that has crowded out the mountains, gasp and sob. Because the narrator is worried about scandal (being ambitious he is concerned with outward appearances like the invisible man) he leaves the Ferry area and Avey. And in his self-important blindness, he sees Avey's difference as laziness and indolence. Yet, ironically in his blindness, he believes others do not know how to love while he still denies Avey's very humanity:

" . . . shame held no pain for one so indolent as she."<sup>1</sup> Thus, using the character of Avey as a yardstick, Toomer continually

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<sup>1</sup>Ibid., p. 83.

points up the narrator's moral weaknesses.

Five years pass, and the narrator, wounded by the world, ironically believes he has changed. He wants to "see" Avey, yet when he does in the dusk he finds her as indolent as before. Avey, in her isolation from people, has ironically become a prostitute. The narrator, in the fertile shower of wind from the warm soil of the South, takes Avey to a lovers' tryst. He has gone here before, alone; yet ironically in his solitude he tells the reader that he hopes to find the truth others keep hidden in their hearts. In this manner, Toomer demonstrates that the narrator does not see that in love of another and in giving of himself there alone is truth and beauty. Once again, the narrator talks, and he wishes the Howard Glee Club would sing "Deep River" as a background for his rhetoric. By the latter reference, Toomer stresses that the protagonist is, indeed, another Rhobert who is sinking in his own rhetoric. Again, Avey eloquently contrasts his sterile narrative, which is ironically concerned with creation, with her fertile silence. As he talks about her nature and temperament, he clearly shows he sees neither Avey nor himself. So as the dawn overtakes Washington, making the Capitol dome a ghost ship adrift at sea, by which Toomer symbolizes the state of the nation, the narrator does not awaken Avey who, he feels, is an "orphan-woman,"<sup>1</sup> and in his blindness and inability to act, he fails to see his own childishness and

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<sup>1</sup>Ibid., p. 88.

sterility.

Thus, Toomer has successfully constructed this plot of action. The narrator, like John Marcher in "The Beast in the Jungle," has blindly met his fate. Even the comparatively wordy style of the tale reveals the narrator's vain character and selfish thoughts which make him unable to receive Avey's love and thus unable to avoid his own life of egoistical isolation.

The two poems, "Beehive" and "Storm Ending" which follow "Avey" emphasize the theme of escape and anticipate the next tale, "Theater." "Beehive" is a fourteen-line poem in free verse. It lacks the drive and fresh imagery of many of Toomer's other poems, but like "Evening Song" and the next poem, "Storm Ending," its main purpose is related to its position in the novel; it is to contrast the immature escapist dreams of John in "Theater." The poem is centered around the image of the earth as a cell in the comb of the world. The persona, a drone, drunk with honey, longs to escape past the moon to curl instead forever on some farmyard flower. This longing to escape to somewhere or something vitally alive by a character trapped by his own personality is again to be echoed in the next tale, "Theater."

"Storm-Ending," the next poem, is similar in both purpose and structure to "Beehive." It also is a free verse poem that is important for its place in the novel rather than for its individual merit. In the poem, thunder is pictured as bell-

like flowers touched by the sun, and the rain as golden honey. Yet, the sweet earth seeks still to fly from the thunder. Thus, the poem also prefigures the character of John, who will find Dorris beautiful, yet while attracted, will fly from her very beauty and vitality.

"Theater," the next tale, begins with descriptive representation of the Howard Theater whose walls, soaking in the black life around them, like the black blood in "Seventh Street," throb with song which echoes into the nearby Poodle Dog and Black Bear cabarets. They contrast with the dead white-walled buildings, the whitewashed wood of Washington, and point up the protagonist's internal struggle. The light from a window high above immediately emphasizes John's divided personality: one half of his face is orange; the other is in shadow. His division is between heart and head. He is an incomplete person because he lacks what Toomer calls themosense.<sup>1</sup> John's mind coincides with the shaft of light while his body throbs with the life of the walls.

This representation introduces the cause and effect plot which is also a plot of action. John, the protagonist, is contrasted with the character of Dorris as their lives briefly cross during Dorris' dance, but their ultimate union

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<sup>1</sup>Toomer was concerned with the division between heart and head. S. P. Fullenwider in The Mind and Mood of Black America; 20th Century Thought (Illinois: The Dorsey Press, 1969), p. 140, quotes Toomer as stating "themosense (thought and emotion and sensing) is the inner synthesis of functions which represents the entire individual and gives rise to complete action."

is prevented by John's fear of life. John and Dorris are consecutively the whitewashed wood and the throbbing black blood pictured in "Seventh Street." To present this tale, Toomer once more uses a combination of an implied narrator and direct views into the characters' consciousness. Indeed, their thoughts, which Toomer treats like lines in a drama, emphasize the inner drama that their personalities are acting out in this theater as does the division of the narrative between them and their internal conflict within themselves. Thus, Toomer depicts that all the world is a stage, but John refuses to accept the part that is offered to him. Like Esther, he is a "dictie," the dried white wood of Washington, who ironically considers himself, for this reason, above and removed from the pulsing black blood. Like the narrator of "Avey" he is a sterile dreamer who rejects Dorris' offer to live.

Toomer's initiating incident is John's sighting of Dorris in the soft stage light, so different from the harsh light that illuminates his face. His body, responding to the dancers, wants to shout, but his mind plays the part of an impersonal God with the lives of the girls. Crudely in the language of jazz, which Toomer uses to reveal John's blunt-edged character, he labels them and casts them aside, finding them monotonous. He knows all too soon their individual moments will be blunted to conform to the demands of Broadway, and the audience will picture them as white and call them beautiful. But Toomer makes these thoughts of John's part end incompletely

developed to show that although John understands life is somehow like the dance, he cannot translate this knowledge into the rhythm of his own being. Thus, as the walls press all to the center of physical ecstasy, and as even John's mind thinks in terms of the song, he wills his thought to rid him of passion.

Ironically, John objects to the controlled movements of the girls, seeing them as a herd of ponies, but he fails to see how his own mind has rendered the same sterile, stale order. Dorris' passionate liveliness is what attracts him; yet, it is again his mind that rejects her. Ironically, the reason for this is not that he will be a stage-door Johnny as his name seems to suggest, but rather because he sees himself as an educated near-white black man, and for this reason, he believes she is irrevocably below him. He is a character like the invisible man who believes white is right and black should stay back. Thus, as his mind and heart are at war, the struggle between his black and white blood leaves him a twisted, static personality.

Toomer, using Dorris for contrast, has her in her own passion, blind to John's true character. She is portrayed as believing she can play the game of life and control the outcome. Her dance is of the soil and is the song of the cane, and the walls, as well as John's body respond. But, John cannot go down into himself, and thus Toomer symbolizes that John, whitewashed by modern society, cannot rejoin the underground

paces. Therefore, symbolically his mind follows the harsh shaft of light away from the vitality of the dance to the sterility of his dream world, and the light ironically becomes the darkness. Thus, as Dorris lives in the dance, John dreams of a ghost-like shadow of the dance. In his dream, he walks on dead silent leaves, dead as he is, and he is made whole only by his melancholy. He has no sensation but sight; yet in the dream it is still ironically blind Dorris who sees, and in a room that seems made of Dorris' vitality, he reaches not for her but for a manuscript he has written and reads it. Thus, Toomer makes John's dream world even more sterile than Esther's. Only at this twice removed distance can he, with his blind eyes, see her dance. His only life, like Rhobert's, is that which is removed from life, and he remains a fragmented person, isolated and apart. Dorris, her eyes overflowing, is left staring at the whitewashed ceiling which symbolizes John's sterility.

Once again, Toomer has correctly chosen his point of view. The insight the reader is given into the character's consciousness as well as Toomer's imagery and symbols make the characters' fate and the reasons for it clear to the reader. By this means, it is clear that this is a plot of action, whose synthesizing principle is a change in the situation of the protagonist, because the reader is shown that John's static thoughts and feelings make him unable to change and accept Dorris' love. Toomer's image of the throbbing walls connects this tale to the



throbbing black blood of "Seventh Street," clearly portraying the reason for John's deadness and revealing him to be another aspect of Rhobert, the modern man, both black and white.

The poem "Her Lips Are Copper Wire" links "Theater" to the next piece, "Calling Jesus," and dwells movingly on the dehumanization and fragmentation of modern man. It is written in free verse, but its style is reminiscent of Shakespeare's sonnet 130. However, modern man's mistress is his machine world. Thus, Toomer vividly describes the beloved's lips as copper wire, writing the poem in the second person so as to also involve the reader in this mechanized love affair. Taking the outlines of a love poem, such as "Evening Song," Toomer ironically constructs his grim modern images, undercutting romantic lines such as ". . . let your breath be moist against me" with following similes "like bright beads on yellow globes."<sup>1</sup> Thus, as John was, the figure described is reminiscent of Rhobert, and Toomer again makes the point that modern man has lost his capacity to love other men, turning instead to his possessions. His passions are insulated, and his capacity for human communication and love is subverted to light the billboard of a sterile society.

"Calling Jesus" continues this same theme. It is written in the same poetic style as "Rhobert" and is more a straight narrative than a tale. Once again Toomer uses a first person narrator, establishing authority and probability, who describes

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<sup>1</sup>Ibid., p. 101.

a persona who is more a symbol than a character. Toomer's purpose in this surrealistic narrative is instructional because the woman will be described as the female counterpart to Rhobert, and as that narrative was, "Calling Jesus" will also be constructed around an extended metaphor. The nameless woman, nameless as the invisible man because her plight is the plight of the modern world, has been separated from her soul which follows her whimpering "like a little thrust-tailed dog."<sup>1</sup>

This narrative comes at almost the physical center of Cane, and its symbols are unifying symbols in the novel. Like Rhobert with his house, this woman has her big outside storm door which she can and does close on her soul, leaving it outside and cold. Thus, Toomer symbolizes that modern man has with his storm doors and houses cut himself off from his very soul. Yet Toomer still sees some future hope for man. While the rest of the narrative is written in the present tense, the hope that someone, some force, will reunite man with his soul is written in the future tense:

Some one . . . echo Jesus . . . soft as a cotton ball brushed against the milk-pod cheek of Christ, will steal in and cover it that it need not shiver, and carry it to her where she sleeps upon clean hay cut in her dreams.<sup>2</sup>

The narrator's call to Jesus is to a warm man-God as opposed to the cold impersonal machine-like God figure seen in "Rhobert." This warm godlike force in "Calling Jesus" is again associated with the earth, the hay and the cane; it is thus also

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<sup>1</sup>Ibid., p. 102.

<sup>2</sup>Ibid.

associated with the black people who live in the alleys and the shanties as opposed to the woman who moves through the streets and lives in a large house. The black people, who are connected with the underground races, buried, forgotten, unimagined by the world, are the folk whose purity, unsullied by modern civilization, offers the world a hope for redemption. Once again as in "Rhobert," Toomer's powerful images such as the soul tagging behind whimpering on the dusty streets, convey his didactic theme and prepare for the redemptive character of Dan Moore in "Box Seat."

"Box Seat" is one of Toomer's most successful tales. Once again, he uses the technique of having an implied narrator in addition to revealing the protagonist's consciousness directly to the reader. As he did in "Theater," he also directly reveals the thoughts of a second character, the antagonist, Muriel. This time, however, his plot is a plot of thought because it involves a complete process of change in the thought of the protagonist, a change which is precipitated by character and action. Dan Moore's love for Muriel, because of his unconquered soil-rooted character, will be destroyed by her acquiescence to the dictates of a sterile, zoo-like, inhuman society.

Once again, Toomer's powerful images and symbols deepen the representation of the cause and effect plot. Dan Moore is established as a symbol of the black race, the throbbing black blood which brings vitality and fertility to the sterile

white "civilized" society. Toomer immediately establishes this connection in the beginning representation. The implied narrator invokes the dusky body of the street, which is depicted as a black man. In addition, given its location, the street is of necessity associated with the soil-rooted underground races. Thus, the narrator calls on the black man in his redemptive role, asking him to give life to a withered society, teaching it to dream. In opposition to this image is the image of the houses as virginal girls who must be taught to love: "Dark swaying forms of Negroes are street songs that woo virginal houses."<sup>1</sup> Dan by his love will attempt to save Muriel from becoming like the houses, from becoming "civilized" and therefore dehumanized. The symbol of the house remains as it was established in "Rhobert." It is the sign of a material dehumanized society; it represents tightly shut up and dying people. Life is kept locked outside the houses as Rhobert kept the life water outside of his.

Thus, it is symbolic that Dan Moore cannot find the bell, and in his pounding, dreams of smashing the door. His dreams of destruction are of a creative destruction akin to the splitting of the dry white wood by the black blood in "Seventh Street." But society will only see him as a baboon as Bigger is later viewed as an ape. Ironically, a dehumanized society which Toomer pictures as "bull-necked bears,"<sup>2</sup> always the enemy of the rabbit, views its own enemies in sub-human

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<sup>1</sup>Ibid., p. 104.

<sup>2</sup>Ibid., p. 105.

terms, thus neither seeing Dan's humanity nor understanding his redemptive role. They are blind and ignorant to his history (he was born in a cane field) which proves he is the messenger of the Christ-like force seen in "Calling Jesus" come to heal the sick world and its people. When the door is finally opened, the dehumanized forces within seem like gorillas in a cage. Thus, Dan is justly thought to be a stranger by these forces.

Mrs. Pribby, Toomer playing on the idea of prim and prissy, is the human representative of these virginal houses. It is her vocation to keep the houses and their occupants untouched. She is a representative of the modern world and indeed fits the description of the woman in "Calling Jesus." She is one with the town as Muriel senses, and Muriel in turn has become one with her. Thus, both Mrs. Pribby's and Muriel's spiritual blindness is represented by their poor physical eyesight. In addition, like so many of Toomer's sterile characters, they prefer the world of illusion to the world of reality. Thus, Mrs. Pribby prefers to read about life rather than to live it, and the rattle of her newspaper becomes the sound of a meaningless society. Muriel, in turn, prefers the excitement of the show to the vital experience of being with Dan. Toomer further symbolizes the dehumanization and mechanization of the modern world by having Mrs. Pribby click into her chair like a bolt being fitted into place, her angular metallic house closing around her as Rhobert's did around him.

And the implied narrator states Mrs. Pribby's house is only one of the many houses to which Dan could not sing, stressing its symbolic purpose.

Toomer uses Dan's virility to highlight the sterility of Mrs. Pribby and her house. Dan as a representative from the underground, like the invisible man, has learned to hear around corners and deep within the earth. He knows what lies beneath the surface of things and hears the murmur of the powerful underground races. The next world-savior, he knows, will come from these black soil underground races. He will come up into the world rather than down to it for the truth is always buried by men. And this new, true Christ will walk on the waters because the continent will sink in the mud as Toomer predicted in "Rhobert" with the weight of the Rhoberts and Mrs. Pribbys. It is this vision that Muriel interrupts by coming down, Toomer thus signaling her separation from the underground races. She also greets Dan as a stranger, and although she maintains an air of animalism " . . . still unconquered by zoo-restrictions and keeper-taboos . . ." <sup>1</sup> by her clicking into her chair Toomer indicates that she has succumbed to the stifling limitations of modern society.

Dan speaks of some recent unnamed tragedy in Muriel's life, and through Dan's view of suffering, Toomer expresses the essential paradoxes of Cane. Indeed, this redemptive view of suffering is the very heart of Cane. Life, Toomer maintains

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<sup>1</sup>Ibid., p. 112.

through characters like Dan, is of necessity composed of both joy and pain, beauty and ugliness, so that the paradox of life, caught between the tension of opposites, is the very source of its vitality and creativity. Muriel's outlook is juxtaposed to Dan's view of life; her philosophy is that of the Rhoberts and the Pribbys, who seek only happiness as the world deems it. She maintains the master-slave attitude that one ought to work more and think less to get ahead in the modern world. She is not capable of the fertility of cradling others in her love. She rejects Dan's redemptive fire, which would melt her metallic world. So time and place part them as if by a glass world. Although Dan has become the lover she has subconsciously wanted, like John before her, she cannot return this love.

As in many of his other tales, Toomer divides "Box Seat." The purpose of this division is to stress the scene at the theater. The first division is composed largely of representation, with only the initiating incident, Muriel's decision to go to the theater, being part of the plot line. This second part takes place in the Lincoln Theater, where Dan is to be freed from his slave-like love for Muriel and yet is to gain this freedom at a great cost. Toomer's sense of word rhyme, which is akin to Ellison's later use of puns, is clearly seen in the descriptive representation which introduces this section. People come in "whishadwash",<sup>1</sup> their sentences

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<sup>1</sup>Ibid., p. 116.

hanging incomplete in the air. Bernice, Muriel's blind follower, is seen as ". . . a cross between a washerwoman and a blue-blood lady, a washer-blue, a washer-lady . . .,"<sup>1</sup> a comparison that Toomer will also use ironically later in "Kabnis." The shallow hypocritical meaning of religion is echoed in a singsong preacher-like tone that Ellison also later uses. This will be contrasted to Dan's later understanding of the Christ figure.

Indeed, Toomer in this tale combines many of his most successful stylistic effects. Again he uses the technique of treating the characters' internal thoughts as dialogue in the drama emphasizing their internal conflict. His tightly knit fragments and simple sentences echo the tension of the incidents. For example in Dan's dream of smashing the door, only one sentence is not a simple sentence or a fragment.

Break in. Get an ax and smash in. Smash in their faces. I'll show em. Break into an engine-house, steal a thousand horse-power fire truck. Smash in with the truck. I'll show em. Grab an ax and brain em. Cut em up. Jack the Ripper. Baboon from the zoo. And then the cops come.<sup>2</sup>

Finally, Toomer's images and symbols are well chosen. For example, the houses and the chairs are readily adapted to the constricting effect he intends. Muriel seen by Dan as "lips, flesh-notes of a forgotten song. . . ."<sup>3</sup> ironically contrasts the image of lips in the poem "Her Lips are Copper Wire," the image to which Muriel will succumb. Indeed the door that Dan longs to smash recalls the storm door in "Calling Jesus."

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<sup>1</sup>Ibid.      <sup>2</sup>Ibid., p. 105.      <sup>3</sup>Ibid.



This artistic use of imagery and symbolism continues in this second section. The chairs, like those at Mrs. Pribby's, are houses bolting people in tightly so that they would be unable to answer even a call to judgment. And the biblical tone of the tale, for example, "I exalt thee, O Muriel! A slave thou art greater than all Freedom because I love thee,"<sup>1</sup> ironically emphasizes the unredeemed nature of the people. Muriel's box seat also functions as a symbol of her life. Society has boxed her in; it has bolted her in place like the houses.

Toomer depicts Muriel as concerned only with superficial outward appearances. She wears her clothes as a protective covering as Rhobert wears his house. Thus, it is probable that she will not conquer life with her vitality but rather conform, instead, to the sterile patterns of civilization. Therefore, Muriel feels the dead weight of the audience's blind eyes upon her, and fears Dan's vitality. Her now tamed nature fears Dan's manhood and his creative destructive power which she sees, symbolically, as a black bull, a black Zeus who will rape her, bringing her new life. Toomer thus portrays that Muriel has been caged in the dehumanized zoo of society and as a result fears Dan's freedom, wishing him beaten and broken like a wild animal. Consequently, Muriel denies her friendship with Dan, and this denial echoes Peter's denial of Christ.

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<sup>1</sup>Ibid., p. 121.

Toomer then draws Dan's portrait in contrast to Muriel's and he uses this comparison as a yardstick to establish a moral judgment concerning both characters. Dan doesn't fit in with the theatergoers at all. He is again constricted by the theater as he was by the house. His only contact with human warmth comes from the portly black woman who sits next to him. He views her as a symbol, and the soil-soaked fragrance of her body suggests to him that her roots, like his own, descend into the black earth and flow south below the cement floor and asphalt streets of the city. They suggest that she is one with those who are underground, those from whom the streets, which Toomer has already equated with the black race, draw their strength. Dan again feels a new-world Christ can be heard through the walls coming up from the underground. But as he himself comes up from his dream world, he is startled to see the woman's eyes, which show that she also has been caged and conquered. Thus, Toomer symbolizes that this dehumanized, modern society can subvert even the elect.

Muriel's impersonal conversation contrasts Dan's redemptive vision, and the saxophone moans, and the voice of the jazz overture seems to weep for mankind. Dan in his slave-like love for Muriel is in danger of becoming conquered by society as the portly black woman had already been. Toomer symbolizes that his love for Muriel has indeed placed him also captive in her cheap brass box. She is the bait with which Dan is to be lured into his cage. Therefore, through her ac-

tions, Muriel is presented as performing like a puppet, as Bigger and the invisible man will later, and thus Toomer contrasts her actions to those of the dwarfs performing on the stage, revealing them to be even more obscene and deformed.

The static impersonality of the audience makes it an invisible yet hostile force to Dan, and like Bigger and the invisible man, he longs to strike out violently and blindly at it. He longs to find the cause of this disorder and failing that, he, like Bigger and the invisible man, strikes out at individuals. It is again a question of responsibility. The dwarf fight thus functions as both a plot incident and a symbol. It is another type of battle royal fought and reflected in Dan's eyes.

Again, Toomer uses the technique of comparison and contrast, using Dan's vision as the background for this macabre fight. At this time, Dan recalls his communion with the old slave, a symbol that will be repeated in "Kabnis." Again, religious adages are undercut by the use of rhyming sounds. Moses has failed to free his people. And Dan, whose blindness has been lifted, sees the knowledge in the old slave's eyes which have seen the old and new worlds. However, the old man is not allowed by the representatives of the modern world to identify the noises from underground and is kept in a wheel chair, bolted down. Once again, Toomer symbolizes that society will always see the seers as crippled and insane.

After this vision and again in contrast to it, Dan re-

calls his love for Muriel's animalism, seeing with his eyes that can burn clean. Yet, when he notices the dwarf grinning at Muriel, he begins to understand that in this zoo-like society the free interchange between men and women is impossible because their relationship is simply to be a sexual one with the male in the dominant position. This is the design of a modern age incapable of love. This Dan bitterly and sarcastically expresses in the form of a modern proposition. Toomer thus portrays that love has been converted to a science.

The dwarf, covered with his own blood as the invisible man was covered giving his prize winning address at the smoker, sings a sentimental love song which recalls Toomer's ironic love poem, "Her Lips Are Copper Wire." Toomer again makes an action symbolic, having the dwarf blind the audience with a mirror as he sings, and this light is the blinding darkness in which the society lives. Like Samson, Dan desires to destroy the theater, and Toomer uses this desire to symbolize Dan's blind love. In Dan's wish to arise like Zeus with a dynamo in one hand and a black god's light giving face in his other, Toomer pictures the source of true power and light. This is the invisible man's aim in his fight with Monopolated Light and Power.

When the dwarf sings to Muriel, although she is nauseated, she reacts to the audience's expectations, as she always has, and forces a smile. But, when she is offered the blood kissed white rose, she balks. In her refusal, Dan sees

the rejection of what is human, the suffering mingled with love, knowledge, beauty which exist even in a grotesque because he too is a man. And the dwarf's clear eyes form the message that there is nothing to fear, that he too is a man made in God's image. Dan springs from his seat completing the message: "JESUS WAS ONCE A LEPER,"<sup>1</sup> buried and hidden underground by men.

With these words Dan is freed, but with the dying of love, his heat is cooled and his flowering is ended. Toomer thus symbolizes that the price of remaining free and human in a dehumanized society is great, but that it must be paid to go on living as a man. Dan, the prophet, is rejected by the audience; he, too, is treated like a leper. Toomer now describes the audience in terms of "the house" stressing again the symbol with which he began the tale. As the virgin houses look on, Dan, his thoughts full of black life, goes on leaving the hollow roar of the mob and the garbage smell of the alley behind him.

"Box Seat" represents the best of Toomer's style. Once again, his point of view is well chosen, revealing Dan's change of thought which results from the combination of his feelings and the action of the plot. His symbols are again functional in the tale; for example, the box seat both places Muriel in a position where she can see the stage and Dan and represents what she has made of her life. Finally, his sen-

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<sup>1</sup>Ibid., p. 129.

tence structure and his use of irony convey his theme that sacrifice is necessary for freedom in this dehumanized society.

The two poems that follow "Box Seat" both echo the themes of it and prefigure the tale of "Bona and Paul." The first, "Prayer," is a free verse poem in which Toomer again experiments with using concrete images to represent abstract concepts:

A closed lid is my soul's flesh-eye.  
O Spirits of whom my soul is but a little finger,  
Direct it to the lid of its flesh-eye.<sup>1</sup>

Toomer also uses the repetition of words at the end of lines to give the poem a sense of rhythm and unity. It also gives the poem a prayer-like pleading quality, giving it the tone of a cry from the blind spirit of man for light and for redemption. The mind and body of the persona are associated with a closed lid reminiscent of the physical feature of lips in an earlier poem. Thus, the mind and body of man are blind to the longings of his soul. In contrast to the mind and body, Toomer equates the soul with the spirits again in physical terms of a little finger. The poem is the anguished cry to these Spirits, asking for the unity of body, mind and soul. Toomer successfully expresses this anguish by the confusion of these images, by the paradox of the strength and weakness of the soul, and by the uncertainty of the prayer, "My voice could not carry to you did you dwell in stars. . . ."<sup>2</sup>

"Harvest Song," the next poem, is also concerned with

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<sup>1</sup>Ibid., p. 131.

<sup>2</sup>Ibid.

the voice of man crying in the wilderness. It is the last poem in Cane, and it is one of Toomer's most successful poems. It is also experimental in form, being written in free verse composed of mostly short simple sentences. It has eleven stanzas which resemble paragraphs in form, thus giving it the intimacy of a tale. The poem is constructed around the persona, a reaper who has cradled his oats but in his fatigue is too tired to bind them. As in Toomer's rural poems, he uses this image not for itself but for the symbolism with which it provides him. Thus, Toomer pictures the persona standing amid the plenty of his labor hungering and thirsting, unable to taste the grain he cracks with his teeth and longing to see others in his isolation. This is Toomer's portrait of modern man. For all his accomplishments, and in part because of them, he is isolated, alone, unable to communicate with others or even to enjoy the fruits of his own labor. He is again Robert who began this section of Cane.

Once more, Toomer uses physical images to convey immaterial concepts. The hunger of the reaper is a spiritual hunger. The dust that blinds his eyes symbolizes his spiritual blindness, and thus his hunger is also a hunger to see, and the dust is thus a feared force. The latter fact is told in parenthesis, an aside whispered to be kept from the ears of a feared enemy. The persona begins to call "eoho" recalling "Calling Jesus," but breaks off in fear. Even should another offer him charity he would turn away from it because this

charity would demand a knowledge of the persona's hunger.

Toomer continues with the same physical images, stressing modern man's isolation. The dust has stopped the persona's ears, making him deaf. In the longing to hear the songs of others, again Toomer represents modern man's fear of communication; thus, the persona longs for other human voices to reach him even though in their strangeness they would deafen him. Once again Toomer repeats the images. "I hunger. My throat is dry. Now that the sun has set and I am chilled, I fear to call. (Eoho, my brothers!)"<sup>1</sup> The repetition gives the poem an ironic song-like quality, and the parenthesis again emphasizes the overwhelming fear of the persona. The natural pain of the persona, beating his palms against the stubble of his harvesting, is again used to emphasize modern man's dehumanization. Thus, the persona considers his pain sweet because this, at least, he can feel, can taste, but even this does not bring him redeeming self-knowledge and leaves him yet unfulfilled. Thus, Toomer, picturing man in the natural image of a solitary reaper, hungry and blinded and deafened by the dust of his own labor, succeeds in painting the desolation of modern civilization.

This poem is followed by the tale of "Bona and Paul," the last tale in the urban section of the novel. The tale is similar in construction to all the other tales in this section, the attention being divided almost equally between the

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<sup>1</sup>Ibid., p. 133.



protagonist and antagonist. Again, Toomer uses the combination of an implied narrator and the direct revelation of the characters' consciousness. The cause and effect plot is also a plot of action ending with Paul's loss of Bona's love due to his rigid character and thought. In addition, Toomer again uses the techniques of treating internal thoughts as dramatic dialogue and of highlighting his incidents by treating them as separate sections as if spotlighting them on a stage.

Paul, like many of Toomer's other protagonists, is a divided personality of black and white blood, a "dictie" like Esther. A Southerner, he has come North to study and is "passing" for white. Bona, who is also a Southerner, is a white girl who is attracted to him. Like Bob Stone, she is drawn to Paul because of his blackness. She sees him as vital, alive, free as opposed to the others, who are sterile and regimented. Because he is out of step and different from the rest of her society, he is beautiful, the spirit of nature, the harvest moon. Yet, Bona, like Bob, is torn by her love for Paul; she, too, is conscious of the watchful eyes of society like Muriel and considers her love for Paul a type of insanity, and also like Muriel, she and Paul are to be teachers: "they are going to be teachers, and go out into the world . . . and give precision to the movements of sick people who all their lives have been drilling."<sup>1</sup> Thus, Toomer uses the drilling as a symbol of stifling uniformity, and the basketball game as the game of

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<sup>1</sup>Ibid., p. 134.

life and love. The first section ends, having established Bona's attraction to Paul.

The second section establishes both Paul's roots and his feelings for Bona. His passion for Bona he finds stifling and blinding; it fills his world with distortion and chaos. Toomer aligns him with the divided and "over-civilized" characters of John and the narrator of "Avey." His philosopher's mind (men have grown cold, he maintains since the first philosopher) chooses to know and not to love. Not that he believes knowing is greater than loving, but it is from knowing that he receives joy. And in his knowledge lies the consciousness of his own blackness, and his uncertainty of its place in this white world he has chosen. Thus, Toomer emphasizes Paul's uncertainty through the symbol of the two windows in his room. Through one he sees his roots, reaching back to the hills of Georgia, and his heritage in the lullaby of the black woman sung under the lusting eyes of a southern planter. Yet at the second window, Bona's window, there is only blackness.

This tale for the first time in Cane uses rounded secondary characters in the representation as "Kabnis" will later. Art, Paul's roommate and Helen, his girlfriend, are used for comparison and contrast to develop the characters of Paul and Bona. Unlike Paul, whose warmth and blackness make him akin to the moon, Art is described in terms of an electric light that is snapped on mechanically. For all his professed friendship, Art sees Paul merely as a stereotype rather than as an

individual, ironically, believing himself the driving force of the two. Understanding this, Paul knows that he is invisible to Art, and thus his anger is also unknown and undreamed of by Art. Yet, Paul dreams of one day beating sight into Art as the invisible man and Bigger will later dream of doing to others. Toomer pictures Art as a curiously tinted purple color, the same color as his unsubstantial dreams. His white skin is strangely dead at night like his song, and Paul concludes the nights are too strong for white skins which pale with the moon, that evil symbol. So they seek refuge from the night in houses and sitting rooms keeping life out like Rhobert.

The third section also introduces Helen, Art's girlfriend, who is a puffy yellow image compared to Bona. Like Bona, she is also attracted to Paul because of his blackness. But unlike Bona, she believes that no girl could really "love" Paul; so she plays with him, and it is all an illusion like the song, "Little Liza Jane." Later she will deny and denounce him; again the hate-love conflict between white and black can be seen.

So they all journey to the land of illusion, the Crimson Gardens, the land of false dreams where all are to shout a hollow hurrah. Toomer emphasizes the falseness of this paradise through various signs. The way there is strewn with dead leaves, and the air smells of stale gasoline. They seem to be traveling isolated from the solid touch of the ground. Paul is cool and detached like the dust. Bona's face too is pale,

like death, and her words are emotionless. Even her beauty seems remote and untouchable. Yet, when she offers herself, her very closeness burns Paul. Love is a dry grain in Paul's mouth; thus Toomer connects him with the reaper in the "Harvest Song," forever cut off from others. And Bona wonders at his coolness, which is his denial of his blackness, and knows something is indeed wrong.

Section four concentrates on the final incident at the Crimson Gardens. The way to this paradise is guarded by a large black man in a crimson uniform. Toomer uses him as a signal which represents reality in the face of illusion, black truth in the face of white lies. And as the white audience, portrayed as dehumanized owl-eyed hyenas, guess Paul to be every race and nationality except that which they seek to deny, to make invisible, the black guard looks on with knowing eyes. Paul is aware of his invisibility; yet, in the pain he feels, in his isolation and in his difference, he finds a definition of himself. As Becky was filled by the words of the townspeople, Paul's emptiness is filled by their stares. He begins in his pain to see himself not clearly but at least in outline. And in this vision, the others also become beautiful in their humanity. But, now he sees that he does not really know them at all, that he has come into this world of illusion, this crimson bubble so like Art's dreams, with strangers.

With his philosopher's mind, Paul judges Bona "a priori". Thus, in his blindness, he believes he sees with opened

eyes and cannot imagine, ironically, unawakened eyes in his dreaming. So, in this place of illusion, filled with the sounds of childish nursery rhymes, all things seem possible. Even the moon, Toomer's symbol of evil, seems peaceful as it was to the bees in "Beehive." Once again, Paul and Bona spar at love, and their passions rise. But as they leave the Gardens to consummate their love, the purple of the Gardens is marked for Paul by the black spot of the guard at the gilded door. As his divided self, the guard's face is two-sided, one smiling and the other leering, and Paul feels compelled to answer this face. He insists that the illusion is reality and that something beautiful is about to happen. He tells the black face that ". . . white faces are petals of roses. That dark faces are petals of dusk."<sup>1</sup> He blindly sees the Gardens as roses at dusk, giving them the ability to join black and white in an image of beauty. But, he has been blinded by the illusion of the Gardens, believing them real, and by the light of his own rhetoric as was the narrator of "Avey." He has not seen into the dark window of Bona with his thoughts because his over-civilized thoughts have suppressed his spontaneous love. So, as he leaves the Gardens, the world of dreams and illusions that he has equated with love and reality, bursts like a purple bubble. Bona is gone.

This tale again exhibits Toomer's ability with words, for example, Art's thoughts "Nuts. Nuttish. Nuttery. Nut-

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<sup>1</sup>Ibid., p. 153.

meg,"<sup>1</sup> stressing that Paul's blackness is always on his mind. Again Toomer's images are poetic: "the bare-back rider balances agilely on the applause which is the tail of her song."<sup>2</sup> However, in spite of this, the tale is not as successful as his preceding tale. It is not as clearly related to Toomer's over-all theme. The moral issues are blunted by the many weaknesses in Paul's character which distract from the central issue of Paul's inability to accept his blackness. Toomer, however, deals with this problem more successfully in his last tale, "Kabnis."

This final tale completes the circular pattern of Toomer's work. Its setting is again rural Georgia, and it deals with the essential problems that have plagued Toomer's characters both in the first and second sections of Cane. Toomer stresses the circular pattern by returning to rural Georgia in the final section of Cane, and by this division, he emphasizes the universality of his theme. In this final section, Toomer gathers all of his previous images and unites all of his previous themes through the tale of "Kabnis." Once more, he depicts clearly how in a dehumanized racially divided world, man has turned against man and both the attacker and the victim are destroyed. Here once again are the Karinths, the Johns, the Rhoberts, the Pauls. Kabnis is the sum and total of them all. Kabnis is the final divided twisted product of modern civilization.

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<sup>1</sup>Ibid., p. 147.

<sup>2</sup>Ibid., p. 149.

Toomer also calls on many of his previous literary devices. The tale is divided into sections, each section highlighting an incident in the decline of Kabnis. In addition, "Kabnis" is organized as an instructional plot and as a plot of character, tracing Kabnis' steady decline to a mere shadow of a man due to his thoughts and the action of the plot. Here, Toomer varies the point of view from his preceding tales. This time the reader sees essentially only into one character's mind, the protagonist, Kabnis, and this insight ends when Kabnis fails to stand up to Hanby and allows Halsey to direct him. As the power of direction completely slips from him to those outside of him, the reader then views the characters almost entirely through their dialogue and their actions narrated by an implied narrator. In sections four through six, Toomer emphasizes the internal dramatic quality of the characters' lives through dramatization rather than narration, reducing narration to a minimum.

The protagonist, Ralph Kabnis, a northern school teacher, who resembles many of Toomer's other weak male characters, has taken up residence in the South. He is, like so many of Toomer's characters, a man of divided blood and personality, running from himself. He has come back to the South, but he cannot accept his past, his southern heritage of slavery and bastardy. Like the invisible man, he blinds himself to his true identity, and his hatred and love of the black race which, in turn, is his own self-hatred. His world

is chaos composed of a mixture of reality, illusion and nightmare. And his schizophrenia finds a concrete expression in his very constant fear of being lynched. His soul, which he periodically denies and affirms, whimpers like the little dog in "Calling Jesus," cowardly, afraid to accept the redemptive suffering that is the pain and beauty of life as Dan Moore understood. He vacillates between calling Jesus and seeing religion as the white man's tool to subjugate the black man. As many of Toomer's other over-civilized and sterile male characters, Kabnis sees himself as an orator, a creator of words. But his words, shaped to fit his soul, lacking action and formed from the nightmare of his life, become twisted, ugly, dead things as this plot of character traces Kabnis' steady decline to a dehumanized specter of a man.

In contrast to Kabnis, Toomer develops the characters of Hanby, Layman, Halsey, Lewis, Carrie and Stella. Hanby, who is continually referred to as a cockroach, prefigures the character of Bledsoe in Invisible Man. He is one who rationalizes his fear and calls his cowardice science, as the Brotherhood in Invisible Man will do. He prides himself on his imagined superiority to other black men and humbles himself in a Bledsoe-like fashion to white men. When he is in the North, he assumes the mask in the best New England tradition. In addition, he spouts a Booker T. Washington type philosophy as a "representative of race relations," and like the Brotherhood finds little value in the individual.



. . . The progress of the Negro race is jeopardized whenever the personal habits and examples set by its guides and mentors fall below the acknowledge and hard-won standard of its average member. This institution, of which I am the humble president, was founded, and has been maintained at a cost of great labor and untold sacrifice. Its purpose is to teach our youth to live better, cleaner, more noble lives. To prove to the world that the Negro race can be just like any other race.<sup>1</sup>

Hanby is, indeed, an Uncle Tom.

Layman, a character Toomer also uses for contrast, survives in the South through adopting another type of black mask, ironically that of the preacher. His protection is his silence and his expressionless face. In the face of violence and hate, he blinds his eyes and ties his tongue and remains immobile to seem innocent.

Through Halsey, who is even more developed as a character, Toomer expresses still another way of black survival in the white South. He also is a descendant of the intermingling of black and white blood. That his past is out of joint, Toomer symbolizes by the fact that the family clock is no longer running. His great-grandfather was an English gentleman with daring eyes whose wife's sad, ugly, suffering but beautiful face reflects its black strain. Halsey is olive white, and Toomer ironically stresses the white is right "joke" by having him well liked and mothered in school because of his light color. Halsey has been North and to Europe, but has always come back to his place in Georgia. He has sought the answer to his life in education and books, but found them wanting. In his

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<sup>1</sup>Ibid., p. 186.

tools and work he finds the only manhood of which he is proud. His philosophy is that the whites will like you if you work for them. While he assumes the mask of playing dumb for the white man, he ponders but cannot find anything to latch on to; he turns to Lewis but fails to understand him. Only in his work does he find release from his thoughts and his fruitless search for something more to life. Thus, Toomer points out that only in his work can Halsey be a man and forget that "prejudice is everywhere about this country. An a nigger aint in much standin anywheres."<sup>1</sup>

The final contrast can be found in the figure of Lewis, whose entrance is heralded by the black song and purple flames of the land. Toomer uses Lewis as a signal. Like Barlo, he is strong, and like Dan Moore, he is a redemptive figure. Lewis is Toomer's modern version of a black redeemer folk figure. Like Dan and Barlo, he is considered to be strange and perhaps even crazy, like the crazy seers in Invisible Man, because both blacks and whites sense his power rooted in his deep penetrating knowledge. Unlike the other characters, he lives life like a man and has no need for a mask. He is what a stronger Kabnis might have been, and to Kabnis he seems to have come from his world of dreams. But, Lewis' redemptive strength is to be rejected by those he came to save. He has come like a god from some unknown place to fulfill a contract with himself. He is the Christ-like savior prophesied in "Calling Jesus,"

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<sup>1</sup>Ibid., p. 211.

but Kabnis, uprooted from the saving soil and divided within himself, will not reach out for his saving touch. Indeed, like Christ, Lewis is threatened with death by both the blacks and whites of the town. Ironically, Toomer has it that his eyes are to be shot out.

Lewis is thought to know others because of his self-knowledge and assurance. Unlike Kabnis, he has accepted and is his past. In the one insight given into Lewis' mind, he recognizes the old man as "a mute John the Baptist of a new religion--or a tongue-tied shadow of an old."<sup>1</sup> But, in calling him Father John, he finds him a paradox containing both. Indeed, Father John, whom Toomer constructs solely as a signal rather than a developed character, represents both possibilities. He is the father of the underground races, and though blind, he saw Jesus in the ricefields and preached God in the black song. As a dead blind father, a Fisher King, he gives birth to a muted folk who will rise from underground. Lewis recognizes him as his source, the pain and beauty of the South, the intermingling of black and white, twisted in their fusion. This is the truth that lies beneath the seeming surface of things, the nightmare just below reality found in the depths of the soul, here, and in the hole of the invisible man, and in the cellar with Bigger.

But, Toomer cannot round out the character of Lewis. The reader is only shown directly the working of Lewis' mind

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<sup>1</sup>Ibid.

once. All his other thoughts are recounted by the implied narrator, the other characters or his external actions. When Lewis leaves, overcome by the pain of those in the cellar, he remains as essentially opaque and mysterious to the reader as he does to the other characters. The modern savior seems a dead-end for Toomer. Therefore, the only ray of hope at the end of the tale radiates from Carrie K's communication with Father John. The latter's only spoken words are to accuse the white man of the sin of slavery, a dehumanizing sin that lies in the face of God himself. And the thuds on the floor above echo eternal agreement. Carrie then prays before this John the Baptist of a new religion asking for the coming of Jesus, and the light that streaks through the window is that of the newborn sun singing a birth-song to the earth. The white moon ever the symbol of evil in Cane has set and the golden, glowing child that takes its place warms the black folk in the hope of its light.

The figure of Carrie K is a portrait that combines many of Toomer's other women characters. In her olive-faced beauty, Lewis also sees her possible future in the southern town. He sees her spirit's bloom even now touched with bitterness like Karintha. Although drawn to Lewis, Carrie pulls away from him in fear of "sinning" like the character of Esther. Her care for Father John also gives her the maternal image of Avey, and Lewis also envisions her mothering Kabnis as the narrator of Avey was mothered. Yet, all of her vitality

and creativity, Lewis feels, is not understood even by Carrie herself, and the pain he feels for her is the pain of the South itself; Toomer once again is showing the results of a dehumanized world. Lewis knows, like Fern, taking Carrie North will not change her fate, and this is the fate from which Father John offers salvation.

Carrie is, in turn, contrasted to Stella who, although she too is beautiful, is already lost. Father John only reminds her of her father who died brokenhearted after a white man took his wife. Now, like Bigger, she no longer cares what happens to her. Halsey used to love her, but now like Karantha, she is beyond love.

In the tale of Kabnis, Toomer also makes use of the patterns of images and symbols that are prevalent throughout Cane. The tale begins with Kabnis' seeking escape from reality in reading, like Mrs. Pribby, while the winds whisper to his fear. The whiteness of his bed offers him no protection from the black night. The song, which Toomer introduces as the song of the wind, gathers echoes that sound throughout the novel, telling that in this white man's land, the blacks sing, but in their very song still lies the threat of lynching which hangs over the black children until the final river brings rest. The song radiates from the ambiguity of the word bear, "burn, bear black children."<sup>1</sup> It means simultaneously birth, endurance, oppression, and the strength to suffer. All

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<sup>1</sup>Ibid., p. 157.

of these qualities make up the black race, and by contrast Toomer portrays that this is what Kabnis cannot accept.

Kabnis, who has a weak chin, dreams of love and strength, and like Esther, he imposes his dream vision on reality. He is a dream, and he longs for his dream-self to become the soul of the South. But his divided self runs in fright from this possibility, and this fact is symbolized by the rat, a symbol which Wright later also uses. Toomer clearly foreshadows Kabnis' fate through his symbols. The hen that he kills, driven by the same passion that later motivates Bigger, the pine smoke, the courthouse tower, and the autumn moonlight, all Toomer's previous symbols of evil, are present. Indeed the moon still symbolizes the white man, who the wind sings is nursed at the breast of the black mother. The fall of both is ironically predicted through the echo of the nursery song.

Kabnis sees his cabin as a God-forsaken hole, a grave, a trap, but like the invisible man, he fails to see that he has always been in such a hole. His quarters are indeed the old quarters of the slaves whose ancestry he refuses to accept. So, as a bastard son, he both curses and blesses his Maker, denies His existence and affirms it: "God, he doesn't exist, but nevertheless He is ugly."<sup>1</sup> Like the townspeople in *Becky*, Kabnis blames God for his own guilt. Kabnis also resembles John, the manager's brother, because his mind and his heart are at war. In addition, like the persona in the

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<sup>1</sup>Ibid., p. 162.

"Harvest Song," he is forever alone and without self-knowledge. He is modern man who moves like a completely artificial man, recalling Toomer's portrait of Rhobert. And always, ever present on his mind, is the fear of being lynched. He yearns for the North, yet knowing that he also despised it; thus Toomer portrays that Kabnis' fear, like love in "Avey," is not lessened by a change in place. So Toomer uses the black folk, people, who are somehow redeemed, who sing, love and are at peace, to highlight Kabnis, who to sleep must think of nothing.

In the second section, Kabnis' fears of being lynched are brought to the surface. For the background of this action Toomer ironically uses the box-like, whitewashed church over whose tower the buzzards fly in a great spiral towards heaven. Again Toomer portrays organized religion as a conscience-soothing evil force in the South. The singing and moaning which draws fear, contempt, anger and pity from Kabnis, also sets the mood. Kabnis, like the invisible man, has been in hibernation, afraid of the cold and of getting stuck in the red mud which resembles the tar baby and is a symbol of his own blackness that he rejects. Kabnis' fear of lynching is portrayed as real enough because the white man is a constant threat, and lynching is, indeed, a possibility because no social position that the black man may obtain will remove this threat. (This theme will also be developed later by Wright and Ellison.) The black man's position is compared to that of the rabbit, the folk symbol, who is always in danger and who

must always, therefore, be cunning. As tale after tale of inhuman violence perpetrated against the black man by the white man is recited to Kabnis, his fear can be seen to be akin to the fear of Bigger Thomas. Ironically, the only defense Toomer has a character offer is self-destruction in the face of death, like Sam Raymon whose Deep River was a Georgia stream, and once again, the reader is reminded of Rhobert and modern society's dehumanization.

Unable to face the real issue of his own cowardliness, Kabnis falls back on criticizing the emotional reaction to religion. (The invisible man will also later object to this show of emotion.) He believes the biggest sinners to be the loudest Christians; yet he fails to see how this comparison applies to himself. So as the shouting reaches a crescendo, the tale of Mame Lamkins is told. She is killed by the whites for protecting her husband, and her unborn baby is ripped living from her womb and struck with a knife to a tree. The ultimate violence and most inhuman act is committed; like the invisible man's castration dream, it symbolizes the attempt to murder all future generations of the black race. Ironically, at this moment, Toomer has the shouting woman in the church call out that she, at last, has found Jesus and that one more sinner is coming home, and the church sings

My Lord, what a mourning,  
When the stars begin to fall.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>Ibid., p. 180.



as Kabnis runs in fear of his own death. The congregation's song is Toomer's ironic comment on both the church and Kabnis. The stars are falling as the world is sinking. Yet, there remains one hope suggested by the remaining verses of this black folk spiritual, which Toomer leaves unfinished.

You'll hear the trumpet sound,  
To wake the nations underground,  
Looking to my God's right hand,  
When the stars begin to fall.

You'll hear the sinner mourn,  
To wake the nations underground,  
Looking to my God's right hand,  
When the stars begin to fall.

You'll hear the Christian shout,  
To wake the nations underground,  
Looking to my God's right hand,  
When the stars begin to fall.<sup>1</sup>

The underground races yet offer salvation to this world of chaos. To them in the person of Lewis, Kabnis must turn.

Instead, fearing his own lynching, Kabnis runs as both Bigger and the invisible man will run, and like the rabbit, he fears the hounds coming after him. He has become, in his fear, a scarecrow replica of a man, covered with the mud of the tar baby from whom he has always run. Thus, he seeks refuge in the darkness of his hole like the invisible man, and becomes the "boy" Halsey calls him, dependent as a child.

In the fourth section, Toomer stresses Kabnis' continual decline by having him take up residence with Halsey. Toom-

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<sup>1</sup>The words for this spiritual were provided by Professor Thomas Geovanis of the Mayfair College Humanities Department.

er details Halsey's shop making it a symbol of black heritage in the South. It is described as constructed prior to the Civil War, and it bears the marks of that confrontation. In its heart is a cellar known as "The Hole," the home of Father John and also the scene of Halsey's debaucheries. The Hole represents the heart of the black man, the "heart of darkness," and it contains the contradictions and the paradoxes of his Southern ancestry. Toomer ironically refers to it as an old "infirmary" used to cure those slaves who could not or would not willingly be slaves; they were cured as society "cured" Bigger. Thus, Kabnis has retreated to still another hole.

This is also the scene of the fifth section. This section begins, ironically, with a birth image.

Night, soft belly of a pregnant Negress, throbs evenly against the torso of the South. Night throbs a womb-song to the South. Cane-and-cotton-fields, pine forests, cypress swamps, sawmills, and factories are fecund at her touch. Night's womb-song set them singing. Night winds are the breathing of the unborn child whose calm throbbing in the belly of a Negress sets them somnolently singing.<sup>1</sup>

But, the womb-song of the South ends in a bloody abortion as Toomer repeats the wind's song, its dying sounds echoing "burn, bear black children" recalling the inhuman murder of Mame Lamkin's black baby. The soft promise of the night, which Toomer equates with the black race, is murdered by man's hate for man. Toomer also points out this dehumanizing racial hatred through the symbol of the white paint on the wealthier houses which shines with the chill blue glitter of the distant

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<sup>1</sup>Toomer, Cane, pp. 208-09.

stars, recalling the song of the church congregation. In contrast he pictures the black cabins as a warm purple blur, the one ray of hope in a sterile cold land.

Out of this night, Cora, Stella, Lewis, and Kabnis descend into the Hole, the home of the underground races. Like the invisible man's hole, it is warm and dry, unlike a grave. In this underworld, hidden away from the passing life above, sits the old man on a platform, Toomer signifying that he is like a prophet, like a ruler. Kabnis, whom Toomer parallels to the persona of "Harvest Song," is blind and deaf to the meaning of Father John. He sees him as the symbol of hell, failing to understand this underworld is instead the way to salvation. Only for Kabnis himself dressed in grotesque mock solemnity does the Hole become hell, representing his buried underlying fear, the part of himself he refuses to bring forth. Like the invisible man, Kabnis has always been in this hole, lost and without identity. Although he knows that Father John is underground, left like a dead man in a black grave by a dehumanized society, he fails to see that the Hole is, indeed, his own grave that has always been with him through his own slavery.

Yet, ironically, in his very lack of identity, Kabnis insists on the importance of his name. He uses it as a talisman to shield himself from the searching eyes of Lewis. Also ironically, he uses his southern "blue-blood" past to divorce himself from Father John, whom he blindly equates with a false

god of the Christian religion and a false guardian of the race like Hanby. Kabnis, in whom the blue and the black join like Bernice, cannot contain the contradictions of himself: white, black; slave, master. He cannot unite them into a whole; so, he remains split and drying like the stale whitewashed wood of Washington. But his deformity, Kabnis blindly blames on others, not seeing as the invisible man finally does, that his sickness is also created from within. In his fear, the only healing Kabnis can see for his soul is destruction at the hands of the white man struck to a tree like Mame Lamkins' baby, cured as Bigger will be cured.

Thus, hopelessly, in the last section, he is now to be led and mothered. Therefore, when Carrie K offers to resurrect his soul through her communion with Father John, Kabnis still rejects the old man as part of himself. "th whole world is a conspiracy t sin, especially in America, an against me. I'm the victim of their sin. I'm what sin is. Does he look like me?"<sup>1</sup> The destruction of Kabnis is now complete.

"Kabnis" is Toomer's most complex tale, and it is his greatest literary achievement. Once again, Toomer makes his point of view functional in his tale. As Kabnis becomes less of a man, the reader no longer is shown Kabnis' consciousness. As the power of direction slips from him to others, Toomer presents Kabnis solely through his actions with a minimal amount of interpretation by the implied narrator. This fact combined

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<sup>1</sup>Ibid., p. 236.

with Kabnis' empty actions emphasizes his dehumanization as he moves further and further away from other men. He becomes an "it" instead of a "he." Thus, the plot of action demonstrates that Kabnis because of his thoughts and character must be destroyed by his own fear.

Once more, Toomer's poetic style and imagery vividly enhance his plot. His use of the simple sentence and the fragment emphasize Kabnis' irresolution and hesitation. His use of the metaphor gives flesh to his representation: "The body of the world is bull-necked. A dream is a soft face that fits uncertainly upon it."<sup>1</sup> Finally, his uses of song, symbols and folklore deepen the meaning of the tale and make the character of Kabnis itself symbolic. The "burn, bear black children" that haunts Kabnis' mind symbolizes that Kabnis, indeed, is America's original sin of slavery become flesh. Therefore, as Kabnis goes from one hole to another, like a rabbit seeking refuge, with him go the others, Halsey, Layman, Hanby, who also cannot face their twisted lives.

The only weakness in the tale is Toomer's treatment of Lewis. Only at one point is the reader allowed to see into Lewis' consciousness. The only other insights into his character are provided by the implied narrator, the other characters and the dialogue itself. However, since Lewis remains essentially opaque to the others, since on the whole they reject his redemptive role, he also remains a flat character to

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<sup>1</sup>Ibid., p. 158.

the reader. Therefore, he fails to provide the symbolic redemptive force that Toomer intends him to present. This throws the tale strangely off balance when Lewis suddenly vanishes in section five after having identified Father John as the source of the underground races. Thus, this choice of a remote point of view, while it works for the character of Kabnis after section three, fails in the presentation of Lewis.

Because the structure of Cane as a whole has been examined, it is now possible to come to some critical judgment of its structure. As Wayne Booth points out in his brilliant study The Rhetoric of Fiction, it is not so much the type of structure that an author chooses but rather his ability to execute control over his structure that determines the success of his work. Toomer in Cane chose by his episodic structure to emphasize the divided rough-edged personalities of his protagonists. He depends on this theme in both his poetry and tales to unify his work. However, the episodic quality of the novel itself tends to obscure his didactic message. In addition, Toomer often chooses to use narrators who are too removed from the consciousness of his protagonists to present the reader with a moving insight into the protagonists' minds. As a result, occasionally the characters remain undefined, and the reader has difficulty sympathizing with their lot. For example, Fern's motives for immobility must be inferred entirely from external circumstances; thus her anguished cry fails to move the reader. It is similar to Max's guilt-of-the-nation

thesis without the actions of Bigger to give it its impact. At other times, Toomer uses an implied narrator to tell, in Booth's sense of the word, the character's motivation, and occasionally Toomer moves haphazardly in and out of their consciousness at random, as in the tale of "Bona and Paul." Still at other times, Toomer presents his characters through just their own dialogue and sparse actions in a manner closely resembling the drama, but as Booth points out, this limits the psychological development of the characters that the novel rather than the play is capable of and should give. Therefore, Toomer's work lacks the wholeness and the depth that Ellison's and Wright's will later achieve. Yet, in spite of these weaknesses, Cane soars to new heights for the black novelist.

In addition, Toomer's poetry, which he introduces in a creative way using it to link his narratives and reinforce his theme, deepens the impact of Cane. His best poems combine the cadences of the black folk song, the wordplay of the metaphysical poets, and the haunting judgments of modern verse. For example, his "Song of the Son" stresses repetition in its word pattern, particularly in its use of consonance, which gives it a melancholy echo which functions as a reinforcement for Toomer's theme. Thus, the rhythm of the poem itself becomes the song that the poet promises will be eternally sung. As in Shakespeare's sonnet, the poem itself becomes the immortal record of the plaintive soul of the song-touched slave.

Another example of Toomer's successful use of word-

play can be seen in his poem "Conversion." Once again he is able to make his form itself his matter. His use of the Spanish words "cassava" and "palabra" demonstrates his theme that the African has yielded to new words that have corrupted his sense of identity and, therefore, the strength of his language. This use of form to illustrate theme can also be seen in "Her Lips Are Copper Wire." Here the very romantic structure of the poem, reminiscent of a Shakespearean sonnet, is used directly to set off Toomer's grim modern images, which depict modern man's loss of his capability to love.

Finally, Toomer's best poem, "Harvest Song," is an example of his perfection of the use of form to illustrate theme. As in "Song of the Son," Toomer again uses repetition to give the poem its folk song cadence. And once again this form functions ironically to illustrate Toomer's theme. Here is the harvest song that celebrates sterility. The very freedom of the poem's structure points out the contrasting rigidity of the persona whose bountiful harvest has brought him only hunger, thirst, and emptiness. Thus, Toomer makes the entire poem function as his symbol of modern man who, isolated from his brothers, stands among his plentiful goods, withering and dying.

Thus, Toomer's moving style, with its powerful poetic form combined with his pulsing narrative drive, signals the birth of a new vision. Now the black novelist and poet has clothed the themes of protest in the creative vision of true



artistry. Now the path has been laid open for other black writers such as Richard Wright and Ralph Ellison.

## CHAPTER III

### RICHARD WRIGHT

Richard Wright was the spokesman for the problems of the black man existing in the ghetto. He was the first black writer to focus national attention on the stifling life in the urban ghetto intensified by the depression. Like Toomer's and Ellison's, Wright's art stemmed from a personal drive to express a very personal vision. Native Son is Wright's protest of America's divided conscience. It is a reflection of Wright's own sense of justice and identity.

It is fitting that Wright should have become the voice of the inner city because like so many black men, he had migrated from the South to the North, searching to better his life. He had been born on a plantation near Natchez, Mississippi in 1908. His childhood had been marred with personal tragedy. His father had deserted the family when Wright was five, and his mother became paralyzed when he was ten. Black Boy, his autobiography, would tell these experiences in the harshest light. "It would be autobiographical but it would be more than that; he would use himself as a symbol of all the brutality and cruelty wreaked upon the black man by the Southern environment."<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>Constance Webb, Richard Wright: Biography (New York: G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1968), p. 205.

At fifteen, Wright went to Memphis, where he worked to earn enough to go North. In 1927, Wright was able to go to Chicago. There, he held a variety of odd jobs: porter, postal clerk, orderly, agent for a burial society, all of which provided him background for his later novels. During the depression, Wright worked for the South Side Boys' Club where, he would later state, he met the models for Bigger Thomas. It was while working here that Wright joined the Chicago John Reed Club and became interested in communism. Working through such front organizations as the John Reed Clubs, the Communist Party recruited many young black writers. Its organs, such as New Masses, offered these writers an opportunity to publish at a time when many other avenues of publication were closed to blacks. In this manner, Wright became interested in the Communist Party, joining it in 1934. He states at the time that he joined the John Reed Club and was introduced to communism that

I hungered to share the dominant assumptions of my time and act upon them, I did not want to feel, like an animal in a jungle, that the whole world was alien and hostile. I did not want to make individual war or peace. So far I had managed to keep humanly alive through transfusions from books. In my concrete relations with others I had encountered nothing to encourage me to believe in my feelings. It had been by denying what I was with my eyes, disputing what I felt with my body, that I had managed to keep my identity intact.<sup>1</sup>

Thus, as Bone points out,

For Richard Wright, Marxism became a way of ordering his experience; it became, in literary terms, his unifying

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<sup>1</sup>Ibid., p. 122.

mythos. It provided him with a means of interpreting the urban scene which the Harlem School had lacked. Above all, it provided him with an intellectual framework for understanding his life as a Negro.<sup>1</sup>

It was during the time of his involvement with the Communist Party that Wright wrote his most successful works. While he was employed as a writer on the Federal Writers' Project, American Stuff published one of his stories which resulted in the publication of his first book, Uncle Tom's Children, in 1938. The critical reception of this work was enthusiastic, and Wright's career was begun. In Uncle Tom's Children, Wright ". . . set himself a conscious problem: what quality of will must the Negro possess to live and die in a country which denies his humanity?"<sup>2</sup> Wright found that the symbols of Christianity were the expressions of the black's will to live, and thus he found their use valuable to the story. In addition the characters' understanding of their hate was to be their first move to "freedom." Uncle Tom's Children was expanded in 1940 to include Wright's essay "The Ethics of Living Jim Crow," and his story "Bright and Morning Star," which was originally published in New Masses in 1939. However, Wright was not satisfied with the work because its sentimental melodrama had made ladies weep. He wanted to write a novel that would not allow for such a childish reaction. He wanted to write an overwhelmingly powerful book.

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<sup>1</sup>Bone, The Negro Novel in America, p. 144.

<sup>2</sup>Webb, Richard Wright: Biography, p. 157.

The result was Native Son, which was published in 1940.

From the very first, Native Son was unique. The popular reaction to a black writer's novel was unprecedented. The book was chosen as a Book-of-the-Month selection and sold out rapidly. By 1944, Native Son had sold over 300,000 copies, and eventually the novel was to be translated into nearly fifty languages. The popularity of black writers, which had ended with the Harlem Renaissance about the Spring of 1930, was revived and expanded by Native Son. Indeed, Native Son made it possible for many black novelists, who previously had been unable to publish their works, to find publishing outlets. Native Son had proved that black authors also could be money-makers and reach a large audience of both black and white readers.

In addition to this reaction, since Native Son first appeared in print, critics have been at war over its ultimate artistic worth. The criticism related to Native Son alone proves David Littlejohn's thesis that "the literature of the race war over polarizes Americans: it forces them to take sides they would rarely take in life."<sup>1</sup> It is for this reason that some black readers felt ashamed of Bigger Thomas while some whites felt threatened. These feelings account for the twisting and turning of many critics, seeking to pigeonhole the novel's effects. Finally, it accounts for the fact that

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<sup>1</sup>David Littlejohn, Black on White (New York: The Viking Press, 1966), p. 9.

Wright became a "myth" in his own time.

All of this has made it extremely difficult to examine Native Son objectively in the light of its artistic value and to evaluate without sentimentality its place in American letters. The critics who have written about the novel can roughly be divided into two categories: those who have judged its worth by its external social effect, and those who have attempted to judge it on the basis of its internal artistry. Although within these large classifications are varying shades of judgments, this polarization itself accounts for the critical conflicts concerning Wright as an artist. In attempting to break down the myths that surround Native Son, to judge it on its own merits, it is necessary to examine how criticism has contributed to their creation.

At the time of the very first book reviews of the novel, critics lost their ability to make clear judgments in the emotional haze that is an integral part of the American race struggle. In one of the earliest reviews, by Jonathan Daniels in The Saturday Review of Literature, the critic clearly shows his defensiveness: "As a Southerner I may be suspect, but I think this book is better as a headlong, hard-boiled narrative than as any preaching about race relations in America, North or South."<sup>1</sup> This statement clearly shows that the literature of the race war, as Littlejohn calls it, unbalances

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<sup>1</sup>Jonathan Daniels, "Man Against the World," The Saturday Review of Literature (March 2, 1940), p. 5.

critics causing them to make statements that one suspects they would truly avoid in other circumstances. Thus, out of Daniels' defensiveness comes his haltingly uneven review which attempts to concentrate on Wright as an artist. He praises Wright for his compelling narration which "somehow" he feels enlists the reader's sympathies to such an extent that Bigger and the reader become one. He finds Wright a story-teller with ". . . an objectivity which is irresistible,"<sup>1</sup> so irresistible that for terror in narration ". . . there are few pages in modern American literature which will compare. . . ." <sup>2</sup> Yet, when Daniels feels compelled to criticize Book III as ". . . a slowing of pace toward solemnity and almost--not quite--to sentimentality,"<sup>3</sup> he does so by way of apology, asserting that Bigger is not just a symbol of the black race but rather equally a true symbol for all man's failures.

Clifton Fadiman's review in *The New Yorker* on March 2, 1940, also attempts to concentrate on Wright as an artist, but occasionally slips into the sociological approach. Fadiman praises the novel as ". . . the most powerful American novel to appear since The Grapes of Wrath."<sup>4</sup> He believes that Native Son reveals ". . . what it means to be a Negro in the United States of America seventy-seven years after the Emancipation

<sup>1</sup>Ibid.      <sup>2</sup>Ibid.      <sup>3</sup>Ibid.

<sup>4</sup>Clifton Fadiman, "A Black American Tragedy," The New Yorker (March 2, 1940), pp. 52-54.

Proclamation."<sup>1</sup> One suspects that the latter statement would later have placed him in the Irving Howe pro-Wright camp of Wright criticism as opposed to the Baldwin-Ellison philosophy. This stress on the social importance of the novel leads Fadiman to compare it to Theodore Dreiser's An American Tragedy because "Native Son does for the Negro what Theodore Dreiser in An American Tragedy did a decade and a half ago for the bewildered, inarticulate American white."<sup>2</sup> Then returning again to concentrating on the novel itself, Fadiman finds both books similar in theme and technique and their "paralyzing effect" on the reader. Yet, while agreeing with Henry Seidel Canby's comments on the book jacket that Native Son is the ". . . finest novel as yet written by an American Negro,"<sup>3</sup> Fadiman is not blind to the novel's numerous defects as a work of art, even though he feels that these defects are only seen in retrospect because of the novel's gripping intensity. Wright, he feels, is ". . . too explicit. He says many things over and over again. His characterizations of upper-class whites are paper-thin and confess unfamiliarity. . . . He overdoes his melodrama from time to time."<sup>4</sup> But even though Fadiman finds Dreiser's novel better controlled, he believes Native Son will have as much impact on a reader; interestingly enough, Fadiman does not really say why. But perhaps a clue can be found in his believe that Wright has the two qualities necessary for a good novelist--"passion and intelligence."<sup>5</sup> As

<sup>1</sup> Ibid.<sup>2</sup> Ibid.<sup>3</sup> Ibid.<sup>4</sup> Ibid.<sup>5</sup> Ibid.



many of those critics who find Wright's work of great social importance, Fadiman tends to stress as most essential the depth of the writer's emotion.

Peter Monro Jack in a review in The New York Times Book Review on March 3, 1940 also compares Native Son to An American Tragedy. However, Jack lacks the critical judgment of Fadiman, finding almost no fault with the novel except for the fact that Bigger is "too articulate."<sup>1</sup> In the review Jack makes some very strange statements in relation to the novel. For example, he asserts that ". . . Dreiser's white boy and Wright's black boy are equally killed in the electric chair not for being criminals--since the crime in each case was unpremeditated--but for being social misfits."<sup>2</sup> The critic later states that Bigger ". . . commits another crime (this time merely the murder of his Negro mistress) . . . ." <sup>3</sup> Thus, Jack misses the entire purpose of Bigger's second murder, the fact that Bigger's acts were in the greater sense premeditated, a difference that Wright wished to make as opposed to Dreiser. Due to this faulty interpretation, Jack sees society and environment totally to blame for Bigger, and therefore he feels that the book ". . . makes the reader realize and respond to, as he has probably never done before, the actual, dangerous status of the Negro in America."<sup>4</sup> This is also the critic's

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<sup>1</sup>Peter Monro Jack, "A Tragic Novel of Negro Life in America," The New York Times Book Review (March 3, 1940), p. 2.

<sup>2</sup>Ibid.

<sup>3</sup>Ibid.

<sup>4</sup>Ibid.

reason for finding Max's speech "brilliant."<sup>1</sup> Again a type of sociological response accounts for Jack's closing statements: "Mr. Wright does spoil his story at the end by insisting on Bigger's fate as representative of the whole Negro race and making Bigger himself say so. But this is a minor fault in a good cause."<sup>2</sup> Finally, Jack's entire attitude may be summed up in his statement that Wright is important not "merely as the best Negro writer, but as an American author as distinctive as any of those now writing."<sup>3</sup>

Milton Rugoff's review in the New York Herald Tribune Book Review of March 3, 1940 is also a faulty judgment of Native Son. Rugoff sees the novel as "the tragedy of a race."<sup>4</sup> Bigger is ". . . 250 years of Negro frustration incarnate."<sup>5</sup> Therefore, Rugoff finds the violence in Native Son justifiable in terms of the novel; it can be traced to a ". . . significant reflex . . . to the social set-up that conditioned it."<sup>6</sup> Based on this judgment, Rugoff goes on to state that the third section of the novel raises the work to the ". . . whole tragedy of the Negro spirit in a white world."<sup>7</sup> Thus, he sees Max's speech as the strongest section of Native Son, and Bigger's relationship with Max as not only believable but one of the ". . . most moving of human gestures."<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>Ibid.    <sup>2</sup>Ibid.    <sup>3</sup>Ibid.

<sup>4</sup>Milton Rugoff, "A Feverish Dramatic Intensity," New York Herald Tribune Book Review (March 3, 1940), p. 5.

<sup>5</sup>Ibid.    <sup>6</sup>Ibid.    <sup>7</sup>Ibid.    <sup>8</sup>Ibid.

Like Peter Monro Jack, Rugoff admits there are faults in the structure of the novel, melodrama, complications, confusion, " . . . but in the end these all seem easy to overlook, negligible imperfections on the surface of an extraordinary story movingly told."<sup>1</sup> Rugoff is also influenced not by the novel itself but by the race war that lies outside of the novel. This is what he reads into Native Son, and this is why he can state that " . . . we know without being told that fathoms beneath Bigger's terrifying public personality lies a core of trembling flesh within which rots the seeds of the man who might have been."<sup>2</sup>

Margaret Marshall's review in The Nation on March 16, 1940, also takes the sociological approach. She begins her review with the blanket statement that "the Negro in America is confronted by two attitudes. He is treated either as an inferior and an outcast or as the member of an oppressed race who is therefore owed special consideration by 'enlightened' whites."<sup>3</sup> She has indeed accepted Bigger's view of the world. It is for this reason that the critic believes that Native Son bares " . . . the lower depths of the human and social relationship of black and whites. . . ."<sup>4</sup> Thus, the reader is the accessory of Bigger's crimes according to Marshall. Indeed, this is the reason she sees as the key to Wright's success

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<sup>1</sup>Ibid.      <sup>2</sup>Ibid.

<sup>3</sup>Margaret Marshall, "Black Native Son," The Nation (March 16, 1940), p. 367.

<sup>4</sup>Ibid.

" . . . Mr. Wright plays so directly upon the sense of guilt that is inevitably part of the white American's attitude toward his black fellow-citizens--that the critical faculties tend to be held in abeyance while one reads his book."<sup>1</sup> The latter statement certainly tells us more about the reviewer's sensibilities than about Native Son. It is for this reason that although Margaret Marshall finds defects in Native Son, in its characterizations and style, these defects are relatively unimportant to her in light of what she feels is the novel's maturity, which pales the eloquence of The Grapes of Wrath.

Another review that evaluates Native Son on the basis of its social impact is Malcolm Cowley's article in The New Republic on March 18, 1940. He finds that "Native Son is the most impressive American novel . . . since The Grapes of Wrath."<sup>2</sup> He traces Wright's progress as a writer, finding that in Native Son, Wright's sympathies have broadened, and his resentment is better controlled than in Uncle Tom's Children. The proof of this he finds, like most of the critics who view the book as being socially important, can be discovered in the novel's last section, which he feels is also its best part. Again the obvious weaknesses of the trial section are dismissed because of the novel's social message. His review ends with the far-reaching statement that, because

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<sup>1</sup>Ibid.

<sup>2</sup>Malcolm Cowley, "The Case of Bigger Thomas," The New Republic (March 18, 1940), p. 382.

of Bigger's humanity as well as his symbolic purpose, Wright had written " . . . an even better novel than he had planned."<sup>1</sup>

An even more extreme sociological view of Native Son can be found in Marguerite Wyke's review in Canadian Forum, May 1940. While comparing the novel to The Grapes of Wrath, the reviewer finds it of great importance because it is a novel by a black writer concerning "the negro problem."<sup>2</sup> Thus, she makes the following statement: "This book should arouse in Americans an awareness of the dangerous status of these inarticulate masses, the solution of whose problems constitutes a challenge to those who would strive for the realization of democratic ideals."<sup>3</sup> Further, she states that Native Son " . . . shows clearly that the violence and racial strife have become accepted modes of life and are the inevitable consequences of our social system," and thus Max's speech " . . . should be read by every person who denies to the negro or to any other human being 'life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness.'"<sup>4</sup> This concentration on the book's social importance accounts for almost the entire review. In one of the few mentions of the novel's artistic worth, the reviewer understandably finds, given her viewpoint, that Max's speech is "brilliant."<sup>5</sup> This is again an example of judgment clouded by per-

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<sup>1</sup>Ibid.

<sup>2</sup>Marguerite Wyke, "South Side Negro," Canadian Forum, (May 1940), p. 60.

<sup>3</sup>Ibid.

<sup>4</sup>Ibid.

<sup>5</sup>Ibid.

sonal reaction to the race problem in America.

On the heels of all these laudatory reviews comes perhaps the strangest review of all, that by Burton Rascoe in American Mercury in May of 1940. The review begins with the following statement: "Concerning no novel in recent times, with the possible exception of The Grapes of Wrath, have the reviewers in general displayed a more utterly juvenile confusion of values than they have shown in their ecstatic appraisal of Richard Wright's Native Son."<sup>1</sup> Mr. Rascoe then proceeds in the rest of the interview to make, essentially, the same mistakes. He feels that the confusion concerning Native Son is due to the fact that the critics have hitherto been insulated from tabloid literature or that, given the times, reviewers " . . . go easily haywire about anything which looks to them like a social document exposing 'conditions.'"<sup>2</sup>

Rascoe, on the other hand, believes that Native Son couldn't be worse in the most important aspects of the novel. To prove this he offers the following examples. The moral messenger is extraneous to the plot line; the character, who is depicted as essentially incapable of understanding the conditions that have placed him in his given situation, is yet allowed at times a full consciousness of these "conditions."<sup>3</sup> Since these conditions occur in Native Son, Rascoe

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<sup>1</sup>Burton Rascoe, "Negro Novel and White Reviewers: Richard Wright's Native Son," American Mercury (May, 1940), p. 113.

<sup>2</sup>Ibid.      <sup>3</sup>Ibid., p. 114.

believes that not only is the character of Bigger inconsistent but that he is also, therefore, a fraud who is indeed responsible for his own fate. Along the same lines, Rascoe asserts that Wright is picturing Bigger as justified in the novel for the murders that he commits. Rascoe's final point is that "it is a violation of a fundamental esthetic principle--sanctioned from Aristotle on down--to portray a character in speech, thought or action in a way not consistent with what you, the writer, might conceivably do in similar circumstances and in similar conditions."<sup>1</sup> It is this last argument, applied in an absurd way, that Rascoe develops in the remainder of his article. He argues that since Richard Wright would have no reason to kill, particularly white people, Bigger therefore is absurd. Therefore, Native Son's "message," which he takes to be that Bigger " . . . should have become a murderer and that the guilt lies on our own heads . . . " is " . . . utterly loathsome and utterly insupportable."<sup>2</sup> Thus, while arguing that other critics are confused, Burton Rascoe abandons his original premises, that the book is artistically weak, and attacks it on the grounds that the novel's message is offensive to him.

David L. Cohn's review in Atlantic Monthly, May 1940, takes Burton Rascoe's position to an even further extreme. Cohn barely touches on the novel as a work of art. Instead, the entire article views Native Son from a political and so-

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<sup>1</sup>Ibid.      <sup>2</sup>Ibid. p. 115.

ciological angle. His thesis is that Wright has written a ". . . blinding and corrosive study in hate" and that the ". . . book has far-reaching qualities of significance above and beyond its considerable virtues as a novel, because Mr. Wright elects to portray his hero not as an individual merely but as a symbol of twelve million American Negroes."<sup>1</sup>

Cohn's main argument is that Wright has not stuck to the "facts" of the race conflict in America as Cohn sees them. The argument continues with the faulty logic that since the Jewish race has survived under centuries of persecution without becoming murderers, Bigger also should prevail in like manner. Therefore, Cohn argues that ". . . the preaching of Negro hatred of whites by Mr. Wright is on a par with the preaching of white hatred of Negroes by the Ku Klux Klan."<sup>2</sup> The review ends with the biased statements that "the Negro problem in American is actually insoluble; all profound, complex social problems are insoluble, and only a politically naive people will believe otherwise."<sup>3</sup> Thus, Wright's book can only make ". . . a tolerable relationship intolerable."<sup>4</sup> There is no question indeed in the reader's mind for whom the situation is tolerable. It is against this kind of rhetoric that Wright's universal statements in relation to Bigger begin to look realistic.

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<sup>1</sup>David L. Cohn, "The Negro Novel: Richard Wright," Atlantic Monthly, CLXV (May 1940), 659.

<sup>2</sup>Ibid., p. 661.

<sup>3</sup>Ibid.

<sup>4</sup>Ibid.



Sterling Brown's review in Opportunity in June 1940 answers the charges raised by Cohn. Brown sees Wright as the first black writer " . . . to give a psychological probing of the consciousness of the outcast, the disinherited, the generation lost in the slum jungles of American civilization."<sup>1</sup> Wright's narrative drive and social realism are seen as his strongest points. Yet in relation to these, Brown is one of the first critics to point out that the last section of the novel breaks this narrative drive and is, indeed, repetitious. And while the critic can see a resemblance between An American Tragedy and Native Son, he finds the differences most important; Dreiser is more of a naturalist while Wright is more symbolic.

Brown also sees that Wright's desire for narrative compression tends to be melodramatic and at times unconvincing. Yet, Brown praises Wright's courage in drawing Bigger Thomas as a "bad nigger," through whom the novelist can give " . . . the interpretative realism that shows how inevitable it was that he should get that way."<sup>2</sup> In addition, it is not accidental that Brown, a black critic, should be the first to suggest that Max's statement, "multiply Bigger Thomas twelve million times, allowing for environmental and temperamental variations, and for those Negroes who are completely under the

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<sup>1</sup>Sterling Brown, "Insight, Courage and Craftsmanship," Opportunity (June 1940), p. 185.

<sup>2</sup>Ibid.

influence of the church, and you have the psychology of the Negro people,"<sup>1</sup> is not Richard Wright's statement. However, although Brown raises this suggestion, he does not develop it further.

David Daiches in his review of Native Son in the Partisan Review, May-June 1940, also makes the same suggestion. He believes that Native Son is ". . . a powerful study of a certain type of Negro mind. . . ." <sup>2</sup> Yet, he too leaves this idea undeveloped. However, Daiches does take issue with the brutal and unusual murder of Mary. He believes that "the fable would have been more powerful had it been made up of events of less melodramatic quality. . . . Mr. Wright is trying to prove a normal thesis by an abnormal case, and though the case he chooses is one proof of his thesis it is not the most convincing."<sup>3</sup> But, while faulting the central action of the novel, Daiches somehow is able to state that the "separate parts" of the novel are "well done."<sup>4</sup> One suspects that while the review deals entirely with Native Son as a work of art, the latter statement is the result of a sociological view.

Dan Stanford in his brief review of Native Son in The Southern Review, Winter 1940, also finds fault with the murders but on different grounds from Daiches. Stanford finds that Wright's main use for the murders is simply to satisfy

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<sup>1</sup>Wright, Native Son, p. 364.

<sup>2</sup>David Daiches, "Native Son," Partisan Review (May-June 1940), p. 245.

<sup>3</sup>Ibid.      <sup>4</sup>Ibid.

the public's taste for violence and in turn results from Wright's dependence on naturalism. Thus, Stanford misses Wright's true purpose for the murders, which is to comment on Bigger's everyday life, the symbolic purpose of the entire novel.

Another critic who takes issue with Native Son is Theophilus Lewis in his review of the novel for Catholic World in May 1941. The critic begins his article with the statement that he will attempt an "objective discussion" of the novel realizing that negative criticism is "detested" by the human mind,<sup>1</sup> a statement which is, indeed, questionable. Lewis' objection to Native Son is essentially that the reader, due to the novel's gruesome details, ". . . forgets the book is supposed to be a sociological novel and begins to race forward to see what ghoulisn surprise will come next."<sup>2</sup> While the critic is favorably impressed with the flight section (this section he finds is the ". . . closest approach to the realities of the race problem,"<sup>3</sup>) he believes this section is lost as a result of the book's sensationalism. Therefore, Lewis believes Wright's moral purpose, as revealed in the courtroom scene, is also lost on the reader because at this point, since the sensationalism stops, the reader loses interest.

In addition, Lewis questions the praise given Native

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<sup>1</sup>Theophilus Lewis, "The Saga of Bigger Thomas," Catholic World, CLIII (May 1941), 201.

<sup>2</sup>Ibid., p. 202.      <sup>3</sup>Ibid., p. 203.

son by other critics because he believes that contemporary critical standards are too lax, and therefore " . . . critics were impressed by the vividness of the story rather than its veracity."<sup>1</sup> Lewis goes on to try to prove that Native Son is not a tragedy because "tragedy is the frustration of a noble aim . . ." and since Bigger's tale does not come under this definition and "since the story cannot be placed in any other category, (the critic does not say why this is true) its quality as a work of art approaches the dubious level of the contents of the pulp magazine."<sup>2</sup> Up until this point in the review, Lewis discusses Native Son as a work of art, but at this point his criticism deteriorates into personal reaction and is therefore suspect. He believes, he now tells the reader, that since Wright was an admitted communist writing from a Marxian point of view, the novel moves beyond " . . . the bounds of discussion as a work of art," and therefore can only be truly discussed as " . . . a study in psychology or a social document."<sup>3</sup> Again the critic gives no basis for this reasoning.

Yet, Lewis now moves on to state that Wright is wrong in his characterization of Bigger because the blacks' " . . . dominant psychological attitude has been one of fortitude and hope sustained by religious faith and the knowledge that religion has played the most important role in their deliverance from bondage and their progress since their emancipation."<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Ibid., p. 204.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid., p. 205.

Now Lewis begins to sound like a Booker T. Washington type of philosopher. Again one wonders what are the bases for his assumptions. However, it soon becomes clear that what the critic really objects to is Wright's communism rather than any failings Wright might have as a novelist. He believes that Wright draws Bigger as he does because of the Marxian belief that religion is the opium of the people. Thus, Lewis maintains that Bigger is simply a portrait of "abnormal psychology"<sup>1</sup> and not at all in any way related to the race question. The critic explains, with few exceptions, the success of Native Son among blacks by placing blacks into two classes: the intellectuals who applaud the novel because whites like it, and the masses who do not know any better. Thus, the critic, who most condemns other contemporary critics, writes the most prejudiced, patronizing review of all in the name of objectivity.

Finally, an early review of Native Son by Hugh Gloster appeared in Opportunity in December, 1941. Gloster also reviews all of Wright's early work in addition to Native Son. The latter he finds a powerful study of the effect of prejudice and a capitalistic social order on the individual. Therefore, Mary's murder is justifiable in terms of the novel which portrays America's guilt. Furthermore, Max's speech is seen as "able."<sup>2</sup> Therefore, based on primarily a sociological view

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<sup>1</sup>Ibid.

<sup>2</sup>Hugh Gloster, "Richard Wright: Interpreter of Racial and Economic Maladjustments," Opportunity, XIX (December 1941), 365.

of literature, Native Son is judged to be " . . . the most influential novel yet written by an American Negro. . . ." <sup>1</sup>

By the time Alfred Kazin included Native Son in his critical work, On Native Grounds, in 1942, Wright's reputation was already established. Kazin deals with the work objectively and is highly critical of the novel. He finds that "it is precisely because Wright himself was so passionately honest and desired to represent the sufferings of his race as forcefully as possible that the unconscious slickness of Native Son, its manipulation of terror in a period fascinated by terror, seems so sinister." <sup>2</sup> In addition, he states that the writing is poor, Bigger's self-discovery is artificial and unconvincing, and once Wright establishes his point in Native Son the book goes " . . . round and round in the same vindictive circle." <sup>3</sup> However, although Kazin's comments are certainly justified by the novel's artistic weaknesses, these comments are so brief and unsubstantiated by analysis that they must be considered summary opinions rather than a critical study.

In 1944 Edwin Embree also included Wright in his study, Thirteen Against the Odds. However, the study is primarily a biography which includes a summary of the novel and thus adds no additional criticism of Native Son.

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<sup>1</sup>Ibid., p. 383.

<sup>2</sup>Alfred Kazin, On Native Grounds; An Interpretation of Modern American Prose Literature (New York: Reynal & Hitchcock, 1942), p. 386.

<sup>3</sup>Ibid., p. 387.

Then in 1945 in the Antioch Review, Ralph Ellison wrote an article entitled "Richard Wright's Blues." Ellison in this article views Wright's role as discovering and depicting ". . . the meaning of Negro experience: and revealing . . . to both Negroes and whites those problems of a psychological and emotional nature which arise between them when they strive for mutual understanding."<sup>1</sup> But it is Black Boy, Wright's autobiography, that Ellison finds is the vehicle for this communication, not Native Son. Ellison will write of the latter much later in his answer to Irving Howe's "Black Boys and Native Sons."

The next critical review of major importance concerning Native Son was James Baldwin's "Everybody's Protest Novel" written in 1949. It was this now famous review that caused the split between Baldwin and Wright. Baldwin claims that at the time that he attacked "protest literature" he felt that an attack on his ideal, Richard Wright, was farthest from his mind. However, the maturer Baldwin finds Wright's reaction to the article entirely justified.

Bigger is Uncle Tom's descendant. . . . For Bigger's tragedy is not that he is cold or black or hungry, not even that he is American black; but that he has accepted a theology that denies him life, that he admits the possibility of his being sub-human and feels constrained, therefore, to battle for his humanity according to those brutal criteria bequeathed him at his birth. But our humanity is our burden, our life; we need not battle for it; we need only to do what is infinitely more difficult--that is, accept it. The failure of the protest novel lies in its rejection

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<sup>1</sup>Ellison, Shadow and Act, p. 89.

of life, the human being, the denial of his beauty, dread, power, in its insistence that it is his categorization alone which is real and which cannot be transcended.<sup>1</sup>

In the light of such statements an attack on Native Son can hardly be denied. Wright does choose to make Bigger a sub-human symbol, and thereby Wright reduces both the artistic and moral impact of the novel.

An enlargement of Baldwin's evaluation of Native Son is to be found in his article "Many Thousands Gone," which appeared about two years later. This essay reveals as much about Baldwin himself as it does about Wright and should perhaps be examined in that light. Baldwin claims that "now the most powerful and celebrated statement we have yet had of what it means to be a Negro in America is unquestionably Richard Wright's Native Son."<sup>2</sup> Baldwin finds this true because he maintains that there is, indeed, a Bigger Thomas inside the head of every American black man and that the individual's coming to terms with this internal Bigger is what is important. Thus, in the publication of Native Son, Baldwin sees the liberation of other black writers from the image of Bigger. Therefore, Wright becomes Baldwin's spiritual father who freed him from his inner shackles and enabled him to write.

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<sup>1</sup>James Baldwin, Notes of a Native Son (Boston: The Beacon Press, 1955), pp. 22-23.

<sup>2</sup>James Baldwin, "Many Thousands Gone: Richard Wright's Native Son," Images of the Negro in American Literature, edited by Seymour L. Gross and John Edward Hardy, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1966), pp. 237-38.



Yet, in this very fact Baldwin finds the main weakness of Native Son. Wright's view of black life is necessarily too simple, too limited, too stifled. Native Son is too much a part of the times in which it was created, too much of a protest novel. Baldwin sees the basis of the novel as being the presentation of a monster whose creation results from an act of the will by the American republic, and thus it is on this ground that the reader is to feel a sympathetic bond with Bigger. However, Baldwin feels that Wright fails to follow this premise because Wright's execution of the novel was faulty, and his need to redeem Bigger in social terms was disastrous. This faulty execution Baldwin sees as resulting from Wright's having limited the novel to Bigger's perceptions. "What this means for the novel is that a necessary dimension has been cut away; this dimension being the relationship that Negroes bear to one another, that depth of involvement and unspoken recognition of shared experience which creates a way of life."<sup>1</sup> Thus, for Baldwin, the blacks that surround Bigger are drawn more accurately than Bigger himself because their struggles with life more truly depict the complexity of the blacks' adjustment to life in America.

It is not coincidental that the first critic to develop this criticism was a black writer and one who indeed knew Wright. As Baldwin claims Wright "freed" other black writers so also did Baldwin "free" other critics to deal with the myth

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<sup>1</sup>Ibid., p. 241.

surrounding Native Son. While the majority of the previous white critics all rushed to assert that Wright drew a complete picture of the black race in Native Son, it took a black critic to assure them that indeed Wright had not. In an area of criticism that had been as much of a "No Man's Land" as Bigger's mind, it was left for Baldwin to note that

what is missing in his situation and in the representation of his psychology--which makes his situation false and his psychology incapable of development--is any revelatory apprehension of Bigger as one of the Negro's realities or as one of the Negro's roles. This failure is part of the previously noted failure to convey any sense of Negro life as a continuing and complex group reality.<sup>1</sup>

In light of Baldwin's criticism of Wright, at least of the myth of Native Son, it is interesting to note that myths are not easily attacked even by one who is well-armed. In a symposium concerning Richard Wright some thirteen years later, Saunders Redding was to criticize Baldwin, personally, for Baldwin's comments about Wright: "One of the things that disturbs me about James Baldwin is that, though someone has said that he has acknowledged his debt to Richard Wright, he has repudiated that debt. . . ."2

Yet it was Baldwin who was the first critic to so fully acknowledge the debt of both blacks and whites to Wright for exposing the myth of the mask. America could no longer escape a face to face confrontation with the creation of its

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<sup>1</sup>Ibid., p. 244.

<sup>2</sup>Herbert Hill, Anger and Beyond (New York: Harper & Row, Publishers, 1966), p. 204.

own divided conscience. Therefore, it is fitting that the first critic to fully examine this fact was also the first critic to truly examine the myth surrounding Native Son itself.

Now the way was opened for the most objective criticism yet done in relation to Native Son, that of Robert Bone in The Negro Novel in America, published in 1958. Bone is quick to acknowledge Wright's place in the history of American literature: "To the average well-read American, and not without justice, Native Son is the most familiar novel--and Bigger Thomas the most memorable character--in Negro fiction."<sup>1</sup> He sees Wright as a black author who has a true sense of his racial past and who more than any other captures the spirit of his own era. "Wright's contribution to the Negro novel was precisely his fusion of a pronounced racialism with a broader tradition of social protest."<sup>2</sup>

Bone is the first critic to examine carefully the artistic relationship between Bigger and the reader, stressing the fact that Wright plays on the reader's sense of guilt in relation to Bigger's existence; he points out that this reaction is directly elicited by Wright. In addition to this, Bone examines the development in the three books separately in relation to the evolution of Bigger's character as well as Wright's intention. As a result of this investigation, Bone feels that "no such fear-ridden sequence as Bigger's flight

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<sup>1</sup>Bone, The Negro Novel in America, p. 68.

<sup>2</sup>Ibid., p. 152.

and capture is possible without a proportionate act of violence."<sup>1</sup> Thus, because Wright learned from Dreiser's mistake of having the reader's attention diverted from the novel's main point by the "accidental" nature of the victim's death in An American Tragedy, Bessie's murder is necessary. It is needed, Bone feels, to dispel any lingering doubt as to Bigger's guilt. Furthermore, Bone sees the violence as necessary to convey Wright's message.

It is also Bone who carefully examines Wright's communism in relation to its place in Native Son. Yet even though the critic sees that communism is a matter of relatedness rather than politics for Bigger, Bone finds the doctrine a weakness in the novel. Unlike many of the early reviewers, who praised the courtroom scenes because of their "message," Bone finds this section a structural weakness in the novel.

Since Bigger is unable to bear the weight of political symbolism intended for him, Wright is forced to resort to rhetoric. The first two books of Native Son contain two levels of meaning; the bare action, and the running account of Bigger's feelings at the time. Now a third level is introduced: an interpretation of the action, undertaken by the author through the medium of Max's speech. This speech with its guilt-of-the-nation thesis, throws the novel badly out of focus. The reader is likely to come away thinking that Bigger committed a horrible crime to which he was driven by a still more horrible environment, which I, the reader have helped to create. Fictionally, however, the novel makes a different point: Bigger is a human being whose environment has made him incapable of relating meaningfully to other human beings except through murder.<sup>2</sup>

This is certainly an objective evaluation arrived at through a critical examination of the novel rather than the sociologi-

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<sup>1</sup>Ibid., p. 146.

<sup>2</sup>Ibid., p. 151.

cal pronouncement common in many of the early reviews of Native Son.

Yet, in spite of this great structural weakness, Bone praises Native Son as a novel. However, his reasons for doing so in relation to Wright's power as a narrator are vague. Bone writes about Wright's narrative drive and his fusion of this drive with a metaphorical strain. He mentions Wright's tone, which he finds to be one of anguish and despair, as a fact in the reader's sympathy with Bigger. Wright's style we are told is "visceral"; he writes from his "guts."<sup>1</sup> But, Bone never explains how Wright accomplishes this; thus, the reason for Wright's power as a narrator still remains an unexamined part of the "myth."

Baldwin again felt compelled to examine the works of Wright as if trying for one last time to explain away the myth perhaps most of all for himself. His essay, "Alas Poor Richard," published in Nobody Knows My Name in 1961, is a painful examination of Baldwin's personal as well as literary relationship to Wright. It is a strange combination of praise and condemnation, love and loathing. He repeats his criticism of Native Son as well as his belief that Native Son was necessary to "free" writers like himself. Baldwin continues to find the violence in Wright's work "gratuitous and compulsive," but yet sees Wright's power as a symbolist.<sup>2</sup> But he

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<sup>1</sup>Ibid., p. 147.

<sup>2</sup>James Baldwin, Nobody Knows My Name (New York: Dial Press, 1961), p. 188.

finds Wright's power waned when he exiled himself from the United States, and it isn't until Eight Men that Baldwin sees a return of that creative power. However, since some of the narratives in Eight Men belong to the earlier Wright, the thrust of the statement is weakened.

It is in response to such criticism that Irving Howe wrote "Black Boys and Native Sons," which he published in A World More Attractive in 1963. As both Ralph Ellison and David Littlejohn explicitly point out, Howe seems to have lost all critical judgment as well as simple common sense in his evaluation of Richard Wright. The article also seems to be an example of unconscious literary racism because Howe maintains that all blacks, given their experience in the United States, must and should write only about the black "situation," must and should write like Richard Wright. One could hardly imagine Howe maintaining that all white writers must and should write like Dreiser.

Working out from this premise, Howe defends the violence in Native Son in the same manner.

Bigger Thomas may be enslaved to a hunger for violence, but anyone reading Native Son with mere courtesy must observe the way in which Wright, even while yielding emotionally to Bigger's deprivation, also struggles to transcend it. That he did not fully succeed seems obvious; one may doubt that any Negro writer can.<sup>1</sup>

Yet, even a staunch defender such as Howe cannot overlook the novel's weaknesses: its heavy style, its stereotyped

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<sup>1</sup>Irving Howe, "Black Boys and Native Sons," A World More Attractive, (New York: Horizon Press, 1963), p. 116.

characters, the improbable speech of Max. But Howe finds these faults unimportant because of the novel's "social" value.

The day Native Son appeared, American culture was changed forever. No matter how much qualifying the book might later need, it made impossible a repetition of the old lies. In all its crudeness, melodrama and claustrophobia of vision, Richard Wright's novel brought out into the open, as no one ever had before, the hatred, fear and violence that have crippled and may yet destroy our culture.<sup>1</sup>

Howe's viewpoint is the perfect example of the sociological critic.

Because of this stand, Howe readily agrees with Baldwin that Wright made it possible for other black novelists to write, and then he criticizes Ellison and Baldwin because they are indeed not Wright. Howe's viewpoint, like Wright's angle of perspective in his characterization of Bigger, is too simple and therefore too dehumanized.

Ralph Ellison answered Howe's attack on him in two articles composed at the end of 1963 and the beginning of 1964. They were eventually combined and published in Shadow and Act under the title of "The World and the Jug." Ellison raises three questions that indeed challenge the majority of critics who have written about Native Son:

Why is it so often true that when critics confront the American as Negro they suddenly drop their advanced critical ornament and revert with an air of confident superiority to quite primitive modes of analysis? Why is it that sociology-oriented critics seem to rate literature so far below politics and ideology that they would rather kill

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<sup>1</sup>Ibid., pp. 100-01.

a novel than modify their presumptions concerning a given reality which it seeks in its own terms to project? Finally, why is it that so many of those who would tell us the meaning of Negro life never bother to learn how varied it really is?<sup>1</sup>

Ellison justly tells Howe that critics who would deny the richness of humanity to blacks, to any group, ". . . betray the critic's commitment to social reality. Critics who do so should abandon literature for politics."<sup>2</sup>

Ellison's examination of Native Son in answer to Howe is the best analysis of Bigger as a black character. Baldwin writes about Bigger in terms of what Bigger does not do; Ellison writes about Bigger in terms of what he does do.

In Native Son Wright began with the ideological proposition that what whites think of the Negro's reality is more important than what Negroes themselves know it to be. Hence Bigger Thomas was presented as a near-sub-human indictment of white oppression. He was designed to shock whites out of their apathy and end the circumstances out of which Wright insisted Bigger emerged. Here environment is all--and interestingly enough, environment concerned solely in terms of the physical, the non-conscious.<sup>3</sup>

For Ellison, Bigger's view was too limited, too simple, too dehumanized to be a vehicle for the humanity of the novelist. Therefore, Ellison rejects Bigger as a "final" image of the black while recognizing Native Son's achievement ". . . as one man's essay in defining the human condition as seen from a specific Negro perspective at a given time in a given place."<sup>4</sup>

Then in 1966, Herbert Hill published Anger and Beyond,

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<sup>1</sup>Ellison, Shadow and Act, pp. 115-16.

<sup>2</sup>Ibid., p. 119.      <sup>3</sup>Ibid., p. 121.      <sup>4</sup>Ibid., p. 124.



which included the symposium referred to previously in the discussion of Baldwin's "Many Thousands Gone." In this discussion, Saunders Redding, Horace Cayton and Arna Bontemps draw some interesting conclusions concerning Richard Wright. For Cayton, Richard Wright is the "prophet"<sup>1</sup> of the Negro revolt while Redding sees Wright as a liberating force for the black writer. It is Redding who states that ". . . there is no present writer, that is, no Negro writer now at work, who has not felt the tremendous influence of Dick Wright. Certainly, if we are in a renaissance, as it were, more or less similar, though very, very different from the renaissance of the Twenties, it is because of Richard Wright."<sup>2</sup> This statement is based on an early statement by Redding which stressed that

. . . Richard Wright was a new kind of writer in the ranks of Negro writers. He had extricated himself from the dilemma, the horns of which are (1) to write exclusively for a Negro audience and thereby limit oneself to a monotypical, glorified and race-proud picture of Negro life, and (2) to write exclusively for a white audience and thereby be trapped in the old stereotypes, the fixed opinions, the stock situation that are as bulwarks against honest creation. Negro writers traditionally have been impaled upon one or the other horn of this dilemma, sometimes in spite of all their efforts to avoid it.<sup>3</sup>

Yet in spite of the fact that Wright was a powerful force in literary history, Redding sees one major defect in his artistry; it is humorless. Wright's irony, he believes, comes closest to humor but "it seldom causes laughter. It is grim, sardonic and never mirthful."<sup>4</sup> Thus, it is this nar-

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<sup>1</sup>Hill, Anger and Beyond, p. 49.

<sup>2</sup>Ibid., p. 204.

<sup>3</sup>Ibid., p. 18.

<sup>4</sup>Ibid., p. 211.

rowed vision, this humorlessness, that Redding sees as detracting from Wright both as an artist and as a man.

When David Littlejohn published Black on White in 1966, he focused on the critical problems that resulted from the racial struggle in America as it related to literature. Littlejohn points out that the intent of the "immoralist" hero in black fiction is to stifle the white reader's moral judgment of the character. Thus, this type of literature plays on the assumption that all the wrongs are on one side and all the wrongdoings are on the other, and that the use of the We-They rhetoric reinforces this idea. Therefore, the white reader " . . . allows the responsibility for all white cruelty to Negroes to devolve, somehow, on himself."<sup>1</sup>

With this insight as his background, Littlejohn then examines Native Son. He finds the novel historically important because it is the " . . . first Negro fiction to have endured much beyond its own season. . . ."<sup>2</sup> Therefore, he feels that major American black writing must be dated from Native Son. Yet, Littlejohn also sees the faults of the novel, its sadism, its stereotyped white characters, Bigger's incredibility, its crude naturalism, and its stale communistic philosophy. But, for all that Littlejohn believes that Native Son is still an important novel.

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<sup>1</sup>Littlejohn, Black on White, p. 9.

<sup>2</sup>Ibid., p. 101.

The real value of the book--and this applies to all of Wright's fiction--lies not in the simplistic and too easily resistible moral lessons he purposely implants, but rather in the quite different moral 'lesson,' moral activity the reader may extract. What this will be I cannot say; it will differ for each reader.<sup>1</sup>

Again, the social and in this case theological importance of the novel is used to speak for art.

John Milton Hughes' critical work, The Negro Novelist, published in 1967, is another example of literary criticism's being replaced by social commentary. On the whole, Hughes' study is an extremely poor example of criticism. This results from both his faulty analysis and his false critical premise. For example, he mistakenly believes that Britten discovered Mary's bones in the ashes, and he feels that Native Son is a "psychological novel of purpose."<sup>2</sup> In addition, he views Wright's audience as bigots and concludes Wright's melodrama is not only justified but also successful. "The point of Wright's psychological novel of purpose is to portray intensely and clearly the racial issue. He develops his novel around the shock technique, which demands atrocities and violence. An imposing number of great writers from classical Greece to the twentieth century have done the same thing."<sup>3</sup> Therefore, Hughes concludes that Wright is an objective artist

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<sup>1</sup>Ibid., p. 106.

<sup>2</sup>John Milton Charles Hughes, The Negro Novelist; A Discussion of the Writings of American Negro Novelists 1940-1950 (New York: Books for Libraries Press, Inc., 1961), p. 51.

<sup>3</sup>Ibid., p. 49.

who has created a modern tragedy.

Then in 1968, Edward Margolies published A Native Son Reader. He avoided many of the critical errors previously associated with Wright criticism by discussing Native Son as a work of art. He views the novel as a "watershed" in Negro letters,<sup>1</sup> and Wright as a pioneer. Wright is therefore praised for his character portrayal of Bigger and for his prose style and theme. But, Margolies also clearly depicts Wright's faults. Except for Bigger, he finds the characters shallow "types," the communist vision stereotyped and the expository prose didactic. Book III, Margolies feels, is out of key with the rest of the novel. Max's plea is improbable and "the inconsistency of Wright's ideologies and philosophical attitudes prevents Bigger and the other characters from developing properly, adulterates the structure of the novel, and occasionally clouds an otherwise lucid prose style."<sup>2</sup>

However, in spite of these facts, Margolies finds Native Son a powerful novel. He finds its weaknesses as undetected by the average reader while its strength is undeniable to all readers. Yet, when it comes to the crucial question of why the novel succeeds, Margolies is extremely vague. "Yet, for all its faults, Native Son retains surprising power. The reasons are still not clearly understood, even by present-

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<sup>1</sup>Edward Margolies (ed.), A Native Son Reader (Philadelphia: J. B. Lippencott, 1970), p. 65.

<sup>2</sup>Ibid., p. 81.

day critics."<sup>1</sup> Thus, the critic skirts the most important question in relation to the novel.

This objective study of Native Son was followed in 1968 by Constance Webb's laudatory biography of Wright. This critic considers Wright's work as an example of "personalism"<sup>2</sup> and therefore, somehow beyond the bounds of art. While this critic's work therefore adds valuable information concerning Wright's personal history, its critical worth in relation to Wright's artistic endeavors is slight. Constance Webb is far from objective in evaluating Wright as a novelist, and her analysis is occasionally faulty.<sup>3</sup>

The Mind and Mood of Black America, by S. P. Fullinwider, was published the following year. Fullinwider also sees Native Son as an epoch in black literary thought. However, Fullinwider finds the novel of most value in the opposite reaction that it stirred. For example, the critic sees Ellison's and Baldwin's objections to Bigger as based on the fact that Bigger is a white man's creation. For Fullinwider, "Bigger is the white man's attempt to understand the Negro from his vantage point outside of him--the result is a superficial and dehumanized picture, an abstraction."<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Ibid., p. 85.

<sup>2</sup> Webb, Richard Wright: Biography, p. 138.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid., p. 172.

<sup>4</sup> S. P. Fullinwider, The Mind and Mood of Black America; 20th Century Thought.

In the same year, Edward Margolies published a critical study entirely devoted to Richard Wright, The Art of Richard Wright. In the work, Margolies repeats his previous criticism of Native Son and adds the lament that "scarcely any allusion is now made to his literary merit as if by definition one cannot write 'sociology' and be aesthetic at the same time."<sup>1</sup> Yet, while Margolies believes that an author can do both in a novel, this is the central question raised by both Native Son and the criticism related to it.

1969 was also the year that a second book of criticism entirely devoted to the writings of Wright was published, Dan Mc Call's, The Example of Richard Wright. Mc Call has a great deal in common with Irving Howe. Like Howe, he is an avid devotee of Wright, and like Howe, he finds it necessary to downgrade other black novelists to protect Wright's image. In addition, Mc Call falls prey to the emotional traps set by the novel. He praises Wright's unrestrained emotion and accepts the "guilt" for Bigger's existence in an intensely personal manner: Bigger is "an occupant of our imagination, a man imprisoned in our minds."<sup>2</sup> Thus, Mc Call loses the critical objectivity needed for an accurate analysis of the novel.

This uncritical acceptance of the novel is also found

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<sup>1</sup>Edward Margolies, The Art of Richard Wright (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1969), p. 3.

<sup>2</sup>Dan Mc Call, The Example of Richard Wright (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, 1969), p. 75.

in Russell Brignano's study of Wright, Richard Wright: An Introduction to the Man and His Works, published in 1970. The critic sees Bigger's tale as an epic, the truth to come, affecting the entire nation. Again in a sociological approach to the novel, Brignano maintains that Native Son " . . . delivered powerfully to the consciousness and conscience of white America an unforgettable picture of one hideous by-product of American culture--Bigger Thomas."<sup>1</sup> Thus, Brignano is even tempted to surmise at what point Bigger is Wright and ends by asserting that the novel must be judged solely on Bigger's value as a "symbolic monster"<sup>2</sup> rather than in relation to its probability and character development.

In 1970 there was also another biography of Wright published, John A. Williams' The Most Native of Sons. It also basically takes the sociological approach to the novel.

Native Son . . . marked a turning point in American letters. For white readers from that time forward, there would come the realization that in the Negro areas--slums, ghettos, or inner cities as they would later be called--there lurked a murderous despair. For black readers there would come the realization that they could no longer maintain, as many of them had been doing, that their existence in segregated sections of American cities was perfectly all right.<sup>3</sup>

Therefore, the work adds very little to the criticism of Wright.

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<sup>1</sup>Russell Carl Brignano, Richard Wright: An Introduction to the Man and His Works (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1970), pp. 28-29.

<sup>2</sup>Ibid., p. 33.

<sup>3</sup>John A. Williams, The Most Native of Sons: A Biography of Richard Wright (New York: Doubleday, 1970), p. 71.

This survey demonstrates the critical problems in relation to Wright's work. These problems are compounded for critics by the fact that Wright was never again to equal his success in Native Son. In 1941, Wright wrote 12 Million Black Voices, a pictorial history of blacks in America. This was followed in 1945 by Black Boy, Wright's autobiography. Saunders Redding maintains that Black Boy in addition to Native Son and half a dozen of Wright's short stories will stand the test of time.<sup>1</sup> In Black Boy Wright uses his own life as a symbol in the same manner as he used Bigger as a symbol. Now, however, working through his own consciousness he is able to avoid the pitfalls of point of view evident in Native Son. Wright portrays his childhood purposely in the harshest light omitting any softening elements to achieve his didactic purpose, which is to make Black Boy a stirring personal account of what it means to be an American black man.

In 1946, disillusioned with the United States and concerned for the future of his child, Wright emigrated to Paris, where he lived until his death in 1960. It was here that Wright wrote his next novel, The Outsider, in 1953. The novel is a strange mixture of Bigger's dread and existential philosophy. Thus, the protagonist, Cross Damon, is a type of intellectualized Bigger. The narrative involves Damon's escape from his dreary past, his job, his wife, his mistress, and his rebirth into a new life which results from a freak accident.

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<sup>1</sup>Hill, Anger and Beyond, p. 212.



It follows the destruction of this new life as it leads to murder and eventually Damon's own death. However, The Outsider lacks the narrative drive of Native Son while retaining many of the flaws of Wright's previous novel; many of its characters are stereotypes while the actions themselves are frequently improbable. In addition, the influence of French existential philosophy lies heavily on the novel's surface. Even Irving Howe feels the novel is a failure for this reason, and Saunders Redding puts this even more precisely. "Existentialism is no philosophy that can be made to accommodate the reality of Negro life, and especially--as Dick Wright comprehended it--of Southern Negro life, which was Dick's major theme. Indeed, his only true theme."<sup>1</sup> Thus, Redding believed that going to Paris was a mistake for Richard, and therefore ends his review of The Outsider with a plea for Wright to return to America. Eventually even Wright, although drawn to existentialism by his own sense of man, was to see that it was too impersonal to present clearly his own personal view of life.

In 1954 Wright produced his second novel in Europe, Savage Holiday. This novel is perhaps Wright's worst work. It was rejected by Harper's and finally sold to Avon for a paperback printing. The book was based on a newspaper account of a New York business man and was laced with Freudian symbolism. The narrative involves the protagonist's being acciden-

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<sup>1</sup>Ibid., p. 209.

tally locked out of his apartment, naked, a fact that in turn causes the accidental death of a child. The protagonist then, in attempting to deal with his guilt, murders the child's mother and confesses his crime. Even Mc Call admits the book is composed of "schoolbook Freud"<sup>1</sup> and is an artistic failure.

The same year Wright published Black Power, a nonfictional account of his visit to the Gold Coast during which he witnessed the birth of Ghana. Two years later Wright's concern with Africa was again shown in his attendance at the first Afro-Asian summit conference in Bandung, Indonesia. This resulted in another nonfictional work, The Color Curtain, published in 1956. And in the same year, Pagan Spain, Wright's impressions of oppression in Spain, was published.

Following this, in 1957, White Man Listen! was published. This work was based on a series of lectures given throughout Europe primarily on the matters of race and colonialism with an occasional reference to black American literature. Then in 1958, four years after his last novel, Wright wrote The Long Dream. The narrative is centered around the struggle for survival and identity by the protagonist, Fishbelly. It traces his growth from innocence to maturity in a corrupt white Southern town and finally his escape to Paris. "In explaining the meaning of the title, The Long Dream, to a Paris reporter Wright suggested that his title was ironic 'because Fishbelly's dream of identifying with white values can

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<sup>1</sup>Mc Call, The Example of Richard Wright, p. 52.

never be realized under existing circumstances."<sup>1</sup> Edward Margolies and Irving Howe see in The Long Dream a resurgence of Wright's powers as an artist. But, while the novel is certainly superior to Savage Holiday, Granville Hicks and Saunders Redding are correct in finding it inferior to Native Son.<sup>2</sup> It lacks the drive of Native Son, and the character of Fishbelly is far too simply drawn.

Two more completed works of Wright were to be published after his death: a collection of short stories, Eight Men, published in 1961, and a novel Lawd Today, published in 1963. Eight Men is an uneven artistic presentation. Interestingly, Irving Howe uses this collection to prove that Wright's artistic powers had definitely been renewed in the last years of his life, and thus Howe finds Eight Men Wright's most interesting fiction since Native Son. Unfortunately, however, Howe bases his argument primarily on the story "The Man Who Lived Underground," mistakenly believing that this was a later work of Wright when, in reality, the story was first published in Accent in 1942.

Lawd Today was also an earlier work of Wright's; in fact it was his first novel, written in about 1936, but not published in deference to the Communist Party, which might have been offended by his unsympathetic protagonist, Jake. The novel develops the same thesis as Native Son, but it is

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<sup>1</sup>Margolies, The Art of Richard Wright, p. 151.

<sup>2</sup>Brignano, Richard Wright: An Introduction to the Man and His Works, p. 43.

made up of everyday occurrences, rather than melodramatic ones, that smother the personality and result in the petty crimes and disillusionments of the protagonist. However, the point of view is faulty, and the novel tends to get bogged down in a catalogue of events. Thus, Native Son remains Wright's most powerful novel.

Wright's protest is essentially one centered in a personal struggle for identity. The need for self-identity and communion with others is the driving force of Native Son. Conceived in Wright's personal experience, Bigger is born. Through him Wright depicts what he believes has been the black man's dehumanizing experience in modern white America.

Again I say that each and every Negro, during the last 300 years, possesses from that heritage a greater burden of hate for America than they themselves know. . . . Perhaps it is well that Negroes try to be as unintellectual as possible, for if they ever started really thinking about what happened to them they'd go wild.<sup>1</sup>

As Ellison points out,

as a writer, Richard Wright has outlined for himself a dual role: to discover and depict the meaning of Negro experience; and to reveal to both Negroes and whites those problems of a psychological and emotional nature which rise between them when they strive for mutual understanding.<sup>2</sup>

Again as in the novels of Toomer and Ellison, Native Son is the search for identity by an invisible man, a man whose humanity has been denied. Wright, quoting William James in the introduction to Black Metropolis, stresses the fact that

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<sup>1</sup>Webb, Richard Wright: Biography, p. 230.

<sup>2</sup>Ellison, Shadow and Act, p. 89.

"no more fiendish punishment could be devised . . . than that one should be turned loose in society and remain absolutely unnoticed by all the members thereof."<sup>1</sup> Bigger, like Kabnis and the invisible man, is controlled like a puppet manipulated by invisible white strings. The novel, like Cane and Invisible Man, is the story of an initiation rite involving Bigger's struggle for self-identity in the face of the black mask that has been imposed to hide his humanity. Essentially Wright pictures Bigger as modern man, dehumanized by an inhuman industrial society whose origins stem from slavery. The struggle, as in the other novels, is to reject definition by others, for Bigger to become his own creator, his own man. In this modern world that has trapped Bigger and buried him underground, violence is the only avenue of "creativity" that Bigger can find. Wright intended the novel to demonstrate that a divided blind America spawns the twisted, divided personality of Bigger.

To determine to what extent Wright accomplished this goal and to evaluate the place of Native Son in American letters objectively apart from its social importance, it is necessary to analyse this novel before offering any critical judgment concerning it, to develop once again hypotheses in the interpretation of texts. The critical problem is to discover Wright's intention in presenting the reader with particular

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<sup>1</sup>William James, The Philosophy of William James: Selections from His Chief Works ("Modern Library"; New York: Random House Inc., c 1925), p. 128.

incidents, characterizations, imagery and symbolism, and then to decide if that intent is achieved through such presentations. First, therefore, we must draw particular hypotheses in relation to the text, and then we must test these hypotheses. Once again, my textual analysis of the plot structure, characterization, thought and diction of the novel, guided by R. S. Crane's principles, will be the basis for my critical conclusions concerning Native Son. As in Cane, the elements of surprise, suspense and probability and the novel's ability to move our feelings will also be examined. Taking plot as the starting point, my criticism will inquire how Wright creates Native Son through his development of episodes, rendering of character, construction of thought, diction and imagery and ". . . his decisions as to the order, method, scale, and point of view of his representation."<sup>1</sup>

Bigger, Wright states, emerged from this riven consciousness of the nation; therefore, Wright sees him as ". . . a meaningful and prophetic symbol."<sup>2</sup> Bigger is to be "nigger," bigger than himself; he is also to be modern man, both black and white, disinherited and dehumanized by the machine age. It is this vision of man alone and in anguish that links Wright with the existentialists. In the metaphor of the invisible man, he is "dispossessed," the product of a "dislo-

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<sup>1</sup>Crane, Critics and Criticism, p. 623.

<sup>2</sup>Richard Wright, "How Bigger Was Born," Saturday Review, XXLI (June 1, 1940), 4.

cated society."<sup>1</sup> He has been cut off from his roots, from tradition, from religion as a result of modern technology and is left with only the empty dreams and illusions painted by modern civilization. And in his loneliness, a loneliness that Toomer also depicted, he intensely longs to belong, to touch others, to do things, to have an identity.

The narrative begins with the incident of the rat. Here Bigger is revealed as a twenty-year-old member of a destitute family that lives in a rat-infested tenement room on the South Side of Chicago. Bigger's life is revealed through various incidents revolving around a gang of friends linked by petty robberies and idle dreams of being mobile and powerful like whites. The fears and desires of the ghetto are also revealed by the actions of Bigger's family, his religious mother, his timid sister and his impressionable brother.

Through the efforts of the W.P.A., Bigger is interviewed and given a job as a chauffeur and handy man in the home of a wealthy white real-estate tycoon who owns the very tenement in which the Thomas family lives. On the first night of his employment, Bigger is told to drive Mary, the daughter of the house, to a lecture. However, Mary orders Bigger instead to take her to a rendezvous with her lover, a Communist named Jan. The couple then unwittingly involve Bigger in a series of incidents that humiliate him by making him painfully aware of his blackness. The evening ends with Mary drunk and Bigger

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<sup>1</sup>Ibid., p. 18.

alone responsible for her welfare. Because she cannot walk, he carries her to her room and then out of fear of being discovered alone with her, he accidentally smothers her to prevent an outcry when her blind mother enters. To prevent discovery of her death, Bigger then burns her body in the furnace, first mutilating it to cram it into this small space.

Then driven on by an overwhelming sense of power which results from the knowledge of his crime, Bigger devises a scheme to extract ransom money from the family, and he forces Bessie, his girl, to act as an accomplice. When the remains of Mary's body are finally discovered, Bigger flees to avoid capture, taking Bessie with him. He then kills her to protect himself as a frenzied police hunt mauls the black ghetto in search of him.

Finally, Bigger is caught and stands trial for his crimes as racial hatred runs rampant in the city, and troops are called in to guard him from an angry mob. A communist lawyer, Max, defends Bigger with an appeal to the conscience of society, but Max pleads in vain. Bigger is found guilty and condemned to death.

Wright divides this narrative into three large sections which he entitles "Fear," "Flight," and "Fate." This threefold division has many purposes. First, it avoids individual chapter breaks, thus keeping intact the swift pace of the narrative. Second, it concentrates the reader's attention on the distinctive aspects of Bigger's existence that form the bases



for his identity. Fear is the dominant element in Bigger's life and, Wright seeks to demonstrate, a dominant force in America's history. It is fear of the white world that gives birth to the mask, the dehumanization, the self-hate on the part of both the victim and the persecutor. The fear in itself also contains the flight and the fate which emerge in turn as dominant elements from it. Thus, Book One portrays the Bigger who is capable of creating the Bigger of Book Two, while Book Three seeks to demonstrate that the creation of this Bigger was inevitable, given Bigger's environment. In addition, the alliteration of the titles is also used to stress this connection and inevitability.

Finally, this threefold division enables Wright to spotlight various minor characters without having the necessity of maintaining them continually in the foreground. In this manner, Wright concentrates on the motivation of Bigger's family and the Daltons in Book One, includes that of Bessie and the black community in Book Two, and finally that of the courts and Max in Book Three.

An effect of the novel that is also related to this division is Wright's time sequence in relation to the action of the novel. "Fear" traces one day in Bigger's life, and as Bone points out

. . . the murder and the circumstances which surround it are in reality an extended metaphor, like the whale hunt in Moby Dick. . . . It is the hidden meaning of Bigger's life, as revealed by the murder, which is the real subject of Native Son. The novel is a modern epic, consisting of

action on the grand scale. As such, it functions as a commentary on the more prosaic plane of daily living.<sup>1</sup>

Bigger's murders, committed within twenty-four hours, are indeed just his way of living, as Max points out.

Book Two, which begins again in the morning, on the day after Mary's murder, traces Bigger's actions throughout the day, his murder of Bessie, and ends the next evening about forty-eight hours later with his capture. Book Three covers a number of months and uses time to demonstrate the anticlimactic quality of "justice." In addition, Wright incorporates this sense of the furious and futile passing of time into Bigger's own consciousness, thus keeping the reader constantly aware of this tension. Native Son begins with the shattering sound of the alarm clock, signifying a world in which time is out of joint. The drawing of Bigger's character is, indeed, begun by his very first animal-like grunt and the dry sounds his feet make on the planks of the floor. The novel begins in the dark, and the first illumination reveals not a boy but a black boy. Bigger is to be always seen by others only as the symbol, the black mask. His humanity is to be invisible behind his black face.

Wright's problem with point of view is obvious almost from the opening pages. He has chosen for his protagonist a twenty-year-old, uneducated, almost animal-like character. This problem of vision is thus a problem for Wright in the very

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<sup>1</sup>Bone, The Negro Novel in America, p. 145.

structuring of Native Son. Wright must present Bigger with dehumanized consciousness and yet have the reader relate to Bigger in terms beyond this consciousness. Therefore, Wright is forced to use an implied narrator to explain the meaning of Bigger's actions, of Bigger's life. This is also the role of Max; later in the novel he interprets Bigger's life in a more direct manner than the narrator with a more conscious use of symbolism. Therefore, Bigger's consciousness comes to the reader at various stages through a filter more refined than his own vision. It is here that the novel moves away from treating Bigger as a character to viewing Bigger as a symbol.

Although, as Booth points out, every novel's success is dependent upon its point of view, given the character of Bigger, this is particularly true of Native Son. The reader must be made to maintain sympathy with Bigger in spite of Bigger's hideous crimes. This sympathy is created essentially by two aspects of the novel: the action itself, and secondly and more importantly given the action of this novel, the tone of the implied narrator. For example, let us examine the beginning incident of the rat.

Wright uses this incident in many ways in relation to the structure of Native Son. It establishes a symbol, which has its basis in folklore, that deepens and expands the meaning of the novel. The rat signifies the black mask. Like the rabbit, he is a rodent to be trapped, caught, and killed. But Wright gives the folk-animal imagery a new interpretation. He

chooses the rat, who is associated with filth, disease and fear, to represent Bigger and through him the mask of the black man. The mask is no longer the laughable blackfaced comedian; it is the black terror of night and death. Thus, Bigger, his humanity hidden by this blackness, will be mercilessly chased, trapped, and destroyed like this animal, the rat.

In addition, this incident of the rat functions in the novel as representation, establishing characterization and probability. The reader's pity, and to some extent his guilt through his recognition, are elicited by the poverty and horror of the Thomas' lives. Furthermore, the incident establishes Bigger's bravery in the face of danger, and his family's desperate reliance on that strength. They are all trapped and drowning and therefore cling desperately, hopelessly to their strongest member, drowning him also. In this manner, Wright is able to picture both Bigger's strength and cruelty while maintaining the reader's bond with Bigger. Perhaps a parallel can be drawn between Bigger and Milton's Satan, even though Milton's intention differs. It is not because God is wrong, any more than Bigger's family is, that the reader feels drawn to Satan. Rather, it is because both Satan and Bigger refuse to bow to overwhelming odds. Yet Wright insists on maintaining Bigger's sub-human symbolism, thereby depriving Bigger of Satan's intellectual reasons for refusing to serve. Indeed, Wright to an extent negates this sub-human symbolism by attributing to Bigger the qualities of a rebel. These qualities

are the essential appeal of the antihero, and this is one of the devices that Wright uses to insure the reader's sympathy for Bigger even, occasionally, at the cost of artistic consistency.

However, the action itself might not be enough to establish this antihero characterization; therefore, Wright relies on the implied narrator to interpret Bigger's sordid life sympathetically in relation to the over-all meaning of life. For example, in this first incident, the implied narrator explains that Bigger's motivation toward his family is based on the fact that Bigger hates his family.

. . . because he knew that they were suffering and that he was powerless to help them. He knew that the moment he allowed himself to feel to its fullness how they lived, the shame and misery of their lives, he would be swept out of himself with fear and despair. So he held toward them an attitude of iron reserve; he lived with them, but behind a wall, a curtain. And toward himself he was even more exacting. He knew that the moment he allowed what his life meant to enter fully into his consciousness, he would either kill himself or someone else. So he denied himself and acted tough.<sup>1</sup>

In this manner, Wright establishes Bigger's ability to hurt, thus providing probability for his later murders of Mary and Bessie, while maintaining the reader's sympathy for Bigger through Bigger's pride in the face of overwhelming opposition. Because the reader is continually allowed in this section, through the implied narrator, to see into the depths of Bigger's soul, to see his fear and to understand his desperate attempt to live, the reader's feeling for Bigger is maintained.

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<sup>1</sup>Wright, Native Son, pp. 13-14.

However, to sustain this relationship, Wright must make all his major incidents function with the multilevel meanings of the rat incident. It is where the action fails to remain true, and where the implied narrator is cast aside that the novel falters.

In addition to point of view, Wright's style is extremely important in conveying the meaning of Bigger's actions. The narrative must move quickly to keep the reader caught up in the tension of the action and the implied narrator's interpretations, although they must necessarily be deeper than Bigger's surface understanding, must not wrench the tone of the entire novel. Wright's style must be dictated by this vision. Therefore, his sentences are hard, clean, and blunt, devoid of emotional images like Toomer's. On an average page of the novel<sup>1</sup> that is primarily devoted to the narrative of the implied narrator and therefore contains very little dialogue, Wright uses an average of fifteen simple sentences as compared to an average of five complex, four compound and two compound-complex sentences. On a page that contains primarily dialogue,<sup>2</sup> the number of simple sentences increases to an average of twenty-one while the compound and complex sentence averages remain about the same. This emphasis on the simple sentence keeps the narrative moving briskly as the reader is quickly able to comprehend one thought and move on to the next.

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<sup>1</sup>Ibid., pp. 16-17.

<sup>2</sup>Ibid., pp. 12, 19.

Another technique that is related to this is Wright's use of surprise and suspense. The reader learns of events simultaneously with Bigger; for example, he knows only when Bigger knows that they will not rob Blum, Mary is dead, Bigger himself is cornered. Bigger discovers Mary is dead in the following manner.

He stood and listened. Mrs. Dalton might be out there in the hallway. How could he get out of the room? He all but shuddered with the intensity of his loathing for this house and all it had made him feel since he had first come into it. He reached his hand behind him and touched the wall; he was glad to have something solid at his back. He looked at the shadowy bed and remembered Mary as some person he had not seen in a long time. She was still there. Had he hurt her? He went to the bed and stood over her; her face lay sideways on the pillow. His hand moved toward her, but stopped in mid-air. He blinked his eyes and stared at Mary's face; it was darker than when he had first bent over her. Her mouth was open and her eyes bulged glassily. Her bosom, her bosom, her--her bosom was not moving! He could not hear her breath coming and going now as he had when he had first brought her into the room! He bent and moved her head with his hand and found that she was relaxed and limp. He snatched his hand away. Thought and feeling were balked in him; there was something he was trying to tell himself desperately, but could not. Then, convulsively, he sucked his breath in and huge words formed slowly, ringing in his ears: She's dead.

The reality of the room fell from him; the vast city of white people that sprawled outside took its place. She was dead and he had killed her. He was a murderer, a Negro murderer, a black murderer. He had killed a white woman. He had to get away from here. Mrs. Dalton had been in the room while he was there, but she had not known it. But, had she? No! Yes! Maybe she had gone for help? No. If she had known she would have screamed. She didn't know. He had to slip out of the house. Yes. He could go home to bed and tomorrow he could tell them that he had driven Mary home and had left her at the side door.<sup>1</sup>

The effects of suspense and fear in Native Son are

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<sup>1</sup>Ibid., p. 86.

achieved by this use of dramatic techniques. Knowledge is purposely withheld from the reader, and opinions are developed that are reversed by the action. Instead of constructing periodic sentences to withhold knowledge and build up suspense, Wright uses a technique of delayed explanation. We are given certain information in one sentence, but the purpose of this information is not understood until our knowledge is expanded in following sentences. Therefore, the reader is kept moving at the same pace with Bigger and thus necessarily is caught up in the tension of the action. This strengthens Wright's ability as a storyteller by intensifying his focus on events in camera-like fashion.

In addition, this section reveals other techniques of Wright. His achievement of great action, vividness, suspense, and horror is accomplished in part by his choice of language and its arrangement. Wright partially achieves the effect of action by selecting and arranging his sentence structure compactly and simply. Brevity, compression, and simplicity seem to be his principles. The average word length per sentence here is 11.

In addition, action is also the principle of selection in Wright's internal sentence construction. This count of 372 words revealed that Wright's style consists largely of nominals and verbals. In this overall total there were 109 nouns or pronouns, 66 verbs, 38 adverbs, and 35 adjectives. The approximately 1.6 nominal-verbal ratio shows that Wright



has a verbal style which is more conducive to a sense of action than a nominal style. The wish to convey a sense of action is also the reason for Wright's preference of the active rather than the passive voice of verbs; for example, there are no passive voice verbs in this section.

Once again in this section, Wright shows a marked preference for the simple sentence. There are 19 simple sentences, 6 compound, 5 complex, and 4 compound-complex. Of those sentences containing more than one clause, there are only a total of 15, and of those 15 only half have more than two clauses, and in all of these cases there are no more than three clauses as a total. Even when Wright does use clauses, they are simple in form; the average length of these sentences is still only 17 words. Simplicity and brevity again seem to be the principles of selection. In place of a more complex clausal construction, Wright substitutes prepositional, infinitive and participial phrases, and compound verbs. In these 34 sentences Wright uses 27 prepositional phrases, 7 infinitive and participial phrases, and 9 compound verbs which also give a rhythmic effort to his prose.

Furthermore, the lack of adjectives as compared to adverbs and prepositional phrases points up another aspect of Wright's style. Of the 35 adjectives in this section, 22 of them are colorless, possessive adjectives. This lack of adjectives contributes to the sparseness of the imagery, and its purpose is to have the character of Bigger emerge in its

full horror. This horror is achieved by the very fact that the prose is so hard, clean and stark, devoid of emotional images, and thus mirrors the bleakness of Bigger's consciousness and the sterility of his feelings. Therefore, the reader, reacting to the horror of the situation and Bigger's objective view of it, supplies his own intensification of the actions, and the use of his own imagination adds to his sense of guilt, which has already been stimulated by the racial and economic aspects of Bigger's situation.

However, while Wright does not use adjectives to convey vivid descriptions, he does rely heavily upon adverbs of time and place and prepositional phrases signifying location to give a descriptive quality to his style and to stress spatial and time relationships vividly for the reader to keep the reader in motion with Bigger. In 34 sentences, Wright uses 27 prepositional phrases, 20 of which signify location. Of the 38 adverbs used, 11 are adverbs of place and eleven are adverbs of time. Thus, vivid imagery is achieved by depicting the position of the characters in relation to one another and to their surroundings, and by outlining a time sequence of events. These are techniques that Wright uses continually throughout the novel.

Wright's use of vocabulary is directly related, also, to his desire for brevity and simplicity. In this count of 372 words, 314 were words of one syllable, 47 were two syllables, 8 were three syllables and 3 were four syllables.

There were no words longer than this in this section. In addition, there were only four words that could possibly be considered formal and only one word that could be classified as technical. This word "Negro" is used in contrast to "black" to point out the racial difference between the two, Negro being "reserved" for the "good" man while "black" then was applied to the "bad." Now, of course, Bigger is always to be black because of the murder. It is Bigger as black, as defiant of the status quo which would keep him in his "place," that Wright wishes to portray. Indeed, the most important adjectives in this section, the only ones with extensive connotative meanings are racially related: white (used twice), black, Negro. These terms are used to underscore the racial aspect of the murder, keeping it always prominently before the reader's eyes. Always, Bigger is to be seen as a black man in a white world.

In addition, two examples of Wright's use of symbolism that is employed throughout the novel can be seen here. His portrait of Bigger as a trapped animal appears in the first part of this section. Also, he uses transference in reference to the city; "sprawled" a verb normally limited to use with animate subjects is used here to give the city the characteristic of force, a power gathered to strike out at Bigger, who is helpless to defend himself against such an adversary.

This symbolism of oppression and its racial overtones

and its effects is evident from the first pages of the novel. Bigger's fear of the white world, the dominant element of his character in Book One, is used by Wright to account for Bigger's isolation from all other humans. He is related to the blind, deaf man in Toomer's poem "Harvest Song," as well as the invisible man forever hidden away in a deep black hole. Wright is seeking to portray the truth of the statement made by Bigger's mother that Bigger is "black crazy,"<sup>1</sup> and the thrust of the latter part of the novel will be to prove this results from the persecution of the white world. It will seek to verify that, given this situation, his mother's prophecy concerning Bigger's death will inevitably be fulfilled.

Furthermore, Wright portrays Bigger in a manner similar to Toomer's portrait of Kabnis; both characters find their only defense in hating others and shutting them out of their minds. Thus, Bigger, by making others invisible as they have made him, can deny the depths of misery and inhumanity in which he and his family exist. This is the only means society has made available to him to deal with his fear and despair and not dissolve into whimpering self-hate like Kabnis. To make this clear to the reader, Wright chooses the symbol of a wall or curtain that Bigger consciously erects in his mind as a self-imposed darkness in which he can exist by denying himself and acting a part. The implied narrator continually re-

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<sup>1</sup>Ibid., p. 12.

minds the reader of this fact, stating that if Bigger " . . . allowed what his life meant to enter fully into his consciousness, he would either kill himself or someone else. So he denied himself and acted tough."<sup>1</sup> Thus, the reader is always aware of Bigger's motives for his actions, always aware that Bigger feels trapped.

This is also the purpose of other symbolism in the novel. For example, his mother's song, "Life is like a mountain railroad," stresses the "running" quality of Bigger's life. The poster of Buckley, with his white face and watchful though truly blind eyes, is a reminder that Bigger's choices are severely limited. The world, Wright seeks to demonstrate, continually exerts controlling pressure downwards on Bigger and is ever watchful.

From this reality, Bigger's only escape is in the illusion of movies, magazines and dreams. Once again, it is the implied narrator who explains Bigger's motivation to the reader. Through his interpretation the reader sees that reality is Bigger's nightmare; like the characters of Toomer and the invisible man, his world is composed of continual battle royals. His "friendship" with Gus, G.H., Jack (who remain further nameless like the invisible man) is always in terms of a battle royal where they must attack each other or some outside force. But when the attack is to be directed against a white such as Blum, it generates fear because they know this

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<sup>1</sup>Ibid., p. 14.

is against the "rules" of the ritual and will not be tolerated by white society. While Bigger can react with fear to the idea of robbing Blum, it must be left to the implied narrator to explain the motivations for this fear. It is the narrator who must represent the robbing of Blum's as the "ultimate taboo."<sup>1</sup>

The implied narrator's use of the concrete images of the "hard" "mechanical" "distinct" buildings also functions symbolically.<sup>2</sup> This is the same image that Max will use later in the novel to attempt to explain his vision of the world to Bigger. As then, the buildings illustrate that Bigger's creative vision, like that of many men, has been clouded and blurred by the mechanical dehumanization of all men. In addition, Bigger's desire to fly is used by Wright in a similar manner; it is used to symbolize Bigger's desire for mobility in a static society. By this means Wright demonstrates that Bigger will never be allowed by this world to fly in either the literal or symbolic sense. This is not his place in a world that even uses the sky to sell its products. Thus, Bigger's dreams of flying ironically end in flight. His only outlet is to dream of bombing this world to destruction. This is indeed the only "creative" vision possible for him, in a world where he must play "white" and use terms that he does not even understand, such as "left flank"<sup>3</sup> in a struggle that is beyond him. Wright drives home the fact that only by as-

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<sup>1</sup>Ibid., p. 18.

<sup>2</sup>Ibid., p. 19.

<sup>3</sup>Ibid., p. 21.

suming a "white" personality can Bigger even imagine himself a "heroic" character. Thus, Wright keeps the reader constantly aware that for all Bigger's tough facade, he is truly small and defenseless in a white world marshalled against him.

In addition, Bigger's limited vocabulary also suggests that his imagination has been enslaved as his language has been limited. His limited use of language is ironically highlighted by the implied narrator's image of Bigger's brooding as that of a man long " . . . confronted and tantalized by a riddle whose answer seemed always just on the verge of escaping him, but prodding him irresistibly on to seek its solution."<sup>1</sup> This brooding is like Kabnis search for words, and the dirty joke played on the invisible man. Like these characters, Bigger is part of a game of life that he plays blindly without understanding. Bigger differs from others in the same role only in his refusal to keep to his part. He blindly senses, the implied narrator conveys, that he has been buried underground by the world, locked away, and this longing to be part of the world above becomes his driving force. Bigger knows this is against the rules of the game and that it will bring him destruction because his reality is controlled by a white world whose laws are guns, but he determines on resurrection at all costs. And resurrection as the vet demonstrates in Invisible Man will mean "insanity" or death. But Wright demonstrates that Bigger's existence is

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<sup>1</sup>Ibid., p. 20.

so repulsive, and therefore, his desire for movement and change is so great that the results this movement will bring are unimportant to Bigger. Thus, through the pigeon, whose flight Bigger envies, Wright warns of eventual doom.

Wright also used the incident in the movie theatre for both purposes of representation and symbolism. By this means Wright demonstrates that even Bigger's world of illusion reinforces his invisibility. The figures he sees in the movies portray white men and women as part of the rich world outside his reach while the only blacks in the movie still remain in the jungle. Thus, in terms of the world he knows, Bigger is forced to relate to the whites although in reality he knows this is the very thing he cannot do. Even the deepest corners of his imagination are thus twisted and violated. Therefore, Bigger carries his sense of fear and guilt even into the darkened movie house.

Wright also uses the movie called The Gay Woman to ironically foreshadow Mary's life while Jack prophesies that "Man, if them folks saw you they'd run. . . . They'd think a gorilla broke loose from the zoo. . . ." <sup>1</sup> This is also an example of Wright's use of the "we--they" rhetoric that is aimed at the reader's sense of guilt. Irony is also present in Wright's use of the movie to prefigure society's reaction to the communism of Max, and through Bigger's ignorant condemnation of communism, Wright is condemning society. Again,

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<sup>1</sup>Ibid., p. 33.



Wright is stressing Bigger's essential helplessness because even in this world of illusion Bigger is shown clearly that life is a game, and the whites know the rules. Thus, it is Bigger's overwhelming fear that the reader clearly sees, understands, and feels.

The next two incidents also portray the use of illusion in relation to fear. Wright contrasts Bigger's need for sensation to Mrs. Thomas' need for religion. Like both Toomer and Ellison, Wright depicts the hypocrisy of the Christian religion in a divided society. Religion has become for Bigger's mother the filling illusion that the movies are for Bigger. By subterfuges such as these the Thomases attempt to keep the full meaning of their lives from entering their consciousness. Deception is also, the implied narrator reminds the reader, the reason for Bigger's fight with Gus.

His confused emotions had made him feel instinctively that it would be better to fight Gus and spoil the plan of the robbery than to confront a white man with a gun. But he kept this knowledge of his fear thrust firmly down in him; his courage to live depended upon how successfully his fear was hidden from his consciousness.<sup>1</sup>

While the spectators of the fight see Bigger's bravado, the reader is clearly allowed by this means to see Bigger's overriding fear. Thus, through this knowledge the reader is continually allied with Bigger, and therefore, this alliance brings with it a sense of guilt.

Wright also uses Bigger's gun and knife to accomplish

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<sup>1</sup>Ibid., p. 44.

the same end. The reader is shown that Bigger needs these to give himself the manhood that society has denied him. He treasures them, particularly when he goes among white people, because they give him a sense of equality and completeness. His need of them can be equated to the invisible man's continual symbolic castration. In a world where time and place are always prominently defined, Bigger needs his weapons to keep back his own inner sense of chaos. He is outside the scheme of things, filled with fear and emptiness, and he must clutch these as the invisible man clutches his briefcase.

Therefore, the reader is fully aware of Bigger's overwhelming fear of this white world before he agrees to go to the Daltons' home. In addition the reader understands Bigger's increasing hysteria as he is trapped into taking this job. His mother sees only his reluctance while the reader is allowed to see Bigger's horror at having to actually cross the invisible but very physical white-black boundary line as he had only previously imagined doing in the movies. Indeed, the reader sees that Bigger has true reason to fear since people see only the mask, and therefore, Bigger's humanity is hidden from them. Like Dan in Cane, Bigger worries that he might therefore be thought a robber or a rapist. This is part of Wright's technique. If the reader rejects Bigger also, then he joins those outside of Bigger who reject him for the wrong reasons. The reader, in short, joins the racists. In this manner the reader is trapped into accepting the polarized

world of the novel.

Again the novel operates in terms of the "we--they" philosophy. Seeing also only the symbol, not the person, Bigger notices others in terms of their white faces. His reaction to Peggy, the housekeeper, is similar to the invisible man's reaction to the white woman on the train: repulsion and fear. She, in turn, sees him only as the Thomas "boy." Thus, in this hostile world, Bigger even fears the chairs are trying to entrap him, a fear that Toomer also had used symbolically. It is a world lighted by a hidden source that he cannot understand, and he feels uncomfortable and angry.

All of this, of course, the Daltons can neither see nor understand. Mrs. Dalton's physical blindness is Wright's symbol of her spiritual blindness and sterility. She lost her sight at the same time Green, the previous black chauffeur, came to work for the family. Mr. Dalton's "humanitarianism," based as it is in his own corruption, is also blind; it is daltonism, color blindness, in the way that the invisible man discovers the Brotherhood is colored blind. It stems from seeing people as statistics rather than as individuals. Finally, Mary, the young daughter of the Daltons, is the antithesis of Bigger. Although about Bigger's age, Mary in no other way resembles him. She is white, rich, educated, and blindly idealistic. Her world, as opposed to Bigger's, has been one of infinite possibilities. Mary, the product of this world, while seemingly different from her father and like

her mother, combines the blindness of both her parents. Like her mother, she would "save" Bigger, but like her father, Bigger is just a symbol to her. Thus, Bigger's reaction to her is understandably one of fear and hatred. He fears her because she is not playing the "game" by the rules he knows have been established for him. Contrary to his world of illusion, Mary poses a real threat.

Thus, Mr. Dalton's smile, which is akin to Brother Jack's smile, only serves to make Bigger more conscious of his black skin. Mrs. Dalton's white ghostlike appearance and stony eyes serve only to make him feel more invisible. Her words spoken for his benefit are an alien language to Bigger and make him feel strangely blind himself. Therefore, the Daltons' "good intentions" (Mr. Dalton gave over five million dollars to colored schools), like those of Mr. Norton in Invisible Man, are to end not in the living monument they seek to build for themselves but in the death that has always lurked in the depths of their world. And the big white cat, Kate, that follows Mrs. Dalton, is used by Wright to foreshadow this fact. As always, its purpose is to trap and kill the rodent. Thus, while the reader may sympathize with the circumstances in which the Daltons later find themselves, this presentation insures that the characters themselves will never become the center for the reader's sympathies.

Underlining Bigger's abject humility in front of Mr. Dalton lies his hate, which seeks to either blot out Mr. Dal-

ton or himself. It lies there unseen and unimagined because it is not looked for or expected. His outward mannerism, his stoop, his blank look which glances off the surface of things, all assume the part of the mask. Thus, Wright shows that no one bothers to look further to see the individual; all blindly play the game according to the known "rules." Ironically, although Mr. Dalton owns the South Side Real Estate Company that helps to keep the black man in his "place," it is Bigger who bears a sense of guilt. In this world, Wright seeks to demonstrate, it is Bigger who is indeed condemned for the very fact that he is black. Yet, as his clock loudly ticks, signifying time is running out, Mr. Dalton blindly tries to put Bigger at his ease by telling him he was once a boy and thus knows how Bigger feels. Even Peggy later assures him that she knows what it is to be black because she is Irish. By such blindness, Wright is demonstrating that these worlds are so far apart no communication is really possible. In addition, the Daltons' insensitivity and Bigger's constant fear reinforce the reader's sympathy for Bigger. Indeed, since the reader is constantly shown Bigger's motivation and inner feelings while only viewing the other characters externally, Bigger remains the most sympathetic character in this first section.

Wright again plays upon the reader's sense of guilt in relation to the race struggle through Mary's mention of unions to Bigger. Just as he had considered communism evil,

all Bigger knows about unions is that they are "bad." His attitude is also that of Brockway's in Invisible Man. Wright thus demonstrates his belief that the black man has been kept from knowledge that would aid him. Equally mysterious to Bigger are the words capitalist and the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People which, ironically, Mr. Dalton supports. Bigger, like the boys the invisible man sees on the train after Clifton's death, is a man outside of historical time, untouched by its movement. He is out of place even in the white-walled kitchen. His true place is to be found in the cellar by the furnace, underground at the source of heat and power. The cellar is to be Bigger's "Hole" where he, like Kabnis and the invisible man, will finally see his true self. Wright is thus portraying society's attempt to bury the black man and the destruction that results from this attempt.

In the presentation of Bigger's new room, Wright again links oppression with the need for illusion. Green was also a movie fan. It is in this illusionary state, through Bigger's dreams of a new watch, that the reader is made to understand that Bigger imagines himself in tune with this world. Yet once Bigger is out of this room, this vision is immediately contrasted to his meeting with Mrs. Dalton in the kitchen, an incident used for symbolism and probability for his later blind encounter with her in Mary's room. Mrs. Dalton's white face is Wright's symbol of the face of death as Mr. Nor-

ton's later will be. Her flowing white clothes blend in with the white walls while her silence is contrasted by Wright to the fearful ticking of the large wall clock which again stresses that time is running out. To Bigger she seems capable of hearing all things as she seemingly listens to voices that are ever-present but beyond his capability of hearing. The knowing eyes of the white cat seem to see for her blind eyes. They are ever-watchful of Bigger as they would be of a rodent. And as he talks to Mrs. Dalton, Bigger is vaguely aware, the implied narrator informs the reader, that he is also somehow blind. They do not, indeed, see each other, and Mrs. Dalton's blind desire to define Bigger's life is akin to the desire of those people who wish to make a puppet of Kabnis and the invisible man. She is guilty of hubris akin to Oedipus'; she would command others while being blind.

Mary is also invisible to Bigger. She is like a doll in a store window; all Bigger sees is her white face, black eyes and red lips. The car which he drives, and from which he receives a sense of power like the invisible man, is more real to him than Mary. In addition, Mary's vacant eyes also see right through Bigger. Since he is merely a symbol to her, she sees him simply as a projection of her own thoughts. Therefore, she has no doubt that he will understand and accept her actions and explanations. But Bigger sees only that the rules of the game are being violated by Mary's treatment of him as human, and he wonders if this isn't also somehow part

of the game. It is the same lingering feeling of a dirty joke that runs throughout the Invisible Man.

This also explains Bigger's identical reaction to Jan. Thus, Bigger's fear and humiliation as well as Jan's and Mary's blindness make Bigger again a sympathetic character to the reader. Bigger's anger is understandable because the supports of the ritual, all he understands, have been taken from him, and he no longer knows how to act. Mary and Jan make Bigger feel just the opposite of what they intend him to feel. Wright thus portrays that the distance between their world of light and his world of darkness is too great to span. Bigger's whole consciousness is wrapped around his black skin; he knows he is invisible and as such can never cross into the white world. His place is out of the world in No Man's Land hidden underground. This is the truth he has sought to keep hidden from his soul. This is the truth Bigger feels Jan and Mary are amused at; therefore, he hates them with his whole being. Wright symbolizes them as two white walls closing in on Bigger; again, he creates the feeling of being trapped like an animal. Mary's desire to "see" the black people, "they're human,"<sup>1</sup> again raises Bigger's desire to blot them and himself out, once and for all rendering them actually invisible in the sense that he can understand invisibility. Even Jan's poor attempt to speak Bigger's language, "You got something there,"<sup>2</sup> only results in Bigger's continual self-denial, "That's the

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<sup>1</sup>Ibid., p. 70.

<sup>2</sup>Ibid., p. 73.



way they say it. . . ."1 Only in illusion, this time through drunkenness does Bigger manage to even look straight at them. As he drinks, he is able to tell them his history: born in Mississippi, eighth grade education, father killed in a southern riot. It all means simply a poor, black, and disinherited native son.

Thus, as Mary smiles, telling Bigger they want to be "friends," Wright has her mention the trunk for the first time. The probability that her dreamy eyes, planning future things, will soon be forever shut is being developed. And in her dreaming, even her vision of "helping" blacks is seen only in terms of the stereotyped rhetoric; "they" have done such things to the blacks who have such "emotion," such "spirit," such "songs." Mary ends by asking Bigger to sing, another stereotype, as the invisible man will be asked to sing at the Brotherhood party. The song, ironically, is "Swing Low, Sweet Chariot." Thus, Wright contrasts to Mary's violent death the illusion offered by religion.

Bigger then drives the drunken Mary home, and since she cannot walk he must carry her to her room. Thus, in this forbidden place, the scene is set for the murder. The imagery that surrounds Mary's murder is the stuff of Trueblood's dream. Bigger, for whom reality and illusion meet in death, feels he is acting out a part. In the dark room, he sees her white bed. Bigger knows he has entered into the most forbidden of

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<sup>1</sup>Ibid.

sanctuaries, and this very fact makes Mary attractive. Yet, in the very act of touching her body, a crime for which he knows there is no retribution, he turns to see the ghostlike white figure of Mrs. Dalton. In his terror, he feels as the invisible man often does, that he is falling from a great height in a dream. His mind keeps seeing the "white blur" as he smothers Mary.

Bigger has murdered Mary, accidentally smothered her as Wright seeks to show Bigger's own life had been accidentally but definitely smothered by others. It is this fact, in addition to the fact that the murder is originally "accidental," born of Bigger's overwhelming fear, that keeps the reader in sympathy with Bigger even though he later embraces the murder as his own. Bigger knows the only important fact to the world is not the circumstances but the nature of the act. A black man has murdered a white woman, an act in the eyes of the world for which there can be no mercy and no retreat. Thus, like an animal, a rodent, Wright portrays Bigger as instinctively knowing he will have to deal with "them" to stay alive. His mind races in dreamlike fashion as the clock ticks, and its white dial illuminates the room symbolizing that the reality of his situation seems like a nightmare, the nightmare of his life, of his dream world come true. To save himself, he places Mary's body in her trunk and carries it to the basement. The decision to burn Mary's body is akin to his desire to wipe out others and himself. Dan Mc Call views the burn-

ing of Mary's body as an "act of symbolic rape";<sup>1</sup> however, Bigger has already committed symbolic rape in Mary's room by his very presence, and it is his understanding and fear of this that leads to Mary's murder. Bigger himself later agrees that he had raped Mary because "rape" was what he did daily in the course of his life of hate. He raped every time he looked at a white face, his back to the wall. Rather, the fire and the inhuman dissecting of Mary's body parallels the act of lynching in its brutality and disregard for the human body. However, there is one important difference; Bigger's act is instinctively one of self-preservation as opposed to lynchings, associated for example with the characters of Big Boy in the writings of Wright and Toomer. Here again with the burning of Mary's body as with these lynchings, Wright uses destructive fire, the fire that has become as much of an American black folk symbol as the rabbit or in this case the white cat that stares accusingly at Bigger as the first snowflakes fall. Having accomplished Mary's beheading and burning, Bigger returns home and soundly sleeps.

Thus ends Book I, the shortest of the three books. This book is so structured because Wright uses the murder principally to establish the purposes of Books II and III. Book II, the longest book, involves Bigger's acceptance of his crime and its implications as well as his flight. Bigger is able to sleep so easily after his crime because his crime

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<sup>1</sup>Mc Call, The Example of Richard Wright, p. 177.

has been his life. This is demonstrated by Bigger's sudden and violent awakening in Book II which parallels the beginning of Book I. His fear has always been what has given reality and meaning to his life.

The white and cold snow, which is still falling, is used by Wright to seal Bigger's crime, making his escape impossible. Now the new knowledge of his crime makes Bigger live in a deeper sense than he has ever before; his senses are heightened, and his vision is clearer. Thus, Wright does not need to rely so heavily here on an implied narrator to reveal the motivation for Bigger's actions. Now the motivation for his actions is more frequently revealed directly through Bigger's own consciousness, and his consciousness and that of the implied narrator become more alike. This similarity is also possible because Wright has already established a bond of sympathy between Bigger and the reader, a bond which remains, though perhaps diminished, even though Bigger has murdered and decapitated Mary because the reader is always shown Bigger's overwhelming fear while the other characters remain opaque. Wright must make his other characters stereotypes and occasionally improbable to keep the reader's attention and sympathy constantly centered on Bigger. If Wright had allowed Mary's character any dimension, the murder would have completely destroyed the bond between Bigger and the reader that Wright so carefully built in Book I. It is because Mary is so shallow a character that her death is secondary for the reader to

Bigger's fear. In addition, Wright has already established his pattern of symbols for deepening the interpretation of the events, as well as his use of irony. Both continue to be important in Book II, and irony becomes more and more a weapon Wright uses to elicit a feeling of guilt from the reader.

In Book II, a veil has been lifted from Bigger's eyes, and he is able to see his own life without the need for his wall. Through Mary's death, Bigger can truly be said to have just begun to live. Thus, ironically, in a world that has buried him, Bigger's first creative act is murder. For the first time, he begins to initiate his own actions rather than to react just to the forces pressing down on him. This action is an example of Wright's use of irony to elicit guilt on the part of the reader; Bigger was trapped into murder by the "rules" of the game, but from this entrapment has come a new freedom. Like the crime of Sartre's Orestes in The Flies, Bigger's crime has become his own, defined him, and this self-realization no one can take from him. So it is in this act and its future connected acts that Bigger creates himself as the invisible man will later by his memoirs. And it is this self-creation that Bigger will defiantly affirm at the end of the novel. In a world that has rendered him invisible, Bigger, ironically, finds murder the only means to affirm his humanity.

This is Wright's thesis, and he has manipulated all of the action and the characters in the novel to achieve it.

Thus, he allows his other characters to be static, and he allows improbable situations such as Mrs. Dalton's failure to discover Bigger's presence in the room. All these aspects of the novel are sacrificed to the creation of Bigger.

Now Wright portrays Bigger through his crime as anchored in time like the Daltons. Now Bigger has a place from which he can observe others protected by their blindness. They are indeed blind, Bigger realizes, because having made him invisible, they have dismissed him and think him and his actions insignificant. Thus, his invisibility now becomes his protection. It is Wright's own form of the black joke that a black man's skin is a protective coloring at night and a mask of anonymity in the white world by day. Again the mask is also used to appeal to the reader's sense of guilt in relation to the race struggle.

Therefore, although his murder of Mary was an accident, Bigger knows that ultimately it was not accidental. His very presence in Mary's room was an act of treason; thus, he was already guilty and would be judged so in any case by the world. Mary's murder was the objective, visible acting out of Bigger's subjective invisible dream world. Therefore, he had killed many times before, but now his crime itself was no longer invisible. His crime is the natural outgrowth of his black skin. It is his present, future, past, and now Bigger knows where he is going. "The hidden meaning of his life--a meaning which others did not see and which he had always tried

to hide--had spilled out."<sup>1</sup> Thus, in the self-knowledge which Kabnis and the invisible man find pain, Bigger finds pride. Ironically, Wright has the ice break down inside Bigger as the snow piles up outside him. So as others are blinded by the blizzard of their own desires, their own narrowed point of view, Bigger clearly sees and plays on their blindness and his own invisibility. He no longer needs his curtain, his wall, because others' blindness provides a wall of protection for him. Bigger sees that Jan, Mary, Mr. Dalton and Mrs. Dalton have all been blind. Mrs. Dalton had failed even to know Mary was dead because it did not fit into her vision of things. Buddy, too, is blind and like the invisible man sees only the surface of things as he runs in his circular pattern like a blind rodent. His mother in her fear touches things for support; like Mrs. Dalton, she, too, is blind. Thus, through these characters, Wright symbolizes his belief in the blindness of American society.

Wright, faced with the problem of using Bigger's insight to reach the reader, must now stress Bigger's guilt as well as his motivation. There must be no doubt about Bigger's dehumanized nature; therefore, Wright follows Bigger's insights with Bigger's instinctive reaction to kill, even Buddy, if Buddy is a threat to his survival. Once more, Wright describes Bigger as moving like an animal ready to spring. Once more, he describes Bigger as trapped and afraid.

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<sup>1</sup>Wright, Native Son, p. 101.

As the invisible man later lives out his disguise, Bigger tries his new-found invisibility, his new self, on G. H., Jack and Gus. Like a man reborn, he moves anew. Now, knowing they will never see the truth, he is no longer afraid of them. For the first time, Wright shows that Bigger feels free with them; Bigger's philosophy becomes " . . . act like other people thought you ought to act, yet do what you wanted."<sup>1</sup> This is what the invisible man fails to understand in his grandfather's "yes" when he simply acts as others would have him and believes in his actions. Bigger thus has been made to face his deepest fears because he has committed the greatest taboo act possible. In his murder of Mary, Bigger has not acted against an individual but rather the mask of whiteness itself. In that sense, Wright is portraying that Bigger now has nothing left to fear.

The implied narrator points out that to Bigger and people like him, white people are always symbols, not people. Therefore, the white, storming snow sky is used by Wright as a signal; not only does it represent blindness and invisibility, it represents the white race, itself a symbol. It stands for a powerful natural force that is ever-present and must be ever heeded. Thus, Wright used Bigger's shame and fear as a microcosm of the shame and fear of all black people hemmed in their place in society by a white force as overpowering as the blizzard. Again Wright resorts to a "we-they" rhetoric,

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<sup>1</sup>Ibid., p. 108.



using the implied narrator's insight for a sympathetic understanding of Bigger. In this manner Wright seeks to reveal that Bigger's greatest tragedy is his deep unfulfilled desire for community and fellowship, particularly with his black brothers to make a stand against the white force. This desire in an oppressed people, Wright asserts, is one cause for the establishment of dictatorships. Thus Wright seeks to demonstrate that when people are as oppressed as Bigger is, violence and suppression seem to be the only creative answers that they can envision. This doctrine is also certainly aimed at the reader's sense of guilt in relation to the race problem that Wright is here also relating to the looming World War II.

Now with this sense of power and with more self-assurance than Bigger has ever known, he again approaches the big, white, silent house of the Daltons. His life has been caught up into one final meaningful act, and for the first time he looks eagerly to the future. As he enters the basement seeking to find if Mary's body is burnt, he is confronted by Peggy, and once again his fear overwhelms him, and he considers murder to protect himself. Wright uses this scene for several purposes. It adds to the surprise and suspense of the plot, and it reminds the reader of Bigger's guilt while keeping the reader aware of Bigger's constant terror even at the moments when Bigger feels most powerful and free. Again, Wright stresses that Bigger is trapped like an animal, a rat: "Then, slowly, he looked round the basement, turning his head

like an animal with eyes and ears alert. . . ."1 Wright also uses the constantly glowing fire as a symbol of Bigger's destruction as well as of Bigger's fear and guilt; thus the burning fire mirrors the emotions of Bigger's soul. Therefore, the basement is Bigger's underground, the truth that underlies the seeming reality, and it is this truth which must be dealt with. Wright in this way is able to picture Bigger's emotions in waves: the feeling of power is replaced by fear, which is in turn again replaced by power. This ebbing and flowing also aids in keeping Bigger a sympathetic character for the reader.

Bigger's plan, to take the trunk to the station and return seeking Mary, seems a desperate attempt. The sun on the snow, leaping in mute whiteness around Bigger, signals Bigger's entrapment, and Bigger's feeling of belonging, of having " . . . his fingers on the pulse of time"2 in a house that runs like a clock seems pathetic. Yet, Bigger feels himself to be in control and listening like a controlling god from above, Bigger hears the scenes changing in the kitchen, which is located below his room. For once, although he is still outside the action, Bigger feels powerful. Convention is again on his side because Mrs. Dalton's shame even keeps her from questioning Bigger too closely. The invisible line between them protects Bigger as her blind white eyes had, and in his black skin and invisibility will lie his protection

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<sup>1</sup>Ibid., p. 112.

<sup>2</sup>Ibid., p. 115.

from others as well. Bigger's success gives birth to a desire to repeat his crime, to plan for next time, to make it profitable. Like the invisible man, he now desires more power and would almost tell of his crime to have his action seen and buried forever in men's minds so that he will no longer be invisible. Again Wright uses irony which is aimed at stimulating the reader's sense of guilt by using Bigger's desire to belong as motivation for Bigger's actions.

Now Bigger turns to Bessie whom, like his sister, he also treats like an animal. As Max later points out, love is impossible between two such dehumanized people; they have no common vision. Bessie to Bigger, the implied narrator indicates, is just ". . . a shadow in the denser darkness surrounding her."<sup>1</sup> Sex is just a momentary relief, a moment of peace for Bigger in which he can forget the blind world which causes his fear and shame. It gives him strength and cools his senses, and he is reborn with a new sense of time and space. In sex, he finds a hole of warmth, a momentary home until he awakens again with vacant eyes, facing the world he hates and wishes to blot out of existence. For Bigger, Bessie's body is separate from her face, her person, and he longs to possess her body but to blot out the rest of her. She is as invisible to him as she is blind.

Thus, Bessie is to be used. Her desire for sensation, akin to Bigger's own, and Bigger's need to have her see

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<sup>1</sup>Ibid., p. 128.

him as important and to possess her, make her entrapment possible. Again Wright stresses that only now with dreams of murder and kidnapping does excitement surge in Bigger, and for once he has no need to blot out an empty day or night. He knows now he may soon be "running," and that Bessie, whom he sees in terms of a rabbit, will slow him down. But with his new-found sense of time the moment is his as he continually checks his watch.

It is Bessie's mention of the Leopold and Loeb murder that Wright uses for probability for Bigger's ransom attempt. Wright uses the Leopold and Loeb case to parallel Bigger's murder of Mary. Both murders are located in the same neighborhood; both result in a sense of power; both are ultimately defended by an appeal to society's own guilt. Thus, Wright seems to be using the historic Leopold-Loeb murder as a yardstick to be used in evaluating Bigger's murder of Mary, to give this fictitious murder probability, and to link it realistically to life itself. This perhaps accounts for the many reviewers who see the novel as a prophecy of future bloodshed in America. This type of implication is, in part, what Wright seems to be attempting in his Leopold and Loeb reference.

This interpretation is also supported again by the use of the "we-they" rhetoric. Bigger tells Bessie that they will be successful in their plan against the white power structure because "we got a club over 'em, see?"<sup>1</sup> Bigger and

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<sup>1</sup>Ibid., p. 137.

Bessie have their invisibility to protect them because only the mask is seen; no one will suspect they have the courage to carry out the scheme. Yet in this black mask also lies a danger; if Bigger and Bessie are detected, there will be no place to hide and no hope for mercy.

However, Bigger's new sense of self helps to allay and blot out his fear of death. For the first time, his life is his own to dispose of; he can decide when to begin his flight, and that knowledge gives him strength. He believes that now, and only now, he is the master of his own destiny, and therefore, he is more alive than he has ever been. Again Wright uses irony as a weapon; he points out through his implied narrator that now at last Bigger has a goal in life.

For the first time in his life he moved consciously between two sharply defined poles; he was moving away from the threatening penalty of death, from the death-like times that brought him that tightness and hotness in his chest; and he was moving toward that sense of fulness he had so often but inadequately felt in magazines and movies.<sup>1</sup>

His need for his gun and knife has been replaced by his knowledge that he had murdered. Wright depicts that through murder Bigger has become a whole man, complete within himself, needing no external props. He can accept in a new light the fact that his blackness puts him at the bottom of the world, puts him in a hole, and he no longer feels like a puppet controlled by invisible strings as Clifton, the invisible man, and Kabnis had been.

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<sup>1</sup>Ibid., p. 141.

Thus, it is probable that Bigger will return to prey on Mrs. Dalton's blind trust. There, in the red shadows that play on his guilt, he meets Britten, a play on kitten, bitten, who is akin to the white cat that stalks the rodent. Britten is part of the game, and in his eyes Bigger sees a reflection of himself. However, as much as Wright seems to anticipate a deep relationship between Bigger and Britten, this relationship is never developed to any extent in the novel. This kinship between prey and pursuer will be better developed to a greater extent by Wright in The Outsider. Once again for protection, Bigger, by retreating behind his mask and assuming the posture that is expected of him, protects himself. His eyes that seem to see only the surface of things see through the blindness of others, to Bigger's advantage. Thus playing the part of the mask, he tells his story in abased humility and seeming ignorance as the fire sings in his ears, and since he is invisible, he is believed. This time it is Bigger who constructs the "reality" of the world, not the others. There is no one to contradict him but Jan, and since Jan is seen as a "Red," a symbol that is always to be disbelieved, Wright makes Bigger's story probable. The one thing that Bigger has not counted on is that Britten will suspect him, too, of being a communist, a fact that Wright will use later to elevate the Party.

But because of the blindness of others, Bigger's confidence returns as the curtain of white snow continues to

fall, contrasting Bigger's sense of power with his true helplessness, which aids in maintaining his sympathetic stature for the reader. Once more, his knowledge of his murder makes him feel equal to the powerful, secure whites that surround him. Couched in the symbol of the game of life that Bigger can understand, he sees that he has killed "their" symbol of beauty, thus evening the score. This murder appeases his overwhelming sense of deprivation. Yet through the use of dreams, Wright again reveals Bigger's helplessness. His dream, with its tolling bell and red, glaring light, represents Bigger's guilt. In the dream, Wright symbolizes that the bell tolls for all men and that in Mary's death is Bigger's own and indeed the death of all America as Wright will have Max later point out. The dream also prefigures Bigger's coming flight and his running under the glare of the red moon. Bigger's control of his life, which he holds like his own head, is doomed even as it begins; he can but throw himself, no longer caring what becomes of him, at "their" white faces. This Wright, with an irony again aimed at the reader's sense of guilt, depicts as the gift of a native son to his homeland.

In the shadow of this dream, Bigger gathers the animal forces of his body to protect himself in his meeting with Jan. Yet it is Jan's blind innocence that angers Bigger enough to want to kill him, and it is this innocence for which the reader condemns Jan. Once more, Wright sacrifices probability in

Bigger's meeting with Jan to assure the reader's distance to Jan and therefore assure continued closeness to Bigger. It is a sense of convention that saves Bigger. Jan lies because he doesn't want Mr. Dalton to think he left Mary alone with a strange chauffeur. Jan thinks it is all somehow a joke, a game, which in an ironic sense, Wright is showing that it is. Bigger seems to be playing a winning hand, but once again as they always have, his fear and guilt defeat him. He, therefore, cannot shake the ashes of the furnace down.

But, as Bigger's fear increases, Wright is able to have Bigger's desire for power and admiration increase. Bigger wants to control Jan and Britten, to make them see him. Therefore, Wright makes it probable that in spite of his fear, Bigger will continue with his ransom plan. Looking for a hole in which to hide, Bigger passes " . . . many empty buildings with black windows, like blind eyes, buildings like skeletons standing with snow on their bones in the winter winds."<sup>1</sup> As did Toomer, Wright uses the buildings as the symbol of a dehumanized modern society. The buildings, like the black community, have been systematically abandoned and left to destruction. And in this blind world, Bigger chooses a cold white building as the hole he will use. Again Wright uses irony in the fact that the building, like Bigger's own home, is managed by Mr. Dalton's company. Thus, Wright is seeking to portray that the slums have festered a rat that will attack

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<sup>1</sup>Ibid., p. 141.



the heart of the white civilization that has created them. Thus, Wright seeks to depict that Mr. Dalton, a god perched high above these holes, these graves, will be brought low by a sickness of his own creation.

Bigger in fear and hate forces blind Bessie to do his bidding. Yet, for probability Wright has her realize that if Bigger killed Mary he is capable of killing her, too. And Bigger does already feel as he did with Mary. Bigger's justification is that others have killed also, and again he is just evening the score. At the same time as this revelation, Wright again demonstrates Bigger's contrasting helplessness to maintain the bond with the reader. Thus, fear sheathes Bigger, and this hot fear is contrasted to the blizzard outside. Bigger entraps Bessie as the world has entrapped him, and to signal this, again a rat crosses his path emitting a lonely wail of fear. Again with irony aimed at the reader's sense of guilt, Bigger's choice of a hideout is an old abandoned building once the home of rich whites, the type of apartment that was fire bombed when blacks first moved to the South Side. Thus, Wright demonstrates, the score is being evened. This has always been part of Bigger's dream world and the pattern of his life, and his breathless instructions mirror the fact that he has always been running. Once again, he is engaged in a battle royal, this time with Bessie, whose hopelessness Wright uses as a reflection of Bigger's own.

Irony also plays a part in the fact that Bigger in spite of the murder still lives in fear of the social taboos that society has constructed for him. Leaving the ransom note at the front door, which he views as a violation of the huge white house itself, seems to call for an act of God in retribution. And even after committing murder, Bigger is still afraid to eat, without permission, food left on the table. Thus, Wright demonstrates that the old ways that gave birth to Bigger will be harder to kill than Mary was.

The success of the kidnap note again fills Bigger with exaltation. Bigger is not seen leaving the note because Bigger has never been seen. Unseeing eyes do not suspect him. He has signed the note with the symbol--red--placing the glowing red guilt on Jan. Now, Bigger feels he is living on a summit, and he will hold this position even if he is eventually to be dashed down into the blackness from which he came. Again the fact that he has these avenues of choices open to him makes him feel free. Only now has he had the opportunity to create himself, in an existential sense, by his own choices. Wright seeks to demonstrate that the society in which Bigger lives has boxed him in and holed him up so tightly that only through the destruction of its most sacred law is Bigger able to breathe freely and act creatively.

In Britten's investigation of Bigger, Wright again uses irony which is ultimately directed at the reader. Britten seeks to discover if Bigger acts according to the pres-

cribed stereotypes, failing to see that this itself is Bigger's protection. In addition, using Britten's hatred for other minority groups and organizations, Wright has Bigger further able to cloud Britten's eyes. Thus, chaos looms inside the home, and it is mirrored by Wright outside in the blinding blizzard. Again, Bigger is led to the basement and questioned by white faces. Here in his underground where the truth lies immediately in front of the searchers, Bigger is continually able to deceive others because of their blindness. Once again, because Wright has made the reader a party to Bigger's knowledge and aware of the blindness of Bigger's enemies, the reader is drawn to Bigger and separated from others. In addition, the reader's awareness of the mask and Bigger's use of it involves a certain amount of guilt on the part of the reader. Using the knowledge that communist pamphlets on race relations were hateful to these white faces, Bigger is able to tell them what they want to hear. His black mask and his knowledge of it also offer continual protection. Bigger is ruling and controlling this underground hell of his own making, and like Milton's Satan, he prefers this to "living," controlled, in the white society.

However, Wright once more stresses Bigger's fear that remains a result of the old taboos continually taught to him. Now Wright portrays Bigger's true helplessness, born of Bigger's poverty and ignorance. The reporters seem more dangerous than even Britten because Bigger, who has lived in the

world of illusion, sees the papers as inevitably correct, the gospel truth. Therefore, their objective cool representatives are to be feared, and in his fear, Bigger begins to lose control. Thus, he feels the overwhelming deadlike white presence of the Daltons in the red fiery basement, and the white cat, the pursuer of the rodent, which leaps to his shoulder, condemns him and points him out as Mary's murderer. Illusion and reality blend in nightmarish fashion as the scene continues. Mr. Dalton maintains, ironically, that Mary was last seen by his blind wife and Bigger. Bigger has succeeded in making Mary as invisible though present as he himself is. The story is constructed and seemingly made real by the press. Indeed, Bigger's own obsession with reading the newspaper accounts is his attempt to control his illusionary world as he had once done in the movies. Bigger, who is seen as a black clown, a mask, is still unsuspected, but now filled with hysteria, and his hysteria as always will trap him.

As in Cane, it is blinding black smoke that announces the murder. Bigger, for his life, cannot shake the ashes down, and Mary's white bones betray him from the grave as Bigger again fails to see her. The fear that has always haunted him returns, and he, knowing he is black, longs for a weapon. In the chaos, Bigger escapes into the greater chaos of the blizzard, his fear white hot in the cold white snow. Now he is running, and Wright is using this as a symbol to signify that Bigger is running the same race he has all of his life.

Nothing has changed, only now the race has become objective and visible. Now the papers will tell his story, the story that had been hidden, buried always in Bigger's heart. He had thrown it now at them as he had thrown his bloody head in the dream. Now, his captors, who were soon to hold him again captive, must see what they had buried underground.

As Bigger runs, he knows the powerful white world will prove too much for him; he knows, as he has always known, that there is no chance for him in this game. Once again, the reader is drawn to Bigger by his very helplessness in his defiance. He will be searched for, and the black community torn apart for his sake, will offer him no hiding place. Wright again uses irony as a weapon by stressing that Bigger's black invisibility will now render him highly visible. Driven by the desire for communion with others, Bigger will take Bessie even though he sees it will lead to her death. With the milk she had given him still inside him, he will kill her, killing at once symbolically his mother, his lover, his race and himself. Like Bigger, Bessie runs knowing that she has been blind and that there is no hope, knowing that Bigger will be accused of rape as well as murder according to the prescribed formula. Thus, Wright portrays the fact that to be accused of a sex crime is in itself a death sentence for a black because Bigger will be indeed outside the world, murdered in white men's hearts even before his capture.

Now Bigger tries to hide in the jungle that the white

world has created in the slums. He returns to the "black" trouble in which he was born. However, once more the feeling that his life, for once, is in his own hands comforts and strengthens him. Even death is worth the price for once having lived as a free man. In the blind-eyed, empty skull buildings, Bigger hides and instinctively, driven by that same trapped feeling, he murders as the rats run over the rotting floor. Once again, Bigger rapes, for indeed he had raped Mary in the deep hate of his life. He takes Bessie's cold body as he will take her life, going round and round on the same merry-go-round of his own life. Only this violent action rids Bigger of the cramped feeling inside him; only this frees him from the coffin of his life.

It is a tribute to Wright's construction of the character of Bigger that the reader does not at this point lose all sympathy for Bigger which would ruin the entire effect of the novel. Wright needs Bigger's murder of Bessie to demonstrate Bigger's guilt for Mary's murder. Bigger must own his crime like Orestes in The Flies if the novel is to be understood in the sense that Wright intended it to be. Even though Mary's death was in a sense accidental, the reader must see that the crime is embraced by Bigger, and it is this that makes him free. By having Bigger murder Bessie, Wright insures Bigger's guilt, and the reader must see that it is Bigger's crime that creates him anew. Yet, the bond between Bigger and the reader must be maintained if Bigger's final

decision in his cell is to be viewed as tragic for both Bigger and the nation. Wright is able to maintain this bond through various techniques. First, the reader has been carefully prepared by Bessie's murder. Second, Bigger's reaction is viewed by the implied narrator as instinctive, an animal reaction for self-protection. Finally, the reader is shown only Bigger's consciousness in relation to the murder, not Bessie's. Thus, the reader fully understands Bigger's instinctive motivation, and is shown that for Bigger, Bessie's murder is no more difficult than Mary's. Like Mary, Bessie has been invisible to Bigger. She is a sex, not a person, and he quickly comes to think of her body in terms of "it." His animal instinct for survival, like the rat's, is now Bigger's only reality. Bessie's breath is simply a white thread that must be cut to leave him in darkness, and the wind outside moans as the furnace had. His mind repeats over and over in a sterile pattern the fact that she cannot go with him nor be left behind. So with the sense of the white blur hovering over him, he kills Bessie blindly in the dark and throws her body away like an old newspaper, casting it into the dark hole where he has always been. In this manner, Wright accomplishes both a sense of Bigger's guilt and inhumanity as well as being able to keep the reader aware of Bigger's hopelessness.

It is this hopelessness that Wright stresses immediately after the murder; once more, Bigger is filled with fear

and poised to run. He is marked with blood and fears Bessie's dead eyes so like the eyes of the buildings. As with Mary's death, Wright's very objective description of Bessie's "blood and lips and hair and face turned to one side and blood running slowly"<sup>1</sup> adds to the horror and stresses the impersonality and inhumanity with which Bigger is capable of murdering. But even now Wright shows Bigger's fear is dominant because Bigger cannot return for the money in Bessie's pocket anymore than he could shake down the ashes even though Bigger feels intensely powerful because the blind world, hate him as it might, could never undo his actions. Thus, by his actions, Bigger has made his illusory world real, his imaginary murders actual. Wright also follows this murder with an appeal to the reader's sense of guilt again using the "we-they" rhetoric; the implied narrator explains that Bigger

had felt the need of the clean satisfaction of facing this thing in all its fulness; of fighting it out in the wind and sunlight, in front of those whose hate for him was so unfathomably deep that, after they had shunted him off into a corner of the city to rot and die, they could turn to him, as Mary had, and say: 'I'd like to know how your people live.'<sup>2</sup>

Thus, Wright is again stressing that it is society that has created Bigger whole with his thoughts and feelings joined, unlike Toomer's characters.

Bigger comes to grip with his internal chaos in the only way he has been able to, through violence. Again appealing to the reader's sense of guilt concerning the race

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<sup>1</sup>Ibid., p. 223.

<sup>2</sup>Ibid., p. 225.



struggle in America, Wright depicts Bigger as being cramped unto death and therefore striking out blindly hurting whatever he could. Bigger has been treated as an invisible man. Thus, Wright maintains Bigger's greatest tragedy is his unfulfilled desires, satisfied partially, yet at the same time fed by illusions--newspapers, magazines, movies. Bigger desires most, Wright stresses through the implied narrator, to belong in a visible way " . . . to merge himself with others and be a part of this world, to lose himself in it so he could find himself, to be allowed a chance to live like others, even though he was black."<sup>1</sup>

But, instead, as Bigger's world of illusion becomes his reality, the city, all white and still, becomes unreal. His fleeting glimpse of the world, that Max will make flare again, dims. For Bigger there is no redeemer to humanize the cold white world, and his dreams which become reality are not quiet, beautiful ones, but nightmares. He has created for himself a new world made in the hell-like image of his own twisted soul. He is his own creator and redeemer, a black Satan figure created out of the minds of white Americans. Wright seeks to demonstrate that this is the only identity Bigger has been allowed, and now therefore Bigger assumes this dark identity as his own. Bigger, like the invisible man, points to the nightmare lying buried in the fitful dreams of a sleeping land. He, too, Wright is saying, is a native son.

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<sup>1</sup>Ibid., p. 226.

Thus, as Bigger wished, his drama is now acted out visibly in the wind and sun against the stark, cold, dead white background. The white-heated rage of white society akin to the inhuman blaze that consumed Mary, envelopes the black community, and other invisible men are beaten. In this manner, Bigger is hunted like Big Boy, and trapped like a rodent, caught by a white cat that will toy with him for a while before destroying him. But even now as the white world seeks to destroy Bigger, Wright portrays that this world finds it impossible to believe that Bigger differs from the mask it has outwardly created to hide the humanity of blacks. Again, it is blind stereotypes that are hardest to kill.

Now, Bigger runs, cold and hungry, like a cornered animal. In his flight, he moves invisibly in the ghetto. Wright, again, at this point uses "we-they" rhetoric to tell the story of the dead-eyed buildings and the abandoned black people who live in them buried and forgotten in this sealed-off part of the city. He uses Bigger's flight, his running, as a symbol of black life in the ghetto, and through Bigger's realization of his life, Wright puts forth his theme. Like Toomer, Wright pictures the Black Belt as a zoo where blacks are caged like animals, a truth that only a "crazy" seer such as Bigger, the invisible man, or Dan Moore will sight. In the light of this insight, Bigger now sees that he has been tricked out of every breath and has paid more dearly for less because he is black. Blacks in the ghetto have only been allowed to

operate one business--that of burying the dead, and in light of Bigger's own murders, Wright uses this as an ironic social comment. In the figure of speech that the invisible man later uses, Bigger knows that "they gouge our eyes out!"<sup>1</sup>

But, as Bigger again feels some communion with the black community, he is rejected by parts of it as a traitor. Still, others argue that since he is invisible he is not to be held "responsible." Bigger, caught in another battle royal, thinks only of survival at all costs. Once more he is on the outside of the world, and time has stopped for him as his watch indicates. In a scene that parallels "The Man Who Lived Underground," Bigger watches a church function that symbolizes a Christianity that sings only of submission, resignation and ultimately death. It requires giving up the hope of living in the world, a hope that is Bigger's driving force.

Now Wright concentrates on the suspense of the hunt itself. The strangle hold on the black belt tightens, and Bigger's "white" spot of safety shrinks. The communist headquarters and the black community are sacked while the mayor warns against "boring from within."<sup>2</sup> In trying to escape, Bigger climbs upward out of his hole into the visibility of the white searchlight that cuts him off and surrounds him like a prison. Now the hunted and the hunters again meet in the ritual that has only one end. Bigger's own life becomes unreal, as his mind retreats once more behind his wall, free-

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<sup>1</sup>Ibid., p. 235.

<sup>2</sup>Ibid., p. 240.

ing him from himself. Thus, the water that renders him helpless symbolizes a baptism that seals his life. Once more, he is on the outside surrounded by hostile white faces that scream "kill that black ape!"<sup>1</sup> Yet, Wright keeps the reader painfully aware of Bigger's humanity and the inhumanity of his captors by having Bigger's arms stretched in the form of crucifixion. As the mob seeks to kill the image it has created, the reader once more sympathizes with Bigger, whose attempts to escape are more instinctive and therefore less morally accountable than the actions of his pursuers. It is with this scene, of a "legal" lynching that dehumanizes all, that Book II ends.

In Book III, "Fate," Wright varies his previous techniques. Until now, Wright has used a cause and effect plot that had begun with Bigger's being hired by the Daltons. But in the final section of the novel, Wright will organize his plot on an instructional principle rather than on cause and effect. In addition, his didactic concerns will supplant almost entirely his concern with probability. His characters will perform acts that are inconsistent with their previously established modes of action or with general probability, for example, Jan's insight into Bigger's character and Bigger's trust in Max. Also, Wright will rely heavily upon coincidence to further his plot line, for example, Bigger's meeting in the prison room with Jan, Max, the Reverend Hammond, Buck-

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<sup>1</sup>Ibid., p. 253.

ley, the Daltons, Bigger's mother, Vera, Buddy, Gus, G. H. and Jack. Furthermore, Wright will shift his point of view. Although he will still occasionally use the implied narrator, particularly in the beginning of "Fate," Wright will now use Max as the primary spokesman for Bigger's consciousness. In addition, much of Bigger's consciousness will be presented through his dialogue, which will lack the richness and depth of Wright's implied narrator's as Wright struggles to make Bigger articulate directly those ideas previously expressed through narration. This change will also involve a sharp shift in style. Therefore, although most critics of Wright agree generally that the novel is thrown out of focus in Book III,<sup>1</sup> it is profitable to examine this failure carefully in the light of Wright's plot, character development, and style.

Bigger's internal struggle between hope for some communion with other men and final despair and rejection of that hope is the pivotal point of suspense in Book III. The decision concerning Bigger's life had already been made with the hint that he had raped Mary. The remaining unanswered question is whether Bigger will die hoping in community or solitary in hatred. This is the struggle that takes place in his white death cell, which Wright uses symbolically as the

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<sup>1</sup>For example, Edward Margolies criticizes the whole of Book III in his critical study, The Art of Richard Wright, p. 113. In addition, Robert A. Bone in The Negro Novel in America, p. 151, also finds that Max's speech throws the novel badly out of focus.

same hole in which Bigger has always been placed. Here Bigger is kept immovable, cramped, and completely outside of time. His actions are paralyzed once more, and he is surrounded by people who see him as a figment of the black world. Yet Bigger's search continues for something more than the image of the mask, more than living out life as an "obscene joke."<sup>1</sup> His realization that he is to be offered as a ritualistic victim to reinforce the existing taboos for blacks, lures him from behind the wall that he had erected for protection. Again Bigger refuses to play the game, even though he is cornered, and thus once more is reborn. But his resurrection after three death-like days will be a rebirth unto death; he remains an invisible man. Yet his courage in the face of certain defeat and death maintains the reader's sympathy for him as a character.

Wright uses the manner of Bigger's existence in prison as symbolic of Bigger's "normal" life, a life that has always been shackled to white wrists and surrounded by hostile white faces. Mr. and Mrs. Dalton's blind stares are nothing new to Bigger; this is the same pattern, the same merry-go-round. The newspapers that Wright uses as a type of chorus also reinforce this fact. They emphasize fear and the animal image by which the world denies Bigger's humanity and its own moral responsibility for this humanity. They are also used to reinforce the reader's own sense of guilt in relation to the

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<sup>1</sup>Wright, Native Son, p. 256.

race conflict by glorifying the blackface mask: "In speech and manner he lacks the charm of the average, harmless, genial, southern darky so beloved by the American people."<sup>1</sup> Wright thus ironically demonstrates how the mask is even used to hide its own results. Therefore, because society has dismissed Bigger's humanity, lynching as a "cure" is easily accomplished.

Wright also uses the prison scene with the pastor to demonstrate the role of religion in the creation of the mask. Even the language of religion, Wright demonstrates through the preacher's prayer, with its white soul, dark days, light which is equated with love, and darkness with damnation, the black chaos which the light parts in creation, reinforces the mask. Religion has thus become the mainstay of the myth. Therefore, from the picture of man created in God's image, Bigger, the animal, has been excluded. There is no love in it for him. It is for this reason that Bigger must kill religion in his heart (it is his first murder, the implied narrator states) in order that he might live. He puts aside God and becomes his own creator, and for this he will be killed and finally imprisoned forever in the earth.

Turning from religion, Bigger looks to Jan for a possible escape from Wright's circular image of the ". . . vast blind wheel being turned by stray gusts of wind."<sup>2</sup> Although the probability for this scene is weak, Wright must somehow

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<sup>1</sup>Ibid., p. 260.

<sup>2</sup>Ibid., p. 267.

open Bigger's mind to make Bigger's relationship with Max at all feasible. Thus, the reds and the blacks are to join for mutual visibility against a world of weak-eyed Buckleyes who want them lynched and rendered forever invisible.

But, Wright shows through his character portrayals, the world remains blind. Mr. Dalton, in godlike fashion, goes blindly in the same direction, disclaiming guilt and responsibility and allowing the Thomas family to remain in their slum. Blind Mrs. Dalton thinks that perhaps it is better this way. To Bigger's family and friends, in their shame, he still remains invisible. His hope is not to be realized in them. There will be no "seeing" after death. They only arouse his shame. The white world is still in control, and again Bigger longs to blot it from sight, to make it, too, invisible. Bigger is found guilty of many crimes because he is black. By this means, Wright demonstrates his belief that for society Bigger's blackness is the only truth. The "why" of Bigger's killing, which Bigger finds so difficult to articulate, Wright feels society is too deaf to hear. Bigger's deep hate, his life, is to remain invisible by the society's willing blindness.

Bigger is now shut up profoundly alone. Therefore, he has an overwhelming need for light, like the invisible man, so that he will no longer move blindly. Yet, his white surroundings, papers, bones, faces, hair, walls only serve to further blind him as the game continues around him. Wright



uses irony to emphasize the battle royal aspects of this game. For example, the legacy left to Mary is one of the few means of identifying her. She is again merely a symbol, and it is thus that Mrs. Dalton's prayers are answered as ironically as Jocasta's in Oedipus Rex.

Wright now must have Bigger struggle to trust. Using Buckley's evil indictment of the black race and the Communist Party for contrast and probability, Wright has Bigger move toward Jan's and Max's understanding. To insure the reader's sympathy with this move, Wright also contrasts the latter's insight to Mr. Dalton's blindness and Max's humanity to the inhuman use of Bessie's body brought into the court by two white-coated attendants. Even in death, Bessie is not a human but merely "evidence." She is black, and therefore, Wright shows, her death is important only in the fact that it reduces the black population by one. In a technique continually used in the novel, Wright appeals to the reader's own sense of guilt by stressing that battle royals among blacks are allowed and even encouraged in the game. Only those acts, Wright seeks to demonstrate, that challenge the strangle-hold that the whites have on the blacks are not permitted. Once more, Bigger's only defense is his wish to blot out the world. He is backed against the wall, with only his animal-like defense of a snarl, by the world that has made him a frightened animal, and once again the reader is drawn to Bigger because of the overwhelming forces aligned against him.

It is this world that ironically burns a cross as a symbol of its hatred, and Wright makes this the final irony of the religious conflict of Bigger's life. Religion, in relation to the black man, is seen as an instrument of fear used for suppression, and therefore in this light Bigger's rejection of it must be seen by the reader as correct. It is this world that wants Bigger to re-enact his crime for the same vicarious pleasure that Norton receives from Trueblood's history, and again the reader views Bigger's refusal as morally correct in contrast to his captors. In his segregated cell, even the other prisoners offer no hope of communion to Bigger, and Wright highlights this isolation through one of Bigger's cellmates. This "insane" black man, who is akin to the vet in Invisible Man, also portrays the hopelessness of the truth. Like the "insane" characters in Toomer and Ellison, this man has a clear vision of the nightmarish life of the black man in the white man's world. Like the others, this man, too, is strait-jacketed and buried from sight.

It is against this vision and this white world that Max must struggle to have Bigger again will to live and trust. Wright attempts to make this probable through Bigger's reaction of shame to Max's very whiteness. Bigger now inarticulately reviews his actions, actions whose motivations have already been detailed by the implied narrator. In this manner Wright reiterates that Mary's "kindness" was to Bigger a sham that made him feel like an exposed animal as his "looking"

had made his sister feel. Once again it is a question of vision, point of view, and blindness. They were not operating on the same frequencies, and the suggestion to the reader is the same as that posed at the conclusion of Invisible Man: "who knows but that, on the lower frequencies, I speak for you?"<sup>1</sup> The reader is once more linked to Bigger's fate. This fate results from the fact that like the invisible man and Kabnis, Bigger tragically accepts others' views of himself; he lets others define him. And their definition, that of a black rapist, and murderer, becomes Bigger's reality. Yet, Wright uses Bigger's potential self, buried deep within, as a source for another vision of life, and Wright uses this to maintain Bigger's sympathetic bond with the reader. Thus Bigger is a one-eyed rodent, like the invisible man, who just keeps running, chasing round and round after himself. He is pictured as a puppet, controlled by a godlike white world that smothers him, holding out religion as a veil to cover his eyes. But Bigger is portrayed as a rebel who will not buy this happiness, paid for with his life. He wants happiness in the world among people who relate to him and to whom he can relate.

Now Max, instead of the implied narrator, is used to point out the hopelessness of Bigger's situation in terms of the "we-they" rhetoric, again appealing to the reader's sense of guilt. "They felt they had you fenced off so that you could

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<sup>1</sup>Ellison, Invisible Man, p. 439.

not do what you did. Now they're mad because deep down in them they believe that they made you do it."<sup>1</sup> Once again, Wright is drawing the reader into the responsibility for Bigger's creation. This is also the aim of Bigger's surrealistic vision of a united world, where all masks are discarded to reveal the human faces beneath, where "he" and "they" are part of the same reality. This vision so similar to the vision shown in Toomer's "Harvest Song," and Ellison's hospital episode, portrays modern man as cut off from his fellow men, blind to the sight and deaf to the sounds of others. Wright is maintaining that this world has created Bigger who, even in his vision, fears the taboo of making himself the equal of others in his humanity.

In addition, Wright is using Max as a symbol rather than a character, as an indictment of American society. Max is Wright's mouthpiece; through him Wright articulates the vision that previously had been posed by the implied narrator in symbolic terms since Bigger's vision, because of his essential character, was always too limited. Through Max, Wright directly states the didactic meaning of Bigger's life that he has stressed over and over again in his pattern of symbols and through his implied narrator. Yet Max's weakness as a character tends to reduce the impact of these ideas rather than strengthen them.

Because Max is a symbol, Wright allows him almost no

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<sup>1</sup>Wright, Native Son, p. 332.

character development. In addition throughout Max's long speech, Wright shifts his writing style. The average word length per sentence now becomes 25 words (one sentence has as many as 101 words) as opposed to the earlier 11 words per sentence.<sup>1</sup> In a count of 500 words there are 154 nouns and pronouns, 63 verbs, 101 adjectives, and 35 adverbs. The noun-verb ratio demonstrates an increase in nominals from a ratio of 1.6 to 2.4, indicating a slowing of the action. An increase in the number of adjectives also adds a heaviness to the writing. In addition, of the first twenty sentences of Max's speech, only 8 are simple while 6 are complex, 2 are compound, and 4 are compound-complex, the largest of which contains 10 separate clauses. This is a departure from Wright's preference for simple sentences, and this increased length tends to emphasize a wordy, preachy quality in Max's speech.

Furthermore, Wright's choice of vocabulary also shifts from simple to more complex in this section. Although Wright still prefers one syllable words (there are 385 one syllable words, 66 two syllable words, 33 three syllable words, 10 four syllable words, 4 five syllable words, and 2 six syllable words) his choice of formal and technical vocabulary increases. For example, there are 14 words that can be classified as formal, including such words as destiny, encompass, inextricably, pretensions; there are also 11 words which may be classified

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<sup>1</sup>This count is based upon the first three pages of Max's speech. Ibid., pp. 353-55.

as technical, such as defendant, microscope, psychological, symbol, and social organism.

Even Wright's choice of figurative language is more complex and more removed from the character of Bigger; for example Max states of Bigger "the prejudices of men have stained this symbol, like a germ stained for examination under the microscope."<sup>1</sup> This comparative formality has a false rhetorical ring to it, making Max's speech seem amateurish and dull. In addition, Wright no longer uses his dramatic techniques of suspense and fear, withholding information and then reversing the action. Rather, Wright in a heavy-handed manner preaches his meaning to the reader, not through the subtle use of symbolism and irony, but rather most frequently through direct narration. All these things tend to bog down this section of the novel.

The purpose of Max's speech is to prove the guilt of the nation, and it has its verification in what the reader has already seen of this guilt in relation to Bigger. Through Max's speech, Wright symbolizes Bigger as every black man in America, maintaining that all are being tried with him and condemned for being black. Max's defense is an attempt to prove Bigger is not solely "responsible" for his crimes. As in the Invisible Man, it is a question of responsibility in which, Wright is stating, the reader also has a part.

However, Max's defense is more an attempt on Wright's

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<sup>1</sup>Ibid., p. 354.

part to again explain Bigger and to involve the reader in Bigger's guilt than it is an effort to create a realistic courtroom scene. Lines such as "perhaps it is in a manner fortunate that the defendant has committed one of the darkest crimes in our memory"<sup>1</sup> are totally unbelievable. In fact, the lack of legalistic realism weakens the probability as well as the suspense of this section. Using Max, Wright again proclaims, as through the implied narrator, that the force that drives Bigger is a force that is beyond his control. Max is used to point a guilty finger at the nation that has created Bigger. And, occasionally, to show the extent of America's sickness, Wright even has Max's defense couched in the racially tinted language of America that sees Bigger's crimes as dark crimes. Wright relies on the fact that he has created Max as an outcast too, an American Jew who is also a communist, to make Max's concern valid and his position probable. But this fails to make his defense any more plausible. Therefore, Max's thesis of the nation's guilt is less successful in convincing the reader than Bigger's actions as interpreted by the implied narrator. Max's view of the future is less convincing than Bigger's blinding view of the present, and his attempts to tear off the mask are less successful than Bigger's own humanity.

Yet Wright presents Max's defense as an attempt to unveil " . . . the unconscious ritual of death in which we, like

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<sup>1</sup>Ibid.

sleep-walkers, have participated so dreamlike and thoughtlessly."<sup>1</sup> Again in the symbols which are also used to represent the nightmare of reality in Cane and Invisible Man, Wright appeals to the reader's sense of guilt. But Max's effort to join Bigger's actions to communist ideals is unsuccessful. There is nothing previously in the novel to which the latter can be related, and these ideals are beyond the scope of Bigger's consciousness. On the other hand, the treatment of the heritage of slavery for both black and white, the fear, the hate, and the guilt, is convincing because Bigger's actions and the mob's reactions have vividly portrayed their validity. Yet Max's explanations of Bigger's images, the mountains, the blindness, the game, are repetitious and less powerful than the implied narrator's previous use of them.

Max's argument is that slavery is also seen as the child of this modern age, the epoch from which the world went astray and brotherhood was destroyed. "Exalted by the will to rule, they could not have built nations on so vast a scale had they not shut their eyes to the humanity of other men, men whose lives were necessary for their building."<sup>2</sup> Given this reality, Max maintains Bigger's actions are inevitable in a world that has denied the black man the happiness it dangles before his eyes. The guilt-fear syndrome, Wright points out through Max, must of necessity continue in a circular pattern. The argument continues that man in the dark-

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<sup>1</sup>Ibid.      <sup>2</sup>Ibid., p. 259.



ness of modern civilization has created his own laws to blind him to his history of oppression, and these laws are based on the invisibility and denial of identity of men like Bigger. Bigger is the result of the sin of slavery, as are Kabnis and the invisible man, the result from which the nation turns its eyes, blindly. Once again, Wright makes it a question of vision, Bigger's, the Daltons', the mob, and ultimately the reader's. In this light, Bigger's entire attitude toward life is a "crime"; indeed, Wright's most important didactic point is that given this society, Bigger's greatest crime is his very existence. Every sunrise and sunset make him as guilty of murder as the night he murders Mary. This is, Wright has shown through the novel, the only identity that Bigger has been allowed. Even prison, Wright argues through Max, ironically would be more freedom than Bigger has ever known because he will have, for once, a definite relationship with the world, and time would continually be meaningful.

Wright then attempts to prove Max's speech by contrasting Buckley's to it. Buckley argues that the law of customs and taboos is "holy," and only those in control of this law are to be considered human. Even Buckley's speech is in terms of the taboos and the mask. He insists that Bigger raped Mary and finds the rape more hideous and more important than the murder. Ironically, Wright has Buckley call on a suffering Christ to verify that Bigger's crimes are "black," again portraying the hypocrisy of religion, which is used to

destroy the black man. Once more Wright is manipulating the reader's sympathy for Bigger.

When the sentence ending his twenty years is given in number form rather than in human terms, Wright has Bigger most conscious of the judge's white face and unblinking eyes. Thus, even though the reader is aware of Bigger's guilt, the sentence is made to seem the result of a hostile white world. Bigger's subsequent hostility, toward the priest who comes to comfort him, reaffirms the fact that Bigger's only sense of worth comes from acts of violence. However, once more, Wright also underlines the tragedy of Bigger's lost human potential, having him strive one last time to learn the meaning of living even on the verge of death. Bigger turns to Max, who has the symbols and the language to put him in touch with the world. Thus, as the sun falls across Max's white face, Wright portrays Bigger as trying to understand Max's view of the world, seen in terms of communistic ideology. It is in this manner that the reader is once again told of Bigger's humanity. Wright stresses, by using the same cold, concrete, sun-drenched buildings that blocked Bigger's vision in the beginning of the novel, that Bigger's desire to live is the human desire of every man. This communistic vision shows that the common men, the workers, whom Wright thus strives to link to Bigger, have been stifled, dehumanized, and live in deprivation and fear. Thus begins the battle royal. This is the communion with man that Max offers Bigger.

Again in this presentation, Wright sacrifices probability to achieve a didactic purpose; in this case, it is to give communism a forum. It is presented almost as a *deus ex machina* to redeem Bigger at the end. However, since Bigger's only share in life was achieved through murder, this vision obviously must be rejected by Bigger. Perhaps an understanding of Wright's own relationship with the Communist Party will shed light upon his failure to integrate it sufficiently into the novel. Wright describes his relationship and disillusionment with the Party in The God That Failed, published in 1949. In communism, Wright found the communion with others that he sought as well as a personal identity. It was communism's urging to life " . . . to believe in life"<sup>1</sup> that appealed to Wright, not its economics or politics. This is what communism is presented as to Bigger, a means of reaching out to others, of living as part of mankind. Perhaps, however, the reason that communism fails to touch Bigger's vision is also the reason that Wright would later break with the Party. Besides being pitted against Bigger's stronger black nationalism, it fails to understand the common people's language and their deepest hidden feelings. It fails, as Ellison would later demonstrate concerning the Brotherhood, to value the worth of the individual in all his humanity.

Thus, in Bigger's rejection of this vision, Wright

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<sup>1</sup>Richard Crossman (ed.), The God That Failed (New York: Harper & Brothers, Publishers, 1949), p. 118.

depicts that the world has wrought final destruction on Bigger. Bigger dies as a man even before his death. He laughs as for the last time the dirty joke is on him. His final identity is that which he has created for himself through his murders: ". . . what I killed for I am!"<sup>1</sup> And Wright pictures Max's resulting horror as "moral . . . horror of Negro life in the United States."<sup>2</sup> But even this ending suffers because Max's final arguments to Bigger are no stronger than his courtroom arguments and no more probable.

But before rendering a final critical opinion of the novel, it is necessary to review both its weaknesses and strengths. In Native Son, Wright sought to present the fact that to be black and live in America is ". . . to breathe poison each day and hour of the day."<sup>3</sup> Bigger is to embody the results of the blackface mask America has created to hide the humanity of black people; Bigger is thus to be nigger, a symbol as well as an individual character. Therefore, Littlejohn is right in describing Wright's fiction as "an act of violence itself."<sup>4</sup> Wright seeks to demonstrate through this violence that fear becomes dread, dread, self-hatred, and self-hatred, hatred of others.

To do this, Wright creates Bigger as the mask itself.

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<sup>1</sup>Wright, Native Son, pp. 391-92.

<sup>2</sup>Wright, "How Bigger was Born," p. 20.

<sup>3</sup>Webb, Richard Wright: Biography, p. 237.

<sup>4</sup>Littlejohn, Black on White, p. 5.

Therefore, since Bigger will be unable to interpret his own motivation, Wright uses an implied narrator to explain Bigger and to make the use of irony possible. Although Wright's use of the narrator is successful, his use of Bigger as a symbol is not always so. Bigger always remains not totally human; thus Wright is trapped into continually pointing to Bigger's humanity yet at the same time denying this humanity. Thus, Baldwin is right in maintaining that if Wright had made Bigger more human, Wright would have also made Bigger more tragic.

Another outgrowth of Wright's desire to humanize Bigger is the necessity of having the other characters in the novel subservient to Bigger. Wright does this to insure that the reader's sympathies remain with Bigger in spite of his actions. Therefore, Baldwin is also correct in maintaining that the other black characters in the novel lack dimension. They are of necessity flat stereotypes to insure Bigger's probability.<sup>1</sup> This is also true of the white characters in the novel. They are all stereotypes, and with the exception of Max and Jan later in the novel, they are all guilty of either direct evil or ignorance that in itself is culpable.

It is in this way that Wright minimizes the murders of Mary and Bessie and insures the reader's sympathy for Bigger. Yet in doing this, Wright blunts the reader's yardstick for moral judgments, and therefore makes Mary and Bessie the

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<sup>1</sup>This is true even of Buddy also used by Wright to support the probability of Bigger's actions.

victims of the very insensitive, immoral reactions that he seeks to change through the creation of Native Son. Thus, by constructing the world of the novel as one that has all the responsibility for the evil on one side and reinforcing this concept by the use of "we-they" rhetoric, Wright allows the novel to lapse into melodrama and occasionally into sensationalism.

The use of stereotypes also badly weakens Book III of the novel. Max's mind is never sufficiently revealed to the reader for him to be developed as a reliable narrator; thus, the reader's focus is diverted from Bigger without being given a character psychologically developed enough to replace his consciousness. Therefore, the reader is left almost as anxious as Bigger for Max to be done with his "defense" and arguments and for Wright to once portray Bigger's narrative directly. In addition, since Max's communistic vision is so sharp and simple (Wright is later to state in rejecting communism that he would never again be able to feel such a simple sharpness about life) compared to Bigger's haunting, clouded, paradoxically twisted consciousness, this long defense ultimately weakens the focus of the whole novel. Furthermore, the shift in style and plot structure, as well as Wright's failure to integrate his communistic vision, further weakens Book III, and thus instead of strengthening and unifying the novel, this section detracts from it.

In addition to understanding Wright's failures in

terms of his set goals for this novel, it is also possible to understand them in terms of his theories concerning writing itself. In "How Bigger Was Born," Wright states that

. . . in the writing of scene after scene I was guided by but one criterion: to tell the truth as I saw it and felt it. That is to objectify in words some insight derived from my living in the form of action, scene, and dialogue. If a scene seemed improbable to me, I'd not tear it up, but ask myself: 'Does it reveal enough of what I feel to stand in spite of its unreality?' If I felt it did, it stood. If I felt that it did not, I ripped it out.<sup>1</sup>

This echoes Wright's earlier views on writing expressed in "Blueprint for Negro Writing." This view, which stresses the personal at the expense of the objectively artistic, perhaps accounts for many of Wright's artistic failures.

However, in spite of these many artistic weaknesses, and ironically often because of them, literary critics have continued to praise Native Son. Yet one must wonder what the critical judgment of Native Son would be had it been written by a white or had it been written today. It does not seem to stand artistically on its own. Rather, it seems like an idea whose time had come. The time was ripe for Wright to accurately draw a portrait of the mask that America had created to hide the black's humanity. And in spite of the artistic weaknesses in Native Son, Wright's initial narrative drive, with its journalistic clarity and occasional biblical ring, in addition to his storytelling use of suspense and surprise, stirred the conscience of the nation. The social and histori-

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<sup>1</sup>Wright, "How Bigger Was Born," p. 20.

cal value of Native Son is undeniable. Wright proved overwhelmingly that black authors' works could be profitable and therefore opened publishing doors that had hitherto been locked. He created almost single-handedly a reading public for the black novel. Finally, he freed other black writers from the dilemma of the mask. It is Ellison who states that

. . . in this lies Wright's most important achievement: He has converted the American Negro impulse toward self-annihilation and 'going-under-ground' into a will to confront the world, to evaluate his experience honestly and throw his findings unashamedly into the guilty conscience of America.<sup>1</sup>

Thus in spite of the fact that Native Son remains a novel with many artistic weaknesses - a polarized world used to manipulate the reader's moral responses, occasional lapses into melodrama and sensationalism, a disjointed last section - it can still be justly said, because of Wright's accomplishments, that he opened the way for Ralph Ellison and other later black writers.

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<sup>1</sup>Ellison, Shadow and Act, p. 104.



## CHAPTER IV

### RALPH ELLISON

Ralph Waldo Ellison was born in Oklahoma City on March 1, 1914. His father, Lewis Alfred, a construction worker and tradesman, died when Ellison was just three, and his mother, Ida, supported the family by working as a domestic. In his formative years, years between World War I and the Great Depression, Ellison matured, setting for himself the ideal of the Renaissance Man. Thus, the freedom that he found within the restrictions of life that were imposed upon him because he was black, was always more central to Ellison than external limitations. He never, therefore, let others define him.

Ellison very early in life acquired an interest in books and music, particularly jazz, in which he found a statement of identity and integrity. Jimmy Rushing, the blues singer, was to be a lifelong friend of Ellison and a constant reminder of their early love of music. Ellison himself at one time had wanted to be a symphony composer. It was this desire that led Ellison to study music at Tuskegee Institute for three years, 1933 to 1936. In 1936, he went to New York City to study sculpture, and it was there that Ellison began his writing career in 1939.

He worked on the Federal Writers Project and met Richard Wright, who was editing a magazine called New Challenge. Not only did Wright encourage Ellison to increase his reading, suggesting such great writers as Conrad, James, and Dostoevski, but he also asked Ellison to review E. Waters Turpin's These Low Grounds. On the basis of the review, Wright suggested that Ellison try writing a short story. Although the story was not published, the literary career of Ralph Ellison was born.

Ellison, like Wright, was attracted to the Communist Party at the beginning of his literary career. In the early 1940's, he frequently published in New Masses. However, his relationship with the party was much briefer than Wright's, and by the end of 1942 Ellison's contributions to the communistic publishing organs had all but ceased. His contact with the Communist Party was, however, to provide a valuable background for his literary career. From his experience with the Party, Ellison learned a distrust of all organizations that would save mankind by sacrificing the individual. It is this type of philosophy that Ellison satirizes so well in the Brotherhood section of Invisible Man.

It was also in the early 1940's that Ellison began publishing short stories. "Afternoon" appeared in American Writing in 1940, and "Flying Home" was published in Cross Section in 1944. During this period, Wright and Ellison remained close friends. Yet Ellison knew from the beginning

that his art would not be imitative of Wright's. Naturalism was too restrictive a vehicle for his vision. Ellison had read The Waste Land while a sophomore at Tuskegee, and it had captured his creative imagination. His literary "ancestry," therefore, was to be descended from Eliot, Malraux, Dostoevski and Faulkner<sup>1</sup> rather than from Wright. Thus, as an expression of his own vision after having started and rejected a shorter novel, Ellison began Invisible Man in the summer of 1945, and the novel, which took him five years to complete, was published by Random House in 1952.

The novel, which was an immediate success, opened new horizons for Ralph Ellison. With his devoted wife, Fanny Mc Connell, whom he married in July, 1946, Ellison began to travel, lecturing and teaching while continuing to write critical essays and short stories. In 1954, he lectured at the Salzburg Seminar in Austria and conducted a lecture tour in Germany. He taught at Bard College from 1958 to 1961 as an instructor in Russian and American literature. In 1954, Ellison published his short story "Did You Even Dream Lucky?" in New World Writing. This was followed by the short stories "A Couple Scalped Indians" published in New World Writing in 1956, and "And Hickman Arrives" published in The Noble Savage in 1960. In 1961, Ellison occupied the Alexander White Visiting Professorship at the University of Chicago and the visiting professorship of writing at Rutgers University from 1962 to

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<sup>1</sup>Ellison, Shadow and Act, p. 145.

1964. This professorship was followed also in 1964 by a visiting professorship in American Studies at Yale. This same year Ellison delivered the Gertrude Clarke Whittall Lectures in connection with the Library of Congress and the Ewing Lectures at the University of California. It was also in 1964 that Shadow and Act, Ellison's collection of critical essays, was published by Random House.

From that time until the present Ralph Ellison has continued to lecture and to publish critical essays in addition to working on a second novel. There has been much speculation as to why Ellison has waited so long to publish another novel. However, in the light of the history of Invisible Man the time lapse is perhaps understandable. Ellison has shown himself to be a perfectionist concerning his craft, a man who has set the highest possible standards for the novel. Invisible Man took Ellison five years to write, and it was only begun after a false start with another novel. Ellison is therefore perhaps his own most severe critic, refusing to release material with which he is not satisfied. In addition, previously to 1968 the middle section of the second novel, which is as yet unpublished, was totally destroyed in a fire. This forced Ellison to begin anew to recapture the original rhythm of the novel. Ellison has reportedly written over 1,000 pages in the last eighteen years in constructing this second novel and is now in the process of editing it.

Yet Ralph Ellison, on the basis of his one novel, In-

visible Man, and his collection of critical essays, Shadow and Act, has established himself as a major American writer in the tradition of Twain, Melville, Faulkner, and Hemingway. Robert A. Bone in his critical work The Negro Novel in America states "By far the best novel yet written by an American Negro, Invisible Man is quite possibly the best American novel since World War II."<sup>1</sup> Recognition of the literary importance of the novel can also be seen in the fact that it won the National Book Award for Fiction in 1952 and in the selection of Invisible Man thirteen years later by a Book Week poll of some 200 critics, authors, and editors as the most distinguished single work published in America since 1945. Yet there has been up to now no extended or major critical examination of this novel or of Ellison's highly developed artistic theories.

In Invisible Man Ellison set out to write a novel of epic scope. It was a novel not to deny race as occasionally Toomer does in Cane, nor manipulate race in the way Wright does in Native Son, but rather it was a novel that was to use the race war in the United States to reveal a universal truth about human life in the nightmarish modern world. Thus, there is a major difference between the approaches to their novels made by Toomer, Wright, and Ellison.

This difference is also mirrored in the critical treatment of Invisible Man. Invisible Man never caused the

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<sup>1</sup>Bone, The Negro Novel in America, p. 212.

critical division that Native Son initiated. This remains a fact even in the light of Jacqueline Covo's study of Ellison's stature from primarily the period 1952 to 1964, "Ralph Waldo Ellison: Bibliographic Essays and Finding List of American Criticism," published in the College Language Association Journal in 1971. This work seeks to demonstrate that Ellison's critics, both past and present, have both misinterpreted and inadequately studied Ralph Ellison both as a man and an artist. This is true even though critical interest in Ralph Ellison has continued to increase in the years following the publication of Invisible Man, doubling in volume as Jacqueline Covo points out, from 1965 to 1970. In a selective review of the criticism of the novel, one sees that the earliest reviews of Invisible Man were overwhelmingly favorable in spite of occasional charges of overwriting, lack of control, stiffness and melodrama. In fact, the reviews themselves demonstrate the scope of Invisible Man, each reviewer finding something personally appealing in the novel. For example, Harvey C. Webster's review in the Saturday Review on April 12, 1952 states that Invisible Man is a powerful novel.

. . . You are carried forward by an intensity rare in the fiction of any time or place. You become Mr. Ellison's protagonist, a dark Gulliver who is naive and intelligent, whose progress through our society is as 'unreal' as a surrealist painting, as believable as Raskolnikov's through crime and punishment. . . . You feel here, for the first time, is the whole truth about the Negro in America.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>Harvey C. Webster, "Inside a Dark Shell," Saturday Review, XXXV (April 12, 1952), 23.

He continues proclaiming the universality of the novel.

. . . Invisible Man is not just a novel about Negroes; the protagonist is a hyperbole that represents most men; and finally that Invisible Man is not a great Negro novel; it is a work of art any contemporary writer could point to with pride.<sup>1</sup>

Jacqueline Covo views the claim of universality as a plan to escape the issues of racism raised by the novel; however, her view is too narrow. Invisible Man is indeed universal because of its treatment of racism. As Baldwin points out "our dehumanization of the Negro then is indivisible from our dehumanization of ourselves: the loss of our own identity is the price we pay for our annulment of his."<sup>2</sup> Webster is also correct in his assessment of the surrealist portions of the novel. Their nightmarish aspect is exactly the "unreal" quality of modern society that Ellison seeks to capture.

Wright Morris in his review in the New York Times Book Review on April 13, 1952 agrees essentially with Webster's view of the novel. He states that Invisible Man is not a black novel in the sense that it is also written for whites. "There is not much to choose, under the skin, between being black and invisible, and being white, currently fashionable and opaque."<sup>3</sup>

Morris feels that in the process of mastering his

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<sup>1</sup>Ibid.

<sup>2</sup>Baldwin, "Many Thousands Gone," p. 234.

<sup>3</sup>Wright Morris, "The World Below," New York Times Book Review, April 13, 1952, p. 5

rage, Ellison has also mastered his art, and therefore, Invisible Man is a " . . . resolutely honest, tormented, profoundly American book" which belongs with the " . . . classical efforts man had made to chart the river Lethe. . . ." <sup>1</sup> This lavish praise is indeed deserved by Invisible Man. Ellison uses race on the literal level of plot action and also transcends that level, using race symbolically to represent the "race" of all men in their journey to the grave. Thus, black and invisible and white and opaque are indeed just two different views of the same problem of dehumanization. These symbols are akin to Melville's symbol of the tortoise, which is white viewed from one side and black from the other but which is neither white nor black but rather both at one and the same time.

In the New York Herald Tribune Book Review of the same day, Worth Tuttle Hedden agrees with the evaluation of the novel as honest and " . . . a valuable addition to our native literature," but misses its universality by asserting that it will be a valuable source of information to " . . . future historians of Negro-White relations in the depression decade." <sup>2</sup> A review in Time the next day also essentially agrees with the preceding assessments of the novel although it finds patches of overwriting and murky thinking. This opinion rests on the

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<sup>1</sup>Ibid.

<sup>2</sup>Worth Tuttle Hedden, "Objectively Vivid Introspectively Sincere," New York Herald Tribune Book Review, April 13, 1952, p. 5.



critic's lack of understanding of the novel's various levels rather than on an inherent weakness in Invisible Man. Ellison's continual patterning of incidents, as this analysis of the novel will demonstrate, belies any possible charge of murky thinking. Yet Jacqueline Covo's criticism that the review is prejudiced is somewhat unfair. She maintains that Ellison is simply held to be the best of Negro writers. What, however, the review actually maintains is that "Invisible Man is a remarkable first novel that gives 38-year-old Ralph Ellison a claim to being the best of U. S. Negro writers. It makes him, for that matter, an unusual writer by any standard."<sup>1</sup>

Although the Time review is not guilty of prejudice, one must agree that George Mayberry's review in the New Republic on April 21, 1952 lacks sensitivity. Although he finds Invisible Man to be a "violently humorous and quietly tragic book," he views it as too "ingenious and original" and wishes that Ellison would write of "other places."<sup>2</sup> This type of poor criticism is akin to the reviewers who praise Native Son for its very weaknesses. To claim that a novel is too ingenious and original seems contrary to the very creative structure of the novel itself. Such standards would have dismissed every great novel from Tom Jones to the present. Indeed, May-

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<sup>1</sup>Time, April 14, 1952, p. 112.

<sup>2</sup>George Mayberry, "Underground Notes," New Republic, CXXVI (April 21, 1952), 19.

berry's wish that Ellison would write of other places is the reverse of Howe's belief that Ellison must only write of black pain and rage, and Ellison is correct to reject both philosophies as too narrowing of his humanity.

T. E. Cassidy's review, which followed in Commonweal on May 2, 1952, does discuss racial issues as Jacqueline Covo contends, but it also claims universality for the work which Covo chooses not to mention in her discussion. While finding Wright superior to Ellison (one suspects this judgment is based on the guilt motivation activated by Wright), Cassidy finds Ellison more "dramatic" and views the invisible man as ". . . the conscience of all races."<sup>1</sup>

Saunders Redding, one of the few early black reviewers of Invisible Man, finds in his review of May 10, 1952 in the Baltimore Afro-American that the novel lacks control, a view that this dissertation refutes. This view is also supported by Irving Howe in his review in Nation on May 10, 1952. Howe in statements and ideas that he will later incorporate into his article, "Black Boys and Native Sons," also criticizes the "pretentiousness" of the novel, finding that

because the book is written in the first person singular, Ellison cannot establish ironic distance between his hero and himself, or between the matured 'I' telling the story and the 'I' who is its victim. And because the experience is so apocalyptic and magnified, it absorbs and then dissolves the hero; every minor character comes through bril-

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<sup>1</sup>T. F. Cassidy, "A Brother Betrayed," Commonweal, LVI (May 2, 1952), 99.

liantly, but the seeing 'I' is seldom seen.<sup>1</sup>

However, Howe is completely mistaken in his judgment of Ellison's choice of point of view. As an examination of the novel will demonstrate, the choice of the first person point of view was essential if the novel was to succeed. By the use of the prologue, which establishes the matured character of the invisible man who is able to wisely look back on his own past and blind experiences, Ellison is thereby able to develop a reliable narrator to tell the invisible man's history. What Booth says of Pip in Great Expectations holds true also for Ellison's narrator:

. . . He watches his young self move away from the reader, as it were, and then back again. But the third-person reflector can be shown, technically in the past tense but in effect present before our eyes, moving toward or away from values that the reader holds dear.<sup>2</sup>

Thus as Swift had done in Gulliver's Travels, Twain in Huckleberry Finn, and Melville in Redburn, Ellison chooses a narrator who looks back on his own past. In fact the ability to control his narrator distinguishes Ellison's novel from such notable failures in point of view as Conrad's Youth and Fitzgerald's Tender is the Night.<sup>3</sup> As Booth points out,

With the repudiation of omniscient narration, and in the

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<sup>1</sup>Irving Howe, "A Negro in America," Nation, CLXXIV (May 10, 1952), 454.

<sup>2</sup>Wayne Booth, The Rhetoric of Fiction (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1961), p. 157.

<sup>3</sup>See Wayne Booth's discussion of Tender is the Night in The Rhetoric of Fiction, Ibid., p. 190.

face of inherent limitations in dramatized reliable narrators, it is hardly surprising that modern authors have experimented with unreliable narrators whose characteristics change in the course of the works they narrate. Ever since Shakespeare taught the modern world what the Greeks had overlooked in neglecting character change . . . stories of character development or degeneration have become more and more popular. But it was not until authors had discovered the full uses of the third-person reflector that they could effectively show a narrator changing as he narrates.<sup>1</sup>

Thus, the matured invisible man both heightens the reader's sense of the blindness of his earlier self, often through irony, and preserves sympathy for him as well as certainty that eventually his moral blindness will be corrected. Therefore, unlike Wright and Toomer, Ellison is able to present both blindness and insight essentially through one main character whose consciousness is firmly established for the reader. This point of view, in turn, enables Ellison to have more flexibility in both the tone and style of the novel. It enables him to employ successfully such stylistic devices as symbols, folk images, dramatic irony and puns. Indeed, rather than dissolving the hero as Howe suggests, Ellison's point of view firmly establishes his protagonist and sets the tone for the novel. Thus Howe's view of a first-person narration is simply unrealistic as Booth demonstrates in his discussion of viewpoint in The Rhetoric of Fiction.

Yet even Howe in his final analysis finds Invisible Man only marred by its faults, not destroyed, and he must assert that

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<sup>1</sup>Ibid., p. 157

no other writer has captured so much of the confusion and agony, the hidden gloom and surface gaiety of Negro life. His ear for Negro speech is magnificent. . . . The rhythm of the prose is harsh and tensed, like a beat of harried alterness. The observation is expert . . . .<sup>1</sup>

In addition, it is interesting to note that Howe was on the committee that awarded Ellison the National Book Award the following year.

Anthony West's review in the New Yorker on May 31, 1952 is also somewhat critical of Invisible Man. He finds the prologue and epilogue and certain other passages too "arty" and advocates skipping these sections. This criticism is reminiscent of the critics who advocate "skipping" the narrator's portions of Tom Jones, thereby eliminating a whole necessary dimension of the novel. Yet even here, the critic's negative comments are merely secondary to his praise of the novel. ". . . Mr. Ellison has the real satirical gift for handling ideas at the level of low comedy, and when he is most serious he is most funny."<sup>2</sup>

Delmore Schwartz's review in Partisan Review, May-June 1952, has nothing but praise for Invisible Man. Although Jacqueline Covo finds that he criticizes the structure of the novel, this is a misreading. Although he does find the novel composed of continual climaxes, this is ". . . justified by actuality and controlled by Ellison's critical intellectual

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<sup>1</sup>Howe, "A Negro in America," p. 99.

<sup>2</sup>Anthony West, "Black Man's Burden," New Yorker, XXVIII (May 31, 1952), 93.

intelligence and his natural, spontaneous eloquence."<sup>1</sup>

Schwartz also finds the novel universal and ends with the following praise " . . . The language of literary criticism seems shallow and patronizing when one has to speak of a book like (Invisible Man.) . . . Reality (hear! hear!) is not mocked inside a book or anywhere else, as long as such a book can be written."<sup>2</sup>

Although Marcus Klein will later criticize this structural use of continual climaxes, Schwartz is correct in his evaluation of the novel. The theme of Invisible Man involves a series of initiation incidents which will finally result in self-knowledge on the part of the protagonist. Thus, each climax represents a death of some past blindness as the invisible man gropes his way to light and truth. Therefore, the series of climaxes is both intrinsic and necessary to the plot of the novel.

In contrast to Schwartz's article William Barrett's review in American Mercury is critical of the novel's ending because of what is considered its pessimism, although the novel actually ends in an affirmation of the worth of the individual. Lloyd L. Brown, a black Communist critic, writing in Masses and Mainstream in June of 1952 attacks the novel, using it as a vehicle to also attack Ellison as a man. He

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<sup>1</sup>Delmore Schwartz, "Fiction Chronicle of Innocence and Experience," Partisan Review, XIX (May-June, 1952), 358.

<sup>2</sup>Ibid., p. 359.

criticizes what he calls the book's sensationalism and finds it foreign to black people. However, the review is so obviously communistic propaganda that it can easily be dismissed as irrelevant. As with Wright, the Communist Party never forgave Ellison for his defection.

Charles J. Rolo's review in Atlantic is also somewhat critical. He finds Ellison guilty of occasional overwriting, fuzzy thinking, and confusion between reality and surrealism. Again however, these criticisms are primarily based on a failure to understand the different levels operating in Invisible Man. The blending of reality and surrealism is, as Ellison has stated, intentional. Surrealism is used to depict both the confused state of the protagonist, as a result of some past failure such as his relationship with the Brotherhood, and it is also used to portray the confused state of society. As Ellison states in "Harlem is Nowhere," Harlem in reality has indeed a surrealistic quality to it. Yet Rolo's final judgment concerning the novel is a favorable one. He praises the novel's humanity, style and humor. In like manner, Alain Locke's article in Phylon in March of 1953 criticizes what it considers the verbosity in Invisible Man. However it also states that Invisible Man, along with Cane and Native Son, is a major black novel.

As Jacqueline Covo points out in the period of 1952-1964 one finds little treatment of Ellison in general literary studies. However, interesting references to Ellison's

place in literature are made by W. Thorys in American Writing in the Twentieth Century (1960) and M. Cowley in The Literary Situation (1954). Both place Ellison among the most influential modern writers. In addition, in 1956 in his work The Writer Observed, Harvey Breit finds Invisible Man an important novel and uses Ellison's own defense of the novel's surrealism: reality itself is often surrealistic. Following this work in 1958, Bone's The Negro Novel in America was published. His praise of Invisible Man has already been frequently referred to in this dissertation.

Then in 1963, Irving Howe wrote "Black Boys and Native Sons," beginning the now famous literary exchange between himself and Ellison. Howe's faulty critical principles have also been previously discussed in this dissertation in relation to his criticism of Richard Wright. However, some of his particular criticisms in relation to Invisible Man are worth examining here.

Howe repeats his earlier charge that the section of the novel dealing with the Harlem communists is too exaggerated, their treatment of a black too unbelievable. However, one has only to turn to Wright's statements in The God That Failed to refute this charge. In addition, Ellison's treatment of the Brotherhood is vastly superior to Wright's treatment of communistic ideals. While Wright slips into melodrama and the use of stereotypes to create a vision of the workers building the world anew, Ellison is never guilty of these



errors. Indeed, while Max is never a believable character, and always a shadowy one, Jack, Hambro, and Wrestrum are vividly and consistently portrayed. For example, Jack's belief in History as opposed to the individual is mirrored in his fyce-like personality, which is clearly drawn for the reader.

Furthermore, Howe, in his criticism of Invisible Man, tends to oversimplify the novel. An example of this tendency can be seen in the fact that he maintains the invisible man is expelled simply for taking Mr. Norton to the Golden Day. Yet, for all his adverse criticism of Ellison in "Black Boys and Native Sons," Howe ends his article on a note of praise for Ellison, again asserting Ellison's ability to capture Negro life.

Ellison's now famous answer to this essay by Irving Howe addresses itself to the faulty critical principles which led Howe to his erroneous conclusions concerning Invisible Man. Ellison points out that Howe's belief (that all black writers if they are to be honest and successful must write as Richard Wright had done) is both ridiculous and racially prejudiced. In the light of Howe's criticism, Ellison justly asks

why is it so often true that when critics confront the American Negro they suddenly drop their advanced critical armament and revert with an air of confident superiority to quite primitive modes of analysis?<sup>1</sup>

Ellison answers Howe's concept that the protest in Invisible

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<sup>1</sup>Ellison, Shadow and Act, p. 115.

Man is inferior to the obvious agony of Wright by reminding Howe of the intention of art and the responsibility of the critic.

The protest is there, not because I was helpless before my racial condition, but because I put it there. If there is anything 'miraculous' about the book it is the result of hard work undertaken in the belief that the work of art is important in itself, that it is a social action in itself.<sup>1</sup>

Following Howe's article, in 1963 Jonathan Baumbach wrote his article "Nightmare of a Native Son: Ellison's 'Invisible Man.'" Baumbach is critical of what he calls the static quality of the novel; all the incidents " . . . mean approximately the same thing."<sup>2</sup> As Klein will do later, Baumbach mistakenly believes that all novels must have cause and effect plots. Like Howe, Baumbach also criticizes the realism of the Brotherhood section of the novel which he uses to support his belief that Ellison moves too quickly from realism to allegory. However, grounds for such transitions are firmly established, for example in Shakespeare's plays The Tempest and A Midsummer Night's Dream. In addition, Baumbach also tends to commit unforgivable textual errors: for example, he states that Supercargo is white.<sup>3</sup> Yet, like almost every critic before, Baumbach in the end praises the novel. " . . . Ellison has written a major novel, perhaps one of the three or

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<sup>1</sup>Ibid., p. 142.

<sup>2</sup>Jonathan Baumbach, The Landscape of Nightmare (New York: New York University Press, 1965), p. 85.

<sup>3</sup>Ibid., p. 75.

four most considerable American novels of the past two decades."<sup>1</sup>

Baumbach's article was followed in 1964 by Marcus Klein's "Ralph Ellison's 'Invisible Man.'" Klein's article is one of the longest treatments of Invisible Man as well as one of the most seriously critical. Therefore, Klein's major criticisms of Invisible Man, such as those involving structure, are treated in the discussion of the novel itself in this dissertation. In addition to these perceptions, Klein makes occasional textual errors. For example, Klein finds Ras' speeches more eloquent than the invisible man's,<sup>2</sup> forgetting that Ras is wrong when he appeals to Clifton as a pure black Chieftain. Klein is also incorrect when he maintains that the paint is so white because it is made with black dope.<sup>3</sup> Yet, in spite of his serious fault-finding with the novel, even Klein cannot end without praising Invisible Man as a great achievement in literature.<sup>4</sup>

Critics continued to praise the accomplishments of Invisible Man. In 1964 Ellin Horowitz stated that "Ralph Ellison has written an extremely important novel, one that goes far beyond social protest though it is protest and could

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<sup>1</sup>Ibid., p. 85.

<sup>2</sup>Marcus Klein, After Alienation; American Novels in Mid-Century (Cleveland: World Publishing Company, 1964), p. 125.

<sup>3</sup>Ibid., p. 119.

<sup>4</sup>Ibid., p. 84.

scarcely help but be."<sup>1</sup> Then in 1969 S. P. Fullinwider maintained that "in Invisible Man, Ralph Ellison managed to say both what it is like to be a Negro in America and what it is like to be a modern man."<sup>2</sup> In the same year, Littlejohn stated that

incorporated into Ellison's Invisible Man is more of what matters of the Negro's experience of America than in a dozen burning novels of protest--if we only knew how to find it, if we only had the patience and the skill to extract it.<sup>3</sup>

In 1970, Donald Gibson maintained that no critic had done full justice to Invisible Man because it " . . . is a great novel, a novel less captured by the criticism about it than most books."<sup>4</sup>

Then in 1970, Margolies was again critical of Invisible Man, basing his major criticism like Klein on the belief that the novel's circular structure is a defect. In addition, Margolies did not deal with Ellison as a writer, blindly stating that Ellison's " . . . position as an American Negro, an invisible man, will make it impossible for him to find his way."<sup>5</sup> Yet even this critic still stated that Invisible Man

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<sup>1</sup>Ellin Horowitz, "The Rebirth of the Artist," On Contemporary Literature, ed. Richard Kostelanety (New York: Avon Books, 1964), p. 346.

<sup>2</sup>Fullinwider, The Mind and Mood of Black America; 20th Century Thought, p. 196.

<sup>3</sup>Littlejohn, Black on White, p. 19.

<sup>4</sup>Donald B. Gibson, Five Black Writers (New York: New York University Press, 1970), p. xix.

<sup>5</sup>Margolies, A Native Son Reader, p. 148.

is a "major American novel."<sup>1</sup>

Finally in 1970, an entire critical work was devoted to Invisible Man. John Reilly in Twentieth Century Interpretations of Invisible Man maintained " . . . Invisible Man will remain as one of the best guides we have to a uniquely American reality."<sup>2</sup> This work was followed in 1972 by the publication of A Casebook on Ralph Ellison's Invisible Man edited by Joseph Trimmer. Both books have now made readily available previous critical articles about Invisible Man for students of Ellison.

Thus, as this survey of the criticism of Invisible Man demonstrates, this work has been found to be an important American novel even by those critics who offer adverse criticism of it. Ellison has been justly proclaimed an artist of the highest caliber. Indeed this understanding of the nature of the artist can be seen in Ellison's critical theory, developed over a long period of years and collected and published in Shadow and Act in 1964. This theory played an important part in the creation of Invisible Man. Ellison's theory of art is based on, above all, his belief that the work of art evolves from the personal outpouring of the artist, " . . . of converting experience into symbolic action."<sup>3</sup> As

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<sup>1</sup>Ibid., p. 129.

<sup>2</sup>John M. Reilly, Twentieth Century Interpretations of Invisible Man (New Jersey: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1970), p. 9.

<sup>3</sup>Ellison, Shadow and Act, p. XVI.

in Toomer and Wright, it is the personal response to experience that is paramount. It is through the artist's organization of the chaos of his experiences and his personal problems of guilt that he seeks transcendence. Therefore, the key to success for the work of art on both the personal and artistic levels lies in the artist's ability to both ". . . evoke images of reality and give them formal organization" in "socially meaningful patterns."<sup>1</sup> Yet, what truly separates literature from reportage is not its presentation of patterns of events, nor its emotion, but rather its personal outcry " . . . which seeks transcendence in the form of ritual."<sup>2</sup>

Therefore, since Invisible Man deals with a protagonist who turns writer to free himself, Ellison's theories can be examined in relationship to both himself and his protagonist. Yet in spite of the fact that his protagonist is also a writer, and in the face of many critical pronouncements to the opposite, Ellison can justly maintain that the novel is not autobiographical. Indeed, although Ellison states that memories are ". . . the background of my work, my sense of life,"<sup>3</sup> it is the structuring of these memories that remove it from the genre of autobiography. Therefore, the novel tells about the shape of Ellison's imagination rather than his history. How this works in the novel can be seen in Ellison's description in Shadow and Act of a Tuskegee graduation. "At

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<sup>1</sup>Ibid., p. 55.      <sup>2</sup>Ibid.

<sup>3</sup>Ellison and Shapiro, The Writer's Experience, p. 10.

Tuskegee during graduation week countless high-powered word artists, black and white, descended upon us and gathered in the gym and the Chapel to tell us in highflown words what the Negro thought, what our lives were and what our goals should be."<sup>1</sup> The "guardians of race relations" were there. At the same time the black farm people would come and while the speeches went on these people danced outside as if the ceremonies were not connected with their lives. Ellison found their celebration more attractive and meaningful than the graduation ceremonies. Ellison uses this memory of Tuskegee in his description of the campus, but he does so in such a way that it becomes part of the larger ritualistic pattern of the novel. The black farm people then take on the symbolic meaning of the "folk" who have successfully avoided the white-wash that would turn them gray. As in Toomer, they are a symbol of hope.

Another use of this tool of memory can also be seen not only in Ellison's use of personal memories but also in his use of historical figures. For example, Ellison justly maintains that the character of Ras evolved from his own sense of outrage rather than from a purely historical tracing of Marcus Garvey, (1897-1940) the Jamaican born organizer of a nationalistic social movement among blacks which reached its peak of influence in the 1920's. Indeed while Ellison incorporates many of Garvey's beliefs and characteristics in

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<sup>1</sup>Ellison, Shadow and Act, p. 37.

Ras, such as his doctrine of racial purity and separatism, even to the extreme of pitting darker skinned against lighter skinned, his obsession with organization and economic power base, his appealing fiery leadership, his foreign birth, his black pride, Ras becomes more than just a carbon copy of Garvey. Ras becomes a signal in the novel; he is at one and the same time, the one-eyed rodent, the blind fighter of the battle royal, the apostle of chaos, the inner twisted self of the invisible man. In the same manner, the Brotherhood is more than just a shadow of the Communist Party. While some critics explain Ellison's denial that the Brotherhood is the Communist Party as simple personal embarrassment about his past involvement with the Party, this misses the point. The Brotherhood is the signal for all ideologies that would destroy the individual to save the world. Therefore, as Ellison points out in Shadow and Act

the identity of fictional characters is determined by the implicit realism of the form, not by their relation to tradition; they are what they do or do not do. Archetypes are timeless, novels are time-haunted. Novels achieve timelessness through time.<sup>1</sup>

Ellison's theory of literature can, therefore, be given in the following definition: literature is the presentation of a pattern of events, in an emotional manner, which has as its basis a deep personal outpouring on the part of the artist. Thus, while the characteristic that distinguishes literature from all other forms of writing is its personal as-

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<sup>1</sup>Ibid., p. 71.



pect, its genus is its attempt to impose order on chaos, this order being its form. Writing is the artist's method of re-ordering the world, the world of the artist. Thus, in his acceptance speech for the National Book Award, Ellison states that

we who struggle with form and with America should remember Erdothea's advice to Menelaus when in the Odyssey he and his friends are seeking their way home. She tells him to seize her father, Proteus, and to hold him fast 'however he may struggle and fight. He will turn into all sorts of shapes to try you,' she says, 'into all the creatures that live and move upon the earth, into water, into blazing fire; but you must hold him fast and press him all the harder.'<sup>1</sup>

Thus must the artist deal with ordering chaos, with creating form, and therefore, both Ellison and his protagonist, the invisible man, must deal with Rinehartism, that is chaos, in their ordering of life.

In addition to the need for feeling in the ordering of events, emotion is always present in a very personal way in Ellison's view of literature. Yet while dealing with the personal, great literature must also deal with that which is lasting in the human spirit. Thus, for Ellison, as for Aristotle and R. S. Crane, the work of art's moral function is its very essence because the reader's moral approval or disapproval of the characters' actions forms the basis for the reader's reaction to it. Thus, the novel is composed of a system of incidents that have a definite moral nature and due to the human condition, this will always involve an inter-

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<sup>1</sup>Ibid., pp. 113-14.

mingling of the marvelous and the terrible with the impetus of human aspiration forming the marvelous out of the chaos of this world. This truth has taken a unique shape in relation to the American novel because

. . . from its first consciousness of itself as a literary form, the American novel has grappled with the meaning of the American experience; . . . it has been aware and has sought to define the nature of that experience; . . . it has been aware and has sought to define, the moods, the landscapes, the cityscapes, the tempo of American change. And . . . it has borne, at its best, the full weight of that burden of conscience and consciousness which Americans inherit as one of the results of the revolutionary circumstances of our national beginnings.<sup>1</sup>

Thus, the difference between the nation's ideals and its practices " . . . generated a guilt, an uneasiness of spirit, from the very beginning, and . . . the American novel at its best has always been concerned with this basic moral predicament."<sup>2</sup>

This sense of the American experience, and the manner of expressing it, greatly influence Ellison's style. For example, Ellison uses the rich black oral tradition, which developed of necessity under slavery, to explore " . . . new possibilities of language which would allow it to retain that flexibility and fidelity to the common speech which has been its (the novel's) glory since Mark Twain."<sup>3</sup> Thus, Ellison's use of the black preacher's idiom, the animal folk tales, the word play of rhymes and puns, all become an intrinsic part

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<sup>1</sup>Ellison and Shapiro, The Writer's Experience, p. 13.

<sup>2</sup>Ibid.      <sup>3</sup>Ibid., p. 14.

of the pattern of the novel. Here the living language of a varied America gives shape and definition to the novel's characters: for example, Ras' dialect is as distinct from Jack's as their physical characteristics are different.

This sense of time and place also contributes to the style of the novel in another manner. Ellison states in Shadow and Act that

in the South, where he (the protagonist) was trying to fit into a traditional pattern and where his sense of certainty had not yet been challenged, I felt a more naturalistic treatment was adequate. . . . As the hero passes from the South to the North, from the relatively stable to the swiftly changing, his sense of certainty is lost and the style becomes expressionistic. Later on during his fall from grace in the Brotherhood it becomes somewhat surrealistic. The styles try to express both his state of consciousness and the state of society.<sup>1</sup>

In addition to using style to mirror states of consciousness, Ellison uses both his sense of lyrical composition and many of the literary techniques that he learned from the past masters of literature to create his novel. He masters pattern and ritual as Eliot had done in The Waste Land; satiric humor as Twain had in Huckleberry Finn; paradox as Melville had in Moby Dick; technical perfection in description as Hemingway had in The Sun Also Rises; the rendering of consciousness through sentence structure as Faulkner had in The Sound and The Fury. From Dostoevski's Crime and Punishment he learned character and theme development through the use of dreams. From the Greek dramatists, such as Sophocles in Oedi-

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<sup>1</sup>Ellison, Shadow and Act, p. 179.

pus Rex, he learned the use of dramatic irony and from the epic writers, Homer and Virgil, the use of the techniques of the epic. Indeed, like the epic, Invisible Man is the history of a people. The prologue uses the technique of in medias res in a sense because the protagonist is in the process of discovering himself, and in this sense the prologue becomes part of the main body of the novel, while the entire novel is a flashback. As in the epic there are in the novel extended similes (such as those concerned with blindness); catalogues (such as that of Rinehart); invocations (to the millionaires); supernatural elements (such as the hospital machine); wars and single combats (battle royals); statement of theme (the prologue and epilogue); and a simple story line elaborated by repetition.

The structure of Invisible Man has been carefully plotted and controlled by Ellison. It is basically a cause and effect plot; thus, the incidents in the plot line are causally related. Since it is not an instructional plot, because causal action unifies it, theme is not the principle of organization for the plot, as it is for Toomer. However, within the organizational framework of the cause and effect plot, Ellison does use patterned repetition of instructional incidents. These do not therefore account for the outward structure of the plot but rather act as an internal organizational tool. It is this internal organization that Ellison refers to when he states that the form of the novel began with a chart of

the three-part division.

It was a conceptual frame with most of the ideas and some incidents indicated. The three parts represent the narrator's movement from purpose to passion to perception. These three major sections are built upon smaller units of three which mark the course of the action. . . . After all, it's a novel about innocence and human error, a struggle through illusion to reality. Each section begins with a sheet of paper; each piece of paper is exchanged for another and contains a definition of his identity, or the social role he is to play as defined for him by others. But all say essentially the same thing, 'Keep this nigger boy running.' Before he could have some voice in his destiny he had to discard these old identities and illusions. . . .<sup>1</sup>

Indeed, the entire novel makes use of the repetition of instructional incidents. In relation to this organization, all the plot incidents deal with the same moral truth. These incidents are all repetitions of the battle royal. They all involve the symbolic castration of the invisible man, his loss of manhood and self-identity. They are all the same dirty joke played on him over and over again. Thus, this is what he means when he tells the reader in the prologue that history is a boomerang. The use of this type of patterned incident organization enables Ellison to underscore his instructional purpose with irony. Thus, all the time the invisible man thinks he is moving forward, progressing, he is actually not moving at all. The time and place, though they change on the surface and involve journey imagery, remain symbolically the same throughout the novel.

Myth is also a literary tool that Ellison uses to suggest the deeper levels of meaning that lie beneath the surface

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<sup>1</sup>Ibid., p. 177.

action of the novel. For example, the character of the invisible man is paralleled to Oedipus. He is certainly also guilty of hubris, and the dramatic irony of the theme rests upon his self-willed blindness. Like Oedipus, he is responsible for his own fate because in his belief in his sight lies his own blindness and invisibility. Like Oedipus, he refuses " . . . to run the risk of his own humanity which involves guilt."<sup>1</sup> The final similarity between the Oedipus myth and the invisible man is that neither truly knows who he is and thus both must undertake a blind quest for self-identity which ends in a reversal as well as a recognition scene.

Ellison also uses ritual as part of the structural basis for Invisible Man. He believes that rituals lie at the basis of everyday life, and therefore, they are, of necessity, the materials of the artist. Ellison illustrates his point by discussing the example of the battle royal from the novel. It is, he says,

. . . a ritual in preservation of caste lines, a keeping of taboo to appease the gods and ward off bad luck. It is also the initiation ritual to which all greenhorns are subjected. . . . The patterns were already there in society, so that all I had to do was present them in a broader context of meaning. In any society there are many rituals of situation which for the most part go unquestioned. They can be simple or elaborate, but they are the connective tissue between the work of art and the audience.<sup>2</sup>

This basic ritual is at the heart of Invisible Man. It is the repetition of this ritual that is the basis of the main instructional pattern incidents in the novel. It is the

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<sup>1</sup>Ibid., p. 180.

<sup>2</sup>Ibid., p. 175.

basis for the stereotype. The self-humiliation of the victim and the psychological separation of the audience from this act are the factors that motivate the audience. This truth is always part of what the novel refers to as the dirty joke. In fact,

the comic point is inseparable from the racial identity of the performer . . . who by assuming the group-debasing role for gain not only substantiates the audience's belief in the 'blackness' of things black, but relieves it, with dreamlike efficiency, of its guilt by accepting the very profit motive that was involved in the designation of the Negro as national scapegoat in the first place.<sup>1</sup>

Thus, it is the ritual of the battle royal that is repeated over and over again in various forms by the instructional pattern incidents.

The use of folklore is another literary device that Ellison employs in Invisible Man to give the novel its many "frequencies." Ellison defines folklore as

. . . the first drawings of any group's character. It preserves mainly those situations which have repeated themselves again and again in the history of any given group . . . . It projects this wisdom in symbols which express the group's will to survive; it embodies those values by which the group lives and dies. These drawings may be crude but they are nonetheless profound in that they represent the group's attempt to humanize the world.<sup>2</sup>

Ellison makes use of black folklore, for example, in his images of darkness and light, in the invisible man's journey from the South to the North, and in his references to Brer Rabbit and High John de Conquer. In Invisible Man, these folk figures are frequently used as messengers, as warnings,

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<sup>1</sup>Ibid., pp. 64-65.

<sup>2</sup>Ibid., p. 172.

to the invisible man that he is blindly following the wrong path much the same way as birds are used to foretell coming disaster in Greek mythology. It is when the invisible man ignores these warnings and denies his true self that he again becomes the blind victim. Thus, the reader is kept constantly aware of the dramatic irony of the protagonist's actions.

In addition to the use of the literary devices of symbols, signals, myth and folklore, Ellison has carefully chosen his point of view in the structuring of Invisible Man. The first person point of view of the novel determines the tone and to some extent the structure of the novel. First, by its very nature, it makes the reader intimate with the character of the invisible man. This is necessary because as Ellison says the invisible man is somewhat of a liar and a man who refuses the responsibility for his own humanity. But, since the reader views the chaos of the world only through the hopes and aspirations of the invisible man, the character remains a sympathetic one.

However, in this very fact lies the danger inherent in the first person point of view: the reader, due to his sympathy with the protagonist, can be blinded to the faults of the character. To avoid this pitfall, which would destroy the purpose of the novel, Ellison uses several devices to keep the reader continually aware of the invisible man's blindness and cowardliness.

The first of these devices is the prologue. Here the



reader is explicitly told by the mature protagonist that his previous life has been a life of boomeranging, that he has been and still is irresponsible. This firmly establishes his flaws. Also, the prologue establishes a present tense frame for the author which enables him to occasionally remind the reader in the present voice, throughout the novel, of his protagonist's blindness in a particular situation. For example, through the use of a parenthesis the invisible man comments on his speech at the smoker. "So I gulped it down, blood, saliva and all, and continued. (What powers of endurance I had during those days! What enthusiasm! What a belief in the rightness of things!)"<sup>1</sup> Thus, Mr. Klein is wrong when he finds that

. . . the hero is fitted with a perceptiveness that is far inferior to Ellison's. Or, if not always, that becomes a fault. He is sometimes an ingenu, sometimes a naive Gulliver when gullibility should be impossible, sometimes, suddenly, the author. There is a constant struggle between the two, Ellison straining not to let his protagonist know too much because that will give the book away, and sometimes failing.<sup>2</sup>

True, the voice of the narrator in the present is a change in tone, but it is one that has been prepared for by the prologue. The critic has also overlooked the fact that like the invisible man, Gulliver was also allowed occasional insights in the present voice: for example, Gulliver's discussion with his Houyhnhnm master concerning the causes of war. As Edward Rosenheim points out in Swift and the Satirist's Art "general-

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<sup>1</sup>Ellison, Invisible Man, p. 24.

<sup>2</sup>Klein, Images of the Negro in American Literature, p. 252.

zations concerning the satiric fiction, however, can be misleading, especially when they are either too broad or too narrow to do justice to the particular fiction in a specific satiric work."<sup>1</sup> Mr. Klein would have the invisible man be a static commentator in a world of chaos. This would destroy the portrait of that world and the basic truth of the protagonist's character.

Dramatic irony is the second device that Ellison uses to keep the reader aware of the fallibility of his protagonist. The dramatic irony occurs in both the plot line incidents and in the incidents that are part of the representation used to advance the plot line. Indeed, the use of the circular pattern structure is itself ironic. The invisible man is used over and over again, and he is continually blind to the ritualized game. While the incidents themselves are ironic, irony is also involved in the word play, such as puns, and in the use of images, and symbols.

Thus, to appreciate Ellison's achievement and to evaluate the place of Invisible Man in American letters, the novel must be analyzed before any critical judgment concerning it can be rendered. Therefore, hypotheses in the interpretation of texts must be developed, and Ellison's intention in presenting the reader with particular incidents, characterizations, imagery and symbolism must be discovered. Once again,

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<sup>1</sup>Edward Rosenheim, Swift and the Satirist's Art (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1963), p. 19.

my textual analysis of the plot structure, characterization, thought and diction of the novel will be guided by R. S. Crane's principles, and this analysis will form the basis for my critical conclusions concerning Invisible Man. As with Native Son and Cane, the novel's ability to move our feelings, and the elements of surprise, suspense and probability will also be examined. Therefore, my criticism will take the plot as its starting point and examine how Ellison created Invisible Man through the development of episodes, character, thought, diction and imagery. It will also examine order, method, scale and point of view.

The prologue and the epilogue are the outer frame of Invisible Man. The epilogue does function as part of the plot of the novel, however, while the prologue is representation rather than an incident in the plot line.

Ellison gives the following reason for the necessity of the prologue.

The prologue was written afterwards, really--in terms of a shift in the hero's point of view. I wanted to throw the reader off balance--make him accept certain non-naturalistic effects. It was really a memoir written underground, and I wanted a foreshadowing through which I hoped the reader would view the actions which took place in the main body of the book.<sup>1</sup>

Thus, the prologue establishes the mature character of the first person "I" narrator. It represents him in a sympathetic manner as a man who has come to some self-knowledge through suffering. It also contributes to the surprise and suspense

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<sup>1</sup>Ellison, Shadow and Act, p. 178.

as well as the probability of the novel by establishing the invisibility of the protagonist. Finally, it also prepares the reader for the later change in literary technique, and for the narrator's occasional ironic insights delivered in the present voice.

Although Anthony West in his critical review of Invisible Man in the New Yorker found the prologue and epilogue a detriment to the novel, his criticism results from a failure to understand both Ellison's plan and problems in relation to plot. The case developed by Crane and Booth for the narrative portions of Tom Jones can also be applied to the prologue and epilogue of Invisible Man. By establishing a third-person reflector in the prologue, Ellison is able to deal with two main problems. First, he is able to construct and develop a reader's emotional response that is appropriate to the tone of the novel as a whole. Second, this insures Ellison the ability to control the reader's emotion at any given stage of the novel and to keep this reaction in accord with the novel as a whole. Thus Ellison avoids the pitfalls of Wright and Toomer because by means of the mature narrator's comments and tone, the reader is kept aware of the invisible man's blindness throughout the novel. In this manner Ellison is able to use irony in the novel without lapsing into inconsistency or melodrama, as Wright frequently does, to have it operate.

In addition, as Fielding does in Tom Jones, Ellison uses his mature narrator for a purpose that goes beyond the

strictly functional aspects of the novel. Much of the commentary of the narrator relates solely to the relationship between the reader and himself. Thus, as Booth has noted concerning Tom Jones, "we discover a running account of growing intimacy between the narrator and the reader, an account with a kind of plot of its own and a separate denouement."<sup>1</sup> In this sense Ellison has created this mature narrator as he has written the book. And it is in this sense that the protagonist has recreated himself and matured through the telling of his tale in his attempt to come to terms with his invisibility and to have the reader see him.

In addition, as Ellison himself suggests, the prologue establishes the style and diction of the novel. As the judges of the National Book Awards noted, Ellison's style is experimental. Ellison's style differs from both the simpler styles of Toomer and Wright. In an examination of the first two pages of the body of the novel in a word count of 754 words, Ellison's average word length per sentence is 16. In this section there are 254 nouns and 127 verbs, 141 adjectives, 61 adverbs and 65 prepositions. This demonstrates a noun-verb ratio of 2:1, higher than Toomer's and Wright's, and a more complex style. Furthermore, Ellison's sentence structure involves more complexity than Toomer's and Wright's. In these 47 sentences, there are 19 simple, 3 compound, 13 complex, and 12 compound-complex sentences.

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<sup>1</sup>Booth, The Rhetoric of Fiction, p. 216.

Ellison's vocabulary tends also to be more complex than Toomer's and Wright's. Although Ellison also shows a preference for one syllable words, there are 550 one syllable words in this 754 word count, there are 39 words that could be considered formal and technical such as "naive," "expectations," "exulted," "essence," "traitor," and "Reconstruction." In addition, as the analysis of Invisible Man will reveal, Ellison frequently uses figurative language, symbols and puns all of which add to the depth and richness of the novel. There are sixteen incidents of such devices on these first two pages alone, for example the references to invisibility, boomeranging, and victory through yeses.

Furthermore, Ellison's style increases in complexity in the surrealistic sections of the novel. For example, an average page, page 5, in the prologue, encompassing a count of 551 words, shows an increase of the average word length per sentence to 20. In addition while the noun-verb ratio remains essentially the same, 166 nouns--76 verbs, the use of adjectives increases greatly to 120. There is also an increase in the complexity of Ellison's sentence structure. In 27 sentences there are only 8 simple sentences while there are 12 complex, 4 compound-complex, 2 compound sentences and one fragment. This reflects Ellison's increased use of parallel construction, repetition, alliteration, consonance and assonance, devices that give a lyrical quality to his prose, for example "Perhaps you'll think it strange that an invisible man

should need light, desire light, love light."<sup>1</sup> In addition, Ellison in the surrealist sections such as the prologue uses more frequently the device of having the sentence structure itself echo the meaning of his words, for example

Those two spots are among the darkest of our whole civilization--pardon me, our whole culture (an important distinction, I've heard)--which might sound like a hoax, or a contradiction, but that (by contradiction, I mean) is how the world moves: Not like an arrow, but a boomerang. (Beware of those who speak of the spiral of history; they are preparing a boomerang. Keep a steel helmet handy.)<sup>2</sup>

Here the sentences themselves illustrate the circular quality of a boomerang. This technique contributes to the surrealist quality of Ellison's style.

The prologue is also important as representation in the novel. The prologue begins with the major premise of the book, that is that the protagonist of the novel is an "invisible man." Immediately the reader is told that this invisibility is not due to the physical make up of the protagonist but rather to the fact that people refuse to see him. He enlarges this first definition stating that this is due to the condition and disposition of others' eyes. They see the mask not the man. Thus Ellison immediately establishes invisibility itself as a symbol.

The reader is immediately faced with the ". . . questions of order and chaos, illusion and reality, nonentity and identity"<sup>3</sup> that are the quest of the entire novel. The world

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<sup>1</sup>Ellison, Invisible Man, p. 5.      <sup>2</sup>Ibid.

<sup>3</sup>Ellison, Shadow and Act, p. 67.

is represented as an environment composed of a mixture of dream and nightmare. This world reflects what Ellison refers to in Shadow and Act as the black man's "nightmarishly 'absurd' situation in America."<sup>1</sup> Invisibility is the result of others' view of reality. Thus the nature of reality is what is at stake, and therefore it is an "absurd" situation for man.

The great disadvantages of invisibility, the protagonist tells us, are that violence and loss of identity are its results. The invisible person continually struggles against being defined by others as Bigger was. In Shadow and Act, Ellison expresses the same thought:

In our society it is not unusual for a Negro to experience a sensation that he does not exist in the real world at all. He seems rather to exist in the nightmarish fantasy of the white American mind as a phantom that the white mind seeks unceasingly, by means both crude and subtle, to lay.<sup>2</sup>

Thus, like Bigger, struggling with his desires in this modern world, he searches for his identity. This is the meaning of the incident with the tall blond man. Again, it is a question of reality. As far as the man was concerned, he was caught in a nightmare of his own making which, in a real sense, he is. This " . . . indeed, bears out Richard Wright's remark that there is in progress between black and white Americans a struggle over the nature of reality."<sup>3</sup> Ellison uses this concrete incident as a magnifying glass through which to view a

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<sup>1</sup>Ibid., p. 105.

<sup>2</sup>Ibid., p. 290.

<sup>3</sup>Ibid., p. 43.



universal attitude and truth. The act itself is thus a symbol, a ritual.

However, there are means to fight those in power, those who wish to control reality. This fact is symbolized by the invisible man's fight with "Monopolated Light and Power." He is draining off power and has acquired "light"--knowledge--without the knowledge and consent of the power structure. Years ago he "paid" for his light, but now that he is invisible, he is master of his own light. Before the "joke" was on him; now it is on the "power structure." Now he lives in an area reserved for whites, symbolizing that he has come to a knowledge that was to have been kept from him. Also, he lives in a section of the basement that was shut off and forgotten during the nineteenth century. This fact functions on two levels. On the literal level, it functions as representation in the story, giving the plot probability. On the symbolic level, it represents Ellison's attempt, through the novel, to deal with moral issues buried and forgotten in American literature since the nineteenth century, to deal with the ". . . conception of the Negro as a symbol of Man--the reversal of what he represents in most contemporary thought--(which) was organic to nineteenth century literature."<sup>1</sup>

Now, the invisible man tells the reader, he is living in a hole in the ground. He is not dead in a grave, but in hibernation. He has been forced into this hole because of

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<sup>1</sup>Ibid., p. 49.

the unwillingness of others to see him. This unwillingness signifies that

. . . unwillingness to resolve the conflict in keeping with his democratic ideals (that) has compelled the white American, figuratively, to force the Negro down into the deeper level of his consciousness, into the inner world, where reason and madness mingle with hope and memory and endlessly give birth to nightmare and to dream, down into the province of the psychiatrist and the artist, from whence spring the lunatic's fancy and the work of art. It is a dangerous region even for the artist, and his tragedy lies in the fact that in order to tap the fluid fire of inspiration, he must perpetually descend and re-encounter not only the ghosts of his former selves, but all of the unconquered anguish of his living.<sup>1</sup>

This is the position of the invisible man, and this is what Ellison intends the invisible man's memoirs to reveal.

It is in the prologue, too, that the reader is introduced to the book's major symbols such as blindness, black and white, nightmares, the use of folklore such as Jack-the-Bear, and dreams. For example, the necessity of light (enlightenment) is illustrated through a beautiful girl's recurring nightmare. She is in the center of a dark room. Her face expands, and her eyes run until she is a formless mass. This indicates the horror of the loss of self-identity. The invisible man then interprets the dream in terms of himself for the reader. Without light (knowledge) one is without form (self-identity), and this is to live a death. Thus, in invisibility there is light and life and truth.

The ironic and paradoxical tone of the novel is also established in the prologue, for example, in the distinction

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<sup>1</sup>Ibid., 109.

between civilization and culture and in the definition of history as a boomerang. The irony itself moves in a circular manner; the end explains the beginning. Broadway and the Empire State Building represent the "darkness of lightness." They stand for culture which is not necessarily civilized since it is not what it seems to be because it is built on contradictions. Therefore, one must not look for spiral movements in the novel but for circular ones or else get boomeranged across the head by reality.

The use of music, color, and the symbolism of time that occur throughout the novel is also introduced in the prologue. The ironic meaning of "What did I do to be so black and blue" is juxtaposed with the violent color imagery of vanilla ice cream and sloe gin. Time is out of joint. When one is invisible, he is outside of time as Bigger was. The ordered universe doesn't exist for the invisible man; this is the truth that lies below the "order" in the novel.

Music, especially the blues, also takes on a symbolic meaning. It is not used just for background but is entwined with the meaning of the action itself. Louis Armstrong is kin to the trickster of black folklore; he makes poetry out of being invisible. The blues is akin to literature and can be used as a literary symbol because "the blues speak to us simultaneously of the tragic and the comic aspects of the human condition. . . ." Therefore, it is "poetry and . . . ritual."<sup>1</sup> The blues makes a good symbol, Ellison maintains,

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

because it " . . . is an art of ambiguity, an assertion of the irrepressibly human over all circumstance whether created by others or by one's own human failings."<sup>1</sup> Thus, the dream sequence which symbolizes the invisible man's search for his self-identity is a descent, like Dante's; however, it is not into hell but into the depths and meaning of the blues. This is fitting because music is related to identity and the struggle to find meaning in life. Just as the musician, the invisible man must then try to " . . . 'find himself,' must be re-born, must find, as it were, his soul. . . . He must achieve, in short, his self-determined identity."<sup>2</sup> Finally, like the underground memoir of the invisible man himself, Ellison maintains that

the blues is an impulse to keep the painful details and episodes of a brutal experience alive in one's aching consciousness, to finger its jagged grain, and to transcend it, not by the consolation of philosophy but by squeezing from it a near-tragic, near-comic lyricism. As a form, the blues is an autobiographical chronicle of personal catastrophe expressed lyrically.<sup>3</sup>

The dream in the prologue is patterned after the structure of the entire novel. It has a circular form containing various levels of meanings. They are not separate incidents, but rather they are continually going on at the same time on various levels just as various levels of symbolism are related to a single incident in the novel. There is the cave with the old woman singing a spiritual; on the next level there is the slave girl whose body is being auctioned; on a

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<sup>1</sup>Ibid., p. 239.

<sup>2</sup>Ibid., p. 206.

<sup>3</sup>Ibid., p. 90.

lower level, with a more rapid tempo, there is the preacher. The invisible man then returns to the old woman singer and is driven away by her sons, an incident similar to his flight from Ras. He wanders down a dark narrow passage way as he did in the coal bin. He is injured by a "machine" symbolizing the modern machine world that has always been his enemy. Finally, he comes full circle and ascends from this underworld of sound, the underworld of the underworld.

The preacher's text in the dream is the "Blackness of Blackness." The blues is an appropriate medium for this text " . . . for there is a mystery in the whiteness of blackness, the innocence of evil and the evil of innocence, though, being initiates, Negroes express the joke of it in the blues. . . ." <sup>1</sup> The sermon also expresses the "joke" of it as does the entire novel. It is Genesis retold in the violent, contradictory terms of black existence. There is the sound, yet here there is sense beneath the sound. As black will " . . . put you, glory, glory, Oh my Lawd, in the WHALE'S BELLY," <sup>2</sup> like Jonah, the invisible man has been cast in the depths by his "shipmates." Again Ellison's use of repetition adds to the lyrical effect.

The sermon contains thoughts of "reason" in relation to the world of illusory reality. Treason exists in the very acknowledgement of the "Blackness of Blackness" and its para-

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<sup>1</sup> Ibid., pp. 67-68.

<sup>2</sup> Ellison, Invisible Man, p. 8.

doxes. The impious rhyming of BELLY and Aunt Nelly undercuts the apparent tone of foreordained justified suffering set up by the relation to the biblical story of Jonah. Thus, to understand the joke is treason just as to outwit the Light and Power Company is sabotage.

The invisible man is told "go curse your God, boy, and die."<sup>1</sup> He is related to Job, made a modern Everyman from whom all things have been taken. As such, he seeks an answer from the old woman as to what is wrong. Her answer is that slavery has resulted in a love-hate relationship with her master. This paradox is likened to the invisible man's personal history of boomeranging as well as the preacher's paradoxical sermon. And ironically, for all the invisible man's learning and words, he still can not explain it anymore than the old woman. This love-hate relationship is symbolic of the paradox of the black man's life. He has been promised freedom but is never really freed. Yet, it is love that is stronger; it is love that conquers says the old woman just as the grandfather's "yes" is his answer, his conquest in the struggle as opposed to Ras's "no." Indeed a mistake was made somewhere that has resulted in chaos and confusion. Time is out of joint. Finally, the invisible man asks the meaning of "Freedom," and the definition the old woman gives is the definition that takes him his entire memoir to understand. The definition is the heart of the novel: ". . . it ain't nothing but knowing

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<sup>1</sup>Ibid., p. 8.

how to say what I got up in my head."<sup>1</sup> This is the question he must ask himself, and this is the answer he must find. Thus Ellison uses the prologue as a symbol of the novel itself.

Following the prologue, the battle royal, the initiating incident of the plot line occurs. The action itself is ironic: it begins the ritual that continues throughout the novel. The invisible man submits to being blinded for gain; he blindly fights other black men, losing a sense of where he is and who he is. Chaos reigns, and power becomes all important. The game is always played without a knowledge of the rules. The rug is always unknowingly electrified, and the rewards and the assumed identity are always false. This fact demonstrates that the Booker T. Washington philosophy preached by the invisible man, ". . . that humility was the secret, indeed, the very essence of progress,"<sup>2</sup> leads to the dehumanization of both the white and the black man.

In the prologue, the reader has already been shown that in the Invisible Man ". . . there are things going on in its depth that are of more permanent interest than on its surface."<sup>3</sup> Thus, the imagery of nightmare and chaos reinforces the fact that this is the real world that lies behind the calm facade of titles like bankers, lawyers, judges, doctors, fire chiefs, teachers and merchants. The mistaken "social equality" used for "social responsibility" demonstrates

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<sup>1</sup>Ibid., p. 9.      <sup>2</sup>Ibid., p. 14.

<sup>3</sup>Ellison, Shadow and Act, p. 176.

that there cannot be one without the other. The names Tatl-ock (Shylock who wants his pound of flesh) Colcord (Col-ored--"entertainment palaces") Shad Whitmore (loss of wit) mirror the souls of their owners. Names are particularly im- portant because the black man's name as well as his past had been taken from him. Thus, the fact that the invisible man remains unnamed throughout the novel even when these minor characters are named takes on a double significance. On one level he is nameless because he is a modern Everyman while on another it is because he is invisible and has been irresponsi- ble. Therefore, he must first learn who he is before he can possess an identity.

The prologue has also prepared the reader for the use of symbols. The historic person of Booker T. Washington be- comes a symbol of the false philosophy by which the invisible man governs his life. Booker's philosophy, that the slaves were freed and "united with others of our country in every- thing pertaining to the common good, and, in everything so- cial, separate like the fingers of the hand,"<sup>1</sup> is shown to be a false view of history. In fact, Booker T. Washington be- comes a signal for all the false philosophy that the college later represents. The basis, therefore, for this signal is truly historical. Much of the philosophy that Ellison uses ironically in the novel actually appears in Up from Slavery. In his speech at the smoker, the invisible man uses the quota-

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<sup>1</sup>Ellison, Invisible Man, p. 13.



tion, "cast down your bucket where you are"<sup>1</sup> from Booker T. Washington's famous Atlanta Exposition address. Booker T. Washington's philosophy is the philosophy of the invisible man; what the former believed, the latter practices. For example, the students at Tuskegee " . . . were all willing to learn the right thing as soon as it was shown them what was right."<sup>2</sup> This echoes the black folk saying "If you're black, stay black; you're brown, stick around; if you're white, you're right." In addition, Booker T. Washington's philosophy, that the individual must do what the world wants done, is, indeed, practiced by the invisible man, and this is the reason the vet calls him a mechanical man. This philosophy, like the protagonist's, is also based on an overriding optimism which the novel shows is indeed unwarranted. And finally, like the invisible man, Booker T. Washington was not called by his own name, which was lost.

The beliefs of Booker T. Washington are also incorporated later in the novel into Homer Barbee's speech. Just as Booker had returned to Hampton to give his "The Force that Wins" speech, Barbee returns to the campus. His speech rings with beliefs such as Providence provides for man, and that the

Negroes inhabiting this country, who themselves or whose ancestors went through the school of American slavery, are in a stronger and more hopeful condition, materially,

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<sup>1</sup>Ibid., p. 24.

<sup>2</sup>Booker T. Washington, Up From Slavery (New York: The Sun Dial Press, Inc., 1937), p. 123.

intellectually, morally, and religiously than is true of an equal number of black people in any other portion of the globe.<sup>1</sup>

Finally, even the imagery surrounding the Barbee speech is reminiscent of the Atlanta address. In writing of Booker's Atlanta address, Mr. James Creelman stated "he turned his wonderful countenance to the sun without a blink of the eyelids, and began to talk."<sup>2</sup> These are the myths of a black Horatio Alger to whom Barbee is compared. Thus, in the figure of Barbee, these beliefs fall flat as he does on his face.

The school, Tuskegee, which Booker T. Washington founded and which Ellison later attended is the model for the campus in the novel. The cornerstone was laid at Tuskegee sixteen years after the abolishment of slavery and Tuskegee is described as

. . . surrounded by the pure air, the trees, the shrubbery, the flowers, and the sweet fragrance that springs from a hundred plants, enjoying the chirp of the crickets and the songs of the birds.<sup>3</sup>

It is supported by whites who resemble Mr. Norton. Indeed, even the figures of the Founder and Bledsoe are related to the historic Booker T. Washington. Like the Founder, Booker T. Washington was born a slave. In addition the figure of the Founder seems to resemble in part General Armstrong, Booker T. Washington's spiritual father. For example, Barbee refers to him as the fallen general, and it is Armstrong, like the Founder, who makes the career of Booker T. Washington

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<sup>1</sup>Ibid., p. 17.

<sup>2</sup>Ibid., p. 240.

<sup>3</sup>Ibid., p. 265.

possible. The character of Bledsoe is later also related to Booker T. Washington, who was also commended for his modesty.<sup>1</sup> The fact that the invisible man thus visualizes himself as a potential Booker T. Washington, therefore, is meant by Ellison to demonstrate his blindness. The invisible man's paraphrase of Booker T. Washington's philosophy in his speech justly earns his blind soul, his briefcase. He is told

. . . take this prize and keep it well. Consider it a badge of office. Prize it. Keep developing as you are and some day it will be filled with important papers that will help shape the destiny of your people.<sup>2</sup>

This ironically comes to pass, and the briefcase becomes a constant symbol in the novel; it represents the soul of the invisible man. It is filled with false names and is a constant reminder of his blindness, and finally his blood, which Ellison uses as the outward sign of his self-mutilation, spills over on to the briefcase.

The irony of his triumphant hour is further illustrated by the use of a dream. The clowns who represent the supporters of the system such as Tatlock are part of the dirty joke that is not funny. The briefcase is the invisible man, and the envelopes represent his life, which is ordered by the document "Keep this Nigger-Boy Running."<sup>3</sup> He has begun his journey, his race, which will bring him full circle at the end of the novel.

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<sup>1</sup>It is Bledsoe who makes this philosophy pay.

<sup>2</sup>Ellison, Invisible Man, pp. 25-26. <sup>3</sup>Ibid.

The stereotype of the black man as an amoral sexual animal is also introduced by Ellison in this episode. The invisible man is continually associated with this stereotype throughout the novel. The blonde is offered to the blacks only as bait. It is part of the white-black ritual as symbolized by the small American flag tattooed upon her belly. She is described in terms resembling James Joyce's bird girl in A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man. This image, however, is ironically to suggest the castrated future of the invisible man. In addition, the color symbolism and the symbol of physical blindness, which throughout the novel are equated with intellectual and spiritual blindness, are used in this incident. The blacks are all blindfolded with broad bands of white cloth. The attendants are in white jackets. The continual mention of blood recalls the vanilla ice cream and sloe gin of the prologue.

The Norton-Trueblood incident is also an example of dramatic irony. Trueblood is Norton's desire made flesh. Trueblood has committed the act of incest that Norton has subconsciously desired, and it is through Trueblood that Norton vicariously experiences his desire. This is the hundred dollar understanding. The final irony of the incident is the fact that Trueblood acknowledges his act and its results while Norton can never believe that his daughter was his own flesh and blood.

The symbolic and mythical allusions related to this

incident are also ironic in their intent. Trueblood is paralleled to Oedipus through the incest theme and to Orestes through the symbolism of the flies that swarm about his wound. Like Orestes, he is saved by a deus ex machina: the ax stops "like somebody done reached down through the roof and caught it. . . ." <sup>1</sup> Like Orestes he leaves home to seek peace, but unlike Orestes his peace comes from within. He finds himself in the blues. In addition, Trueblood is also paralleled to the folk hero Gawain. Like the latter in Gawain and the Green Knight, Trueblood twists his head aside though he meant to keep it still. Also, like Gawain he is marked by the ax as a sign of his fault. So Trueblood, like Orestes and Gawain, becomes a hero cleansed of his fault through self-acceptance. Nor does Trueblood's folk-hero image stop here. He is the poet and the magician, the story-teller, the singer of spirituals, and the symbol of the black folk people who remains close to Mother Earth. His cabin is a log cabin, and his house will endure forever. He is a strong man who can walk in blackness with certainty. Again, he is ironically contrasted to Norton and the protagonist, who are both physically and spiritually lost.

The campus, created by men like Norton instead of men like Trueblood, is ironically depicted in terms of Eden. There are the many heavily scented flowers, and the rabbits, not having been hunted, are tame. But also present are the

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<sup>1</sup>Ibid., p. 58.

constant reminders of the Fall, for example, the road that leads to the insane asylum. Thus the reader is constantly reminded by Ellison that this is a false vision. Time is out of joint; from the clock on the tower to Norton's watch, it is a time-killing dream. It is a sterile place in contrast to Trueblood's fertility. There is no water, no rain falls there in the memories of the protagonist, and no seeds burst in the Spring. The imagery is an echo of T. S. Eliot's "Four Quartets" and "The Waste Land,"<sup>1</sup> and the multimillionaires, those false gods, are seen in Eliot's song and dance imagery: "And oh, oh, oh those multimillionaires."<sup>2</sup> This land, Ellison thus shows, is unredeemed, the dead creation of the modern world. The inhabitants of this wilderness are equally sterile; the trysting places are virginal and without lovers and the students are like robots. The Founder's status is a cold Father symbol, an ambiguous figure who seems to be effectively blinding rather than freeing a slave.

The symbolism of birds here is used with dramatic irony. As in the Greek myths, they are signs of the future as well as illuminators of present hidden truth. Thus, the

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<sup>1</sup>T. S. Eliot, The Complete Poems and Plays 1909-1950 (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Company, 1952), "Little Gidding," p. 138.

There is no earth smell  
Or smell of living thing. This is the spring time  
But not in time's covenant.

<sup>2</sup>Ibid., p. 29.

mocking birds sing in this Eden, and the starlings baptize the statue of the Founder as the invisible man will be baptized at the end of the novel. The birds warn of the coming incident with Trueblood; they seem as messengers of the gods as Ellison uses them as ironic reminders of the invisible man's true condition. For example, as Norton speaks of his fate, flocks of quail blind the vision of the invisible man. Even Trueblood's dream contains the warning symbolism of birds. "Seems like I heard a whipperwill callin', and I thought to myself, Go on away from here, we'll whip ole Will when we find him."<sup>1</sup> This thought is later echoed in "they picked poor Robin clean." And finally, Trueblood compares himself in his predicament to a paralyzed jaybird that can only watch himself stung to death, an image that the invisible man later relates to himself.

Norton in contrast to Trueblood is the "god" who has helped to build this Eden. He is the patron Saint Nicholas of the school; "a symbol of the Great Traditions,"<sup>2</sup> Ellison tells us Norton is the "white rabbit" with his wafer-thin-watch who leads the invisible man to a wonderland from which he, unlike Alice, will never return. Norton is unlike Oedipus in that he desires an incestuous relationship, but like Oedipus in believing he can control his "fate." He tells the invisible man, that he knows both the campus and his life very

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<sup>1</sup>Ellison, Invisible Man, pp. 42-43.

<sup>2</sup>Ibid., p. 29.

well. Thus, he is blind like Oedipus to his identity and his fate. He too suffers from hubris, thinking of himself as a god ruling the living when he is using men like machines to build a memorial to the dead. Therefore, much of the dialogue that takes place between the invisible man and Norton is also ironic. For example, when he says "young man, you're part of a wonderful institution. It is a great dream become reality . . . ,"<sup>1</sup> the reader is to understand the reverse: reality has become a great dream. Or when Norton says that his fate has been a "pleasant" one and hopes the invisible man's will be as pleasant, the irony lies in the truth of their connected fates, connected even as the invisible man drives with his eyes glued to the white line. In addition, there are four references to this obsession with the white line, including the invisible man's desire at Trueblood's to be back on the other side of the white line.

The use of color symbolism is carried over into Trueblood's dream. Mr. Broadnax, the two-edge-sword avenger, has a bedroom that is white, and the white woman is dressed completely in white, and white geese fly out of the bed as a sign of his coming fate. Time is out of joint, but unlike Clinton, Trueblood tries to get inside time, which is pictured as a machine. The whole dream has overtones of the invisible man's dream in the prologue, and like the latter, violence lies under the surface. Trueblood's hold on the white woman

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<sup>1</sup>Ibid., p. 30.



echoes of Bigger Thomas' crime in Native Son, and Trueblood makes an allusion to Silas, a character in Uncle Tom's Children. The theme of castration is treated with ironic humor in relation to Trueblood's dream. Even though Trueblood is "ethically" seeking a way out of his sin, or at least the sin of being caught, castration is too great a price to keep from sinning. This fact is ironically contrasted with the later castration dream of the invisible man which illustrates that he has always been too willing to be castrated.

The incident at the Golden Day is used by Ellison to present the irony of the "insane" seer. Here is the oracle who truly tells the fate of Mr. Norton and the invisible man, but like Teiresias he is disbelieved. The ironic comparison between Norton and a god continues here. He is called the "Messiah" and the "Creator" by the vets. He has come into the Golden Day to his final judgment. Yet while Norton sees himself as a life giver, in the Golden Day even the invisible man sees that it is death that he resembles. Thus, ultimately, Mr. Norton is seen as either part goat or part ape. He is lustful Pan, the Greek god, bringing confusion even into the Golden Day. Indeed, the world of chaos and nightmare is always the true world of the novel because the modern world with its insane asylums has reverted to chaos, and the seeming order is only a facade. The Golden Day, having been all things in its time, is, ironically, the promised culmination of the history of man.

The color symbolism also continues in this incident. Thus the vets block the way from the white line. The whiteness of Mr. Norton is a nameless horror. Halley slices the white heads off of a couple of beers with an ivory paddle. Supercargo, the super commodity used by the white man for control, is dressed in white. It is Supercargo who desires to keep surface order over the depths of chaos and double order for white folks. He is constantly referred to as a stool pigeon, and in other animal imagery, he is referred to as a bear. He is a black man who has sold out to the white man, and as such therefore he is the enemy of the rabbit. Yet, although the vets are to be controlled, the invisible man sees them rather than himself as players in an unknown game. Once again he is engaged blindly in a battle royal in the center of chaos. Time is again important: "The clocks are all set back and the forces of destruction are rampant. . . ." <sup>1</sup> History is a circular movement that is centered on violence, and words such as "a trustee of consciousness" <sup>2</sup> express the suppression of truth. Finally, the symbols of water and blindness are also present in this incident. When the vet tells Mr. Norton his true fate, a drop of water falls on Mr. Norton's eyes, a baptism for the blind. Indeed Mr. Norton and the invisible man are the blind leading the blind (an image that the invisible man uses later in a Brotherhood speech) as the vet states.

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<sup>1</sup>Ibid., p. 71.

<sup>2</sup>Ibid., p. 69.

Even though chapter four is a short chapter containing only incidents that are part of the representation, it prepares for the chapel incident and establishes the character of Dr. Bledsoe and the probability for the invisible man's expulsion and its following results. Dr. Bledsoe, whose very name has a doubly irony, both bleeding heart and leech, is a fat head, ". . . his broad globular face . . . seemed to take its form from the fat pressing from the inside . . . ,"<sup>1</sup> whose success can only be measured in terms of power. His actions are echoes of Prufrock's preparing his face to meet other faces. He is a bland mask of hypocrisy, and of course, ironically his favorite spiritual is "Live-a-Humble." Yet, this is the man the protagonist hopes to emulate.

The color symbolism of white is also present here, and now it is again accented with red, increasing the stress of the underlying violence. For instance, Mr. Norton's white forehead is livid where it was scraped by the screen. This also again parallels Norton to Trueblood; they are both marked men. Also, there is the obvious irony in the line that Dr. Bledsoe looked as if the invisible man had told him black was white, which is just what, on the literal level, he has done.

Again in the chapel incident Ellison's power in style and diction is clearly illustrated. His poetic uses of parallel structure, repetition, alliteration, consonance and assonance are clearly seen, for example, in the following sen-

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<sup>1</sup>Ibid., p. 78.

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. . . I recall the sudden arpeggios of laughter lilting across the tender, springtime grass--gay-welling, far-floating, fluent, spontaneous, a bell-like feminine fluting, then suppressed; as though snuffed swiftly and irrevocably beneath the quiet solemnity of the vespersed air now vibrant with somber chapel bells. Dong! Dong! Dong!<sup>1</sup>

The light touch of the "l," "g," and "f" sounds is caught up short by the word "suppressed" ending the pleasant romantic image with a signaling of the fall to come. The "s" sound then becomes predominant warning of the future while the dong sound adds to the feeling of oppression.

This ability of Ellison to make his word sounds function to reinforce his meaning can also be seen in the later section concerning Miss Susie Gresham. The "bungling bugler of words," "the trumpet and the trombone's timbre" illustrate the protagonist's point that Miss Susie Gresham is an

old connoisseur of voice sounds, of voices without messages, of newsless winds, listen to the vowel sounds and the crackling dentals, to the low harsh gutturals of empty anguish now riding the curve of a preacher's rhythm.<sup>2</sup>

This is also Ellison's warning to the reader to avoid being convinced by Barbee's words, words whose meaning is sinister but whose form and rhythm are poetically captivating as cadences of the black preacher, for example:

. . . this land of darkness and sorrow, of ignorance and degradation, where the hand of brother had been turned against brother, father against son, and son against father; where master had turned against slave and slave against master; where all was strife and darkness, an aching land.<sup>3</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Ibid., p. 85.

<sup>2</sup>Ibid., p. 88.

<sup>3</sup>Ibid., p. 92.

The chapel incident is begun with Ellison's use of the present protagonist's vision. This chapter contains frequent insights given by the mature protagonist of the prologue because the reader is not to be taken in by the rhetoric in the chapel. The invisible man's memories of his own speaking "achievements" are also recounted as a warning to the reader that Barbee's speech is to be the same empty rhetoric. In addition, the character of Homer A. Barbee and his presentation of the Founder, both render dramatic irony. The Founder is described by Barbee in a series of Christ images. For example, he is from humble beginnings, he questions his elders, and he escapes from his own type of Herod. He is also compared to Moses as a saviour of his people, and in addition, he is used as the expounder of Booker T. Washington's philosophy of a "humble but fast-rising people." And yet, this sower of seeds is sterile, having had his own seed shriveled by lye as a child. He is a eunuch, the symbol of spiritual death. Finally, in death, Barbee pictures him as "already a bronzed statue" recalling to the reader the statue on the campus above the head of the eternally kneeling slave.

Homer A. Barbee, blind Homer, is a seer who cannot see for himself; yet he is a man who frequently uses terms of sight in his speech. He is a man of striking ugliness who seems to be Bledsoe's other self. The imagery Ellison uses to introduce Barbee has echoes of James Joyce's presentation of the retreat master in A Portrait of the Artist as a Young

Man. His speech itself contains both unintentional puns and irony. Thus, the Founder's dream is "concrete, made flesh."<sup>1</sup> He tells his audience that the Founder ignored the warnings of a stranger that he just told them might have been an emissary direct from above. He questions, "How can I tell you what manner of man this is who leads you? How can I convey to you how well he has kept his pledge to the Founder, how conscientious has been his stewardship?"<sup>2</sup>

In line with this irony, Dr. Bledsoe's character is given more development. The parallel between the character and Booker T. Washington is carefully constructed in this chapter. For example, like Booker he begins his education by taking a menial job; however, the irony of the job is obvious because he becomes the best slop dispenser in the history of the school. The caption in the paper referring to Bledsoe as an "EDUCATOR" echoes a similar incident in Up from Slavery, the political influence with the "White House" is also mentioned. Bledsoe is a magician and a frightening figure as evidenced in the pun, "he was our coal-black daddy of whom we were afraid."<sup>3</sup> Like the Founder, he is a cold father image.

Again color symbolism and imagery play an important part in the structure of this incident. The violent imagery of red and white is frequent in the representation. The moon is blood-red, a white man's bloodshot eye. The whippoorwill is singing in this Eden. The benches, which are forerunners

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<sup>1</sup>Ibid., p. 93.

<sup>2</sup>Ibid., p. 102.

<sup>3</sup>Ibid., p. 90.

of the hospital machine, are straight and tortuous, and the students are stiff and inhuman in their actions. The seeming "logic" of the speech is to emotionally control the people in the audience, to convince them that they are here sheltered from darkness and ignorance. It is, ironically, to convince the blind that they see, and the Judas goat is a blind man. Again the invisible man is the victim in a ritual. Again black man strikes out at black man, not with his fist but with his voice, and the goal is the same, power. The violence here is even greater than in the initial battle royal because it is directed against the spirit of man. In this Eden the millionaires are the words made flesh; they are Zeus, his lightning and thunder, and the hymns they hear are part of the ritualistic homage: "Lead me, lead me to a rock that is higher than I."

Chapter six contains comparatively little verbal or symbolic irony because the main incident in itself is essentially ironic. It involves the fine art of lying as presented by Dr. Bledsoe to the invisible man. Dr. Bledsoe, who is the lie personified, insists that the lie is a way of life; yet at the same time he is angry because he thinks the protagonist is lying to him. And the protagonist, having heard the truth, still believes the great lie that Bledsoe tells him about the letters. When the protagonist asks himself, "what is truth," the reader sees that the invisible man is so blind that he can't see the truth even when face to face with

it. Even when he is told that "power is confident, self-assuring, self-starting and self-stopping, self-warming and self-justifying,"<sup>1</sup> he can't see his own self-desires in this definition. He still believes in Bledsoe's words even after the head of this "Negro" College tells him that he would have every black man in the country lynched to stay in power.

In many ways the invisible man is the "son" that Bledsoe continually calls him. He certainly does lack "judgment," as Bledsoe says. He doesn't understand as Bledsoe does that life is a game. He still believes even after Bledsoe tells him he is not the kind of man who'd lead with his right. The invisible man walks blindly into the punch. The puns continue as Bledsoe tells the invisible man he will give him some helpful letters, but that this time he should get into the "swing" of things. He also prophetically tells the protagonist to acquire power and stay in the dark to use it. Yet, the invisible man concludes that Dr. Bledsoe is right just as he had concluded that "white is right." So he packs as his roommate grins unknowingly in his sleep, yet not as asleep or unaware as the protagonist. As the invisible man takes leave of Dr. Bledsoe, the latter's hands are pictured as making a cage of his fingers, and on his desk lies an old leg shackle similar to the one that the invisible man will acquire at the height of his power to symbolize his true past. The invisible man has accepted the bait; the trap is sprung as

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<sup>1</sup>Ibid., p. 110.



Bledsoe tells him in his chapel voice that he is beginning to learn responsibility. Again Ellison uses this word to illustrate the invisible man's blindness and thus his irresponsibility. The protagonist is sent on his way, and his future is ironically forecast in the thought that one of the letters will do something for him.

Now, once again the invisible man meets the vet, the "crazy" seer who like Teiresias speaks the truth but is not believed. Therefore, the vet's words need no ironic symbolism to enlighten the reader. Now Ellison also introduces the myth of the journey from the South to the North for freedom. However, unlike Huckelberry Finn, the invisible man just changes one form of slavery for another. The North isn't freedom, and Harlem is just another false Eden. When the invisible man gets off the bus in New York and asks where Harlem is, he is told it is easy to find if he just keeps heading north. The end of the rainbow is a fraud.

In addition, the invisible man's dream-picture of himself in Harlem is ironically juxtaposed to his actual encounter with Harlem. Instead of the dapper person, with his hair parted on the right side and well deodorized, that he pictures himself to be, the reader sees him as a bumbling innocent who is afraid of the subways and who is told to "keep it clean." The symbolic freedom (this image of his seed as freedom is used seriously later in the castration dream) the vet suggests he will find in a white woman is contrasted by Ellison to his

panic in the subway, where, in the fashion of Gulliver, he stares at the white woman, seeing with horror a large mole on the oily whiteness of her skin.

Also in this chapter once again biblical symbols are used with an ironic purpose. He leaves his Eden as the snake vanishes from view, recalling the tin apple at Trueblood's that signaled his first fall. It has indeed been "the best of all possible worlds" in the true sense of *Candide*. Later like Jonas, an image which echoes the dream of the prologue, he is spit out from the belly of the subway. And finally like Lot's wife, he dare not look back at Ras, whose voice reminds him of his father's.

The invisible man's journey from the South to the North is used by Ellison to symbolize the journey of the black man; his dreams are those of the black race. Like Huck and Jim, he sees the promise of "freedom" and tries to fit into this promised land. What Ellison states about the black man in "Harlem is Nowhere" is mirrored in the invisible man's vision of himself. Thus the style of the novel changes to reflect the change in the character of the invisible man. Ellison's writing becomes more surrealistic to capture the protagonist's consciousness in the form itself because as black people move from the South to the North "they lose one of the bulwarks which men place between themselves and the constant threat of chaos."<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>Ellison, Shadow and Act, p. 286.

Thus, the picture that Ellison draws of Harlem is not a caricature because

Harlem is a ruin--many of its ordinary aspects . . . are indistinguishable from the distorted images that appear in dreams, and which . . . quiver in the waking mind with hidden and threatening significance.<sup>1</sup>

The character of Ras, therefore, is a realistic portrayal because " . . . the most surreal fantasies are acted out upon the streets of Harlem. . . . Life becomes a masquerade, exotic costumes are worn every day."<sup>2</sup>

The Harlem of his dream is the basis now for the invisible man's false view of his future. He sees himself as a young Dr. Bledsoe, a "charming" Ronald Colman, an Esquire man who, like Bledsoe, puts on a face, and a voice, to meet the faces that he meets. And even though the irony of his dream of being sent South again to head the College like the major's cook, who was made principal after she became too lame to stand, is lost on the protagonist, it is not on the reader. In addition, this dream is juxtaposed by Ellison to the invisible man's real emotions as he moves in New York: he has the out-of-focus sensation of a dream. He is unsure of himself, and his uneasiness is paralleled to his feeling about the watching white moon at the College. Time is again out of joint as it was at the school. But, now the invisible man wants a watch like Dr. Bledsoe's as Bigger had also wanted a good watch. He wants to be part of time and to have a place.

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<sup>1</sup>Ibid., p. 283.

<sup>2</sup>Ibid., p. 284.

His letters with their "important" names give him a feeling of importance that he can only find reflected adequately by his own reflection in the mirror, and like Narcissus he will be drowned by his own blindness. The men carrying dispatch cases and briefcases also add to his sense of importance, and yet ironically they remind him of prisoners carrying their leg irons, and they symbolize that he is a prisoner chained to his false image of himself. His letters that he views as a hand of high trump cards are really a deck stacked against him.

The incident with Mr. Bates' secretary is filled with ironic symbolism. The building of white stone challenges him. The castration symbolism is stressed by the invisible man's feeling in the elevator. From the building the Statue of Liberty's torch is almost lost in the fog, and the warning of the birds is also present. The employer's name is "Bates," again signifying that the invisible man is to be reduced, diminished as a man. The pictures on the wall of the office resemble those in Dr. Bledsoe's office, and the men have the self-assurance and arrogance that the protagonist had never seen except in white men and a few razor-scarred blacks. Finally, the protagonist's optimism is ironic in its very truth: "Well, there were unseen lines that ran from North to South, and Mr. Norton had called me his destiny . . . I swung my briefcase with confidence."<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>Ellison, Invisible Man, p. 128.

The folklore symbols are also present here. The invisible man isn't going to operate on C. P. (colored people's time--a black joke which others are not invited to use), and the indifferent, blind New Yorkers would not have recognized Jack the Bear. The latter reference is, of course, ironic because the invisible man himself fails to recognize him later in the novel.

The fact that the invisible man eventually writes to Mr. Norton as he would pray to God for salvation is also ironic. The incident begins with overtones of T. S. Eliot's, "Portrait of a Lady." He waits for three days inside the building, but there is no resurrection, and his letter, any more than an unanswered prayer, is not returned. Indeed, even the invisible man's trip to the movies is symbolic of his own fate. Ironically, he forgets himself because he thinks the characters have no connection with him. He doesn't see the similarity between himself and the heroic Indian who must always be defeated. This blindness is similar to his use of the word "honorable" in his refusal to read his letters. The chapter ends with the representation steeped in dramatic irony similar to the dramatic irony of Oedipus before the revelation of his true identity. The invisible man has decided to "keep faith," and his appeal seems to have been granted just as Jocasta's prayer to the gods. "Something was certain to happen tomorrow. And it did. I received a letter from Mr. Emerson."<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>Ibid., p. 130.

In the incident involving the man with the blueprints, the character is used like a messenger in Greek drama. His warnings, however, are rejected by the blind protagonist. The incident begins as the previous chapter ended on a note of ironic optimism. It is symbolically a fey feeling. It begins on a beautiful day with the invisible man recalling the big seed bull at the college. This image is to contrast ironically to his later symbolic castration. The messenger is singing the blues which already has been linked with truth and self-identity. This is associated with the protagonist's past, his true past before his blinding college experience. The animal imagery that the protagonist only vaguely recalls is associated with the folklore of Brer Rabbit. The reddish eyed messenger, who reminds him of the vets from the Golden Day, asks for a sign of recognition for himself and the invisible man with the words "is you got the dog?"<sup>1</sup> The invisible man's refusal to answer is interpreted as a denial. It is the messenger who finally answers the question, suggesting that the dog has hold of the protagonist. This, of course, is the truth, but the invisible man does not see his similarity to the rabbit. Ellison's ear for dialect makes this symbolism seem natural as the messenger warns the protagonist that Harlem is a bear's den, but as Brer Rabbit, he sees that this is the world in which he must live, and like Brer Rabbit he threatens to get the best of the bear. The messenger's final

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<sup>1</sup>Ibid., p. 132.

warning is that he will not be run into his grave like a rabbit. He is High John de Conquer. He has all the credentials of a prophet: "In fact, I'maseventhsonofaseventhsonbawnwith-acauloverbotheyesandraisedonblackcatboneshighjohntheconqueror-andgreasygreens--." <sup>1</sup> He "verses" the invisible man rather than "curse" him, and he gives his true name as Peter Wheatstraw and, like High John the Conqueror, he is the Devil's only son-in-law having according to legend married the devil's daughter in Hell. His song, an actual blues piece, with its animal imagery is related to the riddle of the Sphinx. The invisible man's doubt about its meaning parallels it to his grandfather's "yes." Again, the protagonist is related to Oedipus. Oedipus solved the riddle of the Sphinx with the answer of man, and the invisible man cannot answer the riddle because he doesn't truly know himself or mankind.

The messenger who is described as a rooster and a bear disposes of blueprints, the dreams of mice and men. The invisible man, though, blindly believes in sticking to his plan; and as the messenger leaves, he detaches himself from his own past once again. He continues this denial under the sign of the blonde selling coke, denying himself the special, and choosing instead the bitter cup of pulpy orange juice in the belief that this is sophisticating, a change for the better. He plans to charge his actions heavily with symbolism; yet ironically, he fails to see their symbolism, himself. At the

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<sup>1</sup> Ibid., p. 134.

very moment when he believes he has discovered the secret of leadership, he is blindly following as Ellison indicates by having a blonde white man order the special.

Emerson, to whom he goes to be self-reliant as pragmatic Ralph Waldo Emerson would suggest, frees him from illusion as he is later freed in the castration dream. Emerson, like the vet, is a little "mad"; he too is a mad soothsayer. Although he enlightens the invisible man, his own sight is partially clouded (he wears glasses), and his motives are not pure. His reference to Jim and Huck (the reader is to be mindful of Leslie Fiedler's "Come Back to the Raft Ag'in, Huck Honey!") as well as the book he reads and his movements demonstrate that he is a homosexual. For all his desire to appear a white liberal, he is guilty of obvious prejudice thinking in terms of the mask, "some of the finest people I know are Neg. . . ." <sup>1</sup> His relationship with his father is ironically juxtaposed to Norton's and his daughter's and is suggested by the book Totem and Taboo. Yet, in spite of all this, his vision is certainly clearer than the protagonist's.

Again, symbolic warnings are given to the protagonist before this incident. The birds in the aviary savagely beat their wings, disturbing the room that is quiet as a tomb. The scene reminds the protagonist of the school museum with its relics from slavery times. The chair is beautiful, but hard, like the benches in the chapel. But, the protagonist is

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<sup>1</sup>Ibid., p. 144.



blind to these signs, and again his blindness is self-inflicted. As he insists that he desires to return to become Dr. Bledsoe's assistant, Emerson justly tells him that ambition is a blinding force. The invisible man ironically promises to prove his identity, but as Emerson points out, modern man as a whole lacks identity. He knows the invisible man is blind, and that there are other levels below the surface. But the protagonist still ironically insists on seeing Mr. Emerson though he is not capable of doing so. Thus, the most ironic line of dialog in the chapter occurs when Emerson gives him Dr. Bledsoe's letter, and he says "but I wasn't asking for this."<sup>1</sup>

The other symbols of the nightmare are also present in this chapter. Emerson compares himself to an alarm clock without a control. He tells the invisible man that he'd make an excellent sprinter, a fact of which the reader has already been made well aware. The fear that the protagonist felt for Norton is also present with Emerson, and he remembers his grandfather's warning. The letter itself reemphasizes previous symbolism. In it Bledsoe refers to the invisible man's fall and signs himself a "humble servant." The protagonist is referred to as the "bearer" of the letter, a pun on the "bear" who is nowhere. The protagonist's reaction echoes his previous reaction to his interview with Bledsoe; he feels he had been through it all before as his eyes ache. He can't

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<sup>1</sup>Ibid.

understand his fate because he had always tried to do "the right thing." The image of blindness is directly linked to ignorance when Emerson warns him not to blind himself to the truth. This is, of course, what the protagonist has done and will continue to do.

In the representation surrounding this incident, the bird becomes more than a warning symbol. The protagonist leaves Emerson's building and sees the headstones of a graveyard, the symbol of the death, in part, of his innocence. The shoeshine boy dancing for pennies is another symbol of what his life has been and will continue to be, and this image re-occurs in Clinton's doll. He goes to the back of the bus automatically, and his mind, as his actions have, goes in circles. It is a joke, and the joke is on him. He is poor Robin; every blind man is poor Robin. Ellison states that "They Picked Poor Robin" was

. . . a jazz community joke, . . . naming of a recurring human situation, and was played to satirize some betrayal of faith or loss of love observed from the bandstand. . . .

Poor robin was picked again and again and his pluckers were ever unnamed and mysterious. Yet the tune was inevitably productive of laughter--even when we ourselves were its object. For each of us recognized that his fate was somehow our own. Our defeats and failures . . . were loaded upon his back and given ironic significance and thus made more bearable.<sup>1</sup>

The invisible man fails to see the connection between this mask and himself; therefore he will be caught like Robin and sent to the "rookery," which is a signal with many meanings:

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<sup>1</sup>Ellison, Shadow and Act, p. 227.

a breeding place for birds; a tenement for people. He has indeed been rooked by a rook. He is still "running" even when he thinks he is now walking with direction. There is a "tyranny" and a "treason" involved as Emerson suggests. And the elevator drops him like a shot; he has fallen again.

Ellison's style becomes more surrealistic now in the paint factory incident. Again, the incident has a factual basis; for example dope is used with paint. Yet, the symbolic meaning of the incident is most important for the novel. Ellison uses legendary Arthurian symbols, having the protagonist cross a bridge over water in a fog, signifying he has crossed into the realm of the supernatural. Emerson's name, used without his permission, works like "magic." Finally, he is to be given tasks to perform much the same as a legendary hero.

The chapter begins with the description of the flags flying before the factory buildings as if they were part of a vast patriotic ceremony. Indeed, they are part of the great American whitewash, ironically seen as keeping America "pure," the whitewash of the blacks and the problem of democracy. The Liberty Paints factory makes paint for the government, including "Optic White" to cover up national monuments in Washington--the ironic inference is, of course, the Congress and the Supreme Court. It is "Optic White" or "white is right" paint, and, as Kimbro states, it will cover anything. Here at Liberty Paints the invisible man's job is to make a milky brown substance pure white by adding ten drops

of black dope that is itself to become invisible, which is what, in a sense, he has been trying to do all along in the novel. The pun on "dope" is obvious. He is told by "Colonel" Kimbro, a pink-necked man, referred to as the slave driver, that he is to assume a slave-mentality and not question instructions. In addition the four more casual references to "white" and "right" in the chapter are used to reinforce the saying that "white is right." For example, when Kimbro states that the paint is ". . . as white as George Washington's Sunday-go-to-meetin' wig and as sound as the all-mighty dollar!" the invisible man answers, "It's certainly white all right."<sup>1</sup> In addition the former reference ironically points out the practical morality of American capitalism vs ideal morality of the American Creed.

However, the invisible man again unwittingly sabotages the system by adding concentrated paint remover, and the paint then has a gray tinge. This has a double significance: the paint is spoiled because the "black" shows through; the spoiled paint is "gray," which is a black term for white people. In addition even when Kimbro makes the correction of adding dope instead of remover, the same gray tinge glowed through the whiteness.

Irony is built on irony as Kimbro approves of the "white" paint. Both the "spoiled" paint and the paint "corrected" by the black dope have the same gray tinge glowing

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<sup>1</sup>Ellison, Invisible Man, p. 153.

through the white. Kimbro had to know that the spoiled paint would never be "pure" white again, but for the sake of the great American whitewash, and his position in respect to it, he blinds himself to its true color. The paint remover and the black dope both have the same effect; they make the paint gray, which is a neuter color and has no identity. Thus, Ellison is showing symbolically that black and white Americans are intermingled eternally and by trying to deny this, by trying to "dope" or remove it, all identity is being destroyed. Therefore, whites trying to classify and separate blacks, and blacks trying to pass for white, become "quite dull and gray."

The invisible man has again been tricked as he was by Bledsoe. Thus, the school is remembered, with a bird darting above, as freshly painted white while the nearby houses and cabins of the black folk escape the whitewash. In the nightmare of his life, the lockers are also reminiscent of the smoker. It is, indeed, the same ritual.

This chapter is also used by Ellison to depict black problems with the industrial unions and the management. Blacks are hired as scabs to whom the management does not have to pay union wages. Both management and labor stereotype the black. In a world where the machine has set man against man, the "democratic" union, which the invisible man encounters going for his cold pork chop sandwich, is closed to a black man. "Fink" is the name by which he is now labeled.

They call him "Brother" while denying his very humanity; he is again, as he suspects, the butt of the joke. "Finkism is born into some guys. It's born into some guys, just like a good eye for color is born into other guys. That's right, that's the honest scientific truth!"<sup>1</sup> Here is a preview of the scientific truth that the Brotherhood will live by. The only defense offered for him, that he is primitive, is echoed later by the hospital doctors. And the final irony lies in the fact that the invisible man is told not to take this personally. The invisible man expected more from the working man's union, as many black men have, and again he is reminded of the Golden Day. In his anger he stares unseeing from a red, misty distance again repeating the symbols of blindness and violence. His physical reaction is similar to his previous physical reactions, and again it symbolizes his castration.

The Lucius Brockway incident is another incident in the circular pattern of the plot line. It takes place in a deep basement like the protagonist's place of hibernation; it is three levels underground paralleling the three levels of the dream in the prologue. Also, like the dream it is full of danger and violence.

The incident begins with a reference to the pine smell of the basement, pine being both the source of turpentine (to remove paint) and tar and pitch which are sticky

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<sup>1</sup>Ibid., p. 168.

black substances. The fact that pine is followed by the reference to a high-pitched black voice, which is later reinforced by the reference to Brockway's appearance of having been dipped in pitch, suggests also pitch-pine a substance used for false grandeur by the steam boats of Twain's day. Thus, Brockway is the protagonist's Tar Baby from whom he cannot escape. Even his name, Brockway, is a signal. He is like the badger, a burrowing animal, and in the secondary sense, he is the protagonist's tormentor. His cottony white hair and white cloth indicate where his head if not his heart belongs. It again involves a question of treason.

Brockway is reddish eyed, like the rabbit, as was the messenger, and his vision, though clouded, is certainly superior to the protagonist's. Ellison uses him to symbolize the black basis on which the white industry is built. He helped dig its foundation as the slaves helped to build the economic foundations of this land. The same point is made by the reference to the janitor of the Water Works; the blacks on the bottom are not truly paid for their labor and are given jobs too filthy and dangerous for white men. And even when they are seemingly successful, such as the vet and the teachers at the college, they must dissimulate to survive. Thus, Liberty Paints' strong base is black Brockway; everything goes through Lucius Brockway's hands. Yet, Brockway, his arguments based on Booker T. Washington's Up From Slavery, distrusts the union. Therefore, Brockway is also the Dr. Bledsoe of

industry. He puts the pressure on the oils and resins before they leave the tanks as Bledsoe applies his own kind of pressure. He is always on the job. He is proud of his place in the scheme of things and, like Bledsoe, would kill anyone to protect it. He knows his basement with its floors and walls as the invisible man will come to know his own hole in the ground. He is proud of his part in the making of Optic White, which is so white it will cover the blackest coal. Like Barbee, Brockway speaks like a preacher and is also a false prophet. He, too, is Judas who has sold his soul for a three-hundred-dollar-bonus for creating the slogan "If It's Optic White, It's the Right White,"<sup>1</sup> and he agrees that it means "if you're white, you're right."

The symbols of the previous chapters are also present here. Brockway carries a heavy engineer's watch, and the electric clock glows on the wall. Even the gauges that go out of joint read like a clock. Sparland, the Old Man, is referred to as a god paralleling the millionaires on campus. His name suggests the fury of the smoker and the Golden Day. It is brown crystals that are the basis for all the paint, and Brockway creates the oils and varnishes too. Finally, Brockway's reference to reading blueprints suggests the warning of the messenger. However, Brockway, for all his blindness, has some concept of his invisibility because he knows the engineer can't see what's staring him straight in the face.

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<sup>1</sup>Ibid., p. 165.



The machinery imagery and symbolism are also employed in this incident. Ellison ironically pictures the machines in human terms while the men are pictured as machines. The basement is noisy, and it isn't until the machines are turned to almost a hysterical pitch that the protagonist can hear. Here the personal pronoun "him" is used to refer to the machine while the invisible man is "buzzed," not called, by Brockway. Also, it is the machine that gives a sudden scream when it marks the invisible man with a tattoo of crystals. Even the paint is referred to in terms of "guts" and bleeding. Brockway sums it all up in his statement, "they got all this machinery, but that ain't everything; we the machines inside the machine."<sup>1</sup>

The second encounter with Brockway again stresses the white color symbolism. The warning signs are there. The clock is ticking away the minutes as time begins to get out of control, and Brockway moves as if in a dream. Once again as at the smoker, the invisible man blindly strikes out at an impersonal force and will still miss the mark as Bledsoe warned him. Again, it is black man striking black man, and the fight is dehumanizing. Brockway bites the invisible man in the same manner that the invisible man had torn his sandwich with teeth.

Thus once more, the protagonist uses his grandfather's words without his grandfather's understanding, always thinking

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<sup>1</sup>Ibid.

that the wrong person has the knife until the castration dream. He is down here, he maintains, because he was sent, not seeing this is where he has always been. Thus, while he sees the relationship between Brockway and the Tar Baby, his ability to act, as always, is replaced by his rhetoric. This action is a mistake because although Brockway is a force without teeth and an underling, he is stronger than the protagonist since he is still part of the system. Therefore, like a blind "fool" the protagonist turns the white valve, hearing Brockway's laugh echo Bledsoe's.

Time now literally is blown out of joint, and the invisible man is again "running." The light has gone out of control, and black becomes white like the paint. He falls again as he continually does until his final actual and symbolic fall into his hole. Time is suspended; it stands still as it always has for him. The machinery, which is reminiscent of the black power plant, the source of all energy at the college, now also takes on the characteristics of Trueblood's dream as well as the later characteristics of the hospital machine. His visions are also similar to his dream in the prologue. Brockway has been victorious as Bledsoe had previously been, and the invisible man loses himself in the Tar Baby.

In chapter 11 the surrealistic style is more constant than in any other until the final chapter of the novel. Ellison uses various stylistic devices to convey the psychological

state of both the invisible man and his captors. For example, the invisible man's dialogue is reduced to childlike simplicity and often left incomplete. The dialogue of the doctors is cold, impersonal and clinical. In addition the reader is only allowed to see events through the eyes of the protagonist, thus is only aware of what the invisible man himself understands at any given moment. In this manner the reader is caught up in the nightmarish uncertainty of the protagonist, lost in a world of undefined objects and sounds. Furthermore, Ellison's use of nonsense rhymes such as "whale--tail" actually echoes the constant drone of rhythmic sound the invisible man feels penetrating constantly on his mind. Once again Ellison makes his sound function to convey his meaning. This chapter is also the chapter that divides the action of the novel; it is almost literally the middle of the book. The symbolic rebirth of the invisible man shifts the thrust of the action from an emphasis on the past to an emphasis on the future. From here on the invisible man no longer seeks to return to the South. Now his illusions are directly centered in the North in Harlem.

The basic irony of the chapter lies in the fact that the invisible man's "rebirth" is a putting on the same "old" blind man. It is rebirth without salvation. This becomes clear from the beginning through Ellison's repetition of previously used symbols. The color symbolism of "white" is stressed from the opening sentence, which is also reminiscent

of the chapel scene; the bright watching eye has followed him from South to North again. He is dressed in strange white overalls and again, as Melville had previously used it in Moby Dick and White Jacket, white is ironically the symbol of evil, not of a purified rebirth. He is still blind even with an eye burning inside his head and again is being controlled like a mechanical man.

Beethoven's Fifth Symphony (the music is reminiscent of the prologue) is running through his brain, and it truly signifies that "Fate Knocks at the Door." However, the music, used by the British as the code for victory in World War II, is used as an inverted symbol; he has irrevocably lost an important victory and therefore will be "all right" as white is right. And since he is no Hamlet, he is played upon like an accordeon. He is still in the "hot" seat; yet, like Norton, he is blindly optimistic about his fate. Again the words, often spoken to the black man, are heard. He is told he is all right and to be patient. The pun is of course played on the last word. He has been patient and that is why he is a patient now.

Also ironically present among the birth symbols, which begin in the last chapter with his feeling of sinking into a lake of heavy water, is the glass and nickel box which resembles a coffin. This is indeed to be a birth unto death. Again the Eden-like grandeur associated with the school is present as he hears "The Holy City" played by musicians with

well-oiled hair. The warning signs are present in this false "paradise," and there is the mocking obbligato of a mocking bird. The "white gnats" that followed Trueblood are also present as well as the trumpet sounds (ironically here associated with Gabriel) of the prologue (it is always a dark trumpeter), and they are all caught up in a live white cloud. This is indeed the "Second Coming," but it is "The Second Coming" that Yeats saw rather than the biblical one. The invisible man follows the same deathly bugle call as always as seen in his remembrance of the hounds chasing chained black men, which is again related to the symbol of Brer Rabbit, as is his grandmother's song. The animal imagery in her song, particularly the monkey image, recalls the earlier song of the messenger, and again the invisible man is warned he is being made a monkey of. In addition, the sexual imagery of the rhyme associated with the nurse has a twofold purpose: it is related to the feminine birth imagery because the music becomes a wail of female pain, and it is related to the sexual bribe of a white woman to play the ritualized game.

The incident with the doctors also reinforces previous symbolism demonstrating the circular pattern of the novel. The machine treatment is another symbolic form of the castration which is actually suggested by one of the doctors. Here his mind and personality are to be mutilated; a right mind is castration. He is ironically to be made whole by being made "unwholesome." His "psychology" is unimportant because he

will continue to live as he has lived "with absolute integrity,"<sup>1</sup> whole and single minded in his blindness. Also there is the concept of guilt-treason against the system; society now will not suffer trauma on his account.

Other previous symbols are also repeated. The shock treatment recalls the rug at the battle royal, and warm blood fills his mouth as it did then. The ceiling is white, and the protagonist ironically wonders where his body ends and the white world begins as all meaning is lost. His connection to the "clinical whiteness" is only by a scale of receding "grays," which again puns on the black term for white people. In addition, the nightmarish quality and the threat of the machine parallel the dream of the prologue and Trueblood's dream.

Time is also disrupted here. With this loss of established limits comes also the loss of self. This, of course, is connected to the birth symbolism, but it is also used to comment on the protagonist's constant flaw throughout the novel. Now he has lost the name that he never had. The color imagery here is centered around black, which is a signal used to represent the death of the self that lies in the center of the rebirth imagery, and it bears a relationship to the preacher's text "Blackness of Blackness." It is this true identity that the protagonist is seeking when he dives below the blackness searching for himself. Again the underground, the black-

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<sup>1</sup>Ibid., p. 180.

ness, the meaning beneath things, is where the truth is to be found. The reason the protagonist fails to find himself when he plunges into the "blackness" of his own mind is because this is the part of himself that he has denied. The protagonist hits on the weak distant light of truth when he realizes that he is perhaps just this blackness, bewilderment, and pain.

Again in the seeming ramblings of a semi-conscious invalid (as before in the prophetic words of a "mad" man and a neurotic, a technique similar to the use of the fool in Lear who warns of Lear's blindness and Pip in Moby Dick who warns of Ahab's) the truth emerges: "I tried, thinking vainly of many names, but none seemed to fit, and yet it was as though I was somehow a part of all of them, had become submerged within them and lost."<sup>1</sup>

This search for an identity does, in fact, ironically bring out the protagonist's true identity, which he has denied. The question concerning his mother reminds him of the "dozens." The question of the identity of Buckeye the Rabbit evokes the delight of self-discovery. He is Buckeye the Rabbit, and the Buckeye the Rabbit song is parallel to the songs

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<sup>1</sup>Ibid., p. 183. For example, the fool tells Lear "Sirrah, you were best take my coxcomb." Hardin Craig, Shakespeare (Chicago: Scott, Foresman and Company, 1958), p. 854. Ishmael says of Pip "he saw God's foot upon the treadle of the loom, and spoke it; and therefore his shipmates called him mad." Herman Melville, Moby Dick (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1961), p. 411.

of his grandmother and the messenger and is correctly identified with Brer Rabbit. Therefore, when questioned about Brer Rabbit, he reverts to playing the dozens. He has correctly identified the game and the violence underlying it. One hides behind the innocent eyes of the true sighted rabbit to outwit a physically stronger foe.

But as always until his final disillusionment, the protagonist closes his eyes to the truth. He forgets what game it is; and, therefore, as in the battle royal, he has lost again. The feeling of guilt is also present as he feels like a clown, the symbol in the dream concerning his grandfather. He wants to solve the mystery of the game and imagines himself circling about in his mind like an old man chasing a young boy. He has forgotten that the child is the father of the man. The whole identity theme is ironically contained in his thoughts about destroying the machine.

" . . . There was one constant flaw--myself. There was no getting around it. I could no more escape than I could think of my identity. Perhaps, I thought, the two things are involved with each other. When I discover who I am, I'll be free."<sup>1</sup>

The ironic rebirth imagery and symbolism lies obviously on the surface in the chapter. For example, the invisible man feels that he has just begun to live. He is laved with warm liquids as he lies in a huge bubble. He be-

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<sup>1</sup>Ibid., pp. 184-85.



believes that he is being treated like a child, and the cord is cut that attaches him to the machine. However underlying this symbolism, where truth always lies in the novel, are the death symbols and the dehumanizing symbols of the machine. The music is human, while the men are inhuman, biological specimens with faces like fish. Even the doctor is referred to by the neuter pronoun "it," and the protagonist no longer even knows what the word "human" means.

Thus, the invisible man is reborn of the machine--the machine is his mother, and therefore, it will solve all things. It has replaced the millionaires as a god. The protagonist now functions like a machine as, in one sense, he always has because the modern world is a factory, and he is part of the silent machinery. He is beyond anger and feels nothing. Ironically, he believes he is no Samson, and therefore cannot destroy himself with the machine to achieve his freedom. But he is like Samson in his blindness and lack of judgment.

The stereotype of the black is also present. He is referred to as a "primitive" to be treated on an entirely different level from a New Englander with a Harvard background--shades of Mr. Norton. Therefore, he is right in thinking the conversation sounds like a discussion of history; this is a problem that has been developing for some three hundred years. Therefore, since he is a mask, he is referred to as "dancing" in the box, a stereotype that is later echoed by the drunk at Emma's. Irony also highlights the incident with the director.

The invisible man correctly questions what is a factory hospital when he is told he is cured--a new man. But indeed the "new man" is simply a blind reproduction of the old; his articulation is perfect, still full of sound and fury, signifying nothing. Also, it is a director he sees because once again he is going to be led. Once again, as the vet observed, the protagonist is the fulfillment of modern society, the mechanical man born not of flesh and blood but of the machine.

The swiftly changing emotional images are the technique Ellison uses to give the chapter a realistic framework. This is the probability that is built into the representation. In this manner images from his past can be used realistically in his meeting with the director. Therefore, his old name is a headache to him as he is told he must become "readjusted," and when the invisible man questions how he will live, he does not see that this is the answer. He is to reassume his old role, the one for which he has been so carefully prepared. Therefore, although he is unprepared for working under industrial conditions, much as the old couple will later be unprepared for modern life, ironically, he will be "compensated," as in the battle royal, by a policy of "enlightened humanitarianism," an "insured" policy of the modern machine age which guarantees relief in exchange for freedom from "responsibility." Again this word is symbolically used by Ellison to mean its opposite. This humanitarian policy is all part of becoming "adjusted," and therefore it is perfectly "fair" in

the game.

The director is somewhere behind his face like Bledsoe, and his scientific gaze, which prefigures the ideals of the Brotherhood, correctly reminds the invisible man of his past--Mr. Norton, Bledsoe, Poor Robin. Indeed, the director's reference to the invisible man as "my boy" is reminiscent of all three. They are his "buddies" from way back, and Ellison's irony is obvious in the invisible man's statement that they don't go around in the same circles. It is, after all, the same ritual.

As he leaves, the flags are collapsing, and they are objective correlatives of his collapsed world. He has again fallen as he will continue to fall until his final "fall" into his cellar. He can no longer go over the bridge, the steps are too high, but must now go down into the depths of the subway. Time is again disrupted, and things are now going too fast for him. Ironically, he thinks his mind and himself are not getting around in the same circles. However, they obviously are because the next image of the platinum blonde nibbling on the red Delicious apple repeats the fall symbolism of the Trueblood incident while the blonde herself recalls the woman at the smoker. Indeed, it is the same circle into which he drops empty-minded as always as he is sucked under.

The rebirth symbolism continues as he meets Mary Rambo (a play on Sambo) who becomes for him a mother figure. She is a stabilizing factor related to his past, and therefore, he

has ambivalent feelings toward her. Mary represents the old "peasant" tradition that belongs to his past. She is a part of his life that he is trying to deny. However, even Mary's sight is not perfect; she wears glasses and speaks in clichés of newsworthy leadership and responsibility. She tells the invisible man he must help to move blacks up higher while the truth lies at the bottom of a hole. However, she does warn him as the messenger had done not to let Harlem get him, but again he rejects the warning. She also warns of those who forget how the fire burns and find a place for themselves, forgetting those at the bottom, which prefigures what the invisible man will do in Harlem.

In this chapter the invisible man seems to have changed on the surface although the use of previous symbols by Ellison portrays that he has not. He knows he can no longer live at the Men's House because he has been boomeranged of his illusions. Beneath this image, though, lies the remembrance of Emerson's son's promise and his final freedom from his illusion in the final dream sequence, which is again reinforced by the reference to himself as a disillusioned dreamer. He can now see through the facade of the college boys, the other advocates, the preachers (without the bread or wine, body or blood of the millionaires). He looks down on these actors and their false images, forgetting that just a short time ago he envisioned himself as "Ronald Colman." Pride in his vision is again his downfall because while he sees they are playing a

game, he is blind to his own part although he is aware that in losing his place in Bledsoe's world, he has "betrayed" them and that it is, therefore, again a question of treason.

In the incident with the preacher, it is the man's fat-headed laughter that makes him certain that it is Bledsoe, and his foul baptism of the man prefigures his own foul baptism at the end of the novel. Once again he has mistaken his man. There is also the obvious pun on the fact that the man is a "Baptist" minister. This incident, as well as the rest of this chapter and the next, are constructed by Ellison to emphasize the external change in the protagonist as he tells the reader a "phase" of his life has ended. This external change is represented by the protagonist's conscious use of irony, imagery and symbolism. However, as always underlying this surface change is Ellison's continual use of previous symbolism and irony, which continues to point up the protagonist's unchanging blindness.

Thus, the "enlightened" narrator, as opposed to the mature narrator, describes his loss of a sense of direction in the imagery of winter. Yet underlying this present perception is the symbol of hibernation recalling to the reader the invisible man's state in the prologue. Now, the protagonist is obsessed with the question of his identity; yet he has no answer for that question. He has a new "contradictory" voice but carries the same old guilt. The images of the black spot and red light mirror his anger and that of the ice cap, his

desire for peace and tranquillity--his old simple way of life. He cannot return, the ice is melting, but he doesn't see that water is just another form of the same element. He wants to forget, but his only salvation is in remembrance. He wants harmony not dissonance and extremes, but in the latter, not the former, is where the truth lies. His anger is kept in control by frozen self-control, but he has forgotten the lesson about anger learned at the hospital.

Therefore, while the protagonist seems to have become active rather than passive, the next chapter begins with the protagonist running after bumping against a woman who called him by a filthy name, recalling the nightmarish quality of the prologue. He imagines that he is lost and can hear the falling of the snow, and in reality he is lost, and he is falling. The snowflakes, which form a curtain, a veil, symbolize the same white blindfold that is always being lowered over his eyes.

However, now he is aware of the false images worshipped in the store windows. The violent red and gold imagery points up the painted plaster images of Mary and Jesus, seen through a glass darkly and surrounded by the other false dreams of dream books, love powder, God-Is-Love Signs, and plastic dice. (These are the hope of the hopeless, and they will later be used by Ellison to parallel the old couple's possessions.) In the same window is the black statue of the naked Nubian slave with its permanently grinning face, depict-

ing to what end these false hopes have been used. But while the advertisement for the miracle of whitening black skin angers the invisible man, he fails to see that what the window promises for the "outside," he has been perpetrating on his soul.

The "yam" incident is also presented by Ellison to depict the seeming change in the protagonist. Here his behavior is contrasted to his previous rejection of the special in favor of the "acceptable" breakfast. The yam smell brings a feeling of nostalgia; this food is symbolic of his true past and history. Thus the pun, "yams and years ago,"<sup>1</sup> is related to the past as Ellison uses alliteration to mark his meaning, recalling the warning of the protagonist in the prologue concerning the boomerang of spiral history. The memory is again one of denial; the protagonist ate yams in secret hiding behind World's Geography.

The yam seller is another messenger. He is an old man with a tear in his eye. The old man speaks in simple truths, truths that the protagonist still doesn't see. He promises the yams are not a binding food, and the pun is related to the invisible man's sense of freedom in eating them. The yam is sweet in contrast to the orange juice which had an acidic taste, and the hot coals parallel the invisible man's inner feelings.

This is an incident of self-acceptance. The invisible

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<sup>1</sup>Ibid., p. 199.

man rejects what is "acceptable" or "proper" in favor of the ethnic food, his true-self image. He imagines humiliating Bledsoe with this image of himself, disgracing him with the "Blackness of Blackness." The protagonist himself now puns on the idea that "I am what I am! . . . I yam what I am!"<sup>1</sup> He realizes that the yams are this "birthmark," and, indeed, they are his birthmark in the same symbolic way that Hawthorne used the birthmark. They really know yams where he comes from, but his place of origin is never named for the same reason that he himself is nameless.

Again as at the hospital, the protagonist has a true insight into himself. He wonders how much he has lost by trying to do what others wanted instead of what he had wished to do. But he still doesn't see that the answer is everything; he is not yet thinking in terms of the whole of experience. He has not yet learned to think in the pragmatic terms of a Rinehart. Thus his conclusion that there are no stereotyped guidelines by which one becomes an individual is soon to be paralleled by Ellison to the comments of the little New England woman at Emma's, to point out how quickly he loses sight of his insight. Life is indeed "a problem of choice," an existential truth that he does not truly grasp until the epilogue. His fault in living is that he has never formed a personal attitude but rather lived as the mask. He has come to a partial understanding which would lead to a better life

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<sup>1</sup>Ibid., p. 201.



even though a bland one. But the fact that the yam is frost-bitten symbolizes that the protagonist's insight will die in his blind following of the Brotherhood's choices, the Brotherhood's "freedom." The yam of knowledge much like the apple turns out to be a bitter fruit. Thus, the previous symbols of his blindness are immediately repeated by Ellison after this incident. The smoke is gray and forces him to walk with his head down and his eyes closed. It pains him, and he almost stumbles as he comes on the eviction scene.

This time the protagonist himself feels the warnings. He has a sense of foreboding and uncleanness. His self-acceptance and his sense of the choices of life will now be denied in favor of his "old" ways. The chapter will end as it began with the invisible man still running. This eviction incident also has echoes of the battle royal; whites move against blacks. It has echoes of the Golden Day; trustees are used to do the dirty work. It has echoes of the paint factory; the black laborer is not paid his just wages. It has echoes of the blind inhumanity of the past; the old couple are piled on the curb with their "stuff" like so much discarded merchandise or old worn out machinery. Again the protagonist's false ideas about Harlem are seen when he questions if an eviction is possible "here." He is asked where he is from, and the truth is he is and has been no where. Yet, when he answers "Never mind, I am who I am. Just don't beat up your gums at me . . ." <sup>1</sup> he shows he has already forgotten the

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<sup>1</sup>Ibid., p. 204.

yam lesson. It is because no one does mind who he is that he is what he is, new false rhetoric and all.

The scene is also reminiscent of the store windows the protagonist had just seen. The old woman can accept having her life torn up by the roots like her plants, but her Bible and her prayers are more sacred to her. The scene is reminiscent of Baldwin's description of his father in "Stranger in the Village." The white world has saddled the old woman with a God that, judging by its practices, it doesn't believe in itself. So the hot-eyed white man's statement, that they could stay until hell freezes over, is particularly appropriate. Looking at the crowd, he addresses the powers of darkness.

The crowd, which the protagonist now no longer refers to as "they" but as "we," is filled with shame akin to the sense of guilt of the protagonist. They are "witnesses," seers who do not wish to see or hear the old woman's crying, which is mind-plunging. Again, the truth lies in the depths. Here the invisible man sees with burning eyes the old couple's "stuff" on the sidewalk which begins to awaken strange memories that echo in his head. Their "stuff" is indeed the stuff of his own past. Their nineteenth-century picture recalls the commitment of the nineteenth referred to in the prologue. Their just pride is juxtaposed to his own pride which is illusory, and therefore it is both a reproach and a warning as the messenger had been. The knocking bones are remi-

niscent of the black-faced minstrels and all they stand for as Ellison points out in Shadow and Act. The plants like the couple are cast out to die. The straightening comb and the switches of false hair and the card that reads "God Bless Our Home" are also ironic reminders of the store windows at the beginning of the chapter. The nuggets of High John the Conqueror, the lucky stone, are also an ironic reminder of the messenger's warning. The whiskey bottle filled with rock candy and camphor suggests a sickness, and the small Ethiopian flag, a faded tintype of Abraham Lincoln, and the smiling image of a Hollywood star torn from a magazine suggest that the sickness is the same one depicted by the store windows. The camphor is also reminiscent of the paint factory which links the underpaid Brockway to the old day laborer whose heavy labor has gone for naught. The broken pieces of delicate china juxtaposed to the plate celebrating the St. Louis World Fair ironically suggest broken dreams, dreams for the future seen in the promise of 1904 Universal Exposition.

Indeed much of the life of the old couple as well as of the protagonist spills out into the white snow. The "good luck" symbols are there, but they have failed to catch the real, elusive brass ring; thus, the rabbit's foot ironically symbolizes both "luck" and Brer Rabbit. Indeed, the baseball card registering a game won or lost years ago symbolizes the ritualized "game" that is still being played and lost by the protagonist as well as the old couple. And the symbols of

life, the breast pump, recalling the "curdled milk of a million black slave mammies," the baby shoe, the infant hair, the card to grandmother, also ironically point out this death on the city pavements. The bent Masonic emblem is another ironic touch. The black Masons in the United States are referred to by the "Freemasons" as "unrecognized" Masons, which is certainly a term akin to invisibility. Indeed all these symbols are summed up in the three lapsed life insurance policies marked "Void," and the caption, "MARCUS GARVEY DEPORTED." The "enlightened humanitarian" society referred to by the hospital director has found the old couple and their descendants "void" just as it found Garvey a threat to the system and therefore expendable. He is deported; they are dispossessed. Those who will not or cannot play the game are to be eliminated.

The old couple is a symbol for the black race enslaved and then "freed" by their white "master." On the frozen dirty white step lies the fragile old paper written in black ink. The black man, "Primus Provo," the first provocation, a fore-taste of the future, the first act in the continuing ritual, is freed by his "massa Jack," but his freedom is no more real than the protagonist's is. The old couple, like the protagonist, is really no freer in Harlem than in Macon. In fact, the man's eighty-seven years recall the protagonist's reference in the present voice in chapter one to the fact that he was in the cards eighty-five years ago all things having been equal or unequal, and the reference to his grandparents being

freed eighty-five years ago. So the old couple is indeed like the invisible man's grandparents and his parents as he himself points out. Eighty-seven years for nothing; eighty-seven years in a cyclone going around in the same boomerang of history. Once again Ellison uses images which in themselves convey his meaning.

The "FREE PAPERS" also ironically make the protagonist feel that he has been running for a long distance. They recall his own "free papers"--"Keep This Nigger-Boy Running," and the reference to the coiled snake recalls his journey from the college to nowhere. The time imagery is repeated when he questions whether slavery had been longer removed in time, but he knows that it hasn't been. Indeed, time has in this sense always stood still.

The fact that this incident makes the protagonist feel, makes him ashamed, emphasizes the external change in the character. His physical reaction is as his past reactions have been, and the bitter gall symbolically splashes the old folks' possessions. Here the protagonist himself is somewhat conscious of the echoes and his own relationship to the incident. However, he doesn't clearly see that what he has lost is identity, his soul. Even with this sense of dispossession, even with the realization that these objects represent more than themselves, even with the vision of his mother pictured in the imagery of winter, the veil doesn't lift. It only briefly stirs on the cold street.

However, this stirring does move the protagonist into action. The Shylock, who wants his pound of flesh with the furniture, refuses to let the old couple pray. He applies the rules of the system, maintaining that the couple was "legally" evicted. Time is not to be wasted; time is money and prayers do not pay dividends, as Melville pointed out. Again, the ensuing battle is an inhuman, impersonal one. It is fought in blind terms of stereotypes--the "paddies" versus "them." Thus once again, Ellison demonstrates that the invisible man has only undergone a surface change. His reaction is similar to his reaction to the beating of Supercargo. Indeed, he is about to fall again as he seems to totter on the edge of a great dark hole.

His speech has all the previous cliches of his past speeches. But here the Booker T. Washington slogans, "law-abiding," "slow-to-anger people," sound intentionally sarcastic to his listeners, given their all too obvious outcome. The true irony in this incident functions not because of the protagonist's insights but in spite of them. The effect is due to Ellison's juxtaposition of the Booker T. Washington philosophy with its results. Thus, when the protagonist shouts, "let's be wise and organize," the readers as well as his listeners see that they have always been playing a game of "follow the leader" with dire results. They understand that the leader who turned in the fugitive violated a higher law. This action is also ironically contrasted to the found-

er's own history of flight. Thus, the protagonist's speech is not what he intended at all; it is Gulliver's sarcasm, used for instance in discussion of the "honorable" causes of war, without Gulliver's intention. It is the protagonist's desire for power that compels him to speak. He uses his voice as Barbee used his, for control, and his sound effects resemble the preacher's sermon in the prologue. "Turning the other cheek" is made to rhyme with "week," thus undercutting the thought and giving it a mocking tone, and "what would you, what would I, what would he have done?"<sup>1</sup> has echoes of "Only Make Believe," stressing the fact, that the protagonist is now commercializing on his insights. As in the past, the crowd is pictured by Ellison as dehumanized; they are a whirl of legs and overshoes. The beating of the "law" is also reminiscent of the beating of Supercargo, and the woman whose face was a blank mask is like Sylvester. Both the "white" law and the crowd are "running" as they have always been, and the biblical echo of "give it back to him unto the third and fourth generations"<sup>2</sup> is ironically juxtaposed to the continual references to the old couple's Bible.

It is this incident in which the protagonist again acts blindly that Ellison uses for probability to introduce the Brotherhood, an association that is the subject of the remainder of the novel. Thus, with the smell of stale cabbage assailing his nostrils, the invisible man again mistakes his

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<sup>1</sup>Ibid., p. 210.

<sup>2</sup>Ibid., p. 213.

man, thinking that Jack is the marshal. This ironic beginning is symbolic of his whole future relationship with Jack and the Brotherhood.

The protagonist's instinctive reaction of uneasiness and doubt about the Brotherhood is overlooked in his thoughtless agreement to march with them. Once again he is falling into line as he did in the college, and once again his eyes don't focus as he tries to look at the faces of people in the crowd. Other symbols are also repeated; the white girl who directs the flight of the invisible man is reminiscent of the blonde at the smoker. Like the blonde, she prefigures his future, which as always is to be "Keep This Nigger-Boy Running." He is running as the sun and the snow remain constant symbols of his present and past. Like the rabbit, he thinks he is being chased, but as he truly discovers later in the epilogue, Jack is just running too with a short-legged scramble that is doglike. The bird symbolism is also present, and they are "white" birds as in Trueblood's dream.

The warning symbols still continue as he emerges on the street. The street is a long white stretch, the aroused pigeons still circling overhead continuing the bird symbolism. The protagonist's scanning of the roof tops in expectation of the white man's peering eyes parallels the moon at the college and his feeling of being watched in the city. The funeral parlors with their modern neon signs and funeral cars are death symbols and the juxtaposition of these images to



the woman in labor at an unexpected time recalls the birth unto death in the hospital. Ellison is thus symbolizing that the protagonist is again about to enter into a "new" life that is to be a repeat of his "old" one.

The moment the protagonist has convinced himself that he is safe is ironically the very moment that Jack discovers him. The invisible man is trapped, as always, by his hubris; Jack's flattery leads him to overcome his belief that Jack is no friend. Again here Ellison, learning from the Greeks, is using a technique of tragedy by employing what Aristotle referred to as the tragic flaw. Jack is the dog after the rabbit; he is described by Ellison as a "fyce" with bushy eyebrows and a rolling step interested only in the target. Once again the invisible man is the rabbit and the "fyce," a rodent-chasing dog, corners him. Jack, like a well-trained hunting dog, knows his part. He is a juggler of both cake and people and very deft at handling both. He offers the traditional bait of "cheese" cake to catch his mouse. But again the invisible man is blind to the underlying meaning of things; he misses everything except the fact that Jack's large bites of cake show his crude manners, and he prides himself on his smaller rodent-like bites. Jack's metaphoric image of the old couple, "They're living, but dead. Dead-in-living . . . a unity of opposites,"<sup>1</sup> is a stylistic device that Ellison is continually using in the novel. Indeed this

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<sup>1</sup>Ibid., p. 220.

description is also symbolic of the invisible man's relationship with Jack and the Brotherhood as well as his previous history. In fact, the reader is immediately made aware of Jack's true character by his statements concerning the old couple and "history," and by his praise of the protagonist's skillful control. Thus, Jack and the Brotherhood, these "friends of the people," advocate not wasting emotions on individuals because they do not count. The "agrarian types" like the old couple (who represent symbolically the peasants untouched by the national whitewash) are being destroyed by modern industrial society. The probability for the future dehumanizing actions of Jack and the Brotherhood is therefore immediately provided by Ellison. So, ironically, Jack tells the invisible man that the truth of his connection to the old couple is false. He describes this fact in terms of a snake shedding his skin, and this is reminiscent of the invisible man's "fall" at the college: "You have not completely shed that self, that old agrarian self, but it's dead and you will throw it off completely and emerge something new."<sup>1</sup> As previously, the birth imagery is ironically used to symbolize the death of the self. The reader is now seeing another "Death on the City Pavements," that of the protagonist's newly discovered self. The agrarian part is indeed his true self as opposed to the industrial false modern image.

To replace his honest feeling of anger, the protago-

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<sup>1</sup>Ibid., p. 221.

nist is given new words--such as "historical situation" and "articulation." These are to replace his sense of his blackness. The Brotherhood will praise his "effectiveness" as a black man at the same time it asks him to cease being black in the name of universal Brotherhood. This dichotomy is clear when Jack asks, "Why do you fellows always talk in terms of race!"<sup>1</sup> Jack tells him that he can't be the individualist that he pretends to be, and, of course, the trouble is that he isn't. The protagonist gets caught by the same old line; he is again to be a spokesman for "his" people.

The warning signs are there in Jack's very offer. His "number" is written on white paper, and he tells the invisible man that he need not give his name, for indeed he is again not to be a man. He is truthfully told by Jack that he is wise to distrust him since the protagonist doesn't know who he is. Again, there is the implication of treason and guilt. Also Jack's reference to him as "brother" is reminiscent of Bledsoe's reference to him as "son." So the invisible man is caught again by his desire to make speeches and his inability to understand what happens afterwards. He again suspects a "trick" is being played on him but is incapable of seeing his part in the "joke." He recognizes that Jack was "running" the same way he was, but fails to see the irony of thinking he is the better runner. Once again, the invisible man is the victim of words, failing to see the irony in the fact that he

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<sup>1</sup>Ibid., p. 222.

will be more effective the longer he remains "unseen." He, therefore, will become his own image of the black-face comedian who shrinks from a ghost while the white pigeons shoot up around. Jack indeed does remain "effective" by being unseen by the protagonist, and the fact that it is turning darker and colder than the invisible man has ever know prefigures his blind cold future. In spite of the fact that the protagonist now sees his college training as "Bledsoeing," he goes into training with the Brotherhood and is ground into the pieces of paper in his briefcase.

The protagonist now abandons his insight into his true self that he discovered in the "yam" incident, and as he does so, he also ceases to think of himself in images or to be intentionally ironic. He is again reverting to his role as victim, and therefore even as he seems to be becoming more active, he is mentally more passive. The irony again operates because of his blindness rather than his vision.

The note of security that he found in Mary is now shattered. The odor of cabbage (which is also present in the luncheonette from which he calls Jack) is reminiscent of the old couple's apartment, and his depression is reminiscent of their dispossession. He questions what kind of man he is becoming and fails to see that he is the same as he has always been. Instinctive distrust of Jack, the red-headed man akin, of course, to red-necked, is put aside. His "talent" for public speaking ironically is his reason for denying him-

self. Unlike Brer Rabbit, the invisible man has allowed himself to be caught by Jack the Bear. The very name Jack is used by Ellison as a signal and a warning about the protagonist's future. It stands for "Massa" Jack; the formal form, John, has the colloquial meaning of a dupe, a stooge, a sucker; the colloquial meanings of "jack" include money, masturbation, a disliked, ignorant, confused or simple person; in addition, Jack is the one-eyed jack, a wild card like the joker, in a deck stacked against the protagonist. The protagonist is already unable to truly speak his mind when he first calls Jack, and he goes out in the cold to be left out in the cold.

The warning symbols are again present before the fall. Jack, who smiles and smiles, still remains a villain, and the men who travel with him are impersonal. The snow white imagery is still present, and the sudden peace of Central Park is contrasted to its zoo with its dangerous animals; the bears warn of danger for the rabbit, and the snakes, coiled tightly underground, are reminiscent of the false peace of the College. The warning symbolism is also present in the name of Emma's building, "Chthonian"; he is again falling, descending into the underworld. The glass is again frosted--through a glass darkly--and the protagonist ironically feels everything is too familiar, that he has been through it all before, as indeed he has. The elevator goes up, away from the truth, but like Norton in the epilogue, the invisible man loses his sense of direction. The bird symbolism is also present in the form of

the bronze larged-eyed owl door-knocker, and the unexpected icy peal of the chimes recalls the chapel bells.

Emma, the universal one, is another white woman used as a reward in the great game of life. The invisible man's close physical contact with her is reminiscent of the blonde at the smoker, the vet's prediction, and the white woman on the subway. The protagonist's feeling that he had hitherto been through it all before as a spectator is ironically related to a scene in the movies, recalling again the Indian movie, and his association with a buried dream connects it to the dream sequences in the novel. The room with its musical instruments recalls previous rooms, Bledsoe's and Emerson's, while the expensive instruments are contrasted to those of the old couple, and Jack's statement that the protagonist had advanced history twenty years, recalls the fact that twenty years of the old couple's history had been overlooked by the landlord.

Again, the false rhetoric is present-"dispossessed," "effective demonstration," "mission," "a better world for all people"-and its emptiness is continually demonstrated by the action itself. Emma's pun on the crowd's "throwing up" their leaders points to the protagonist's future. Her feeling that the protagonist should be a "little blacker" recalls the image of the blackfaced comedian, and the invisible man's reference to the fact that she wants him to ". . . sweat coal tar, ink, shoe polish, graphite"<sup>1</sup> recalls the paint factory.

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<sup>1</sup>Ibid., p. 230.

The invisible man has fallen into the same ritualized role, and Brother Jack is another Bledsoe with blind eyes. Ironically, the protagonist believes that he is done with the College while Jack praises college "training" and tells him he will be given books telling him how to think. The promise to make him the new Booker T. Washington is ironic in its very truthfulness; the invisible man has already been the personification of Booker T. Washington's philosophy and now will continue to be its spokesman.

The invisible man's crystal glass of bourbon is no crystal ball, for he believes a curtain has been parted and that he now sees how the country operates. However, the reader recalls the veil being placed over the slave's eyes and realizes that this is just another more effective blinding. What now seems unreal to the invisible man will become only too real, and his feeling that this is like his fraternity initiation recalls another initiation, the battle royal. The ritual again also exacts the same price. He is to become dehumanized. His family and Mary are too personal; so, he must abandon them. For all his speaking he is to talk to no one and put aside his past. Again, he is to deny his very soul, and he is given a new identity, a new name that is written on white paper that reeks of perfume. It is the same game, and he has betrayed himself for three hundred dollars, a betrayal which recalls Brockway's three hundred dollar bonus for the white paint slogan. Again as at the hospital, he is to acquire

new clothes for his new life. The irony of the toast, to the Brotherhood of Man and History and Change, is obvious in the fact that the liquor burns and makes the invisible man lower his head to hide his tears. Ellison is thus demonstrating that his protagonist is still drinking from the same cup, still playing the same role.

Ellison demonstrates that the protagonist's connection with the Brotherhood is built on a lie. The invisible man dissembles trying to be like the members of the Brotherhood as he previously had tried to be like Bledsoe. Also once again, his idealized vision of himself is quickly shattered. One of the first people that he calls "Brother" is the drunk. The hilarious incident, "all colored people sing," does hit the invisible man with a yard of chitterlings as he had pictured humiliating Bledsoe. And the drunk is ironically correct in saying, "Tell dat ole Pharaoh to let ma colored folks sing!"<sup>1</sup> because Jack has taken away the protagonist's right to be "I yam what I am!" The word "responsible" is also again used ironically, and the protagonist's reference to the drunk's being high like a Georgia pine recalls Brockway while the fact that not all the brothers are so highly "developed" recalls the hospital. The invisible man has been their blackfaced comedian telling them what they wanted to hear. Yet, ironically, he is worried that they might find him undependable or unworthy, and he prepares to shed his clothes as Jack pre-

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<sup>1</sup>Ibid., p. 237.



dicted he would shed his skin. It is time, he thinks as he compares his hat to a leaf struck by the symbolic winter's snows. His new hat will be a "homburg . . . humbug"<sup>1</sup> as he is a humbug, a dishonest person, imposter. Indeed, this taking on of a new identity is "old hat" to him. Once again he is traveling light and fast because he is again running. He is to be a "race leader," Ellison puns,--the leader of the race--the fastest runner because he is already "hooked" on the rhetoric of the Brotherhood.

Yet his old skin is not so easily to be shed as Ellison uses the black cast-iron figure to demonstrate. The image is a self-mocking one that is related to the black identity that the invisible man is trying to deny. This incident is paralleled and contrasted by Ellison to the "yam" incident; the latter was an incident of self-acceptance while this incident is one of denial. The cast-iron figure also is symbolic of what the invisible man has become; he has been made to perform for his money, and the figure's expression that is more of a strangulation and choking than a grin, recalls the protagonist's own choking laughter at the party. Thus, the invisible man shatters the figure as his own world will later be shattered, and the bloodletting that results is paralleled to the battle royal and Trueblood and Norton incidents.

The knocking incident, which is connected to the image of the figure, is also used symbolically by Ellison. The

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<sup>1</sup>Ibid., p. 239.

voice, which is reminiscent of the factory, makes the invisible man literally scratch himself "gray," the white being underneath. He is awake but not awake because his world is a living nightmare. The knocking is also symbolic of the ritualized game. He again strikes out blindly not knowing who his antagonist is. He questions who is responsible, and again the word "responsible" is used to signify its opposite. When the protagonist yells, "why don't you act like responsible people living in the twentieth century? . . . Get rid of your cotton-patch ways"<sup>1</sup> the reader sees these are responsible ways and remembers the sarcastic distinction that the protagonist made in the prologue between civilization and culture. Finally, the knocking sound recalls the music of "Fate Knocks at the Door" heard in the hospital, and the protagonist speaks his own doom with his belief that the others have no respect for the individual.

Following this incident the protagonist makes his final break from Mary and his true past. He thinks of being "scientific" while the clock above the stove shows his timing is off. His parting cup of coffee is a bitter libation and the oily swirl on the top is reminiscent of the pulp in the orange juice. He doesn't have time for Mary now because his number came up, and indeed his number is up while Mary believes him to be lucky. He believes that he will be all right now when indeed ironically his luck has changed for the worse.

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<sup>1</sup>Ibid., p. 242.

Thus, the image of the roaches is used in the same manner that the rat is used in Native Son. The roaches that are crushed and destroyed prefigure the people of Harlem as well as the protagonist.

Ironically, the protagonist places the shattered figure and coins in his briefcase. However, his past is not so easily abandoned. He is accused on the one hand of being a "field nigger," and later he is cursed for being a "young New York Negro," and as he threatens the woman, black man is again striking out blindly at black man. Thus, while he is accused of being a confidence man making a "pigeon drop," he truly is a dupe, and his flight is reminiscent of his flight from Jack while his picture in the paper resembles Bledsoe's imagined newspaper picture. But again even here, he is not truly identified; he is referred to as an unknown rabble rouser, a pun on "rabbit rouser." Ellison is thus demonstrating that the invisible man has put on his new uniform and is marching to the same drummer as Jack snaps his order like a general.

In chapter sixteen, Ellison uses more ironic symbolism than in any following chapter until the final one concerning the riot. The artistic reason for this is one of probability. As previously with Barbee, the reader is to be warned against the persuasive rhetoric of the protagonist's speech, and again, the irony points to the probability of the invisible man's final fall. Time is again carefully de-

lineated. The men are impersonal, and the violent color red is dominant. The dressing room, with its smells of sweat, iodine, blood and rubbing alcohol, brings back memories of the battle royal. Just as with the blind fighter, the invisible man will also lose his "sight" in this same arena, becoming a blind crusader, in a crooked fight.

Again, even though he feels out of place and unsure, the invisible man believes with his eternal optimism that he has to trust them. His "identity" problem, born of the hospital, again plagues him, and the irony lies in the fact of its deeper truth. In questioning what his name is, he believes that he is making a sad joke with himself while, ironically, he actually is the butt of the "joke." It is "absurd" but absurd in the existential sense of the word. He wonders if he will forget his new name or be recognized by someone in the crowd while Ellison keeps the reader aware that the protagonist has never had an old name or identity. His preoccupation with his legs is a reminder to the reader that the invisible man is still running. The feeling that he is standing " . . . simultaneously at opposite ends of a tunnel"<sup>1</sup> is an image that again emphasizes the circular quality of the plot. The reader is aware that there is no real distance between the campus and this arena and that the protagonist is still sleepwalking. Yet the warning is again echoed in the depths of the protagonist's being. In his feeling of vague-

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<sup>1</sup>Ibid., p. 253.

ness, which he compares to seeing a picture exposed during adolescence and showing an unflattering truth, lies the truth of his present character. This internal dissenting voice is part of his true identity that has been enslaved and has yet to be freed. Thus, ironically, he thinks of his "new" beginning in terms of suppression and believes that he is becoming someone else, in his new blue suit which is reminiscent of the policeman at the eviction, when actually he is destroying his identity. The protagonist thinks of his own rhetoric as a magic formula that will transform him into another personality--"not just a nobody with a manufactured name which might have belonged to anyone, or to no one."<sup>1</sup> The irony is that the name does, indeed, belong to no one. By this means, Ellison demonstrates that the invisible man has no past and that, in another sense, his past is still his present.

Ellison also uses the image of the abandoned hole of the protagonist's youth in a similar manner; it symbolizes his present fall and prefigures the final hole of his hibernation. The carbolic acid is a reminder of the paint factory as well as the battle royal, and the reader is thus reminded that the protagonist is still part of the same old game. The train which passes the hole is a reminder that the protagonist is still on his own kind of journey, and the syphilitic who stretches out his fingerless hand for money is another image of himself as the bank previously had been. In

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<sup>1</sup>Ibid., p. 254.

addition, the three mounted policemen repeat the hunt imagery as does the image of the black-and-white bull dog, named Master, which recalls the previous image of Jack, the dog, stalking his rabbit. Master grins like Jack, and his expression always remains a mask, unchanged, whether he is snapping at flies or people. Ellison continues the pun as the invisible man sees the crowd as a "Master" and even sees the physical similarity between Jack and a toy bull terrier without seeing spiritual significance. Thus, indeed Jack will be Master-- Massa Jack--and have his rabbit.

The roar of the crowd is also reminiscent of the battle royal as is the smoky haze. Again the protagonist cannot see clearly as he blindly follows others, including two men presumably black enough for Emma. The protagonist walks alone like the pivot of a drill team, again marching as on the campus, and symbolically even the light is blinding as they move into the darkness. In addition, the protagonist is blinded by the spotlight both in the literal and figurative sense. Ellison also uses the song, "John Brown's body lies a-mold'ring in the grave," to recall the ritual songs demanded of the students of the College--a sign of the audience's enslavement, ironically, as they sign of a true rebel. Thus, the people are making the old song new as the same ritual is to be repeated, and the same sacrifice demanded. The tingling in the protagonist's spine is reminiscent of both the electrified ring at the smoker and of the hospital machine, and the

flag-draped platform reminds the reader of the blonde with the American flag tattooed upon her belly.

Once again Ellison displays his ability to control rhetoric, showing how words are used to do violence by enslaving people. The crowd is one; no longer are there individuals. Jack is pictured as a paternal figure--the great white father. It is again the benign attitude of the school trustees, and his salute and the audience's reaction demonstrate his dictatorial power. The invisible man's feeling that people are getting vaguer and vaguer demonstrates how dehumanized he is also to become while, by way of contrast, even before his speech, the rally has the emotional impact of a southern revival. This also recalls the emotionalism of Barbee's speech.

When the protagonist's turn to speak comes, the spotlight surrounds him like a cage of steel, and thus Ellison indicates that the protagonist has again been caught in the same trap and his feeling that a curtain has dropped recalls the image of the statue at the College. He is blinded and feels the isolation of the hospital machine as the microphone reminds him of the skull of a man who died of dispossession. Ellison uses this image to symbolize that, indeed, in this technical modern world, one must be distant and somewhat inhuman to make things "work." So, as the crowd responds to the speech as if it were part of a game, the invisible man addresses his audience blindly using the phrase, "I'm all right," as one of his first utterances.

The irony in the invisible man's speech exists in the contrast between the essential truth of his words and his own blindness to their meaning as it applies to himself. In addition, Ellison's previously established ironic symbolism is repeated in the speech. For example, the protagonist uses the rhetoric of the Brotherhood betraying its emptiness while he himself is taken in by it: "They've got a slogan and a policy, they've got what Brother Jack would call a 'theory and a practice.' It's 'Never give a sucker an even break!'"<sup>1</sup> Yet he fails to see that the "they" includes the Brotherhood and that he is the same old "sucker." His words prefigure his own destiny in the same way that Oedipus blindly curses himself: "It's use his protest as a sounding brass to frighten him into silence, it's beat his ideas and his hopes and homely aspiration into a tinkling cymbal! . . . Beat it in stoptime, give the dumb bunnies the soft-shoe dance! The Big Wormy Apple. . . ." <sup>2</sup> In realistic dialect Ellison incorporates the symbols of the rabbit and the fall. Thus, as the smoke boils in the spotlight, the invisible man utters his own doom: "We let them do it!"<sup>3</sup>

Ellison has the entire rhetoric of the protagonist's speech function as dramatic irony. It is the protagonist himself who is being dispossessed of his manhood; again he is castrated as he goes blindly, willingly, to his own destruction. He is his own image of the one-eyed rodent. Thus while

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<sup>1</sup>Ibid., p. 259.

<sup>2</sup>Ibid.

<sup>3</sup>Ibid.



the invisible man warns the audience that they are in danger of losing the other eye because they might "see" something, he is blinding himself in both eyes like Oedipus. However, the difference between Oedipus and the protagonist here is that Oedipus blinded himself physically because of what he could see while the protagonist symbolically blinds himself because of what he does not see. Therefore, irony is piled on irony in the image of the blind leading the blind, and the pit is to be his own hole. In addition, he is also ironically correct in believing that they have been wrong to blindly fight one another when their true enemy is using them both, but he is at this very moment involved in another battle royal as a black man used to catch other black men. So while the protagonist pitches no "balls," he is in turn struck out.

Thus, when the invisible man's rhetoric runs dry, and he breaks with tradition making his confession, it contains the greatest irony in his speech. His belief that he has become more human is used by Ellison to illustrate the protagonist's dehumanization. The truth is, of course, that he has become less human, become dehumanized again in the same continuing ritual, in fact, more so now because he has become the Judas goat leading others to the slaughter like Barbee. Therefore while the invisible man believes that he can see down the corridor of history, the reader is made aware that the corridor is indeed just part of a system of circular tun-

nels to be traveled through on a blind journey. As in the hospital, the invisible man again experiences a rebirth unto death. It is, indeed, an unholy baptism into the Brotherhood. The aftermath of the speech is also similar to the battle royal. There is the confusion, the violence, the seeming rewards and the feeling that the protagonist is involved in a game of blindmen's bluff as, indeed, he is. His subsequent decision to wear dark glasses next time he stands in the spotlight again links him to Barbee. The invisible man, too, is a blind speaker.

Ellison now introduces the characters of Brother Wrestrum, a pun on rest-room, and Brother Hambro. The protagonist realizes the physical similarity between Wrestrum and Supercargo, but he fails to see the resemblance goes even deeper--their positions are essentially the same. Thus, the invisible man is accused of being emotional and unscientific when actually he had just used the wrong rhetoric. But Jack, with his red head bristling, points out that the experiment is just in its initial stages. The "mob" is to be used, and all will still be well. Yet, even being told this, the invisible man is blind to his destiny. The protagonist goes into training to be "tamed" by Brother Hambro, a name that Ellison uses to echo Mary's last name and its connotations; the protagonist is again to be "cared" for but in an entirely different way. So while Jack now points out that science isn't a game of chess, but that chess may be played scientif-

ically, the reader recalls the "game" that is being played with the invisible man. This comparison is reminiscent of Thomas Huxley's comparison of life and chess in his essay, "A Liberal Education; and Where to Find It." In both cases anyone who does not understand the game will eventually be destroyed. The invisible man has led others blindly, so now they are all to fall into the pit. Now once again he is going to school to blindly follow the rules.

Later when the invisible man reviews his speech, he believes that he said the "right" things; white is still right although he believes that his life from now on would be different. He believes his speech was uttered by his other self, and yet he sees only the commercial value of that self. He believes that the broad possibilities offered by the Brotherhood transcend "race" and will save him from disintegration while just the opposite is true. They are going to take a "chance" with him the same way that the factory hospital did, and when the invisible man questions what he meant by being more "human," he thinks of his grandfather but then dismisses him because he believes an old slave has nothing to do with humanity. The truth is, however, that the question of slavery is directly related to the question of humanity and inhumanity as Ellison illustrates by the Woodridge quotation. Ellison also voices this belief in Shadow and Act.

In Negro culture there is much of value for America as

a whole. What is needed are Negroes to take it and create of it 'the uncreated consciousness of their race.' In doing so they will do far more, they'll help create a more human American.<sup>1</sup>

This is what the protagonist fails to understand. He will try to lead the people of Harlem without first creating himself, without seeing who he is. He has yet to learn the existential truth that man "creates" all mankind by his own choices. The human being is given identity by his choices rather than his physical presence. Thus, Stephen, whom Woodridge uses as an example, as Wayne Booth points out in his article on A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man in The Rhetoric of Fiction, is essentially an egoist and a character who has yet to mature. This is also true of the invisible man who, like Stephen, has yet to create the "uncreated features of his face."<sup>2</sup> Thus in trying to understand what he meant by more human the invisible man can justly only understand the words in terms of becoming less. He thinks that being kicked into the darkness by Bledsoe and Norton has provided him with the possibility of being more than just a member of a race. Therefore, he fails to see that his own reasoning has brought him into even greater darkness, and in truth, the only real possibilities for him will be found in the darkness of his final hole.

His training with the Brotherhood teaches the invis-

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<sup>1</sup>Ellison, Shadow and Act, p. 302.

<sup>2</sup>Ellison, Invisible Man, p. 268.

ble man not to ask questions as he is put through his paces. He is truly to be the Brotherhood's trained rabbit. Ellison demonstrates this through the incident at the El Toro Bar. The El Toro Bar, with its neon-lighted sign of a bull's head, is a signal radiating various relationships to the protagonist's future. The bull later is used to symbolize Ras as well as the invisible man's final defeat. The panel with the first bull scene is used in place of a mirror, thus signifying that the invisible man cannot see himself. Yet at the same time, it illustrates his blindness in another manner: he ironically sees only the grace of the scene, thinking of the bull and the man as one. It is only later, as Jack tells him how well he is doing, that he sees the second scene of the matador impaled on the black bull's horns, signifying the truth of his future that he does not see. Further, Jack, who will administer the coup de grace, ironically thinks the bull fight barbaric.

Other aspects of the El Toro Bar also contain ironic symbolism used for probability in the novel. The image of the pink and white girl on the calendar recalls the other white women in the novel while the date reads April one--April Fools' Day. The invisible man is the same blinded fool, and the "joke" is still on him during what he believes is his finest hour, the moment he becomes chief spokesman of the Harlem District. On this, his first trip to Harlem since his speech, he has already become accustomed to being seen as a

hero; however since he is still under orders to make no speeches, Ellison is demonstrating that the protagonist is, indeed, dumb.

The protagonist also has learned that Jack is a man of changing moods. He also notices that one of Jack's eyes glows brighter than the other while the song on the juke box is "Media Luz" meaning "half a light." Yet, he fails to see the significance of both facts adding to the novel's probability. He will forever act without thinking, a commandment of the Brotherhood, as a good mechanical man. So the protagonist says that he "sees" as Jack tells him he'll do "all right" and to keep "them" aroused. The invisible man is to have "freedom," the same kind of freedom he has always had--the freedom to do what others want. This is the true meaning of the word "discipline." As a result, the protagonist blindly agrees to lead Harlem when he doesn't even know where his Harlem location is to be.

The Harlem office is a building which is reminiscent of the Golden Day. Here he is to pawn his soul for power by making the Brotherhood his god. The names of the Brothers, Tarp and Tobitt, also have a significance: Tarp is related to "Tar" as in the Tar Baby--he accepts his Blackness and acts as a messenger to the protagonist; Tobitt is a pun on two-bit. Ellison also now introduces the character of Tod Clifton. Tod is also a half blind player in the game. His name "Tod" suggests the fox; like the invisible man he is

running from the "dogs." The dog has "got holt" of him as well as the protagonist. The name Clifton also suggests his divided personality, and his coming fall. The slave woman in the dream of the prologue has prefigured Tod because he is the result of the great American dream gone awry. He represents the mingling of American black and white blood and the denial of the existence of such mixture by a society that willingly blinds itself to reality. He is black and beautiful and an American heritage that has been disinherited to invisibility. Yet, ironically, Ras later spares Tod because he sees him as a pure-blooded African King. Clifton is used in the novel by Ellison as both a foil and a yardstick to judge the character of the invisible man. Clifton realizes the truth about the Brotherhood long before the protagonist. His partial sight is then contrasted to the blind protagonist's.

It is in this chapter also that the character of Ras is introduced. His artistic purpose is basically the same as Clifton's. His partial sight is also contrasted to the protagonist's total blindness. At the same time, Ras is also used as a foil to Clifton. His name, Ras, is a signal; it has suggestions of "race," "Rastus," "rash," "rascal," "rase." The title, "Exhorter," is also confused with "Extorter." He is described as a "drunken bull" who bulls his way out of things, panting "bull-angry." Ras, although partially blind to his role in the game, sees much more than the invisible man. With his insight, Ras sees that the Brotherhood is still

part of the "enslaver" who is going to "sell" out the people of Harlem. Ras understands the battle royal aspect of black man fighting black man while being blind to his own part as a catalyst in it.

Me crazy, mahn? You call me crazy. Look at you two and look at me--is this sanity? Standing here in three shades of blackness! Three black men fighting in the street because of the white enslaver? Is that sanity? Is that consciousness, scientific understahnding? Is that the modern black mahn of the twentieth century? Hell, mahn! Is it self-respect--black against black? What they give you to betray--their women? You fall for that?<sup>1</sup>

The rewards of money and white women, Ras understands, are worthless, paid in exchange for black blood. Ras is also correct in questioning what kind of "education" has led a black man to betray his own mother, which is what the invisible man has done in relation to Mary because of his education. Showing them how unscientific and illogical they really are, Ras asks them where their eyes are. He points out to them that they are denying their blackness while he is not afraid to be black, and as a result they are also denying their manhood. He sees that they are sleepwalkers without a past or a future, and he knows that Jack and the Brotherhood are laughing at them.

Yet, for all of Ras' insights, he is also partially blind. His beliefs and actions are contrasted by Ellison to Clifton's and the invisible man's as Laertes and Fortinbras are used as yardsticks by which to judge Hamlet's actions.

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<sup>1</sup>Ibid., p. 281.



But, there is one main difference. Whereas Fortinbras' actions are portrayed as right actions as opposed to Hamlet's and Laertes', Ras, Clifton and the invisible man are all portrayed as blind characters. Thus, while Clifton is attracted to Ras in the same way he is attracted to Garvey, his tragically divided personality also makes him a prey for the Brotherhood. When he finally "sees" that he has been a dupe, his only recourse is to plunge outside history so as to keep from killing someone or going "nuts." He learns what the vet learned, and his recourse is death rather than St. Elizabeth's Hospital, where the vet was sent, Ellison ironically choosing the same name for the hospital as the hospital where Ezra Pound was imprisoned for political insanity. But Ras is blind to both Clifton's and the invisible man's true heritage and their true past. The only true "brothers" are of the same color, he believes, but ironically Clifton is living proof that this is not so. In addition, Ras also believes in the modern world without understanding its dehumanizing effect. Thus, in his own way, he is another Jack: "We organize--organization is good--but we organize black. BLACK!"<sup>1</sup> He also wants power, and thus he recognizes Clifton's black possibilities. Therefore, since Ras is a talker like the protagonist, Ellison also has him speak his own doom again using the technique of dramatic irony. Ras states that the white man ". . . wahnt you black young men to do his dirty work. They betray you and

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<sup>1</sup>Ibid., p. 282.

you betray the black people. They tricking you, mahn."<sup>1</sup>

Therefore, contrary to his promise he will become a traitor to the black people for the white people because by using Ras' violence, the Brotherhood is able to create a battle royal situation in Harlem to be used to advance the Brotherhood's own ends while Jack ironically insists that the Brotherhood is against violence, aggressive, that is. Aggressive can thus be defined as any violence that is not intended for use of the Brotherhood.

In addition to the parallel structure of this chapter, Ellison also continues the use of symbolism to emphasize the blindness of the characters. Thus, people are used like machines, and black man is again used to catch black man as the incident with the black leaders in Harlem indicates. The invisible man is still going around in the same old circle; the people he meets seem like familiar people in a dream. Thus, the protagonist falls again, this time from a ladder while the empty sound of his voice sounds against the traffic.

Even the protagonist sees the resemblance between the fight with Ras and the battle royal. They fight in the dark uncertain whether they are fighting friend or foe. There is a lot of running, and Ras is pictured as backed against a door like a runner at the starting blocks. The violent red neon sign, "CHECKS CASHED HERE," is reminiscent of the money on the electrified rug at the battle royal and is a signal for

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<sup>1</sup>Ibid.

all the false rewards of the game. There is also a suggestion of castration in reference to the knife held by Ras.

Also, once again, the invisible man is moved by the eloquence of another speaker, but he is blind to the speech's real truth and sees only the unreal quality of the street. Therefore, the invisible man suppresses his emotions; the heart is to be denied in favor of the head without understanding the dehumanization of such a separation. Ras, therefore, is dangerous on the "inside" because he has not made such a separation; he has accepted his feelings as well as his blackness.

Juxtaposed to this incident is the figure of Frederick Douglass. Ellison uses Douglass for the same artistic purpose that Melville used the historic figure of Nelson in Billy Budd. Here again is a figure that the reader can use as a yardstick in judging the novel's characters. Just as Vere is found wanting in a comparison to Nelson, the invisible man's character is found wanting when compared to Douglass. Frederick Douglass is also contrasted to Booker T. Washington; Douglass symbolizes the clear-eyed leader while Washington symbolizes the blind. So Douglass is a messenger for the invisible man to "look" at as the protagonist rises to power; he is a reminder of his grandfather's voice and message. Still the protagonist doesn't see his invisibility and his false identity. He laughs when he hears the director of the Men's House address him with respect, but he can't see how his

thoughts relate to his own actions when he laughs at the idea that to call a thing by a name is to make it so. Thus, his true insight into himself, "I yam what I am" is contrasted to his present belief, "And yet I am what they think I am. . . ." <sup>1</sup> Again Ellison has the irony lie in the underlying truth of his statement.

Yet the invisible man feels the division within himself between his old self that flies without wings and plunges from great heights and his new self, the voice of the Brotherhood. This division causes him to feel as if he is racing himself. He is indeed still running, and the new self is repeating the experiences of the old self. The new self as well as the old self is like Icarus doomed to fall because he has not listened to the warnings. Once again Ellison uses the present voice to remind the reader of the protagonist's blindness when he refers to those days of certainty. Now in these days, the protagonist believes in the "magic" in the spoken word as he believed in the magic of Emerson's name. Yet by his comparison of himself to Douglass-both are orators who have come North and taken another name-the reader is again shown the protagonist's blindness. Douglass defined himself whereas both the invisible man and Booker T. Washington became what others wanted them to be under their assumed names. Douglass remembered that he was still Saul while the invisible man believes he has completely become Paul. He has

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<sup>1</sup>Ibid., p. 286.

forgotten the truth of his identity as he has forgotten the true meaning of Buckeye and Brer Rabbit. He has forgotten that if you can't tell where you are, you can't tell who you are. Yet, with this lack of direction, the invisible man believes the Brotherhood can control history even though he admits it is a strange world portrayed on the map in his office by red men " . . . of a different tribe and in a bright new world."<sup>1</sup> Again Ellison is reminding the reader of the Indian movie and echoes the suggestion of Brave New World.

The chapter again ends with the protagonist speaking in the present voice:

Thus for one lone stretch of time I lived with the intensity displayed by those chronic numbers players who see clues to their fortune in the most minute and insignificant phenomena: in clouds, on passing trucks and subway cars, in dreams, comic strips, the shape of dog-luck fouled on the pavements.<sup>2</sup>

The double irony in this statement lies in the fact that he has read these "signs" incorrectly for example, the "dog-luck," and that in the imaginary world of the Brotherhood there are no loose ends. Life is indeed all pattern, but not pattern in the sense that the invisible man sees it.

Now Ellison again uses the device of a letter, the intent of which is to keep the protagonist running. He is reminded of his place in the white world and told he is going too fast. For probability, the writing as well as the message is familiar. Here the protagonist turns to Brother Tarp,

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<sup>1</sup>Ibid., p. 288.

<sup>2</sup>Ibid.

whom he sees as connected with his grandfather. Again the invisible man has a messenger sent to point to the epochs of the plot. Brother Tarp, too, had run from the South to the North, bearing the mark of his blackness, his limp. His "crime" is the opposite of the invisible man's; Tarp had said "NO," a crime for which there is no retribution. Thus, Tarp's "no" is directly related to his grandfather's "yes"; it is the negative that is contained in this ambiguous "yes."

Tarp is also Brer Rabbit, who outsmarts the dogs, saying "yes" to himself and freedom. He accepts himself and his past, and he remembers and keeps the "link." Ironically this link with the past is now passed on to the invisible man; he doesn't inherit his grandfather's watch, but he does inherit his brother's symbol of slavery. Yet, this is the very past that he has been trying to deny. He does not understand its true significance anymore than he does understand the terms of "yes" and "no" that it symbolizes. This chain represents the true struggle for freedom because while Bledsoe's showpiece had been smooth, Tarp's bears the marks of his violent struggle on its thick, dark, oily surface. Thus, as Tarp gives his luck piece to the invisible man, due to the invisible man's blindness, the link instead symbolizes the trap in which he has placed himself.

Again the sense of time and its meaning is stressed by Ellison. Time to Tarp means waiting and watching and looking for freedom like the old slave in the prologue. Time is

also stressed in the meaning of the link; it at one and the same time joins the blind protagonist to his past and his future. Thus, Tarp is a truer orator than the protagonist, and his link will eventually aid the invisible man. Yet, now the invisible man rejects the memories of the past that Tarp has called to mind simply because they are of things past. As in The Waste Land, there is no time for memory. Thus, time stands still during his talk with Tarp, and once again the invisible man has failed. " . . . It seemed as though I'd plunged down a well of years."<sup>1</sup>

Thus the invisible man goes on seeing the rightness of things through his blind perspective. The dirty joke is still on him even though he can see some relationship between this anonymous letter and Bledsoe's letter. He doubts his old Southern distrust of whites, and thus turns his back on his experiential knowledge. Therefore, continuing on his fool's journey, he reaffirms his belief in the Brotherhood, and although he believes the letter is from someone more insidious than Ras, he buries his idea in himself.

Ironically in the light of this decision, the Wrestrum, restroom, incident immediately follows. Wrestrum, like the protagonist, has abandoned his past and his blackness; therefore, the skinlike link, which is reminiscent of the fact that the protagonist has tried to shed his skin, upsets him. He wants no differences in the Brotherhood, no indi-

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<sup>1</sup>Ibid., p. 294.

viduality and no mention of his blackness. The fact that the protagonist is amused at his statements is ironic because Wrestrum's conception of the Brotherhood is truer than the the protagonist's own as his future so clearly shows. Thus Wrestrum roots out anything in himself that is in disagreement with the Brotherhood just " . . . like a man cauterizing a mad-dog bite."<sup>1</sup> He is the caught rabbit and the one-eyed rodent who sees that the whites in the Brotherhood are in complete control but fails to see how this relates to himself. Yet, he wants an external sign to identify himself, a flag of his own because even with the Brotherhood he has no true flag, no flag that belongs equally to him as to others. Therefore, such an emblem would ironically give the black brothers an external identity to cover up their internal lack of self-acceptance.

This fact is ironically juxtaposed by Ellison to the invisible man's discussion with the editor of the picture magazine as well as the symbolic poster "After the Struggle: The Rainbow of America's Future." Clifton and the white couple, surrounded by children of mixed races, are to represent the future, but it had been considered unwise to show simply Clifton and the girl. Indeed Clifton himself is the rainbow of America's present and future--a native son who has been dispossessed. Thus, the one-eyed rodents, Wrestrum, and the protagonist, talk about "seeing" each other while Wrest-

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<sup>1</sup>Ibid., p. 297.



rum warns that the link should remain unseen because it will cause confusion.

Because the warning have gone unheeded, the protagonist now again takes part in another battle royal. The Brotherhood meeting room filled with smoke has long benches and usually sounds like a prize-fight or a smoker. This scene recalls the initial battle royal as well as following ones such as the speech given in the arena. Wrestrum's demand that the protagonist not lie is reminiscent of Bledsoe's previous demands although it ironically reverses the conditions. Wrestrum has brought back the invisible man's past; thus, the protagonist feels naked and exposed. He is ashamed that they sounded like characters in a vaudeville act, but he fails to see that he as well as Wrestrum has always played the blackfaced role not knowing who they are or where they are.

The invisible man can't understand the Dick Tracy make-believe aspect of the Brotherhood, any more than he can understand that they have never had any real contact with him as a person. But once again the protagonist does the "right" thing and remains, swallowing the line that the individual doesn't count, which sounds strangely like "some of my best friends are . . . ." The smoke blinds him, and he can barely see faces as Jack tells him he is to speak on the Woman Question with Jack's pamphlet as his guide. He has indeed been spun round again like a top since it is still the

same old game of blindman's bluff, and he is still the butt of the same old outrageous joke. Yet again he "bends," kneels like the slave of the statue. His price again is power because he believes he is coming closer to the secrets of power in the Brotherhood, and his ambitions are great. Thus, he convinces himself that he is a spokesman, and therefore all things are possible in his optimism. In addition, he is again promised white women, as a reward for playing the game. Therefore, the invisible man takes up his comic role of spokesman on the Woman Question. As he speaks with conviction about the Brotherhood's ideology, it is not his voice that the audience responds to but rather his black image, not himself but his ritualized role. He is on view as a domesticated rapist, as Sybil later sees him--the original "boogey" man. It is in this position as the primitive black force that he ironically is seduced and raped. Yet even this act, like all the other relationships in the book, is an impersonal one. The woman is nameless and seems to be acting out a symbolic role of fertility. Her apartment is reminiscent of Emerson's office, and the protagonist is simply to be added to her life like another trophy. Yet he naively believes that she is interested in the spiritual values of Brotherhood, and Ellison humorously has him sense a " . . . possibility of a heightened communication; as though the discordantly invisible and the conspicuously enigmatic were reaching a delicately balanced harmony."<sup>1</sup> All of this "harmony" is disrupted

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<sup>1</sup>Ibid., p. 311.

by the sweeping motion of her robe, displaying a nude similar to the pink Renoir on her wall. And even though the invisible man finds the idea of milk instead of wine repulsive, he is seduced. So they make love--he to an image of feminine fertility, and she to a man with "tom-toms" beating in his voice.

The bedroom is reminiscent of the one in Trueblood's dream, and the invisible man wonders what kind of game is being played. The mirrored image of their figures and the white bed seems to multiply time and place and magnify the circumstance. This vision reflects both his psychological and physical reaction, and again he isn't sure what is real and what is a dream. Ironically, the consequences of his actions, unlike those of Trueblood or Bigger in Native Son, are only imaginary. He has been a Prufrock who has had the mermaids sing to him only to find he is still Prufrock. In his sensual dream he is chased by a bull, but the man who sees him in the bed is neither surprised nor interested. The whole incident seems unreal to the protagonist, and she seems like a dreamer who would scream if awakened. Later, he comes to understand that she is indeed one of the dreamers, and he and the man, who resembles himself with his briefcase, had seen but not seen each other in this "civilized" affair. He has come full circle, back to initiating the Ronald Colman image--perfect smile, firm warm handshake and the proper mixture of arrogance and humility.

Thus, the protagonist continues to play the part of the black ritualized victim; he has put on the blackfaced mask to act the ritualized role. Therefore,

. . . the fascination of blackness could be enjoyed, the comic catharsis achieved. . . . The mask was the thing (the 'thing' in more ways than one) and its function was to veil the humanity of Negroes thus reduced to a sign, and to repress the white audience's awareness of its moral identification with its own acts and with the human ambiguities pushed behind the mask.<sup>1</sup>

It is for this reason that the invisible man's audiences undergo a strange unburdening, and his sense of guilt is aroused.

"Motives of race, status, economics and guilt are always clustered here."<sup>2</sup> Once again the protagonist is the blind victim, and he can't understand this anymore than he can the man in the doorway--himself. Therefore, he still has to question how "responsibility" relates to the Brotherhood while the reader is now sure of the answer. Once again he seems to be awakening from a deep sleep when he is ordered to return to Harlem. Clifton, who the protagonist feels is too responsible to fail, has disappeared. Again the invisible man is warned not to be late as symbolically time is running out for him.

The following chapter begins with the protagonist in the dark, and as Ellison states in Shadow and Act, "what happens uptown while he is downtown is part of his darkness, both symbolic and actual."<sup>3</sup> In Barrelhouse's Jolly Dollar, the protagonist learns that the glad money has run dry, and

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<sup>1</sup>Ellison, Shadow and Act, p. 64.

<sup>2</sup>Ibid.      <sup>3</sup>Ibid., p. 178.

that the Brotherhood has stopped supporting Harlem. The fight has been stopped, and the people are again "dispossessed." The light begins to flicker in his mind like the image of the couple striking matches, their faces etched out in the dark for a few faint seconds. In following his instinctive reaction, he almost returns to Mary's door, but again he rejects this as a mistake and turns away. When the invisible man returns to the hall, his messengers have gone; their warnings had been for naught. It is indeed a city of the dead as it always has been, and the reader recalls Death on the City Pavements. The interests of Harlem have become secondary to national interests, recalling the great American whitewash at Liberty Paints.

Once again the invisible man is running; this time it is downtown for directives. But there are no directives, so the protagonist decides that he will run no more and then ironically goes to buy new shoes. These summer shoes he associates with neighborhood foot races, and yet blindly he returns to his district to await a Brotherhood call with the belief that he has run his last foot race.

However, on a street in New York in the hot sun, things now begin to boil. The Italian vendor mistakenly believes that the invisible man is part of Clifton's shill operation which, in the symbolic sense, he is. Clifton chooses to sell those dolls; after his investment of hope in the Brotherhood, he is now turned against that part of himself

that believed in Brotherhood and is trying to destroy it. It is a " . . . rejection of a role which has been assumed in great hope and then released, feeling that this had been an act of betrayal."<sup>1</sup> He sees that the doll is a symbol for what both he and the protagonist have been, obscene puppets performing on a string for the Brotherhood. The doll is a black mask that evokes the same fascinated reaction from the audience that the invisible man did from his downtown audiences. He has been that grinning, sensuous, black, mask-like-face who has performed "a degrading act in public. . . ."2. This is what Clifton's spiel essentially is stating. He is Sambo--Black Sambo--here to entertain, to purge the viewer's soul in ritualistic fashion. He is not a human being but rather a mask, a symbol, an invisible force. Thus the invisible man's reaction, a struggle between the desire to join the laughter and to destroy the doll, is similar to the passage Ellison quotes from Hemingway concerning

. . . the tribesman in Green Hills of Africa who hid his laughing face in shame at the sight of a gut-shot hyena jerking out its own intestines and eating them, in Hemingway's words 'with relish.'<sup>3</sup>

When the invisible man realizes that Clifton is the spieler, he again has the sensation of falling. Clifton looks past him unseemingly as the protagonist fails to see the true

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<sup>1</sup> Interview with Ralph Ellison, April 2, 1968.

<sup>2</sup> Ellison, Invisible Man, p. 326.

<sup>3</sup> Ellison, Shadow and Act, p. 65.

meaning of Clifton's actions. But this, the protagonist knows, is no dream. Clifton tells the protagonist through his spiel that they have become twentieth-century miracles, Samboes--boogey men reformed and domesticated to play their part in the game. He mocks the protagonist by using the invisible man's own word "dispossession" in the same rhyming technique of the preacher's speech in the prologue as well as in the speaking technique of the protagonist himself. Thus Clifton as a spieler is a truer orator than the invisible man, and his seemingly immoral actions are far more honest than the protagonist's great crowd-moving speeches. So Clifton in running from the police is no longer blindly running from himself. Yet, it is the invisible man who feels betrayed when actually it is he who has betrayed Clifton and his people. Therefore, as he spits upon the doll, even a bystander can see the resemblance between the doll and the protagonist, and the chorus line of dolls represents what he would make of other people. Like the bank, this self-image seems alive, and this fact combined with the doll's puppet quality both symbolizes the reason for Clifton's defection as well as the protagonist's own blindness.

However, the invisible man sees only Clifton's fall, his "plunge" outside of history (the Brotherhood, the game) and doesn't see how this relates to his own fall. Clifton's insight into the game and the Brotherhood is still unshared by the protagonist, and therefore the protagonist has yet to

understand the true meaning of Clifton's actions. The invisible man can't see that the "plunge" is the only way to become human, so he clings to the Brotherhood.

Again the warning symbols are present before Clifton's death. The circling flight of pigeons marks the time of his death, but time slows for the protagonist like a slow-motion movie. The sun is glaring, screaming, and at first the protagonist believes that Clifton is a shoeshine boy, recalling the boy outside Emerson's office. Clifton's life is snuffed out like the white feather lost by the bird circling above him, and as each pigeon dives at the sound of the gun, Clifton is a "cooked pigeon"<sup>1</sup> as he has always been a pigeon for the Brotherhood. The invisible man moves blindly now, and in the unthinking way he has always moved. And as the birds' wings flap, and the cop tells the invisible man it's "right," Clifton again has been a source of entertainment in death for the apple-cheeked boy with Slavic eyes. It is all part of the game, and the invisible man still wonders what it means. The impersonal crowd still walks on as Clifton's body and his symbol, the dolls, are taken away.

Clifton's death gives rise to a moment of flickering light in the protagonist's mind. It lasts briefly like the light of the subway cars roaring through the tunnel. His mind, plunging, attempts ironically to understand why Clifton gave up his voice and a chance to define himself by

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<sup>1</sup>Ellison, Invisible Man, p. 331.



abandoning the Brotherhood. He still fails to see that he, Clifton, and Harlem are just like the bits of paper blown up momentarily by the train. He questions what "history," the catchword of the Brotherhood, really means and justly concludes that it is a club used to wield power. He sees those outside the Brotherhood as "transitory"--"birds of passage," and yet he can't help referring to them as "us,"<sup>1</sup> thinking about Clifton. Indeed he, too, as well as Clifton has been a pigeon. He has still to learn that history is a boomerang, but he does see that history has not been completely conquered, defined by science. There are the outsiders, the displaced, silent ones, those who refuse to or can't play the game such as the three boys in the subway and the old couple. The protagonist questions whose design controls them if not "history." The invisible man then must question if they are even "seen" by those who play the game. But having come to this partial insight, the one-eyed invisible man has no yardstick, no accepted past experiential knowledge by which to judge who are the "living" people. In his blindness he questions if the boys, who seem like dancers in a funeral ceremony, have to bury others or to be buried themselves. He even questions whether perhaps these men, who are outside of time, are really timeless men, saviors. Perhaps like Wright's character in "The Man Who Lived Underground," they had found the true world lying beneath and therefore were custodians of

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<sup>1</sup>Ibid., p. 332.

this knowledge which even they did not understand. He questions whether history is a gambler with these aces yet to be played. They are running with Tod, but they are in the race to win. They can at least see themselves in the train window. Yet, now the protagonist can see himself in them and thinks in terms of "we." They should have been, he thinks, rationalized out of existence in the first part of the nineteenth century. But even now, he fails to see that he has been, and still is, playing a major part in this process of rationalization. So while the invisible man compares himself to Douglass, the comparison only serves for contrast. Now he sees himself as a meteorite rather than a rising star, for indeed Clifton understood himself and the outsiders better than the invisible man does.

The falsely ordered world of the protagonist is beginning to spin out of control. This can be seen in his reaction to the two nuns who are mirror images of each other. Each is isolated, cut off in her prayers from the other, and the protagonist sees that the isolation of religion, with which he had previously compared the Brotherhood, is no answer to the problem of history. Here are no allies. The verse from the Golden Day is also reminiscent of the preacher's sermon in the prologue. History is far from being redeemed.

Now his shoes hurt; he is beginning to tire of the race. Harlem now is seen more clearly, and it again takes on the surrealistic quality that he saw when he first arrived

from the South. Once again he begins to see people, taking time to look at them. His past begins to emerge, and they all seem like people from home. Thus, he sees jazz represents an honest response of the people, and the invisible man wonders if it will be the only true record of the times. He, like the nuns, is isolated, forgotten, unrecognized, unseen because he has ceased to exist as a person. He has been playing the game blindly, and therefore he is surprised when an old woman helps some boys escape as he wished to do. He feels guilty, and like a dreamer waking from a deep sleep, he feels "responsible" ironically because he has not done enough.

Once again the incident with Clifton displays Ellison's powerful style, which evokes the nightmarish atmosphere of a world gone awry. He juxtaposes ordinary images with the brutal murder of Clifton, a technique which conveys a sense of horror to the reader through the very fact that these images seem coldly misplaced in this highly charged emotional atmosphere.

They were coming my way, passing a newsstand, and I saw the rails in the asphalt and a fire plug at the curb and the flying birds, and thought, You'll have to follow and pay his fine . . . just as the cop pushed him, jolting him forward and Clifton trying to keep the box from swinging against his leg and saying something over his shoulder and going forward as one of the pigeons swung down into the street and up again, leaving a feather floating white in the dazzling backlight of the sun, and I could see the cop push Clifton again, stepping solidly forward in his black shirt, his arm shooting out stiffly, sending him in a head-snapping forward stumble until he caught himself, saying something over his shoulder again, the two moving in a kind of march that I'd seen many times, but never with anyone like Clifton<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>Ibid., p. 329.

The second purpose for Ellison's use of these objects is that their addition tends to retard the action, giving the effect of slow motion to the incident which also reinforces the nightmarish quality of the event. This effect is also enhanced by the use of parallel structure; the present participial phrases follow one another in a long succession. In addition, the repetition of words such as "forward," "something," and "shoulder," and the repetition of the endings of the verbals, in addition to the use of alliteration in words such as "sun," "see," "stepping," "solidly," "shirt," "shooting," "stiffly," "sending," "snapping," "stumble," "saying," "something," "shoulder," all add to the sensation of a time lag. These same devices are again successfully used at the end of this chapter when the invisible man relives Clifton's death as he stares at the men on the train.

The next incident is centered around the invisible man's third recorded speech and his last one for the Brotherhood. Ironically the statements in the speech are true while his reason for giving it is based on a lie. The invisible man cannot face his role in Clifton's death. He hypocritically states that he can only accept responsibility for the living, and not for the dead. But he has forgotten, as the peddler's bell clangs, that the living and the dead in a sense are one; he has forgotten for whom the bell truly tolls.

Thus, as he stares at the now dying trees outside his window, he again gropes with the meaning of the dolls. His

decision, that he had been politically stupid and failed by acting personally instead of educating the crowd, shows in an ironic way he has indeed aided and abetted "social backwardness."<sup>1</sup> His attitude is still the same as at the smoker where he obligingly swallowed his own blood. Now, in a sense, he is swallowing Clifton's. But Clifton is gone like the trail of smoke left by the sky-writing plane above him, and only the doll is left as a reminder; its two grinning faces are reminiscent of Clifton's tragically divided personality. It is also still a signal for the black mask which represents both ritualistic inhumanity and death. Indeed, even its invisible black thread, the source of its motion, is symbolic; Ellison uses it to represent both the protagonist's impotence and invisibility.

Thus again, to silence his mind, the invisible man must view Clifton's death as political. Blindly the invisible man must now use the dead for political gain, and he seizes on the idea of a public funeral as if to save his own life. Therefore, he excuses Clifton's actions as he does his own, justifying them, rationalizing them because the only other recourse he feels is to plunge, himself, outside of history. Therefore, he can see the doll only vaguely as he decides that it is "all right" to put Clifton's integrity back together by the funeral. His use of the word "integrity" is therefore similar to his use of the word "responsibility."

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<sup>1</sup>Ibid., p. 336.

Again the invisible man is following Jack's advice to act first and theorize later. But, although the invisible man does not go to bed for two days and nights, there is to be no resurrection on the third day.

The funeral takes place in the heat under the ever-present, watchful sun. The invisible man feels apart from it all as he reads the ironic sign "Brother Tod Clifton/Our Hope Shot Down." There is a thirty-piece band, symbolizing the act of betrayal. The smell of female dogs is everywhere as people from all walks of life join in the procession. The gray coffin is a signal for the many aspects of Tod's personality, his life and his death as well as for the invisible man's present actions. The black iron bell which sounds "Doom-Dong-Doom" is a reminder of who has really fallen. Once again the protagonist is high above the crowd as he sees the white uniforms of the watching nurses glowing in the bright sun, and the reader is reminded of the whiteness of the hospital. As Clifton was, the invisible man is boxed in, and he feels lost. Thus, the question is raised by the protagonist if the community's coming together signifies love or hate, and the reader is again reminded of the love-hate issue expressed in the prologue.

The old fashioned euphonium horn and the old man-both from the past-then pay tribute to what Clifton's life had been; he had been like a black pigeon rising above the white landscape, rising and tumbling and rising again. He is in-

deed simply one of "Many a Thousand Gone," a song that is from the protagonist's past, as true as the girl's song had been at the College, and thus it is that it calls forth the protagonist's envy. The old singer with a knife welt around his neck recalls both Trueblood and the razor-scarred black men who had the assurance and arrogance of the rich white men in the photograph in Mr. Bate's office. The song had always been there, but the invisible man failed to release it because of his shame and fear, the same shame and fear of his past, his true identity. Therefore, on the top of the mountain there is only the sound of Tod Clifton's name because the scientific Brotherhood has no name, no words, for the emotion underlying the slave-born words of the song.

Yet the invisible man will still blindly try to control the crowd for the Brotherhood. He will try to make pigeons of them like himself and Clifton, and this is seen in the symbol of the peanut vendor who stretches forth his arms and is covered with feasting birds. The warning is again given, but once again, although he will speak the truth in Cassandra-like fashion, he will not believe his own words. This is not a ritualistic speech, and there is no microphone to support him. He feels a futility about the crowd; yet he fails to question his own motives. The end is "in the beginning" as it has been for him, but for Clifton, however, there is "no encore."<sup>1</sup> But Tod Clifton does have a name, is

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<sup>1</sup>Ibid., p. 343.

an individual, while the protagonist remains nameless. Thus, while the crowd does not look at the invisible man but rather at the pattern of his voice, he tells them Clifton's name, and Ellison uses the repetition of sounds to drive home the finality of Clifton's death. Clifton was like their "cousin John,"<sup>1</sup> Jack the Rabbit, Jack the bear, High John the Conqueror. He is their fallen symbol. Now although the invisible man can no longer say I am what I am, he can say "so I know it as I know it."<sup>2</sup> He has seen Clifton's red blood and cannot forget it, and there is no more escaping to the movies or "Amos and Andy." Like the vet Clifton thought his work would make him more human, but again like the vet and the invisible man, Tod was full of illusions because he thought he was a man.

Thus, the invisible man continues his speech, a speech that isn't political, a speech that stresses the reality that lies buried under the nightmare of a comic-book world. Indeed, Clifton's death itself was a result of resisting reality--the same controlling reality that has existed throughout the novel, a .38 caliber revolver. Therefore, only in death has Clifton become part of reality, part of "history" and been freed, and this freedom prefigures the invisible man's final "freedom" because Tod Clifton is now underground.

Yet the invisible man has some progress toward vision

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<sup>1</sup>Ibid.      <sup>2</sup>Ibid., p. 344.



since the speech in the arena because now he doesn't see a crowd but rather individuals. Shined shoes, which recall the running images in the book as well as shoeshine boys, echo in his head as he tries to think in terms of the Brotherhood. The memories of the past intervene as his nostrils are filled with the stench of dead vegetables and wilted flowers rejected downtown. Again he is warned, but the protagonist still remains blind to the consequences of his actions.

Ellison repeats the warning symbols in the following meeting with the Brotherhood. The meeting has been prefigured by the dream of his grandfather. The one light burning above the table repeats the symbol of "Media Luz." Brother Jack, whose head is cocked in doglike fashion, still wears his ambiguous smile; the others have blank, unhuman faces. Also, once again, the smoke is rising in spirals above their heads and clouding the room.

The invisible man listens to the sound of his own voice as he states he acted on his own personal responsibility, and the image of the smoker and his use of "social responsibility" is recalled. He is again ironically to be taught that he is considered responsible only when he abandons both personal reaction and responsibility. Indeed, he has been as guilty of forgetting this as he was of confusing "responsibility" and "equality" at the smoker. So the pattern is repeated as the circle is almost complete. Here at another smoker, he is again taking part in another battle royal in

which his opponents are as blind as he. Tobitt--Brother Two-bits--is, as always, adding his two cents worth, and his "sight" is based on too narrow a source (there is always a woman in it) as the invisible man points out. Jack, the "great white father," "Marse Jack," ironically unmasks his blindness to prove his insight while the invisible man struggles blindly with them and with his divided self. All are to be losers.

Therefore, Jack doesn't even "see" the protagonist anymore than the invisible man has seen him. So now at his first sight of Jack he sees a bantam rooster-like man with a blind eye, another member of the nation of one-eyed animals. Instead of Jack being the Zeus the protagonist had imagined him to be, he is the Cyclops who has been destroyed by proudly trusting in his own weakness. The invisible man is driven back to the defenses of his past. He begins to answer Jack as though he were playing the dozens as, indeed, Ellison is symbolizing that he is. His stomach trembles as before, but this time it is Jack who disembowels himself in the fight that results because the invisible man has forgotten his place in the game. He, like Clifton and the vet, has been guilty of thinking of himself as a man, a man whose work gives dignity to his manhood. Thus, Jack finds him guilty of using the very philosophy the Brotherhood had preached to him, "Give 'em the ax, the ax, the ax."<sup>1</sup> The latter, of course, recalls the Trueblood incident. The invisible man

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<sup>1</sup>Ibid., p. 351.

has forgotten that his is to be the way of patience and discipline which now he sees has always meant blindness, intimidation, and self-mutilation. In the heat, he is again forced to say "all right" to a denial of self as Jack tells him politicians are not persons. Therefore, the protagonist has been Anthony giving the oration over the body of Brutus, proclaiming, "this was a man," forgetting that he is to be just a supporting character.

The excuse used for the invisible man's beating is that Clifton, like Brutus, was a traitor, but even the protagonist can see this is not the most important fact, the fact that Clifton was indeed, a man, and his self-contained contradictions mirrored those of Harlem as well as the protagonist's own. With this insight, the protagonist has come to another plateau of self-understanding; now he sees that the Brotherhood isn't the black race, and that truly no organization is. Therefore, he no longer denies his race in the face of Jack's demands, realizing at last that this is the same old game. He has been isolated and in prison although ironically Jack insists as a way to control him that he hasn't served time. But now the protagonist can see that Harlem isn't responding to him but rather that he is responding to Harlem, and with this knowledge he can see to some extent where he is and with whom. Although he has still to learn who he is, he is learning as Jack ironically points out. It is for this reason he adopts the false grin of a Jack as he is clearly

told he is a puppet who will speak only through the ventriloquy of the committee. He is on the road Clifton took, and there is no turning back.

Now his "am what I am" becomes "I'll stand on that as I stand on what I see and feel and on what I've heard, and what I know."<sup>1</sup> Clifton's death has taught him to look for truth in the unrecorded history of Harlem life. Thus, symbolically the invisible man feels that he is falling and can suddenly see previous unseen objects on the dark side of this fall. So as Jack physically comes between him and the light, Ellison also uses the invisible man's physically weak legs to repeat the symbolism of the blind race, demonstrating to the reader that the finish line has yet to be reached.

Then Jack, shouting some foreign unintelligible language, which, ironically the protagonist will call the language of the future, removes his dead white eye which is distorted by rays of light. The strange command in Jack's gaze is gone; thus, the reader is shown that the power of his gaze lay in his blind eye. Indeed, the invisible man ironically did not know about Jack and would have preferred that the truth remain hidden. Once again the invisible man is awaking from a dream after having been boomeranged. Never again will he be so completely taken in by Jack's act. Yet in the protagonist's remaining partial blindness lies the irony of Ellison's pun on sight and insight. Therefore, the Good Night,

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<sup>1</sup>Ibid., p. 239.

Brother is patterned after the emptiness of the closing of the "Game of Chess" section of The Waste Land and its original, Ophelia's mad farewell.<sup>1</sup> Thus, in this world of madness, the invisible man cannot face the entire truth about himself; he believes he must keep in touch with the Brotherhood to keep on fighting, and the reader is again reminded of the battle royal.

It is at this point that Ellison introduces the character of Rinehart. Rinehart means chaos, invisibility, a world of infinite possibilities and no limitations or guidelines, no yeses and noes. Rinehart offers an alternative to the invisible man, another way of looking at the world, another way of moving. The invisible man has functioned, run, in a tightly timed and spatially controlled world. It has been structured as the Brotherhood has attempted to structure history. But in Rinehart's world, time, space and history are nonexistent; everything is fluid. It is the existential world of Sartre taken to its extreme without Sartre's sense of responsibility. Here in this world of infinite possibilities no man is responsible for anything except to play the confidence game well and to exhaust all the possibilities for his own gain. This is the world of opposites and paradoxes that has always existed underneath the surface of things.

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<sup>1</sup>Eliot, The Complete Poems and Plays 1909-1950, p. 42. "Good night, ladies, good night, sweet ladies, good night, good night."

Thus Rinehart can be the runner, the gambler, the briber, the lover, the Reverend; he can be both mind and heart. Thus, this analysis shows that Rinehart is patterned after the Original Character in Melville's The Confidence Man. As such, Rinehart is a signal for all levels of disorder, physical and metaphysical. By the use of this type of symbolism, Ellison is able to sustain a paradox even within one entity and thus heighten the dramatic irony of the novel.

. . . B. P. Rinehart (the P. is for 'Proteus,' the B. for 'Bliss') . . . is a cunning man who wins the admiration of those who admire skulduggery and knowhow; an American virtuoso of identity who thrives on chaos and swift change; he is greedy, in that his masquerade is motivated by money as well as by the sheer bliss of impersonation; he is god-like, in that he brings new techniques--electric guitars, etc.--to the service of God, and in that there are many men in his image while he is himself unseen; he is phallic in his role of 'lover'; as a number runner he is a bringer of manna and a worker of miracles, in that he transforms (for winners, of course) pennies into dollars, and thus he feeds (and feeds on) the poor. But the main purpose of Rinehart's role in the formal structure of the narrative is to suggest to the hero a mode of escape from Ras, and a means of applying in yet another form, his grandfather's cryptic advice to his own situation.<sup>1</sup>

This multi-level purpose is seen even in Ellison's choice of names. Rinehart also is a blues piece, and Proteus has many meanings. The Proteus or Olm is a blind, water-breathing, tailed amphibian, inhabiting the limestone caves to the east of the Adriatic. It is a small eel-like animal that exposed to white light turns the color black. Proteus is also the name of a Greek sea-daemon, shepherd of the flocks of the sea and a great prophet. He knew all things, past, present and

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<sup>1</sup>Ellison, Shadow and Act, p. 71.

future but did not like to tell his knowledge. When caught he would assume various shapes and identities to make his escape. Thus he became a symbol for the matter or chaos from which the world was believed to be created. Rinehart is indeed all of these things and therefore represents change in America.

Rinehart has found the secret of power that has always escaped the invisible man. Here this ultimate confidence man takes on the godlike characteristics of the school's millionaires; he is also an ironic Christ symbol, having preached the Lord's word at twelve years old. Rinehart thus also has the ultimate scientific disposition the Brotherhood seeks. As a spiritual technologist, he has control over history: "I DO WHAT YOU WANT DONE! DON'T WAIT!"<sup>1</sup> Rinehart is the ultimate leader that Emerson, Bledsoe, and Jack all seek to be: "HOLY WAY STATION/BEHOLD THE LIVING GOD."<sup>2</sup> Yet Rinehart is also reminiscent of the invisible man's grandfather because Rinehart's seeming yes is also a no. As the protagonist discovers

the world in which we lived was without boundaries. A vast seething hot world of fluidity, and Rine the rascal was at home. Perhaps only Rine the rascal was at home in it. It was unbelievable, but perhaps only the unbelievable could be believed. Perhaps the truth was always a lie.<sup>3</sup>

Thus, Rinehart holds the answer to the questions the protago-

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<sup>1</sup>Ellison, Invisible Man, p. 374.

<sup>2</sup>Ibid.      <sup>3</sup>Ibid., p. 376.

nist has been asking. He is the eternal liar who speaks the truth; he is thus another messenger sent to show the protagonist the errors of his ways. In the darkness created by his glasses, the invisible man sees Rinehart's sign, "Let There Be Light!" It is Rinehart's handbill that warns that the old is ever new; from South to North it is the same pattern and the same game is played. In addition, it is Rinehart who shows the protagonist that he is invisible.

So in running, the invisible man has stumbled into Rinehartism, which he later will equate with cynicism in his relationship to the Brotherhood. Rinehart opens up a gulf between the invisible man and the Brotherhood that is too deep to be forged. Thus, while he can defend the Brotherhood to Ras in the beginning of the chapter, he can no longer defend it to himself at the end of the chapter.

Yet, the protagonist is uncertain whether he is now able to see Rinehart because of Clifton's death or Ras's hostility because his running from Ras gives probability to his disguise of dark glasses and a white hat. Actually he has always played this role of being a mask rather than a human being as when he lectured on the Woman's Question. Now, however, he plays it knowingly; he has begun to recognize the fact that he is invisible. Thus, the dark glasses that he puts on have a twofold significance: they render him a universal mask, and in their blackness and blinding quality, they enable him, paradoxically, to see. Their green, vague sinis-



ter light is reminiscent of "The Man Who Lived Underground," and symbolically the first people he sees through his glasses are people emerging from the underground. Again he is seeing "through a glass darkly" but now, although he cannot remember how this will end, he knows it.

So the large woman who reeks of "Christmas Night" perfume brings him a type of salvation in the form of Rinehartism. He discovers that the ultimate magic is not in his voice, as he previously believed, but rather in his invisibility, the fact that he is so clearly seen only to remain unseen. And with this fact, he himself is beginning to understand that he also does not know who he is. So the nightmarish figures that he sees through his green haze are indeed part of reality. In addition the murky cave appearance of the bar prefigures his future hole, while his fight with Brother Maceo recalls his fight with the white man in the prologue who also didn't "see" him, the first but last battle royal. The suggestion of the knife and castration is also present. So as Brother Maceo doesn't see him, he begins to doubt that Brother Maceo's identity is real. All things become absurd yet real and dangerous as in the prologue and the ever constant battle royals. Again Ellison is demonstrating it is the same old joke.

The many personalities of Rinehart also recall other previous symbols and experiences of the protagonist. His identity as Rine the runner, leading astray the old woman,

the "Old Ship of Zion," as the Confidence Man leads the old man at the end of Melville's novel, recalls that the protagonist is a different kind of runner. The old woman's dream bet recalls the dispossessed couple and their dreams, and her reference to his shoes recalls Clifton's shooting. The girl's calling him a "dumb John" ironically points to the fact that he certainly has been no High John The Conqueror and has abandoned his past. In addition, Rinehart's building, which has been converted from a store to a church, recalls both the Golden Day and the invisible man's headquarters in Harlem. Finally, the music in Rinehart's Church is reminiscent of the music of the College, a dreamlike recital. Thus, the congregation's speaking in an unknown tongue like Jack's is ironically used by Ellison to signify the dark tongue of the blind future rather than a blessed gift of tongues.

Thus, Rinehart is as "true" and as false as the invisible man. However, Rinehart, unlike the invisible man, does not have to be known; his existence is real because he is unknown. Indeed, Jack, Clifton and the invisible man himself have all been as known and unknown as Rinehart; they have all been playing a game of charades, assuming false identities at the sacrifice of their true humanity. As Ellison points out, "America is a land of masking jokers."<sup>1</sup> Even the shoeshine boy could recognize this while the invisible man has been as mistaken about it as Columbus was about "India." Thus, again

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<sup>1</sup>Ellison, Shadow and Act, p. 70.

the protagonist is reborn, feeling as if he had just been removed from a plaster cast which is reminiscent of the hospital machine.

Therefore, Ellison again directly raises the question of freedom. Now freedom is ". . . not only the recognition of necessity, it was the recognition of possibility."<sup>1</sup> But this freedom is too vast for the protagonist. This real chaos he still blindly considers as being outside of history. He believes he is nowhere, and this is true because he is still without an identity. Therefore continuing blindly to play the game, he goes back to Hambro still being little black Sambo, but now his pockets are loaded with the glasses, the leg chain, and the doll.

At Hambro's, the child's song, Humpty Dumpty, signifies that the invisible man will no longer be able to put his world back together again while the second song, Hickory Dickory Dock, signifies that he is still to act like a blind rodent. Although his perception of time and space has been altered, he is still to be the same sacrificial victim in the same ritualistic game, and Harlem is to be sacrificed with him. Even the sound of his voice seems like an antiphonal game, and through it all his sense of Rinehart lies just below the surface. Yet he still fails to see his true relationship to Rinehart, how he too even now is a charlatan. Thus, in the style of Alexander Pope, Ellison has Hambro with his

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<sup>1</sup>Ellison, Invisible Man, p. 377.

almost "Lincolnesque" face argue that partial evil is universal good, claiming to follow the laws of reality. In addition, in the dialectic earlier used by Orwell in Animal Farm, Hambro argues that some must make greater sacrifices than others, and that blacks must now and always be slowed down for their own "good." This he believes with all his "integrity," and the use of this word (which is akin to responsibility) demonstrates that the only magic in the Brotherhood is its ability to change integrity into thin air. Indeed Bledsoe had warned the invisible man long ago to leave words like "pride" and "dignity" to the white folk. Therefore, the protagonist's work in Harlem is to disintegrate like the smoke ring that Hambro nonchalantly blows because the "master" plan and timing are not to be upset. It is indeed the same old game and recalls the statue of the kneeling slave. Slavery is still profitable, and now the invisible man's relationship to Rinehart is clearly seen. The people are to be taken advantage of, for their own good of course, based on scientific "objectivity." They are to be placed in a box, like the hospital machine and like Clifton's. Now the protagonist sees the "unreality" of the doctrine that is pronounced with a smile and proclaimed as realism. Therefore, the Brotherhood would have their modern world populated by machines because "the only scientific objectivity is a machine."<sup>1</sup>

Thus as the invisible man pleads with Hambro to see

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<sup>1</sup>Ibid., p. 381.

him, the latter looks at him as if he were not there. The protagonist has moved one more step closer to self-knowledge in this initiation rite. Now, he is beginning to see the pattern of his life: "Everywhere I've turned somebody has wanted to sacrifice me for my good--only they were the ones who benefited. And now we start on the old sacrificial merry-go-round."<sup>1</sup> It is still the blind leading the blind that the invisible man described in his arena speech, and there are still the same results. He has been no savior, no god, no father; all he has given the people is one used glass eye. But his blind days are still not over; he is still caught up in the power game, seeking retribution. He still believes that he can lead others without knowing who he is himself. The only alternatives that appear on the horizon of his vision are to return to serving Bledsoe and Emerson or serving Jack, the absurd to the ridiculous, both acts of continued self-betrayal as he can now see.

Yet, even now he has reached another plateau of understanding because now he can see that he is invisible and indeed always has been to everyone, with or without dark glasses. Now the character of the invisible man again can be intentionally ironic. Now with his insights, much of the novel's symbolism functions with and through his self-knowledge. Now he has come to see the contradiction of himself; instead of stating, "I am what I am," he now states " . . . I was and

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<sup>1</sup>Ibid., p. 382.

yet I was invisible. . . . I was and yet I was unseen."<sup>1</sup> He has also changed from the present to the past voice stressing his increased uncertainty. Thus, he realizes that the dirty joke is and always has been on him, and raging as he had raged at Bledsoe, he can take another step toward self-realization. He can accept his past for the first time. He can look around corners, an attribute of invisibility that he had mentioned in the prologue. Therefore, the protagonist can see, at last, the pattern of his past experiences:

. . . Images of past humiliations flickered through my head and I saw that they were more than separate experiences. They were me; they defined me. I was my experiences and my experiences were me, and no blind men, no matter how powerful they became, even if they conquered the world, could take that, or change one single itch, taunt, laugh, cry, scar, ache, rage or pain of it.<sup>2</sup>

He is becoming human; he has made the existential and pragmatic discovery that a man is the sum total of all his choices; he creates himself. Therefore, in denying his past, he had denied himself. This leads him to the further realization, like Orestes in Sartre's The Flies or Sisyphus in Camus "The Myth of Sisyphus," that even the most powerful forces, be they gods or men, cannot take these experiences from him.

Understanding the meaning of the joke, and that Jack, Norton, and Emerson are all the same figure, the protagonist decides to use his grandfather's advice though still blindly not understanding its meaning. He will go on saying yes to them, believing this is a new path, when, in truth, this is

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<sup>1</sup>Ibid., p. 383.

<sup>2</sup>Ibid.

all he has ever done. He has not yet seen the ambiguity and paradox in his grandfather's "Yes." Thus, he will be a machine to destroy them, forgetting as in the paint factory that he will then be the machine inside the machine and that this leads only to destruction. Now although he sees that history is no spiral force and that rising upward to success is a lie used to control people, he fails to see that his own formula for success is the pattern formula of all his past failures. So he goes his old course, filling out memberships with fictitious names such as his own had been. Therefore, as in the battle royal, he seeks out a white woman hoping to gain power, still fighting in the dark. Thus, he dreams that he instead of Clifton has been lost, seeing another ironic bird girl prefigure his desolate future. Ellison thus portrays that there will always be temptation and that the protagonist will again fall.

The Sybil episode then follows this warning. As Harlem is running out of control, the protagonist tries to be a Rinehart without really understanding the game he is playing, yet feeling a sense of violated "responsibility." He realizes his invisibility but fails to see that his present use of this knowledge is further distorting his personality. Ellison mirrors this fact in the objective correlative of the distorted images of the boys who dance in front of the smashed mirrored facade on 125th Street. Thus, the hot-dog-days close in on Harlem to destroy it. Jack has prevailed, and his birthday

celebration, a type of Yeatsian second coming, is the day of his triumph.

This reality is contrasted by Ellison to the invisible man's visit to a blind Sybil. The protagonist knows that Sybil doesn't see him; yet he blindly believes that she can reveal the future. Thus, in an ironically funny scene, he attempts to seduce Sybil in the manner that he previously had been seduced, American Beauty roses and all. He fails in another of Rinehart's roles, that of the lover. Again he is expected to sing or show his strength which is, as always, that of a poor blind fighter. So, once more, he is riding the same circular merry-go-round which is reminiscent of the smoker, Trueblood, his meeting with Emerson, his lectures on the Woman Question, and his seduction. It is the same ritual, the same joke, the same game. He is again a mask, Boogie Bear. As Ellison points out in Shadow and Act, "the Negro is idealized into a symbol of sensation, of unhampered social and sexual relationships."<sup>1</sup>

Yet even poor blind Sybil can see that she and the protagonist are alike. They have both been taught to worship power. Therefore, both end the evening ironically unfulfilled, and the invisible man again had caught himself in a trap of his own making. They are just two blind people who cannot see each other, and as the invisible man washes away his "sin" with benzine, which recalls the paint factory, he

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<sup>1</sup>Ellison, Shadow and Act, p. 97.



wonders about the responsibility for his actions. And this sense of "responsibility" again leads him to answer the call of the Brotherhood.

Now, the invisible man is again running with the stars sailing red behind his eyelids. His poor drunken Sybil is enshrined against an ancient building with huge Greek medallions. He is still running, dreamlike, with his eyes closed, and his briefcase is heavy under his arm. He has rejected his messengers for a blind Sybil.

Yet as always he has been chasing a dream that turns out to be a nightmare. Even blind Sybil has told him more of the truth than he can see. She has warned that George, who represents the Brotherhood, is as blind as a mole, a blind man who works in dark places. She has told him, wild-eyed and white faced, that this world, in which he has tried to be a dictator, is not of their making. Against this background, he recalls his first entrance into Harlem and feels as if he had drowned in the river as he heads to a new baptism. He has been no Grant, leading his followers to victory, and his revolutionary agony, like that of the Palisades, will be lost on a roller coaster ride. His race is almost run as the sign "The Time Is Now" suggests. Now he is to be stomped on by history as ironically as he had intended to stomp on the Brotherhood. His true baptism at floodtide is not in the cool water with which he washes his face and eyes, but rather, ironically, in the droppings of the birds. He

crosses a Jordan River of hard stones and steel to his meeting with history as the sound of a faceless multitude again echoes in his ears. The bird symbolism now climaxes: "It came, a twitter, a coo, subdued roar that seemed trying to tell me something, give me some message."<sup>1</sup> So as the girders march off rhythmically into the darkness, like the bridge in the castration dream, the birds seem as though they have been waiting for him alone with an eternal dedication. As their wings fill his mind, his face and body are left streaked like the bronze statue of the College Founder. He has come full circle, still running blindly not knowing who he is, where he is, or where he is going, as he covers his head with his briefcase. The warnings unheeded, the birds, pigeons, sparrows, gulls, run him through the gantlet as he has always run, in one continual battle royal, one running joke.

In the final chapter, Ellison's style reflects the frenzied state of the protagonist's consciousness as well as the riot. For example, Ellison describes the meeting between Ras and the invisible man in the following manner:

I looked at Ras on his horse and at their handful of guns and recognized the absurdity of the whole night and of the simple yet confoundingly complex arrangement of hope and desire, fear and hate, that had brought me here still running, and knowing now who I was and where I was and knowing too that I had no longer to run for or from the Jacks and the Emersons and the Bledsoes and Nortons, but only from their confusion, impatience, and refusal to recognize the beautiful absurdity of their American identity and mine.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>Ellison, Invisible Man, p. 430.

<sup>2</sup>Ibid., p. 422.

The balanced sentence structure here reflects the paradox of the protagonist's journey of hope and hate, and its complexity mirrors the journey's arduous quality. In addition, the use of synonyms such as, ". . . I'd run, been run, chased, operated, purged . . . ." suggests the circular patterning of the plot incidents.

The final chapter of Invisible Man is also the culmination of the symbolism and irony involved in the novel. Here the protagonist runs as fast as he ever has through a nightmarish blue fire-glow similar to his viewing objects and people moiling in the eerie green tint of his glasses. Here, clutching in his briefcase all the previous symbols of his denied self, he stumbles on to his true identity. Here, at last, he comes home to his invisibility.

The probability for the riot has been carefully prepared for, particularly by the preceding chapter. For example, an unidentified man in a Harlem crowd had previously insisted they needed guns to take "an eye for an eye." Therefore in Jack's blind-eyed fashion the destruction begins. On a hot dry August night a black Fourth of July is celebrated. Time stands still, as with the last blow of an ax, as it always has since his meeting with Trueblood. Once again the machine and man have changed places; a man dies quietly while the auto tire shrieks in agony. The race riot is again a bloody battle royal fought in the dark between invisible men. It is the culmination of the nightmare, the last laugh of the

dirty joke, the ritualistic sacrifice of the mask.

Again with his face bleeding, recalling his relationships to Trueblood and Norton, the invisible man, the man with a "hole" in his head, keeps irresponsibly running in a hell of his own making. And the crowd, which seems to come from underground, again is used by Ellison to point up the protagonist's blindness. The dead man, reminiscent of Tod Clifton, is a reminder of this blindness, but now the invisible man can no longer speak his name. As always, the protagonist's mind is evading his responsibility, placing a "gray veil," which is reminiscent of the paint factory, of his blindfold and the veil over the slave's eyes, between himself and the truth.

The ominous warnings are there; the walks are like broken mirrors, the street signs are dead, and sounds have lost their stable meaning while the chickens are suspended by their necks. Yet the invisible man again does not heed them and forgets where he is and with whom. Once again he is fooled by Dupre (dupery-the condition of being duped) who, like himself, is both sacrificer and victim. So here in hell, in never-ending chaos like the Golden Day, he is again told that he is "all right." He is healed as he was in the hospital, and drinks whiskey like Norton, thankful for the shock it gave him. Here with his loot, his price money, Mary's broken bank and coins, the invisible man gets the final payoff.

Again he is led, following blindly, this time through hell by Scofield. Here Dupre, a signal for ruler, dupe, devil, and also black slave history with his cotton-picking sack, leads in his Dobbs, which is reminiscent of the invisible man's "homburg." Indeed, the invisible man's briefcase, which is ever present in the chapter, has been his own cotton-picking sack, the sign of his slavery. In this way, Dupre is further related to the invisible man; both had brought their "sacks" to the North to fill them with loot. Yet, as a signal, he is also related to Rinehart because he is a wearer of many hats and the master of chaos.

So now in the "dog days" the rabbit is again caught. Time has run out as the protagonist runs clutching his already too full briefcase. Ironically, the initiating incident for the riot is unknown. Some attribute it to Clifton's death although they ironically cannot remember his name. Yet, the protagonist is blindly right when he asserts that someone must know the reason. Therefore, the invisible man gives his true identity to Dupre and is recognized when he states he is not somebody, that he is "nobody." The pattern has come full circle, and the blind battle royal continues with Dupre who is, in addition, related to both Jack and Ras by his call for "organization." Once again the invisible man is glad to play follow the leader. Thus, as the men work in the dark concealing their identity and lack of identity, the invisible man is again running with the blind leading the blind. It is

the same old game as the cash register rings, the voices play in the air, and they fill their buckets with coal oil reminiscent of the paint factory. It is indeed the devil's holiday for Clifton, and the muddied milk recalls the curdled milk of millions of black slave mammies previously mentioned by the protagonist and also the blood and beer of the Golden Day. The scene is like a circus parade, and therefore is reminiscent of his dream of his grandfather. All are still running.

Now comes the final duping of the invisible man, the apartment burning. Since it is worked out according to plan, the invisible man calls it good. Dupre, a doer like the invisible man, tells them it is "all right," leading the people in godlike fashion, like the invisible man, to destruction. They follow like blind animals no longer knowing where they are going while Lattie, like Lot, is told to leave the city of destruction. So again the old are dispossessed as the men work like blind moles. Like the Brotherhood, they are men who work in the dark to bring about destruction while failing to see that this act is also self-destroying. Again, the dream is only too real as the violent red flames accent the chaos.

The invisible man still fails to see that this action is part of a still larger plan, the plan within the plan. So again, the invisible man plunges down, still running, his briefcase spotted with oil, still blind to the fact that it is the Brotherhood that has organized this history. Thus, the

fact that the woman believes he is now leading these men is ironically true. Therefore, symbolically, once again he can no longer "see" the people, and his head hurts as it had in the hospital. The invisible man has blindly continually betrayed the people and himself; they looked to him as a healer, like the man bleeding to death, but he cannot even heal himself. It is only with the words "race riot" that the invisible man's sight is finally restored. Now, the protagonist sees he indeed has been "responsible," and the word is used here in its true sense for the first time. Thus, although he still carries his heavy briefcase, he now can use it to strike the dog who chases him. Symbolically the dog no longer has "got holt" of him. And as the flood, the baptism of blood, rises, he sees a symbol of himself, the man with the hallucinated cry who seems to have run for years, and his cry clearly states the invisible man's past, present and future.

Now again, as the invisible man runs with a painful sense of isolation, he seems to fall. Under the eye of the still watchful moon mirrored in the river of shattered glass, he sees the white female dummies hanging. The nightmare, which is all too real, has overtones of Trueblood's dream. This is where it has all led, and thus the dummies are real even though they are unreal. Therefore, ironically to hang the invisible man with the dummies will add one dummy that is real.

Now, Ras dressed in the skin of a wild animal, his time come round at last as he promised, has become the "Destroyer." He is another part of the reality of the nightmare. Therefore, the invisible man, who no longer sees through a glass darkly, his lenses crushed, uses Tarp's chain for self-protection. Now seeing clearly both his own and Ras' sacrificial role, the protagonist ironically becomes true orator using only a few simple words, but now no one will hear him; the sleeping ones will not be awakened. He stops saying yes and refuses to go on with the battle royal, refuses to be the butt of the dirty joke. Yet, in his very refusal, he will even be killed according to the ritual--death by lynching, death for the mask because Ras believes the protagonist is "responsible" for the mask and therefore must die. But the invisible man in his self-realization ironically only now also becomes a true leader running from the illusions of Ras. Therefore, even though he is still running, he is paradoxically no longer running from or for himself and his past. He sees the paradox and the absurdity and thus knows who he is and where he is and that only the refusal to see his American identity is to be avoided.

In this light, therefore, his sacrificial death would be too "narrow" like Tobitt's source; it would not make him visible. He would still be just the mask, just part of the game even for his murderers. Indeed his murderers have been responsible in part for the mask through their blindness.



Thus, his death would be too absurd even in this existing absurdity because Ras is as confused about the nature of reality as the white men, who seem to solely control it, are blind. Again, the blind lead the blind. Therefore, the protagonist determines that it is better to live out one's own absurdity than to die for illusions of others.

Now the invisible man again dies and is reborn as in the hospital, but this time he is born in truth. Therefore, he silences Ras as he has silenced his deceptive self. He sees now that American reality is one long battle royal with all the players, losers, fighting in the dark, destroying themselves. Now the protagonist sees that respect and love, as the slave woman suggests, are the way to end the joke. It is thus that he is finally baptized with water as like the rabbit he is hunted down by policemen on horseback while the comet image warns of the destruction of his old world during still another battle royal. Therefore, ironically, as a black man suggests, this night is about the same as all other nights.

But revenge is not to be the protagonist's anymore than it was to be Ahab's as he is still to be made the butt of the joke. Guarding his shame in his briefcase, he falls into the coal pit; he has come home to himself. Now, he knows that not only his life is in his briefcase, but the lives of all men. In this further self-knowledge of where he is, he experiences another symbolic death and rebirth, a death in

life, as he floats out on black water dreaming of Mary.

Thus, the invisible man is reborn to his invisibility, and paradoxically in this darkness he sees his true self. Here in this limitless, timeless, blackness, he discovers himself by literally burning his past, each of the papers he had allowed to define him, name him and set him running, beginning with his high school diploma. These feeble torches give him the light to see that it was Jack who had written the anonymous letter, and here in the darkness, he fights his last battle royal, with himself, and stops running caught in the reality between dreaming and waking like Trueblood's jaybird.

The final dream sequence of the novel is used by Ellison to sum up the protagonist's fool's journey. Now the darkness turns to light, and he sees he is a prisoner of Jack, Emerson, Bledsoe, Norton, Ras, the school superintendent and others who had kept him running. And now his castration, which has continually symbolically taken place throughout the novel, becomes the center of his dream. Because he will not return to them, they free him of his illusions in this manner. They free him "all right," and this final act of dehumanization is the price he must pay for his insight. As he states in the epilogue, there is a passion for conformity to the pattern, and Jack and the boys are always waiting to "ball the jack."<sup>1</sup> Man should be allowed to keep his "many parts,"<sup>2</sup> but he has by his life allowed them to destroy his

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<sup>1</sup>Ibid., p. 435.

<sup>2</sup>Ibid.

manhood, and now his realization of this, his freedom from illusion, leaves him painfully empty. And through a series of reversals, such as those of the previous episodes of the novel, he discovers that there is no salvation in this dehumanization for himself or his destroyers. The butterfly is just part of the joke. Now he sees, in a red haze in which he paradoxically cannot see, they have made him their destiny like Norton, their sun, and their moon, and their world. He is indeed their only history, and he and his generations are an inseparable part of this history. So as the iron man, representative of the dehumanization of all men, and the goals of the modern world which continually threaten to turn all men, players and spectators alike, into mechanical men, moves off, the protagonist cries that he must be stopped and that "we" must stop him. In this manner, Ellison uses the dream to sum up the action of the novel and prepare for the statements of the epilogue. Therefore, "the end was in the beginning."<sup>1</sup>

The epilogue functions in two ways. First, it functions as a part of the frame of the novel, and second, it is also an incident in the plot itself. It is the final boomeranging of the protagonist. The writing of his memoirs has shown him his major fault. "And my problem was that I always tried to go in everyone's way but my own."<sup>2</sup> As Ellison says of his protagonist,

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<sup>1</sup>Ibid., p. 431.

<sup>2</sup>Ibid., p. 433.

the hero's invisibility is not a matter of being seen, but a refusal to run the risk of his own humanity, which involves guilt. This is not an attack upon white society; it is what the hero refuses to do in each section which leads to further action. He must assert and achieve his own humanity; he cannot run with the pack and do this--this is the reason for all the reversals. The Epilogue is the most final reversal of all; therefore it is a necessary statement.<sup>1</sup>

The act of putting his memoirs down in black and white has changed him. He has come from his definition of himself as "an orator, a rabble rouser" from placing the blame of his condition on others to realizing that at least half of his sickness was self-inflicted. Ellison points out that

the final act of Invisible Man is not that of a concealment in darkness in the Anglo-Saxon connotation of the word, but that of a voice issuing its little wisdom out of the substance of its own inwardness--after having undergone a transformation from ranter to writer. . . . For the novel, his memoir, is one long, loud rant, howl and laugh. His mobility is dual; geographical . . . but, more important, it is intellectual. And in keeping with the reverse English of the plot, and with the Negro American conception of blackness, his movement vertically downward (not into a 'sewer,' Freud notwithstanding, but into a coal cellar, a source of heat, light, power, and through association with the character's motivation, self-perception) is a process of rising to an understanding of his human condition.<sup>2</sup>

It is this structure that leads Marcus Klein to chastise Ellison as an artist.<sup>3</sup> Klein seems to think that there can be only one kind of plot structure in the novel, that of the incident, where the incidents culminate eventually in a

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<sup>1</sup>Ellison, Shadow and Act, pp. 179-80.

<sup>2</sup>Ibid., pp. 71-72.

<sup>3</sup>Klein, Images of the Negro in American Literature, p. 250.

change of fortune for the protagonist. This, however, simply isn't true, and to criticize an author for choosing another type of structure is as ridiculous as saying all books should be constructed like Tom Jones. The very instructional point that Ellison wishes to make depends on the repetition of the initial pattern incident. There has been no change in fortune for the protagonist because he has been blind to the truth of this situation. Thus, it is his knowledge, and through this, his character, that must change (and it does through the writing of the novel as seen in the epilogue) while the action of the incidents remains the same. Self-awareness, self-knowledge, is what the protagonist must learn before his situation can change, and it is only with the telling of his memoirs that he comes to full self-awareness.

The period of hibernation, of preparation described in the prologue, is over. He can no longer be "irresponsible," shrinking from responsibility as in the prologue; he can no longer just hate the sleepwalkers. The protagonist comes up from the underground because the act of writing demands it. Thus, Invisible Man is a plot of character as opposed to a plot of action because the change in action is secondary to the change in character; the action of the novel stays essentially the same throughout while it is the protagonist's knowledge of the situation that is eventually changed with his self-enlightenment in the darkness of his hole.

But because of Marcus Klein's criticism of the novel's

structure, it " . . . doesn't finally go anywhere,"<sup>1</sup> he must also determine that the epilogue is a desperate attempt on the part of Ellison to correct what the critic considers a major flaw in the plot of the novel. The epilogue, however, is part of the plot because it is here that the invisible man sees that he has created himself by the sum of his actions. He comes to the existential insight that even though life is absurd, the world, even for one who is invisible, contains infinite possibilities. Yes, the world is chaos, and good and evil are concepts that cannot be pinned down and therefore are confused with each other. Even though modern man, as Sartre says, is forlorn and suffers anxiety and despair, the invisible man has discovered "life is to be lived, not controlled; and humanity is won by continuing to play in the face of certain defeat."<sup>2</sup> Thus, the invisible man's life becomes the life of all men; he is an Everyman, and his story, the story of the human race.

In this sense all writing for Ellison or his protagonist becomes the agency of their efforts "to answer the questions: Who am I, what am I, how did I come to be."<sup>3</sup> What is true of the artist in general is also true of the invisible man's compulsion to make art of his invisibility. Therefore, Ellison's statement concerning the artist also applies

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<sup>1</sup>Ibid., p. 251.

<sup>2</sup>Ellison, Invisible Man, p. 435.

<sup>3</sup>Ellison, Shadow and Act, p. XIX.

to his protagonist; he too is created by his writing, and it is because of this very fact that the epilogue gives no easy answers, sells "no phony forgiveness"<sup>1</sup> any more than the blues. The ambiguity of his grandfather's "yes" is still not given a simple answer. It is a signal, like the whiteness of the whale in Moby Dick, that raises many questions, many answers, given their relationship within the interaction of man's experience. Here again can be seen Ellison's use of the stylistic devices of repetition, balanced sentences, parallel construction, and alliteration. In addition, his choice of words such as "darkness," "origin," "sacrificed" give this passage a biblical tone of authority.

A partial meaning of affirming the principle on which this "yes" is based can be found in Ellison's comments in Shadow and Act.

. . . Being a Negro American involves a willed . . . affirmation of self as against all outside pressures--an identification with the group as extended through the individual self which rejects all possibilities of escape that do not involve a basic resuscitation of the original American ideals of social and political justice.<sup>2</sup>

It is at its basis a question of retaining one's humanity in the face of a more and more dehumanized modern world. It points to the fact that those who would stereotype blacks to destroy them, in the final analysis, disfigure and destroy their own humanity. That is why the invisible man denounces

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<sup>1</sup>Ellison, Invisible Man, p. 438.

<sup>2</sup>Ellison, Shadow and Act, p. 137.

and defends, hates and loves, and that is what makes him able to finally share in the humanity of his grandfather. His grandfather understood that being black

. . . involves a rugged initiation into the mysteries and rites of color which makes it possible for Negro Americans to suffer the injustice which race and color are used to excuse without losing sight of either the humanity of those who inflict that injustice or the motives, rational or irrational, out of which they act. It imposes the uneasy burden and occasional joy of a complex double vision, a fluid ambivalent response to men and events which represents, at its finest, a profoundly civilized adjustment to the cost of being human in this modern world.<sup>1</sup>

The Jacks and Nortons of the world and their rigidly constructed views of the world and history must be opposed because the place we seek is " . . . that condition of man's being at home in the world, which is called love, and which we term democracy."<sup>2</sup>

This is why the invisible man finds the answer to living lies in diversity, not conformity, in being one's self, not in being the stereotype on the cover of Esquire as he had once dreamed. Thus, the joke of the novel has always been involved in the protagonist's blindness to where, and therefore, who he is; in his confusion of both the time and the place, he has endangered his humanity, seen in terms of his manhood, both physically and spiritually. Finally, the novel comes full circle, and the invisible man replaces the old singer of spirituals in the prologue. Her way becomes his way; he has understood the paradox of being human in this

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<sup>1</sup>Ibid., p. 137.

<sup>2</sup>Ibid., p. 114.



modern mechanical society. This is what Ellison has stated is the sign of the true novel. These writings " . . . even when most pessimistic and bitter, arise out of an impulse to celebrate human life and therefore are ritualistic and ceremonial at their core. Thus they would preserve as they destroy, affirm as they reject."<sup>1</sup> It is in this way that Ellison presents the invisible man as the modern day Everyman, and his story as the story of the human race. At the end of the novel the first person narrator directly appeals to the reader: "Who knows but that, on the lower frequencies, I speak for you?"<sup>2</sup>

Thus, the invisible man to become a man must pass through an initiation rite that is similar to Robin's in "My Kinsman, Major Molineux." Like Robin he is initiated through a series of incidents into the knowledge of evil, and like Robin, he must have all his hopes and aspirations destroyed; he must lose his "innocence." Life is not at all as he thought it was, and he must pass through chaos, through a series of opposites to come to its paradox of truth. His experiences show him that to succeed is to fail and to fail is to succeed. Therefore, his losses become his gains as he discovers that to fall is truly to ascend and that his previous rise had indeed been a series of continuous falls. He learns that his "sight" had been the cause of his blindness,

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<sup>1</sup>Ibid., p. 212.

<sup>2</sup>Ellison, Invisible Man, p. 439.

and thus as an invisible man, he becomes, for the first time, a person. He learns in the darkness that is his light that he had lived in a dream world strictly limited and controlled by time and space, but he awakens to reality which is a nightmare, chaos in which there are no dimensions of time or space. He discovers in Rinehartism that a lie is the truth, and his truth has been a lie; therefore his fondest idea of responsibility has resulted in his most irresponsible actions. He learns in addition that the triumph of technology has been the defeat of humanism. He believed life and death were as different as black and white only to discover in a death alive that " . . . one of the greatest jokes in the world is the spectacle of the whites busy escaping blackness and becoming blacker every day, and the blacks striving toward whiteness, becoming quite dull and gray."<sup>1</sup> Thus, in his place in the world, which is a place outside of the world, he can see the love of power is a great weakness, and that for all his "progress," he has been standing still. Therefore, indeed, the end is in the beginning, and as he creates himself searching for his identity in retelling his history, the beginning is in the end.

As a result of these experiences, the protagonist comes to an understanding of the true paradox of himself and of the world, and in the form of mad notes from the underground comes truth. The invisible man has learned in the act

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<sup>1</sup>Ibid., p. 436.

of recording his life that as in the fairy tale " . . . beauty must be awakened by the beast, the beastly man can only regain his humanity through love."<sup>1</sup>

Thus, Invisible Man is truly a novel in the American tradition because as Ellison notes, the search for identity is the American theme. Like most men, this black and invisible protagonist was not conscious of his own identity, and the terms with which he had been trying to define himself were inadequate, being totally those of others. In his search for himself, which is the search of every man, he had to learn "if I would know who I am and preserve who I am, then I must see others distinctly whether they see me so or not."<sup>2</sup> Thus, Ellison's statements concerning the writer's struggle with the world, which he likens to the Tar Baby, apply equally to the nameless protagonist's search; our names must be made our own to achieve a place carved out of chaos.

Therefore in the final analysis, given its structure and its moral purpose, Invisible Man is indeed a truly great and major American novel. It touches the heart of the American paradox and deals with American chaos. It answers the very challenge that Ellison himself poses for the novel.

Its [America's] truth lies in its diversity and swiftness of change. Through forging forms of the novel worthy of it, we achieve the resolution of those world problems of humanity which for a moment seem to those who are in awe of statistics completely insoluble.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>Ellison, Shadow and Act, p. 38.

<sup>2</sup>Ibid., p. 132.      <sup>3</sup>Ibid., p. 114.

## CHAPTER V

### CONCLUSION

Since Cane, Native Son, and Invisible Man have been analysed in detail, it is now possible to draw contrasting critical conclusions concerning these works and to offer some suggestions as to their places in American letters. As I have previously stated, most of the existing criticism concerned with these novels has been done in a piecemeal manner with no attempt to detail their literary relationship. These three novels were chosen because they represent various stages of development of the black writer. Since the black author in America has been able to publish to any great extent only within the last decades (Arna Bontemps compared this ability to publish to the falling of the walls of Jericho) it follows that serious critical examination of the works of the black authors has also lagged behind. My dissertation is meant to bridge in a small way this gap, a gap of which I have been continually made aware in my years of teaching about black American novelists, by examining in detail the major work of three of America's most talented black writers. Since this dissertation has studied their plot structures in relation to their characterization, thought, symbolism and its related devices, scope and point of view, and finally their style and

intent, it is now possible to critically compare and contrast these novels and ultimately make some judgment concerning their literary worth.

Toomer, Wright and Ellison thus struggle essentially, as this analysis of their works shows, with the presentation of the same moral problems. The three novels depict the blind vision of a nation that has made many of its native sons invisible. The metaphors and symbols which they use to portray the tragically divided personalities of their protagonists are strikingly alike. Their protagonists are underground men whose very existence underlines the nightmare of reality. The novels all involve initiation rites through which these characters, many of whom are nameless, must pass to achieve self-realization and a true identity; they must create themselves in the existential sense to truly exist in a sterile, dehumanized, industrial society. All three novels use the symbols of blindness, invisibility, the joke, the game, the puppet, running, and the battle royal. All three also use folklore and pattern repetition to achieve their artistic ends. Finally, all three novels use patterning also to emphasize the static quality of the lives of their protagonists given their places in this divided, dehumanized modern world. However, the success of the novels must be determined on the structuring of plot elements as well as character, style and intention, and it is on the basis of the previous analysis and criticism of these works that their

ultimate literary worth will be determined.

Like Wright and Ellison, Toomer uses surrealism to depict the quality of nightmare that is reality for his characters. As the invisible man will be, they are constantly involved in the game of life, in battle royals with others and within themselves. Like Bigger and the invisible man, Toomer's characters often seek escape from this reality through diversions such as the theatre, books and newspapers. But there is no lasting peace, and the songs, which Toomer uses in a manner similar to Ellison, touch their blind eyes and deaf ears, offering the only hope in a sterile modern world.

Toomer's tense, shifting style reflects the chaos of his personal life. The fact that Toomer would ultimately deny his blackness is perhaps also foreshadowed by the division in his work. However, his experimental linking of poetry and prose mirrors the strivings of the Negro Renaissance which brought a new sense of creativity to the black writers of the Harlem School.

This linking of poetry and prose also contributes toward the uniqueness of the plot of Cane. Its tales, set in both urban and rural settings, of necessity depend upon the overall theme of the novel for their unity. This episodic structure dictates that the incidents in the novel must therefore be made to directly or indirectly further Toomer's thematic purpose.

This structure, on the positive side, allows Toomer a certain amount of freedom that would be restricted by the usual cause and effect relation prevalent in the novel. It coincides with Toomer's fluid style, and it allows him to depict a variety of unconnected events involving grotesques causally unrelated to one another. More importantly for Toomer, it also allows him to introduce his poetry at will. The best of this poetry captures the black roots of the nation, the folklore, the drama, the tragedy, and the haunting beauty. Poems such as "Song of the Son," "Conversion," and "Harvest Song" voice, in the cadences of the black folk song, the cleavage that slavery has left on the soul of the nation. These poems strike at the barrenness and sterility of a modern society that has sacrificed its humanity to progress. They highlight the traces of the human touch that remain and struggle toward the light from underground. These poems are the most profound production of Toomer's genius.

This poetic style also influences the lyrical quality of Toomer's prose. His haunting images, the dusk-like folk women, the cane drenched Dixie Pike, the whispering spirit of Jesus, all bear his poetic touch. Indeed, even Toomer's treatment of the sterile modern city, with its death-like white-washed emptiness and its Rhoberts who place material gains above life itself; has a lyrical quality. In addition, Toomer's three-part division intrinsically has the effect of sending rhymical reverberations echoing throughout the novel,

again a type of lyrical effect.

Yet, inherent in Toomer's very experimental style is the weakness that detracts from the novel's impact. His episodic structure and his intermingling of poetry and prose, while it does heighten the lyric sense of the novel and emphasizes the twisted, divided, grotesque personalities of his protagonists, also highlights the novel's dependency upon theme for a sense of wholeness. Yet the extremely episodic quality of the novel itself tends to obscure this didactic theme. For example, the connections between the tales of "Bona and Paul" and "Karintha" are at best nebulous.

Another characteristic that tends to make the novel seem halting and hesitating is Toomer's choice of narrators, perhaps because of his own uncertainty of his blackness, that are too removed from the consciousness of his protagonists. This results, occasionally, in characters who remain undefined and who, therefore, fail to move the reader. For example, in the tale of Karintha, Toomer uses an implied narrator who is so removed from the consciousness of the protagonist that the reader's sense of Karintha's tragedy is limited. In addition, this distance also tends to reduce the surprise and suspense of the tale. Furthermore, Toomer at times presents his characters almost entirely through their dialogue and occasional actions, thus limiting the psychological development of these characters and therefore reducing rather than expanding the possibilities of the novel. An ex-



ample of this reduction can be seen in the character of Fern, who is present entirely through the narrator's impressions of external circumstances.

However, even though Toomer's novel thus lacks the wholeness and depth of the later works of Ellison and Wright, Cane represents a high point in the development of the black novelist. Toomer's vision, conceived in powerful poetic images and conveyed by a surging narrative drive, reveals new horizons for the black writer. Now a black novelist has demonstrated that the themes of protest can be forged in the creative vision of true artistry. Therefore, one must agree with Bone's judgment of Cane as

. . . an important American novel. By far the most impressive product of the Negro Renaissance, it ranks with Richard Wright's Native Son and Ralph Ellison's Invisible Man as a measure of the Negro novelist's highest achievement.<sup>1</sup>

Richard Wright's Native Son is also a novel composed of powerful images and pulsing narrative style. But Wright avoids Toomer's sporadic quality. His novel centers on Bigger's actions, the motivations for these actions, and what Wright pictures as the results of these motivations. Native Son, published in 1940, is part of a different era than Toomer's Cane. Novels based on racial backgrounds were now frequently written by black authors. Primitivism, such as Toomer depicted in his novel, was being replaced by concerns for the problems of blacks in urban centers and their relationships

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<sup>1</sup>Bone, The Negro Novel in America, p. 81.

to the race struggle in America.

Unlike Toomer, Wright was certain of his blackness. Bigger was to be the presentation of the mask that had been created to hide the humanity of blacks. Wright's swift moving style, his threefold division, and his continual concentration on the character Bigger, while minimizing the importance of other characters, furthers this aim. As in Toomer and Ellison, Wright uses the images and symbols of blindness, illusion, running, guilt, the joke, and burial underground. As in these authors' works, these images and symbols are used to depict the inner life of a black character.

Yet, as in Cane, there are inherent artistic defects in Native Son. These defects have been made perhaps more difficult to discuss because of the literary criticism that has surrounded Native Son since its publication. For example, in James Emanuel's and Theodore Gross' work Dark Symphony, the novel is praised as a black novel for its very literary weaknesses.

Native Son is an awkward book in terms of style, structure, and characterization, and it suffers from a tendentious quality that one finds in many naturalistic novels; but its very clumsiness gives its subject--the victimization and crucifixion of the Negro by a white society--a strength that is absent from more carefully written, more subtlety conceived works of art. The book has the haunting quality of revelation, for never had the Negro's suppressed feelings been so ruthlessly exposed, and it succeeds in inducing guilt on the part of the American reader as he realizes that Bigger Thomas, the protagonist of the novel, is a part of America too, that he is also one of its native sons.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>James A. Emanuel and Theodore L. Gross, Dark Symphony; Negro Literature in America (New York: The Free Press, 1968), p. 224.

This type of criticism is also an example of the part that guilt, related to racial struggle in America, played in the reception of the novel. Indeed, as the analysis of Wright's novel shows, Wright himself encouraged this feeling of guilt by the construction of the novel itself. Therefore, it is not totally surprising to find critics such as Irving Howe abandoning what Littlejohn calls "moral and critical clarity"<sup>1</sup> to praise Native Son.

However, objective criticism cannot overlook the novel's lapse into melodrama and an occasional sensationalism. Nor can the novel's frequent improbability be accepted, as Wright attempts to have it accepted, on the basis of inner "feelings." It is not that Bigger's hatred isn't real; it is Wright's methods of revealing that hatred that are not, for example the confrontation of the Daltons in Bigger's prison cell.

In addition, Native Son has weaknesses that result from Wright's choice of point of view for the novel. Wright has created the sub-human character of Bigger, and yet Wright must maintain the reader's sympathy for his protagonist. The only manner in which to do this is to use an implied narrator, reporting on Bigger's experiences as if through Bigger's own consciousness. Because of his limited consciousness, Bigger is himself not totally aware, nor is he capable of adequately presenting the hidden meaning of his life, which is essential

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<sup>1</sup>Littlejohn, Black on White, p. 5.

for the reader to see to both sympathize with Bigger and to understand the novel at all. Therefore, Wright must use this implied narrator constantly to interpret Bigger's motivation for the reader. This narrator is maintained steadily throughout Books I and II. However, in Book III, Wright has Max replace the implied narrator as spokesman for Bigger's motivations. This disturbs the flow of the novel. It involves a style change as well as a change in focus. In Books I and II, the implied narrator's comments flow unobstructively, enlightening the reader as to the hidden meaning of Bigger's life. But in Book III, the tone of the novel is wrenched out of joint. Furthermore, the character of Max is never developed sufficiently to support the role as spokesman for Bigger, and his pronouncements tend to be repetitious. In addition, the final communistic vision that Max presents to Bigger is imposed on the novel rather than developed as an integral part of the work.

Also the supporting characters of Native Son tend to be wooden stereotypes. This serves to reinforce Bigger's own lack of humanity. The result is, as Baldwin points out, a reduction of the feeling of tragedy and universality. However, the historical and social importance of Native Son can never be denied. It was the immensely popular success of Native Son that helped to provide both a reading public and a publishing outlet for future black writers. In addition, Wright can be said to have freed the black writer from the

dilemma of the mask. As Baldwin notes

recording his days of anger [Wright] has also nevertheless recorded, as no Negro before him had ever done, that fantasy Americans hold in their minds when they speak of the Negro: that fantastic and fearful image which we have lived with since the first slave fell beneath the lash. This is the significance of Native Son and also, unhappily, its overwhelming limitation.<sup>1</sup>

There is, in relation to this limitation in Wright's novel, a major difference between Wright's and Ellison's approach to their novels. The character of Bigger himself limits Wright's scope. Thus, Ellison justifiably criticizes Wright's simplistic vision of life and commitment to an ideology which narrows the conception of the individual and the quality of black humanity. Like Wright, Ellison accepts his blackness, but Ellison through his acceptance is able to posit a universality that is lacking in Wright's work. In this manner, Invisible Man answers Baldwin's lament that there is no black writing that truly expresses the tradition in black life and that Wright's penetration of

. . . this phenomenon, this inward contention of love and hatred, blackness and whiteness, would have given [Bigger] a stature more nearly human and an end more nearly tragic; and would have given us a document more profound and genuinely bitter and less harsh with anger which is, on the one hand, exhibited and, on the other hand, denied.<sup>2</sup>

Invisible Man is such a document balanced on the paradox of love and hate. Although it deals with the same issues that Wright took up in Native Son, the blindness of too much oppression, the black man made to feel as a puppet jerked

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<sup>1</sup>Baldwin, "Many Thousands Gone," p. 240.

<sup>2</sup>Ibid., p. 244.

by invisible white strings, the society that makes its members invisible, Invisible Man deals with these issues through tradition.

For a tradition expresses, after all, nothing more than the long and painful experience of a people; it comes out of the battle waged to maintain their integrity or, to put it more simply, out of their struggle to survive.<sup>1</sup>

The critical treatment of Invisible Man is therefore interesting in relation to its importance and place in literary history. Invisible Man never caused the critical division that Native Son initiated.

Thus, in the light of the entire body of criticism concerning Invisible Man, the remarks of the judges in awarding Ellison the National Book Award in 1953 seem more than justified:

Ralph Ellison shows us how invisible we all are to each other. With a positive exuberance of narrative gifts, he has broken away from the conventions and patterns of the tight, 'well-made' novel. Mr. Ellison has had the courage to take many literary risks, and he has succeeded with them.<sup>2</sup>

In addition the Russwurm Award was given to Invisible Man in 1953 by the black National Newspaper Publishers' Association for the novel's contribution to the conception of democratic principles through its depiction of the American problem of racism.

As the judges of the National Book Awards noted, Ellison's style is experimental. In addition, Ellison's style

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<sup>1</sup> Ibid., p. 241.

<sup>2</sup> Negro Historical Bulletin, October, 1953, p. 20.

differs from both the simpler styles of Toomer and Wright. Thus, it is evident that Ellison rejected both Wright's style and ultimately Wright's vision in Invisible Man. While acknowledging Wright's literary success, Ellison avoided both the narrow vision of Native Son and, therefore, its point of view. In the final analysis, it is precisely Ellison's more complex vision and point of view in Invisible Man that enable him to transcend the artistic problems that plagued Wright. His establishment in the prologue of the mature narrator, who looks wisely back at his own past and blind experiences, gives Ellison a control in his novel that is lacking in the novels of Toomer and Wright. This enables Ellison to have the novel operate on the various levels which give it its universal scope. Thus, Invisible Man is an epic novel that treats of the blindness of all men on their journey through life.

Finally, Ellison's ultimate vision is more universal than Wright's and Toomer's. Unlike Bigger and Kabnis, his protagonist is more tragic because as he himself discovers in the epilogue, his downfall results from a tragic flaw as well as from his external surroundings. It is the complexity of the American experience, with both terrible and marvelous aspects, that Ellison presents in Invisible Man. His novel commemorates the enduring, abiding qualities of American black people especially those developed as a result of oppression and denial. He writes of the faith, sense of life and timing, as well as the method of expressing these, that

make up the American black. Invisible Man is, indeed, a truly great and major American novel. It touches the heart of the American paradox and deals with American chaos while celebrating freedom and life. It answers the very human challenge that Ellison himself poses for the novel.

However, while Ellison's Invisible Man is artistically superior to Cane and Native Son, all three novels are historically important. All three were written to keep alive in our hearts what Wright would call a sense of the inexpressibly human. They irrefutably reveal again what Baldwin stated that "our dehumanization of the Negro . . . is indivisible from our dehumanization of ourselves: the loss of our identity is the price we pay for our annulment of his."<sup>1</sup> Thus, this dissertation has attempted to present these important novels objectively to aid in the understanding of their worth. It is an attempt to correct the critical treatment of black writing, which as Saunders Redding points out " . . . has also been set apart, and the standards by which so much of it--indeed, most of it--has been judged have only rarely been aesthetic and literary."<sup>2</sup>

This is, indeed, also Ellison's just complaint in his rejoinder to Irving Howe's "Black Boys and Native Sons." As the previous study of criticisms of Toomer, Wright and Ellison demonstrates, too frequently when confronted with the

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<sup>1</sup>Baldwin, "Many Thousands Gone," p. 234.

<sup>2</sup>Hill, Anger and Beyond, p. 1.



American black, critics do revert to primitive methods of analysis. Many critics with an air of superiority narrowly reiterate the meaning of black life in America without bothering to learn its complexities. In contrast to these failings, this dissertation has tried to examine the major work of these three great American novelists in accordance with objectively established literary principles. It has taken a unique approach to these writings by fully analyzing and comparing their plots, their style, and their authors' intentions, thus giving a new insight into the novels. In addition, this analysis of Cane, Native Son, and Invisible Man has taken into account their varied artistic form and depth. The final criticisms of the novels are the result of this analysis. Thus, the ultimate goal of this dissertation is to provide a true critical treatment of these writings, a treatment that judges them objectively as serious works of art. As David Littlejohn's critical survey of writings by American blacks suggests, there is indeed a great need for such objective literary treatment of novels written by American blacks.

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## APPENDIX

APPENDIX: Interview with Ralph Ellison

This interview was conducted by Arlene Crewdson and Rita Thomson on WTTW, Channel 11.

Crewdson: In an interview called "The Art of Fiction" you said the book, Invisible Man, was divided into three main divisions with three minor sections in each division and that each one was begun by an important letter or paper of some type. Would you perhaps clarify that a little bit for us?

Ellison: Well, the first paper I would take it, because it has been a long time since I have read the book, but the first paper would have been his diploma from high school which was connected with his entrance into college. And the second, I take it, would have been the paper on which his Brotherhood name was scribbled. With the third name the, no, I am out of sequence. The second name would have been involved with those letters which Dr. Bledsoe gave him to present to people in the North and the third, of course, would have been his Brotherhood name.

Thomson: Then each time he has faith in one of these letters or one of these pieces of paper, then eventually he is disillusioned. His faith is completely torn

Thomson: apart.

Ellison: Yes, each time he allows someone else to define him, to give him an identity or an identity which he tries to assume, he runs into difficulty. And so in the last chapter when he falls into the darkness, he becomes aware of this when he starts burning all these papers to make light for himself.

Thomson: And the paper then that is the anonymous threatening letter isn't really one of the major papers because it doesn't give an identity, because it is a different . . .

Ellison: Well, let's try not to make this too neat; when you are giving an interview you don't always remember how many tags and errors you leave as you structure your plot. Yes, the anonymous letter was significant and perhaps no less than these others because always it has to do with identity and the misconception or the misconceiving of identities.

Crewdson: May I ask you, did you start out, sir, with this idea or did it develop as you went on writing?

Ellison: Oh, I started out by writing a phrase, "I'm an invisible man." I spent the next five years discovering what I meant by it. I did make an outline, a conceptional outline; I knew certain incidents, but as I put it together I discovered that certain things began to happen which seemed to

Ellison: have no direct connection with the concept which lay behind me. And that's part of the excitement of trying to write something.

Thomson: In one of the interviews, "The Art of Fiction," when you were talking about Invisible Man, you mentioned something about the ritual understructure of fiction, and you said that this helps to guide the creation of characters. I was wondering if you could explain to us, perhaps, what you mean by the sense of ritual in the book.

Ellison: Ritual is a sense of the correct way of doing things. It is usually involved with a myth which explains the actions. I do not want to get too technical here because I'm not competent to do so. But it becomes detached in society, and we have many, many rites, some comic, some quite serious. They are connected with taboos; they are connected with growing up in some way and keeping alive, and sometimes they are connected with intimidating. So I became aware after studying Eliot's use of Ulysses and other myths in his poetry that perhaps I could do the same thing if I studied the significance of little social forms which we usually engage ourselves in but not too consciously. The battle royal, for instance, is a form which turns up among Boy Scouts, among all peoples, many, many



Ellison: peoples and has no necessary unpleasant violence concerned with it. But it is, if you know a little anthropology, a way of introducing the young to the chaos which is implicit in darkness, and they fight their way through. And, of course, a boy who wins is somehow heroic because he has gone through the darkness; he has fought his enemies, opposing forces, blindfolded so he comes out of it. In the South the battle royal is benignly, or it used to be benignly fought among Negro kids, themselves. But it is when the racial thing enters, the concept of white superiority and the concept of, well the notion of a hierarchy based upon race is introduced, that this turns into something else, and at that point I thought it did tell us something quite meaningful about the structure of racial relationships.

Crewdson: If I can go back to that same interview, you said in that that action is the thing, that what we are and what we do and what we don't do is what is important. And you went on to say " . . . the problem for me is to get from A to B to C and my anxiety about transitions greatly prolonged the writing of my work." Now, for you as a writer, do you feel therefore that the plot is perhaps the basic element to work with and maybe the characters come

Crewdson: out of the plot?

Ellison: No, I think that as you can conceive a scene, a scene as implicit, I mean the character is implicit in the scene, or if you conceive a character in any sort of active way, in any situation where he has to act, then the scene becomes implicit. Kenneth Burke has a pentab which he uses as a critical instrument; he calls it act, scene, agent, agency and purpose and they are very useful when you want to analyze the relationship between background, character, scene, mood, agents and so on. I am, in a strange kind of way, and I don't want to give myself airs, an Aristotelian because I think in drama it is character which is determined by plot, and this gets us back to the notion of rites. Rites are there before character; rites are there to form and to test character and I believe speaking abstractly that this is the way I want my fiction to work.

Thomson: One of the very interesting things, too, I think in the book are what you called surrealist elements, impressionistic elements in the book, and I think in the interview you said that the part that takes place in the College really is very naturalistic because it is extremely appropriate and then from the time of the Brotherhood some

Thomson: scenes become very surrealistic, and I wonder if you could explain to us what you mean by this and how you have used it?

Ellison: Well, I thought I was just being true to reality. I was not trying to impose the theories of surrealism upon my plot. In those days the time, remember this has been 15 years ago, I assumed that when a Negro character moved across the Mason and Dixon's line, he was not simply taking a trip geographically but he was moving through certain historical stratifications of time. He was moving from a primarily rural environment with all of the slow paced tempo, tempi, of the South, and then when he moved North he was snatched up into a more rapid tempo, a tempo not so closely related to the seasons but to the Stock Market, to the existence of certain kinds of highways, a density of automobiles and so on. Thus, he did move into something which seemed to be surrealistic but which is only a normal American juxtaposition of times and places and elements from the past. I might add here I was in New Orleans recently and was talking to a young friend, and he said, "Ellison, I thought that you were just playing around with surrealism until the other day, and I looked at television, and I saw all of that garbage, millions

Ellison: of tons of garbage, on the streets of New York." So I understood what you meant. It's not surreal at all; it's just what happens in a society which is so rapid and so fluid and so given to juxtaposing of diverse elements in peoples and so on. Customs, for instance.

Crewdson: This point struck me toward the end of the book for example, on page 112 the protagonist states "The day's events flowed past. Trueblood, Mr. Norton, Dr. Bledsoe and Golden Day swept around my mind in a mad surreal whirl." I wondered as I read that later on if you weren't trying to make that artistically work in the way that we saw how he saw it in this world?

Ellison: That was the challenge and, yes, that is what I tried to do to subject his particular consciousness to this multiplicity of time levels, of ritual levels and of manners because he was always challenged, as I think most of us Americans are challenged, to be very, very conscious of where we are and that's not an easy thing to do, and I do believe that knowing where we are, has a lot to do with our knowing who we are and this gets back to the theme, I hope, of identity with which he was sometimes involved.

Crewdson: I think you make the point very well at the end

Crewdson: where he meets Mr. Norton, and he tells him you don't know where you are and if you don't know where you are, how do you know who you are.

Ellison: Yes.

Thomson: That's the part of the epilogue, and I wonder if you would tell us about the purpose of the prologue and the epilogue. Did you feel that they sort of pointed the reader in a direction? They are quite different, of course, from the rest of the story but they seem to sum up so beautifully the theme.

Ellison: Well, actually they're the first parts written. Not all the epilogue, but I conceived and felt, . . . because I don't want to make this too conscious a process, but I wrote the first line and then I was involved. As I became more conscious of what I had to do I felt it necessary to prepare the reader through the prologue, through the pitch, through the tonality, through the general craziness of the sensibility of the narrator for the kinds of experience which would be unfolded as the novel progressed. So, then when I got to the end, I had to find a way of rounding it out, so I just made an envelope, and it was to work that way, I think, because for all my long efforts to make this a novel, it is not really my book, it

Ellison: is a memoir of this narrator, and to cut it off at some point, I had to have the epilogue, so I just put it between the two and so it tells you how he conceived of himself, how he came to conceive of himself, and it ends with his falling into the hole where he would begin to write the memoir which I call my novel but which is really his memoir.

Crewdson: This leads to another question. Why did you choose to write the novel as a first person "I" narration and perhaps limited view?

Ellison: Well, for a number of reasons. I felt that I had to test my own abilities, and I wanted to test certain theories of a writer whom I admire very much and that was Henry James, who felt that Dostoevski was not much of a novelist because he wrote in the first person, and novels in the first person tend to be great baggy monsters, and I also admired Ernest Hemingway, and he had written two very wonderful, moving and, I think, great novels in the first person, and so had Scott Fitzgerald and so had Melville in Moby Dick. So I wanted to see if I could do that. Now that's one part of it. I also felt that I could achieve certain types of intensity and vividness if I wrote in the first person, and I also wanted to challenge myself to

Ellison: see if I could create a dramatic action while being narrated in the first person and at the same time make that an integral part of the experience because you notice that the man moves from someone who talks all the time (the exact reversal of what has happened to me, I now talk all the time) but he started out as an orator in school, and he really ends up, though he doesn't say so, by writing a book.

Thomson: I imagine, too, that writing the book in the first person has led so many people to ask if it is autobiographical, and I know in "The Art of Fiction" that you say, no, it is not autobiographical. What do you tell people when they ask about that?

Ellison: Well, I say that if they will grant me that I'm all the men and all the women and all the children and animals and the black people and the white people, yes, it's all me. But it has very little to do with the factual biography of Ralph Ellison. It does have a lot to do with the shape of his imagination.

Crewdson: On those lines, too, you said in an interview in Harper's of March 1967, "Free one's self as a writer by actually going in and trying to get the shape of the experience from the writer's perspective and the writer's type of memory." Now, how

Crewdson: does this actually work in your case as a writer?

Ellison: Well, I was referring to the internalization of technique. With novelists, with fiction writers, as with poets, I believe that technique is not just an abstract set of tools of formulas, but it becomes a way of feeling, hearing and sensing and smelling and evoking reality. It's a way of putting the imagination to work, moving beyond the given to one's own most intimate and hopeful sense of human value and possibly human predicament. So that's pretty much of what I must have been trying to say there.

Thomson: Well, I think I would like to go to the epigraphs in Invisible Man, and ask Mr. Ellison perhaps what relation they have to the theme of the story. The first one is from Melville, "'You are saved,'" cried Captain Delano, more and more astonished and pained;" "you are saved: what has cast such a shadow upon you?" "Is this to mean that the man at the end, our narrator in the story, is saved?

Ellison: No, no, I purposely did not give the reply that Benito Cereno gave the Captain because the answer is the Negro, and the Negro in that sense becomes more than the African slaves, the captured Africans, on board that ship. It becomes a matter of the ambiguity of life and our involvement in it -



Ellison: indeed our involvement in those forces which seem to oppose us or which we seem to dominant. I was aiming for a general sense of that ambiguity and also there is a prayer involved there. I was hoping the readers seeing that would say maybe if we read this book with the same quality of attention that we have read Benito Cereno, it will be a better book.

Thomson: The other quote is from Family Reunion by T. S. Eliot, and this one

I tell you, it is not me you are looking at, not me you are grinning at, not me your confidential looks incriminate, but that other person, if person, you thought I was: let your necrophilia feed upon that carcass. . . .

Now, is this again . . . ?

Ellison: Well, yes, that is calling attention to mistaken identities and the assertion of identity which Harry was making and which fondly I hoped this memoir of my narrator would be. You see you didn't see me is what you were saying while you were saying this and you will find references to that theme throughout.

Crewdson: I think something else that interested me in reading the novel is your use of dreams very often to reveal present inner thoughts of the characters or in some cases events that are to come. Why did you choose to use this media, any particular reason?

Ellison: Oh, because I guess when I was about ten I went to a friend's home in Oklahoma City - the father was a dentist and the mother a teacher - and I came across a book called Interpretation of Dreams, and I thought it was the kind of dream book that you saw around. But that was my first contact with Freud, and I read quite a lot of Freudian psychology, and my first job, a very temporary job, when I came to New York, was to work with Dr. Harry Stack Sullivan. I was his receptionist for a few months, and I also filed case histories. And so, in glancing through the case histories of some very famous people, I began to get an understanding of how important dreams were. This was long before I decided to write, but as I began to write and call upon those works which had been so meaningful to me, I realized that I had read fairy tales far into my teens, which was rather abnormal given the other things I was doing, but I also have been strongly influenced by Dostoevski, and he has taught the novelist how to use the dream. And so, you see, there is this level where you are just having fun in seeing whether you can do what has been done, and this is the secret joy of the novelist when he can bring something off.

Thomson: One other element that you seem to use quite a bit

Thomson: is music in the novel, and I know you have been, of course, very interested in music yourself. Is this the reason or is it again kind of artistic experimenting?

Ellison: No, I love music but at this time when I realized I was going to write I deliberately stayed away from it. But fortunately I was writing about a milieu and a people who were intimately involved with music so I could bootleg it in.

Crewdson: Do you think there is any connection between the art of writing and the art of music?

Ellison: I think so. I think that the novel which has been most attractive to me, that is the nineteenth century novel, moved toward tragic form and the form of the symphony. Symphonic form is basically a play upon tragic form so you have your big, your three movements, the intermixing of the tragic with the comic, the light with the solemn and so on. I should say the only form that I studied as a student both in high school and in college, was musical form. I was kind of stuck with that. Even if I hadn't been writing about Negroes I probably would have gotten it in there somewhere.

Crewdson: I would like to ask you something about a section that doesn't appear in Invisible Man that you published separately in a collection calling it

Crewdson: "Out of the Hospital and Into Harlem." You mentioned in introducing the section that it was due to space that this section does not appear in the novel as we have it. Do you ever regret that, or would you like to see it in the novel?

Ellison: No, this book is no longer so much a part of my ambition. I was unhappy that I couldn't include some of the things. I guess this happens to any writer. You know you write scenes which you are just terribly taken with, but there is no place. This book did have to be shortened and rather than trying to do a mechanical cutting job, I reconceived it so "Out of the Hospital and Under the Bar" is the original version of how I managed to get the narrator out of the hospital and into Mary's house because in that version Mary worked in the hospital and she, in my idea of what happens to the folk Negro in Harlem, was a direct agent in his release from this electro-mechanical device.

Crewdson: And that was the reason for the use of the folk medicine?

Ellison: Yes, yes, of course. I feel that even today much of what seems strange to us about the eruption in our big cities among Negroes is surprising because we don't really know enough about the South,

Ellison: not only the black South but the white South, and we don't know the folk ways. I'm hoping that the televising of the funeral of Martin Luther King gave millions of non-southerners an opportunity to see the mixture of life styles and cultural forms which are present and very much a part of the Southern Negro community.

Thomson: You said, too, in publishing this middle section that you had left out, that you felt that it could stand by itself on its own, and it struck me when I read this that I think perhaps other parts of the book could also stand by themselves such as the riot scene at the end of the novel. Do you think parts of it really form small wholes?

Ellison: I don't, I don't think so. I rather hoped that they would, but you know you are ambivalent about this because a tightly structured work should not allow for cutting. You could just have samples; you could not have fully rounded actions. I wish I could interest my editor to looking into that file of stuff that I cut out to see whether there wouldn't be something to stand alone. But if you want to create an organic form, you have to take the disadvantages which means you can't chop it up so easily and make extra money by publishing a separate section.

Crewdson: I have one other question, too, concerning what you said in introducing that section. Talking about the hero, you wrote in parenthesis "the hero who is somewhat of a liar," and I was interested in knowing did you intend him to be so in the novel or was this statement the result of a later change in your attitude toward the protagonist?

Ellison: Well, I felt that the reader was getting a report from his point of view, you see. That's what you have to be alert to whenever you read fiction in the first person. Ford Maddox Ford wrote a very wonderful novel which turned, I mean, on the fact that the narrator was not being truthful, and when we look at this man you have to question just what he is reporting. You see he is a bit of a fool. If he had been a little bit more alert he wouldn't have had to go through all those repetitions of the same pattern. Of course, I would not have had a book to write either.

Thomson: In addition you said that the hero's invisibility is not a matter of being seen but a refusal to run the risk of his own humanity, and so this at the same time seems as though society isn't to blame, and I think in the book that society, too, makes it very difficult for him to have his own humanity.

Thomson: Isn't that part of the theme? He may be at fault, but, I think that the book said society is at fault too.

Ellison: Yes, too, as long as we don't make it, you know, all one way because wherever you are born, under whatever circumstance and whoever you are, whatever color you are, you do have an obligation to try to make your way because they are not going to grease the skids for you. You still have to find ways of asserting your own humanity. Of course, society is much against it, and his great fault was saying or was trying to say "yes" too often to the society, but not "yes" in that ambiguous way that his grandfather was advising him but just "yes; let me be--I am willing to do the right thing. You want me to be good; I'll be good, and I'll advance." But this didn't help him very much.

Crewdson: You also said in the Harper interview that this invisible man has been characterized by what the sociologists term "high visibility." Now, not being a sociologist, what did you mean by that?

Ellison: Sociologists used to say - for example Park and Burgess published right here in Chicago, you know, which is one of the centers for American sociology - used to say that the great problem of the American Negro is caused because of his high visibility.

Ellison: After all, we have more pigment than most people so if you put us in a crowd you can always pick us out. It's not so easy anymore but . . . .

Thomson: Do you agree with that definition of him?

Ellison: It wasn't whether I agreed or disagreed. I saw it as ironic, and I could play upon it, you see. If Negroes were all as white and as blue-eyed as Danes, and they insisted upon being Negroes, the same things would happen to us. The racism is a source of great political power and of great psychological security to people who need a victim, people who must feel that there are some people who are not so fortunate as they are. So, it becomes pretty complex business.

Crewdson: Also, when you speak about the fact that one of the problems concerning his withdrawal from society was that his humanity involved a type of guilt, could you explain that in terms of the invisible man?

Ellison: No, I don't understand that question.

Crewdson: Well, let's put it this way. He said he was irresponsible in the beginning but he accepts a possible social responsibility in the end. Is this where he sees the guilt in himself? He is not as responsible as he can be?

Ellison: Is this the beginning of the prologue?



Crewdson: Yes, in the prologue and the epilogue.

Ellison: Well, the prologue is the end, you see. So he is teasing; he is preparing the reader by this time for a kind of responsibility which is the responsibility of the man who writes a memoir not of the boy who went through the experience out of which he wrote the memoir. He was saying, if I remember correctly, that this is the only way that he could make a statement and thus be responsible, and he had to start with fundamental things by asserting the complexity of this personality as based upon the complexity of his experience.

Thomson: Perhaps I should talk about some of the imagery and symbols that you used in the book. We mentioned the music, I think, that runs through it. Too, it seems that you use quite a lot of animal imagery in the book, hostile animals like the bear.

Crewdson: And, the dog imagery for instance, did you purposely choose animal symbols that were hostile?

Ellison: No. I didn't purposely choose them. Well, not because they were hostile, but, I can't really account for some of the things which go on there. The Jack the Bear--Jack the Rabbit, Jack the Bear--are ambiguous animal images. They usually are connected with folklore, and they always appear

Ellison: in the context of where he has moved backwards or forward to his folk tradition. So they are not necessarily, for him, antagonistic and when the young man who is pushing the paper cart confronts him with the dog, I think he is reminding him. He's a kind of messenger such as you get in Greek tragedy who points the eras of the plot and reminds the hero in an ambiguous way of the time of day or the tonality that experience is turning into.

Crewdson: Isn't the man with the yams something like that?

Ellison: No. This is the man with the blueprints.

Crewdson: But isn't the man with the yams also a messenger?

Ellison: The man with the yams, that was food, and this was a moment of nostalgia and self-acceptance which also announced a turn in his approach to his experience. I use every and anything I can.

Thomson: Some of the other things that, too, seem to have more meaning and become sort of symbolic, I think, are the bank that he finds in the room and then carries with him and can't seem to get rid of, and the dolls that Tod is selling. Would you say these are symbols?

Ellison: Well, they are symbols; they are ambivalent symbols, but when Tod begins to sell those dolls after his strong hope and investment in the Brotherhood, he is turning against that part of himself and

Ellison: trying to kill it off. You have seen these figures, haven't you? They are real burlesque golliwogg types, and if you put dark glasses on them you might have something quite contemporary. But I think that is what my imagination was trying to get at, this rejection of a role which had been assumed in great hope and then released, feeling that this had been an act of betrayal.

Crewdson: Also, I think the use of biblical symbols is very interesting. I am sure you intended it to appear as such, such as the campus and the Garden of Eden and the apple on Trueblood's step.

Ellison: Was there an apple there? I had forgotten.

Crewdson: Yes, there was.

Ellison: Well, so much of this just comes into the imagination because of the density of the western literary and religious tradition. All these symbols have passed back and forth for years and years, and you don't have to be conscious when you put them down; you only have to be conscious as you structure them.

Thomson: I wonder too about Trueblood. What significance does he have? Does he tend to sort of be symbolic, too, in the story?

Ellison: Well, Trueblood involved himself in incest, which is always a tragic action, and the point was, in-

Ellison: volving himself, he accepted the consequences of his act and tried to act manly about it, but his tragedy became a kind of entertainment for Mr. Norton and an embarrassment for the narrator. It put it up to the reader to take his own choice as to the quality of Trueblood's action, and I am hoping that more and more readers will understand there was a little bit of the hero in this fellow, who was right in the center of the context of irony in which the whole action of that part of the book unfolded.

Crewdson: You mentioned in one interview you were surprised the interviewer didn't see the humor in the work, and I think that we can see the humor in it. I wondered if you had any particular passage you enjoyed?

Ellison: Oh gosh, I rather enjoyed when he goes into the Chthonian Hotel to this meeting and the man wants him to sing, and he can't sing. But the over all business of running so hard to get somewhere and always being sent on these fools' journeys, errands rather, amused me and in a wry sort of way. The humor is not unmixed, but I guess if I had longer to think about it, I could think of other specific passages which amused me.

Thomson: Well, we're running out of time. Maybe we have

Thomson: time for one short question. I know you were influenced by many authors. I wonder if just on the spur of the moment you could say whom you would advise a young person today who wanted to write to read? What writers would you advise them to read?

Ellison: Well, I would advise them to read as many good writers as they possibly could. Writing comes out of earlier writing; it doesn't come out of feeling in any immediate way. It's an expression of a sensibility which has been shaped by the mastery of certain artistic skills. And so I would say read Melville, read Andre Malraux, read Hemingway, read Mark Twain, read Raymond Chandler.

Thomson & Crewdson: Thank you very much, Mr. Ellison. It has been our pleasure.

Ellison: Thank you.

APPROVAL SHEET

The dissertation submitted by Arlene J. Crewdson has been read and approved by the following Committee:

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The final copies have been examined by the director of the dissertation and the signature which appears below verifies the fact that any necessary changes have been incorporated and that the dissertation is now given final approval by the Committee with reference to content and form.

The dissertation is therefore accepted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy.

1/13/74  
Date

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