

“Continuing to Play”: Humour in Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man*

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Abstract

Ralph Ellison's novel *Invisible Man* (1952) is sometimes comical, despite many critics' claims of the opposite. This master's thesis provides a close reading of humorous elements in the novel, demonstrating how humorous framings of sometimes tragic realities of black Americans can be effective to engage readers' reflections. The aims are to analyse 1) some historical and psychological contexts behind these humorous scenes, and 2) Ellison's use of humour as a means to critique and question commonly held assumptions about race, and about both individual and political possibilities and limitations. *The Collected Essays of Ralph Ellison* (1994) provide many insightful ideas from Ellison that informs this analysis.

The main argument is that, by using humour, Ellison implicitly asks readers to look beneath the surface. Readers may laugh at the otherwise unlaughable, and in a disengaged way reflect upon the underlying meanings, and see the invisibles. In a racially segregated USA during the 1930s, the naïve, young black protagonist believes that his self-worth depends upon white men's judgments. This puts him into situational ironies where his misinterpretations sometimes become comical. Ellison satirises liberalism's tradition of paternalism, communism's blind insistence upon conformity and discipline, and black nationalism's destructive hatred, and shows what hides behind the masked façades. Moreover, Ellison overturns racial stereotypes by portraying black individuals as witty, eloquent, and autonomous. He incorporates African American humour like signifying and playing the dozens, together with folklore, jazz, and the blues. Ellison's irony plays with different interpretations of laws, political action, and personal responsibility. In other words, Ellison eloquently incorporates many different forms of humour which may appeal to different kinds of readers, in his vision that accepts a pluralistic and diverse America.

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Introduction

“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”
(*Invisible Man* 568).

i) Research Questions and Thesis Aims

“Look, didn’t you find the book at all *funny*?” Ralph Ellison asks in a 1955 *Paris Review*-interview about his novel *Invisible Man* from 1952 (“The Art of Fiction: An Interview” 221). Ellison’s 1953 National Book Award-winning novel was immediately recognised as a literary classic, a “metaphoric machine of a book” (C. Johnson ix). It follows a naïve but ambitious black man’s psychological hardships leading him to feel alienated, “invisible,” from others’ refusal to see his humanity. He moves from the contradictions of white philanthropism in the American South to a Harlem turf war between Communists and black nationalists during the racially segregated 1930s (viii). These serious thematic issues of social alienation and racism might be why many critics tended to regard the novel with a seriousness that Ellison frustratedly struggled. They missed the humour in *Invisible Man*’s tragicomic vision (Callahan, “Ellison’s *Invisible Man*” 316). Ellison himself suggests that he wished *Invisible Man* to be “a comic antidote to the ailments of politics” (Introduction xxxi).

Arguably, the novel’s humour is a rhetorical instrument to make the invisible visible. In other words, the present thesis is an investigation of the humorous elements in *Invisible Man*, with the aims to analyse 1) some historical and psychological contexts behind these humorous scenes, and 2) Ellison’s use of humour as a means to critique and question commonly held assumptions about race, and about both individual and political possibilities and limitations. One hypothesis is that humour is an effective way to engage readers and enable them to see things new. More concretely, Ellison’s humour highlights tragic historical realities and psychological consequences from American racism and segregation. The thesis is a close reading of *Invisible Man* with special attention to humorous elements and the relationship amongst Ellison, his character narrator, and readers. The novel’s humorous elements are understood in their broadest sense with jokes, puns, ironies, sarcasms, laughter, and aesthetic prose, and other sources that may evoke laughter or amusement.

To achieve these aims, I will consult *The Collected Essays of Ralph Ellison*, which provide personal, historical, and psychological contexts to many of the novel’s ideas and scenes. Some main ideas from the chosen essays are discussed below in (iii) together with historical

context. Before that, (ii) provides summaries of *Invisible Man* and selected literary criticism. Lastly, a brief review of humour in literature and theoretical concepts that have inspired this thesis (ix).

The three chapters are divided into three, three, and four subchapters respectively, following the novel's trajectory. The last chapter's shorter, fourth section discusses the Epilogue and concludes the thesis. Each of the three chapters are introduced with a short argument or anecdote from a selected essay by Ellison that connects the chapter's ideas.

Chapter 1 mainly concerns the power of storytelling and Ellison's argument that in fiction, the audience is both collaborator and judge. Different humorous elements include the sardonic narrator's understatements, the naïve protagonist's misinterpretations, and a black sharecropper's vivid tale about his own incest. Chapter 2 examines some different masks that people employ for different reasons to hide or change their personalities, for example war veterans who laugh to cope with their tragic realities imprisoned in a mental hospital; the college president who acts humbly to gain power; and Invisible's silent signifying humour when trapped in a hospital machine. African American folklore and music are portrayed as counterpoints to white racism in this chapter. Chapter 3 is about diverse voices that point out how different laws may contradict each other; how causation and responsibility are difficult to determine; and how ridiculously absurd violence, death, and destruction becomes seen from a comic distance to the events.

ii) Summary and Literature Review

Through almost 600 pages, the talkative, unnamed first-person narrator of *Invisible Man* tells his story about how he became "invisible." In the initiating prologue, he begins by explaining that he is invisible "simply because people refuse to see me" (3). This invisible man, whom I from now on will call Invisible, lives in an abandoned cellar in "hibernation" on the borderline to Harlem (6). The novel is this ironic, black narrator's extended flashback of his twenty-something years. The 25 chapters in between the framing prologue and epilogue chronologically retells the events leading him to hibernation. These chapters are divided into three parts.

The first chapter depicts how the ambitious Invisible gains a scholarship by delivering his valedictorian speech to "the town's leading white citizens," but not until after he is forced to participate in a humiliating battle royal (17). In chapters 2-6, Invisible studies at an all-black college funded by white philanthropism. Invisible is expelled because he shows a white funder

the slum areas besides campus which makes the college president Dr. Bledsoe furious (“the only way to please a white man is to tell him a lie!” [137]).

Chapters 7-14 depict how Invisible leaves the South for the freer North, as many blacks did during the Great Migration. He realises that racism comes in different shapes even in the supposedly free New York. Invisible briefly works in a paint factory. This employment ends with an accident after which Invisible wakes up in a hospital and gets treated by some racist doctors that laugh at him when he is given electric shocks (“look, he’s dancing ... Get hot, boy!” [233]). After some months of confused contemplation about what to do and who he is, Invisible becomes a spokesman in Harlem for a radical socialist organisation called The Brotherhood.

Invisible’s experiences with the Brotherhood cover the last 15-25 chapters. His initial success gets complicated by jealousy and the Brotherhood’s emphasis upon blind discipline. The Brotherhood’s claims about working for the dispossessed turn out to be mainly a heuristic to gain power (“the trick is to take advantage of them in their own best interest” [496]). The narrative ends in a chaotic race riot, when suddenly Invisible falls into a manhole filled with coal. When he cannot come up, he eventually finds his way to an abandoned cellar where he chooses to “hibernate.” This is where he decides to write his memoirs. The “narrative now” of the Prologue returns in the Epilogue, when he reflects upon the events he has just written down.

During his journey, Invisible encounters different characters, many of whom are to different degrees blind to his humanity and individuality. In a “roller coaster ride of betrayals and revelations,” people like the following examples abuse their power and betray Invisible’s trust in them (C. Johnson vii). There is the white co-founder of his college, Mr. Norton – a “trustee of consciousness” – who believes that black people are his “fate” but discovers his fears mirrored in his encounter with the black sharecropper Trueblood who has committed incest; Dr. Bledsoe, the black college president, “the example of everything [Invisible] wanted to be” who has deliberately acted humbly to manipulate his way to power; and Brother Jack, a leading figure in the activist political organisation The Brotherhood, who speaks “as though he had everything figured out” but can never understand the black perspective (*IM* 88; 98; 286). Invisible naively follow these people who provide him an identity and a plan for his life to follow. Near the end, Invisible begins his “awakening” and understands that he is invisible (468).

Secondary sources include: the writer and literary critic James Phelan, who argues in “Invisible Man (1952) – Bildung, Politics, and Rhetorical” that the narrator is partly unreliable due to his lack of ethical judgment and interpretive ability. When the narrator fails to judge

adequately what readers can see, the ironic distance created is sometimes humorous (256; 261); the historian and literary critic Eric Sundquist in *Cultural Contexts for Ralph Ellison's Invisible Man* who provides contexts to African American history and culture. For instance, how the fear of “racial mixing” makes white men inform Invisible that he must know his place when Invisible utters the phrase “social equality” instead of his intended “social responsibility” (66); John F. Callahan, the editor of *The Collected Essays of Ralph Ellison* and of *Ralph Ellison's Invisible Man: A Casebook*, has written several articles about *Invisible Man*. For instance, in “Frequencies of Eloquence,” he emphasises the paradox that Invisible is eloquent but unable to guide his audience’s responses in his intended direction (152).

They also include: Ross Posnock, editor of *The Cambridge Companion to Ralph Ellison*, who argues in “Ralph Ellison, Hannah Arendt, and the meaning of politics” that Ellison satirises ideological determinism’s inability to engage spontaneous political action. Consequently, the Brotherhood’s mantra of discipline counters real political action (210); and, the writer and associate professor of English, Matthew Stratton’s “Visible Decisions: Irony, Law, and the Political Constitution of Ralph Ellison.” Stratton argues that Ellison presents multiple perspectives, none of them “right” nor “wrong,” but which reciprocally affect each other. For example, in a scene about an eviction, Invisible changes the meaning of the law, which points out how the law is embodied, linguistic, and subject to change (162).

Invisible Man is inexhaustibly rich in its many literary, historical, cultural, and psychological depths. This thesis will by no means try to investigate all. The intent is to stay close to the text, follow the fictional events and Invisible’s psychological development, and explore different humorous aspects. The greatest source is Ralph Ellison, who has written essays covering over 800 pages. Below, some of his ideas are unpacked together with a historical context to the novel. The full name of the essay will be presented the first time it appears in the text, afterwards the title will be shortened to one to three words, for example “An Extravagance of Laughter” will be shortened to “Extravagance.” Likewise, scholarly articles will be shortened after the first time they appear in the text.

iii) Ralph Ellison and Historical Context

Ralph Waldo Ellison was born in 1914 and grew up in Oklahoma, before he went to Tuskegee Institute to study music. He played the trumpet from an early age and was interested in both classical music and jazz. Jazz musicians later inspired Ellison in his writings, with their perfection and artistic devotion. In 1936, Ellison moved to New York and from the late 1930s,

Ellison wrote essays, reviews, and short stories to different periodicals (Callahan *Collected Essays* v). He was always interested in reading and has often underscored the impact T.S. Elliot's *The Wasteland* had upon his turn from music to writing ("Hidden Name and Complex Fate" 202).

In 1945, Ellison began writing *Invisible Man*, which took him seven years to finish (Callahan *Collected Essays* v). Ellison explains that by observing his surroundings and historical events, he used real life inspirations, old photographs, riddles, practical jokes, church services, college ceremonies, and his own experiences from reporting race riots and participating in different protests as resources to *Invisible Man* ("Introduction" xxvii; xxix). Upon its publication in 1952, the novel was a bestseller, won the National Book Award for Fiction 1953, and was acknowledged as one of the most important works of fiction of its time (Callahan *Collected Essays* v-vi). Afterwards, Ellison lectured and taught at a wide range of institutions, for instance Harvard, Brown, Yale, and the New York University. He was awarded with several medals for his contributions to art and a was chart member of the National Council on the Arts and Humanities. Ellison lived with his wife in Harlem for over forty years, until he died in 1994, leaving *Invisible Man* his only longer work of fiction (vi).

Despite its achievements, *Invisible Man* has been critiqued for being too intellectually and morally difficult for readers "reluctant to abandon simplistic formulas about race in America." The novel even inspired severe anger, as it was called "a vicious distortion of Negro life." It was also critiqued for being snobbishly middle-class, avoiding politics and instead insisting upon aesthetic mastery (C. Johnson ix).

The literary critic Harold Bloom finds Ellison's concept of invisibility a "timely device," because at the time, white people could avoid "seeing" black people, while *Invisible Man* forces readers to a new seeing (16). The novel appeared some years before the rise of the civil rights movement which initiated the disassembly of racial segregation in the United States (Sundquist 1). Throughout the first half of the twentieth century, Jim Crow laws in the South either excluded African Americans or offered them inferior separate services, from schools, hospitals, public places, transportations, voting booths, and business establishments, etcetera. African Americans were "invisible" in social practice and legal standing to many of the white people. "Separate but equal," the law of segregation was called in the 1896 Supreme Court ruling of *Plessy v. Ferguson*. In practice, contradictory to American democratic ideals, African Americans did not have equal access to American institutions (2).

This contradiction between Americans' racial prejudices and their commitment to equality was "the American dilemma," according to Gunnar Myrdal's classic study of racism,

An American Dilemma from 1944. Ellison argues in “*An American Dilemma: A Review*” (1944) that after the Civil War, the Southern ruling class wished to continue their exploitation of African Americans for economic interests, and the Northern ruling class refused to act against the discrimination in order to restore and develop their trading relationships (330). However, beneath those economic interests lay a psychological barrier between black and white people. Ellison praised the study’s revelation that, in his words, “the mechanism of prejudice operates to disguise the moral conflict in the minds of whites produced by the clash on the social level between the American creed and anti-Negro practices” (329). Simply put, the contradiction could be ignored if prejudices became scientifically verified. Americans’ strong belief in scientific methods as objective and neutral to values during the beginning of the twentieth century – a “false assumption” regarding social science, Ellison claimed –, triggered stale preconceptions of African Americans (“*American Dilemma*” 329).

Social science in the early century could claim that

the Negro has always been interested rather in expression than in action; interested in life itself rather than in reconstruction or reformation. The Negro is, by natural disposition, neither an intellectual nor an idealist, like the Jew; nor a brooding introspective, like the East Indian; nor a pioneer and a frontiersman, like the Anglo-Saxon. He is primarily an artist, loving life for its own sake. His *métier* is expression rather than action. He is, so to speak, the lady among the races (“*American Dilemma*” 333).

Ellison asks his readers to “imagine the effect such teachings have had upon Negro students alone!” and compares this preaching to that of Joseph Goebbels’ (333-334). That is, categorising different human “races” and their “natural disposition” is more similar to German Nazi propaganda than science and truth, Ellison implies. In other words, Ellison believes that the scientific framing of racial stereotypes allowed for white Americans to justify their racial discrimination, and it affected black Americans’ own self-image.

Ellison’s scepticism to sociology contributed to the novel’s title. It is designed to ironize what Ellison refers to as the “pseudoscientific sociological concept” that Afro-American’s “high visibility” was the source to most of their difficulties, but which actually translates “keep those Negroes running – but in their same old place.” Ellison argues that this high visibility in fact rendered African Americans “*un-visible*” since “on the basis of his darkness he glowed, nevertheless, within the American conscience with such intensity that most whites feigned moral blindness toward his predicament” (Introduction xxv). That is, the darkness of their skin and the darkness of American history with slavery and racial discrimination could “glow” within white Americans’ conscience. The moral dilemma between democratic ideals and racial

discrimination was often suppressed into “blindness,” according to Ellison (xxviii). The joke of the title, thus, is that the African American whose most salient feature, his high pigmentation, makes him invisible (“An Interview with Ralph Ellison” 9).

Not only social science, but also fiction contributed to establish a rigid and false image of African American identity, Ellison argues. In “Twentieth-Century Fiction and the Black Mask of Humanity” (1953), Ellison criticizes most fiction of portraying black characters “drained of humanity.” Seldom had he read a novel that illustrated the complex ambiguity of a human being in a black character. They were more often “an oversimplified clown, a beast, or an angel,” but rarely the opposites “of good and evil, of instinct and intellect, of passion and spirituality” which is the projection of man in great literature (82).

This falsified image of black individuals had severe consequences, Ellison thinks, because words have the power to “revive and make us free” or to “blind, imprison, and destroy” (“Twentieth-Century” 81). Fictive African Americans create not just a stereotyped image for other groups, but for the individual African American who internalises those racial stereotypes (84-85). Art and visionary thinking are aligned, and fiction can be a “thrust toward a human ideal” by “negating things as given” into a complex world of other possibilities (“Introduction” xxx). To Ellison, fiction has true potential to effect change (xxix). Thus, in short, racist stereotypes and discrimination were justified by sociology and fostered by fiction, creating an even larger distance between whites and blacks, in Ellison’s view.

In “Change the Joke and Slip the Yoke” (1958), Ellison accuses white American culture of a simplistic dualism, where black was on the negative side of the colour line, associated with chaos, evil, and stupidity (103). This false depiction of black people made many black people to put on a “mask,” a façade to hide their inner feelings and thoughts. They played the role the white enforced upon them, sometimes out of fear, but more often out of spite, a “profound rejection of the image created to usurp his identity.” However, not only black Americans used a mask; it was “in the American grain” (“Change” 109). Ellison quotes W.B. Yeats, who said that,

If we cannot imagine ourselves as different from what we are and assume the second self, we cannot impose a discipline upon ourselves, though we may accept one from others. Active virtue, as distinct from the passive acceptance of a current code, is the wearing of a mask (qtd. in “Change” 107).

Hence, to wear a mask is a “playing upon possibility” in which the individual makes himself an identity. In all societies, individuals enact and change roles to participate in the collective (Ellison “An Extravagance of Laughter” 633). Masking, understood this way, allows for a

greater social mobility both upward and downward. Thus, masking to Ellison is a strategy common especially to the American society in which “possibilities are many.” This strategy of masking is reinforced by “an ironic awareness of the joke that lies between appearance and reality ... and perhaps even an awareness of the joke that society is man’s creation, not God’s.” Using masks is a strategy to change one’s appearance and even personality, and by extension one’s status. Nonetheless, many people deny the use of a mask or cannot apprehend it (“Change” 108).

If the masks people wear are either conscious or unconscious attempts to change their selves, the possibilities to imagine a second self depend to some extent upon which images are available. Ellison believes that his own task was to “transcend those restrictions” which existed in African Americans’ depicted personality and American society’s structure, using his novel as Mark Twain did, as a “comic antidote to the ailments of politics” (“Introduction” xxxi). Hence, his narrator is able to think and act, where his “capacity for conscious self-assertion” would be the foundation for his quest for freedom. Ellison’s task also included that of “revealing the human universals hidden within the plight of one who was both black and American.” In other words, Ellison wishes to transcend stereotypes and demonstrate that African American culture is also American culture, and African American identity is also American identity (xxviii).

Ellison wanted to avoid writing “another novel of racial protest” but rather a “dramatic study in comparative humanity.” Ellison’s narrator became a “laugher-at-wounds who included himself in his indictment of the human condition.” Being forced to the underground, *Invisible Man*’s “taunting laughter” inspired Ellison to depict a voice “less angry than ironic” (xxviii). In “World and the Jug” (1964), Ellison defends his novel against the critique that *Invisible Man* does not adequately protest racial inequality and does not make a polemical ideological standpoint. Ellison rather transforms his protest into a piece of art than trying to fight some “ideological battle.” He argues that black writers who blame their rejections on racial discrimination, more often is a failure of art, “bad writing” (182). “The protest is there not because I was helpless before my racial condition, but because I *put* it there,” Ellison argues. Like the blues, he says, he wishes to “transcend the painful conditions with which they deal,” which means to create art for art itself. He sees the novel as a carefully constructed social action, which should be judged aesthetically and not ideologically (183).

Moreover, Ellison is highly critical to the conclusion in *An American Dilemma*, that African Americans should be advantaged from assimilating into the American culture. First, because African American culture is also American. Second, because in contrast to Myrdal,

Ellison does not find African American culture and personality a “social pathology.” Third, because white American culture in Ellison’s view is not the “*highest*.” Ellison argues that African American culture was not only a *reaction* against refused participation, but a *rejection* of the white American culture (“*American Dilemma*” 342). Drawing upon his knowledge of American novels, Afro-American folktales, and the blues and jazz music, Ellison improvised and experimented with different forms, techniques, and speech patterns in *Invisible Man*. Compared to “the rich babel of idiomatic expression” around Ellison, he found many naturalistic novels of his time “embarrassingly austere,” whereas his people’s was “an alive language swirling with over three hundred years of American living, a mixture of the folk, the Biblical, the scientific and the political” (“Brave Words for a Startling Occasion” 129).

“America is a collectivity of individuals,” Ellison argues in “Perspective of Literature” (785). He emphasises that the democratic ideals which America was founded upon, freedom and equality, must be enacted deliberately on the basis on personal responsibility. “A people must define itself,” and Ellison saw it as the responsibility of minority groups to have their own ideals and images recognised as parts of “the still-forming American people” (“Twentieth-Century” 99). In other words, as his narrator states in the epilogue of *Invisible Man*: “Whence all this passion toward conformity anyway? – diversity is the word. Let man keep his many parts and you’ll have no tyrant states” (567).

Finally, this thesis pays attention to the novel’s humour, and Ellison argues in “An Extravagance of Laughter” (1985) that “comedy is a disguised form of philosophical instruction.” Comedy

allows us to glimpse the animal instincts operating beneath the surface of our civilized affectations. For by allowing us to laugh at that which is normally *unlaughable*, comedy provides an otherwise unavailable clarification of vision that calms the clammy trembling which ensues whenever we pierce the veil of conventions that guard us from the basic absurdity of the human condition. During such moments the world of appearances is turned upside down (617-618).

In other words, by joking with certain aspects that are not funny in reality, a writer may allow readers to laugh and then realise what lies behind the joke. The tragic reality, the “unlaughable,” can be seen in a new, clearer light. The hidden truths that may be revealed have been covered to protect human beings from the “basic absurdity of human condition.” Perhaps, that is against immoralities, evils, and the meaninglessness of life that human beings often suppress and ignore, but which by humour can be more accessible and easier to cope with.

iv) Humour and Theory

In *Comic Relief: A Comprehensive Philosophy of Humor*, the philosopher John Morreall who has written about humour and laughter in several decades, argues that comedy offers a playful and non-emotional approach to life (78). Traditionally, comedy is often thought of as “light” and insignificant compared to tragedy. Comedy is generally designed to evoke amusement, while tragedy is designed to evoke emotions like pity and fear (Morreall 75). These responses are fostered not only towards a stage or a book but may become attitudes towards life (76). The non-emotional, playful approach may offer a more flexible view of problems, compared to tragedy’s rigidity. Comedy may raise problems without evoking pity and fear in readers, which consequently opposes reader responses of self-pity (78). Hence, humour and comedy may sometimes be useful in literature even when concerning serious thematic issues.

African American humour has historically been used, and continues to be used, as a means of facing and critiquing the evil and violence of racism. These forms include satire, parody, burlesque, and tragicomedy, and also, more specific to African American culture, ‘signifying’ (Carpio 315). Signifying is, simply explained, about insulting an opponent in a humorous, witty or downgrading way. Signifying has been known as “mother-wit” and was a largely segregated form of humour until the late sixties (317). During slavery and Jim Crow-segregation, African American humour developed a two-faced identity. On the one hand, the humour was quite non-threatening, directed to white people’s belief in black people’s inferiority, but it usually disguised aggression. On the other hand, the humour amongst blacks which targeted racism and inequality was more sarcastic and assertive when whites were absent. African American humour became a means to affirm their own humanity, in the face of white people’s denial of it (315).

African American writers, especially during the Antebellum Period and after the emancipation, were generally careful to avoid using humour in their writings. Morally important questions like the violence of Jim Crow segregation seemed too important and sincere to be treated with humour. If black writers used humour to mock slavery or racism, they often chose irony, satire, or parody, which are considered more sophisticated forms of humour than for example slapstick comedy. They wished to distance themselves from the racist assumptions about the supposed inborn relationship between “blackness and buffoonery.” Many writers hid their critique in their texts since they did not wish to scare publishers or alienate readers (Carpio 315). Carpio argues that *Invisible Man* “surely incorporates the bounce and brio of African American humor” (329).

However, using humour for political causes might not always be efficient. There is a risk that the use of racial stereotypes may affirm rather than rebuke them (Carpio 318). Satirical depictions of racial stereotypes have suffered criticism for “voluntarily” continuing the minstrel traditions. Similarly, using dialects to transform stereotypes has been criticised for affirming racist beliefs about black Americans’ ignorance (320). During the early and mid-twentieth century, an African American writer who used humour risked being accused for not depicting African Americans as uncompromisingly heroic. Similarly, the writer risked becoming the victim of “the regretful tongue-clickings of humorless liberals” and might consequently do no more than reinforce those persistent viewpoints (321). Conversely, D. B. Gordon argues that humour arises from passion which provides a useful channel to express human feelings (255). Humour may invoke both shame, fear, and empathy, making its emotional appeal superior to logical reasoning (259). In a racially segregated America in the middle of the twentieth century, African American humour artfully confronted the fact that black and white people’s lives were “inextricably but unequally bound together” (273).

Morreall argues that fictionalising problems in a comic way makes it easier to respond to problems with a playful attitude (53). He argues that humour is social since humans generally enjoy humorous situations more when they share the experience, either in the moment or when they retell it afterwards. In a sense, humour is a shared activity – including sharing it with fictional characters (54). Humour is also exhilarating, lively, and inhibits action and movement like the tones in music, rather than the stillness in watching a lovely sunset. Wittiness demands quickness of thought, and in humour, we are never quite certain of what will happen next (56).

Furthermore, humour is liberating, as it allows otherwise forbidden thoughts, utterances, and actions. Humour may be used as a weapon to challenge authorities and traditions, religions, and regimes, and even a serious approach to life itself (Morreall 56). What is more, humour opens for a play of imagination just for our own pleasures (57). According to Morreall, humour disengages human beings from the threats “here and now.” That is, negative emotions like anger and fear are centred in the brain’s limbic system, while humour is centred in the more rational cerebral cortex (66). Anger and fear are emotions that activate the “fight-and-flight” mode, evolved for us to act quickly in dangerous situations, but when the situation is not immediately dangerous, laughter helps us to disengage and reflect (67).

In *Wonderworks – Literary Inventions and The Science of Stories*, the neuroscientist and literary scholar Angus Fletcher argues that satire can provide a feeling of looking down on the situation, from a “God’s-eye view,” because of the ironic distance to the depicted events (Fletcher 75). Hence, the satiric and humorous elements in *Invisible Man* may, arguably, make

readers recognise their own tendencies. If they are able to laugh at their own tendencies, this self-irony helps to distance them from what might otherwise have been a painful realisation and see things from a new perspective (Fletcher 80). Fletcher views narratives as having certain psychological and emotional effects upon readers, an idea central in rhetorical narrative theory.

Therefore, I have been inspired by some ideas from James Phelan's *Somebody Telling Somebody Else – A Rhetorical Poetics of Narrative*, especially in 11., to examine how Ellison communicates one message, but his narrator sometimes communicates another with his own purpose. These different tracks of communications are interesting because they distinguish between Phelan refers to as “the ethics of the telling and of the told.” Ellison's ethics of the telling may reveal to readers what Invisible does not agree with or understand, while the ethics of the told refers to ethical dimensions amongst the characters and events in the storyworld (8-9). Phelan argues that a narrator's function is to report events, interpret those events and evaluate those interpretations. If the narrator differs from the author's view in any of these, the narrator is unreliable. Briefly explained, estranging unreliability increases the distance between the narrator and the readers, while bonding reduces that distance because this unreliability “includes some communication that the author – and thus the authorial audience – endorses.” In other words, Ellison's narrator may be unreliable in his interpretation of an event, but once he begins to understand more, his unreliability decreases, and he comes closer to Ellison's covert communication. This has bonding effects with the readers, Phelan suggests (*Somebody* 100). These ideas about narration and reader responses will to some extent inform my reading of *Invisible Man's* humour, but the main source is, as argued before, Ralph Ellison himself.

Chapter 1: The Art of Storytelling

This chapter concerns the power of storytelling to affect audience's emotions, values, and insights. Humour is arguably a part of this. How *Invisible Man* is carefully constructed to approach its readers is worth taking extra notice of. Ellison designs his prologue to affect readers and to create a collaboration with them, which will have consequences for reader responses throughout the novel. Chapter 1 will analyse the Prologue and the first two chapters of *Invisible Man*.

Ellison believes that an artist “by playing artfully upon the audience’s sense of experience and form ... seeks to shape its emotions and perceptions to his vision.” The artist must try to persuade, exhort, and even woe his audience “as the price of its applause.” In the audience, there are those “eager to be transported, astounded, thrilled” but there are also those who, in “antagonistic cooperation,” counter the artist’s creation. The audience, to Ellison, is both collaborator and judge. They must “be appealed to on the basis of what it assumes to be truth as a means of inducting it into new dimensions of artistic truth” (“The Little Man at Chehaw Station” 496). Hence, Ellison’s challenge was to design a novel that could bridge many different backgrounds and tastes to the constantly changing American cultural identity (498).

1.1. They Refuse to See Me

When *Invisible Man*’s prologue begins, readers do not know where the first-person narrator is. A few pages later will he reveal that he lives in a “hole,” an abandon cellar on the border to Harlem, New York. The first paragraphs focus on how he is invisible. The Prologue is vivid, quick, and improvisational in an oral style, which attempts to engage and persuade readers (Fabre 537). The eloquence, irony and angry frustration in the Prologue are sharply contrasted to the naïve and ambitious, much younger Invisible portrayed later in the first chapter.

Introducing himself in the Prologue, Invisible begins:

I am an invisible man. No, I am not a spook like those who haunted Edgar Allan Poe; nor am I one of your Hollywood-movie ectoplasms. I am a man of substance, of flesh and bone, fiber and liquids—and I might even be said to possess a mind (3).

The negative interjection “No” implies a conversation between the narrator and the narratee. Invisible already from the beginning invites readers to an active role in the narrative. He assumes that he knows what his narratee believes, and he feels the need to correct this false conception of the word “invisible.” Simultaneously, Invisible assumes that the narratee knows enough about American literature to understand the reference to Poe’s ghosts. The next phrase

indicates a narratee who takes part in maintaining Hollywood-movie stereotypes – those without substance –, and Invisible disassociates himself from those stereotypes by using the pronoun “your” as opposed to “I.” In other words, the falsely depicted black people in fiction, Invisible indicates, are not of “flesh and bone.” The first two sentences thus establish that the narrator and his narratee share common features and live in the same world (Fabre 538).

The ironic understatement, that he “might even be said to possess a mind,” works because he has already demonstrated eloquent diction and references to both high and popular culture: Poe and Hollywood, respectively. Invisible is the source and the target of the understatement, which Phelan interprets as Invisible consciously self-deprecating and covertly protests that he must do so. The pun on the word “spook” also contributes, when he satirises those who cannot see him and wants his narratee to grasp this irony (Phelan, “Invisible” 254). Spook is an insulting white slang for black (Fabre 538). “I am invisible, understand, simply because people refuse to see me,” Invisible continues (3). By using the word “understand”, and by creating an opposition between “you” (his narratee) and “they” who refuse to see him, Ellison challenges readers to do their best to see and understand both Invisible and Ellison as clearly as possible (Phelan, “Invisible” 255).

In *Invisible Man*’s Prologue and Epilogue, the narratee is given a significant role. The narratee should both be able to decipher and understand many of the novel’s cultural references, and to actively participate in the audience (Fabre 535). Invisible must capture his narratee’s interest in order to become seen and heard, which is his only way to exist (536). Invisible explains that, sometimes, “you wonder whether you aren’t simply a phantom in other people’s minds. Say, a figure in a nightmare which the sleeper tries to destroy” (3). By requesting the narratee to see him, to read his tale, readers are put in an active role inside the narrative (Fabre 537).

However, in the next paragraph, Invisible changes his tone with a taunting laughter. He recollects one incident when he physically abused a “tall blond man” who called Invisible “an insulting name” when accidentally bumped into. “Oh, yes, I kicked him,” he remembers (4). During that abuse, Invisible stops himself from slitting the man’s throat when it occurs to him that the blond man has “not *seen* me, actually,” and walks away “amused,” beginning to “laugh at this crazy discovery” (4). Invisible thus reveals how his angry frustration vents into physical violence, and that he is a man with a short fuse. His extreme response to a man who might have insulted him not for his appearance, but perhaps for being bumped into, warns readers not to trust this underground narrator wholeheartedly (Phelan “Invisible” 256). The next day, Invisible reads the newspaper about the man, who claims to have been “mugged.” Invisible responds

“with sincere compassion”: “Poor fool, poor blind fool ... mugged by an invisible man!” (5). Since readers are already advised not to trust Invisible, the words “sincere compassion” might not accurately describe his emotions here.

However, the narrator asserts that most of the time, he neither tries to deny violence by ignoring it, as he once did, nor is he “so overtly violent,” but tries to “walk softly so as not to awaken the sleeping ones” (5). Here, Invisible ironically maintains the thematics of blindness and darkness, invisibility and vision (D. B. Gordon 261). He likens those who refuse to see him with “sleepwalkers”, who might become dangerous if awakened (5). Hence, by avoiding being seen, Invisible stays away from violence. He does, nevertheless, keep up his fight, silently, invisibly, without them noticing. Invisible brags about how he steals electricity from “Monopolated Light & Power” to light his 1.369 lightbulbs. By not paying for state provided electricity, and by changing its historically official name “Consolidated Edison,” Invisible demonstrates his self-chosen isolation and distancing from established society (Phelan, “Invisible” 257).

The Prologue continues with Invisible rambling about contradictions and paradoxes, about darkness in lightness. Here, Ellison’s prose is like “a flexibility of enunciation and rhythmical agility with words which make us constantly aware of the meanings which shimmer just beyond the limits of the lyrics”, as Ellison describes the blues by his friend Jimmy Rushing (“Remembering Jimmy” 277). In other words, Invisible’s speech about contradictions and paradoxes might intrigue and fascinate, without letting readers know concretely of what he speaks. Here is a typical passage from the Prologue:

Those two spots [Broadway and the Empire State Building] 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). I know; I have been boomeranged across my head so much that I can see the lightness of darkness (6).

Invisible imitates oral performance with his changes (“pardon me, our whole culture”), parentheses and explanations (“by contradiction, I mean”), and his direct advice to the narratee (“Keep a steel helmet handy”). Invisible’s rhetorical strategies resounds the ambiguity of the blues. The narratee is “subtly cajoled ... into half-amused, half-irritated acquiescence,” Fabre argues (540). In other words, the meaning seems to “shimmer just beyond,” eloquently amusing but irritatingly unclear. For example, does he ironically indicate that he disagrees with the “important distinction” that while black people are part of the civilization, the social structure

of America, but the contradiction is that they are not included in the American culture? And by emphasising “our whole culture,” argues that they are included? Furthermore, does the boomerang metaphor imply that he has progressed but been tossed back again, over and over? Readers might be confused, but intrigued to continue reading to find out.

The narration enters a surrealistic mode when Invisible recalls a dream he had high on marijuana and listened to Louis Armstrong’s “What Did I Do to Be so Black and Blue?” (7). “Like Dante,” Invisible tells, he descends into the depths of the music (7). In this dream, Invisible hears a call-and-response preaching about blackness, and then he speaks to an old female singer of spirituals who loved her master because he gave her two sons, but she poisoned him because she loved freedom more. Chased away by her bitterly laughing and angry sons, Invisible is released into a dark passageway. The dream ends when he is struck by a speeding machine trying to cross a road (11-12).

Alluding to Dante, Ellison hints that something is hidden underneath the surface (Fletcher 103). The incongruity, the surrealism, and the ambiguities of the dream may produce feelings of paranoia in readers. Fletcher argues that when an author introduces something strange into a familiar environment, readers may be warned by the “threat-detection network” (102). That is, paranoia – the suspicion that there is something beyond that which can be seen – triggers brains to be aware (103). Hence, when Ellison uses Invisible’s surreal dream, he hints at a secret lurking in the darkness. The narration does not fully explain, but rather asks readers to look for the secrets in the unfolding narrative with an open mind (Fletcher 105).

Invisible feels Armstrong’s music deeply not only due to marijuana, but also due to his invisibility. “I play the invisible music of my isolation,” he says, and wonders if his “compulsion to put invisibility down in black and white be thus an urge to make music of invisibility?” (13; 14). Ellison introduces the connections between sound and sight, and perhaps he has his narrator articulating his own challenge, to create a novel which makes music of invisibility (Phelan “Invisible” 258). As the old singer of spirituals defines the concept of freedom to Invisible in his narcotic dream: “*I guess now it ain’t nothing but knowing how to say what I got up in my head. But it’s a hard job, son*” (11). Indeed, it is a “hard job” to know how to say what one thinks. Invisible becomes articulate and eloquent through years of struggling, by finally writing down his story. During the main part of his experiences, however, he does not know how to articulate his thoughts and emotions (A.A. Johnson 35).

Ellison relates to his own conception of freedom: “perhaps the writer’s greatest freedom, as artist, lies precisely in his possession of technique.” Technique, to Ellison, is “a way of feeling, of seeing and of expressing one’s sense of life,” enabling the writer “to possess and

express the meaning of his life". By writing essays, Ellison himself was able "to discover what I *did* think" (Introduction *Shadow and Act* 56; Johnson, A.A. 35). The technique of *Invisible Man* is characterised by how Ellison "writes a 'melody' (thematic line) and then orchestrates it" (Bone 200).

Notably, the overall mood of the Prologue is that of the blues, which Ellison identified as "an art of ambiguity" ("Remembering Jimmy" 277). The blues tone is accompanied with the jazz musician Louis Armstrong, who is "the matrix" of the novel, through whom most metaphors in the Prologue are derived from. The concept of invisibility, the fluidity of time, the improvisational attitude to creation of art, the oppositions, paradoxes, and uncertainties – all these are considered in Armstrong's music and mirrored in some sense in Ellison's art (Tracy 133). "Invisibility, let me explain, gives one a slightly different sense of time, you're never quite on the beat," Invisible tells his narratee (8). Invisible compares this different perception of time ("what you hear vaguely in Louis' music") with a prize-fighter boxing a yokel. The yokel had "struck one blow and knocked science, speed and footwork" by "simply [stepping] inside of his opponent's sense of time" (8). Both Armstrong's and the boxer's improvisational effects are stunning. Hence, Ellison has Armstrong representing a trickster figure whose music provides the narrative with covert meanings and technique to a sharp reader (Tracy 133). The song "What Did I Do to Be So Black and Blue" is a wordplay that refers to the skin colour black and the mood blue, as well as to the black and blue battering the protagonist must endure, not unlike a boxer (134).

Near the end of the Prologue, Invisible again addresses his narratee directly: "I can hear you say, "What a horrible, irresponsible bastard!" And you're right ... But to whom can I be responsible, and why should I be, when you refuse to see me?" (13). In this passage, Invisible begins by denying his personal responsibility for the "near murder" of the blond man (Phelan, "Invisible" 258). He puts words in the mouth of his narratee (Fabre 540). Then, he agrees; he is responsible, and acted irresponsibly as a "coward" because he did not slit the man's throat (14)! Eloquenty and perhaps quite comically – but certainly unethically –, Invisible here changes the meaning of the concept 'responsibility.' In other words, Ellison's narrator is unreliable in his interpretation and evaluation of this situation, as he crossed a line with his extreme response to the man's insult and his refusal to take responsibility for his actions (Phelan, "Invisible" 258).

Phelan argues that this unreliability may warn readers to be careful about assuming that they understand Invisible, his outsider status, and its consequences. Invisible is to some extent blinded by his own projections: a blond man may be equated with those who refuse to see him,

and therefore deserves this excessive force (“Invisible” 256). This unreliability, however, functions to emphasize Invisible’s deep anger, frustration, and isolation. Moreover, by changing his opposition between “them” and “us”, he now bundles his narratee together with “them”, as he asks to whom he should be responsible “when you refuse to see me” (258).

Nevertheless, in the final paragraph of the Prologue, Invisible returns to a more conciliatory tone: “But what did I do to be so black and blue? Bear with me” (14). Readers may accept his request to try to understand him as he narrates, but are also warned not to trust this ironic, frustrated outsider in all his judgments (Phelan, “Invisible” 259).

In sum, Ellison uses his narrator’s voice in the Prologue to engage readers in a dialogue. Simultaneously, the narrator is fluctuating between bonding and estranging rhetorical strategies. Invisible asks his narratee to see him but also demonstrates his own predetermined assumptions about the narratee’s beliefs and responses. Eloquent, ironic, and blues-infused prose amusingly presents a distinct narrative voice in the Prologue which sets the tone for the continuing narrative over twenty-five chapters and the Epilogue.

1.2. Keep This Naïve Boy Running

This section examines the ironic distance created between the narrating-I from the Prologue and the much younger, gullible experiencing-I in the first chapter. The comic effects from this distance comes from situational ironies in which readers understand what Invisible does not. He is untrustworthy in these early chapters, and Ellison guides readers to see this.

When chapter 1 begins, Invisible tells his readers of his “some twenty years” younger self, around the time of his high school graduation, about to make a speech at a gathering for the “town’s leading white citizens” (15; 17). The speech is based on Booker T. Washington’s ideas about “the secret, the very essence of progress” – namely, humility (17). The narrating-I describes his younger self with one word: “naïve” (17). As readers soon find out, the differences in both knowledge and attitude between the challenging and complex personality of the narrating-I readers meet in the Prologue, and his much younger, naïve experiencing-I, are striking (Phelan, “Invisible” 250; 259).

Readers are told by the narrating-I that all his life he was looking for himself but asked everyone else and accepted their – often contradictory – answers (15). This “unquestioning willingness to do what is required of him by others as a way to success” is Invisible’s major flaw (Ellison “The Art of Fiction” 203). There are some similarities to Jonathan Swift’s satire *Gulliver’s Travels*, since both works follow the journey of a naive mind through deceptions,

moving from safe and comforting innocence to painful experience. Also, both novels rely on readers to sympathise with the protagonist; and both rely on irony and hyperbole in their satiric treatments of corruption and deceit (Schafer 40). Both protagonists encounter different kinds of people and are gullibly impressed by them. Gulliver, during his final journey, idolizes the very rational, horse-like Houyhnhnms. By agreeing with their will to exterminate the vile and stupid Yahoos, he unknowingly agrees to exterminate his own kind – Yahoos turn out to be human beings (Fletcher 320).

Similarly, Invisible is gullibly impressed with the white men of power he meets and tries to pattern his life plan according to their standards. When these men mock black Americans, and Invisible does not defend his peers in his narration, readers are asked by Ellison to question Invisible's judgment. For example, during the gathering where Invisible is invited to hold his valedictorian speech, the naive Invisible believes that the "town's big shots" will truly take his speech seriously (17). Before he may speak, Invisible must watch a naked blonde dance, and then participate in a battle royal with nine other young African American men.

Ellison explains in an interview that this scene draws on "a vital part of behavior pattern in the South," which the Southerners – black and white – accepted unquestionably. Its function, according to Ellison, was to preserve caste lines. Moreover, it represented a ritual, "a keeping of taboo to appease the gods and ward off bad luck." For black Southern boys there was an initiation rite most of them had to go through, Ellison claims, so that he had only to present these patterns in a broader context of meaning. Many patterns of behaviour, or rituals as Ellison calls them, go unquestioned in any society ("Art of Fiction" 216). This scene, which might seem unbelievably cruel to many contemporary readers, portrays aspects of reality for Southern blacks less than a hundred years ago. Ellison argues that to laugh at the unlaughable provides "an otherwise unavailable clarification of vision" ("An Extravagance of Laughter" 617). In other words, he incorporated humour into his battle royal scene to point out the absurd inhumanity in a ritual like this.

Hence, most comically, Invisible – who at the time thought of himself a potential Booker T. Washington – "suspected that fighting a battle royal might detract from the dignity of my speech" (17). Moreover, he is annoyed with his combatant:

I fought back with hopeless desperation. I wanted to deliver my speech more than anything else in the world, because I felt that only these men could judge truly my ability, and now this stupid clown was ruining my chances (25).

This is "textbook estranging unreliability," Phelan argues ("Invisible" 261). That Invisible believes these drunk white men to be able to judge his ability, demonstrates how Invisible is

blinded by his false conviction that they differentiate between him and the other black young men and will regard his speech seriously. Ellison, however, clearly portrays these drunk men as inhumane, since they first dehumanise the blonde dancer before the battle, and then the young men who are fighting (Phelan, “Invisible” 261). When Invisible – while almost choking on his own blood – delivers his speech, readers may not be surprised that they ignore him or make him repeat words with mocking laughter. These bigshots judge Invisible according to the stereotypes of minstrel blackface shows (Callahan, “Frequencies of Eloquence” 157).

The only time they take Invisible seriously is when he threatens social order, and unintentionally (perhaps unconsciously) replaces the phrase “social responsibility” with “social equality” (31). Here, Ellison alludes to “social equality” as distinguished from “political equality” concerning segregated race relations in America during the nineteenth and twentieth century. While political equality gave African Americans access to voting, contract obligations, and legal due processes, social equality generally referred to access to equal schools, housings, transportations, and other public services. The latter concerned matters where white and black citizens could come in closer physical contact with each other, and which included the legal segregation approved in political decisions such as *Plessy v. Fergusson* (1896). However, since many people feared “racial mixing” (meaning dating, marriage, and parenthood between blacks and whites), they were afraid of allowing political rights to African Americans because it might lead closer to social equality. The prohibition against this so-called “miscegenation” should guarantee the “hysterical reaction” amongst white people who opposed integration when the social boundaries were close to be crossed (Sundquist 66).

Thus, with Invisible’s slip of tongue, the white men fear he might threaten to cross a line of social taboos. This is symbolically emphasised with the earlier scene, as the naked blonde, with a tattoo of the American flag, dances sensually before the young African Americans who are threatened equally if they watch or if they look away. Also, as the prize money are to be collected from an electrified rug, and then turns out to be fake money, Invisible and the others are offered white men’s symbols of success – women and money – but are then denied them (Bone 203). When uttering the phrase “social equality,” Invisible is told that he “must know [his] place at all times” (31). To “encourage him in the right direction,” Invisible is rewarded with a scholarship to “the state college for Negroes” and is overjoyed to tears (32). This ironic distance between Invisible and the reader creates a comic effect, due to his naïve blindness. As Schafer puts it, he is rewarded as a “good nigger” by “sexually depraved, drunken, oafish babbitts” (43).

While Invisible may not understand how these white men try to keep him in his place, that he is the butt of the joke, his unconscious registers the dissent. Like a curse, his grandfather's deathbed-words follow him, that

our life is a war and I have been a traitor all my born days, a spy in the enemy's country ever since I gave up my gun back in the Reconstruction [...]. I want you to overcome 'em with yeses, undermine 'em with grins, agree 'em to death and destruction [...]" (15-16).

Puzzled by this advice, Invisible cannot grasp its meaning. He feels guilty anytime he is "praised by the most lily-white men", being "an example of desirable conduct", because he thinks that he, somehow, is a traitor to the white people whom he desires to please (16). Hence, after retrieving his scholarship inside a new, gleaming calfskin briefcase, Invisible's grandfather appears in his dream that night. His grandfather laughs at him when his briefcase contains a letter saying, "To Whom It May Concern ... Keep This Nigger-Boy Running" (33).

The many variations of the song "Run Nigger Run" in African American folklore thematizes the escape from slavery (Sundquist 117). Ellison connected the "oxymoronic" phrases "benign neglect" and "reverse discrimination" with "Keep those Negroes running – but in their same old place" (Introduction xxv). Thus, even though Invisible has "no insight into its meaning" (33), readers gain insight through his unconsciousness how these men really view him: they want to keep him in his inferior place (Phelan "Invisible" 260; 262).

The "old man's laughter" will be "ringing in [Invisible's] ears ... for many years after", and it appears in dreams and thoughts whenever Invisible feels uncertain (Ellison, *IM* 33). Ellison intends this character to represent for Invisible "the ambiguity of the past" because "his sphinxlike deathbed advice poses a riddle which points the plot in a dual direction" (Ellison, "Change" 110). Invisible follow this dual direction throughout his journey, trying to repress this "part of me that observed listlessly but saw all, missing nothing, ... the malicious, arguing part; the dissenting voice, my grandfather part; the cynical, disbelieving part – the traitor self that always threatened internal discord" (328). Readers may notice this pattern of suppression as a warning that Invisible should listen to.

Invisible's grandfather was thought of as "the meekest of men", so his last words caused a lot of confusion. Invisible's parents were even "more alarmed over his last words than over his dying," as Invisible interprets it (16). Invisible comically exaggerates to make his narratee understand that the grandfather had used his "mask of meekness" so well that even his family believed it to be his 'true identity' (if such one would exist). This mask was a means for the grandfather to survive, by submissively conforming while silently protesting his oppressors, "a denial and rejection through agreement" (Ellison, "Change" 110). Invisible's grandfather

employed a mask of meekness in order to survive in the white man's world after the Emancipation. He advises his grandson to play "a kind of jiu-jitsu of the spirit", Ellison suggests in one of his essays ("Change" 110). Invisible does not yet understand this masking device, but he will do as the narrative develops.

The first chapter thus contrasts the taunting laughter of the sarcastic and frustrated narrating-I, and the gullible and naïve, young and ambitious experiencing-I. Here, Invisible is unreliable in his narration since he cannot see the hypocrisy of the white "big shots" nor his relation to them. This unreliability creates an ironic distance between readers and Ellison on the one hand, and Invisible on the other hand, as readers understand what Invisible cannot. The suspense of his fate is removed by the Prologue so readers are intrigued rather to wonder *how* the narrative will develop to close the gap between the two different personalities of this invisible man (Phelan "Invisible" 250). How did he go from the naïve, illusioned youngster to the sardonic, disillusioned man living underground?

1.3. Jim Trueblood's Tale of Incest

This section continues to explore literary techniques, satiric historical allusions, and reader responses, through a close reading of chapter 2. Here, Invisible encounters a rich white man, Mr. Norton, and a poor black sharecropper, Jim Trueblood. This sharecropper tells a story, making Invisible a listener. This literary technology, "The Story in the Story", may be used in different ways, to transport the reader from one fictional reality into another (Fletcher 354). Arguably, Ellison uses this technique with a twist in the second chapter of *Invisible Man*. It operates to open readers' minds to the possibility that Jim Trueblood, the teller of the story, gives a comic wink to assure Invisible that "none of this is really true" (Fletcher 358). The comic wink is a moment when a character interrupts a fictional story or play by a glance or a speech, a signal that makes the audiences' brains comforted to enjoy the alternate reality (359). First comes a summary of the events leading up to Invisible's meeting with Trueblood.

Chapter 2 begins when Invisible recalls his "beautiful college" with white buildings covered in vines, "lined with hedges and wild roses that dazzled the eyes," the honeysuckle and wisteria, the fluttering birds, and the timorous and unexperienced young lovers (34):

Oh, long green stretch of campus, Oh quiet songs at dusk, Oh moon that kissed the steeple and flooded the perfumed nights, Oh, bugle that called in the morning, Oh, drum that marched us militarily at noon – what was real, what solid, what more than a pleasant, time-killing dream? (36).

With this series of “corny apostrophes”, Invisible parodies the idyllic picturesque landscape and his youthful excitement in a tone of peaceful melancholy (G. T. Gordon 201). Ellison asks readers to notice that it is intended to be read ironically, reminding them that it is the voice from the Prologue who speaks: “I’ve recalled it often, here in my hole” (34). This kind of intervention by the narrating-I, reminding readers about the act of storytelling, is exceptional to a few scenes, only when Invisible recalls his college (Fabre 537).

Invisible complicates his memoirs by asking – in a kind of inner monologue rather than an address to his narratee – “what was real? ... If real, why is it that I can recall in all that island of greenness no fountain but one that was broken, corroded and dry? ... Why? And how? Why and how?” the narrating-I wonders (36). The narratee almost becomes one with the narrator in this form of inner monologue (Fabre 537). Fletcher argues that readers may become ask the same questions as Invisible in this kind of inner conflict (what was real?). By engaging in the same inner conflict, readers’ brains are triggered to become self-aware (Fletcher 292). They may begin to consider the degree of truthfulness in the story told. How much of Invisible’s memories can be trusted, being so long ago? Moreover, by asking the same questions as Invisible, readers may identify *with* Invisible rather than feeling for him (291). Consequently, by considering what was real, the college institution might Invisible romantically recalls might not be the ideal he seems to remember.

Invisible’s college resembles Tuskegee Institute, Ellison’s alma mater. However, it is not contained by the association. The satire of the institute is rather archetypal, just as all historic references in the novel are elusive and implicit (Callahan, “Chaos, Complexity, and Possibility: The Historical Frequencies of Ralph Waldo Ellison” 572). To Ellison, Tuskegee Institute was a means to “deflect Negro energy away from direct political action” (“*American Dilemma*” 331). That is, the ruling class of the North established Tuskegee Institute as a veil to promote blacks’ education, with Booker T. Washington as its leader, to control black people’s destinies economically and politically. This way, they could continue to develop their trading relations and national solidarity with the South, and simultaneously pretend that they improved the conditions for black people. Rather, though, the institute worked to assimilate the black elite to white norms and prevent them from demanding equal rights. It may sound cynical, Ellison agrees, but he believed that the American dilemma was at bottom a psychological barrier between white and black people (“*American Dilemma*” 331). Ellison argued that “philanthropy on the psychological level is often guilt-motivated – even when most unconscious”. Hence, according to Ellison, black people were a moral problem hidden in the white rulers’ conscience (332).

For instance, Invisible describes himself and the other college students: “our uniforms pressed, shoes shined, minds laced up, eyes blind like those of robots to visitors and officials on the low, white-washed reviewing stand” (35). The sardonic tone of the narrator, recalling the college in his hole, clearly states his mind about their will to conform to the “white-washed” norm. With “minds laced up” and blind eyes, these students do not seem encouraged to think freely, which Ellison communicates amusingly with his robot simile. As Ellison argues, “for the Negro there is relative safety as long as the impulse toward individuality is suppressed” (“Richard Wright’s Blues” 139). Like the grandfather, these students use a mask of obedience and humility in order to succeed.

At Founder’s Day, “the millionaires descended from the North”, and Invisible is assigned the noble task of chauffeuring one of the white trustees, Mr. Norton (36). Invisible is remarkably impressed with Norton, the “shrewd banker . . . , philanthropist, forty years a bearer of the white man’s burden, and for sixty years a symbol of the Great Tradition . . . , [his] movements dapper and suave” (37). Being a true gentleman, Norton excuses Invisible’s blunder when he began by “bending forward to suppress a belch, I accidentally pressed the button on the wheel and the belch became a loud and shattering blast of the horn” (37). Invisible is terrified that Dr. Bledsoe, the college president, might refuse to allow Invisible to drive again. Ellison subtly indicates that something worse might happen to Invisible when he inserts this humorously insignificant worry.

Planlessly driving off campus, Invisible is occupied by thinking about what Norton could have meant about his “pleasant fate”, when they suddenly enter a slum area on the countryside. Invisible realises that they are outside the cabin belonging to Jim Trueblood, the “sharecropper who had brought disgrace upon the black community” for impregnating his own daughter (46). Norton insists that they visit him, and unable to utter his protests, Invisible dreadfully follows Norton to Trueblood’s cabin where they are invited to listen.

Trueblood’s tale, covering some eighteen pages, tells in sum how Trueblood shares bed with his family during a cold night and wakes up from a dream, discovering that he is having sex with his own daughter: “I’m figurin’ how to git myself out of the fix I’m in without sinnin’ . . . But once a man gits hisself in a tight spot like that there ain’t much he can do”, Trueblood says. He tried to get away, but the problem was to “move *without* movin’” (59). Then, his daughter “gits to movin’ herself”, first trying to push him off but then holds tight to him. Trueblood says, “the more wringlin’ and twistin’ we done tryin’ to get away, the more we wanted to stay” (60).

The humour here lies partly in Ellison's usage of graphic folk-storytelling and the imitation of the vernacular (Schafer 45). More than that, though, Ellison here parodies a Southern narrative depicting the black man as not only "over-sexed and immoral but as incestuous," unable to control his desires. Norton watches Trueblood with "envy and indignation" as he understands that Trueblood "feels all right" and has "no need to cast off the offending eye" for what he did to his daughter (51). In a sense, Trueblood becomes "Oedipus sighted." That is, instead of the fate of the classic incest hero, Trueblood is rewarded for his behaviour by those white men "helping the Negroes" (D. B. Gordon 262):

The niggahs up at the school come down to chase me off and that made me mad. I went to see the white folks then and they gave me help. That's what I don't understand. I done the worse thing a man can ever do in his family and instead of chasin' me out of the country, they gimme more help than they ever give any other colored man, no matter how good a niggah he was" (67).

Ironically, in this world, black men like Trueblood are rewarded, while young ambitious men like Invisible are kept in their places (D. B. Gordon 263). Trueblood has become somewhat of a celebrity by his sinful behaviour (Bone 204).

This is most ironical, since Invisible aspires to rise to the top by the opposite means, staying away from sin, suppressing his animalistic instincts that Trueblood is a caricature of. He represents the stereotype of "barely controllable creatures of untamed instincts", derived from "anti-Negro stereotypes" portraying them "ignorant," "morally loose," "sexually animalistic," and "disgusting in their public conduct." Blacks "were seen as sometimes comic but nevertheless threatening negatives to the whites' idealized image of themselves" (Ellison "Extravagance" 642). Naming him Trueblood, Ellison satirises the perception that these stereotypical, false notions of black people would be in their blood as inherent characteristics. The name refers to 'pure sang;' fullblood (Bone 204). By approaching racial stereotypes and proceeding beyond these, Ellison argues that he wanted to convey human complexity concealed by these very stereotypes ("Introduction" xxxii).

Norton listens "intensely", with "eyes glassy" in perverse fascination to Trueblood's incest tale, as other white men have before him, and gives Trueblood a hundred-dollar bill before he and Invisible leave (57; 63). Importantly, before meeting Trueblood, Norton tells Invisible how his own deceased daughter has played a major role in his life. He describes her as "a being more rare, more beautiful, purer, more perfect and more delicate than the wildest dream of a poet" (42). Hence, this scene suggests that Trueblood offers himself as a symbol for man's "dream-sin" and is rewarded for it, while Norton only dreams of it, and represents an "Oedipus blind" (D. B. Gordon 262). Norton also reveals his different moral standards for black

and white people, as he comments that a girl who is pregnant without being married “shouldn’t be so strange. I understand that your people – Never mind!” (49). Those white liberals’ concerns for African Americans in the South were never a serious issue to these men, Ellison indicates (D. B. Gordon 263). It rather veiled (perhaps unconscious) feelings of guilt, as Ellison suggested (“*An American Dilemma*” 332).

However, readers may notice that Trueblood is not simply portrayed as a stereotypical, dumb, and animalistic black farmer. Invisible tells his readers, but notably not Norton, that Trueblood was “one who told his stories with a sense of humor and a magic that made them come alive” (46). For instance, Trueblood’s wife has realised what he was doing with their daughter and throws something at him: “Somethin’ hits the wall – boom-a-loom-a-loom! – like a cannon ball, and I tries to cover up my head” (61). A while later, she has gone out but comes back dragging something:

I tries to see what it is ‘cause I’m curious ‘bout it ... I thinks to myself, it’s a handle. What she got the handle to? Then I sees her right up on me, big. She’s swingin’ her arms like a man swingin’ a ten-pound sledge ... Lawd, yes! ... Then I sees that ax come free! It’s shinin’, shinin’ from the sharpenin’ I’d give it a few days before, and man, way back in myself, behind that windbreak, I says, ‘NAAW! KATE – Lawd, Kate, NAW!!!’” (63).

Trueblood’s vivid and onomatopoeic oral language create comic effects. Trueblood does possess the skills of storytelling, using figurative language and suspense to keep readers interested, building up the tension before the final climax when he screams loudly, coming out from his “windbreak,” his frozen state of mind. He even makes Invisible to look up “startled” and pause his retelling of Trueblood’s tale to tell readers about the gripping voice of Trueblood. Mr. Norton was transfixed. Even Trueblood’s children paused their play.

Additionally, his voice takes on “a deep, incantatory quality, as though he had told the story many times” (53). Does Ellison thus hint to his readers to reconsider the honesty of Trueblood? During his long tale, he gives a smile which arguably is a rhetorical ‘wink.’ Trueblood “seemed to smile at [Invisible] behind his eyes as he looked from the white man to [Invisible] and continued” (60). Readers may do as the transfixed Norton and interpret Trueblood’s tale as true, but the smile Trueblood gives Invisible could also indicate that it should be read as a tall tale. A tall tale is an exaggerated “comic fiction disguised as fact”, used for entertaining the audience (Johns 239). Ellison argues elsewhere that a tall-tale improvisation may transcend violence with “cruel but homeopathic laughter” and transform racial cruelties with a traditional form of folk art (“*An Extravagance*” 639). In other words, by telling stories

comically, perhaps exaggerated and perhaps untrue, is a means for the oppressed to mentally escape from the threats from their oppressors.

It is possible that Trueblood makes up a racialized dream-story for naïve whites, exaggerating those “polite Negro stories” – whatever they might have been – of Norton’s (Johns 243). If read this way, Trueblood uses his rhetorical play to take advantage of the white people’s guilt and repressed sexual desires for money in exchange. Rather than offering the true narrative, Trueblood gambles without a definite truth about his daughter’s pregnancy (Johns 245). Reading it as a tall tale would also prove a poorly educated, lower class black man with more intelligence and agency than Invisible would like to admit. Invisible and his peers “hated the black-belt people, the “peasants,”” because despite the college community’s attempts to “lift them up,” Trueblood and the others “did everything it seemed to pull [them] down” (47). Johns interprets the triangle between the white elite (Norton), the black elite (Invisible), and the black lower-class (Trueblood) as an invite for readers to share Ellison’s oblique alignment with Trueblood’s perspective (243-244). Since Norton’s prurience decreases his ethical judgment, and Invisible tells readers that “something was going on which I didn’t get,” neither Norton nor Invisible are interpretive or ethically reliable in this scene (68).

Perhaps it is best to read Trueblood not as a symbol, “someone to be tittered over, affirming racist stereotype, or shunted aside as an embarrassment to the race,” but rather as an individual. This individual either attempts to atone for his sins or creates a persona who benefits from his wrongdoings in society where other opportunities are limited (Tracy 134).

Johns advocates for a tall reading of the tale, because verbal play within humorous discourse may function as “a *fair* contest” about “the future history.” The reader is placed in a position to choose between combatting perspectives in the novel, a “rhetorical middle ground”. That is, a kind of “game space” where Trueblood and other lower-class African Americans contribute to the multiple perspectives and readings of *Invisible Man* (248). Johns argues that Ellison’s “rhetorical work implicitly moves “lower” African American subjectivity toward the public sphere housing cultural authority” (238). In other words, since Trueblood is a skilled storyteller in the traditional manner of African Americans, he is potentially given cultural authority in the novel.

Trueblood tells a story about an essential experience that reveals how he identifies himself. He is also invisible, because no one can see him for who he is. The black people consider him a disgrace, and the white people laugh at him as a sort of dark joke. Trueblood, however, does not seem to be bothered about how others ridicule him. Instead, he asserts his own sense of identity by telling his tale that is his own creation multiple times. He acknowledges

that he is both guilty and not guilty, since the action began in his sleep. Thus, he faces the truth and accepts his sin, and then he can control the meaning of his life by converting his experiences into a story. This careful shaping of his narrative provides him the opportunity to manipulate and construct which experiences that will determinate his identity (Smith 210). Trueblood's tale is arguably a "possible seduction" of his narratee, a symbolic story within the story that mirrors Invisible's quest to get seen and heard. Trueblood's blues-like affirmation of "I'm nobody but myself" might be a clue to reader responses. By the end of the novel, readers may react to Invisible's narrative either as Invisible does to Trueblood's and not understand that Trueblood also speaks for him "on the lower frequencies" or get the shock of this revelation that Norton gets (Fabre 536; *IM* 572).

How does Ellison guide readers to interpret Trueblood's tale? Invisible's narration is restricted. Besides describing Trueblood as "some farmer" that made Invisible "torn between fascination and humiliation", Invisible does not reveal how he feels after the tale (67). He concentrates on Trueblood's face during the story to avoid looking at Mr. Norton. By the end of the tale, Invisible describes Norton's shoes and the background sounds and the smells of "wood burning in the hot sunlight" (68). He finally looks at Norton and becomes "startled" due to Norton's pale face. As Trueblood looks questioningly at Invisible, Invisible does not understand what is going on. He describes how Norton gives a hundred dollars to Trueblood, and then how Invisible helps Norton to the car. His only reaction is: "You no-good bastard! You get a hundred-dollar bill!" silently blaming Trueblood (69). Invisible focalises his narration on Norton's shocked behaviour, but reveals very little to readers. Arguably, Ellison portrays Invisible's obsession with the white man's behaviour as Invisible's only concern for guidance of his own behaviour.

What Invisible does not reveal becomes similarly interesting, as readers do not know how Invisible feels or thinks about the story he has just heard or the Norton's behaviour afterwards. With restricted narration that focuses on the actions, not the feelings, readers have little insight to Invisible's true feelings or thoughts. Perhaps Invisible does not understand Norton's shock, or he suppresses his thoughts and does not want to understand.

Thus, by incorporating a story within the story, Ellison makes Invisible a passive listener. The story is in itself humorously depicted by Trueblood, who takes control over his sinful behaviour by creating a gripping story about it. This way, he empowers himself, which mirrors Invisible's later attempt to "make music of invisibility," and transcends the stereotypical image painted of him by others (14). The episode is also ironic in the sense that Trueblood is rewarded by the white people for confessing his sins and accepting his identity, while Invisible constantly

strives to please the white people. He was embarrassed by a belch and a press on the horn, which is comical in comparison to what Trueblood has done and unashamedly retells. Furthermore, Invisible's ignorance and inability to understand is again parodied in this scene, which is recurring throughout the novel.

Chapter 2: What Hides Beneath the Surface?

This chapter examines the difference between appearance and reality. Ellison argues that “oddly enough,” it was less painful for him to be forced to the back of the bus in the South or other matters he could not change at that moment, than to “tolerate concepts which distorted the actual reality of my situation or my reactions to it.” It was possible to escape the reduction from unjust rules, laws, and customs, but, Ellison argues, he could not escape the reduction of his personality as nothing but the sum of those rules, laws, and customs. Ellison writes that he learnt to outmanoeuvre those who interpreted his silence as submission, his self-control as fear, and his contempt as awe. This battle was mostly fought in silence. Ideas, Ellison continues, are important in themselves, but they are threatening when they are “interposed between me and my sense of reality” (*The World and the Jug* 169). Invisible and other black people in the novel are perceived as false stereotypes. Their protests are masked as laughter for a group of war veterans, as a way of playing the game to gain power for the college leader, and as silent insults in Invisible’s minds when he is reminded of African American folklore.

2.1. Behind Their Laughing Faces

In chapter 3, readers can see how black war veterans who fought in World War I were put in mental hospitals for violating Jim Crow rules. These fictional veterans responded with laughter to cope with their tragic fate. One of the vets insinuates that Invisible should not so naively idolise the white Mr. Norton he accompanies. Moreover, the myth-building college and its hypocritical president are parodied by Ellison in chapters 4-6. This way, Ellison portrays “an ironic awareness of the joke that always lies between appearance and reality” (“Change” 107-108). In other words, what lies beneath the mask that people wear for different reasons to cope with or manipulate themselves and their environments.

In the following episode, the fictional war veterans make a grotesque scene to joke whimsically with Mr. Norton. In his essay “An Extravagance of Laughter” (1985), Ellison argues that laughing at a grotesque play may function as a relief in the moment, and in retrospect, it may allow viewers to grasp the interplay within the play, and tremble (651). In this kind of play, a character can be made to act the clown in order to save his audience’s sanity, when the events of the play are painfully real. Southern black people acted the fool in a similar way, in order to save their own sanity, Ellison continues. That is, they struggled with the roles assigned to them and the norms enforced upon them by whites. Black people were allocated roles of both clowns and fools, according to Ellison. They “fooled” rather than “losing

themselves in a world rendered surreal through an excess of racial pride” and did not care how white people perceived them. They wanted to endure. These black people observed how American life “is of a whole” and recognised that somehow blacks would become a part of the nation as a whole, which Ellison referred to as “their dark-visioned version of the broader “American Joke”” (652). Very often, the motivation to wear a mask is not by fear but rather a “profound rejection of the image created to usurp his identity” (“Change” 109).

Chapter 3 begins when Mr. Norton, pale and ill-looking, requires a stimulant after hearing Trueblood’s tale. Invisible hurries to the only inn in the neighbourhood: the Golden Day. Unfortunately, they arrive the same day as the inmates of a local veteran’s hospital pay their weekly visit to the prostitutes. To Invisible, these veterans sometimes appeared “as though they played some vast and complicated game with me and the rest of the school folk, a game whose goal was laughter and whose rules and subtleties I could never grasp” (73). The veterans “were supposed to be members of the professions toward which at various times I vaguely aspired myself,” making Invisible uncomfortable (73).

During this slightly hysteric episode at the Golden Day, Invisible has a conversation with two veterans about Norton who is almost unconscious after his shocking meeting with Trueblood:

“Look, Sylvester, it’s Thomas Jefferson!”

“I was just about to say, I’ve long wanted to discourse with him.”

I looked at them speechlessly; they were both crazy. Or were they joking?

...

“Gentlemen, this man is my grandfather!”

“But he’s *white*, his name’s Norton.”

“I should know my own grandfather! He’s Thomas Jefferson and I’m his grandson – on the ‘field-nigger’ side,” the tall man said.

“Sylvester, I do believe that you’re right. I certainly do,” he said, staring at Mr. Norton. “Look at those features. Exactly like yours – from the identical mold. Are you sure he didn’t spit you upon earth, fully clothed?”

“No, no, that was my father,” the man said earnestly (77).

In this joking discourse, Ellison humorously plays with historical consciousness and that, black or white, we are all human beings. In the joke between appearance and reality, black people looked upon white people disbelievingly wondering how they could be “so self-deluded over the true interrelatedness of blackness and whiteness”, Ellison argues (“Change” 109). But since Invisible identifies with white men like Norton, he does not know if these men are serious or joking. Again, readers are offered a choice to accept Invisible’s limited ability to interpret and

evaluate the situation, and simply laugh these men off as insane jokesters, or to further reflect upon the historical reality behind their laughing masks.

By invoking one of the founding fathers, Ellison alludes to The Declaration of Independence and the fact that these men are not created equal. According to Ellison, Thomas Jefferson, who himself owned slaves, fought against slavery. However, due to vague formulations in the founding principles, it could be interpreted to allow slavery, despite its emphasis on equality and freedom (Ellison "Perspective of Literature" 780). That is, the founding fathers could portentously escape the contradiction between the founding principles and slavery, and hence refuse "to cleanse themselves ... motivated by hierarchical status and economic interests." (779). In other words, status and wealth motivated the founding fathers to evade the question of slavery, Ellison argues. The supposed differences between human "races" could be invoked as a reason to escape their moral responsibility (780). With the joke about Thomas Jefferson, Ellison suggests that slave owners like him could likely be ancestors to many black Americans.

Although Ellison's communication is again "veiled and metaphoric" – his historical allusions are never explicit –, these veterans are clearly not patients but "prisoners" who have transgressed Jim Crow rules (Callahan, "Chaos" 571; 572). "How could you treat a Negro as equal in war and then deny him equality in times of peace?", Ellison wonders in his introduction to the novel (xxiii). Callahan argues that the heroism of black soldiers from World War I was well-known, but perhaps not so much the "humiliations and terrors" they faced when returning home from Europe ("Chaos" 572). These humiliations will be discussed further below.

From slavery times, humour became an escape from the tragedy of African Americans' life circumstances. That is, songs and comedy provided a relief from suffering and degradation, and it functioned as a bonding mechanism between the oppressed (Schafer 39). For the oppressed, humorous discourse may even provide a vital channel of expression (D. B. Gordon, 255). This may be due to the biological fact that humour and horror share the same neural origin, which is our brain's perception of something odd. When we experience something funny (in the double meaning of laughable and of uncomfortable), our "threat-detection network" is triggered. Then, we may evaluate if the situation is dangerous or not, making us prepared to run – or to laugh, if the situation turns out to be safe (Fletcher 187). It seems that our humour response has evolved as a means to reduce cortisol levels when we mistakenly experience something as dangerous. In other words, laughter may reverse the stress that occurs in a potentially threatening situation (188).

Ellison himself argues that “making grotesque comedy out of the extremes to which whites would go to keep us in what they considered to be our ‘place’” allowed him and his friends to “buffer the pain and negate the humiliation” (“Extravagance” 640). Thus, perhaps these men at the Golden Day employ this whimsical humour to cope with their situation as “prisoners” in the Jim Crow south. The comic and literary tradition of African American humour, like other kinds of humour which has arisen from oppression, has been perceived as gallows humour, as “a safety valve,” as a linking means for the community, and as a means for expressing and reducing aggression and tensions. This humour can be connected to one of the three major theories of humour: the relief theory, which suggests that laughter is a release of repressed negative emotions (Carpio 316). Also, perhaps these men enter the roles they are forced to play as insane patients, thus putting on the mask of the fool. Some readers may laugh at their silly conversation, but underneath it lies the bitter truth of their tragic reality. In a safe and controlled way, by fiction, Ellison uses humour as a means to show that which is hidden.

By jokingly referring to Norton as his grandfather, connections may also be drawn to the concept of father figures. Symbolically, their superintendent is called Supercargo (probably as in the Freudian conception of superego). Supercargo drunkenly requires order, which motivates the inmates to abuse him to unconsciousness. With Supercargo down, “they whirled about like maniacs” (83). As he represents an internalisation of white values, his absence allows for chaos – the opposite of order –, and the bar turns into a hysteric riot scene (Bone 205). In what Ellison refers to as “the basic dualism of the white mind,” black represented the opposite of order and purity, namely chaos (“Change the Joke” 105). Not coincidentally are these “patients” former doctors, teachers, and lawyers, members of the black middle class. In difference to Trueblood, they have been professionally successful but are punished and repressed for their achievements (Bone 205). Hysteria, to Ellison, is “suppressed intellectual energy expressed physically” (“Richard Wright’s Blues” 138). In other words, these intellectuals have been forced to play the fools, and when their suppressive force (Supercargo) is down, this suppression may express itself as this hysteric response.

The key scene during the chaotic episode at the Golden Day occurs when a former surgeon examines Norton, when he lies in a bed upstairs. Norton, who was nearly unconscious, now compliments the vet for his skills in medicine and asks how long time he spent in France. “Long enough to forget some fundamentals which I should never have forgotten,” the vet replies (89). The conversation then follows the pattern of the vet speaking cryptically, Norton asking silly questions, and Invisible silently wishing for them to leave for campus. Readers find out that the vet was a student at Invisible’s college, after which he studied and worked as a

skilled specialist in medicine in France. Yet, once back in the US, he was whipped by ten men in masks for “saving a human life” and forced to “the utmost degradation,” because of his belief that his knowledge and ability to save lives could bring him “dignity” and “other men health,” the vet sarcastically narrates (92).

The vet then turns directly to Invisible, and asks if now he understands, but Invisible is confused and insists on returning Norton to the college. The vet insinuates but seldomly clearly expresses his mind in a sophisticated and sometimes sardonic tone. Neither Norton nor Invisible understands that the vet – and Ellison – argue that Invisible is blind to his own lack of self-agency. Invisible only acts as he believes white men wishes him to, making him “a walking zombie,” “the mechanical man,” and believing that “white is right,” according to the vet (92). The last phrase refers to a joke between black people, saying, “If you’re black, stay back; if you’re brown, stick around; if you’re white, you’re right” (“The Art of Fiction: An Interview” 215). Ellison thus makes an internal joke with those readers who might appreciate this subtle humour.

Invisible experiences ambivalent feelings, similar to the contradictions between the phrases ‘social responsibility’ and ‘social equality.’ On the one hand, he feels that the vet jeopardises Invisible’s chances to succeed at college by behaving this way. On the other hand, he receives “a fearful satisfaction from hearing him talk as he had to a white man” (Callahan 572; *IM* 91).

Moreover, when Norton says that he watches his fate grow at campus, the vet explodes with laughter (92): “The campus, what a destiny! ... You would hardly recognise it, but it is very fitting that you came to the Golden Day” (92). The vet insinuates what Invisible has already told us, that the patients are members of the professions he aspires to. Yet, Ellison parodies Invisible’s inability to grasp this irony, while implicitly compliments readers’ intelligibility when they connect the dots of the vet’s insinuation (Fletcher 74). The vet describes himself as “more clown than a fool,” indicating that he intends to be silly rather than laughed at (152). By doing so, the vet uses the mask of the clown as a survival technique. This mask enables him to laugh at the absurdity of his own fate dictated by the whites in power (Ellison “An Extravagance” 652).

He also points out some truths that lay underneath the surface of the well-polished campus. By now, readers understand more than Invisible does: Norton should look for his destiny at the “semi-madhouse” (89) rather than at the campus, because that is how African Americans from the middle class can be treated by whites who wished to keep them in their inferior place. Consequently, the college is only a veil for indoctrination towards conformity

(that “white is right”) (Bone 205). This is symbolised by the statue of the Founder who lifted a veil off a kneeling slave’s face, “or lowered more firmly in place,” as a puzzled Invisible observes (36).

2.2. Behind the Humble Mask

The college’s myth-building is parodied in the scene when Invisible returns to college after the Golden Day visit, during a biblical oration by Reverend Homer A. Barbee. The institutional power in building a dream has a slogan: “We are a humble, but fast-rising people” (Bone 205; *IM* 118). If they adapt the white people’s recipe for success, the students may perform “great deeds” (*IM* 131). The sermon by Barbee emotionally and powerfully retells the Founder’s Christ-like journey and death. Barbee tells the students that the college president, Dr. Bledsoe, has become the Founder’s resurrected “physical presence” (130). Moreover, Bledsoe’s “is a form of greatness worthy of your imitation. I say to you, pattern yourselves upon him. Aspire, each of you, to follow in his footsteps,” for then, “the history of the race [will be] a saga of mounting triumphs,” Barbee ends his biblical oration (131). The legend of Bledsoe’s rise to become the president was well-known to all students. His story typifies the “rags-to-riches formula,” as he came barefooted to college, with a “fervor for education,” and worked hard to become the assistant to the Founder, before himself becoming the president of the school and a nationally recognised leader (Smith 195). Invisible thinks that “he was our leader and our magic” (114).

Invisible was gullibly impressed by the “big shots” at the evening of the battle royal, and by Norton. His major role-model at college, however, is the powerful and influential black president of his college, Dr. Bledsoe,

with his broad globular face that seemed to take its form from the fat pressing from the inside, which, as air pressing against the membrane of a balloon, gave it shape and buoyancy. “Old Bucket-Head,” some of the fellows called him. I never had. He had been kind to me from the first, perhaps because of the letters which the school superintendent had sent to him when I arrived. But more than that, he was the example of everything I hoped to be: Influential with wealthy men all over the country; consulted in matters concerning the race; a leader of his people; the possessor of not one, but *two* Cadillacs, a good salary and a soft, good-looking and creamy-complexioned wife (98).

Invisible’s illustrative and creative imagery paints a funny picture of the president of the college. Then, Invisible signalise his own virtue of not, at that time, making fun of Bledsoe for his appearance like others do. Here, Invisible believes himself to be, as in the battle royal,

somewhat superior to his peers. He does, however, make fun of Bledsoe to his readers when he writes about Bledsoe with “his broad globular face ...”.

His next sentence which explains why Bledsoe has always been friendly to him halts, since the school superintendent he speaks of is the same drunk, hypocritical “babbitt” that wished to keep him in his place at the smoker in chapter one. Here, readers are also told what Invisible aspires to gain in life: economic wealth, social status, and a beautiful lady (which, readers know, he will not succeed with, since in the ‘narrative now’, the present time of writing his novel, he lives isolated and unemployed in a cellar, steals electricity, and listens to Armstrong). Invisible displays his mystification of Bledsoe and his own inability to differentiate between material wealth and moral virtue. Invisible evidently lacks irony when he blends together Bledsoe’s achievements with his possessions. Also, notice how his “creamy-complexioned wife” is part of Bledsoe’s possessions in Invisible’s eyes (Smith 195).

However, after the biblical ceremony in which Bledsoe was spoken of as practically a saint, it turns out that Reverend Barbee is blind, symbolically foreboding how he is blind of judgment about Bledsoe. His appraisal will become ridiculed and demolished by Bledsoe showing his true face. Since Invisible has showed Norton behind the veil of the college myth, he has committed an unforgettable sin. Called in to Bledsoe’s office, Invisible explains that, “Oh – but [Norton] insisted that I stop, sir. There was nothing I could do ...”. Bledsoe interrupts him: “My God, boy! You’re black and living in the South – did you forget how to lie?” Whereby Invisible answers, “Lie, sir? Lie to him, lie to a trustee, sir? Me?” (136). The naïve Invisible barely knows what the word “lie” means. His answer reveals that he even struggles with formulating a sentence in which he would possibly be a person to “lie” to a white man (Smith 196).

Bledsoe laughs at Invisible, and continues to explain the simple facts of life, that “the dumbest black bastard in the cotton patch knows that the only way to please a white man is tell him a lie” (137)! The sheer contrast between the hypocritical Bledsoe and the innocent and ignorant young Invisible is designed to be amusing. With Bledsoe, Ellison satirises Invisible’s Booker T. Washington-based plea to live a humble life, which becomes “a compound of obsequiousness and Machiavellian plotting” (Schafer 43). Bledsoe only possesses power, no dignity (Bone 206). The ethics of the telling in this conversation is that Invisible should see through Bledsoe’s mask and detect him as a power-mad lying fraud.

The ethics of the told, however, is that Bledsoe is right and Invisible should take his responsibility for the events. When Invisible realises that Bledsoe will suspend him, despite promising Norton that he would not, Invisible loses his senses. He vaguely sees that if Bledsoe

can break a promise, and Invisible himself can be reprimanded although he was not at fault, then his view of the world that cause and effect are orderly patterned will collapse (Smith 196). When the lying Bledsoe suspends Invisible, he provides him with letters of recommendations to some important friends of the school in New York. Invisible's momentary despair is relieved, and he forces himself to restore his belief, as he must trust that Bledsoe's letters will provide him with an important job in the big city:

Somehow, I convinced myself, I had violated the code and thus would have to submit to my punishment. Dr. Bledsoe is right, I told myself, he's right; the school and what it stands for have to be protected. There was no other way, and no matter how much I suffered I would pay my debt as quickly as possible and return to building my career (145).

Contradictions, accidents, and inconsistencies are not parts of Invisible's conceptions of life. Instead, he reinterprets the whole series of events with Trueblood, Norton, the vet, and Bledsoe to make them his responsibility. Thus, his punishment will make sense, which is easier for him to accept than to face the fact that things are not always what they seem (Smith 196).

This whole passage demonstrates, again, how naïve and gullible Invisible is. Moreover, he fools himself and denies what the vet and Bledsoe tells him about the reality of his view of the world, in which "white is right". Invisible does not allow himself to think about his suppressed grandfather-voice of his, the voice that doubts and questions what he perceives to be the truth. Ellison parodies Invisible's innocence and keeps asking readers to see how Invisible fails to understand what lies beneath the surface, because he does not dare to confront his own, one-visioned path to success. Moreover, the success he seeks is also parodied as it consists of possessions and status, but no moral virtues or ideas about a better world for others than himself, as exemplified with his idolisation of Bledsoe's power and material wealth.

This obsession with looks and status is humorously described in a later scene, in chapter 12, when Invisible has seen with his own eyes that Bledsoe's letters were fake and only told the receivers to keep him running. He now recognises that the values he had at college, which Bledsoe tried to tell him, are simply bogus. He has repeatedly tried to humble himself, but realises after his failures in finding a job in New York that the American dream is not for him (Smith 199). This recognition makes him see things from a new perspective, and during his last visit to the Men's House, where he lives in Harlem, he sees the other residents in a new light.

Amongst many, these various groups of men include:

the pathetic ones who possessed nothing beyond their dreams of being gentlemen, ... and all pretending to be engaged in some vast, though obscure, enterprise, ... who spent most of their wages on clothing such as was fashionable among Wall Street brokers, ... with their orthodox

and passionate argument as to what was the correct tie to wear with what shirt, ... and what would the Prince of Wales wear at a certain seasonal events; should field glasses be slung from the right or from the left shoulder; who never read the financial pages though they purchased the *Wall Street Journal* religiously and carried it beneath the left elbow, pressed firm against the body ... with an easy precision (Oh, they had style) while the other hand whipped a tightly rolled umbrella back and forth at a calculated angle ... (250-251).

Here, Ellison's very long and expository sentence paints a clear picture of the men described, quite comically. Readers can find these men as possible in real life and respond to the mimetic component with laughter since the descriptions are so detailed.

Invisible sarcastically distances himself from their silly manners of imposing an air of importance without achieving anything. It is all performance. These men are described as performing something in order to become something else, those who wished to be gentlemen pretends to be "engaged in some vast ... enterprise", and those who wanted status by dressing fashionable. None of them are what they wish to be, and Ellison satirise their very detailed "orthodox and passionate" arguments about how to look. Indeed, their consciousness about their appearance is parodied as Invisible describes how they "religiously" carried the *Wall Street Journal* without reading it ("Oh, they had style"). Quite ironically, these men are concerned with if field glasses should be slung from the right or left side. Even the angle of the "tightly rolled umbrella" is calculated. Everything is thought through and performed; they are carefully acting their roles, wearing their masks – but they do not achieve any difference or anything meaningful in the world, it seems. There is no action involved, and their concerns seem ridiculously small and self-centred.

Invisible feels alienated to the others whom he has up until now identified with (Smith 199). He "felt a contempt such as only a disillusioned dreamer feels for those still unaware that they dream" (250). His disillusionment makes him feel freer, and it results in an incongruous revenge act, when he suddenly sees Bledsoe amongst these men. He reaches for a spittoon and dumps "its great brown, transparent splash upon the head" of Bledsoe (252). But whom he thought was Bledsoe was a Baptist preacher! An "amused porter" later that day told him that he was banned for "ninety-nine years and a day", but they would never stop talking about Invisible because he "really baptized ole Rev!" (252). The unexpectedness of Invisible's action and the funny pun on baptizing a reverend with a full spittoon might give readers a sense of momentary comic relief. What is more, Invisible felt "amazed at my own action" after he "baptized" the man (252). Symbolically, Invisible overturns his former dreams with this act of revenge on Bledsoe (Smith 199).

This is bonding unreliability of the sort Phelan calls “partial progress towards the norm” (Somebody 108). Earlier scenes have demonstrated how Ellison communicates that Invisible does not understand that there are other ways in life than his American dream. Throughout the narrative, it becomes clear that one of Ellison’s positions in *Invisible Man* is that Invisible must make individual choices and act autonomously. In order to counter both his individual struggle to find an identity and his collective struggle against racist oppression, he must take individual action to create something positive. Hence, Invisible’s act to empty the spittoon over Bledsoe demonstrates his distance towards Bledsoe and those men who only pretend to signal status. Invisible’s narration here shows that he has progressed from believing that “Bledsoe was right”.

However, despite his feelings of amazement, the action in itself is insignificant since neither Bledsoe will know about his revenge, nor does it change anything substantial in Invisible’s life. Nevertheless, the dominant effect of this passage is to narrow the distance between readers and Invisible, which marks his progression towards Ellison’s norm (Phelan *Somebody* 109).

In sum, behind the humble mask is a corrupt hypocrite, only interested in his own power. Invisible’s inability to face the truth in front of him indicates that he is blind to what lies behind the surface. Once his illusion of Bledsoe and the college as a dream collapses, Invisible is able to ironize about the performative follies of the men at the Men’s House. In a symbolic opposing act he takes his revenge upon “Bledsoe” and baptise a Baptist with a spittoon!

2.3. Behind the Smiling Silence

Invisible Man should not be read as an autobiography, but there are some incidents and thoughts that resembles Ellison’s own life. Ellison moved to New York the summer of 1936 to earn money for the next year’s tuition at Tuskegee Institute. In the South, he knew how to behave because there were strict rules and limitations between white and black people. Ellison later realised that he had internalised the Southern “thou-shalt-nots,” which made him confused when coming North (“Extravagance” 619). Ellison’s embarrassment when he realised that he did not know how to act in interracial situations made him employ a mask of what he believed to be a sophisticated Northerner, because “one was accepted on the basis of what one appeared to be” (620; 633). And, to deal with white pretentiousness in the North, Ellison recalled survival strategies from African American folklore (646). Similarly, Invisible is reminded of his cultural heritage which will help him overcome his fear and find his identity, as will be discussed shortly.

In chapter 8, when Invisible has just arrived in New York, he plans how to behave: “I would always be – yes, there was no other word, I would be *charming*.” In the South, he would be thought of as “putting on”, but here in the North he will “slough off my southern way of speaking” and speak with “dazzling eloquence” (161; 160). Because “if Dr. Bledsoe could do it, so could I,” Invisible thinks (161). Despite his plans, Invisible feels “unsure how to act” around white people in New York (165). They do not seem antagonistic like the whites in the South. Rather, they seem “impersonal,” as though they do not see him and “would beg pardon of Jack the Bear” (165). “It was confusing,” Invisible thinks. However, his insecurity fades when he remembers that “Mr Norton had called me his destiny ... I swung my briefcase with confidence” (165). Invisible is still naively caught up in the illusion that Norton could see his individuality, and is ironically encouraged by this belief. He insures himself that he will get a job from one of the recipients of Bledsoe’s letters. Readers, conversely, may suspect what Invisible cannot apprehend, that he should not trust these letters wholeheartedly.

On his way to the last of those recipients, in chapter 9, Invisible meets the self-proclaimed “Devil’s only son-in-law”, Peter Wheatstraw (173). Wheatstraw is singing on a blues, pulling a cart full of leftover blueprints over buildings and houses. He tells Invisible that

All it takes to get along in this here man’s world is a little shit, grit and mother-wit. And man, I was bawn with all three. In fact, I’m a seventh son of a seventh son bawn with a caul over both eyes and raised on black catbones highjohn the conqueror and greasy greens – ... You dig me, daddy? (172).

In other words, Wheatstraw has learnt that the combination of luck, will, and skill is a key to become street-smart and survive in a society dominated by whites (Callahan “Frequencies of Eloquence” 154). In this quote, black cat bones refer to the traditional belief that they give invisibility to their possessors, and High John the Conqueror is a root which, if chewed, symbolises protection from enemies. In other words, they are thought to have conjuring capabilities (Anderson 41; 39).

Peetie Wheatstraw was the stage name of an actual blues singer called William Bunch, whom Ellison once played with in Saint Louis. Wheatstraw was often called “high sheriff from hell” and “the devil’s son-in-law,” and other blues singers also adopted the pseudonym (Sundquist 123). This fictional Wheatstraw’s quickness with words makes Invisible laugh, telling Wheatstraw that he is “going too fast.” Continuing with his word games and riddles derived from African American folklore and popular songs, Wheatstraw makes Invisible “grinning despite myself” and unsuccessfully, he tries to come up with an answer as quick-witted (173). Invisible has learnt to play the role of a silently smiling, politely agreeable man,

and is uncustomed to this outspokenness. Invisible's inarticulateness is part of his acceptance of submission, the "mask of meekness" that he has unconsciously internalised. African Americans in Invisible's circles who spoke their minds were punished, while those who did not express themselves were rewarded, like Bledsoe and Invisible's grandfather (A. A. Johnson 36).

Wheatstraw demonstrates to Invisible the importance of folk tradition, of improvisation and wariness, and of creativity in a world where Invisible believes that "you have to stick to the plan" (172). Wheatstraw is a self-created man who has actively chosen a mask that allows him to negotiate his way through life (Tracy 134). He embraces African American folk traditions and opposes the illusory "good" world of the whites. Like jazz and the blues, his language is not quite on the beat (135). These syncopated effects are sources of amusement for both Invisible and arguably for readers. The blues signifies the down-home, earthy, and lower-class perspectives and the wisdom of ancestors (127). Moreover, Wheatstraw's strategy is to oppose radical determinism by making his own choices and acting in the world, and thus becomes a self-reliant man that defies racial stereotypes (135).

"Haw, but look me up sometimes, I'm a piano player and a rounder, a whiskey drinker and a pavement pounder", Wheatstraw ends their conversation before walking away (173). The rhythmical use of consonance in "piano player" and "pavement pounder", the assonance in "whiskey drinker", and the rhyme on "rounder" and "pounder" has a humorously poetic effect. Wheatstraw's aesthetically amusing language is arguably a source of humour (Schafer 40). There are similarities between aesthetic and humorous experiences, since they are enjoyed for the pleasure of the experience in itself (Morreall 70). In both, imagination and surprise may lead to see things from new perspectives (71). Arguably, Ellison invites his readers to see lower class African American culture as articulate, witty, and rich, and to challenge readers' views of African American agency during this time (Johns 251). Wheatstraw is able to improvise and adapt to changes in his life using the blues as his *modus operandi* in life. Thus, Ellison portrays this "braggadocio", street-smart Wheatstraw as a black, lower-class man more competent with words than Invisible who arrogantly believes himself more intelligent than other black Americans (250).

When Invisible finally reads the letter from Bledsoe, telling the recipient essentially to "keep him running," and he realises that he will never return to college, Invisible reacts with an ironic laughter. "It was a joke. Hell, it couldn't be a joke. Yes, it is a joke ..." (189). Invisible hears someone whistle on a tune and is reminded of an old song they sang for a laugh as children:

*O well they picked poor Robin clean
 O well they picked poor Robin clean
 Well they tied poor Robin to a stump
 Lawd, they picked all the feathers round
 from Robin's rump
 Well they picked poor Robin clean."* (189-190).

This song is a “jazz community joke”, according to Ellison. It “was played to satirize some betrayal of faith or loss of love” (“Charlie Parker” 256). Poor Robin was picked of his feathers repeatedly by mysterious, unnamed pluckers. The tune, however, was productive of laughter, even for the objects of it. Ellison argues that “each of us recognized that his fate was somehow our own.” The African Americans’ defeats were “loaded upon his back” and due to its ironic significance, the song made their lives more bearable (257).

In other words, like the veterans at the Golden Day, Invisible responds with laughter to cope with a painful situation. The meaning of the song helps Invisible to ironize his own situation, and thus distance himself from his pain. John Morreall argues in *Comic Relief* that a cognitive shift (here, Invisible’s realisation that he is betrayed) may produce feelings of confusion. Our perceptions, thoughts, and beliefs are our guiding systems in life. Once they are challenged, it might threaten our control over what we are doing and what is happening to us (Morreall 52). Responding with laughter to such a cognitive shift as Invisible experiences, might be beneficial because he distances himself from the “here-and-now” negative emotions. It allows for a more distant perspective which makes it easier to reflect upon the situation objectively (Morreall 67). Hence, Invisible realises and rejects the fact that he has up until now been fooled. However, his anger from this realisation makes him dream about killing Bledsoe. This anger becomes a driving force for him to take a job in a paint factory, and he “could hardly get to sleep for dreaming of revenge” (191).

In chapter 10, Invisible works in the Liberty Paints Factory where he must mix ten drops of black into the white paint. This whiteness will KEEP AMERICA PURE and cover the government buildings. This represents the racial mixing in the US, and Ellison satirizes the government’s embracement of segregation and simultaneously celebrate African American culture’s importance (Sundquist 3). Invisible’s brief employment ends with a literal explosion. In chapter 11, Invisible wakes up in a mysterious machine in the factory hospital. The white doctors ignore him, and instead discuss whether Invisible is representative for the success of the machine they use on him.

One of the doctors argues that since Invisible is not a “New Englander with a Harvard background,” “more advanced conditions” might not be cured as effectively by this new machine (231). The machine gives Invisible painful electric shocks similar to lobotomy that will produce “a complete change of personality.” Invisible’s personality is “absolutely of no importance,” and “he will experience no major conflict of motives, and what is even better, society will suffer no traumata on his account,” another doctor explains (232). Not only is Invisible’s individuality threatened by him being an African American, but also by machines (Bone 197). The electric shocks make Invisible involuntarily dance: “Look, he’s dancing,” ... “They really do have rhythm, don’t they? Get hot, boy! Get hot!” the doctors laugh (233).

Readers might laugh at their jokes, but since Invisible is the focal point of emotion, readers may instead feel that the doctors’ joking is highly hurtful and humiliating. The doctors infantilise him; they ignore him, they ridicule him; they feel superior – while readers may sympathise with Invisible. Here, the doctors’ joking functions negatively to block their compassion, neglect responsibility, and promote prejudice, allowing them to joke about Invisible without seeing the consequences of their dehumanization of him (Morreall 102). To them, as to the men in the battle royal scene, Invisible is but a representation of a minstrel black-face comedian. He is involuntarily masked by their prejudices.

However, since Ellison guides readers to align with Invisible, the ethics of the telling points out the immorality in such humour. “Why not a castration, doctor?” they laugh, continuing: “What’s the definition of a surgeon, “A butcher with a bad conscience”” (232). The ethical dimension of this scene clearly portrays these doctors as inhumane, harassing bullies without conscience, ignoring their patient who is trapped inside a box and getting electric shocks while they jokingly insult him.

Invisible’s small revenge comes as he is reminded of his cultural heritage. Invisible realises that he cannot remember his own name. He undergoes a kind of reconstruction of his own in the factory hospital. Another doctor tries to help him remember his identity by recapitulating the folk history of his race (Schafer 40). He asks Invisible of his name, but he cannot remember. He asks, “WHO WAS YOUR MOTHER?” and Invisible thinks, “half in amusement, I don’t play the dozens. And how’s *your* old lady today?” (237). Smilingly Invisible observes the doctor’s annoyance. Notably, the machine has deprived him not only of his memories, but seemingly he cannot speak to the doctors. They write notes which he only answers in his mind. This way, Ellison communicates to readers but not to the doctors what Invisible answers.

The game of ‘playing the dozens’ entails slang witticisms about the opponent’s origin and legitimacy to outscore him or her verbally (Schafer 40). Verbal games like playing the dozens, verbal battles, boasting and toasting are all part of the humour of signifying, sometimes involving the “risqué denigration of mothers” (Sundquist 25). Signifying belongs to one of the three major categories of humour, the superiority theory which suggests that laughter comes from experiencing other people’s misfortunes. Here, it functions to criticize racial oppression (Carpio 316).

After asking him of his own identity and his mothers’, the doctors ask Invisible, “BOY, WHO WAS BRER RABBIT? He was your mother’s back door man, I thought” (238). Invisible makes a dirty joke in a language of the blues, indicating sexual revenge (Schafer 41). Ellison argues that whenever a white person made a racist insult, black people had to keep their negative opinions to themselves and within their group. To remain ‘cool’ “became a life-preserving discipline” to avoid physical dangers from racists (“An Extravagance” 635). White peoples’ insults were often intended to provoke black people to go “*beyond* words and into the arena of physical violence,” Ellison continues (636). Hence, by keeping his insults to himself, but retelling them to his readers in his memoirs, Invisible both demonstrates wit and bonds with readers who recognise and identify with this kind of humour. Without risking physical abuse from his joking ridicule of the doctors, Invisible demonstrates his protest to his readers. In other words, what hides behind his silent mask.

This verbal duelling is linked to the major theme of *Invisible Man*: the quest for identity. (Schafer 41). He is reminded of his cultural heritage of slavery, while being symbolically captured inside a machine; and also, of how weaker animals like the rabbit often outsmart stronger ones like the fox in those traditional folktales, through wit and cunning. These stories are often allegories of the power imbalance between slave and master. They have been used in ironic comments on the unchanged conditions for blacks after the Reconstruction (Carpio 318). The rabbit figure is frequently used as a metaphor for anonymity or for bondage, slavery, and racism in the African American experience (Sundquist 120).

In one of the many tales about Brer Rabbit, for instance, he is tricked by Brer Fox who has made a “Tar-Baby,” a doll out of turpentine and dressed in clothes. When Rabbit walks past and politely greets Tar-Baby, Rabbit feels offended when he is not greeted back. Starting to insult and fight Tar-Baby, Rabbit becomes more and more entangled in the doll. Fox appears when Rabbit is stuck, laughing, and tells him: “Howdy, Brer Rabbit ... I speck you’ll take dinner wid me dis time” (Harris 69). “I don’t ker w’at you do wid me, Brer Fox,” Brer Rabbit says, “so you don’t fling me in dat brier-patch.” Repeating this wish, Brer Fox, who wants to

harm him “bad as he kin,” slings Brer Rabbit into the brier-patch. Seeing Brer Rabbit run away, he knows he has been “swoop off mighty bad.” Brer Rabbit triumphantly yells, “Bred en bawn in a brier-patch, Brer Fox!” (70). Being the smarter of the two, the rabbit thus manages to escape from the trap set up by the stronger fox.

However, these trickster tales should not be simplified into tales about “Weak-but-Cunning Black versus Strong-but-Duller White”. On the one hand, such an easy interpretation might hold, but on the other hand, it might not. The “weak” rabbits of the tales are frequently portrayed as selfishly proud and “dangerously out of sync with their surroundings and fellow creatures,” like most trickster figures in most cultures are. Their function is more often a warning than an example of how to live (O’Meally 56).

Stories about these African American trickster figures have been used in different writings to emphasise “what is paradoxically both a great source of comedy and a key principle underlying chattel slavery, namely the inability to control one’s body” (Carpio 318). This scene in *Invisible Man* thus uses comedy to deal with the historical painful tragedy that the enslaved faced, and the sense of captivity that blacks during Ellison’s time still faced. Both threats of physical violence and the stereotypical, false images that created a mental barrier between whites and blacks are satirised in this scene. Ellison said that in folk tales we “depict the humor as well as the horror of our living” (qtd. in Sundquist 128).

The rabbit is a trickster figure relevant to *Invisible*, because he must “find his way through a world of tricks, traps, exploitation, illusion, and outright antagonism” (Sundquist 127). By recalling African American folklore and humour, *Invisible* learns to handle betrayals and mocking laughter in this scene. This newfound strength will make *Invisible* realise the absurdity in being ashamed of your past and of what you like, which occurs in a scene when he eats yams.

In chapter 13, *Invisible* walks down the streets and is tempted by the odour of “hot, Car’lina yams” (256). He buys and eats one immediately. Compared to how he proudly resisted traditional Southern pork chops in “an act of discipline” when he first arrived in New York, *Invisible* now realises that he does not need to fear who may see him (Smith 200; *IM* 175). He can publicly enjoy what has earlier embarrassed him because he associated it with Southern country bumpkins, providing him an “intense feeling of freedom” (258). He imagines Bledsoe being caught eating yams and other foods associated with Southern country bumpkins in private. *Invisible*, in his fantasy, shouts to him: “Bledsoe, you’re a shameless chitterling eater! I accuse you of relishing hog bowels! Ha! ... I accuse you of indulging in a filthy habit, Bledsoe!”

Imagining Bledsoe lugging out yards of chitterlings, mustard greens, pigs' ears, pork chops, and black-eyed peas, Invisible lets out "a wild laugh" and continues his daydream:

Why, with others present, it would have been worse than if I had accused him of raping an old woman of ninety-nine years, weighing ninety pounds ... blind in one eye and lame in the hip! Bledsoe would disintegrate, disinflate! With a profound sigh he'd drop his head in shame. He'd lose caste. The weekly newspapers would attack him. The captions over his picture: *Prominent Educator Reverts to Field-Niggerism!* (258).

With this hyperbole, Invisible makes fun of the fact that many blacks were ashamed of their cultural heritage. The unlikelihood of Bledsoe being caught eating these kinds of foods would be *worse* than raping a defenceless woman like that strikes humorously. This kind of humour may be linked to one of the three major theories of humour, the incongruity theory, which posits that laughter comes when our expectations are disrupted. Sometimes, the humour of incongruity can get us to question our myths and biases, for example that eating a certain type of food would be downgrading (Carpio 317).

Additionally, Ellison here satirises the hypocrisy involved in power games, since Bledsoe easily could be humiliated in front of the college's white trustees. If Bledsoe would be caught as a typical "field-nigger", the white bourgeoisie would realise that he is a bad example for the students. At the "white-washed" college where the students are to be kept running (in their same old place), they are supposed to conform to "white" culture. Hence, many of the ambitious blacks shamefully tried to hide their origins.

Their shame may be because children who grow up in segregation and discrimination usually feel inferior and humiliated. They become confused of their own personal worth (Bloom 34). Simultaneously, their need to feel personal dignity is conflicted with the lack of respect from others. This conflict and confusion, where the child wonders if he and his minority group do not deserve more respect than they receive, lead to self-hatred and rejection of one's own group. Children from lower social classes may often react with aggression, while children from middle and upper classes either become submissive or try to conform to the majority group's values in order to succeed in that world. Minority children from all social and economic classes tend to be hypersensitive and anxious about their relations to society and may expect rejection and hostility in situations even where there is none (Bloom 35). Hence, when Invisible uses the unlikely comparison with raping a very old, very thin, fragile, blind, and partly lame woman as being worse, Invisible comically highlights this ridiculousness, and concludes, "to hell with being ashamed of what you liked" (258).

Shame is an emotion that disrupts feelings of self-acceptance. In contrast to guilt, which makes a person feel insecure about outer actions, shame makes a person feel insecure about his or her inner nature (Fletcher 160). Thus, feelings of shame does not correct a behaviour like lying or cheating, but it is a feeling that makes a person disgust his or her permanent characteristics. However, by expanding a person's belief in what constitutes socially acceptable behaviour, feelings of shame may be reduced (161). This is what Invisible experiences when he jokes about Bledsoe's indulging in "shameful" foods, and also allows readers to feel a "boost" of self-acceptance by seeing the ridiculousness in being ashamed for something they like (165). Invisible runs back to the yam-man, asks for two more yams, and tells him: "I yam what I am!" (260). A "lovely pun," Callahan thinks, that demonstrates his approaching acceptance of himself and his ability to make jokes, but which also brings new insights as Invisible realises that he has "never formed a personal attitude" and must now begin to make active choices ("Ellison's" 301; *IM* 260).

In sum, what goes on inside of Invisible's mind is not what others see. He has internalised the "thou-shalt-nots" from the South, and even though he tries to modulate his behaviour and be "*charming*", he is still inarticulate. Particularly during the hospital scene, when he cannot move or express his mind, is there a vast contrast between how he is perceived by the doctors and how readers perceive him. His small signifying revenge cannot be heard by the doctor, and it is not until readers read this scene that Invisible's thoughts are revealed. In other words, there is more than what appears beneath his mask of silence.

However, Wheatstraw's blues, Poor Robin's ironic jazz tunes, and Brer Rabbit's cleverness help him to conclude that he needs not be ashamed of his past. By joking, Invisible may slowly overcome his fears and shames, which is demonstrated with his wild humour imagining Bledsoe be shamed by eating chitterlings. Thus, Ellison points out how ridiculous it is to be ashamed of personal tastes, and does this with a pun: "I yam what I am" (260).

Chapter 3: Laws, Action, Responsibility, and Chaos

In his essay “Remembering Richard Wright” (1971), Ellison compliments his mentor, the writer Richard Wright because he fought against his comrades in the Communist Party when they insisted upon “blind discipline” and to follow unthinkingly (673). As an outsider, Ellison watched “this comedy of misperception” with amusement when Wright was considered a threat to them for his ambitions and intellect (667). Hence, “one must pay his dues to change and take advantage of possibility by asserting oneself. ... one’s fate is also determined by what one does and by what one does *not* do” (671). In other words, independent thought and individual action is key to political change, Ellison suggests. His characters are formed from their actions, and Invisible’s flaws come from “what he refuses to do in each section that leads to further action” (“Art of Fiction” 221). This chapter addresses the issues of following unthinkingly as opposed to conscious individual action.

3.1. The Law is a Cacophony of Voices

This section demonstrates how Ellison plays with concepts like action, law, and change. In chapter 13, Invisible makes an impromptu speech during an eviction. After his speech, a collective uproar of protests momentarily changes those unjust conditions for the evicted couple, but the irony is that the changes are superfluous. Moreover, Invisible uses verbal irony which changes the meaning of the concept of ‘law,’ indicating that laws are not fixed but subject to interpretation. This invites readers to be judges of the multiple meanings of ‘law.’

Ellison argues in “Perspective of Literature” (1976) that language can be seen as a “primary agency of order” because language separates man from animals. Through language, human beings seek “simultaneously to maintain and evade our commitments as social beings.” In this sense, human society could be seen as fictitious, because it is built upon linguistic, legal documents that are the basis for societal order (776). Moreover, Ellison argues, law and literature both work in the interests of social order. Literature “strives to socialize those emotions and interests held in check by manners, conventions and again by law” (777). Ellison likens the law with a stage upon which the democratic values are acted out, “the rest is up to the individual” (785).

The following is a constituent event because Invisible’s impromptu speech will lead to Invisible’s job offer for the Brotherhood. The historical precedent might be the radical resistance against evictions in many American cities during the 1930s (Stratton 166). For

example, “The Battle of the Bronx” had thousands of supporters who beat the police officers with bottles and sticks, halting the evictions momentarily (167).

Ellison argues that “the moment you say something explicit about history in a novel, everybody’s going to rise up and knock the Hell out of you, because they suspect that you are trying to take advantage of a form of authority which is sacred. History is sacred, you see, and no matter how false to actual events it might be” (qtd. in Callahan “Chaos” 571). Hence, Ellison’s strategy is again connotation; readers understand that times are tough when Invisible lives in Harlem, but there is no mention of the Great Depression. Ellison’s unwillingness to restrict the following events to one moment in history might be because he wishes to point out recurring representative experiences for black people throughout times, rather than providing a possibility to blame racial discrimination on tough times alone (Callahan “Chaos” 571).

In chapter 13 of the novel, just after he eats yams, Invisible observes a “sullen-faced crowd” watching two white marshals carrying out all belongings of an older couple, called the Provos, to the street (262). Invisible feels deeply moved and tries to wrestle his feelings, reminded of people he knows and realises that he feels connected to the other black people around him (“as though they, *we*, were ashamed” [264], emphasis added). Invisible hears someone say, “Sho, we ought to stop ’em [...] but ain’t that much nerve in the whole bunch”. Another man replies, “All they need is someone to set it off. All they need is a leader” (262). This reply invokes Invisible’s long-standing desire to be a heroic leader and implies that his desire might be fulfilled in this scene (Stratton 165).

Suddenly, the crowd moves collectively to abuse the marshal who physically prevents the old lady Provo from re-entering her flat to go in and pray. The marshal threatens to shoot them. Afraid and angry, fascinated and repelled by the potentiality of violence, Invisible explains that “beneath it all ... boiled up all the shock-absorbing phrases that I had learned all my life.” He begins speaking “without thought but out of my clashing emotions ... “No, no,” I heard myself yelling ... “Black Brothers! That’s not the way. We’re law abiding. We’re a law-abiding people and a slow-to-anger people.”” This makes the crowd stop. “Yeah, but we made now,” a voice called out (269). Invisible attempts to lead the crowd away from violence. The repartee continues:

“Let’s follow a leader, let’s organize ... We need someone like that wise leader, ... you read about him, ... that wise man who was strong enough to do the legal thing, the law-abiding thing to turn him over to the forces of law and order ...”

“Yeah,” a voice rang out, “so they could lynch his ass.”

Oh, God, this wasn't it at all. Poor technique and not at all what I intended.

"He was a wise leader," I yelled. "He was within the law. Now wasn't that the wise thing to do?"

"Yeah, he was alright," the man laughed angrily. "Now get out of the way so we can jump this paddie."

The crowd yelled and I laughed in response as though hypnotized.

"But wasn't that the human thing to do? After all, he had to protect himself because —"

"He was a handkerchief-headed rat!", a woman screamed, her voice boiling with contempt.

"Yes, you're right. He was wise and cowardly, but what about us? What are we to do?" I yelled, suddenly thrilled by the response (269-270).

Here, the crowd's responses are humorously depicted, despite their anger. Invisible relies on a call-and-response technique which can be found in jazz, the blues, and spirituals (Tracy 126). He tests his improvised performance and adapts to the responses, trying to change what he thinks of as "poor technique" that does not match his intentions (Callahan, "Frequencies" 152).

Invisible shows his disappointment with an expressive "Oh, God", explaining that what he intended "wasn't it at all". Despite the crowd's yelling, Invisible continues and laughs "as though hypnotized" to the communication between him and the audience. Invisible is "thrilled with the response", but his evaluation here seems to be mistaken. The crowd does not respond to him, they angrily try to get rid of him. From their perspective, Invisible's speech threatens to rob them of their initiated action. An ironic collaboration between Invisible and his audience begins, in a kind of reversed call-and-response where he rather follows his audience's moves than leads them (Callahan, "Frequencies" 161; 163).

However, Invisible continues and modulates his style into a monologue, shifting between asking his audience to look at the old Provos and the policeman, and asking rhetorical questions about what they might do. His oratory has an affirmative response and momentarily moves the audience to reflection (Callahan, "Frequencies" 162). Now, Invisible redefines "law-abiding" when he points at the police marshal, "*Laws*, that's what we call them down South! Laws! And we're wise, and law-abiding" (272). With this change of meaning, 'laws' no longer refers to a mandated system of legislation to prevent and regulate behaviour. Instead, Invisible uses the vernacular idiom "Laws", which describes the violent embodiment of the law of force (Stratton 166).

"This is legal and I shoot if I have to!" the marshal says (273). When the Provos are denied going in and pray, Invisible addresses his audience again, saying, "All we have is the

Bible and this Law here rules that out” (273). In other words, the biblical code is no option for resistance to injustice; neither is the law in this sense (Stratton 166). Comically, Invisible again asks his audience, “Where do we go from here, without a pot –,” but is interrupted by, “We going after that paddie,” and Invisible is pushed aside by the angry mob (273). Since neither the police change their minds, nor Invisible manages to persuade them to an alternative to violence, they collectively mobilise into action and abuse the marshal (Callahan, “Frequencies” 162).

Ironically, Invisible joins them and is soon “beside myself with excitement” (274). He sings and yells that they should go in and pray, although he thinks that they will need some chairs then. Hence, Invisible again changes the meaning of “law-abiding,” when he happily asks the crowd to put back the furniture into the flat: “It’s blocking the street and the sidewalk, and that’s against the law” (275). Now, they are “law-abiding” because they enforce the law against littering. Hence, by use of verbal irony, Invisible eloquently changes the meaning of “law” from the sense of ‘pay rent or face eviction,’ to the marshal as the embodiment of the force of law, and again to the law against littering. Thus, they may break one law in order to obey another (Stratton 168).

In this scene, laws do not constitute a unified, law-abiding perspective (Stratton 168). Rather, the law is like the voices responding to Invisible’s speech: multiple and diverse. Ellison argues that Americans must “recognize that behind the Constitution, which we say rests in principles that lie beyond the limits of death and dying, are really man-made, legal fictions” (“Perspective of Literature” 775). That is, the Constitution and laws are composed by men; they are never so sacred that they may not be questioned. Their function is subject to interpretation before they are enacted (Stratton 169). Ellison argues that transcendent ideals upon which the nation is founded are the solid base upon which laws may be interpreted (“Perspective” 777). Like Invisible does in this scene, judges must adjudicate these principles which sometimes come into conflict (Stratton 169).

Ellison invites readers to a conversation, asking, “Where do we go from here?” (*IM* 273). Rather than providing an answer, Ellison asks his readers to consider the different interpretive possibilities of laws. According to Ellison, a writer’s role is to “yell ‘Fire’ in crowded theaters,” Ellison argues (“Perspective” 777). Thus, to present fictional legal representatives in a comic light may allow readers “to laugh at themselves, and most impious of all, to laugh at the courts and perhaps at the Constitution itself” (775). Hence, in *Invisible Man*, irony is used to demonstrate that the law is both embodied, violent, and linguistic, and simultaneously enacted with relative and inconsistent consequences (Stratton 171). Had the “law” (the marshal) been

more cooperative and allowed the couple their “fifteen minutes’ worth of Jesus,” perhaps the unnecessary violence could have been prevented (272).

Moreover, during their uproar, Invisible admits that he was “no longer struggling against or thinking about the nature of my action” (275). He enjoys their collective rebellious act (“It was like a holiday” [275]). This is an example of unreflective collective action, which on the one hand results in one form of justice, as the couple may return to their home. On the other hand, this unreflective action parodies praxis since their rebellion has resulted in an undoubtedly temporarily change. The appearance of change may rather serve as an obstacle for continued action, because it appears as though they have made profound changes (Stratton 168). Ellison has designed this scene as one of many in which Invisible has the gift of speech, but is unable to form the audience’s response beyond a chaotic and futile response (Callahan “Chaos” 573). Invisible’s desire to lead is contradicted to his joy in unreflectively following the group’s collective moves.

The revenge on the “laws” for evicting the old couple is only momentary, as they undoubtedly will be evicted the day after their furniture is put back in their flat. The joke that lies between appearance and reality, is again ironized by Ellison in these passages. What appears to be a radical victory results in uncertain prospects for the Provos. Also, the marshals become scapegoats for the unjust system and enactment of laws. The subtle communication from Ellison, however, is that Invisible’s joining in unreflected mob lynching against a police officer is not a long-term solution to the underlying problem of racial discrimination (Sayers 356). Instead, by humour and irony, readers are invited to reflect upon a “subtle process of negating the world of things as given into a complex world of other possibilities” (Ellison *Introduction xxx*).

In conclusion, this scene highlights a common assumption that laws are unchangeable and impersonal legal documents. Built upon transcendental principles of equality and justice, laws are always subject to interpretation, and sometimes the interpreter must – like Invisible – make a choice between conflicting principles to define what constitutes as “law-abiding.” This rhetorical action allows the crowd to break one law by abiding another. By humorously depicting the violent responses and chaotic consequences from Invisible’s speech, Ellison demonstrates both that Invisible is unable to guide the responses to his words, and that he easily joins a group without reflecting upon its consequences. Also, the scene gives voice to a group of Harlem people that are frustrated for their poor conditions and unjust treatments, which will be further discussed in section 3.3.

3.2. The Brotherhood's Blindness

This section analyses three scenes. First, the situational irony when Invisible meets Brother Jack and Invisible is unable to decipher Jack's portentous language. Second, the improvised joke by Invisible in his first speech for the Brotherhood creating a bond between him and his audience. Third, the sarcastic jokes Invisible makes when he has realised that the Brotherhood has abandoned the "dispossessed" people and betrayed him. The section addresses the problem of unthinkingly following a political party that strives for conformity and discipline.

By the end of chapter 13, after the speech at the Provo's eviction, Invisible is introduced to an activist organisation called the Brotherhood. Despite some similarities to the Communist Party (C. P.), for example their efforts to combat American racism, their use of blacks for political purposes of their own, the rigidity of their party doctrine, and their dangerous militancy, the Brotherhood is not a caricature of the C. P. (Sundquist 19). Ellison invented the Brotherhood to caricature political patterns and ideologies' limitations more broadly (Callahan "Chaos" 573). Ellison says that had he wanted to critique the C. P., would he not have done this in fiction (Sayers 343).

However, Ellison describes Richard Wright's problems with the Communist Party in his essay "Remembering Richard Wright." These problems include Wright's "difficulty in pursuing independent thought" due to the functionaries' "insistence upon blind discipline and a constant pressure to follow unthinkingly a political line ... who regarded Wright ... as a dangerous figure who had to be kept under rigid control" (673). Also, Ellison said that the Communist stood for asserting the principles of equality and possibility, "or *pretended* to stand for" (675). Eventually, Wright left them because he "discovered that they were blind" (676). These issues resemble Invisible's problems with the Brotherhood, although Wright, in contrast to Invisible, "had no interest in keeping silent at the price of his freedom of expression" (673).

The fictional Brotherhood claims to work for social justice for the dispossessed people. Nevertheless, they demonstrate their deceitfulness when they abandon the people for more international issues, leaving the Harlem community stranded. With biting and amusing satire, Ellison portrays a political movement that provides Invisible with a new name, a new pathway for his ambitions to become a leader, and a new myth to believe in (Bone 208).

In chapter 13, Brother Jack, a leading figure in the Brotherhood, hears Invisible's speech at the Provos' eviction. Jack is impressed by Invisible's "effective piece of eloquence" which "aroused them so quickly to action" (283). Ironically, Jack does not know that Invisible intended the opposite and prevent violence. Invisible is flattered by Jack's compliment, perhaps

why he accepts the cake and coffee Jack buys him, despite his suspicions about this white “short insignificant-looking bushy-eyebrowed man” (281). Comically, Invisible tries to disadvantage Jack and his “extremely crude” manners of “shoving far too large a piece into his mouth” by “pointedly taking a small piece of the cheesy stuff and placing it neatly into my mouth” (283). Again, Invisible is occupied with appearance; a small and insignificant gesture that he believes *signals* his advantage. Describing Jack as “insignificant-looking” also contributes to Invisible’s scepticism of him, since he gets impressed with important and powerful men.

During their conversation, Ellison communicates directly through dialogue, mainly dropping Invisible’s narratorial filter. Interestingly, Invisible’s earlier contemplative and emotional thoughts during the eviction (“it was as though I myself was being dispossessed of some painful yet precious thing which I could not bear to lose; something confounding, like a rotted tooth that one would rather suffer indefinitely than endure the short, violent eruption of pain that would mark its removal” [266]), differ remarkably to his short, indifferent answers. Clearly, Invisible does not wish to reveal his feelings to Jack. He is, however, put off guard as Jack confuses him:

“You try to sound cynical, but I see through you. I know, I listened very carefully to what you had to say. You were enormously moved. Your emotions were touched.”

“I guess so,” I said. “Maybe seeing them reminded me of something.”

He leaned forward, watching me intensely now, the smile still on his lips. ...

“I think I understand. You were watching a death –”

I dropped my fork. “No one was killed,” I said, tensely. “What are you trying to do?”

“... I only meant meta-phor-ically speaking. They’re living, but dead. Dead-in-living ... a unity of opposites.”

“Oh,” I said. What kind of double talk was this? (284).

Continuing, Jack tries to explain his metaphor: “The old one, the agrarian types, you know. ... They’re like dead limbs that must be pruned away ... or the storms of history will blow them down anyway. Better the storm will hit them –” (284–285). Invisible does not understand Jack’s elusive and portentous speech which continues about death, history, and individuals that do not count, and that Invisible has not shed his “old agrarian self” that is now dead. “I don’t know what you are talking about. I’ve never lived on a farm and I didn’t study agriculture”, Invisible says (285).

In this dialogue, Ellison motivates Invisible's speech in his intention to hide for Jack how deeply moved he was by the couple's eviction; and he motivates Jack's speech in his interest to demonstrate that he (according to himself) knows what Invisible experiences (Phelan *Somebody* 172). Arguably, Jack represents those whites who impose their interpretations upon African American experience "that are not only false, but in effect, a denial of Negro humanity," from their own interest (Ellison "Harlem is Nowhere" 326). Jack's interest is to recruit Invisible to the Brotherhood and tries to appeal to him by creating some kind of kinship, brotherly feelings.

On the one hand, Invisible cannot understand Jack's abstractions and metaphors, comically interpreting his figurative speech literally. Ellison argues that "the concrete conditions of [blacks'] lives are more real than white men's arguments" ("Harlem is Nowhere" 326). In other words, Jack's metaphors may be too abstract to capture the reality he believes that he describes. On the other hand, Jack cannot understand Invisible's emotional attachment to the older black couple. Invisible feels a deep personal connection due to their shared racial and historical past (Phelan "Invisible" 269). The gap between the two, their different understandings of the world – the one abstract and metaphorical, the other concrete and literal – may never be bridged, this first meeting indicates. Nevertheless, Invisible is offered a job as a spokesperson for the Harlem district.

At his first public speech for the Brotherhood, in chapter 16, Invisible begins by approaching the microphone incorrectly. Invisible halts, embarrassed, but saves himself with a joke:

Sorry, folks. Up to now they've kept me so far away from these shiny electric gadgets I haven't learnt the technique ... And I tell you the truth, it looks to me like it might bite! Just look at it, it looks like the steel skull of man! Do you think he died of dispossession? (334).

The joke works because, first, Invisible – similarly to how he addresses his narratee in the Prologue – uses the pronoun "they" to mark that he is one of them, a part of the people in the audience. "They" are the opposition who keeps them from public speaking, symbolised by the microphone. Second, he uses the image "shiny electric gadgets" instead of its proper word. This indicates that he feels alienated from such fancy technology that he has not been allowed to learn, because he, like his audience, is dispossessed.

Third, he bonds with the audience by saying "I tell you the truth" as a kind of confession, only to surprise them with his punchline: "it looks like it might bite". The humour here lies in the incongruous: the audience might not expect this twist when he promises to tell them "the truth" (Morreall 10). Fourth, asking the audience to "look at it" invites them to join him in his joke and see for themselves that – yes, actually –, it does indeed look like a steel skull. In other

words, Invisible enables his audience to see from a new perspective and thus open them to consider new possibilities with his joke. If the audience finds the joke humorous, as their responses indicate, they will be more perceptible to consider new ideas during the remaining of his speech. Humour fosters both open-mindedness, creativity, and critical thinking, why Invisible's improvised speech was a rhetorically efficient device in this scene (Morreall 112).

Finally, Invisible manages to connect his simile (steel skull) with a word familiar to the audience (dispossession) that leads into the subject matter of his speech, the dispossession of the people. Doing so with a question, he uses the rhetorical technique of call-and-response from his traditional past, which invites the audience to think and respond actively. Hence, the microphone becomes a complementary instrument, turned into an occasion for contact (Callahan, "Frequencies" 164). Invisible tells the audience that all he needed was a chance. "You've granted it, now it's up to me!" he continues. "We with you, Brother. You pitch 'em we catch 'em," someone replies.

Invisible tells his readers that it was all he needed, he had "made contact" by turning his disadvantage into a joke and thus transformed his initial embarrassment into a successful connection to his audience (334). Thanks to the reciprocally call-and-response technique, Invisible manages to create an interaction, a dialogue, efficiently (Callahan, "Frequencies" 164). By beginning with a joke, Invisible and his audience laugh together, which has bonding effects (Morreall 58). The speech is a success with the audience. Some people in the Brotherhood committee are not convinced by Invisible's eloquence, however, because "it was *incorrect*," which was pronounced "as though the term described the most heinous crime imaginable" (324). Brother Jack defends Invisible, and they decide to put Invisible in training.

When chapter 17 begins, four months of indoctrination has taught Invisible "most of the Brotherhood arguments so well – those I doubted as well as those I believed – that I could repeat them in my sleep" (350). Again, Invisible suppresses his doubts and soon becomes "dominated by the all-embracing idea of the Brotherhood ... everything could be controlled by our science. Life was pattern and discipline; and the beauty of discipline when it works. And it was working very well," Invisible explains (375). However, Invisible repeatedly fails his many trials. It becomes comical rather than tragical because his mistakes are self-generated "boomerangs", painful but insignificant blunders (Wright 226-227).

His failure in the Brotherhood comes when jealous reactions and false accusations have him reassigned downtown, and he accepts them without much protest. What happens during Invisible's absence from Harlem remains unknown, because Invisible is isolated from the party committee. When Invisible returns, the Harlem community is in turmoil, and they see

Invisible's absence as a betrayal. He never told anyone why he was leaving (A. A. Johnson 41). Invisible finds his missing friend Brother Tod Clifton in a symbolic action of selling politically incorrect sambo dolls. These dancing dolls on a string symbolise the Brotherhood's selling and controlling of their black brothers (Sayers 350). Invisible becomes the witness of a police officer shooting Tod Clifton, and he organises a funeral for his friend despite not being able to reach the Brotherhood committee for guidance. Invisible argues that the murder had racist motives: "The cop ... had an eager ear for a word that rhymed with "trigger," and when Clifton fell he had found it. The Police Special spoke its lines and the rhyme was completed," he aesthetically expresses it in his speech at Clifton's funeral (457).

Shortly after the funeral, the Brotherhood questions Invisible's decision to organise "the funeral of a hero" to "a traitorous merchant of vile instruments of anti-Negro, anti-minority racist bigotry," as Jack expresses it (458). Invisible defends Clifton ("He was a man!" [458]) and replies that the funeral was organised upon his own "personal responsibility" (463). No one in the Brotherhood is allowed to act on their own initiative, decisions must be externalised to the Committee, to history, or to scientific rationality (Stratton 179). Hence, Brother Jack scornfully mocks him: "Did I hear him correctly? Where did you get it, Brother?" (455). Invisible almost makes an inappropriate joke, "From your ma-," but stops himself (455). Playing the dozens is perhaps too great an insult surrounded by hostile whites that Invisible dares to make.

Invisible tries to explain to the Brotherhood that the crowd from the funeral is angry with the police for shooting Clifton. The Brotherhood must take their responsibility and lead the people of Harlem, for Invisible fears what they might do otherwise. Brother Tobitt tries to mock him: "Now he's lecturing us on the conditioned reflexes of the Negro people" (460). Invisible answers him:

"And what is the source of your great contributions to the movement, Brother? A career in burlesque? And of your profound knowledge of Negroes? Are you from a plantation-owning family? Does your black mammy shuffle nightly through your dreams?"

He opened his mouth and closed it like a fish. "I'll have you know that I'm married to a fine, intelligent Negro girl," he said. ...

"Brother, I apologize," I said. "I misjudged you. You have our number. In fact, you must be practically a Negro yourself. Was it by immersion or injection?" (460).

Here, Ellison satirises Brother Tobitt's attitude, and implies that he cannot understand black experience even though his wife is "a fine, intelligent" black girl. Ellison argues that although

it does not take an African American to tell the truth about their experience, “you had to at least get down into the mud and live with its basic realities to do so. You could not deal with its complexities simply from a theoretical perspective” (“Remembering Richard Wright” 675).

In other words, Ellison satirises the Brotherhood’s blindness to the reality that Invisible tries to explain. Readers can imagine Tobitt’s humorously fish-like mouth when he tries to think of an answer. Ellison does not portray him as a very clever man in this moment. Invisible’s sardonic joking with Tobitt, with his mock-apology and the “immersion or injection” question indicate that Invisible has learnt to defend himself, with witty sarcasm. This joke recalls the ironic Invisible from the Prologue. His verbal triumph enables him to laugh at the expense of Jack. However, such a pleasure of feeling superior is only momentary, and condescension may increase long-term feelings of anxiety. For readers, nonetheless, Invisible’s wittiness enables them to laugh with him, which rather strengthens their bond to him (Fletcher 79).

When Jack will not listen to Invisible’s request to lead the angry crowd (“Our job is not to *ask* them what to think but to *tell* them”), Invisible suggests they should call him “Marse Jack” (465). The challenge posed to Jack makes him play his “trump card” and pulls out his eye made of glass. This move brings Ellison’s thematics of vision and blindness into its high: Jack is half-blind (Phelan “Invisible” 271). Jack boasts that he lost his eye in sacrifice for the Brotherhood, the discipline that Invisible needs, which means “sacrifice, *sacrifice*, SACRIFICE” (467). What Invisible takes away from this scene, however, is that Jack does not see him. Jack tells him by the end of their conversation that he does not wish Invisible the same fate, in an attempt to recreate their broken relationship. “If it should, maybe you’ll recommend me to your oculist,” Invisible jokes sardonically, “then I may not-see myself as others see-me-not” (469). With this joke, Invisible demonstrates his “awakening” (468). He realises that Jack and the others blind themselves to reality and that they will not lead the Harlem people away from violent uproars.

This caricature of a political party that uses its members, Invisible’s “bad comedy” which he now realises he has been living, is neatly demonstrated by Invisible’s teacher of indoctrination, Brother Hambro (470). He smiles remotely and says:

We don’t have to worry about the aggressiveness of the Negroes. Not during the new period or any other. In fact, we know have to slow them down for their own good. It’s a scientific necessity (495).

Thus, Ellison’s biting satire of their cynicism comes to its maximum. The Brotherhood believes that they can control History (with capital H) as a “force in a laboratory experiment” (*IM* 434). But, Invisible wonders, “what if history was not a reasonable citizen, but a madman full of paranoid guile?” (434). To be able to act politically, in Ellison’s understanding of the word, is

to be able to begin something new without foreseeing or controlling its consequences (Posnock 210).

This question returns to Invisible's claim in the Prologue that he believes "in nothing if not in action", "despite Brother Jack and that sad, lost period of the Brotherhood" (12-13). This opposition between action and the activist politics of the Brotherhood, could be explained by how the Brotherhood smothered spontaneity and creativity of political action with their scientific and absolute historical inevitability, and their "mantra of discipline and sacrifice" (Posnock 210). Understood this way, freedom to act is in opposition to both ideological determinism and bureaucratic rationalism (208). Freedom, in the sense of "*knowing how to say what I got up in my head,*" is opposed to the Brotherhood's conformist attitude that undermines "personal responsibility" (11; 465). To Ellison, action requires individual imagination and adaptation to new possibilities, which are hindered by dogmatic ideologies like the Brotherhood's (Posnock 208).

Invisible's now much more mature and reliable narration tells readers, "They'd asked us for bread and the best I could give was a glass eye" (498). With this sly comment, he implies that Jack's sacrifice into blindness does not achieve any profound changes for the dispossessed. Ironically, however, Invisible decides to shirk his responsibility and take on his grandfather's advice to "yes 'em to death and destruction", which will be discussed in the next subchapter.

In sum, the Brotherhood goes from promising social justice and a better future to the dispossessed, to reveal that behind their mask of egalitarianism hides hierarchical rivalries and deception. Invisible's naivety and willingness to conform and obey prevent him from seeing this. Invisible's successes in the Brotherhood depends partly upon this blindness, and partly upon his eloquence as a public speaker, in which he improvises and uses humour as a tool to bond with his audience. Invisible then shows his maturation and is able to joke sarcastically with the Brotherhood's theoretical perspective that cannot see the people they claim to work for.

3.3. Who is to Blame?

Since Invisible will never know what the final cause to the race riot in the end of the novel was, readers will not know whom to hold responsible. This section discusses multiple interpretations, considering how Invisible escapes responsibility when he continues to work for the Brotherhood in an attempt to destroy them from the inside. The Brotherhood's refusal to act, and the black nationalist leader Ras the Exhorter become Destroyer both contribute to escalate

the violence. The rioters in Harlem take advantage of the chaos, and the police seem eager to shoot civilians. Can there be one cause, one agent to hold responsible? By the end, in the Epilogue, Invisible reflects upon his experiences and comes to the conclusion that he himself is partly responsible for the riot and for his own pains.

In chapter 23, shortly after Invisible has seen Jack's glass eye, Invisible buys sunglasses and a wide-brimmed hat to avoid being recognised by the black nationalist leader Ras. This disguise makes him repeatedly mistaken for a certain Rinehart. "As though in on the joke," Invisible plays along but realises that this Rinehart has a range of diverse identities: "Rine the runner and Rine the gambler and Rine the briber and Rine the lover and Rinehart the Reverend? Could he himself be both rind and heart? ... His world was possibility and he knew it" (476; 490). Invisible falls into "a fit of laughing" when Rinehart's multiple identities remind him of "a shoeshine boy who had encountered the best treatment in the South simply by wearing a white turban instead of his usual Dobbs or Stetson" (491). This realisation is profound for Invisible. He understands that identity can be manipulated, it is not a constant; and what appears may not be what lies beneath. Rinehart's fluidity and chaotic world is a far more accurate conception of reality than the Brotherhood's rigid categories are to him now (Bone 211).

Invisible decides that he must "do a Rinehart" (499). He will apply his grandfather's advice, and say "yes" to the Brotherhood without agreeing. He now believes that he is invisible, and consequently, of no larger importance. Hence, although no longer convinced of the Brotherhood's ideology, he performs his tasks with energetic enthusiasm, pretending to recruit new members. Nevertheless, this nihilism, this mask of cynical yes-saying is not a revenge on the Brotherhood. He cannot "agree 'em to death and destruction" (16). When Invisible tries to revenge the Brotherhood by playing his Rinehart-role, it rather contributes to the developing race riot in Harlem.

This fictional riot bears some relation to the Harlem riots of 1943 and 1935, but again, it is fictional and not intended to depict any historical situations. It rather demonstrates an American form of violence that had happened and could happen again (Callahan, "Chaos" 571). During this riot in chapter 25, Invisible hurries towards Harlem, where "the shooting sounded like a distant celebration of the Fourth of July" (526). When Invisible arrives, it feels surreal, like a dream. The police seem to be shooting wildly and deliberately, and rioters shoot, run, hide, and lay dead on the streets. One bullet scratches Invisible's head, and he gets help from a man called Scofield.

The surrealness of the scene changes to a comical tone when Invisible speaks to Scofield, who describes how he just saw "one ole' woman with a whole side of a cow on her back. Man,

she was ‘bout bent bowlegged trying to make it home” (529). Then, Scofield is disappointed with his friend Dupre who has looted a hat shop, “with all them hats in there and I’m going to come out with anything but a *Dobbs*? Man, are you mad?” (530). When a man yells “Colored store!” repeatedly, Scofield says, “Listen at the bastard. For one time in his life he’s glad to be colored” (532). Instead of focalising on the unnecessary sufferings and destruction of the riot, Ellison makes the scene comical by these kinds of funny comments, while Invisible suppresses his feelings that he should go the district.

Scofield and his friends are “fixing to do something which needs to be done” (533). Invisible “felt no need to lead or leave them; was glad to follow” (533). They loot a shop for flashlights and buckets of oil, and Invisible “laughed with the others, thinking: A holy holiday for Clifton!” (534). As Invisible soon finds out, they are going to burn down their own infested block of flats. Scofield rhetorically reminds Invisible that they only reside there, “You call *this* living?” and excitedly jokes, “And ain’t the bedbugs going to get a surprise?” (537; 538). These people represent “the insult of oblivion” (Hannah Arendt’s term), those whose needs and wishes have for too long been ignored (Posnock 211). Scofield’s friend Dupre is a type of leader that rises and leads his community into resistance, a type that is “always leading me into trouble,” Scofield explains (Stratton 174; *IM* 534). To Invisible, he is “a type of man nothing in my life had taught me to see, to understand, or to respect” (538).

Invisible’s restricted narration functions mainly to report events with little interpretive and evaluative judgment in this scene. It is significant that Invisible does not reflect when he participates in the act of burning (Stratton 174). When he joined the uproar during the Provos’ eviction, he was “no longer struggling against or thinking about the nature of my action” (275). At that time, Invisible asked his audience to follow a leader, to organise, after which he happily followed the collective action unreflectively and put back the furniture, being “law-abiding” (275). In this scene, when the residents are about to burn their own homes, he thinks, “it didn’t occur to me to interfere, or to question ... They had a plan” (533). His complete trust in others’ plans signifies his immaturity. After all supposed disillusionment and growth, Invisible is still reliant upon a plan formulated by someone else (Stratton 174).

However, their act of burning will result in an indeterminate future for the residents. Where will they live? Consequently, this scene invites readers to compare agents, actions, and consequences (Stratton 177). For example, Invisible has regressed from being a person who tries to persuade a crowd away from violence to a person who actively and unreflectively participates in such violence (176). Although, a spectator who recognises Invisible believes that he has fulfilled his promise: “Brother, ain’t it wonderful ... You said you would lead us, you

really said it” (540). This remark is ironic because readers know that Invisible has not led them but followed without thinking, which mirrors Jack’s interpretation of Invisible’s speech in the eviction scene.

Should readers agree with Invisible’s “sense of fierce exaltation” when he interprets the effect of their self-agency: “They organized it and carried it though alone; the decision their own and their own action. Capable of their own action” (539)? Ellison gives readers multiple options to judge Invisible’s interpretation. Is the Brotherhood, the violent residents, or the unequal social system the cause and, thus, responsible for the burning of the building (Stratton 178)? These multiple options have multiple implications, each plausible but none is final (181).

If read literally, in agreement with Invisible, the residents themselves are responsible. However, this literal reading would be to decry their action because its consequences are uncertain and leaves them without a home. Therefore, their resistance against their horrible living conditions might then be read as a “violent shortsightedness of African American political agency.” This would also be to agree with those critics who dismiss *Invisible Man*’s politics and Ellison’s refusal to create a model for social action, thus criticising Ellison for depicting stereotypical (and potentially inefficient) riots and lootings (Stratton 178). Nonetheless, Posnock reads the scene literally and suggests that their action “gives birth to the possibility of something new – the destruction of dehumanizing conditions.” That is, the residents acted deliberately to change something that the Brotherhood has promised but never delivered. This action symbolises the possibility for those people excluded from public decisions to make concrete changes in their own lives (211).

If, on the contrary, Invisible’s evaluation of these rioters’ agency is read ironically, they should not be held responsible for the burning, which risks patronising these people. They would then be seen as puerile men without autonomous agency. Such a reading would legitimise the Brotherhood’s scientific approach to action and history, because they would then have manipulated these residents into reacting violently. This paternalism is a long, racist tradition that denies African Americans genuine agency. It is also a perspective of action that Ellison disavows (Stratton 178).

Then, readers may also consider how Invisible takes on the responsibility as he realises that the Brotherhood has used him: “By pretending to agree I had agreed, had made myself responsible for that huddled form lighted by flame and gunfire in the street” (544). If readers agree with his acceptance of responsibility for the burning and for the riot, they might agree with his specific perspective on causation. That is, neither economic nor social factors caused the rioters to burn down their homes, nor did they take a rational decision that burning down

the building would be their best option. The cause is then that Invisible assented to “sacrifice” Harlem and involuntarily contributed by not directly opposing the Brotherhood (Stratton 178). Should readers trust Invisible when he accepts this responsibility?

Likewise, Ellison plays with many possible causations to the riots. Invisible asks Scofield and some others how it all started. Surprised, he says, “Damn if I know, man. A cop shot a woman or something.” The others disagree: “Hell, that wasn’t what started it ... “Didn’t I see it with my own eyes? ... “Damn if that’s the way I heard it” ... “You wahn know who started it?” ... “Don’t nobody know how it started” (531-532). With this humorous confusion of information, Ellison demonstrates the impossibility of knowing or determining one simple cause to the violent riots. Instead, the causes are many, simultaneously affecting each other in different directions. Thus, no single actor or event might be the only cause to a large social action like this, and hence, not one single agent is responsible. Causations and responsibilities are as manifold as the voices in this scene.

By portraying these voices in the middle of a violent race riot, Ellison might wish to emphasise black people’s humanity. They are not a black mass to be controlled by a political party, they are lively and diverse individuals. With Invisible’s “awakening” comes his realisation to the paradox that, “Outside the Brotherhood we were outside history; but inside of it they didn’t see us. It was a hell of a state of affairs, we were nowhere” (491). This refers to a phrase common in Harlem at the time. To the question, “How are you?”, the answer was often, “Oh, man, I’m *nowhere!*” (Ellison “Harlem is Nowhere” 323). Ellison argues that in Harlem, in order to overcome social discrimination, they had to use their imagination. Northern “Negro Americans are in desperate search for an identity,” he writes, because they were regarded as primitive and not fully citizens. By rejecting this second-class status, they felt alienated (322). The felt unreality of their lives, Ellison argues, made it “increasingly difficult” to remain calm. They were not worse off than in the South, but in the North, African Americans had not replaced “certain important supports to his personality” (323).

The South provided a relatively stable social order, in which the black man had developed some survival techniques towards the brutalities he faced during several hundred years. Leaving this stability by moving North made African Americans vulnerable, Ellison continues (“Harlem” 323). They surrendered their “peasant cynicism,” the refusal to hope for “the fulfilment of hopeless hopes” (323-324). They also had to surrender their sense of feeling at home in the world, which came from confronting and accepting “the obscene absurdity of his predicament.” In addition, in the North, African Americans had left a comforting and authoritative religion, a stable family structure, and a body of folklore that could provide

guidance to action in the South (324). When left out of social institutions, they had no direction, and may have felt “that his world and his personality are out of key.” Hence, the expression “I’m *nowhere*” represents a feeling of being without a stable and recognisable place: “One’s identity drifts in a capricious reality in which even the most commonly held assumptions are questionable” (325). Invisible says, “Well, I *was* and yet I was invisible, that was the fundamental contradiction” (499).

Ellison argues that the psychological state of being this “displaced person” was not enough, but their poor living conditions were considered proof of their inferiority. The frustrations from all these emotions became a “free-floating hostility” which “bombards the individual from so many directions that he is often unable to identify it with any specific object.” Some feel guilty, and some feel outraged. These feelings contributed to the Harlem riots of 1935 and 1943, according to Ellison (“Harlem is Nowhere” 326).

Throughout the last chapter, Invisible is “nowhere,” and he is surrounded by chaotic looting and rioting. Suddenly, it feels “unreal” to Invisible. He encounters Ras the Destroyer who prepares for violence. Invisible believes that he can say “a few words” to make Ras and his adherents understand that the Brotherhood has used both him and them. Again, Invisible ironically misinterprets his own ability to persuade. Ras is blinded by his hatred of white people and tells his men to “hang the lying traitor” (549). In desperation, Invisible grabs a spear that one of those men carries. He throws the spear straight through Ras’s cheeks and runs away. Invisible points out the absurdity in the situation to his readers: Ras’s ideas about reality – that white people are evil and black men in the Brotherhood are traitors – makes him want to kill Invisible, who has an assumed name from the group that Ras hates, but which Invisible does not identify with anymore. The Brotherhood are as blind to reality as Ras, and Invisible finds it “too outrageously absurd” to die for such a confusion of reality (550).

The ridiculousness of this destructive hatred and violence is comically depicted when Invisible overhears a conversation when he hides for Ras’s men behind a hedge. One of the rioters has witnessed “that crazy guy” Ras fighting police officers and gives a detailed recount of the events. Ras rides on a large horse, and wears a “fur cap” and “some kind of old lion skin or something over his shoulders and he was raising hell. Goddam if he wasn’t a sight” (554). Ras comes

bookety-bookety with that spear stuck out in front of him ... and that ole black hoss let out a whinny and got his head down – I don’t know where he got *that* sonofabitch – but, gentlemen, I swear! ... Ras tries to spear him a cop ... and rode off a bit and did him a quick round-about-face and charged ‘em again-out for blood, man! ... and the hoss is pooting and snorting and pissing

and shitting ... [T]he cops got tired of that bullshit and one of 'em started shooting. And that was the lick! Ole Ras ... let fly with that spear ... and then him and that hoss shot up the street leaping like Heigho, the goddam Silver." (554-555).

This passage might allude to the picaresque hero Don Quixote, who fought windmills, and by the end to the Lone Ranger (Haupt 10). Ras might have wanted to exude originality and heroism in his costume, but his appearance becomes comical more than anything. Fighting on horseback with a spear and shield recalls epic heroes, but in this world, the police "got tired of that bullshit" and simply started shooting at Ras (554). It comically describes the sensed unreality of the whole riot, in which Ras is deluded by his hatred and the police seem eager to use their guns. The unnecessary violence becomes absurd in this comical light, but that is also deeply tragic (Haupt 10). Both the Brotherhood's and Ras's blindness to others' humanity and to reality itself brings death and destruction to the community. The comic here exposes Ras's failure to see the reality of himself and of society which functions both as a critique of the unreal, and a mode of transcendence (Haupt 8).

Invisible may transcend the events because when he listens to this comical portrayal of Ras fighting the police, Invisible is not directly involved in the action and is, therefore, not threatened. This disengagement, and the fictionalisation of the events through a comic light, allows him to realise the humorous in the situation (Morreall 53). He can see that Ras is partly right, just as Bledsoe and the Brotherhood are in their own ways, but none of them can neither understand nor accept others' perspectives. They are all leaders with "absurdly neurotic and politically inadequate representatives of a fractured humanity." They worship control and manipulation, and are almost like mechanical men, rigid and robotic. Their inadaptability becomes comic because they cannot conceive the world in its fluid reality and, therefore, they cannot transform the world creatively (Wright 235). Laughter may function as a means to humiliate a mechanical person to act livelier and more humanly again (Morreall 130). Hence, readers may laugh at these men's stubborn insistence upon a single and final interpretation of a chaotic and multifaceted world. Consequently, readers may, as Invisible does here, transcend rigid preconceptions and see things anew. Comedy may raise problems without evoking pity and fear, which may help towards a more nuanced and non-emotional perspective to the events (Morreall 78).

Despite the funny portrait of Ras above, Invisible interprets the above speaker's version of what happened: "Why did they make it seem funny, only funny? ... And yet I knew that it was. It was funny and dangerous and sad" (555). This illustrates how Ras's loss of reality, in a tragi-comic tone, highlights the boundaries between reality and fantasy, and by humour

reconciles readers to a sense of reality (Haupt 10). Ras's assessment of white men's betrayals is accurate, but with this mixture of violent unrealistic atavism it becomes ambiguously both funny, sad, and dangerous (Wright 235).

Ellison cannot end his novel with a comical depiction of the riots. *Invisible* must understand that it is not "only funny." Ellison argues that to truly project both individual and societal dilemmas in fiction is a difficult task, due to "a tradition of forgetfulness, of moving on, of denying the past" and of converting tragic realities into comedy. Instead of attempting to portray the writer's vision of "the complexity and diversity of the total experience," the American novelist often loses his faith and creates black comedy, which Ellison thinks is "a cry of despair." Ellison argues that a novel should demonstrate some belief in human possibility, without denying its tragic elements ("The Novel as a Function of American Democracy" 768).

Hence, *Invisible* will end on a vaguely optimistic note. By the very end of the last chapter, *Invisible* is chased by some hostile men and falls into a manhole full of coal. They close the lid upon him, and he is trapped in the darkness. He sleeps and dreams and rages until he decides that he must stay underground to think in quiet, which ends the last chapter. This thinking led him to create his own narrative, "torturing myself to put it down" (570).

3.4. The Epilogue

The Epilogue begins in the present time when the Prologue ended, in which the only time passed is the act writing of his memoirs. The Epilogue is mostly the now reliable *Invisible*'s reflections upon his experiences from his tale (Phelan "Invisible" 275). *Invisible* has reluctantly come to accept that he is an invisible man: "What else could I have done?" (563). However, as with his speeches, his intention with writing his life history does not match the outcome: "Here I've set out to throw my anger into the world's face ... But I've failed. The very act of trying to put it all down has confused me and negated some of the anger and some of the bitterness" (Callahan "Frequencies" 306; *IM* 570).

With his self-irony, *Invisible* has become detached. He can observe himself from the outside, which in turn reduces his intense feelings of pain. This wry humour *Invisible* has shown by satirising not only others, but also his own failures, becomes a mental medicine to cope with the horrors of his life (Fletcher 79). This does not mean that he can "file and forget": "I sell you no phony forgiveness, I'm a desperate man" (570). He interprets his grandfather's riddle as a way of affirming the principle of democracy, but not "the men who did the violence" (564). *Invisible*'s attitude towards his country is not simply optimistic conformity, but a self-conscious

“division” in which he can both affirm and denounce, love and hate. He realises that he is partially responsible for his situation, but he has been “hurt to the point of invisibility” (Posnock 209; *IM* 570).

A “phony forgiveness” would forfeit the embrace of differences and simply affirm, but Invisible’s constant affirmations meant “to take myself by the throat and choke myself until my eyes bulged and my tongue hang out and wagged like the door of an empty house in a high wind” (564). In other words, Invisible learns that genuine forgiveness affirms while embracing diversity. Abstract democratic ideas have multiple practical expressions and possibilities of action (Posnock 209). That is, he cannot affirm other people’s projections of his identity, he must be self-reliant. Thus, “one of the greatest jokes in the world is the spectacle of the whites busy escaping blackness and becoming blacker every day, and the blacks striving toward whiteness, becoming quite dull and gray” (568). Being able to laugh and joke about it, Invisible is able to move on, despite all of those Bledsoes and Jacks and others who have run him.

Telling his story has allowed him to arrange and recall his experiences to give meaning to his life (Smith 214). To Ellison, “the novel is a way of possessing life, slowing it down, and giving it the writer’s own sense of values in a delicately and subtly structured way” (“The Novel” 761). Invisible chooses where to begin and end his narrative and how he frames the events. Notably, he begins his telling with the battle royal scene, in which he demonstrates his naïve and gullible personality. Possibly, this ensures that attentive readers will see his overdependence upon others’ values, and pay attention to how the following failures also result from his naivety and lack of self-agency. Partly, Invisible portrays his susceptibility to deception by focalising his own limitations and wrongdoings. He slowly learns the value of self-reliance (Smith 214). He could have emphasised the differences between the battle royal and Bledsoe’s humiliations of him, for example, but he chose to demonstrate to readers how he was blinded by his belief in the American Dream and desperately suppressed his doubts. Hence, he does not appear as a powerless victim of random circumstances. Instead, Invisible highlights both his own culpability and the organisations’ deceitfulness (Smith 215).

Thus, like Trueblood, Invisible has learnt to create his own identity by telling his own story, and therefore to face his own responsibility. Like the blues, which Ellison describes as an impulse to keep the painful details and episodes of a brutal experience alive in one’s aching consciousness, to finger its jagged grain, and to transcend it, not by the consolation of philosophy but by squeezing from it a near-tragic, near-comic lyricism (“Richard Wright’s Blues” 129). Invisible too has transcended his brutal experiences in a tragi-comic lyricism. Invisible’s novel has become a jazz improvisation and an ambiguous blues novel. By interacting with his

audience, improvising as he did during his oral speeches, his written words now draw him towards action once again (Callahan C 306). Hence, “it’s damn well time” that he ends his hibernation: “I’m coming out, no less invisible ... but coming out nevertheless” (572). He does not know what he will do, but he thinks that “even an invisible man has a socially responsible role to play” (572). By not suggesting what Invisible might do next, Ellison has readers to focus upon the lessons from the narrative, making the ending more effective in its universal appeal (Phelan “Invisible” 275).

The ending is his famous question: “And it is this which frightens me: Who knows but that, on the lower frequencies, I speak for you?” (572). When Invisible includes his narratee in his final indictment, he also invites readers to reflect upon their own tendencies with an ironic distance to their lives. Perhaps everyone is invisible and blind to some extent. Have they been able to identify themselves, or are they too projections of others’ prejudices and expectations? Do they themselves suppress and ignore what is in front of their nose? Perhaps everyone needs to create their own story to see their comic and tragic experiences in a new light, which opens for “infinite possibilities” (567).

Then, perhaps readers too can learn from their tragicomic jazz and blues tones that “all life seen from the hole of invisibility is absurd” (570), but “life is to be lived, not controlled; and humanity is won by continuing to play in face of certain defeat. Our fate is to become one, and yet many – this is not prophecy but description” (568). By continuing to play, in the double sense of playing a music instrument, and of playing in life, humanity is won. By not trying to obsessively follow a plan and controlling life, but being more adaptive and accept differences, the nation of many can be one without denying anyone’s humanity.

In conclusion, Invisible has moved from a naïve and overly trusting person who is blind to others’ hypocrisy to a sardonic and eloquent person who can see the irony in his own invisibility. Invisible in the Prologue thought that he shirked his responsibility for not slitting the blond man’s throat, but the therapeutic act of writing has ostensibly changed his approach to life and his understanding about his relation to it. The many comical situations, ironies, and witty dialogues in his novel have arguably helped his process to disengage from his fears and angers, and towards his own self-acceptance, ironically, as an invisible man. Readers may realise how Invisible to some extent was responsible for his own pains by not asserting himself. Although, Invisible’s revenge comes also by portraying those who kept him running in an almost caricatured, hyperbolic manner to demonstrate that they, too, have a personal responsibility of causing Invisible pain, despite Brother Jack’s scornful mocking of the phrase.

Ellison's humour in the many perspectives and voices present the almost absurd dilemma a black man like Invisible could face by racial discrimination. What could he do when no one listened? The novel lingers upon yet an unanswered question, regardless of his naïve trustfulness: What did Invisible *do* to be so black and blue?

Conclusion

First, it should be noted that Ralph Ellison was right, *Invisible Man* is indeed “funny.” By juxtaposing the comic and the tragic, Ellison writes a jazzy and blues-toned novel that asks readers to see an individual black man as a complex human being. The many humorous elements highlighted in this thesis demonstrate many ways of using humour to affect readers into reflections about history, about humanity, and about themselves. Ellison has eloquently depicted his protagonist in different social situations, painful, embarrassing, and shameful. The humorous situational ironies occur when readers can see how the protagonist fails to be true to himself and follows others unthinkingly. Ellison communicates to readers what Invisible does not reveal, and implicitly presents multiple perspectives where Invisible and other characters stubbornly see only one limited way. Thus, humour functions as an attempt to accept new possibilities and new perspectives.

Ellison’s humour lays partly in depicting multiple voices, possibilities, and limitations to this fictional individual’s chances to success in a racially segregated society. The protagonist has internalised racist prejudices about himself but manages by the end to transcend these through a tragi-comic view of himself and of life. He neither descends to a cry of despair of self-pity or nihilism, nor to a denial of his painful memories in a “file-and-forget” sense. Through the act of writing, Invisible can distance himself from his own experiences and create pattern to his seemingly chaotic life. This distance gives him an ironic view of himself, allows him to laugh at his own as well as others’ mistakes, and see what lies behind the masks. In turn, this more playful approach to life which he gains by the end of the novel, after writing his memoirs, allows him to, quite ironically, see his life as one of infinite possibilities while still living in a hole underground, invisible to those who still refuse to see him.

The humorous elements in the novel open readers for seeing things differently and question assumptions about racial oppression and about identity. Ellison’s contemporary society could suppress the moral dilemma between racial discrimination and democratic ideals. By on the one hand satirising Booker T. Washington’s plea for humility, white liberalism’s paternalism, communism’s obsessive conformity and ideological rigidity, and black nationalism’s violent hatred, Ellison on the other hand celebrates aspects of African American culture with his humour. His protagonist is included in his indictment of society, and he is both fool and victim. Thus, Ellison’s humour points out the absurd in the potential violence and destruction that comes from misunderstandings and refusal to see others’ perspectives as exemplified in the race riot by the end. In a comic light, Invisible understands this ridiculous

absurdity. Likewise, readers can understand the absurdity in having war veterans imprisoned in mental asylums for breaking Jim Crow laws, or making racist jokes about a defenceless patient who gets electric shocks.

Ellison's plea for unity in diversity, that true democracy is a collective of individuals where differences are not only accepted but necessary, is efficiently argued for in this tragicomedy. Thus, humour is a rhetorical instrument in *Invisible Man* to make visible the invisible. Those voices who are seldom heard are sounded here, and contradicted by others in a sometimes humorous conversation amongst and between characters, readers, and author.

When Ellison jokes about stereotypes, incest, racial oppression, and violent race riots that lead to death and destruction, he does this not to downplay their severities but, on the contrary, to bring these serious issues more efficiently into light. This leads to the question if it is ethical to joke about anything? Perhaps Ellison would answer that it depends upon the writer's eloquence and mastery of his art. Perhaps an artist's ability to joke demonstrates a great understanding of the complexities and contradictions surrounding the issues. If the artist may reveal those eloquently, the joke does not become insulting or downgrading but enlightening. The question might not be if it is possible to joke about a serious issue, but *how* to joke about it to engage reflection and enlightenment. To laugh at the unlaughable, which Ellison suggested, turns the world of givens upside down.

This view of humour and art leads to new areas of exploration which this thesis has not discussed. How has other authors used humour in their writings? During my research, Ellison has been compared to, and himself referred to, authors like Mark Twain, William Faulkner, and T.S. Elliot. Moreover, Toni Morrison has been mentioned by more recent critics as an author who resembles Ellison in her writings. A comparative analysis of *Invisible Man's* humorous elements and other works of fiction would be interesting. My first idea was to compare it to Nelle Harper Lee's *To Kill a Mockingbird*, but due to the many interesting ideas about *Invisible Man*, there was unfortunately no space left for Lee this time. Also, a comparative analysis with non-fiction, for example how Martin Luther King Jr. used humour as a rhetorical device in his speeches would be fascinating to compare with fictions like *Invisible Man*. The options for further explorations are manifold.

One interesting aspect about *Invisible Man* is Ellison's view of freedom as the hard job of "knowing how to say what I got up in my head" (11). As I have noticed myself, by writing this thesis, what "I got up in my head" is many times chaotic, contradictory, and impossible to formulate. Invisible, too, struggles to formulate himself and many times his intentions do not match the outcome (sometimes comically). Thus, articulateness and eloquence bring clarity to

thoughts and ideas. To be free is to be able to express what one thinks, but more than that, to be listened to, respected and understood, despite disagreements. Hence, when Invisible begins his narrative, he asks readers not necessarily to agree with him, but to hear him and try to understand him, because only then can he become visible. In our contemporary world, the idea of honestly listening to others' perspectives, despite disagreements, is not always self-evident. There is a tendency, not least on social media, to be blind to others because they are supposed to belong to a certain group. Perhaps those who view the world in those simplified stereotypes could gain from reading and understanding the chaos and possibilities that *Invisible Man* portrays, and by its humour, see what lies behind the face of things.

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