

1966

# Wright, Baldwin. and Ellison: A comparative study of the negro novel

Theresa P. Ammirati  
*Lehigh University*

Follow this and additional works at: <https://preserve.lehigh.edu/etd>



Part of the [English Language and Literature Commons](#)

---

## Recommended Citation

Ammirati, Theresa P., "Wright, Baldwin. and Ellison: A comparative study of the negro novel" (1966). *Theses and Dissertations*. 3393.  
<https://preserve.lehigh.edu/etd/3393>

This Thesis is brought to you for free and open access by Lehigh Preserve. It has been accepted for inclusion in Theses and Dissertations by an authorized administrator of Lehigh Preserve. For more information, please contact [preserve@lehigh.edu](mailto:preserve@lehigh.edu).

WRIGHT, BALDWIN, AND ELLISON: A COMPARATIVE  
STUDY OF THE NEGRO NOVEL

by

Theresa Perri Ammirati

A Thesis

Presented to the Graduate Faculty

of Lehigh University

in Candidacy for the Degree of

Master of Arts

in

Department of English

Lehigh University

1966

This thesis is accepted and approved  
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for  
the degree of Master of Arts.

James R. Frakes  
Professor in Charge

May 27, 1966  
Date

J. Burke Severs  
Head of the Department of English

TABLE OF CONTENTS

	Page
Abstract . . . . .	1
I. Introduction . . . . .	5
II. Richard Wright . . . . .	10
III. James Baldwin . . . . .	38
IV. Ralph Ellison . . . . .	62
V. Conclusions . . . . .	92
Notes . . . . .	103
List of Works Consulted . . . . .	112
Vita . . . . .	117

## ABSTRACT

The Negro novelist in America is influenced by both the dominant culture of "white" America, which is European in origin, and the Negro sub-culture, which stems from a heritage of slavery, from the folk traditions of the Southern Negro, from long experience with the separate institutions of Negro press, church, hospitals, and colleges. He must contend with not only the thematic and aesthetic difficulties faced by all artists but also with the social and emotional problems which are unique among Negroes in a society which is just beginning to grant them full citizenship.

One of the aims of a serious artist is to achieve some degree of universality in his art, to transcend time and place in order to assure lasting recognition of his work. The achievement of universality is complicated for the Negro artist because the special conditions of Negro life which prompt him to speak for his race may also force him to choose propaganda in place of truth and protest at the expense of his art. Richard Wright, James Baldwin, and Ralph Ellison have had varying degrees of success at solving the complicated problems of the Negro author. In his first novel each dealt with the problem of achieving identity, concerning himself not only with the problems faced by any young man approaching maturity

but also with the specific disadvantages faced by the young Negro.

Native Son was the first novel depicting the ugly reality of the life of the ghetto-bound Negro to attract the attention of the American public. Unfortunately, Wright, in his desire to clearly and forcefully state the brutal facts of the life of the American Negro of the 1930's, allowed his characters to become stereotypes; in order to make his point most vividly, he drew a less than complete picture of his protagonist, Bigger Thomas. His commitment to the thesis that the white world created sub-human creatures by its oppression of the Negro, distorted his view of reality so that his characters become cardboard characters instead of human beings. Sacrificing a full exploration of his protagonist's character for the sake of his cause, Wright not only frustrated the truth of the Negro's individual humanity, but the possibility of universality.

Go Tell It On The Mountain gives a more complete picture of the life of the protagonist, allowing John Grimes and his family to become real. Baldwin shows his characters as defined by more than the attitudes of the white world but still depicts the influence of that world on the lives of his characters. John's fumbings, anguish, and inability to communicate his needs to his family link him with all adolescents, while the specifics of his life

make him most particularly what he is: a young Negro boy trying to find his way in a world in which most young men, as well as most young Negroes, are lost.

In recent years Baldwin's concern for the cause of Negro equality and his feeling that there will always be a lack of understanding and communication between whites and Negroes, have made his talent more suited to the essay than to fiction, but Go Tell It On The Mountain, little marred by the bitterness, anger, and faulty characterization which flaw his later works of fiction, gives evidence of a novelistic talent that has not yet developed.

Ellison's Invisible Man raises anger and agony to the level of art. His invisible, nameless hero, unseen not only because he is a Negro but because he refuses to "run the risk of his own humanity," to take responsibility for his actions, could be any man. He is blind as well as invisible because he refuses to look behind the platitudes and stereotypes that govern his life. During his hibernation the hero begins to realize that he must take responsibility for his actions if he is to achieve a full and mature identity; that there is a role in society for even an invisible man so long as he is not blind. When the hero makes his final statement to the reader: "Who knows but that, on the lower frequencies, I speak for you," one sees that Ellison has created a character who is invisible, but who is man. Ellison's work portrays a world

and a man in esse so that though the protagonist is a Southern Negro, he is, as Jonathan Baumbach states, "in Ellison's rendering, profoundly all of us."



## INTRODUCTION

The good writer seems to be writing about himself but has his eye always on that thread of the universe which runs through himself, and all things.

-- Ralph Waldo Emerson

The Negro writer in America labors under the twofold burden of being both a Negro and an artist. That is, he encounters in his work the thematic and aesthetic difficulties suffered by artists everywhere, as well as the social and emotional problems which are unique among Negroes in a society which, until very recently, has given Negroes the status of less than full citizenship.

The American Negro author must understand the culture of the American Negro, which, according to Robert A. Bone, stems

. . . from the group past with its bitter heritage of slavery, and from the group present, with its bitter knowledge of caste. . . . from the contact . . . with the folk culture of the Southern Negro, which has left its clear stamp on Negro life in the North. . . . from long experience with separate institutions: with a Negro press and a Negro church, Negro hospitals and Negro colleges . . . from the fact that most Negroes still spend most of their lives within the geographical and cultural confines of a Negro community. These and similar circumstances have combined to produce a distinctive minority culture which is neither obliterated from the larger culture nor completely separate from it.<sup>1</sup>

The culture of the American Negro, then, is out of the mainstream of American life, but is still distinctively

American.<sup>2</sup>

Because he is a part--and often a critic--of it, the American Negro writer must also understand the culture of "white America," which, unlike his own, has its traceable beginnings in the history of European culture, and which is, moreover, a direct outgrowth of the culture of Europe.

The Negro author's alienation from the "white" culture of his country and from his non-Negro fellow citizens is not strange. This alienation can be a disadvantage in that it may keep him from a full understanding of the society which he attempts to interpret in his work, but, according to Julian Mayfield, it can also serve as an advantage in that it "may give him the insight of the stranger in the house, placing him in a better position to illuminate contemporary American life as few writers of the mainstream can."<sup>3</sup> Mayfield feels that the alienation of the American Negro author can also serve to "make him more sensitive to philosophical and artistic influences that originate beyond our national cultural boundaries."<sup>4</sup>

Whether or not the American Negro novelist can understand the dual culture in which he lives, and whether his alienation from the mainstream of American life serves to help or hinder him, there still remains for him the problem of approach to his subject matter. He must decide if he will use Negro life as source material, if he will

write novels of racial protest, or if he will avoid propagandistic writing and attempt, rather, to interpret and illuminate the universal qualities of his particular life and experience. As Bone remarks,

From the beginning, the Negro novelist has been torn between the conflicting loyalties of race and art. On the one hand he has sought to be a spokesman for his people; on the other, to be accepted on his merits as an artist. Historically speaking, the issue has seldom been in doubt: the urge to protest has all but stifled the urge to create.<sup>5</sup>

Bone notes, however, that in recent years a controversy that focuses on the problem of source material has arisen among Negro literati. In the course of this controversy the Negro writer has been subject to various pressures. He has been urged to concentrate on racial protest and to avoid it; to exploit his distinctiveness as a Negro and to abandon the materials of Negro life completely.

"Seldom," says Bone, "has he been encouraged simply to be about his business as an artist, free to choose his subject matter on aesthetic grounds alone."<sup>6</sup>

Most critics agree that the aim of any serious artist is to achieve universality and that the Negro artist, like any other, can best achieve the universality he desires through a sensitive interpretation of his own culture.

Ralph Ellison, one of the writers to be considered in this study, reflects this view, remarking that "Negro life is a by-product of Western civilization, and in it,

if only one possesses the humility and the humanity to see, are to be discovered all those impulses, tendencies, life, and cultural forms to be found elsewhere in Western society."<sup>7</sup>

The purpose of this paper is to examine closely a major work of each of the three men who most critics agree are both major contemporary Negro novelists and leading American writers: Richard Wright, James Baldwin, and Ralph Ellison. It is my intent to discover how each has dealt with the unique problems of the Negro writer as well as with the difficulties of novelists in general; to examine their differences and similarities in approach to subject matter; and to discover the themes that unite them and the attitudes that separate them.

It is to be emphasized that this study is not primarily biographical (although, certainly, pertinent biographical material will be used) or historical. I shall not attempt to survey the development of the American "Negro novel" from its beginnings to the present, nor will I examine to any degree the works of other American Negro novelists. Although the major portion of my discussion will be devoted to studies of Wright's Native Son, Baldwin's Go Tell It On The Mountain, and Ellison's Invisible Man, in the light of the problems described above, I shall also deal with other works of each writer when relevant to the discussion. The works that will be

discussed at length have been chosen for several reasons. The problem of identity, a problem faced by all men but complicated for Negroes by the structure of American society, is central to each of the three novels. Additionally, the novels work well together in terms of approaches to subject matter, theme, and characterization, and offer material allowing the widest range of discussion.

The order in which I have chosen to discuss the novelists is aesthetic rather than chronological. That is, although each of the novels to be examined may be regarded as a "protest" novel in one way or another, and although each of the novelists has felt the need to be in some measure a spokesman for his race, each has achieved the artistic ideal of universality only to the degree that he has chosen to be a spokesman for man rather than a spokesman for the Negro alone.

## RICHARD WRIGHT

Even during the 1920's when the urbanization of the Negro had progressed sufficiently to be reflected in his literature, the resulting fictional image was shallow and distorted. To the writers of the Harlem school the urban scene was symbolized more by the crowded cabaret than the crowded tenement. For another decade a shallow exoticism prevented the Negro novelist from coming to grips with the hard realities of city life. It was not until the Great Depression, with its strikes and evictions, its bread lines and its hunger marches, that the plight of the urban masses could no longer be ignored. Paradoxically, the first Negro novelist to deal with ghetto life in the Northern cities, was a Southern refugee named Richard Wright.<sup>1</sup>

Wright, born on a plantation near Natchez, Mississippi, in 1909, spent his boyhood in a series of moves from one Southern town to another. At fifteen he went to Memphis, where he worked intermittently at various jobs until he migrated North to Chicago, where he arrived on the threshold of the Depression. In 1932 he joined the Communist Party, in which he remained until 1944. Harold Isaacs notes that "the cost of this experience was heavy. Though the Communist gods failed him, they did make him sufficiently over in their image to make him more of a political being than an artist."<sup>2</sup> The influence of the Party ideology can be noted in most of Wright's works (including those which were published after his break with the Party) and especially in Native Son,<sup>3</sup> the subject of the present study.

Wright's first published works were poems, articles,

and stories for the Communist Party press. In 1938, Wright published his first longer work, Uncle Tom's Children, a collection of four novellas. In Big Boy, of the first story, "Big Boy Leaves Home," Wright created the prototype of Bigger Thomas and, indeed, "of all his heroes, who were ever to be angry, bitter, vengeful, violently hurling themselves against the walls that barred them from a life they knew was a better life than theirs, belonging to people no better than themselves."<sup>4</sup>

In 1940, with the publication of Native Son, the American reading public was exposed to what James Baldwin called "the most powerful and celebrated statement we have yet had of what it means to be a Negro in America."<sup>5</sup> Baldwin's statement, however, must be amplified and clarified. Native Son is a powerful statement of what it meant to be a Negro in America in the difficult times after the Depression and before the advent of governmental concern over the plight of American Negroes. Further, it is a statement of what it meant and means to be Bigger's kind of Negro--joyless, humorless, lacking wit, grace, and intelligence; bitter, angry and filled with fear. Finally, the greatest power of the book comes from the gradual revelation of the meaning of Bigger's life to Bigger himself. For with the knowledge of the meaning of his life and his crime, Bigger is able to free himself from his fears and to begin, at the end of his

life, to live freely.

As Baldwin has noted, the book cannot be divorced from the specific social climate of the time in which it was written.<sup>6</sup> Published one year before the United States entered the second World War, at a time when the Depression still influenced the lives of most Americans, it brought the oppression of Negroes like Bigger and his ghetto-bound family and friends, clearly and shockingly to the consciousness of its readers.<sup>7</sup> Wright's thesis that society was to blame for Bigger's situation and condition, and his belief that the Communist Party could help the Negro to achieve his identity and aims, are responsible for part of the strength and some of the limitations of Native Son.

We first encounter Bigger in his family's squalid Chicago apartment, killing a rat with a skillet. Baldwin states that "one may consider that the entire book . . . is an extension, with the roles inverted, of this chilling metaphor. Bigger's situation and Bigger himself exert on the mind the same sort of fascination."<sup>8</sup>

Wright evidently intends that the reader understand Bigger's life by sharing his experiences, so that when it reaches its inevitable end one will feel pity, horror, and guilt. Yet, although one follows Bigger closely from the time he kills the rat until he is in the death cell, one knows very little about him. One knows nothing of



his childhood and little more of his young adulthood. One sees the people around him through his perception, which is limited and thus limiting. Intent on making Bigger a social symbol, Wright has failed to make Bigger and his other characters human beings. Thus, one faces the following stereotypes: Bigger's hard-working, ever-patient, long-suffering mother; his ambitious sister, taking sewing lessons at the "Y" in order to better herself; his admiring younger brother. Outside Bigger's family, one meets pool-room friends who also have no depth (again, perhaps, because one sees them only through Bigger's limited perception). One meets also Bigger's girlfriend, Bessie, a less religious, younger version of Bigger's mother. The white race is represented by the Daltons, wealthy and philanthropic toward Bigger and "his people," but also the owners of the tenement in which Bigger lives and the slumlords of much of the South Side ghetto which is Bigger's neighborhood; their daughter, Mary, a Communist sympathizer, who is incredibly stupid and insensitive in her attitude and remarks to and about Bigger; the sneering private detective, Britten, hired by the Daltons to solve the mystery of Mary's disappearance but more intent on proving that Bigger has some relationship with "those Jews and Reds" than on discovering Mary's whereabouts. Because the reader sees Bigger's world largely through his eyes, the complex motivations for his actions and his

deeper emotions must be made known to the reader through his thoughts. Consequently, Bigger is often forced to express his feelings in language that is based on ideas too sophisticated for his intelligence and seems to have an insight that is not consistent with his character. Ellison sees this ambiguity as stemming from Wright's desire to "translate Bigger's complicated feelings into universal ideas. . . ." <sup>9</sup> Once again, stereotyping and ambiguity can be traced to Wright's attempt to make Bigger a social symbol, an attempt that results in making him something less than a living character.

In tracing the story of Bigger's rebellion against the white world, Wright makes use of the naturalistic tradition of Dos Passos, Farrell, Dreiser, and Steinbeck. A close parallel between Native Son and Dreiser's An American Tragedy has been noted. Criminality--especially of a kind that is the inevitable product of a warped society--serves as the chief dramatic device of both novels. The titles of both also point out that the protagonists are native products of American society, and both authors supplement their environmentalist view of crime with a guilt-of-the-nation thesis. <sup>10</sup>

That there are similarities between the two novels does not mean that Wright borrowed from Dreiser. Bigger Thomas has his source in Wright's childhood, where there was not just one Bigger, but many. In "How Bigger Was

Born,"<sup>11</sup> an article written shortly after the publication of Native Son, Wright cites five examples of the many Biggers of his childhood. All were Southern Negro youths unable to adjust to the rigid rules by which they, as Negroes, were expected to live; all were unable to compromise with an inner rebellion against the Jim Crow laws under which they had to survive. Each shared with Bigger "two factors psychologically dominant in [their personalities]. First, through some quirk of circumstance, [each] had become estranged from the religion and the folk culture of his race. Second, [each] was trying to react to and answer the call of the dominant civilization whose glitter came to him through the newspapers, magazines, radios, movies, and the mere imposing sight and sound of daily American life."<sup>12</sup>

Bigger is attracted to the "glitter of the dominant civilization" but is fearful of and resentful toward the people who inhabit it. Throughout the first section of the novel, "Fear," Bigger's simultaneous attraction and repulsion are evident. Bigger would like to be an aviator, but the white world prevents him from becoming one; at the same time, he realizes that it is a good thing that "they" will not let him fly, "'Cause [if] I took a plane up I'd take a couple of bombs along and drop 'em as sure as hell . . . ." (20). He plays "white" with his friend Gus, impersonating both a clerk talking to J. P. Morgan

and the President of the United States, but the game ends in frustration when he realizes that "They don't let us do nothing" (22). Bigger explains to Gus that the power of the whites and the subservience of the Negroes are things he cannot get used to: "Every time I think about it I feel like somebody's poking a red-hot iron down my throat. Goddammit, look! We live here and they live there. We black and they white. They got things and we ain't. They do things and we can't. It's just like living in jail. Half the time I feel like I'm on the outside of the world peeping in through a knot-hole in the fence . . ." (23).

The first half of "Fear" shows an alternating tension between Bigger's impotent rage and braggadoccio, his half-articulated search for a meaningful action in an otherwise meaningless life, and his fear of allowing the full realization of the meaninglessness of his life to come into his consciousness. Thus, early in the novel the power generated by Wright's portrayal of Bigger's tension comes into conflict with Wright's inability to deal with his portrayal of Bigger's mind. The reader is told that "He [Bigger] knew that the moment he allowed what his life meant to enter fully into his consciousness, he would either kill himself or someone else" (14). One wonders how Bigger can realize consciously that he must not allow the meaning of his life to enter "fully into his conscious-

ness" without being consciously aware of what his life means. Wright accomplishes his intent, which is to inform the reader of the struggle going on in Bigger's mind, more perfectly when he has Bigger say less articulately, "Sometimes I feel like something awful's going to happen to me . . . I just feel that way. Everytime I get to thinking about me being black and they being white, me being here and they being there, I feel something awful's going to happen to me . . ." (23).

Bigger, unlike Gus, cannot help thinking of the injustice of the white world's control of everything. He is unable to get drunk and forget about his anger because he has no money. He cannot rid himself of the specter of "white folks" because they live "right down here in my stomach" (24). He feels the white world "like fire" in his chest and throat, and his fear and hatred of it suffocate him so that one can be sure he will eventually strike out against it.

Bigger and his friends plan to strike a blow against the white world and get some money at the same time, by robbing an old white merchant's store. Bigger, however, manages to prevent the accomplishing of the plan. For, though fear and hatred tempt Bigger to plan some audacious act against the whites, fear will prevent him from carrying out any meditated act of violence against them. Again, the central ambiguity of the book arises: the strength

of this episode of the chapter comes from the reader's knowledge of Bigger's fear-produced inability to go through with the robbery: Bigger "hated Gus because he knew that Gus was afraid, as even he was; and he feared Gus because he felt that Gus would consent and then he would be compelled to go through with the robbery" (28). Thus, the tension between fear and hatred is maintained (as it is throughout most of "Fear"), but the feeling of the tension is somewhat destroyed after Bigger fights with Gus, spoiling plans for the robbery, and the reader is told that "His [Bigger's] confused emotions had made him feel instinctively that it would be better to fight Gus and spoil the plan of the robbery than to confront a white man with a gun. But he kept this knowledge of his fear thrust firmly down in him; his courage to live depended upon how successfully his fear was hidden from his consciousness" (44). As long as Bigger's instinctive knowledge is kept hidden from his consciousness, his character is real and troubling; again one wonders, however, how he can realize that he has an instinctive knowledge of something without having a conscious knowledge of that same thing. When the reader is confronted by such a problem, Bigger becomes less of a reality and more of a mere vehicle for Wright's thesis.

The reality of the injustice of Bigger's life, its meaninglessness, and Bigger's need to perform some action

which will give him an identity, clearly exist despite the troubling ambiguity between his articulated instincts and his inarticulate consciousness. Wright is creating one of the first existential characters in literature in his creation of Bigger<sup>14</sup>--that is, a character whose existence is defined by his actions and experience rather than by religion or culture. Although Wright has failed to explain why Bigger is alienated from the religion of his family and the culture of his race or to demonstrate how the forces that affected Bigger affected his family, it is quite clear that Bigger lives in a state of almost total alienation from everything that might offer him an identity. Bigger can be defined only by his actions since he lives apart from all the conventional forms by which man defines himself: family, religion, folk-culture, and even nationality (since he does not feel himself to be an American).

Bigger is dimly aware of the need for meaningful action by which he can establish his identity and is also dimly aware that in his case, because of the circumstances under which he lives, a meaningful action will be one directed against the white world, one of such scope that the white world will sit up and take notice. Because his fear prohibits him from committing any premeditated act, his meaningful action will have to be almost accidental; ideally, the first, unplanned, meaningful action should

release him from his fears and enable him to perform acts which are planned as well as meaningful. Because of the circumstances of Bigger's life, his lack of education, intelligence and opportunity, his only outlet for meaningful action will be through crime. Thus, his murder of Mary Dalton and his subsequent murder of Bessie are almost inevitable.

The whole portion of the novel dealing with Bigger's employment by the Daltons, his introduction to Mary and Jan Erlone, the young Communist, his murders of Mary and Bessie, and his subsequent capture is a combination of engaging reading, tension, naturalism, symbolism, and incredibility. The Daltons, by whom Bigger is employed as a chauffeur through the city relief agency, are philanthropic toward Negroes. Mrs. Dalton, who is blind, encourages her Negro employees to seek an education and treats Bigger with what can be described only as sympathetic patronization. Mr. Dalton, also anxious for Negroes to receive educational and employment opportunities, is owner of the South Side Realty Corporation, which owns most of the rat-infested ghetto in which Bigger lives. Mary, to whom both parents are devoted, is an only child. She is a college student who is sympathetic toward Communist activities and also, following the liberal attitudes of her family, devoted to the Negro and his "cause."



Bigger, introduced to the world of the Daltons, is frightened and confused by it as well as resentful toward the Dalton family. Mrs. Dalton, dressed always in white and moving in a "sort of white glow," is a symbol of those liberal white people who try to help the Negro but who are blind to him as a human being and to the real nature of his problem. Bigger's first job as chauffeur introduces him to Jan Erlone, whom Mary meets secretly instead of attending the lecture to which she has told her parents she is going. Jan's job seems to be to recruit young men and women into the Party. He and Mary set about treating Bigger with "equality," which treatment consists of an incredible lack of understanding of Bigger, indicated by questions about his life and his "people" and an urging for Bigger to "relax" with them. Bigger's discomfort grows throughout the evening, reaching its peak when he is compelled to join Mary and Jan for a meal at "Ernie's Shack," a Negro restaurant.

Bigger's discomfort is caused by a combination of factors. There is, first, his natural fear of whites and his reluctance to associate with them. Since he has never had and does not wish to have any white person as his friend, he is awkward and uncomfortable when he is forced to be with white people, and even more uncomfortable when the whites force themselves into his own, Negro, environment; into a place where Bigger can be seen by friends and

acquaintances in the society of the despised whites. Bigger's fear of whites and his reluctance to associate with them are then combined with the realization that he has disobeyed Mr. Dalton by taking Mary to meet Jan instead of driving her to the University as instructed. As Jan and Mary begin to drink and Mary becomes intoxicated, Bigger becomes more fearful of Mr. Dalton and the anger that will erupt when he learns about Bigger's part in Mary's disobedience.

Although Mary, and Jan to a lesser degree, seem rather unbelievable in these scenes, there is imposed upon the reader a strong awareness of Bigger's awkwardness to the point where the reader himself is tense and uncomfortable. This reaction is caused by annoyance with the doltish and insensitive Jan and Mary as well as by the sympathy engendered by Wright's relation of Bigger's feelings. Part of the reaction stems from the problem of language. For although Wright can make Bigger's language seem realistic, he has difficulty in doing the same with the language of the white characters in the novel. The conversations of the Daltons seem to be more Wright's idea of what the conversations of wealthy whites sound like than what they are in fact. As in the case of other characters who appear later in the novel (e.g., Britten, the newspaper reporter, the minister) the unreality of the language is related to Wright's use of his characters as symbols. In many cases

he is unable to make his symbolic characters seem real, and thus they become stereotypes in language and in action. Yet, as noted before, despite the incredibility of much of the character portrayal in the novel, Bigger's tension and fear are realistic and quite believable. Thus, his murder of Mary is a believable act which must inevitably follow his previous actions. After leaving Jan at a bus station and bringing Mary home, Bigger finds that she is so drunk that he must half-carry her to her room. Mrs. Dalton enters while Bigger is in Mary's bedroom, and his fear of being discovered in such a forbidden place is so intense that he stifles Mary's low cries with a pillow, thus suffocating her. After Mrs. Dalton leaves the room, unaware of what has taken place, and Bigger realizes what he has done, he formulates a plan to prevent discovery of the murder. Part of the plan involves stuffing Mary's body into the furnace in the cellar. He realizes, however, that it will not fit and that he must cut off her head in order to get the body into the furnace. The scene is described in naturalistic detail:

He got his knife from his pocket and opened it and stood by the furnace, looking at Mary's white throat. Could he do it? He had to. Would there be blood? Oh, Lord! He looked around with a haunted and pleading look in his eyes. He saw a pile of old newspapers stacked carefully in a corner. He got a thick wad of them and held them under the head. He touched the sharp blade to the

throat, just touched it, as if expecting the knife to cut the white flesh of itself, as if he did not have to put pressure behind it. . . . Gently, he sawed the blade into the flesh and struck a bone. He gritted his teeth and cut harder. As yet there was no blood anywhere but on the knife. But the bone made it difficult. Sweat crawled down his back. Then blood crept outward in widening circles of pink on the newspapers, spreading quickly now. He whacked at the bone with the knife. The head hung limply on the newspapers, the curly black hair dragging about in blood. He whacked harder, but the head would not come off.

. . . He got the hatchet, held the head at a slanting angle with his left hand and, after pausing in an attitude of prayer, sent the blade of the hatchet into the bone of the throat with all the strength of his body. The head rolled off. (90-91)

The first book, "Fear," ends with Mary's cremation and Bigger's plan to implicate Jan in her murder. The image of Mary's black curls dragging in blood recurs throughout most of Book II, "Flight." Bigger's guilt causes him to see the image each time he looks at the furnace. He is not exorcised of the sight until his crime is discovered.

Because Mary had planned to leave early the next morning for a trip to Detroit, Bigger feels that he is safe in remaining in Chicago. He realizes that if he takes her trunk to the depot as planned, the Daltons will think that Mary has left for Detroit and thus it will be sometime before they suspect that something has happened to her.

Early in "Flight" Bigger begins to have an awareness

of the significance of his act. Lamenting about the disparity between the living conditions of the Daltons and of his own family, Bigger thinks, "Maybe they [his family] had to live this way precisely because none of them in all their lives had ever done anything, right or wrong, that mattered much" (100). Bigger is beginning to allow "the meaning of his life to enter fully into his consciousness," but now he can do so safely because "the thought of what he had done, the awful horror of it, the daring associated with such actions, formed for him for the first time in his fear-ridden life a barrier of protection between him and a world he feared. He had murdered and had created a new life for himself. It was something that was all his own, and it was the first time in his life he had had anything that others could not take from him" (101).

Although the murder and the subsequent disposal of the body are acts of crime and horror, it is only through these that Bigger can begin to live as a human being. If anything can release Bigger from the net of fear which entangles him, the act of murder can. It provides the beginnings of self-awareness, for "it was no longer a matter of dumb wonder as to what would happen to him and his black skin; he knew now. The hidden meaning of his life--a meaning which others did not see and which he had always tried to hide--had spilled out. . . . There was in

him a kind of terrified pride in feeling and thinking that some day he would be able to say publicly that he had done it. It was as though he had an obscure but deep debt to fulfill to himself in accepting the deed" (101).

Besides the growing awareness of himself and of his ability to perform meaningful acts, Bigger also begins to gain an awareness of the blindness of others. He realizes that each person has a vision of the world and the other people in it and that each views other people in the light of his own expectations. Thus, Bigger feels that he has great freedom in his choice of action since he can pretend to conform to what is expected of him by others and at the same time act as he really wishes. In Book II, Bigger begins to plan the actions which spring from his crime. Released from fear by his unplanned murder of Mary, he now has the capability to perform significant action which is planned. With his lover, Bessie, who is somewhat unwilling to participate, Bigger plots the sending of a ransom note. Although Bessie does not know that Bigger has murdered Mary, she agrees to go along with the plan after Bigger assures her that Mary has eloped with some "red" and will not return to her parents.

Bigger despises white people because they limit his freedom both physically and emotionally. That is, whites have given the Negro a portion of the city in which he

may live, but beyond the boundaries of the Negro ghetto they have severely restricted his physical freedom. Through the web of hate and fear which the whites create in the Negro, they control him emotionally, "for he [Bigger] felt that they ruled him, even when they were far away and not thinking of him, ruled him by conditioning him in his relations to his own people" (110). Bigger begins to break away from the control exerted by the white world when he murders Mary. His hatred and his disgust toward the fear and shame engendered in him by whites cause him to rationalize his crime. "He felt that his murder of her was more than amply justified by the fear and shame she had made him feel" (108).

Thus, the ransom note through which Bigger plans to obtain ten thousand dollars is also more than amply justified in more than one way: i.e., it is an action directed against the hated whites who cause him to be fearful and ashamed; it is another action which matters and which will lift him further out of the morass in which his family and friends live because of their inability to do "something, right or wrong, which mattered." As Bigger becomes more aware of the cause of his hatred of whites, as he articulates his reasons more clearly to himself, his attitude toward his own people changes from one of bewilderment and faint annoyance to one of active contempt. As Bigger becomes bolder through his gradual

loss of fear, he becomes feared by and somewhat awesome to his family, friends, and Bessie. The fear and awe which he himself engenders are both a source of gratification and a cause of hatred to him. He becomes contemptuous first toward his family for their acceptance of the status quo, then toward his friends because of their acceptance and lack of full awareness of their situation, and finally toward Bessie because of her fear, her temerity, and her insignificance. Although he includes her as part of his plot to gain ransom money, largely because he needs someone to help him, he realizes quite early that Bessie will be, more than anything, a burden to him. Bigger does not consciously formulate his later plans for Bessie, but the reader is aware that another significant action is in the offing. Bigger despises Bessie, who is to him a symbol of everything that is wrong with the Negro. And although Bessie has never meant too much to Bigger romantically, she now becomes nothing more than an outlet for his sexual urge. His eventual disposition of her is not much of a surprise to anyone, not even to Bigger himself.

As the chapter progresses, Bigger's kidnap plan seems successful. He implicates Jan, claiming that he left Jan with Mary the night before her disappearance. Bigger clears himself of suspicion by acting timid and dumb, preying upon the blindness of those who would not suspect



a fearful Negro of having anything to do with the disappearance of a millionaire's daughter. Although Jan is released from custody, pending more evidence, Bigger implicates the Communist Party in Mary's disappearance by signing the crude ransom note with the hammer and sickle and the name "Red." The signature is an obvious contrivance and one which seems incredible (one feels that if Mary's disappearance were a Communist plot to help the party gain money, the perpetrators would not wish people to know who was responsible), but the Daltons, their private detective, and the newspapermen immediately suspect the Party. At the "press conference" which the Daltons call to inform the alleged kidnappers, via the newspapers, that they will do as instructed, the reporters grill Bigger. Gathered in the cellar, near the furnace, they question him about the last time Mary was seen and begin to photograph him. Bigger again stresses Jan's involvement in the case by noting that Jan spoke with him about Communism. The reporters grasp at Jan's association with the Party, his recruitment of Negroes ("These Negroes want to be left alone and these reds are forcing 'em to live with 'em, see?" [201]) and his foreign-sounding name ("Is he Jewish?" [201]). While the reporters are questioning Bigger, he is ordered by the Daltons' cook (a white woman) to clean the furnace. Once again his fear stops him as he realizes that if Mary's

body has not been completely burned, all his careful plotting will be destroyed and he will be discovered. The image of "Mary's head lying there bloody and unburnt" (204) paralyzes him as one of the reporters pokes around in the ashes. With the discovery of a piece of bone and an earring, Bigger realizes that he must flee if he wishes to remain free. The rest of "Flight" details Bigger's attempts to hide in the South Side ghetto and his rape and murder of Bessie, who hides with him. Bigger murders Bessie ostensibly because she is too much of a hindrance to his attempts to remain uncaptured. But his sexual assault and his murder of her stem from a deeper cause: as Mary's murder was an act against the white world, Bigger uses Bessie brutally, and murders her just as brutally, as an act against the Negro world. For the white world Bigger feels hatred and fear, and he proclaims his freedom from it by his murder of Mary; for the Negro world Bigger feels contempt, and he proclaims his loathing by the brutal murder of Bessie. For, as noted previously, in her meek submission, in her tired movements, in her insignificant actions, Bessie is for Bigger a symbol of the Negro, so that Bigger is half-consciously attempting to crush the entire Negro world when he crushes Bessie's head with the repeated blows of a brick. And after Bessie's murder, Bigger feels once again the power and freedom he felt after the murder of

Mary:

. . . there remained to him a queer sense of power. He had done this. He had brought all this about. In all of his life these two murders were the most meaningful things that had ever happened to him. He was living, truly and deeply, no matter what others might think, looking at him with their blind eyes. Never had he had the chance to live out the consequences of his actions; never had his will been so free as in this night and day of fear and murder and flight.

. . . And yet, whether in running away or in fighting, he had felt the need of the clean satisfaction of facing this thing in all its fulness [sic], of fighting it out in the wind and sunlight, in front of those whose hate for him was so unfathomably deep that, after they had shunted him off into a corner of the city to rot and die, they could turn to him, as Mary had that night in the car, and say: "I'd like to know how your people live." (224-225)

One sees that there will be no repentance or remorse on Bigger's part. For how can one feel remorse for an act toward which one's whole life has been directed, an act that releases one from fear and bondage? Bigger takes a certain pride in what he has done, behaving as if his two acts of destruction were acts of creation. And in a certain sense they are creative, for as Bigger destroys the symbols of the worlds that enslave him, he creates not only freedom but the beginnings of manhood in himself.

His acts are admittedly extreme, but a character such as Bigger cannot do otherwise.

Wright also attempts to show, in the latter portion of "Flight," the extent of the white world's degradation of the Negro. Bigger, because of his flight from the

Daltons, becomes the prime suspect in Mary's murder. The police begin to make a house-to-house search of the South Side as the newspapers condemn Bigger as a rapist and murderer. Newspaper accounts note that hundreds of Negro employees throughout Chicago are fired from their jobs; in effect, the entire Negro population is being punished for Bigger's crime. The sordid conditions, the fear and shame in which Negroes are forced to live, are again underscored as Bigger, from one of his hiding-places, looks into the uncurtained window of a tenement and sees a naked Negro couple copulating on a bed while three youngsters look on. "They keep us bottled up here like wild animals, he thought. He knew that black people could not go outside of the Black Belt to rent a flat; they had to live on their side of the 'line.' No white real estate man would rent a flat to a black man other than in the sections where it had been decided that black people might live" (233). Bigger later hears two men arguing about whether or not to protect him if he should ask for their help. The gist of one man's argument is that Negroes must help one another since they will get no help from the whites, to whom they are indistinguishable. The other man, caught in the fear which Bigger has come to despise, states that he would not protect the murderer who has caused him to lose his job. He tells the first man, "Man, yuh crazy! Don' yuh wan' a home

'n' wife 'n' chillun? Whut's fightin' gonna git yuh?  
 There's mo' of them [whites] than us. They could kill us  
 all. Yuh gotta learn t'live 'n' git erlong wid people"  
 (236).

As the police get nearer and nearer, Bigger runs to a rooftop to hide and is found there by the searchers. After hitting and perhaps killing one of the policemen, he flees to the top of a water tank, from which he falls after fire hoses are turned on him. The chapter ends with a rather obvious bit of symbolism as Bigger is lying flat on his back in the snow: "Two men stretched his arms out, as though about to crucify him; they placed a foot on each of his wrists, making them sink deep down in the snow. His eyes closed, slowly, and he was swallowed in darkness" (253).

Thus Bigger becomes at the end of Book II a kind of inverted Christ, black rather than white, brutal rather than gentle, violent rather than peace-loving. He shares with Christ the label of outcast of the larger community, a label which he shares with most of his fellow Negroes; he shares also the quality of being "more sinned against than sinning," which is what Max, Bigger's lawyer, will try to prove in Book III, "Fate,"

"Fate," the portion of the novel which deals with Bigger's incarceration and trial, contains the philosophical crux of the novel. Bigger, at first meek and

submissive--

Having been thrown by an accidental murder into a position where he had sensed a possible order and meaning in his relations with the people about him; having accepted the moral guilt and responsibility for that murder because it had made him feel free for the first time in his life; having felt in his heart some obscure need to be at home with people and having demanded ransom money to enable him to do it--having done all this and failed, he chose not to struggle anymore. . . . (255)--

comes slowly to a true awareness of himself and the meaning of his crime (within his limited capabilities) largely because of Max, the Communist lawyer who feels impelled to defend him. Bigger is confronted, in the final chapter, with all the forces that have kept him from freedom, and Max, through his understanding and sympathy, leads Bigger to an articulation, for the first time, of his confused but powerful feelings about his crimes. Bigger is led from dazed action through hope to a greater perception than he has shown before. Indeed, the tragedy of Bigger's life is that he shows the greatest perception about its meaning a few moments before he is to die in the electric chair. This is not to say that Bigger's awareness comes to full flower. His perception is still limited by the various restrictions that first caused his predicament. He comes, however, to see more of life than the surface, and when he finally asks Max "How can I die?" he is expressing not so much a fear of death as a sadness at having to die just as he is learning how to live. For, although

Bigger has again rejected religion and family, he has accepted himself.

Max's plea for Bigger's life, which contains many profound insights despite its "party-line" aspects, seems to make little impression on the white world. It does, however, make a strong impression on Bigger, who reasons that he must have some worth if someone is willing to make such a speech to save his life. Again, in Max's speech, one notes one of the contradictions of the novel: those parts that are most powerful are also the parts that contain the greatest weaknesses. In the case of Max's speech the weaknesses are topical rather than artistic. Although much of what Max says is still valid, much has lost its meaning today because of the changing times. Trade unions are no longer despised; the rich-vs.-poor aspect of the speech has become almost meaningless; there has been a gradual shift in attitude toward prison as a place of rehabilitation rather than a place strictly for punishment; and educational and social opportunities have begun to open for the Negro. Max's speech, however, does not lack eloquence or significance, for much of what he says about the stunted growth of the Negro is still valid, much of what he says about society's part in Bigger's crime is still true.

The book ends on an almost triumphant note as Bigger realizes, ". . . What I killed for, I am! It must've

• been pretty deep in me to make me kill! I must have felt it awful hard to murder. . . . What I killed for must've been good! . . . It must have been good! When a man kills, it's for something. . . . I didn't know I was really alive in this world until I felt things hard enough to kill for 'em . . ." (391-392). Bigger is yet unable to understand the exact meaning of his crime or, for that matter, of his life. But his awareness at the very end of his life is much more profound than it was at the height of his criminality. Allowing for the limits of his undeveloped intelligence, his still incompletely awakened consciousness, one sees that his meaning as a man, the existential nature of his life, has finally penetrated his consciousness. At this high point of the novel Bigger almost ceases to be Bigger Thomas, the symbol of a young Negro in the 1930's, fighting the world that the whites have created for him, and becomes, more universally, the eternal outsider, fighting a world he never made. The high point of the novel, however, comes a little too late. Native Son, one fears, will soon cease to have any true artistic value and will have, instead, only socio-historical worth. Wright, although displaying (especially in the latter parts of the book) some eloquence, some mastery of his craft, and some artistry, is too steeped in the social movements of his time, too unable to cast the necessary objective glance, to be truly free of the prop-



agandistic element in his work. Deeply involved with the plight of his race, strongly influenced by the Communist Party, his art is hampered by his cause.

One can follow the logical and inevitable progression of Bigger's life, but one cannot empathize or, for the most part, identify with him. One cannot, for that matter, truly identify with any of the characters in the novel, for although the characters represent a point of view they do not live. Wright's talent is evidenced by his ability to make one feel the force of Bigger's struggle for freedom even when one does not truly believe in Bigger, by his ability to involve the reader when the reader cannot justify his involvement.

Because the forces against Bigger are so specific, because the battle lines are so clearly drawn, the meaning of Bigger's struggle and his plight can have significance only as long as the particular battle that Bigger fights continues to be fought. A quarter-century later, Bigger's life has less meaning than when the book was first published. As the cause of civil rights comes slowly and painfully to be won, Bigger's meaning, his value, diminishes. In another twenty-five years, one fears, Native Son will be only an interesting period piece about a very interesting period.

## JAMES BALDWIN

James Baldwin, born in Harlem, New York City, in 1924, is probably the best known of the contemporary Negro authors. His position derives from his skill, his prolific output, and his ability to seize his reader's attention, especially when discussing the problems faced by the contemporary Negro. Baldwin is the author of three novels, two plays, a collection of short stories<sup>1</sup> and numerous essays. Each of the novels, Go Tell It On The Mountain, Giovanni's Room, and Another Country, focuses on an outsider of one sort or another; that is, the major characters in each book either do not fit easily into the established community, or they belong to a community that exists apart from the "normal" or accepted one. These same characters are shown most often trying to establish or define their identities and are usually hampered in their actions by their inability to communicate with one another.

Giovanni's Room,<sup>2</sup> published in 1956, is primarily concerned with the inability to love. David, the major character, heterosexual until he meets Giovanni, is unable to give more than physical sustenance to Giovanni, a young homosexual, when Giovanni is in need of David's love. After Giovanni's decline to the point where he commits a murder to regain the vestiges of self-respect, David is left to confront himself with the realization of

his involvement in Giovanni's guilt and his guilt in the destruction of Giovanni's life.

Another Country,<sup>3</sup> Baldwin's most recent novel, published in 1962, is peopled with jazz musicians, writers, singers, and homosexuals, most of whom encounter difficulty in communicating with and understanding those who should be closest to them. Like David of Giovanni's Room, each of the major characters, Vivaldo, Ida, Cass, and Eric, is forced to an awareness of his own involvement in, and responsibility for, the lives of those he loves. In Another Country the central character is Rufus, who commits suicide shortly after the novel begins. It is through the degree of recognition of their failure in loving and responding to Rufus' needs, that Eric, Ida, Cass, and Vivaldo are finally able to achieve some degree of peace with themselves and with each other.

Go Tell It On The Mountain,<sup>4</sup> the subject of this study, has as its protagonist a sensitive adolescent struggling toward self-definition and emotional salvation in the world of his elders, who understand self-definition and salvation only in religious terms.

Giovanni's Room and Another Country are marred to a great extent by faulty characterization. Another Country is marred even further by Baldwin's inability to control his anger when discussing white-Negro relations. Since Giovanni's Room has only white characters, Baldwin's

racial feelings play little part in its philosophy. Another Country, however, is intimately concerned with both Caucasians and Negroes; thus Baldwin's own racial attitudes are very much a part of the novel. As he implies in several of his essays, it is his opinion that whites and Negroes will never be able truly to communicate, since whites will never allow themselves really to understand the lives, thoughts, and feelings of Negroes. Consequently, Baldwin does not allow any of the characters in the novel really to understand one another, and the reader understands least of all. While the Negro characters are sensitive toward others and sinned against, the white characters are too often inconsiderate and sinning. Paradoxically, Baldwin takes time to explain the actions of his white characters, while he leaves the explanation of the attitudes and actions of his Negro characters to the reader's interpretation. In effect, he is saying, "you would not wish or be able to understand in any case; thus I shall not bother to explain." Even those characters who attempt to love and understand are unable to do so. Only Eric, an expatriate homosexual, is able to span the differences of race, sex, and temperament; only Eric can finally open the door to communication; and it is Eric who seems the least motivated, whom one finds most difficult to understand.

Go Tell It On The Mountain is Baldwin's earliest

novel and, surprisingly, the novel least flawed by the imperfections of characterization and communication that mar his later works. Despite its faults, Go Tell It On The Mountain is the finest of Baldwin's three works of fiction and gives evidence of a talent that has not yet developed.

The action of the novel takes place on the fourteenth birthday of John Grimes, following him from the morning when he awakens until early the next morning when he returns home with his family after being "saved" at The Temple of The Fire Baptized, the Harlem church where his stepfather preaches. The novel is divided into three parts, and incorporated skillfully into the second part are three flashbacks: one dealing with Gabriel Grimes, John's stepfather; one with Florence Grimes, John's aunt; and one with Elizabeth Grimes, his mother. Through the flashback device (about which more will be said later), Baldwin depicts not only John's history and ancestry, but indeed, recapitulates the history of the American Negro.

John, like the characters in Baldwin's later novels, is an outsider. More intelligent than the members of his family, he is unable to communicate with them on any level other than the superficial. His deep sensitivity is endangered by the dulling and wounding exigencies of the life of the poor in Harlem; his life is further complicated by the need for the love and approval from an older man,

a need which his stepfather either cannot or will not fulfill. Thus, though a member of a family, he remains outside of it. And although an observer of the outward forms, he is unwilling to accept the stringent and unloving religion of his stepfather. His shy and intelligent demeanor, however, presents to the church elders a picture of him as a religious and "good" boy who will surely soon be "saved" and born into the church. John, then, though still not clearly defined to himself, has a clear-cut identity in the minds of those around him. Only John's mother, Elizabeth, has a half-formed but deeper understanding of her son. Only Elizabeth shares John's vague awareness that the salvation for which the troubled boy is searching must come from a source other than The Temple of The Fire Baptized.

Unlike Bigger Thomas, John is not greatly resentful of the white race. He feels the need to prove himself more to himself and to his stepfather than to the white world. Indeed, it is his white teacher who recognizes his intellectual abilities and needs more than anyone within his small circle; it is an elderly white man, who smiles at him in Central Park, who communicates a feeling of love to John that is stronger to him than the love he has received from his stepfather. John needs extension of himself into another world, whether white or black, a world in which loving and understanding will be his. Dimly

aware that the attempts by his white teacher to reach out to him are thwarted by his father's hatred of whites, aware that he and the elderly man can have only a transitory and momentary communication because of the structure of society, John has fantasies of power in which he is "King of the Mountain" in charge of dispensing love and forgiveness. These fantasies extend into others in which he avenges himself and his mother on his stepfather:

His father's arm, rising and falling, might make him cry, and that voice might cause him to tremble; yet his father could never be entirely the victor, for John cherished something that his father could not reach. It was his hatred and his intelligence that he cherished, the one feeding the other. He lived for the day when his father would be dying and he, John, would curse him on his deathbed. (19)

John's imaginings enable him to relieve some of the burdens of his adolescence. And his adolescent burdens are many; his need for an identity, the burden of every adolescent, is complicated by poverty, by his being expected to find his identity in religion, by his color, by his intelligence, and by the problem of an awakening sexuality. John, at fourteen, is bound by feelings of guilt and shyness and is unlike Roy, his younger brother, who can accept sex and street violence with equanimity. He finds in his first act of masturbation a conscious guilt as well as a subtle method of rebellion against his father:

He had sinned. In spite of the saints,

his mother and his father, the warnings he had heard from his earliest beginnings, he had sinned with his hands a sin that was hard to forgive. In the school lavatory, alone, . . . he had watched in himself a transformation of which he would never dare to speak.

And the darkness of John's sin was like the darkness of the church on Saturday evenings; . . . The darkness of his sin was in the hardheartedness with which he resisted God's power; in the scorn that was often his while he listened to the crying, breaking voices, and watched the black skin glisten while they lifted up their arms and fell on their faces before the Lord. For he had made his decision. He would not be like his father, or his father's father. He would have another life. (17-18)

John's conscious sin is that he has committed a forbidden sexual act, but as indicated in the foregoing passage, he has sinned in a much greater manner and in the deeper recesses of his mind there is a strong awareness of the magnitude of his sin. In resisting his stepfather, John has also resisted God. But John is yet aware that to attain a life for himself that is meaningful and rewarding, he must deny the life offered to him by his father and his heritage. For it is John's heritage, too, with which he must come to terms; a heritage of which he knows very little is his to accept or deny. John's present search for identity, his search for the meaning of his life as he lives it, must include, whether or not he knows it, a discovery also of the meaning of his past and his ancestry. Baldwin skillfully uses flashbacks to trace John's ancestry. Interwoven with the praying, sing-



ing, and crying of the worshipers in the storefront church are the memories of the Reverend Grimes, Elizabeth, and Florence, which outline the lives of the three from early youth until late adulthood. In a larger sense, the lives of the Grimeses, the problems each has had to confront, represent the lives and problems of most Negroes in America. Thus one is aware not only of the forces that have shaped the lives of John's relatives and, of course, of John himself, but also of the forces that have shaped the history of the American Negro.

Baldwin uses the flashback to introduce characters who are necessary for a full understanding of John and his family, but who would otherwise have no place in the novel. Thus, one sees not only the headstrong and sexually obsessed young Gabriel but also his deeply religious mother and his equally religious but sexless first wife, Deborah. One sees also the youthful, innocent Elizabeth, and the sensitive Richard, John's natural father, of whom John has no knowledge, believing throughout the novel that Gabriel is his true father. George E. Kent states that the novel unfolds

in a series of major movements . . . the first movement introducing the reach of fourteen-year-old John Grimes for identity, a fearful, faltering reach, from a boy filled with guilt, hatred, fear, love, amidst the stern, religious frustrations of his elders and the pagan rebelliousness of his brother, Roy; the second presenting the tragedy of Florence, unable to overcome . . .

the concept of the Negro she has internalized from the dominant culture--and therefore on insecure terms with herself and others; the third presenting Gabriel Grimes . . . blocked from complete fulfillment by his attempts to escape his pagan drives in a fierce, frustrated embrace of Christianity; the fourth presenting Elizabeth . . . who after brief fulfillment in illicit love, retreats, frightened and awestricken, into the frustrated and frustrating arms of Gabriel Grimes. The final movement is the questionable flight of John Grimes from the quest for identity into the ostensible safety of religious ecstasy.<sup>5</sup>

The second three movements are perhaps the most important to the reader's understanding of each of the characters. Only after reading the flashbacks does one become aware that Gabriel's evident favoritism toward Roy is not due merely to Roy's position as a real son rather than a stepson, but derives from the more complex emotion of guilt--guilt which stems from the unacknowledged recognition of and love for Royal, Gabriel's first and illegitimate son by Esther. Esther affirms within her all that Gabriel seeks to deny; passionate, with a natural and free attitude toward sex, she has yet "a firm concept of her dignity and humanity, and what is life-affirming and life-negating. . . ." <sup>6</sup> Although she does not deny God and the religion practiced by Gabriel and Deborah, neither is God the focal point of her life. Gabriel's rejection of Esther, and more so of Royal, is a rejection of his humanity and, in a sense, the rejection also of understanding and love. It is Baldwin's

thesis throughout his works that sex (hetero- or homosexual) is the major means of communication between people, of true involvement in the life of another human being. When one rejects sex, or sexuality, therefore, one also rejects one's responsibility toward bridging the gap that exists between people. Gabriel begins the pattern of rejection of his humanity with his marriage to Deborah, who, raped repeatedly by a group of Southern white men when sixteen, is sexually unresponsive as well as infertile. Although Gabriel is fond of Deborah, his marriage to her is primarily a means of repentance for his youth and for his sexual drives and an announcement of himself as a true man of God-- an adoption of emotional celibacy, as it were. His rejection of Esther and his son firmly fixes the pattern, one by which he continues to live so strongly that when he wishes to break it, to love and communicate with Roy, so like Roy and himself, he is unable to do so. Esther, Roy, and Royal affirm life and love; Gabriel denies life and, unloving, is also unloved.

Again, after reading the flashbacks, one better understands both Elizabeth and her deep love for John, and Florence and her strong antagonism toward Gabriel. For Elizabeth, John is not only a son, but a living part of her father and of Richard, her dead lover. Much of Elizabeth's flashback concerns Richard, and his characterization is a major flaw in the novel. He is not quite real, not

quite believable. One feels that Richard is perhaps Baldwin's favorite character, and thus is not treated quite so objectively as the other characters in the book. One agrees with Wallace Graves who states that

the failure of Baldwin to maintain an artistic distance between the narrator and the character of John's father Richard explains the failure of this character, and the technique which reveals this lack of objectivity is the presence here, as nowhere else in the book, of a rather mawkish use of irony toward Elizabeth which causes the narrator to intrude as a controlling personality. It is as if, in this section, Baldwin is incapable of treating John's natural father with the cool honest eye so apparent elsewhere, thus Richard, instead of being allowed life as a separate character, is surrounded by a cocoon of the artist's protective sentiment, so that the emotional center of the book becomes disturbed.<sup>7</sup>

Richard is portrayed as a victimized, sensitive young man whose attitudes are indicated by his decision "to get to know everything them white bastards knew . . . and . . . to get to know it better than them, so could no white son-of-a-bitch nowhere never talk me down, and never make me feel like I was dirt, when I could read him the alphabet, back, front, and sideways. Shit--he weren't going to beat my ass, then. And if he tried to kill me, I'd take him with me, I swear to my mother I would" (144). Although he has had little formal education, his interests extend to Ancient Rome, museums, and "things dead." His firmness, certainty, and intelligence are a source of strength to

Elizabeth, but her inability to understand his drives, his moods, and the powerful hate that motivates him, causes him to be a source of confusion to her as well. In turn, her simplicity seems to strengthen him, although, since the reader sees Richard through the combined sentimentality of Baldwin and Elizabeth, it is difficult to know exactly why Richard does choose Elizabeth. Her simplicity and quiet dignity are not truly sufficient, for after Richard's humiliating experience with the police, who arrest and beat him for a crime which he did not commit, his spirit becomes broken:

The courtroom seemed to feel, with some complacency and some disappointment, that it was his great good luck to be let off so easily. They went immediately to his room. And there--she was never all her life long to forget it--he threw himself, face downward, on his bed and wept.

. . . She tried to hold him, but for a long while he would not be held. His body was like iron; she could find no softness in it. She sat curled like a frightened child on the edge of the bed, her hand on his back, waiting for the storm to pass over. It was then that she decided not to tell him yet about the child.

By and by he called her name. And then he turned, and she held him against her breast, while he sighed and shook. He fell asleep at last, clinging to her as though he were going down into the water for the last time.

And it was the last time. That night he cut his wrists with his razor and he was found in the morning by his landlady, his eyes staring upward with no light, dead among the scarlet sheets. (150)

Elizabeth believes that she might have prevented

Richard's suicide if she had told him about the child she was expecting. It is perhaps true that Richard would have chosen to live had he known about Elizabeth's pregnancy; however, Richard, although somewhat sustained by Elizabeth, has subsisted mainly on the nourishment of his hatred for and pride in the face of the white world. To remain alive after his utter humiliation by white men would offer Richard a meaningless existence, which even the promise of a child could not alter.

The presence of the white world, although not so blatant as in Native Son, exists subtly, but powerfully in Go Tell It On The Mountain. As Ihab Hassan notes in Radical Innocence,

The story does not focus on what social workers call "interracial tensions" --these merely crackle in the air everyone breathes, trickle unnoticed in the water they drink, are part of the gritty bread they eat.

. . . The white world is kept at a distance--we have only glimpses of a Negro soldier mutilated by the city riffraff, of Richard, Johnny's father, beaten up by policemen, of a white man spitting in front of Gabriel's feet.<sup>8</sup>

The reader also sees Elizabeth as the center of crude jokes made by the policemen, and learns of Deborah's rape by white men. The theme of "interracial tensions" is introduced early in the book through incidental casual remarks and carried through the novel almost as casually, erupting from under the surface only occasionally as when Elizabeth, after witnessing and sharing in Richard's

humiliation looks

out into the quiet, sunny streets, and for the first time in her life, she hated it all--the white city, the white world. She could not, that day, think of one decent white person in the whole world. She sat there, and she hoped that one day God, with tortures inconceivable, would grind them utterly into humility, and make them know that black boys and black girls, whom they treated with such condescension, such disdain, and such good humor, had hearts like human beings, too, more human hearts than theirs. (150)

Thus the undercurrents of racial tension, the quiet outbursts of anger and hatred, create a mood as effective and as gripping, in a more subtle manner, as the continual anger and shouting of Native Son. The influence of the white world on the Negro is shown through more than acts of cruelty that cause hatred.

The white world motivates through jealousy as well as through hatred, and Florence is motivated as strongly as Richard. Accepting the white idea of blackness as a source of evil, Florence does all in her power to emulate the white world and tries to live as white people do. Her money is spent on bleaching creams and hair-straighteners, and her idea of respectability is not merely the idea of respectability, but respectability as the white world sees it. Her desire to have a better life than her mother's is a desire with which one can sympathize, but her desire to live according to the nebulous standards she attributes to the white world makes her a pathetic figure.

She attends "Uplift Meetings" where prominent Negroes speak about the future and the duties of the Negro race. She objects to the "common and dirty niggers" her husband brings home, nagging him until he must ask in rage, "And what do you want me to do Florence? You want me to turn white?" (75). She is never fully aware of the control she has allowed the white world to exert on her and is finally driven back to the church that she scorns not because of humility, but from fear of death. Yet while she prays in The Temple of The Fire Baptized and recalls her life, she is contemptuous of it and of the people who attend it.

. . . one knelt before the altar once only, in the beginning, to ask forgiveness of sins; and this accomplished, one was baptized and became a Christian, to kneel no more thereafter. Even if the Lord should lay some great burden on one's back--as He had done, but never so heavy a burden as this she carried now--one prayed in silence. It was indecent, the practice of common niggers to cry aloud at the foot of the altar, tears streaming for all the world to see. (58)

Florence's contempt is for the low, common, and dirty; for the "nigger" that she sees in Negroes. It is self-contempt as well as contempt for others, and it is, finally, part of an overwhelming hatred for her brother, Gabriel. For he is, to Florence, the symbol of all that is worst in the Negro, and, moreover, in any man. He is selfish, cruel, dishonest, and unloving. He is the favored child who does not (in Florence's eyes) deserve the love of his



mother, the love which, given to Gabriel in such a large degree, shut Florence out.

While Florence sees Gabriel thus, and Elizabeth sees him as a stern but good husband and father, Gabriel himself recalls his past, and sees himself as a man who has "walked before God in true repentance" (100), a man who has denied sin and who is worthy of God's recognition. Viewing himself thus, he cannot understand why of his two real sons, the sons who would fulfill God's promise, "who would carry down the joyful line [their] father's name, and who would work until the day of the second coming to bring about His Father's Kingdom [sic]" (100), of his two hopes for some kind of immortality, one is dead and the other is far from his father and God. He sees the lives and failures of both the dead Royal and the living Roy in terms of sin. The death of Royal, conceived in lust and born in sin, is to Gabriel a just death, the payment for the sin of his parents; but the hardness and hatred that are a part of Roy confuse him. Roy is a son of holy marriage; Roy was conceived in a holy bed. Thus, Roy's failure must, for Gabriel, be attributed to Elizabeth, who has never truly repented for her sin in giving birth to John. Gabriel sees John as "the living proof of her sin, he who knelt tonight, a very interloper among the saints, [standing] between her soul and God" (99-100). Toward John there is directed a hatred too deep and terrible for

Gabriel to acknowledge, which has its roots in a profound jealousy. For John, "the son of a weak, proud woman and some careless boy" (100), is all that Gabriel's son is not. He is intelligent and gentle, and, worse, now stands before the altar of God a potential saint, while the living son of the "royal line" of Gabriel Grimes lies at home, bloody and bandaged, recovering from a street fight, with the curse that he has flung at his father still hanging heavily in the room.

Interrupted in his reverie by the cry of a young man, Gabriel fears that John has begun to accept the "power of the Lord." He is relieved to discover that it is Elisha who has cried and turns back to his thoughts. The fear that John may gain salvation, that John may lead the life that Gabriel has planned for Roy, is a fear which is a controlling factor in Gabriel's life. Gabriel is unable to see his failures as a father, his failures as a man, his failures in his relationships with other people. It is sufficient to repent his sins; he sees no need to make amends for them. The grave failure of his refusal to acknowledge his son, Royal, is not a sin of any magnitude to Gabriel, nor does he realize that he has never forgiven Elizabeth for her sins, the largest and most troublesome of which is John. He sees himself as a prophet and as a saint but lacks the essential Christian qualities of charity and love. Gabriel loves only Gabriel. He loves

his sons, Royal and Roy, only insofar as they are projections of himself, the necessary instrument to carry out the "royal line" that is part of the one-sided covenant he has made with his idea of God. He loves his stepson, John, not at all.

John, desperately in need of a father, turns to the ~~only elder~~ male he knows well, Elisha. It is Elisha with whom John "horses around," Elisha to whom he tells his thoughts (insofar as they can be told to anyone), and Elisha who must "pray John through" while Gabriel stands watching. Elisha, then, to some extent, takes the place of the father John cannot find in Gabriel, and John thus has two stepfathers.

It is a weakness of the book that Gabriel is John's stepfather and that John is never aware of this fact. John is thus relieved of all responsibility for Gabriel and for Gabriel's sin in not loving him. Yet, since John is not aware that Richard ever existed, he cannot come to terms with his actual parentage and the actual heritage that Richard might have given him. Gabriel's role as John's stepfather works out well in terms of the dramatic framework of the book, but there seems to be no actual necessity for him to be a stepfather rather than a real father (other than Baldwin's need to create Richard as a character and to show sympathy for John). One agrees with Marcus Klein's statement that

Baldwin's tenderness for John . . . extends to curious shifts. It is Baldwin who . . . quite beyond John's knowing anything about it . . . [makes] his father really only his stepfather. His real father, safely dead, was . . . loving, understanding, graceful, and intellectual, and the victim of irrational injustices. And this is a little fault, a small softness in the story, but a large symptom. If tenderness will substitute for pursuit of character and action, then there will be nothing to do but explain circumstances and bemoan.<sup>9</sup>

The difficulties in understanding and communication that usually exist between an adolescent and his father are complicated by Gabriel's character and further by the somewhat unnecessary burden of Richard looming over the relationship, rarely thought about by Gabriel and completely unknown to John. In addition, the fact of Richard, a fact which John should know about in order to achieve a full identity, and John's lack of knowledge of him is a weakness of the novel which is indicative of another similar but larger flaw--a gap in John's knowledge of his family's past and his heritage--a flaw which, oddly enough, stems from one of the most skillful elements of the novel, the flashback.

The interweaving of the memories of Elizabeth, Gabriel, and Florence with the church services is handled so that John's salvation is played out against the memories of his elders. It is so well done that the services in which John and his family take part and the memories of John's family become one. Further, the section, called "The

Prayers of The Saints," is well arranged symbolically in that the first section belongs to Florence, whose relationship to John is the least intense; the second to Gabriel, who is closer to John than is Florence; and the third to Elizabeth, whom John loves the most and to whom he is closest. At the end of Elizabeth's section she remembers John's cry as a baby, just as she hears a different cry from him as he is beginning to be a man:

. . . not the cry of the child, newborn, before the common light of earth; but the cry of the man-child, bestial, before the light that comes down from Heaven. She opened her eyes and stood straight up; all of the saints surrounded her; Gabriel stood staring, struck rigid as a pillar in the temple. On the threshing-floor, in the center of the crying, singing saints, John lay astonished beneath the power of the Lord. (163-164)

Thus, at the end of Elizabeth's section John begins to accept the mode of salvation and identity designated for him by his family. Yet, for all the dramatic effectiveness of this entire section, the flaw exists which, though hidden in the drama of the flashbacks and John's turning toward religion, is perhaps the major flaw of the novel.

It has been stated that the memories of Florence, Gabriel, and Elizabeth present a recapitulation of the history of the American Negro; at the same time, they present John's ancestral heritage. Thus, the section called "The Prayers of The Saints" is the dramatic center of the

book.

The novel is in that way John's exploration of his history. . . . The triple flashback allows Baldwin to hold within a single vision the experiences of a long history of the Negro in America. He can incorporate into it slavery and abrupt emancipation, the frustrations and the extremes of the life of the peasantry of . . . [the South], the battle within the peasantry, and intimately within the family, for order, continuity, and moral stability. At the same time he contains within the vision the development of a religion that is an instrument at once of ethical prohibition, of promise, hatred, and of emotional deliverance. In the same moment he can contain the Negro experience of the trek to the North, the illusory promises of the North, with its sharper frustrations and its greater desperations.<sup>10</sup>

If the novel, through the device of the flashback, is "John's exploration of his history," as it, indeed, seems to be, then John's exploration and discoveries will lead him to accept or reject the mode of life offered to him by his elders. Because so much emphasis is placed on John's history, one is led to believe that John must understand the meaning of his life within the context of the meaning of the lives of his family. For the history of the Negro, as recapitulated in the flashbacks, and the history of John's family, are responsible for the presence of Florence, Gabriel, and Elizabeth in the Temple of The Fire Baptized; their personal and racial histories are responsible for what they are at present and, in turn, they have helped to bring John to his present moment of decision. Thus, John's

salvation, his time on the "threshing-floor," means more than that he has come into the church of his fathers, that he has turned to God. It means also that John is choosing to accept his ancestry, that he is choosing to define himself in terms of his family, and it means, most importantly, that he is accepting not only the immediate identity being offered to him through the church, but an identity that encompasses Gabriel's lust, Florence's weaknesses, and Elizabeth's and Richard's gentleness and grace. John's acceptance of a family-defined identity could be acceptable to the reader except for the very important fact of John's lack of knowledge of the events that have shaped his life and that he is supposedly accepting. Although John's salvation is intricately involved with the flashbacks concerning his family, John is completely unaware of these memories, his and his family's past, and the knowledge that Gabriel is not really his father. Therefore, if Baldwin intends the reader to regard John's religious involvement as a symbolic acceptance of his family and the life their past has forced them to offer him, as the internal evidence of the novel indicates, he seriously mars his intent by keeping John in utter ignorance of what his religious salvation actually signifies; for John cannot truly accept that of which he is entirely unaware. Thus, the value of John's salvation is greatly lessened.

The validity of John's salvation is also lessened

when one considers how intimately bound in John's mind are religion, God, and Gabriel. John identifies God with his father; in disobeying his father's wishes, he feels he offends God; in disobeying God's law, he is also disobeying his father, and he uses this almost unconscious knowledge to rebel against his father. Thus, if John accepts Gabriel's religion, if he accepts salvation in Gabriel's church, he is, effectively, accepting Gabriel. One feels that the acceptance of Gabriel, whether conscious or unconscious, would be completely alien to John at this point in his life. His sensitivity, heightened by his adolescence, his distaste for the religion offered him by his family, his hatred for Gabriel, make his salvation a stop-gap solution--at best, only a temporary means of self-identification, compounded both of emotion and of emulation of Elisha. The surface dramatic action of the novel seems to justify John's acceptance of the church, but the underlying action, the tensions beneath the surface, make John's action a weakness of Baldwin's, as if having reached the climax of the book, he could see no other way out than to have John accept the church, no matter how invalid a sensitive reading of the novel would show this action to be.

If, however, one feels that John's action can be justified when one considers that the religious fervor that overtakes the members of the church at a prayer-



meeting overtakes John as well, that his emotional state is such that he is most susceptible to a dramatic religious gesture, to the point where he is gripped by religious passion and reduced to tears and moans, one still feels that John's intellectual makeup will not allow his religious conversion to be permanent; that the identity that he will finally discover will have very little to do with the church. The resolution made at the end of the novel, then, can be considered as a resolution that is justified by the dramatic action of the book but that, because of the intellectual and emotional character of John Grimes, can be a resolution for only the time of his youth. John, searching for his identity, hesitating before manhood, and finally taking a step toward it, has not yet become a man, has not yet found his real identity. He will have to come to terms with his feelings for his father; he will have to gain a more complete knowledge of the past that is so important to him and come to terms with that; and he will have to place religion and the kind of life his family leads in a perspective arrived at by deep introspection before he can be said to have truly achieved his identity, to have truly become a man.

## RALPH ELLISON

Ralph Ellison is the least prolific but perhaps the most significant of the writers herein discussed. Although he has written several short stories and numerous articles and essays, the subjects of which range from jazz to literary criticism, his fame rests largely on one novel, Invisible Man. In 1964 Ellison published Shadow and Act, a book of essays written between 1945 and 1964, all of which had been previously published elsewhere. He describes the essays as being "concerned with three general themes: with literature and folklore, with Negro musical expression--especially jazz and the blues--and with the complex relationship between the Negro American sub-culture and the North American culture as a whole."<sup>1</sup> Ellison's personal history is very often a large part of the subject matter of the essays. It is interesting to note that Ellison's father, who died when his son was three years old, had hoped that Ellison would become a poet and gave him the middle name of Waldo as a kind of assurance that his hopes would be fulfilled.<sup>2</sup> Ellison, however, planned to be a musician even until after the first of his works had been published, at which time he realized that he "had been devoting as much time and energy to reading and writing as to music, and was passionately engaged, night and noon in acquiring the basic knowledge and skills of the novelist."<sup>3</sup>

Ellison's meticulous craftsmanship is perhaps the reason for his small output. Since 1952 he has been working on his second novel, which has yet to be published as a finished work, although excerpts from it have appeared as short stories in several publications.<sup>4</sup>

Ellison's precision and care are quite evident in Invisible Man, the most skillfully written and the most universal in underlying theme of the three novels which are the subjects of this paper. Unlike Baldwin and Wright, Ellison makes extensive use of symbolism and mythology. And although the protagonist of the novel is Negro, it is important to note first that he is unnamed, and second that he is invisible man, not the invisible man or an invisible man. Thus, the title, the reader's first introduction to the novel, is most significant, for it gives the first clue to the character of the protagonist, a character extending beyond racial characteristics, a character that in many ways symbolizes all men who struggle against an impersonal and overwhelming society in their efforts to achieve some sort of individual identity. Ellison notes that he structured the novel

with a chart of the three-part division. It was a conceptual frame with most of the ideas and some incidents indicated. The three parts represent the narrator's movement from . . . purpose to passion to perception. These three major sections are built up of smaller units of three which mark the course of the action and which depend for their development upon what I hoped was a consistent and developing

motivation. However . . . the maximum insight on the hero's part isn't reached until the final section . . . it's a novel about innocence and human error, a struggle through illusion to reality. Each section begins with a sheet of paper; each piece of paper is exchanged for another and contains a definition of his identity or the social role he is to play as defined for him by others. But all say essentially the same thing, "Keep this nigger boy running."<sup>5</sup>

The "nigger boy" is kept running through a number of initiatory experiences, some surreal in nature, until he runs (literally) into a hole, where he decides to hibernate while he thinks out the meaning of his experiences and plans for future action. As Ellison notes,

Before he could have some voice in his own destiny he had to discard [his] old identities and illusions; his enlightenment couldn't come until then. Once he recognizes the hole of darkness into which these papers put him, he has to burn them.<sup>6</sup>

The novel begins with a Prologue, which is, in effect, an Epilogue. The protagonist, speaking from his cellar, which is illuminated with 1,369 light bulbs<sup>7</sup> explains his present thoughts, recounts a dream, and then begins the novel. The book is, in essence, a flashback, with only the Prologue and the Epilogue taking place in the present. The Prologue also serves to introduce some of the major themes of the book, the narrator's philosophy of history and time, and some of the mythological elements used throughout the book. The protagonist also explains his invisibility, which arises not because he is

a spook like those who haunted Edgar Allan Poe; . . . [or] 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. I am invisible, understand, simply because people refuse to see me. Like the bodiless heads you see sometimes in circus sideshows, it is as though I have been surrounded by mirrors of hard, distorting glass. When they approach me they see only my surroundings, themselves, or figments of their imagination--indeed, everything and anything except me.

Invisibility, which the hero feels has been forced upon him by those who refuse to see him, has led him into his warm, well-lighted cellar, where he begins to understand the necessity for hibernation as a means to rebirth. Stating that "a bear retires to his hole for the winter and lives until spring; then he comes strolling out like the Easter chick breaking from its shell" (9), he at once connects the ancient mythological idea of rebirth with the Christian belief in resurrection; at the same time the mixed metaphor (bear to chick) denotes his own belief in and desire for rebirth with a new identity.

Involved also in the hero's sense of invisibility is his sense of time. He states that the world moves "not like an arrow, but a boomerang" (10), and warns, "beware of those who speak of the spiral of history; they are preparing a boomerang. Keep a steel helmet handy" (10).

Invisibility acts somewhat like a drug, giving one a different sense of time: ". . . you're never quite on the beat. Sometimes you're ahead and sometimes behind. In-

instead of the safe and imperceptible flowing of time, you are aware of its nodes, those points where time stands still or from which it leaps ahead. And you slip into the breaks and look around" (11). Like a hallucinogen, invisibility allows one to "enter" music, hearing in space as well as time; allows one to hear the silence of sound. And the music most important to the hero is a recording by Louis Armstrong called "What Did I Do to Be So Black and Blue?" The hero wonders if "perhaps I like Louis Armstrong because he's made poetry out of being invisible," or if "it must be because he's unaware that he is invisible" (11). In any case, it is entirely possible that "this compulsion to put invisibility down in black and white [is] an urge to make music of invisibility" (11). Music, history, time, blackness, and whiteness are elements that will enter into the hero's rebirth. The narrator does not intend to remain in his cellar forever. He states that "A hibernation is a covert preparation for a more overt action" (16), and it is important to note the hero's definition of hibernation, for although the reader cannot be sure what action is planned until the Epilogue, action, it is important to recognize, is the protagonist's final choice. The explanation of how the hero arrives at his plan toward action also must wait until the end of the story ("although the end is in the beginning and lies far ahead" [9]); the reader must first learn the answer to

the narrator's question "But what did I do to be so blue?" (17).

As the narrator states in the Prologue, "the end is in the beginning." Thus at the beginning of the first chapter the narrator relates the sum of the knowledge he has gained from his painful experiences:

It took me a long time and much painful boomeranging of my expectations to achieve a realization everyone else appears to have been born with: That I am nobody but myself. But first I had to discover that I am an invisible man! (19)

Searching for the meaning of his identity, like Bigger and John, the hero looks to those around him for some clue of what his life means and how he is to deal with his knowledge. The first to define the terms of existence for the hero is his grandfather, who, on his deathbed, announces that he has been a traitor all his life in his dealings with the white world and advises the narrator's father on how to carry on the treachery:

I want you to overcome 'em with yeses, undermine 'em with grins, agree 'em to death and destruction, let 'em swoller you till they vomit or bust wide open. (19-20)

The grandfather's advice remains a source of confusion and discomfort to the hero throughout the novel. Unable to accept his grandfather's doctrine, he is also unable to truly understand it and yet cannot ignore it. Although the narrator believes that humility is the best method to use in dealing with the white world, he is puzzled by his

grandfather's definition of humility as treachery, and is afraid that his own humility will cause him to be looked upon as a traitor by both Negroes and whites. Worse still, he finds that each time he tries to use his grandfather's advice to his own ends he becomes the victim instead of the victimizer. The narrator's graduation speech, in which he attempts to follow his grandfather's instructions, leads to the first of his initiatory experiences. The speech is one

. . . in which I showed that humility was the secret, indeed, the very essence of progress. (Not that I believed this--how could I remembering my grandfather?--I only believed that it worked.) It was a great success. Everyone praised me and I was invited to give the speech at a gathering of the town's leading white citizens. It was a triumph for our whole community.  
(20-21)

Before he is able to give the speech, however, the narrator must participate with nine of his schoolmates in several degrading experiences. First, the boys are issued boxing gloves and led into a large ballroom, where they must watch a nude white dancer. Terrified as well as sexually excited, several of the boys cry, but instead of being allowed to leave at the end of the dance, they are forced into a boxing ring, where they are blindfolded and made to participate in a battle royal. After the boys have fought each other, they are led, sweating and bloody, to a rug scattered with gold coins and are told to pick up their money. As they jump onto the rug



and grasp at the coins, they find that the rug is electrified and that the coins are slugs. It is only after the narrator has gone through each of these experiences that he is allowed to deliver his speech. His willingness to perform the degrading acts and still advocate humility earns him a leather briefcase and a scholarship to a leading Negro college.

The three first initiatory experiences in the novel foreshadow and parallel other situations throughout the book. Each of the protagonist's experiences anticipates a later one. Hence the nude white dancer anticipates the white women who throw themselves at the narrator after he joins the Brotherhood, a group resembling the Communist Party; the battle royal anticipates the Harlem race riot, in which Negro potency is once again turned against itself by white men; the electrified rug anticipates the quasi-lobotomy performed upon the narrator in the factory hospital. The scholarship that serves to open the world of education to the hero serves also to open the way to further initiation.

Each of the chapters in the novel is a blend of the real and the surreal, and in each chapter the surrealism seems to become more intense. As Jonathan Baumbach notes,

The invisible hero undergoes an increasingly intense succession of disillusioning experiences. . . . The hero's final irremediable loss of illusion forces him underground into the coffin (and womb) of the earth to be either finally buried or finally return.<sup>9</sup>

The narrator's career at school goes well in the beginning, for despite his degrading experiences at the smoker, the protagonist still sees himself as a potential Booker T. Washington, and his humility and intelligence gain him the favor of the school administration. When Mr. Norton, a Northern white trustee who sees his future in the Negroes he has helped to educate, visits the school, the narrator is assigned the honor of escorting him around the campus. In first allowing Norton to meet his alter ego, Jim Trueblood, a tenant farmer who is the community pariah, and, then, taking the trustee to the Golden Day Saloon, the narrator precipitates his expulsion from school and the next of his initiatory experiences. In having sexual intercourse with his own daughter, the Negro Trueblood has committed the sin of incest, the sin that the white Norton has unconsciously desired to commit. By first performing the act and later recounting the story, Trueblood frees Norton from the stigma of the desired but unperformed action. Thus, once again, as at the smoker, the Negro has become the white man's potency:

"You did and are unharmed!" [Norton] shouted, his blue eyes blazing into the black face with something like envy and indignation. . . .  
 "You have looked upon chaos and are not destroyed!" (51)

But the actual knowledge of the committed horror is too terrible for Mr. Norton, and he becomes faint. The hero

realizes that the stimulant requested by Mr. Norton can be obtained at the Golden Day, a "kind of sporting-and-gambling house" used as a place of recreation for shell-shocked Negro veterans who are inmates of a local asylum. Norton's fright and anger when he views the activities of the drunken inmate-veterans at the Golden Day result not only from the fear of physical violence, but from the knowledge that these Negroes do not conform to his image of Negroes and are thus uncontrollable by him. The response of the supposedly insane doctor to Norton's statement that he feels that his destiny is somehow tied up with that of the school angers Norton because it implies that the destiny of the students at the college is not unlike that of the madmen at the Golden Day. Norton is afraid to face the knowledge that the doctor's statement is true and becomes even more upset. Predicting the lobotomy scene at the hospital, wherein the protagonist becomes an extension of a machine, the doctor states the bald facts of the hero's condition:

"You see," he said turning to Mr. Norton, "he has eyes and ears and a good distended African nose, but he fails to understand the simple facts of life. Understand. Understand? It's worse than that. He registers with his senses but short-circuits his brain. Nothing has meaning. He takes it in but doesn't digest it. Already he is--well bless my soul! Behold! a walking zombie! Already he's learned to repress not only his emotions but his humanity. He's invisible, a walking personification of the Negative, the most

perfect achievement of your dreams, sir!  
The mechanical man!" (86)

The doctor's statement is perhaps the core of the novel. Everything leading up to it and everything that follows it serves only to amplify and reinforce the statement that defines the hero and explains his dilemma. The doctor does not merely define, however; he goes on to state what the hero must recognize before he can truly achieve his identity, what he will realize only through a period of hibernation:

" . . . you both fail to understand what is happening to you. You cannot see or hear or smell the truth of what you see--and you, looking for destiny! It's classic! And the boy, this automaton, he was made of the very mud of this region and he sees far less than you. Poor stumblers, neither of you can see the other. To you he is a mark on the score-card of your achievement, a thing and not a man; . . . a black amorphous thing. And you, for all your power, are not a man to him, but a God, a force. . . . He believes in you as he believes in the beat of his heart. He believes in that great false wisdom taught slaves and pragmatists alike, that white is right. I can tell you his destiny. He'll do your bidding, and for that his blindness is his chief asset. He's your man, friend. Your man and your destiny. . . ." (87-88)

As I have said, the doctor's words, more than anything else in the novel, tell what the novel is about. For it is important to note that as other men are blind to the hero, so is the hero himself blind. He is unaware of the reasons for Norton's attack of illness after speaking to Trueblood, and so completely is he immersed in his awe of

white men that he is unable to understand the men at the Golden Day. As other people cannot see the reality of his existence, neither can he; further, he cannot see the reality of the existence of others and it is this terrible blindness that allows him to be used by the Brotherhood, the white citizens at the smoker, and Dr. Bledsoe, the president of his college. It is more than naivete that motivates the hero; it is an almost willful blindness which arises from his refusal to face the ugly, but important, facts of his life--to think about and to take responsibility for his actions.

An evidence of the hero's blindness is his unfeigned surprise at Dr. Bledsoe's reaction to Mr. Norton's unscheduled side trips. The hero cannot believe that Dr. Bledsoe is angry because Norton has been allowed to meet Trueblood. Having seen Bledsoe's humility and deference toward white visitors, he is unable to believe that Bledsoe would have had him disobey Norton's wishes by preventing the meeting, and that humility and deference are disguises for arrogance. Thus even after his expulsion from the college because of the Norton incident, the hero retains his faith in Dr. Bledsoe and trusts in the letters of recommendation that Bledsoe gives him.

Interposed in this portion of the novel is one of the "jazz-like improvisations in italics, in which the narrator removes himself from the action, extending his

consciousness back and forth over the whole sweep of his life, standing as it were, in disembodied fashion outside of it all."<sup>10</sup> Such passages occur throughout the novel and are most significant in the Prologue and Epilogue. Working well within the not completely realistic novel, they serve to freeze time as, almost hypnotic in effect, they draw the reader into a frozen tableau of chaos. Because the writing, especially in the jazz passages, is so intense, however, the reader is unable to pause and take a breath but is whirled about, like Alice in the rabbit-hole, sinking deeper and deeper into the surreal world surrounding the narrator. Immediately following the dream-like passage is a sermon given by Homer A. Barbee, a friend of the late Founder and an honored guest on campus. Ironically, but not completely unexpectedly, Barbee, who gives the narrator the "vision" of the Founder, is blind. Thus one becomes aware that the characters in the novel are divided into those who are invisible, those who are unable to see, and those who are both.

After his expulsion from the college, the narrator feels that his failure has somehow been caused by his grandfather's curse. Confused because he believes that he has behaved in the manner expected of him and is still a failure, he decides that he must either accept Bledsoe's decision without bitterness or admit to his grandfather's

wisdom and posthumous triumph. The hero therefore explains his feelings to Dr. Bledsoe, asks for and receives letters of introduction to Northern "friends of the school," and once again allows himself to be used and betrayed. Dr. Bledsoe's betrayal of the boy is a gratuitous display of power, which is ironic since one of Dr. Bledsoe's most admired attributes is his power.

Since the novel demonstrates that the process of initiation is a stripping away of illusion, each episode in the book repeats the process of experience followed by disillusionment for the narrator. Thus, each experience, although outwardly different from all the others, will be essentially the same as every other experience. Klein states that "the novel sets out to gain clarity, but no new discovery. Its end is in its beginning. Therefore with every gain in illumination the novel concludes."<sup>11</sup>

He adds:

Each of [the hero's] adventures is an attempt at self-definition as they each present a seemingly fixed version of the world's reality within which he might have a place for himself. He tries in each version of reality to make a place for himself. And then his every version explodes into chaos and he is exploded out of it.<sup>12</sup>

The hero's testing of different versions of reality involves a great deal of mobility, both geographical and intellectual,<sup>13</sup> leading him eventually to the North to a job at the Liberty Paint factory, wherein is produced

"Optic White"<sup>14</sup> paint. Klein notes that

[a]s the hero moves North, madness, confusion, violence, the bursting of the irrational are always the last and the purest expressions of the relationships between black and white. . . . His proper life is a war, at least a guerilla action. In the North of industry and labor unionism, then, he finds that black is a disturbing secret of the white social fabric, a secret which has been tucked almost out of sight by a stated ideal of liberty, a secret which to his peril he unwittingly springs.<sup>15</sup>

And at the company called Liberty Paint, black is certainly an important secret ingredient. The secret of the purity of the Optic White paint is found in the addition to it of ten drops of black dope; the mixing of the black dope into the paint becomes the job of the hero. The allegorical extensions of the episode, its relationship to other parts of the novel, are noted by Jonathan Baumbach:

The mixing of the black into the white is of course symbolic: the ten drops are analagous to the ten boys in the prize-ring, and in each case the white becomes whiter by absorbing the Negro's virility, by using the black to increase the strength of the white. Yet the name Optic White suggests it is all some kind of visual illusion. When the black dope runs out, the hero as apprentice paint mixer is ordered by his boss, "the terrible Mr. Kimbro," to replace it without being told which of the seven vats has the right substance. Left to his own discretion, the hero chooses the wrong black liquid (concentrated paint remover) which makes the white paint transparent and grayish; this act symbolizes the implicit threat of Negro potency left to its own devices.

Yet there is the illusion of another alternative: When the narrator adds the black drops to the paint which already contains the black remover, though the mixture appears gray to him, it passes for white in Mr. Kimbro's



eyes. This is, in symbol, the role of subterfuge and infiltration--his grandfather's legacy and curse.<sup>16</sup>

Baumbach neglects to note that the paint passing for white in Kimbro's eyes also suggests that the color black, like the hero, is invisible.

The hero undergoes several changes of identity in the course of the novel, each entailing a symbolic death and rebirth. The explosion of the furnace that the hero is tending heralds one of the most surrealistic scenes in the novel and one of the most violent identity changes. Knocked unconscious by one machine, the hero, the "mechanical man," is put into another machine, to be started again. The shock treatments from the latter machine recall the electrified rug on which the hero received his first literal and symbolic shocks. The hospital scene implies both lobotomy and castration. Lobotomy is implied through the neutralization of part of the hero's brain. The voice which the hero hears as he is lying on the table states,

" . . . we apply pressure in the proper degrees to the major centers of nerve control--our concept is Gestalt--and the result is as complete a change of personality as you'll find in your famous fairy-tale cases of criminals transformed into amiable fellows after all that bloody business of a brain operation. And what's more . . . the patient is both physically and neurally whole." (206)

The symbolic castration of the hero is implied through

his being left by the machine without identity, without potency of self. The machine becomes, in effect, his mother. The cord attached to his stomach node symbolizes, of course, the umbilical cord cut from him so that he can leave the machine. His "climb out of the case" (213) is his climb from the womb. While he is in the machine, there comes to the hero an insight into his non-physical identity which, like the insight of the mad doctor at the Golden Day, is ignored.

I wanted freedom, not destruction. It was exhausting, for no matter what scheme I conceived, there was one constant flaw-- myself. There was no getting around it. I could no more escape than I could think of my identity. Perhaps, I thought, the two things are involved with each other. When I discover who I am, I'll be free. (212)

The hero's insight is, of course, the answer to all his problems. When he discovers the meaning of his life, his identity, he will finally be free of the people who use him as an object, he will be free of the illusions and gullibility that make him so ripe for exploitation, and most important, he will be free of his invisibility. That the hero can apply his knowledge only to the specific situation with which he is confronted rather than to the central problem that is his life is a flaw in his personality; that this knowledge comes to him at all is a flaw in Ellison's art. That the solution to the hero's dilemma is stated boldly by him without his awareness that it is the solution seems to be a way for the author

to bypass the narrator in his communication with the reader. (A similar flaw is found in Native Son, where, since Bigger is so much less articulate than Wright, Wright is forced to resort to some sort of bypass more often.) Although bypassing the narrator happens too infrequently to be the major flaw which Klein sees, he is partially right in stating that

[the hero] is sometimes an ingenu, sometimes a naive Gulliver when gullibility should be impossible, sometimes, suddenly, the author. There is a constant struggle between the two, Ellison straining not to let his hero know too much because that will give the book away. 17

After the "operation" the hero finds a room with Mary, a Negro woman who attempts to give him the identity of a leader. Wanting the narrator to be a "credit to the race," she speaks to him constantly of responsibility and leadership. The hero is both grateful for her solicitude and resentful of her talk:

Other than Mary I had no friends and desired none. Nor did I think of Mary as a "friend"; she was something more--a force, a stable, familiar force like something out of my past which kept me from whirling off into the unknown which I dared not face. It was a most painful position, for at the same time, Mary reminded me constantly that something was expected of me, some act of leadership, some newsworthy achievement; and I was torn between resenting her for it and loving her for the nebulous hope she kept alive. (225)

The unknown that the hero "dared not face" is the meaning of his life, and Mary, the ideal mother-figure, will protect her adopted son-stranger from the painful

knowledge that awaits him. For knowing the platitudes and stereotypes that govern his life and, indeed, the lives of all Negroes, the hero is afraid to look for the reality behind them; he is afraid to examine them in the light of his own life, afraid, in short, as Ellison says, "to run the risk of his own humanity."<sup>18</sup> However, the problem of identity does remain irksome for him, and, on a cold winter day in Harlem, he thinks that he has begun to discover some of the answers to his questions. Symbolically and literally, the way northward has meant the way to freedom for Negroes, and a form of freedom comes to the narrator when he impulsively buys a hot yam from a street peddler. Stanley Edgar Hyman sees the hero's equation of "yam" with "I am" as a coming "to terms with his Negro identity and folk tradition, while maintaining his quest for a fully developed human consciousness."<sup>19</sup> And in some ways the hero does come to terms with his "Negroness" and his background, as he gains a certain knowledge in those moments on the street:

. . . I no longer felt ashamed of the things I had always loved. What and how much had I lost by trying to do only what was expected of me instead of what I myself had wished to do? What a waste, what a senseless waste. But what of those things which you actually didn't like, not because you were not supposed to like them, not because to dislike them was considered a mark of refinement and education--but because you actually found them distasteful? . . . How could you know? It involved a problem of choice. I would have to weigh many things carefully before deciding and there would be some things that would cause

quite a bit of trouble simply because I had never formed a personal attitude toward so much. I had accepted the accepted attitudes and it had made life seem simple. . . . (232)

The hero's reasoning, then, would seem to have led him to a solution to one of the central problems in his search for identity: the assumption that accepted attitudes are correct and should thus be accepted at face value is a wrong one and should not be made. His "I yam what I am" (231) should be a simple but profound statement in that the hero should finally be able to realize that he is only what he wishes to be and not what others make him. However, the simplicity of the statement belies its profundity, and when the hero eats the last yam and finds that it tastes unpleasant because it is frost-bitten, the reader is aware that, as "yam" stands for "I am," so does the yam's unpleasant taste stand for the hero's inability to acknowledge his failure to admit the weaknesses in his search for identity. The statement "I yam what I am" is not enough. Until the hero looks at himself realistically and discovers what he truly is, he will certainly find that "some things . . . cause quite a bit of trouble" when one is trying to find one's identity; that attitudes that are not his own will be accepted by him as his own because of his intellectual and emotional dishonesty; that he will again be used by others as their pawn. Thus, because the solution seems all too simple to him, he becomes involved with the

Brotherhood<sup>20</sup> and is unable to realize exactly what the Brotherhood and his place in it mean to him in terms of his search for himself.

The hero experiences another change of identity when he agrees to join the Brotherhood after he is heard making a speech protesting the eviction of an elderly couple from their Harlem apartment. Once in the Brotherhood he is given a new name and with it a new non-identity. He begins to realize the nature of his position in the Brotherhood when he asks himself, "What was I, a man or a natural resource?" (263). Without knowing it, he has discovered the crux of his relationship to the organization. For the hero is a natural resource, one thrown from out of the masses, one whose eloquence can be harnessed and then manipulated by the powers-that-be within the Brotherhood to serve their own ends. Thus the mechanical man becomes a natural resource with little awareness that he is, or ever has been, either one.

The Brotherhood decrees that the hero must assume a new name and a new personality and that, to implement his new identity, he must leave his room at Mary's and cease writing to his parents. The changes sadden him somewhat, but his vision of himself as a leader of his race, as another Founder, more than compensates for the necessary changes. As he is packing, he notices, for the first time, in his room an iron bank,

the cast-iron figure of a very black, red-

lipped and wide-mouthed Negro, whose white eyes stared up at me from the floor, his face an enormous grin, his single large black hand held palm up before his chest. It was a bank, a piece of early Americana. . . . For a second I stopped, feeling hate charge within me, then dashed over and grabbed it, suddenly . . . enraged by the tolerance or lack of discrimination, or whatever, that allowed Mary to keep such a self-mocking image around. . . . (277)

Thus, "the hero begins to repudiate his Negro persona--he savagely breaks Mary's iron figurine which represents the very idea of the Negro in parody, concealing it in his briefcase for the rest of the novel because he cannot, literally and symbolically, dispose of it in any manner."<sup>21</sup>

Once in the Brotherhood the narrator finds himself swept along by others, unable to become quite the leader he imagined. Sent uptown and downtown by his superiors in the organization, he is still not aware of the manner in which he is being used. Again, he undergoes a change of identity, but this change is not so much a change as a total acceptance of the new identity given to him by the Brotherhood. After giving his first major speech, the narrator realizes that

. . . from now on my life would be different. . . . What had come out was completely uncalculated, as though another self within me had taken over and held forth. . . .

Even my technique had been different; no one who had known me at college would have recognized the speech. But that was as it should have been, for I was someone new--even though I had spoken in a very old-fashioned way. I had been transformed. . . . My possibilities were suddenly broadened. (306)

Through the Brotherhood the hero meets three men who are seemingly very different from him and from each other. Yet each of them possesses an identity that answers some deep need of the hero, so that before the novel ends he has assumed, to some degree, the identity of each of the men. Tod Clifton, Ras the Destroyer<sup>22</sup> and Bliss Proteus Rinehart are, in effect, three different facets of any man's personality or identity. Allegorically, the men stand for Integrity, Anger or Malice, and Cunning. Tod, perhaps the only noble character in the novel, is sympathetic to Ras's motives but is too civilized to accept the Destroyer's methods. Baumbach explains that

the Brotherhood . . . with its cant of "historic necessity," represents to Clifton the enlightened alternative to racist violence through which the Negro can effect his protest. Entrapped by the Brotherhood through the commitment imposed by his integrity, Clifton becomes, even more than the narrator, a victim of the Brotherhood's betrayal. Like the implicit suicide of Conrad's Lord Jim, Clifton's death . . . is a sacrifice to a culpability too egregious to be redeemed in any other way and, at the same time, a final, if gratuitous, act of heroism. In giving himself up to be murdered, Clifton takes on himself the whole responsibility for the Brotherhood's betrayal of the Negro. If by his sacrifice he does not redeem the hero from his own culpability, he at least through his example sets up the possibility of the hero's redemption. If the various characters with whom the "invisible" hero is confronted represent possible states of being, Clifton symbolizes the nearest thing to an ideal.<sup>23</sup>

Clifton changes from a respected member of the Brotherhood to a street-corner peddler selling dancing puppet



dolls which, in their grinning cardboard faces and their ability to be manipulated, not only mock the Negro generally, but are a symbolic representation of the hero as he exists in his role of spokesman for the Brotherhood. The hero spits at the grinning doll which Clifton is demonstrating, symbolically performing the murder of Clifton, an act which a policeman commits in reality a few moments later. Baumbach states that

When the hero knocks over the doll, an onlooker laughs at what he thinks is the likeness between the spitter and the spit-on doll. As Clifton in selling the obscene doll has been mocking himself, the hero in spitting at the doll has been attacking himself as well as Clifton, though without benefit of awareness. Only after his showdown with the Brotherhood (and even then incompletely) does the hero become aware that he has been performing all along as if he were, in life-size, the dancing puppet-doll.<sup>24</sup>

Clifton, knowing that he does greater harm to his integrity by performing the demands of the Brotherhood than by selling the dolls, attempts to turn his back on the movement and step outside history. The knowledge that his act is misunderstood by the hero, and by others like him, compels Clifton to perform an even more forceful act, the sacrifice of his life. Although the hero's perception and insight are somewhat limited, he does understand Clifton's sacrifice. The public funeral and oration, planned and acted out by the narrator, lead to his break with the Brotherhood and ultimately to the race riot on the streets of Harlem.<sup>25</sup> In order to escape being caught by his

various enemies (Ras's men and agents of the Brotherhood), the hero adopts one of Rinehart's disguises and thereby uncovers a world of limitless possibilities. For Bliss Proteus Rinehart, like the Proteus of Greek myth, has many faces. He is at once Preacher, Numbers-runner, Lover, and Gambler. The hero, in adopting Rinehart's many faces, discovers that when one is everybody, one is also nobody: one is again invisible. Invisibility, however, is a necessity at this point in the hero's life, and he puts his invisibility to good use in escaping his enemies. Having discovered the Brotherhood's betrayal, first of Clifton, then of himself, the hero has resolved to attempt once again to turn his grandfather's curse into a blessing, to "overcome 'em with yesses . . . agree 'em to death and destruction, let 'em swoller you till they vomit or bust wide open." Once again, however, he is unable to follow his grandfather's advice. In attempting to thwart the Brotherhood by pretending to agree with it, he has actually furthered its plans. He has unwittingly helped the Brotherhood by indirectly causing the Harlem riots. The sight of Negro against Negro, of Negro potency again turned against itself by the white world, in order to make the white world more powerful, gives the narrator a profound sense of responsibility. For the first time in his life the hero considers the consequences of his acts and takes responsibility for them:

It was not suicide, but murder. The committee had planned it. And I had helped, had been a tool. A tool just at the very moment I had thought myself free. By pretending to agree, I had indeed agreed, had made myself responsible for that huddled form lighted by flame and gunfire in the street, and all others whom now the night was making ripe for death. (478)

The Christian symbols which have been evident throughout the novel are very much in evidence in the section dealing with the riots. As the hero begins to gain self-knowledge,

the flaming buildings and streets, the burnt tar stench, the black figures moving shadow-like through the eerily illuminated night become an evocation of Hell--a mirror for the hero's raging interior guilt. At the center of the riot--at the very seat of Hell--he experiences the deaths of his various corrupted identities, shedding the false skins to get at the pure invisibility underneath. . . . To propitiate Ras and stop the riot, the hero disavows allegiance to the Brotherhood, killing in effect his Brotherhood-self. But as he is invisible, he is unheard--his words as always not communicating his meanings. Struck by the absurdity of the demonic Ras on horseback, of the senseless pillage and murder around him and . . . of existence itself, the hero is for the moment willing to relinquish his life if it will make the white man see him and, consequently, see himself. But the example of Clifton's meaningless suicide dissuades him. Faced with death, he decides that it is "better to live out one's own absurdity than to die for that of others, whether for Ras's or Jack's" (484). When in self protection, he impales Ras, who is in a sense the deepest of his identities, he experiences the illusion of death and rebirth.<sup>26</sup>

The cycle of death and rebirth is at the base of Christianity and, although the hero's life does not in many ways parallel the life of Christ and the chronology does not

follow sequentially, the hero does experience Hell, death and rebirth, and baptism. Struggling to reach Mary, his exlandlady (who, as noted before, is a kind of mother to him), the hero is baptized by an exploding water main. Before he can reach Mary, he is chased by two men and, fleeing from them, falls into an open manhole. The manhole becomes the place in which he conceives the idea of remaining underground. His idea leads him to the cellar room, symbolic of Purgatory, in which he will spend his hibernation before returning to the world, a new man. Before the hero can hibernate and meditate, however, he must completely shed his old identities. One by one the hero burns the papers that contain his past, the papers that are the symbols of his old selves. His high-school diploma, Clifton's doll, anonymous letters, the card on which his Brotherhood name is written--all are burned as the hero realizes "that to light my way out I would have to burn every paper in the brief-case" (491). All burn quickly except for Clifton's doll, which "burned so stubbornly that [he] reached inside the case for something else" (491). Running in utter fear, the hero finally feels he is free and collapses in exhaustion, intending to rest before returning to Mary. While resting, he has a strange dream in which he is castrated by Jack and Tobitt, two of his superiors in the Brotherhood; at the price of his manhood, his male identity, he becomes finally free of all

illusions. Upon awakening, he realizes that he can return to no part of his old life:

I could approach it only from the outside, and I had been as invisible to Mary as I had been to the Brotherhood. No, I couldn't return to Mary's, or to the campus, or to the Brotherhood, or home. I could only move ahead or stay here, underground. So I would stay here until I was chased out. Here, at least, I could try to think things out in peace, or, if not in peace, in quiet. I would take up residence underground. The end was in the beginning. (494)

The hero's history ends with his decision to remain underground. The epilogue, which takes place in the hero's present, recounts what he has learned while in the cellar. Although his grandfather's advice still haunts him, he feels that its underlying meaning is perhaps that one should "yes to death" not the men who control society, the Nortons or the Brotherhood, but rather that one should acquiesce to the principles that are the foundations of America. In a conclusion that rings somewhat less true than the rest of the novel the hero thinks,

Could he have meant--hell, he must have meant the principle, that we were to affirm the principle on which the country was built and not the men, or at least not the men who did the violence. (496)

In a sudden dawning of knowledge, a dawning that has taken most of his life in coming, the hero realizes that he must take responsibility for his actions; that he can affirm the principles that he believes must be affirmed only through his actions, and thus must act with thought and care:

Was it that we of all, we, most of all, had to affirm the principle, the plan in whose name we had been brutalized and sacrificed-- not because we were afraid or opportunistic, but because we were older than they in the sense of what it took to live in the world with others. . . . Or was it, did he mean that we should affirm the principle because we, through no fault of our own, were linked to all the others in the loud, clamoring, semi-visible world, that world seen only as a fertile field for exploitation by Jack and his kind, and with condescension by Norton and his, who were tired of being the mere pawns in the futile game of "making history"? Had he seen that for these too we had to say "yes" to the principle, lest they turn upon us to destroy both it and us? (497)

In the cellar the hero learns that he is linked to the rest of his race, but as a man rather than as a "race leader." It is in the cellar, too, that he learns that the world has become one of "infinite possibilities." For where he once tried to understand the world, he has now come to understand himself and his relationship to the world; he has learned that he is "invisible, not blind" (499), and thus has the ability to act. Ellison states:

In the Epilogue the hero discovers what he had not discovered throughout the book: You have to make your own decisions; You have to think for yourself. . . . The hero's invisibility is not a matter of not being seen, but a refusal to run the risk of his own humanity, which involves guilt. . . . He must assert and achieve his own humanity. . . .<sup>27</sup>

Thus, the hero decides finally to come out from hiding. Feeling that there is a role in society for even an invisible man, he comes to think that perhaps his greatest social crime lies in overstaying his hibernation. He

is coming out, a new man, to play a socially responsible role, perhaps the devil's advocate. And his message to his readers is an important clue to both the hero's function and Ellison's purpose. For when the hero asks his final question, "who knows but that, on the lower frequencies, I speak for you?," the reader feels that more than any of the other characters studied here, more than most heroes of modern fiction, this invisible, nameless man speaks for us all.

## CONCLUSIONS

Richard Wright, James Baldwin, and Ralph Ellison, men of different backgrounds and interests, share the bond of members of a persecuted race as well as that shared by authors. Each in his first novel wrote of a young man about to become an adult but hampered in his efforts toward identity by society, family, and personal liabilities. Each is concerned in his writing not only with the problems faced by any young man on the threshold of maturity but also with the more specific disadvantages faced by the young Negro. The concern is understandable, but it is one that can very easily affect the tone and quality of an artistic work. Thus, one must consider each of the three novels from a twofold point of view: first, one must examine how well each author has shown the struggle for identity that concerns his protagonist; at the same time, one must discover how the specific concerns of race have affected the work.

As stated in the introduction to this study, a work of art, if it is to endure, must contain elements with which a majority of readers can identify, elements that transcend time and place. In effect, if a novel is to be a lasting work, it must explore the problems confronting humanity in general as well as the problems confronting any specific individual, and it must explore these problems with artistry. For as Ellison has stated,



. . . . protest is not the source of the inadequacy characteristic of most novels by Negroes, but the simple failure of craft, bad writing; the desire to have protest perform the difficult task of art, the belief that racial suffering, social injustice or ideologies of whatever mammy-made variety is enough. . . .

. . . . protest is an element of all art, though it does not necessarily take the form of speaking for a political or social program. It might appear in a novel as a technical assault against the styles which have gone before, or as protest against the human condition.<sup>1</sup>

Thus, it is not protest with which one must find fault, but the failure of craft; it is not the presence of problems that are faced by only the Negro with which one must be concerned (for the problems exist, and for any of the three authors to deny them would be folly as well as dishonesty) but with how well each of the authors has "tried . . . to transform these elements into art."<sup>2</sup>

Native Son, Go Tell It On The Mountain, and Invisible Man have, of course, certain qualities in common as well as certain disparities. The protagonist of each is a young boy (although the ages differ) approaching manhood and searching for the meaning of his life, his identity. John Grimes is the youngest of the three, at fourteen years old. Bigger Thomas and Ellison's unnamed hero are several years older. All three live in Northern cities, although Ellison's hero has migrated from the South. Bigger is the least intelligent of the three while Ellison's hero is the most educated, having had several years of college. Each

of the three is, to some degree, an outsider. For Bigger, life is extremely solitary. He cannot speak of his intimate feelings to his family and is not understood by his friends or girlfriend, nor does he know himself well. John, too, lives very much within himself, unable to discuss his hopes and plans with his family and having few friends. Ellison's hero is very often surrounded by people, but is invisible to them. Of course the problem which affects all three protagonists is race. Each is Negro, and the difficulty each has in discovering his identity is intensified by his color.

For most young men, the question of identity is troublesome, but for most young men the world is one of almost limitless possibilities and choice always exists. For the Negro, however, the problem of identity is complicated by the limits of his world and by the people who wish to choose an identity for him. Thus, the religious identity offered to John has in a sense been chosen for him by the white world, which allowed the Negro race religion as one of the few areas to which it could turn. Ellison's hero, as has been shown, is invisible to white men. Unfortunately, he is also invisible to Negroes. And Wright has placed the entire blame for Bigger's condition on the white world.

As noted in the chapter dealing with Native Son, Wright's novel is the least "artistic" or universal of the three. One cannot separate the novel from its time. Nor

is it possible to make Bigger into a living, breathing character. Ellison notes that

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

The limits that are imposed on Bigger by the white world certainly do exist, but a work of art, a work of long-lasting value, would also explore the limits imposed on Bigger from other sources. As previously noted, the reader is told very little of Bigger's family or his youth. The emotional environment in which he lives is left almost entirely to the imagination. If Bigger has any emotional resources to fall back on, the reader is unaware of them. Wright's protest is shocking, but his art, sadly enough, fails. As Ellison states,

. . . without arguing Wright's right to his personal vision, I would say that he was himself a better argument for my approach than Bigger was for his. And so . . . is James Baldwin. Both are true Negro Americans. And both affirm the broad possibility of personal realization which I see as a saving aspect of American life. Surely this much can be admitted without denying the injustice which all of us have protested.<sup>4</sup>

Surely there are few who would even attempt to deny that grave injustices have existed and do exist in American

society. But Bigger is not totally a victim of white oppression. How different would he be in a world of greater possibilities? How more able would he be to communicate his personal longings; to gain his personal desires? Wright does not give a full enough portrait, or an honest enough one, to allow the reader to answer these questions.

Wright communicates his anger masterfully, and he has, certainly, delivered an indictment of the white world. His novel, however, would be infinitely more meaningful if the characters he portrayed were not stereotyped, if they had human counterparts.

Wright's commitment to his thesis distorted his view of reality, so that his characters are neither real nor symbolic of reality. Instead they are cardboard figures created to illustrate a thesis instead of human nature. Bigger's learning that he must accept the responsibility for his crime in order to be free, that, more important, he must accept himself, makes him almost human, and at the end of the book one is almost convinced of his humanity. One can only sympathize, however, not empathize. It is difficult to identify with a symbol; one identifies better with a reality. Klein's strictures are correct:

More than the others, because the traditions have been made and because the political necessity is pressing, the Negro novelist runs the risk of protest literature, of collapsing his tricky humanity into a social plea or a social warning. The tradition of protest for the Negro can be seen

to be located ultimately in three market-able ghosts: in Uncle Tom, in the Negro who is white, and in Bigger Thomas, with little choice between them. And not only must the Negro novelist by participating in a stereotype frustrate the truth of the Negro's individual humanity, after which nothing about politics or any Negro can be learned, but he risks converting the stereotype into his own personality. When he accepts the stereotype of his protest as his truth, then his reality has collapsed into sociology, and he has become his own propaganda.<sup>5</sup>

Unfortunately, Wright's reality did "collapse into sociology," and Native Son is a lesser work for it. The same turn toward sociology has been taken by Baldwin, causing his frankly protesting, non-fiction essays to far outshine his later works of fiction, which often try to combine protest with art and fail in much the same way as Native Son. Fortunately, Go Tell It On The Mountain is free of propaganda, displaying what Klein calls

. . . obligations prior to Negro-ness [which J. Saunders Redding, a prominent Negro critic, explains as] . . . "The human condition, the discovery of self. Community. Identity. Surely this must be achieved before it can be seen that a particular identity has a relation to a common identity, commonly described as human." The sense of self within the human condition, the qualities of identity and community, and the motions between identity and community are just what [Baldwin and Ellison] came forward to write about.<sup>6</sup>

Baldwin writes about a young boy who is quite real to anyone who remembers adolescence. Without being consciously aware of what he is doing, John Grimes is attempting to establish an identity separate from the identity offered to him by the community in which he lives. The presence

of the white world and its effect on his identity, as well as on the identities of his relatives, are indicated subtly but powerfully. At the same time, Baldwin, unlike Wright, shows that each of his characters consists of more than the definition imposed by the white world. His characters, in their weaknesses and strengths, have qualities in common with most men, not only with most Negroes. John's fumbings, his anguish, his inability to communicate his needs to his family link him with all young men who are poignant because they have not yet learned to disguise their need. At the same time, the specifics of his condition (his family's religion, his slum environment, his color, the problems faced by his family only because of their race) make John most particularly what he is: a young Negro boy trying to find himself in a world in which most young Negroes, as well as most young men, are lost. Thus, his problems are at once general and specific; his situation is both common and individual. Like most human beings, then, John is at the same time both ordinary and unique.

Baldwin has created a world that is familiar and disturbing. His characters are, by and large, real human beings and one can sympathize with their frailties. This is not to say that the novel is flawless; one must recognize Baldwin's over-sympathetic portrait of Richard, his failure to find some way to allow John to know of his true heritage (a knowledge that is all-important if John is to

grow into full manhood), and his allowing John's decision to be saved to appear as a permanent one, when all evidence of the novel points to this decision as the acceptance of only a stop-gap identity, assumed by John until he can discover his real self. These faults prevent the novel from being a great one; they do not, however, limit it in the way that Native Son is limited, nor do they prevent it from being a fine and sensitive portrait of a young man. The novel presents a story that is meaningful now and that will continue to be meaningful as long as people try to understand the problems preventing them from living fully and happily with themselves.

Ellison, too, has written, in Invisible Man, a novel with meaning for more than one segment of society. Baumbach most concisely explains the novel:

Ellison's novel chronicles a series of initiatory experiences through which its naive hero learns, to his disillusion and horror, the way of the world. . . . Invisible Man takes place, for the most part, in the uncharted spaces between the conscious and the unconscious, in the semi-lit darkness where nightmare verges on reality and the external world has all the aspects of a disturbing dream. Refracted by satire, at times cartooned, Ellison's world is at once surreal and real, comic and tragic, grotesque and normal--our world viewed in its essentials. Though the protagonist of Invisible Man is a Southern Negro, he is, in Ellison's rendering, profoundly all of us.<sup>7</sup>

Ellison has stated that he understands a bit more about himself as a Negro because literature has taught him something of his identity as Western man, as political being,<sup>8</sup>

and in the same way he has created a character who is Western man, political being first, Negro second. The hero is buffeted about by various forces and used by certain men because of what he is as a human, not because of what he is as a Negro. And although some situations occur in his life only because he is a Negro, although some of the humiliation and degradation that he suffers would not happen to a white man in precisely the same way, the hero is invisible (and blind) largely because he is too cowardly to take the responsibility for his actions, too timid to assert himself, too weak to "run the risk of his own humanity."

Thus, the narrator is a character who, in his essence, is comprehensible to most readers; not only is he comprehensible, he is at times uncomfortably familiar. That the hero is ripe for exploitation, because in many ways it is easier to be used than to resist, is one of the elements that give the novel its universal quality. That a Negro, because of his historical background in America, is often riper for exploitation than a white man, that he is too often subject to humiliation and degradation are truths that give the work an added dimension, another level of meaning. Ellison raises both anger and agony to the level of art and creates a world that is real, disturbing, and recognizable at the same time as it is illusionary, chaotic, and surreal. Hassan states that

Ellison, who has the formal sense of a jazz musician and the instinct of a singer of blues,



understands that anger or agony is transient without art. Turbulence, in private or political life, amounts to a denial of the dignity of man. To acknowledge the innate dignity of mankind is also to reconcile the idea of freedom prescribed in the founding political documents of America with the violence of a Harlem race riot. The act of reconciliation is an action of what Ellison calls Mind, a fact of form. The "Negro question" becomes a question of determining the essence of the human in a way that the questioning and tormented mind can grasp. The credo is one that requires him to exploit the resources of irony. And it prompts him . . . to draw upon the healing powers of the American joke and Negro blues.

Ellison, then, has written a work in which the elements noted by Hassan--irony, the American joke, Negro blues--are skillfully interwoven with symbolism, sensitive characterization, and surrealist as well as realistic description, to portray a world in essence. The narrator is at once the least and the most realistic of all three protagonists, the hardest to pin down and the easiest to identify, the least sympathetic but the one with whom it is easiest to sympathize. He is invisible, but he is man.

The question, then, to which this study is a partial reply, is whether Wright, Baldwin, and Ellison are major artists whose works will live beyond the time in which they were written, will be comprehensible to men who have not lived through the events described, will be truly answered only by time. Artistically, there is little question that Invisible Man will stand up to the rigors of time. It is unfortunate that Native Son was more propagandistic than

artistic to begin with and seems more so with the passage of time. It is difficult to make a judgment on Go Tell It On The Mountain, but in many ways it lacks the deep skill and artistry necessary to a major work of art and thus will most probably be surpassed by other similar but better written novels of its type.

Turning to content, it would seem that as Civil Rights becomes less of an important issue, Wright's creation will become less of an important work (as it has become already less important since its initial publication) while Go Tell It On The Mountain and Invisible Man, to a greater degree, will remain meaningful as long as the essential problems confronting human nature remain unsolved.

## NOTES

Chapter I

<sup>1</sup>Robert A. Bone, The Negro Novel in America (New Haven, 1958), p. 2.

<sup>2</sup>The importance of the African ancestry of the majority of American Negroes is usually negligible. It is virtually impossible to trace the ancestry of the American Negro who is a descendant of slaves beyond the first records of slavery in America. Further, the African heritage has played little part in the evolution of the culture of the American Negro.

<sup>3</sup>Julian Mayfield, "Into the Mainstream and Oblivion," The American Negro Writer And His Roots--Selected Papers from The First Conference of Negro Writers. March, 1959, (New York, 1960), p. 33.

<sup>4</sup>Ibid.

<sup>5</sup>Bone, p. 215.

<sup>6</sup>Ibid.

<sup>7</sup>Ralph Ellison, "Richard Wright's Blues," Antioch Review, V (June, 1945), p. 210.

Chapter II

<sup>1</sup>Bone, p. 141. In the late twenties, a group of Negro writers, including Countee Cullen and Langston Hughes, wrote

works which were attempts to write beyond protest and which very often used folk materials in exploration of the Negro world. These writers came to be known as the "Harlem School."

<sup>2</sup>Harold R. Isaacs, "Five Writers and Their African Ancestors," Phylon (Fall, 1960), p. 255.

<sup>3</sup>Richard Wright, Native Son, (New York, 1940). All subsequent references in the text will be to Native Son, New York: Signet Books, 1964.

<sup>4</sup>J. Saunders Redding, "The Alien Land of Richard Wright," Soon, One Morning, ed. Herbert Hill, (New York, 1963), p. 54.

<sup>5</sup>James Baldwin, "Many Thousands Gone," Notes of a Native Son, (Boston, 1962), p. 30. Hereafter cited as "Thousands."

<sup>6</sup>Ibid., p. 32.

<sup>7</sup>Baldwin ("Thousands," p. 32) states, "The Negro, who had been during the magnificent twenties a passionate and delightful primitive, now became [at the time of the publication of Native Son] as one of the things we were most self-conscious about, our most oppressed minority. In the thirties, swallowing Marx whole, we discovered the Worker and realized . . . that the aims of the Worker and the

aims of the Negro were one. This theorem . . . seems now to leave rather too much out of account; it became, nevertheless, one of the slogans of the 'class struggle' and the gospel of the New Negro."

<sup>8</sup>Baldwin, p. 34.

<sup>9</sup>Ralph Ellison, "Richard Wright's Blues," Antioch Review, V (Summer, 1945), p. 207.

<sup>10</sup>Bone, p. 142.

<sup>11</sup>Richard Wright, "How Bigger Was Born," Saturday Review, (June 1, 1940), pp. 3-4, 17-20.

<sup>12</sup>Ibid., p. 3.

<sup>13</sup>See also Richard Wright, The Outsider, published in 1953, after Wright's long exile in France, in which Cross Damon, the protagonist, is a culmination of Wright's concept of the truly existential character. The work, although artistically weak, is notable for being one of the few consciously existential works in American literature.

### Chapter III

<sup>1</sup>James Baldwin, Going to Meet The Man, (New York, 1965).

<sup>2</sup>James Baldwin, Giovanni's Room, (New York, 1956).

<sup>3</sup>James Baldwin, Another Country, (New York, 1962).

<sup>4</sup>James Baldwin, Go Tell It On The Mountain, (New York, 1953). Subsequent references in the text will be to Go Tell It On The Mountain, New York: Signet Books, 1963.

<sup>5</sup>George E. Kent, "Baldwin and the Problem of Being," CIA Journal, VII, No. 3 (March, 1964), p. 204.

<sup>6</sup>Ibid., p. 206.

<sup>7</sup>Wallace Graves, "The Question of Moral Energy in Baldwin's Go Tell It On The Mountain," CLA Journal, VII, No. 3 (March, 1964), pp. 219-220.

<sup>8</sup>Ihab Hassan, Radical Innocence: Studies In The Contemporary American Novel, (Princeton, 1961), pp. 81-82.

<sup>9</sup>Marcus Klein, After Alienation, (Cleveland, 1964), p. 184.

<sup>10</sup>Ibid., p. 179.

#### Chapter IV

<sup>1</sup>Ralph Ellison, Shadow and Act, (New York, 1964), p. xviii. Hereafter cited as Shadow.

<sup>2</sup>See "Hidden Name and Complex Fate," Shadow, pp. 144-166, for an explanation of what the name Ralph Waldo Ellison has meant to Ellison and what burdens the name has imposed on him.

<sup>3</sup>Ellison, Shadow, p. xi.

<sup>4</sup>For an instance of Ellison's short fiction, see "A Coupla Scalped Indians," New World Writing, Ninth Mentor Edition, (Paperback edition), (New York, 1956), pp. 225-236.

<sup>5</sup>Ellison, "The Art of Fiction: An Interview," Shadow, pp. 176-177.

<sup>6</sup>Ibid.

<sup>7</sup>In a letter from Ellison to the author, dated October 23, 1963, Ellison explains the significance of the 1,369 lightbulbs as follows: "When I was a boy in Oklahoma, players of the illegal lottery known as POLICY always played the numbers 3-6-9 after dreaming of fecal matter. These figures were listed under this reference in the 'dream-books' designed for players of this game and money bet upon them was sure to bring a 'hit' or win. . . . I suppose that the underground in which my imagination was operating in that section of the novel dredged up that bit of the sewer quite naturally. . . ."

"The conscious motive of the 1369 bulbs was to see if the concentrating of such a blaze of light upon the reader's eye could produce a kinetic effect from the page of a book. I felt that given such a concentration within a dark enclosure I should be able to re-enforce the thematic content

of the character's situation and make it resonate with overtones or [sic] withdrawal, alienation and that self-possession into which one comes when one has plunged into chaos and refused to be destroyed. . ."

<sup>8</sup> Ralph Ellison, Invisible Man, (New York, 1952).

Subsequent references in the text will be to Invisible Man, New York: Signet Books, 1960.

<sup>9</sup> Jonathan Baumbach, "Nightmare of a Native Son: Ralph Ellison's Invisible Man," Critique: Studies in Modern Fiction, VI, No. 1, (Spring, 1963), p. 49.

<sup>10</sup> Hassan, p. 175.

<sup>11</sup> Klein, pp. 109-110.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid., pp. 127-128.

<sup>13</sup> Ellison, "Change the Joke and Slip the Yoke," Shadow, p. 57. (First published in Partisan Review, Spring, 1958.)

<sup>14</sup> Ellison makes extensive use of punning in the novel. Thus, "Optic White" paint is the paint which the invisible, blind protagonist must work with. In addition, the names of many of the characters are puns or word-plays. For example, Jonathan Baumbach notes that Tod Clifton's name "suggests a kind of Promethean Entrapment," (op. cit., p. 55). Members of the Brotherhood include Wrestrum (rest



room), Tobitt (Two-bit), and Jack (money, masturbation). Finally, the "P" in B. P. Rinehart stands for Proteus, a symbol of fluidity and change.

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

<sup>16</sup> Baumbach, pp. 53-54.

<sup>17</sup> Klein, p. 110.

<sup>18</sup> Ellison, "The Art of Fiction: An Interview," Shadow, p. 179.

<sup>19</sup> Stanley Edgar Hyman, "The Negro Writer: An Exchange," Partisan Review (Spring, 1958), p. 210.

<sup>20</sup> The Brotherhood is thought to represent the Communist Party, with which Ellison, like Wright, was associated. Ellison remained with the Party for a very short time, but it is safe to assume that he drew on his experiences within the Party for some of his characterizations.

<sup>21</sup> Hassan, p. 172.

<sup>22</sup> Baumbach feels that Ras and his followers represent the Black Muslims. However, since the book was published in 1952 and the Black Muslims did not gain prominence until the late fifties, it is more likely that Ras represents Marcus Garvey, whose "Back to Africa" movement was widely known during the early 1900's. Ellison, however, denies that

relationship, stating, "In 1950 my wife and I were staying at a vacation spot where we met some white liberals who thought the best way to be friendly was to tell us what it was like to be a Negro. I got mad at hearing this from people who otherwise seemed very intelligent. I had already sketched Ras but the passion of his statement came out after I went upstairs that night feeling that we needed to have this thing out once and for all and get it done with; then we could go on living like people and individuals. No conscious reference to Garvey is intended." ("The Art of Fiction: An Interview," Shadow, p. 181.)

<sup>23</sup>Baumbach, p. 59.

<sup>24</sup>Ibid., pp. 60-61.

<sup>25</sup>The race riot in the novel is no doubt based on the Harlem riots of 1943.

<sup>26</sup>Baumbach, pp. 62-63.

<sup>27</sup>Ellison, "The Art of Fiction: An Interview," Shadow, p. 179.

## Chapter V

<sup>1</sup>Ellison, "The World and the Jug," Shadow, p. 137.

<sup>2</sup>Ibid.

<sup>3</sup>Ibid., pp. 114-115.

<sup>4</sup>Ibid.

<sup>5</sup>Klein, p. 75.

<sup>6</sup>Ibid., p. 80.

<sup>7</sup>Baumbach, p. 48.

<sup>8</sup>Ellison, "The World and The Jug," Shadow, p. 117.

<sup>9</sup>Hassan, p. 169.

## LIST OF WORKS CONSULTED

The American Negro Writer And His Roots: Selected Papers  
From The First Conference of Negro Writers, March,  
1959. New York, 1960.

Baldwin, James. Another Country. New York, 1960.

\_\_\_\_\_. "As Much Truth As One Can Bear," The New  
York Times Book Review, (January 14, 1962), pp. 1 & 38.

\_\_\_\_\_. Giovanni's Room. New York, 1956.

\_\_\_\_\_. Go Tell It On The Mountain. New York, 1953.

\_\_\_\_\_. Going To Meet The Man. New York, 1965.

\_\_\_\_\_. Notes of A Native Son. Boston, 1955.

\_\_\_\_\_. "Richard Wright," Encounter, XVI, iv (1961),  
 58-60.

Bardolph, Richard, ed. The Negro Vanguard. New York, 1959.

Baumbach, Jonathan. "Nightmare of A Native Son: Ralph  
 Ellison's Invisible Man," Critique, VI, 1 (Spring,  
 1963), 48-65.

Bone, Robert A. The Negro Novel in America. New Haven,  
 1958.

Butcher, Margaret Just. The Negro in American Culture.  
 New York, 1956.

Ellison, Ralph. "A Coupla Scalped Indians," New World Writing, Ninth Mentor Edition, 225-236. New York, 1956.

\_\_\_\_\_. Invisible Man. New York, 1952.

\_\_\_\_\_. "It Always Breaks Out," Partisan Review, XXX, 1 (Spring, 1963), 13-28.

\_\_\_\_\_. "Richard Wright's Blues," Antioch Review, V, ii (Summer, 1945), 207-209.

\_\_\_\_\_. Shadow And Act. New York, 1964.

\_\_\_\_\_. "The Roof, the Steeple and the People," Quarterly Review of Literature, X, iii (1960), 115-128.

Embree, E. R. 13 Against The Odds. New York, 1944.

Ford, Nick Aaron. "The Ordeal of Richard Wright," College English, XV, ii (1953), 87-94.

Gloster, Hugh Morris. Negro Voices in American Fiction. North Carolina, 1948.

Graves, Wallace. "The Question of Moral Energy in James Baldwin's Go Tell It On The Mountain," CLA Journal, VII, iii (March, 1964), 215-223.

Hassan, Ihab. Radical Innocence: Studies in The Con-

temporary American Novel. Princeton, 1961.

Hill, Herbert, ed. Soon, One Morning. New York, 1963.

Hughes, Carl Milton. The Negro Novelist. New York, 1953.

Hughes, Langston. "Problems of The Negro Writer: The Bread and Butter Side," Saturday Review, XLVI, iii (April 20, 1963), 19-20.

Hyman, Stanley Edgar. "The Negro Writer: An Exchange," Partisan Review, XXV, 1 (Spring, 1958), 197-216.

Isaacs, Harold R. "Five Writers and Their African Ancestors," Phylon, XXI, iii (Fall, 1960), 243-265, 317-336.

Jacobson, Dan. "James Baldwin As Spokesman," Commentary, XXXII, vi (1961), 497-502.

Jones, LeRoi. "Problems of The Negro Writer: The Myth of A Negro Literature," Saturday Review, XLVI, iii (April 20, 1963), 20-21.

Kent, George E. "Baldwin And The Problem of Being," CIA Journal, VII, iii (March, 1964), 202-214.

Klein, Marcus. After Alienation: American Novels in Mid-Century. Cleveland, 1964.

Lomax, Louis E. The Negro Revolt. New York, 1966.

Redding, J. Saunders. "Modern African Literature," CLA Journal, VII, iii (March, 1964), 191-201.

\_\_\_\_\_. "The Problems of The Negro Writer," Massachusetts Review, VI, i (Autumn-Winter, 1964-65), 57-70.

Rideout, Walter B. The Radical Novel in The United States, 1950-54. Boston, 1956.

Rovit, Earl H. "Ralph Ellison And The American Comic Tradition," Wisconsin Studies in Contemporary Literature, I, iii (1960), 34-42.

Williams, John A. "Learning To See Invisible Men," Book Week: The Sunday Herald Tribune (December 20, 1964), 2.

\_\_\_\_\_. "Problems of The Negro Writer: The Literary Ghetto," Saturday Review, XLVI, iii (April 20, 1963), 20, 40.

Wright, Richard. Black Boy. New York, 1945.

\_\_\_\_\_. "How Bigger Was Born," Saturday Review, XXII, vi (June 1, 1940), 3-4, 17-20.

\_\_\_\_\_. "I Tried To Be A Communist," Atlantic Monthly, CLXXIV, iii (September, 1944), 61-70.

Wright, Richard. The Long Dream. New York, 1958.

\_\_\_\_\_. Native Son. New York, 1940.

\_\_\_\_\_. The Outsider. New York, 1953.

\_\_\_\_\_. Uncle Tom's Children. New York, 1938.



## VITA

Theresa Perri Ammirati, the eldest of the three daughters of Gaetano and Theresa Perri, was born March 29, 1942 in Brooklyn, New York. Educated in the New York City public school system, she graduated from New Utrecht High School, Brooklyn, New York, in June, 1959. She began Brooklyn College, majoring in Comparative Literature, in September, 1959. While a student there she became engaged to Thomas Ammirati who was studying Physics at the Polytechnic Institute of Brooklyn. In 1962, her parents moved to Lakewood, New Jersey, and she was no longer able to fulfill the residency requirements for eligibility at Brooklyn College. Thus, in her senior year, she transferred to Douglass College of Rutgers University in New Brunswick, New Jersey, where she changed her major to English. She received her B.A. from Douglass on June 5, 1963 and was married on June 8. In September, 1963, she began graduate work in the Department of English at Lehigh, where her husband was completing his M.S. in Physics.

She is currently employed as Relocation Co-ordinator for the Redevelopment Authority of the City of Bethlehem and plans to remain in Bethlehem several years until her husband completes his doctorate.