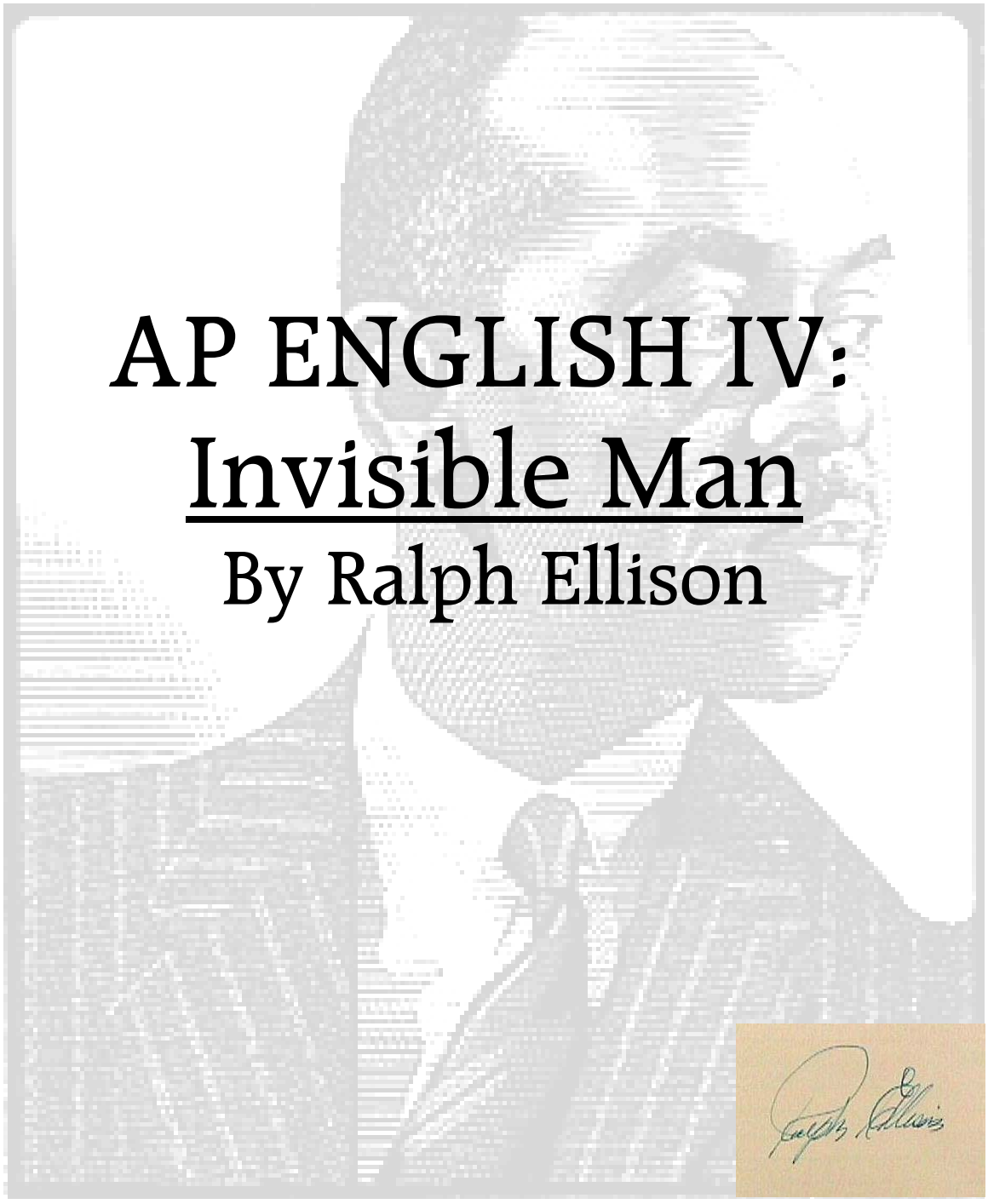
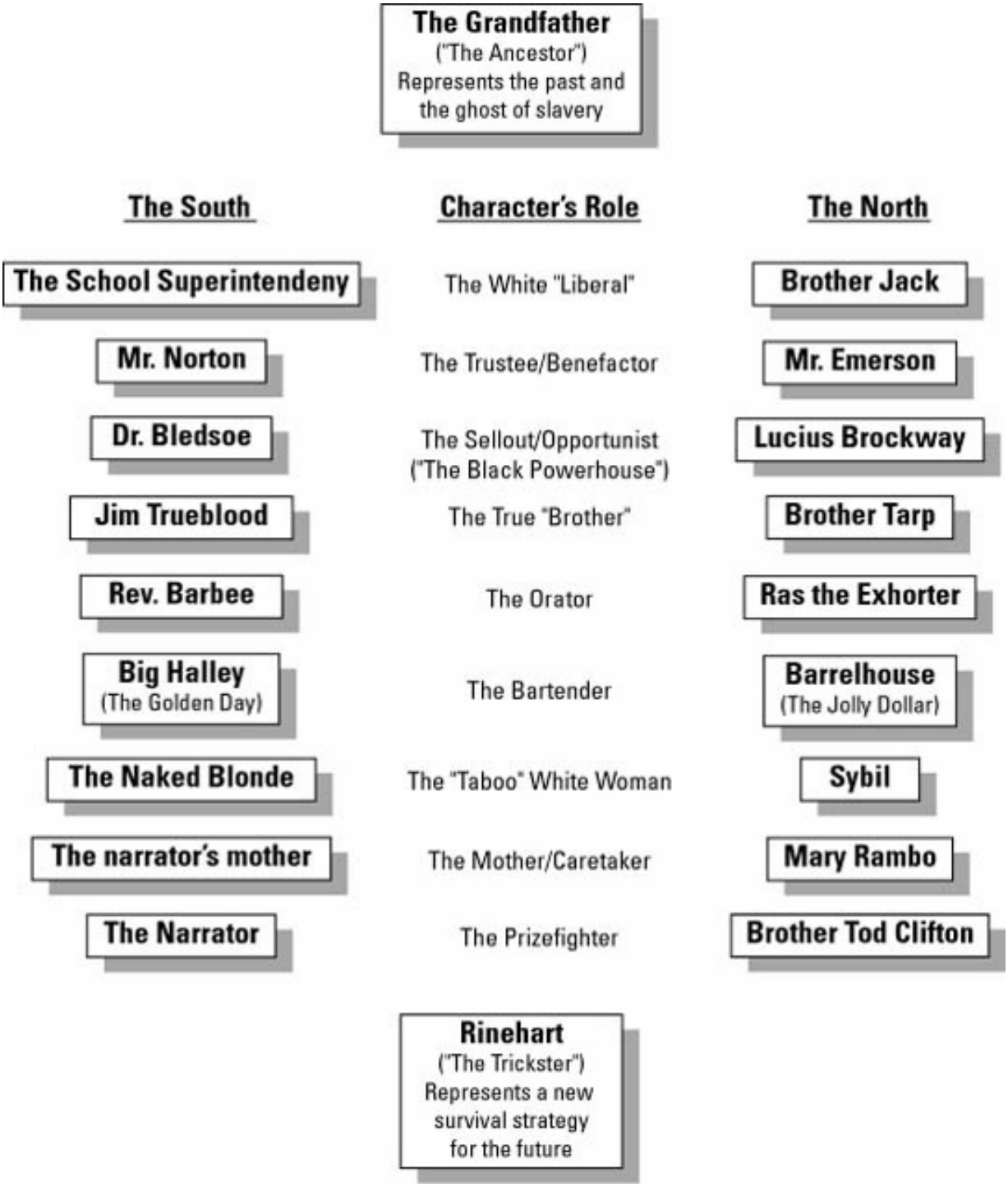


AP ENGLISH IV:
Invisible Man
By Ralph Ellison

Invisible Man: Character Map

Mr. Pogreba, Helena High



Invisible Man: Character Summary

Mr. Pogreba, Helena High

Invisible Man

The unnamed protagonist of the novel. In explaining to the reader what he has done to be so "black and blue," the hero says, "I was looking for myself and asking everyone except myself questions which I, and only I, could answer." By the end of his adventures, he will conclude "that I am nobody but myself. But first I had to discover that I am an Invisible Man!" The Invisible Man starts his tale as an innocent, one who believes that "humility was the secret, indeed, the very essence of progress." His greatest aspiration is to be an assistant to Dr. Bledsoe, the president of his college, who kowtows to whites in an attempt to hold on to his position. The Invisible Man believes, consciously or unconsciously, "the great false wisdom … that white is right" and that it is "advantageous to flatter rich white folks." He grudgingly admires other blacks who do not share his scruples; for instance, he is both humiliated and fascinated by the sharecropper Jim Trueblood's self-confessed tale of incest, and he is similarly impressed by the vet at The Golden Day: "I wanted to tell Mr. Norton that the man was crazy and yet I received a fearful satisfaction from hearing him talk as he had to a white man."

Although he has the "queer feeling that I was playing a part in some scheme which I did not understand," he ignores his instincts, as when, for instance, he personally delivers to prospective employers in New York City what he foolishly believes to be positive letters of recommendation from Dr. Bledsoe "like a hand of high trump cards." For every two steps forward, he takes one back. His experience in the factory hospital, for example, is a kind of awakening, and he develops an "obsession with my identity" that causes him to "put into words feelings which I had hitherto suppressed." But though he is skeptical of the Brotherhood's motives in recruiting him—"What am I, a man or a natural resource?"—and their obvious emphasis on the "we," the Invisible Man sets aside his misgivings and embraces the organization; "it was a different, bigger 'we,'" he tells himself. He is kind, joining the Brotherhood partly out of desire to pay Mary Rambo the rent money he owes her, and loyal to people like Brother Tarp and Brother Clifton in whom he senses a fundamental goodness But he is forever second-guessing himself, and it takes the raw injustice of Brother Clifton's murder to spark the Invisible Man into consciousness: "Outside the Brotherhood we were outside history; but inside of it they didn't see us…. Now I recognized my invisibility." At first defiant—"But to whom can I be responsible, and why should I be, when you refuse to see me?"—by the end of the novel the Invisible Man is ready to come out, "since there's a possibility that even an Invisible Man has a socially responsible role to play."

His Grandfather

The Invisible Man's grandfather, whom the protagonist had always thought of as a model of desirable conduct. He is dead when the novel begins, but his influence on the Invisible Man is powerful. His dying words were, "Son, … I never told you, but our life is a war and I have been a traitor all my born days, a spy in the enemy's country ever since I give up my gun back in the Reconstruction. Live with your head in the lion's mouth. 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…. Learn it to the younguns." These words prick the Invisible Man's complacency, and he remembers them as a curse that haunts him throughout his journey, a reminder that all is not right in the world.

Invisible Man: Character Summary

Mr. Pogreba, Helena High

Dr. A. Herbert Bledsoe

Dr. Bledsoe is the president of the college attended by the Invisible Man. Called "Old Bucket-head" by the students, he is a shrewd survivor who has spent his career humoring the white trustees in the hopes of retaining his position. A person of considerable affectation, he can manage even in striped trousers and a swallow-tail coat topped by an ascot tie to make himself look humble. He is aghast when the Invisible Man tells him that he took Mr. Norton to see Jim Trueblood because that's what the trustee wanted to do: "My God, boy! You're black and living in the South—did you forget how to lie?" His recipe for success is to attain power and influence by making the right contacts and "then stay in the dark and use it!" His self-interest makes him capable of betrayal, as when he lets the Invisible Man head off for New York City thinking that the letters he is carrying addressed to various trustees are letters of recommendation.

Mr. Norton

A white philanthropist and trustee of the college attended by (he Invisible Man, Mr. Norton describes himself as "a trustee of consciousness" and believes that the students of the college are his "fate." He calls his "real life's work … my firsthand organizing of human life." A romantic about race, he insists on being taken to the old slave quarters, where he expects to hear a lively folktale but instead is treated to a matter-of-fact account of incest by Jim Trueblood. Norton is the cause of the Invisible Man's expulsion from the school.

The Reverend Homer A. Barbee

A blind preacher from Chicago of substantial rhetorical skill who gives the Founder's Day speech at the college.

Jim Trueblood

Once respected as a hard worker and a lively storyteller, Jim Trueblood is a black sharecropper who has since shamed the black community and who shocks Mr. Norton with his matter-of-fact account of incest with his daughter. Despite the awfulness of his crime, Trueblood's refusal to stint on the details or to make excuses for himself reveals a basic integrity that is reflected in his name, and the Invisible Man listens to him with a mixture of horror and admiration.

Veteran at the Golden Day

A skilled doctor who served in France and on his return to the States is run out of town and ends up in the local mental hospital. He attends to Mr. Norton after his heart attack at the Golden Day. The Invisible Man is impressed with the bold way the vet talks to the white trustee. The vet is the first person to grasp the Invisible Man's dilemma: "You cannot see or hear or smell the truth of what you see."

Peter Wheatstraw

A kindly rubbish man the Invisible Man meets in the streets of Harlem singing the blues and who makes him think nostalgically of home.

Invisible Man: Character Summary

Mr. Pogreba, Helena High

Mr. Kimbro

The Invisible Man's first supervisor at Liberty Paints.

Lucius Brockway

The Invisible Man's irascible second supervisor at Liberty Paints. "Lucius Brockway not only intends to protect himself, he knows how to do it! Everybody knows I been here ever since there's been a here." His one worry is that the union will do him out of a job.

Mary Rambo

Mary Rambo runs a rooming house and takes the Invisible Man in after finding him ill in the street following his stay in the factory hospital. The only person to treat him with genuine affection, Mary is cynical about the big city, and puts her faith in the newcomers from the south: "I'm in New York, but New York ain't in me." The Invisible Man does not 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 some unknown which I dared not face."

Brother Jack

The Brotherhood's district leader for Harlem, he befriends the Invisible Man after hearing him address a crowd gathered to witness the eviction of an elderly black couple, and sets about recruiting him to the Brotherhood. That his motives might be suspect is evident from the beginning, when he asks the Invisible Man, "How would you like to be the new Booker T. Washington?" (Washington was viewed negatively as an accommodationist by many blacks) and warns him, "You mustn't waste your emotions on individuals, they don't count." Brother Jack turns out to be the author of an anonymous threat mailed to the Invisible Man.

Brother Tod Clifton

Young and handsome, Clifton is the leader of the Brotherhood youth, "a hipster, a zoot suiter, a sharpie." He has run-ins with Ras the Exhorter over their philosophical differences. He is friendly and helpful to the Invisible Man, despite the hero's being made his superior. "I saw no signs of resentment," says the Invisible Man in admiration, "but a complete absorption in the strategy of the meeting.... I had no doubt that he knew his business." Brother Clifton has put his full faith in the brotherhood, and when he is abandoned by it, his despair is total. He plunges "outside of history," becoming a street peddler selling paper black sambo dolls, and is murdered by the police. His death is a defining moment for the Invisible Man.

Brother Hambro

Hambro takes the Invisible Man through a four-month period of intense study and indoctrination after his arena speech to the Brotherhood to correct his "unscientific" tendencies. "A tall, friendly man, a lawyer, and the Brotherhood's chief theoretician," he tells the Invisible Man that "it's impossible not to take advantage of the people.... The trick is to take advantage of them in their own best interest."

Invisible Man: Character Summary

Mr. Pogreba, Helena High

Brother Tarp

An old but ideologically vigorous member of the Brotherhood. "He can be depended upon in the most precarious circumstance," Brother Jack tells the Invisible Man. Brother Tarp hangs on the Invisible Man's office wall a picture of Frederick Douglass, which reminds him of his grandfather. Unlike the Invisible Man, who left the south more or less voluntarily, Brother Tarp was forced to escape to the north after spending nineteen years on a chain gang because "I said no to a man who wanted to take something from me." He gives the Invisible Man a link from his ankle iron as a keepsake.

Brother Wrestrum

A troublemaker, jealous of the Invisible Man. He makes a false accusation that indirectly results in the protagonist's being taken out of Harlem and sent downtown.

Sybil

Wife of a member of the Brotherhood with whom the Invisible Man has a brief liaison in the hope of gaining inside information on the organization.

Emma

One of the first members of the Brotherhood the Invisible Man meets. The hero is skeptical of the Brotherhood's motives when he hears Emma ask, "But don't you think he should be a little blacker?"

Ras the Exhorter

Modeled on Marcus Garvey, though not a caricature of him Ras is a flamboyant West African nationalist who preaches black pride, a return to Mother Africa, and a willingness to die for one's principles. Ras and the Brotherhood are engaged in a perpetual turf war, and Ras repeatedly exhorts the black members of the Brotherhood to remember their history. He says to Brother Tod Clifton: "You my brother, mahn Brothers are the same color; how the hell you call these white men brother?...Brothers the same color. We sons of Mama Africa, you done forgot? You black, BLACK! … You African, AFRICAN!"

Rinehart

A mysterious figure who signs himself a "Spiritual Technologist." The reader never meets Rinehart, but the Invisible Man is mistaken for him by so many different people that he ends up putting together a fascinating though confusing composite: "Still, could he be all of them: Rine the runner and Rine the gambler and Rine the briber and Rine the lover and Rinehart the Reverend. Could he himself be both rind and heart? What is real anyway?… Perhaps the truth was always a lie." It is in trying to figure out Rinehart that the Invisible Man begins to see both how complex reality is, and that it is possible to live with contradictions.

Invisible Man: Booker T. Washington

Mr. Pogreba, Helena High

Biography

- Born in 1856, the son of a white father and black slave. He moved with his family to West Virginia after Emancipation in 1863.
- He attended the Hampton Institute, where he started as a janitor after working his way up through diligence and his nature.
- In 1881, he was chosen to be the head of a black college in Tuskegee, AL.
- He became famous in the US as an educational reformer.
- He was widely known, meeting with Presidents and other famous dignitaries
- His autobiography, Up From Slavery, was written in 1901.
- He died in 1915

Position on Race: Accomodationist?

- "The wisest among my race understand that agitation for social equality is an extremist folly. It is important and right that all privileges of the law be ours but it is vastly more important that we be prepared for the exercise of those privileges." –Booker T. Washington
- He believed that African-Americans needed to make themselves a core part of the American economic system. He wrote, “no race can prosper until it learns there is as much dignity in till being a field as in writing a poem."

Atlanta Compromise Speech

- In 1895, Washington gave a speech to the Cotton States and International Exposition in Atlanta. It is widely regarded as one of the most famous speeches about racial discrimination in U.S. history. You can listen to Washington deliver this speech at this web site (http://historymatters.gmu.edu/d/88/)
- Ellison uses the speech in the Battle Royal scene. Some quotes from the speech:
    - To those of my race who depend on bettering their condition in a foreign land, or who underestimate the importance of preservating friendly relations with the southern white man who is their next door neighbor, I would say: “Cast down your bucket where you are.” Cast it down, making friends in every manly way of the people of all races, by whom you are surrounded.
    - To those of the white race who look to the incoming of those of foreign birth and strange tongue and habits for the prosperity of the South, were I permitted, I would repeat what I have said to my own race: “Cast down your bucket where you are.” Cast it down among the eight millions of Negroes whose habits you know, whose fidelity and love you have tested in days when to have proved treacherous meant the ruin of your fireside. Cast down your bucket among these people who have without strikes and labor wars tilled your fields, cleared your forests, builded your railroads and cities, brought forth treasures from the bowels of the earth, just to make possible this magnificent representation of the progress of the South.

Invisible Man: Booker T. Washington

Mr. Pogreba, Helena High

Uses in the Novel

- Ellison attended the Tuskeegee Institute, from 1933-1936, leaving without receiving a degree.
- **Dr. Bledsoe/Founder** (The story told by Reverend Barbee about the Founder is very similar to Washington's life. The Founder "was born a slave and a son of slaves, knowing only his mother" (Ellison 116). Barbee goes on to say that the Founder "...worked noontime, nights and mornings for the privilege of studying" (Ellison 117). The Reverend Barbee describes the Founder as humble and patient "moving slowly as he surmounts each and every opposition. Rendering unto Caesar what is Caesar's, yes; but steadfastly seeking for you that bright horizon which you now enjoy..." (Ellison 117). The Founder, like Washington, solicits donations from wealthy businessmen.
    - His speech before the Battle Royal is lifted, almost verbatim from the Washington address in Atlanta, and his confusion/mistake on social equality/social responsibility exemplifies the dilemma his character will face.
    - The narrator seems to embrace this view initially, desiring to become like Bledsoe, to even become his assistant at the college. Bledsoe's influence and power are an enormous draw for the narrator.
- **Lucius Brockway**. In a sense, Bledsoe/Washington re-emerges with this character, who is the king of his domain, wants to please his white bosses, and keeps the pressure in the boiler from exploding…in much the same way that Washington/Bledsoe tried to.
- **More**?

Invisible Man: Existentialism

Mr. Pogreba, Helena High

Existentialism: Basic Definition

- Existentialism, broadly defined, is a set of philosophical systems concerned with free will, choice, and personal responsibility. Because we make choices based on our experiences, beliefs, and biases, those choices are unique to us — and made without an objective form of truth. There are no "universal" guidelines for most decisions, existentialists believe. Instead, even trusting science is often a "leap of faith." Finally, they believe that individual experience is the only reality that matters. Specifically,
    - Humans have free will.
    - Life is a series of choices, creating stress.
    - Few decisions are without any negative consequences.
    - Some things are irrational or absurd, without explanation.
    - If one makes a decision, he or she must follow through.
- Maybe the most famous dictum of existentialism is is Jean-Paul Satre's observation that, ""existence precedes and rules essence", which means that there is no pre-defined essence to humanity except what we make for ourselves.
- Satre, in Existentialism and Human Emotions, said, "existentialism's first move is to make every man aware of what he is , and to make the full responsibility of his existence rest on him."[1]
- John Fowles, in The Aristos, wrote, "existentialism is the revolt of the individual against all those systems of thought, theories of psychology, and social and political pressures that attempt to rob him of his individuality."
- Some of the most important existentialist philosophers are: Jean-Paul Sartre, Albert Camus, Søren Kierkegaard, Karl Jaspers and Gabriel Marcel

Existentialism: What it Rejects about Modern Life

- Existentialism does **not** support any of the following:
    - The good life is one of wealth, pleasure, or honor.
    - Social approval and social structure trump the individual.
    - Accept what is and that is enough in life.
    - Science can and will make everything better.
    - People are good by nature, ruined by society or external forces.

- Existentialism requires the active acceptance of our nature. Professor Robert Olson noted that we spend our lives wanting more and more. Once we realize the futility of wordly desire, we try to accept what we have. We turn to philosophy or religion to accept less. We want to detach from our worldly needs — but we cannot do so. It is the human condition to desire. To want. To seek more, even when that "more" is "more of less." It is a desire to prove something to ourselves, as well as others.

[1] Sexist language in the original quote—and some that follow.

Invisible Man: Existentialism

Mr. Pogreba, Helena High

- The existentialists … mock the notion of a complete and fully satisfying life. The life of every man, whether he explicitly recognizes it or not, is marked by irreparable losses. Man cannot help aspiring toward the goods of this world, nor can he help aspiring toward the serene detachment from the things of this world which the traditional philosopher sought; but it is not within his power to achieve either of these ambitions, or having achieved them to find therein the satisfaction he had anticipated.

Ellison and Existentialism

- While each of the major schools of existentialism provided different answers to the absurdity of human life (Sartre=socialism, Camus=despair, Kierkegaard=religion), Ellison seemed drawn most to the work of the French existentialist **André Malraux**, who believed that the key to transcendence was art.
    - Malraux stated that all art is a revolt against man's fate, and art is a means of transcendence. "Art," he once said, "is an anti-destiny."
    - "Culture is the sum of all the forms of art, of love and of thought, which in the course of centuries, have enabled man to be less enslaved."
    - "A man becomes truly Man only when in quest of what is most exalted in him. True arts and cultures relate Man to duration, sometimes to eternity and make of him something other than the most favored denizen of a universe founded on absurdity."
    - "The great mystery is not that we should have been thrown down here at random between the profusion of matter and that of the stars; it is that, from our very prison, we should draw from our own selves images powerful enough to deny our nothingness."
- According to Pancho Savery, "What Ellison accepts is the world of possibility, consciousness, and struggle: the world of ambiguity over the world of cold, predictable logic, in other words, the world of art."[2]
- Ellison believed that the artist's task was "to present the human, to make it eloquent, and to provide some sense of transcendence over the given, that is, to make his protest meaningful, significant, and eloquent of human values."[3]
- For Ellison, art was ambiguous (and opposed to propaganda) because discoveries are made about human nature in the creative process.
    - Because human life is open-ended and ambiguous, art in the form of literature must be similarly open-ended.
    - Life does not follow rules or laws; neither should literature.
- The narrator makes his final discoveries about himself through the process of telling his story.
- Connection to The Blues
    - According to Ellison, the blues transcend the pain of life by transforming pain into art.
    - Albert Murray, in a criticism of Ellison and Malaraux wrote, "Andrě Malaraux might well have been referring to the blues and the function of blues musicians when he described the human condition in terms of ever-impending chaos and declared that each victory of the artist represents a triumph of man over his fate." [4]

---

[2] Savery, Pancho. Approaches to Teaching Ellison's Invisible Man. 1989

[3] Ellison, Ralph. Shadow and Act.

[4] Murray. Albert. Stomping the Blues

Invisible Man: History and Dialectics

Mr. Pogreba, Helena High

Historical Materialism Explained

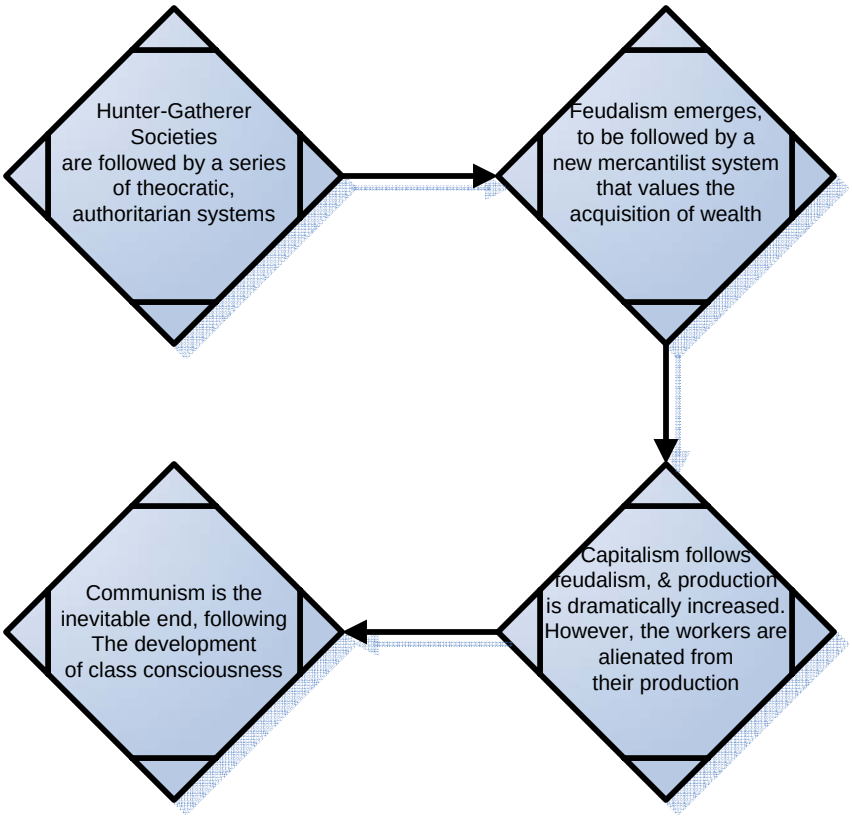
- **Dialectical Materialism** is a way of understanding reality; whether thoughts, emotions, or the material world.
    - A **dialectic** is an exchange of propositions (**theses**) and counter-propositions (**antitheses**) resulting in a **synthesis** of the opposing assertions, or at least a qualitative transformation in the direction of the dialogue.
    - Materialism means answers the fundamental question of philosophy by asserting the primacy of the material world: in short, matter precedes thought
- In a very basic sense, **historical materialism** is the belief that history is **deterministic**, that is, it prescribes that history inevitably follows certain laws and that individuals have little or no influence on its development. In other words, history moves not because of the efforts of great singular individuals (i.e. "The Great Man theory of history), but as the result of an inevitable collision of opposing ideologies.
- When these two ideologies (**thesis** and **antithesis**) come in conflict, **synthesis** emerges. At this point, history moves forward, and a new economic arrangement develops.
- The fundamental proposition of historical materialism can be summed up in a sentence: "it is not the consciousness of men that determines their existence, but, on the contrary, their social existence that determines their consciousness."

Relationship to the Narrator and His History

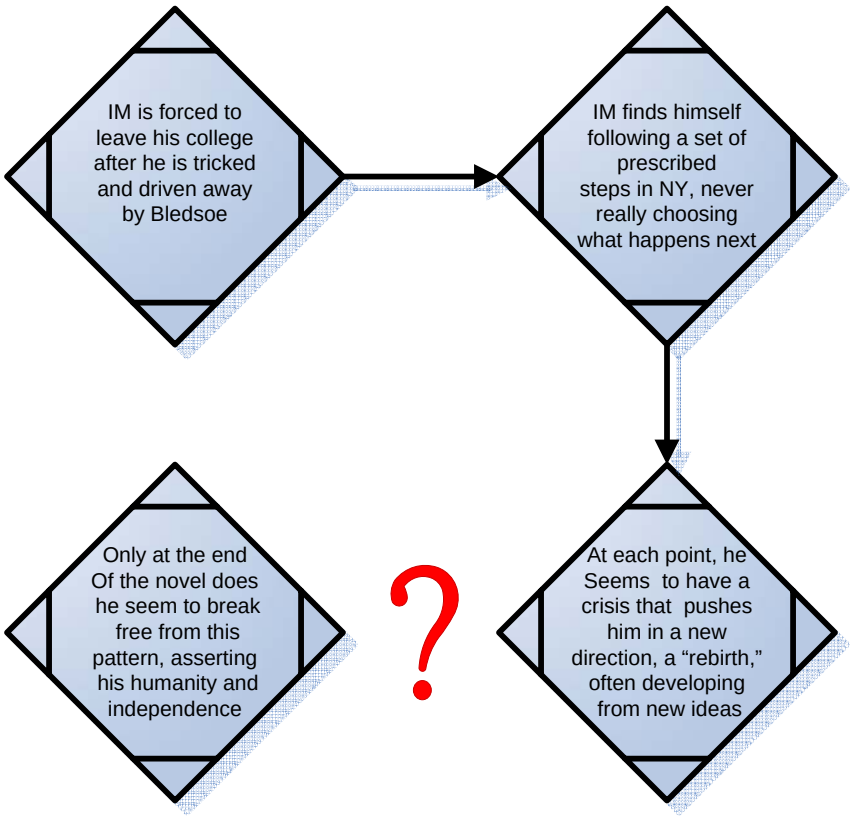
- *"What if Brother Jack were wrong? What if history was a gambler, instead of a force in a laboratory experiment, and the boys his ace in the hole? What if history was not a reasonable citizen, but a madman full of paranoid guile and these boys his agents, his big surprise!"* (pg. 441)
- In many ways, the narrator seems to view his life as a series of inevitable events that he has little control over. He is forced from his college to New York, from his dreams of a new job to the paint factory, from the paint factory to the Brotherhood. His story (and lack of control over it) parallels the "scientific" focus of the Brotherhood, who embrace the notion of historical materialism.
- This approach by the Brotherhood, in the words of the narrator, "makes people expedient," brutally applying science to explain human nature and to justify horrific goals.
- Czeslaw Milosz argues, in The Captive Mind (1953), that:

> Dialectical materialism, Russian-style, is nothing more than nineteenth century science vulgarized to the second power. Its emotional and didactic components are so strong that they change all proportions. Although the Method was scientific in its origins, when it is applied to humanistic disciplines it often transforms them into edifying stories adapted to the needs of the moment. . . .[Dialectical materialism] gives the illusion of full knowledge; it supplies answers to all questions, answers which merely run around in a circle repeating a few formulas. (200-201)

- Ellison seems to deconstruct the idea of historical materialism, at least as it applies to the individual. Once the narrator steps out of time, steps out of the notion of inevitability, he has the ability to reach his potential as a human being. This fulfills the existentialist goal of individuality in the face of absurdity, and the expectations the narrator's grandfather.
- At the end of the novel the narrator has stepped into a future that he can create for himself.



Marx and Engels believed that history was inevitable, that rather than being dictated by great individuals (The Great Man Theory), history was the result of social forces in collision. Feudalism, for example, according to Marxists, came to an end because of the conflict generated when the old social order came into conflict with the new economic arrangements of mercantilism. Adherents of this philosophy, called historical materialism, believe that these social forces are inevitably leading towards communism.



The story of the narrator in Invisible Man seems to follow the pattern established by historical materialism. His life seems to be almost beyond his control, as he carried on by the forces of prejudice, education, the economic system, and finally, the Brotherhood. It is only when he begins to question the Brotherhood that he begins to question the forces that seem to control his history. In this moment, he breaks free of the cycle of his personal history, and begins to develop his humanity.

A Very Basic Look at Dialectical Historicism And its Relationship to the Narrator of Invisible Man

What Did I Do To Be So) Black and Blue

Words by Andy Razaf and Music by Thomas "Fats" Waller and Harry Brooks

Verse: Out in the street, shufflin' feet,
Couples passin' two by two,
While here am I, left high and dry,
Black, and 'cause I'm black I'm blue.
Browns and yellers, all have fellers,
Gentlemen prefer them light,
Wish I could fade, can't make the grade,
Nothing but dark days in sight:

Chorus 1: Cold, empty bed, Springs hard as lead,
Pains in my head, Feel like old Ned.
What did I do, to be so Black And Blue?
No joys for me, No company,
Even the mouse ran from my house,
All my life through, I've been so Black And Blue.

I'm white inside, It don't help my case
'Cause I can't hide, what is on my face, oh!
I'm so forlorn, Life's just a thorn,
My heart is torn, Why was I born?
What did I do, to be so Black And Blue?

'Cause you're black, Folks think you lack
They laugh at you, And scorn you too,
What did I do, to be so Black And Blue?
When you are near, they laugh and sneer,
Set you aside and you're denied,
What did I do, to be so Black And Blue?

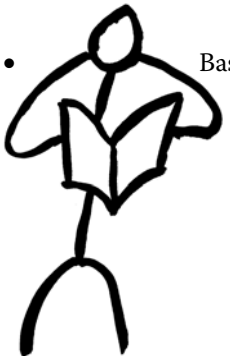
How sad I am, each day I feel worse,
My mark of Ham seems to be a curse!
How will it end? Ain't got a friend,
My only sin Is my skin.
What did I do, to be so Black And Blue?

Literary Terms #5

- **In media res**- in or into the middle of a sequence of events, as in a literary narrative
- **Intentional fallacy**-assuming from the text what the author intended to mean
- **Interpolation**-A passage included in an author's work without his/her consent
- **Intertextuality**- Intertextuality is a way of accounting for the role of literary and extra-literary materials without recourse to traditional notions of authorship. A literary work, then, is not simply the product of a single author, but of its relationship to other texts and to the structures of language itself.
- **Inversion**-reversal of the normal order of words for dramatic effect
- **Irony**- A device that depends on the existence of at least two separate and contrasting levels of meaning embedded in one message.
  - **Verbal irony** is sarcasm, when the speaker says something other than what they really mean.
  - In **dramatic irony**, the audience is more aware than the characters in a work.
  - **Situational irony** occurs when the opposite of what is expected happens. This type of irony often emphasizes that people are caught in forces beyond their comprehension and control.
- **Magical realism**- a literary technique where the disbelief of the reader and writer produces a momentary shift in the real world wherein an element of the surreal enters and leaves with ease."
- **Malapropism**- is an incorrect usage of a word, usually with comic effect. "He is the very pineapple of politeness."
- **Metaphor**- a type of figurative language in which a statement is made that says that one thing is something else but, literally, it is not. In connecting o-ne object, event, or place, to another, a metaphor can uncover new and intriguing qualities of the original thing that we may not normally notice or even consider important. Metaphoric language is used in order to realize a new and different meaning.
- **Metonymy**-A figure of speech in which a word represents something else which it suggests. For example in a herd of fifty cows, the herd might be referred to as fifty head of cattle

Reader Response Criticism

Mr. Pogreba, Helena High



Reader Response Criticism: Where Did it Come From?

- Basically, functions as a response to classical and new criticism, which held that the text was the center of analysis.
    - From the time of Plato to that of the Romantics, critics focused on finding meaning solely in the text
    - For a brief period starting in the early 19th century (the Romantics) the focus shifted to the author—as a genius who saw truths the average person could not
    - Then back to the text with the **New Critics**, who saw the text as an objective object whose meaning could be uncovered through study. TRUTH exists in the text, if one looks hard enough to find it.
        - New Critics believed that a text was an **autotelic artifact**, something complete with in itself, written for its own sake, unified in its form and not dependent on its relation to the author's life or intent, history, or anything else.
        - For the new critic, it would be wrong to focus on the effect on the reader. William K. Wimsatt and Monroe C. Beardsley called the Affective Fallacy — the fallacy of confusing a work of literature with its effects on the reader.

Reader Response Criticism: Explained

- Reader + Text=Meaning
- Literature is a performative art and each reading is a performance, analogous to playing/singing a musical work, enacting a drama, etc. Literature exists only when it is read; meaning is an event
- The literary text possesses no fixed and final meaning or value; there is no one "correct" meaning. Literary meaning and value are "transactional," "dialogic," created by the interaction of the reader and the text. According to Louise Rosenblatt, a poem is "what the reader lives through under the guidance of the text."
- Each reader comes to a text within the framework of her **horizons of expectation**. A text will constantly challenge these expectations, moving the reader to a series of unique positions relative to the text.
- There is a tension between various kind of readers. Wolfgang Isser divides readers into three categories:
    - The Real Reader-the actual person reading the text, with all of her cultural experiences
    - The Virtual Reader-the one that the author assumes is reading the book
    - The Ideal Reader—the best prepared and most knowledgeable readers

Reader Response Criticism

Mr. Pogreba, Helena High

Louise Rosenblatt

- Wrote Literature as Exploration in 1937, pushing Reader Response Criticism to the forefront
- She argued that there were two types of reading:
    - **Efferent**: the search for newly gained information, not the words themselves
    - **Aesthetic**: the desire to experience the text, its sounds, words, and patterns
- When reading, the reader and the text share a **transactional experience**. Simultaneously, the text:
    - Is a stimulus for past experiences, thoughts, and ideas of the reader
    - And a blueprint for selecting, ordering, limiting ideas that best match the text.
    - The result? A New Creation, which has a limited, but not exclusive number of plausible interpretations

Stanley Fish (Affective Stylistics)

- Meaning is not something extracted from a text, but negotiated, line by line. Meaning is what happens to readers
- Readers create a piece of literature as they read it.
- The text, according to Fish, as an independent director of interpretation, disappears.
- Readers divide themselves into **interpretive communities**, who tend to read for the same meanings in literature. Some of these interpretive communities are the same communities that we have discussed as as schools of literary criticism.

Invisible Man: Themes

Mr. Pogreba, Helena High

Identity

- Invisible Man is concerned primarily with identity. Its nameless protagonist experiences a series of situations, during which he attempts to establish his identity by successive association with a white - dominated educational institution, a white - controlled industrial organization, and a political movement which is eventually revealed to be indifferent to the welfare of black people
- The narrator, in his interactions with various institutions, attempts to define himself through his relationship with others.
- Ellison tricks the readers with repeated images of death and rebirth, suggesting that, at each instance, the protagonist has truly found himself. In each case, there is a sense of disappointment and failure.
- The narrator seems to be struggling to find his **authentic self**, the person that is truly him, and is torn between his desire to be truly black, truly Southern, truly educated, a true Brother, and a true man.
  - "I yam what I yam"
- In a sense, it is only at the end of the novel, when the narrator is alone that he truly begins to discover who he is. The act of burning the possessions in his briefcase symbolize casting off his past as this new realization emerges.

Black Identity

- One of the central questions of the novel is whether the narrator's search for identity is a universal experience, or a specific experience as an African-American in a predominantly white America.
- Some critics argue that the novel is an Jeffersonian story about the power of human potential. They would argue that the experience of the Invisible Man is universal.
- Other are less sure. For them, the central issue in the novel is the experience of being black. D. Sikorsky argues that Ellison could not "envision a world in which a black man could both maintain his individual identity and affect political change," suggesting that the Invisible Man might never leave his solitude.
- Naomi Zack argues, "The unacceptability of generalizations from black experience, which do not acknowledge the effects of racism on that black experience, to all human experience, is mirrored by the unacceptability of generalizations from white experience to all human experience. The generalizations from white experience neglect the ways in which racism enders black experience different from white, while the generalizations from black experience appropriate and normalize, ire., "whiten," the effects of white racism on black experience, so that whites can identify with it, as whites. In both cases, racism against blacks is not identified as something distinctive, unjust and uncommon in the broad range of normal human experience. Racism is ignored in both cases." Her broader point is that reading a novel like Invisible Man without focusing on the central question of identity in a specialized society is nave at best, dangerous at worst.
- Does the Invisible Man identify himself primarily in terms of his *humanness* or his *blackness?*
- The novel also explores the notion of **doubleness** in the life of African-Americans in the United States. The narrator seems to learn that acceptance only comes from acting "white," and yet, it is never forgotten that he is black.
  - He learns at the end of the novel that both Bobsleds and his grandfather were right.
  - Brother Tod Clifton as a multiracial member of society perfectly illustrates this dilemma for African-Americans.

Invisible Man: Themes

Mr. Pogreba, Helena High

Doubleness

- With few exceptions, almost all of the characters in the novel reflect a sense of **doubleness** in their nature. These characters are often quite different in public than in private, and both the narrator and readers are left with some confusion about their true nature. For example,
  - **Bobsleds**: supporter of black education/false servility to whites/arrogant and power-hungry
  - **Brother Jack**: socializing with the wealthy/communist/scientist/anger
  - **Norton**: believes his destiny is the young men at the college/forgets and betrays narrator
  - **Tod Clifton**: double in his racial identity/advocate for blacks/salesman of racist dolls
- The character who best exemplifies this notion is **Rinehart**, who is everything and nothing, "rind and heart." Though the narrator never meets Rinehart, through disguise, he temporarily becomes him, this person who can simultaneously be a preacher and a number-runner.
- Rinehart reflects the human capacity to create any self for itself. He fulfills the argument made by William James in the "The Social Me," where he argues that humans only develop a personality and identity through interactions with others. In this way, Rinehart can be anything that others project on to him.
- Connects to the theme of black identity and blindness.

Blindness/Invisibility

- Throughout the novel, loss of sight in a physical sense in associated with a lack of insight. Characters like the Reverend Homer Barbee, the boxer and Brother Jack are the most obvious manifestations of this motif, which resonates throughout the novel.
- For many characters, the blindness seems to be self-inflicted. It is not that they **cannot see**, but that they **choose** not to.
- Perhaps the narrator best demonstrates this tendency. He is unable to see the racism in Norton, the hypocrisy of Bledsoe, or the treachery of the Brotherhood, even as they are evident.
- The invisibility that the narrator speaks of is the result of societal blindness. He is not, of course, literally invisible, but because society chooses not to see him—or to only see him as a black man—he cannot be seen.
- Because we never "see" the narrator, he remains invisible to the reader as well.
- Rinehart's glasses demonstrate how easy it is to change one's perception.
- Ironically, it is only when the character is in a place of blindness and darkness that he is able to see.
  - Ellison alludes to Plato's Allegory of the Cave (*Human beings living in a underground cave, which has a mouth open towards the light and reaching all along the cave; here they have been from their childhood, and have their legs and necks chained so that they cannot move, and can only see before them, being prevented by the chains from turning round their heads. Above and behind them a fire is blazing at a distance, and between the fire and the prisoners there is a raised way; and you will see, if you look, a low wall built along the way, like the screen which marionette players have in front of them, over which they show the puppet.*) when he has the character finally gain insight in this cave of darkness, surrounded by light.
  - The narrator tells us, "I'm invisible, not blind."

Invisible Man: Themes

Mr. Pogreba, Helena High

Existential Search for Self

- The **absurdity** of the events in the novel illustrate one of the core themes of existentialism. Because the events of one's life are often beyond her control, the important thing is to discover and to become one's self.
- Ellison once wrote that what really mattered was happened to the narrator after leaving his solitude. In an unusual way, the novel serves as a prelude to a life that is fully lived as an authentic person.
- The narrator realizes his human potential once he realizes the options available to him as he explores what it means to be himself.
- At the same time, the narrator realizes that he is responsible for his actions. While he spent much of his life placing blame on others, he comes to understand a core existential argument: that one is responsible for his actions:
    - "But deep down you come to suspect that you're yourself to blame, and you stand naked and shivering before the millions of eyes who look through you unseeingly. *That* is the real soul-sickness, the spear in the side, the drag by the neck through the mob-angry town, the Grand Inquisition, the embrace of the Maiden, the rip in the belly with the guts spilling out, the trip to the chamber with deadly gas that ends in the oven so hygienically clean—only it's worse because you continue stupidly to live. But live you must, and you can either make passive love to your sickness or burn it out and go on to the next conflicting phase." (pgs. 576-76)
- On another level, the novel works as an extension of the argument that Malraux makes about art.
    - For Malraux and Ellison, the artist has an obligation to impose the order of art on the chaos of human experience.
    - It is possible that the narrator only fully discovers his "humanness" in the process of creating and telling his story.

Invisible Man: Bildungsroman

Mr. Pogreba, Helena High

What is a Bildungsroman?

- A German term that means "novel of formative education," **Bildungsroman** is a literary type that deals with the formative years of a person.
- Specifically, a Bildungsroman often contains these elements:
  (1) A Bildungsroman is, most generally, the story of a single individual's growth and development within the context of a defined social order. The growth process, at its roots a quest story, has been described as both "an apprenticeship to life" and a "search for meaningful existence within society."
  (2) To spur the hero or heroine on to their journey, some form of loss or discontent must jar them at an early stage away from the home or family setting.
  (3) The process of maturity is long, arduous, and gradual, consisting of repeated clashes between the protagonist's needs and desires and the views and judgments enforced by an unbending social order.
  (4) Eventually, the spirit and values of the social order become manifest in the protagonist, who is then accommodated into society. The novel ends with an assessment by the protagonist of himself and his new place in that society.[1]
- Traditionally, a bildungsroman ends on a positive note, though it may be tempered by resignation and nostalgia. If the grandiose dreams of the hero's youth are over, so are many foolish mistakes and painful disappointments, and a life of usefulness lies ahead.
- A variation is the Künstlerroman, which deals with the formative years of an artist.

Its Purpose

- The bildungsroman explores the universal attempt to discover one's self and to mature. Stories like Candide and The Adventures of Hucklberry Finn demonstrate this tendency.
- At the same time, a bildungsroman forces the reader to examine the societal order that creates and molds a character, and by extenson, him/herself.
- A comparison of the characteristics of the bildungsroman and the epic hero cycle reveal some similarities; each is a mechanism for explaining human action and desire.

Ellison and Bildungsroman

- Effectively interpreting Invisible Man as a modem Bildungsroman, Ellison says: "In my novel the narrator's development is one through blackness to light; that is, from ignorance to enlightenment: invisibility to visibility"[2]
- "It's a novel about innocence and human error, a struggle through illusion to reality" (14); "Whatever [Invisible Man] did when he returns ...should be based on the knowledge gained before he went underground. This is a question of self-knowledge and ability to identify the processes of the world" (74); "I do believe that knowing where we are, has a lot to do with our knowing who we are and this gets back to the theme, I hope, of identity with which [Invisible Man] was sometimes involved" (263).

---

[1] Hirsch, Marianne. "The Novel of Formation as Genre"

[2] Graham, Maryomma, and Amritjit Singh, eds. Conversations with Ralph Ellison. Jackson: UP of Mississippi, 1995.

Invisible Man Essay Prompts

Mr. Pogreba, Helena High

First Essay Prompt

If you get an A on this essay, you do not need to take the exam over Invisible Man.

Find a passage in the novel Invisible Man that uses symbolism and/or allusion to develop a deeper meaning than the literal text. Explain how the the device functions, both in terms of its literal and symbolic meaning. How does the symbol or allusion enhance a theme developed in the novel?

- You can definitely do this in a solid, tightly constructed 1 ½ pages.
- Please site the passage(s) you are using, and don't be afraid to quote from the novel liberally.

Second Essay Prompt

Answer one of the following questions in a well-developed 1 ½-3 page response. Irving Howe reviewed Invisible Man in 1952, and wrote, "Though immensely gifted, Ellison is not a finished craftsman. The tempo of his book is too feverish, and at times almost hysterical. Too often he tries to overwhelm the reader; but when he should be doing something other then overwhelm, when he should be persuading or suggesting or simply telling, he forces and tears. Because the book is written in the first person singular, Ellison cannot establish ironic distance between his hero and himself, or between the matured "I" telling the story and the "I" who is its victim. And because the experience is so apocalyptic and magnified, it absorbs and then dissolves the hero; every minor character comes through brilliantly, but the seeing "I" is seldom seen." Respond specifically to these observations.

1. Analyze the novel's three-part structure. How does it represent the narrator's movement from "purpose to passion to perception"?
2. Explain how the motif of invisibility is explored in the novel . What does it signify? How does it change? In what ways does Ellison use invisibility to explore the themes of the novel?
3. One of the major philosophical movements that motivated Ellison was existentialism. Using copious examples from the text and occasional reference to the notes, make an argument that Invisible Man is or is not an existential novel.
4. Orville Prescott wrote, "The bewildered and nameless hero of "Invisible Man" longs desperately to achieve a personal success and to help his people. But his role as a man acted upon more often than acting, as a symbol of doubt, perplexity, betrayal and defeat, robs him of the individual identity of the people who play a part in his life. These, while not subtly portrayed, have a vibrant life which makes them seem real and interesting. They include Dr. Bledsoe, the sanctimonious and unscrupulous college president; Mr. Norton, the Boston millionaire benefactor of the college; Lucius Brockway, psychopathic engineer in the paint factory; "Ras, the Exhorter," rabble-rouser and street prophet; Brother Jack, one-eyed and ruthless member of the "Brotherhood" committee." Discuss. ☺

From *The Atlantic Monthly*, 84 (November, 1899), pp. 577 - 587

"The Case of the Negro"

by Booker T. Washington

All attempts to settle the question of the Negro in the South by his removal from this country have so far failed, and I think that they are lively to fail. The next census will probably show that we have nearly ten million black people in the United States, about eight millions of whom are in the Southern states. In fact, we have almost a nation within a nation. The Negro population in the United States lacks but two millions of being as large as the whole population of Mexico, and is nearly twice as large as that of Canada. Our black people equal in number the combined populations of Switzerland, Greece, Honduras, Nicaragua, Cuba, Uruguay, Santo Domingo, Paraguay, and Costa Rica. When we consider, in connection with these facts, that the race has doubled itself since its freedom, and is still increasing, it hardly seems possible for any one to take seriously any scheme of emigration from America as a method of solution. At most, even if the government were to provide the means, but a few hundred thousand could be transported each year. The yearly increase in population would more than likely overbalance the number transported. Even if it did not, the time required to get rid of the Negro by this method would perhaps be fifty or seventy-five years.

Some have advised that the Negro leave the South, and take up his residence in the Northern states. I question whether this would make him any better off than he is in the South, when all things are considered. It has been my privilege to study the condition of our people in nearly every part of America; and I say without hesitation that, with some exceptional cases, the Negro is at his best in the Southern states. While he enjoys certain privileges in the North that he does not have in the South, when it comes to the matter of securing property, enjoying business advantages and employment, the South presents a far better opportunity than the North. Few colored men from the South are as yet able to stand up against the severe and increasing competition that exists in the North, to say nothing of the unfriendly influence of labor organizations, which in some way prevents black men in the North, as a rule, from securing occupation in the line of skilled labor.

Another point of great danger for the colored man who goes North is the matter of morals, owing to the numerous temptations by which he finds himself surrounded. More ways offer in which he can spend money than in the South, but fewer avenues of employment for earning money are open to him. The fact that at the North the Negro is almost confined to one line of occupation often tends to discourage and demoralize the strongest who go from the South, and makes them an easy prey for temptation. A few years ago, I made an examination into the condition of a settlement of Negroes who left the South and went into Kansas about twenty years since, when there was a good deal of excitement in the South concerning emigration from the West, and found it much below the standard of that of similar communities in the South. The only conclusion which any one can reach, from this and like instances, is that the Negroes are to remain in the Southern states. As a race they do not want to leave the South, and the Southern white people do not want them to leave. We must therefore find some basis of settlement that will be constitutional, just, manly; that will be fair to both races in the South and to the whole country. This cannot be done in a day, a year, or any short period of time. We can, however, with the present light, decide upon a reasonably safe method of solving the problem, and turn our strength and effort in that direction. In doing this, I would not have the Negro deprived of any privilege guaranteed to him by the Constitution of the United States. It is not best for the Negro that he relinquish any of his constitutional rights; it is not best for the Southern white man that he should, as I shall attempt to show in this article.

In order that we may concentrate our forces upon a wise object, without loss of time or effort, I want to suggest what seems to me and many others the wisest policy to be pursued. I have reached these conclusions not only by reason of my own observations and experience, but after eighteen years of direct contact with

leading and influential colored and white men in most parts of our country. But I wish first to mention some elements of danger in the present situation, which all who desire the permanent welfare of both races in the South should carefully take into account.

First. There is the danger that a certain class of impatient extremists among the Negroes in the North, who have little knowledge of the actual conditions in the South, may do the entire race injury by attempting to advise their brethren in the South to resort to armed resistance or the use of the torch, in order to secure justice. All intelligent and well-considered discussion of any important question, or condemnation of any wrong, whether in the North or the South, from the public platform and through the press, is to be commended and encouraged; but ill-considered and incendiary utterances from black men in the North will tend to add to the burdens of our people in the South rather than to relieve them. We must not fall into the temptation of believing that we can raise ourselves by abusing some one else.

Second. Another danger in the South which should be guarded against is that the whole white South, including the wise, conservative, law-abiding element, may find itself represented before the bar of public opinion by the mob or lawless element, which gives expression to its feelings and tendency in a manner that advertises the South throughout the world; while too often those who have no sympathy with such disregard of law are either silent, or fail to speak in a sufficiently emphatic manner to offset in any large degree the unfortunate reputation which the lawless have made for many portions of the South.

Third. No race or people ever got upon its feet without severe and constant struggle, often in the face of the greatest discouragement. While passing through the present trying period of its history, there is danger that a large and valuable element of the Negro race may become discouraged in the effort to better it condition. Every possible influence should be exerted to prevent this.

Fourth. There is a possibility that harm may be done to the South and to the Negro by exaggerated newspaper articles which are written near the scene or in the midst of specially aggravating occurrences. Often these reports are written by newspaper men, who give the impression that there is a race conflict throughout the South, and that all Southern white people are opposed to the Negro's progress; overlooking the fact that though in some sections there is trouble, in most parts of the South, if matters are not yet in all respects as we would have them, there is nevertheless a very large measure of peace, good will, and mutual helpfulness. In the same relation, much can be done to retard the progress of the Negro by a certain class of Southern white people, who in the midst of excitement speak or write in a manner that gives the impression that all Negroes are lawless, untrustworthy, and shiftless. For example, a Southern writer said, not long ago, in a communication to the New York Independent: "Even in small towns the husband cannot venture to leave his wife alone for an hour at night. At no time, in no place, is the white woman safe from the insults and assaults of these creatures." These statements, I presume, represented the feelings and the conditions that existed, at the time of the writing, in one community or county in the South; but thousands of Southern white men and women would be ready to testify that this is not the condition throughout the South, nor throughout any Southern state.

Fifth. Owing to the lack of school opportunities for the Negro in the rural districts of the South, there is danger that ignorance and idleness may increase to the extent of giving the Negro race a reputation for crime, and that immorality may eat its way into the fibre of the race so as to retard its progress for many years. In judging he Negro we must not be too harsh. We must remember that it have been only within the last thirty-four years that the black father and mother have had the responsibility, and consequently the experience, of training their own children. That perfection has not been reached in one generation, with the obstacles that the parents have been compelled to overcome, is not to be wondered at.

Sixth. Finally, I would mention my fear that some of the white people of the South may be led to feel that the way to settle the race problem s to repress the aspirations of the Negro by legislation of a kind that confers certain legal or political privileges upon an ignorant and poor white man, and withholds the same privileges

from a black man in a similar condition. Such legislation injures and retards the progress of both races. It is an injustice to the poor white man, because it takes from him incentive to secure education and property as prerequisites for voting. He feels that because he is a white man, regardless of his possessions, a way will be found for him to vote. I would label all such measures "laws to keep the poor white man in ignorance and poverty."

The Talladega News Reporter, a Democratic newspaper of Alabama, recently said: "But it is a weak cry when the white man asks odds on intelligence over the Negro. When nature has already so handicapped the African in the race for knowledge, the cry of the boasted Anglo-Saxon for still further odds seems babyish. What wonder that the world looks on in surprise, if not disgust? It cannot help but say, If our contention be true that the Negro is an inferior race, then the odds ought to be on the other side, if any are to be given. And why not? No; the thing to do -- the only thing that will stand the test of time -- is to do right, exactly right, let come what will. And that right thing, as it seems to us, is to place a fair educational qualification before every citizen, -- one that is self-testing, and not dependent on the wishes of weak men, -- letting all who pass the test stand in the proud ranks of American voters, whose votes shall be counted as cast, and whose sovereign will shall be maintained as law by all the powers that be. Nothing short of this will do. Every exemption, on whatsoever ground, is an outrage that can only rob some legitimate voter of his rights."

Such laws as have been made, -- in Mississippi, for example,--with the "understanding" clause, hold out a temptation for the election officer to perjure and degrade himself by too often deciding that the ignorant white man does understand the Constitution when it is read to him, and that the ignorant black man does not. By such a law, the state not only commit a wrong against its black citizens; it injures the morals of its white citizens by conferring such a power upon any white man who may happen to be a judge of elections.

Such laws are hurtful, again, because they keep alive in the hear of the black man the feeling that the white man means to oppress him. The only safe way out is to set a high standard as a test of citizenship, and require blacks and whites alike to come up to it. When this is done, both will have a higher respect for the election laws, and for those who make them. I do not believe that, with his centuries of advantage over the Negro in the opportunity to acquire property and education as prerequisites for voting, the average white man in the South desires that any special law be passed to give him further advantage over one who had had but a little more than thirty years in which to prepare himself for citizenship. In this relation, another point of danger is that the Negro has been made to feel that it is his duty continually to oppose the Southern white man in politics, even in matters where no principle is involved; and that he is only loyal to his own race and acting in a manly way in thus opposing the white man. Such a policy has proved very hurtful to both races. Where it is a matter of principle, where a question of right or wrong is involved, I would advise the Negro to stand by principle at all hazards. A Southern white man has no respect for or confidence in a Negro who acts merely for policy's sake; but there are many cases, and the number is growing, where the Negro has nothing to gain, and much to lose, by opposing the Southern white man in matters that relate to government.

Under the foregoing six heads I believe I have stated some of the main points which, all high-minded white men and black men, North and South, will agree, need our most earnest and thoughtful consideration, if we would hasten, and not hinder, the progress of our country.

Now as to the policy that should be pursued. On this subject I claim to possess no superior wisdom or unusual insight. I may be wrong; I may be in some degree right.

In the future we want to impress upon the Negro, more than we have done in the past, the importance of identifying himself more closely with the interests of the South; of making himself part of the South, and at home in it. Heretofore, for reasons which were natural, and for which no one is especially to blame, the colored people have been too much like a foreign nation residing in the midst of another nation. If William Lloyd Garrison, Wendell Phillips, or George L. Stearns were alive today, I feel sure that he would advise the Negroes to identify their interests as closely as possible with those of their white neighbors,--always

understanding that no question of right and wrong is involved. In no other way, it seems to me, can we get a foundation for peace and progress. He who advises against this policy will advise the Negro to do that which no people in history, who have succeeded, have done. The white man, North or South, who advises the Negro against it advises him to do that which he himself has not done. The bed rock upon which every individual rests his chances for success in life is the friendship, the confidence, the respect, of his next-door neighbor in the little community in which he lives. the problem of the Negro in the South turns on whether he can make himself cu indispensable service to his neighbor and the community that no one can fill his place better in the body politic. There is at present no other safe course for the black man to pursue. If the Negro in the South has a friend in his white neighbor, and a still larger number of friends in his own community, he has a protection and a guarantee of his rights that will be more potent and more lasting than any our Federal Congress or any outside power can confer.

The London Times, in a recent editorial discussing affairs in the Transvaal, where Englishmen have been denied certain privileges by the Boers, say: "England is too sagacious not to prefer a gradual reform from within, even should it be less rapid than most of us might wish, to the most sweeping redress of grievances imposed from without. Our objet is to obtain fair play for the Outlanders, but the best way to do it is to enable them to help themselves." This policy, I think, is equally safe when applied to conditions in the South. The foreigner who comes to America identifies himself as soon as possible, with the community in which he settles. We have a conspicuous example of this in the case of the Jews, who in the South, as well as in other parts of our country, have not always been justly treated; but the Jews have so woven themselves into the business and patriotic interests of the communities in which they live, have made themselves so valuable as citizens, that they have won a place in the South which they could have obtained in no other way. The Negro in Cuba has practically settled the race question there, because he has made himself a part of Cuba in thought and action.

What I have tried to indicate cannot be accomplished by any sudden revolution of methods, but it does seem that the tendency should be more and more in this direction. Let me emphasize this by a practical example. The North sends thousands of dollars into the South every year for the education of the Negro. The teachers in most of the Southern schools supported by he North are Northern men and women of the highest christian culture and most unselfish devotion. The Negro owes them a debt of gratitude which can never be paid. The various missionary societies in the North have done a work which to a large degree has proved the salvation of the South, and the result of it will appear more in future generations than in this. We have now reached the point, in the South, where, I believe, great good could be accomplished in changing the attitude of the white people toward the Negro, and of the Negro toward the whites, if a few Southern white teachers, of high character, would take an active interest in the work of our higher schools. Can this be done? Yes. the medical school connected with Shaw University at Raleigh, North Carolina, has from the first had as instructors and professors almost exclusively Southern white doctors who reside in Raleigh, and they have given the highest satisfaction. This gives the people of Raleigh the feeling that the school is theirs, and not something located in, but not a part of, the South. In Augusta, Georgia, the Payne Institute, one of the best colleges for our people, is officered and taught almost wholly by Southern white men and women. The Presbyterian Theological School at Tuscaloosa, Alabama, has only Southern white men as instructors. Some time ago, at the Calhoun School in Alabama, one of the leading white men in the country was given an important position; since then the feeling of the white people in the county has greatly changed toward the school.

We must admit the stern fact that at present the Negro, through no choice of his own, is living in the midst of another race, which is far ahead of him in education, property, and experience; and further, that the Negro's present condition makes him dependent upon the white people for most of the things necessary to sustain life, as well as, in a large measure, for his education. In all history, those who have possessed the property and intelligence have exercised the greatest control in government, regardless of color, race, or geographical location. This being the case, how can the black man in the South improve his estate? And does the Southern white man want him to improve it? The latter part of this question I shall attempt to answer later in this

article.

The Negro in the South has it within his power, if he properly utilize the forces at hand, to make of himself such a valuable factor in the life of the South that for the most part he need not seek privileges, but they will be conferred upon him. To bring this about, the Negro must begin at the bottom and lay a sure foundation, and not be lured by any temptation into trying to rise on a false footing. While the Negro is laying this foundation, he will need help and sympathy and justice from the law. Progress by any other method will be but temporary and superficial, and the end of it will be worse than the beginning. American slavery was a great curse to both races, and I should be the last to apologize for it; but in the providence of God I believe that slavery laid the foundation for the solution of the problem that is now before us in the South. Under slavery, the Negro was taught every trade, every industry, that furnishes the means of earning a living. Now if on this foundation, laid in a rather crude way, it is true, but a foundation nevertheless, we can gradually grow and improve, the future for us is bright. Let me be more specific. Agriculture is or has been the basic industry of nearly every race or nation that has succeeded. The Negro got a knowledge of this under slavery: hence in a large measure he is in possession of this industry in the South to-day. Taking the whole south, I should say that eighty per cent of the Negroes live by agriculture in some form, though it is often a very primitive and crude form. The Negro can buy land in the South, as a rule, wherever the white man can buy it, and at very low prices. Now, since the bulk of our people already have a foundation in agriculture, are at their best when living in the country engaged in agricultural pursuits, plainly, the best thing, the logical thing, is to turn the larger part of our strength in a direction that will put the Negroes among the most skilled agricultural people in the world. The man who has learned to do something better than any one else, has learned to do a common thing in an uncommon manner, has power and influence which no adverse surroundings can take from him. It is better to show a man how to make a place for himself than to put him in one that some one else has made for him. The Negro who can make himself so conspicuous as a successful farmer, a large tax-payer, a wise helper of his fellow mean, is to be placed in a position of trust and honor by natural selection, whether the position be political or not, is a hundred-fold more secure in that position than one placed there by mere outside force or pressure. I know a Negro, Hon. Isaiah T. Montgomery, in Mississippi, who is mayor of a town; it is true that the town is composed almost wholly of Negroes. Mr. Montgomery is mayor of this town because his genius, thrift, and foresight have created it; and he is held and supported in his office by a charter granted by the state of Mississippi, and by the vote and public sentiment of the community in which he lives.

Let us help the Negro by every means possible to acquire such an education in farming, dairying, stock-raising, horticulture, etc., as will place him near the top in these industries, and the race problem will in a large part be settled, or at least stripped of many of its most perplexing elements. This policy would also tend to keep the Negro in the country and smaller towns, where he succeeds best, and stop the influx into the large cities, where he does not succeed so well. The race, like the individual, which produces something of superior worth that has a common human interest, wins a permanent place, and is bound to be recognized.

At a county fair in the South, not long ago, I saw a Negro awarded the first prize, by a jury of white men, over white competitors, for the production of the best specimen of Indian corn. Every white man at the fair seemed to be proud of the achievement of the Negro, because it was apparent that he had done something that would add to the wealth and comfort of the people of both races in that county. At the Tuskegee Normal and Industrial Institute, in Alabama, we have a department devoted to training men along the lines of agriculture that I have named; but what we are doing is small when compared with what should be done in Tuskegee, and at other educational centres. In a material sense the South is still an undeveloped country. While in some other affairs race prejudice is strongly marked, in the matter of business, of commercial and industrial development, there are few obstacles in the Negro's way. A Negro who produces or has for sale something that the community wants finds customers among white people as well as black. Upon equal security, a Negro can borrow money at the bank as readily as a white man can. A bank in Birmingham, Alabama, which has existed ten years, is officered and controlled wholly by Negroes. This bank has white borrowers and

white depositors. A graduate of the Tuskegee Institute keeps a well-appointed grocery store in Tuskegee, and he tells me that he sells about as many goods to one race as to the other. What I have said of the opening that awaits the Negro in the business of agriculture is almost equally true of mechanics, manufacturing, and all the domestic arts. The field is before him and right about him. Will he seize upon it? Will he "cast down his bucket where he is?" Will his friends, North and South, encourage him and prepare him to occupy it? Every city in the South, for example, would give support to a first-class architect or housebuilder or contractor of our race. The architect or contractor would not only receive support, but through his example numbers of young colored men would learn such trades a carpentry, brickmasonry, plastering, painting, etc., and the race would be put into a position to hold on to many of the industries which it is now in danger of losing, because in too many cases brain, skill, and dignity are not imparted to the common occupations. Any individual or race that does not fit itself to occupy in the best manner the field or service that is right about it will sooner or later be asked to move on and let another take it.

But I may be asked, Would you confine the Negro to agriculture, mechanic, the domestic arts, etc.? Not at all; but just now and for a number of years the stress should be laid along the lines that I have mentioned. We shall need and must have many teachers and ministers, some doctors and lawyers and statesmen, but these professional men will have a constituency or a foundation from which to draw support just in proportion as the race prospers along the economic lines that I have pointed out. During the first fifty or one hundred years of the life of any people, are not the economic occupations always given the greater attention? This is not only the historic, but, I think, the common-sense view. If this generation will lay the material foundation, it will be the quickest and surest way for enabling later generations to succeed in the cultivation of the fine arts, and to surround themselves with some of the luxuries of life, if desired. What the race most needs now, in my opinion, is a whole army of men and women well trained to lead, and at the same time devote themselves to agriculture, mechanics, domestic employment, and business. As to the mental training that these educated leaders should be equipped with, I should say, give them all the mental raining and culture that the circumstances of individuals will allow, -- the more the better. No race can permanently succeed until its mind is awakened and strengthened by the ripest thought. But I would constantly have it kept in the minds of those who are educated in books that a large proportion of those who are educated should be so trained in hand that they can bring this mental strength and knowledge to bear upon the physical conditions in the South, which I have tried to emphasize.

Frederick Douglass, of sainted memory, once, in addressing his race, used these words: "We are to prove that we can better our own condition. One way to do this is to accumulate property, money, if you please, will purchase for us the only condition by which any people can rise to the dignity of genuine manhood; for without property there can be no leisure, without leisure there can be no thought, without thought there can be no invention, without invention there can be no progress."

The Negro should be taught that material development is not an end, but merely a means to an end. As Professor W.E.B. Du Bois puts it, the idea would not be simply to make men carpenters, but to make carpenters men. The Negro has a highly religious temperament; but what he needs more and more is to be convinced of the importance of weaving his religion and morality into the practical affairs of daily life. Equally does he need to be taught to put so much intelligence into his labor that he will see dignity and beauty in the occupation, and lose it for its own sake. The Negro needs to be taught to apply more of the religion that manifests itself in his happiness in prayer meeting to the performance of his daily task. The man who owns a home, and is in the possession of the elements by which he is sure of a daily living, has a great aid to a moral and religious life. What bearing will all this have upon the Nebrok's place in the South, as a citizen and in the enjoyment of the privileges which our government confers?

To state in detail just what place the black man will occupy in the South as a citizen, when he had developed in the direction named, is beyond the wisdom of any one. Much will depend upon the sense of justice which can be kept alive in the breast of the American people; almost as much will depend upon the good sense of he Negro himself. That question, I confess, does not give me the most concern just now. The important and

pressing question is, Will the Negro, with his own help and that of his friends, take advantage of the opportunities that surround him? When he has done this, I believe, speaking of his future in general terms, that he will be treated with justice, be given the protection of the law and the recognition which his usefulness and ability warrant. If, fifty years ago, one had predicted that the Negro would receive the recognition and honor which individuals have already received, he would have been laughed at as an idle dreamer. Time, patience, and constant achievement are great factors in the rise of a race.

I do not believe that the world ever takes a race seriously, in its desire to share in the government of a nation, until a large number of individual members of that race have demonstrated beyond question their ability to control and develop their own business enterprises. Once a number of Negroes rise to the point where they own and operate the most successful farms, are among the largest taxpayers in their county, are moral and intelligent, I do not believe that in many portions of the South such men need long be denied the right of saying by their votes how they prefer their property to be taxed, and who are to make and administer the laws.

I was walking the street of a certain town in the South lately in company with the most prominent Negro there. While we were together, the mayor of the town sought out the black man, and said, "Next week we are going to vote on the question of issuing bonds to secure waterworks; you must be sure to vote on the day of election." The mayor did not suggest whether he should vote yes or no; but he knew that the very fact of this Negro's owning nearly a block of the most valuable property in the town was a guarantee that he would cast a safe, wise vote on this important proposition. the white man knew that because of this Negro's property interests he would cast his vote in the way he thought would benefit every white and black citizen in the town, and not be controlled by influences a thousand miles away. But a short time ago I read letters from nearly every prominent white man in Birmingham, Alabama, asking that the Rev. W. R. Pettiford, a Negro, be appointed to a certain important federal office. What is the explanation of this? For nine years Mr. Pettiford has been the president of the Negro bank in Birmingham, to which I have alluded. During these nine years, the white citizens have had the opportunity of seeing that Mr. Pettiford can manage successfully a private business, and that he has proved himself a conservative, thoughtful citizen, and they are willing to trust him in a public office. Such individual examples will have to be multiplied till they become more nearly the rule than the exception they now are. While we are multiplying these examples, the Negro must keep a strong and courageous heart. He cannot improve his condition by any short-cut course or by artificial methods. Above all, he must not be deluded into believing that his condition can be permanently bettered by a mere battledore and shuttlecock of words, or by any process of mere mental gymnastics or oratory. What is desired along with a logical defense of his cause are deeds, results, -- continued results, in the direction of building himself up. so as to leave no doubt in the mind of any one of his ability to succeed.

An important question often asked is, Does the white man in the South want the Negro to improve his present condition? I say yes. From the Montgomery (Alabama) Daily Advertiser I clip the following in reference to the closing of a colored school in a town in Alabama: --

"Eufaula, May 25, 1899. the closing exercises of the city colored public school were held at St. Luke's A.M.E. Church last night, and were witnessed by a large gathering, including many whites. the recitations by the pupils were excellent, and the music was also an interesting feature. Rev. R.T. Pollard delivered the address, which was quite an able one, and the certificates were presented by Professor T. L. McCoy, white, of the Sanford Street School. The success of the exercises reflects great credit on Professor S.M. Murphy, the principal, who enjoys a deserved good reputation as a capable and efficient educator."

I quote this report, not because it is the exception, but because such marks of interest in the education of the Negro on the part of the Southern white people may be seen almost every day in the local papers. Why should white people, by their presence, words, and actions, encourage the black man to get education, if they do not desire him to improve his condition?

The Payne Institute, an excellent college, to which I have already referred, is supported almost wholly by the Southern white Methodist church. The Southern white Presbyterians support a theological school for Negroes at Tuscaloosa. For a number of years the Southern white Baptists have contributed toward Negro education. Other denominations have done the same. If these people do not want the Negro educated to a higher standard, there is no reason why they should pretend they do.

Though some of the lynchings in the South have indicated a barbarous feeling toward Negroes, Southern white men here and there, as well as newspapers, have spoken out strongly against lynching. I quote from the address of the Rev. Mr. Vance, of Nashville, Tennessee, delivered before the National Sunday School Union, in Atlanta, not long since, as an example:--

"And yet, as I stand here to-night, a Southerner speaking for my section and addressing an audience from all sections, there is one foul blot upon the fair fame of the South, at the bare mention of which the heart turns sick and the cheek is crimsoned with shame. I want to lift my voice to-night in loud and long and indignant protest against the awful horror of mob violence, which the other day reached the climax of its madness and infamy in a deed as black and brutal and barbarous as can be found in the annals of human crime.

"I have a right to speak on the subject, and I propose to be heard. The time has come for every lover of the South to set the might of an angered and resolute manhood against the shame and peril of the lynch demand. these people whose fiendish glee taunts their victim as his flesh crackles in the flames do not represent the South. I have not a syllable of apology for the sickening crime they meant to avenge. but it is high time we were learning that lawlessness is no remedy for crime. For one, I dare to believe that the people of my section are able to copy with crime, however treacherous and defiant, through their courts of justice; and I plead for the masterful sway of a righteous and exalted public sentiment that shall class lynch law in the category with crime."

It is a notable and encouraging fact that no Negro educated in any of our larger institutions of learning in the South has been charged with any of the recent crimes connected with assaults upon women.

If we go on making progress in the directions that I have tried to indicate, more and more the South will be drawn to one course. As I have already said, it is not to the best interests of the white race of the South that the Negro be deprived of any privilege guaranteed him by the Constitution of the United Sates. This would put upon the South a burden under which no government could stand and prosper. Every article in our Federal Constitution was placed there with a view of stimulating and encouraging the highest type of citizenship. To continue to tax the Negro without giving him the right to vote, as fast as he qualifies himself in education and property for voting, would insure the alienation of the affections of the Negro from the state in which he lives, and would be the reversal of the fundamental principles of government for which our states have stood. In other ways than this the injury would be as great to the white man as to the Negro. Taxation without the hope of becoming voters would take away from one third of the citizens of the Gulf states their interest in government, and a stimulus to become taxpayers or to secure education, and thus be able and willing to bear their share of the cost of education and government, which now rests so heavily upon the white taxpayers of the South. The more the Negro is stimulated and encouraged, the sooner will he be able to bear a larger share of the burdens of the South. We have recently had before us an example, in the case of Spain, of a government that left a large portion of its citizens in ignorance, and neglected their highest interests.

As I have said elsewhere: "There is no escape, through law of man or God, from the inevitable.

"The laws of changeless justice bind

oppressor with oppressed;

And close as sin and suffering joined

We march to fate abreast."

Nearly sixteen millions of hands will aid you in pulling the load upwards, or they will pull the load downwards against you. We shall constitute one third and more of the ignorance and crime of the South, or one third of its intelligence and progress; we shall contribute one third to the business and industrial prosperity of the South, or we shall prove a veritable body of death, stagnating, depressing, retarding every effort to advance the body politic."

My own feeling is that the South will gradually reach the point where it will see the wisdom and the justice of enacting an educational or property qualification, or both, for voting, that shall be made to apply honestly to both races. The industrial development of the Negro in connection with education and Christian character will help to hasten this end. When this is done, we shall have a foundation, in my opinion, upon which to build a government that is honest, and that will be in a high degree satisfactory to both races.

I do not suffer myself to take too optimistic a view of the condition in the South. The problem is a large and serious one, and will require the patient help, sympathy, and advice of our most patriotic citizens, North and South, for years to come. But I believe that if the principles which I have tried to indicate are followed, a solution of the question will come. So long as the Negro is permitted to get education, acquire property, and secure employment, and is treated with respect in the business world, as is now true in the greater part of the South, I shall have the greatest faith in his working out his own destiny in our Southern states. The education and preparation for citizenship of nearly eight millions of people is a tremendous task, and every lover of humanity should count it a privilege to help in the solution of a problem for which our whole country is responsible.

Plunging History

By Jim Neighbors

Plunging history: naming and self-possession in Invisible Man

African American Review, Summer 2002

In several interviews, Ralph Ellison joins many of his readers in resolving Invisible Man into a declaration of coherent identity. Effectively interpreting Invisible Man as a modem Bildungsroman, Ellison says: "In my novel the narrator's development is one through blackness to light; that is, from ignorance to enlightenment: invisibility to visibility" (Graham and Singh 12); "It's a novel about innocence and human error, a struggle through illusion to reality" (14); "Whatever [Invisible Man] did when he returns ...should be based on the knowledge gained before he went underground. This is a question of self-knowledge and ability to identify the processes of the world" (74); "I do believe that knowing where we are, has a lot to do with our knowing who we are and this gets back to the theme, I hope, of identity with which [Invisible Man] was sometimes involved" (263). This chain of reasoning presents Invisible Man as successfully negotiating a labyrinth designed to rob him of his identity. Once his invisibility is made visible, a preeminent and self-reliant self lifts out of its confusing history in a parousia of self-knowledge and resolves to act or write--conflated by this logic into the same thing--a declaration of coherent identity. (1)

This reading of Invisible Man as an heroic narrative of the ultimate re/possession of a dispossessed self derives out of Aristotelian conceptions of language and subjectivity. The Aristotelian logic of metaphor, in which a metaphor properly resembles the essence of a prelinguistic and determining referent, is compatible with--in fact, constitutive of--the logics of the transcendental Self and instrumental writing. The term Self serves as the literal figure that categorically names the proper transcendental Self that sits behind, as it were, the term. A person's proper name, in this way, is the literal--and, so, most proper--figure of the extralinguistic Self behind the name. The Self is a stable referent that extends itSelf to its proper name; the proper name thus consists of a transference, a carrying over, from the stable referent of the Self. What motivates one's proper name is the Self behind (before, a priori, etc.) the name. A proper relation of transference from Self to proper name ("Self") defines res emblance. The literalizing of the Self (to "Self" or proper name) is the process of naming, of properly rendering into language what exists prior to language. Writing, then, is instrumentalized in the process of naming: The term serves (as a tool, or vehicle) the a priori Self as slave to master. The master Self determines its linguistic presence by using appropriate language to name itSelf. Language does not interfere in the process; it merely serves the Self properly.

Conceiving of a Self prior to and as master of writing provides the conceptual basis for interpreting Invisible Man as a Bildungsroman. By this logic, Invisible Man becomes the stable identity behind the writing of his story: He sits in his chamber, reflects on his life experiences, and writes his biography, the meaning of which is guaranteed by the referential stability and coherence of instrumentalized writing. The guarantee to reference in writing by the transcendental and a priori Self not only allows for the existence of referentially stable biography, but extends to any form of graphein. As long as writing can be mastered, then history can be written.

But Invisible Man does not so neatly resolve into such coherence. Following a different narrator, this essay will argue that Invisible Man "plunges" modem fantasies of narrative coherence and stable identity, and defines history as being constituted by disruption, contingency, and the difference in writing. (2) And while these

qualities do not "add up" to the logic of an aporia, I work to show that the relation between Invisible Man and his name is not dialectical but aporetic. (3)

Dispossessing the Possessed Self

The ostensibly declarative opening of Invisible Man--"I am an Invisible Man:--reveals, in a grammatical askesis of declaration, an in-completion of the subject. Instead of the predicate nominative properly complementing the subject, the modifier "Invisible" negates ("In") the empirical status of the object, "Man." The "object" thus disappears even as it is called into being, leaving "Man" to signify nothing other than a space of negation. This disrupted declaration, however, seems to be explained by the narrator in the second paragraph of the "Prologue":

That invisibility to which I refer occurs because of a peculiar disposition of the eyes of those with whom I come in contact. A matter of the construction of their inner eyes, those eyes with which they look through their physical eyes upon reality.... you're constantly being bumped against by those of poor vision. Or again, you often doubt if you really exist. You wonder whether you aren't simply a phantom in other people's minds.... You ache with the need to convince yourself you do exist in the real world... and you swear to make them recognize you. And, alas, it's seldom successful. (3-4)

By emphasizing the viewer's "poor vision," Invisible Man creates the possibility of an ontological condition of good vision, or true sight, wherein observers would be able to recognize the real person--not the negation or phantom--they are seeing. True sight would therefore resolve the apparent problem introduced by the negation of the subject in the process of its declaration.

But in a fashion emblematic of the novel's structure as a whole, Invisible Man's positivism is shown to be untenable:

One night I accidentally bumped into a man.... I stopped the blade, slicing the air as I pushed him away, letting him fall back to the street.... He lay there, moaning on the asphalt; a man almost killed phantom.... Would he have awakened at the point of death? Would Death himself have freed him for wakeful living? But I didn't linger.... Poor fool, poor blind fool, I thought with sincere compassion, mugged by an invisible man! (4-5)

The ambivalence of the encounter for Invisible Man is palpable: His "compassion" for the "poor blind fool" evinces a continuing belief in the possibility for true sight, but the question of whether the blind fool would have "awakened at the point of death" to "recognize" Invisible Man is both left unanswered and, at the same time, by virtue of the extreme likelihood that the man would not have awakened, is highly pessimistic about the potential for "wakeful living." Indeed, the combination of contingency, unknowability, and absurdity that characterizes the "accidental" encounter between an anonymous "phantom" who later becomes institutionalized as a "mugger" is both introduced and left unresolved throughout the novel's remainder. Just as there is no clarity of sight available for the "tall blond man" (4) to properly identify his "invisible" assailant (4), genealogical and typological methods of any kind to establish a coherent and stable identity will also always be subject to the same--and unceasingly urgent --conditions of impossibility. (5)

Plunging History

By Jim Neighbors

(Un)Mastering Mastery

The disruptive syntax and semantics of the novel's opening two paragraphs begin the novel's disruption of identity claims and self-possession. To better contextualize the significance of Ellison's aporetic narration, and to situate my reading of the novel--a reading that departs from and is conditioned by the novel's opening sentence--it will be necessary to outline the logic of self-possession for which both a certain Ellison and many of his readers argue. Then I will compare Houston Baker's impressively wide-ranging reading of the Trueblood episode to the logic of self-possession.

There are two primary components to the logic of self-possession. First, the novel must be seen as being written retrospectively: The narrator, having emerged from his confusing labyrinth, reviews the trials of his process of self-discovery. The traumatics of self-discovery are finished; the self is discovered, an identity completed. After all, we must know who we are before we can be free"--the narrator's knowledge of who he is gives him a history to represent. Second, the novel (and, by extension, writing in general) must be seen as consisting of this representing: The hero, safely ensconced in his illuminated chamber, writes the story of a quest for identity, which is Invisible Man.

My purpose in engaging Baker's article is neither revisional nor agonistic: I wish to call attention to one revealing aspect of his argument rather than to contest or add to it. A particularly representative passage from Baker's essay highlights the crucial tension. "Artists," he contends, "must, in essence, sufficiently modify their folk forms (and amply advertise themselves) to merchandise such forms as commodities in the artistic market. To make their products commensurate with a capitalistic marketplace, folk artists may even have to don masks that distort their genuine selves. Ralph Ellison is a master of such strategies" (344). Two dichotomies exist here: artists vs. merchants and "masks" vs. "genuine selves." The movement from the "vital repository of 'humane value' " (323) of an "undeniable folk authenticity" to the "constraint" of the marketplace signifies many things for Baker, including an "obscene... delivering up" of Afro-American "expressive selves" to "their Anglo-American oppressors" (341). B ut what concerns us here are the dichotomies themselves.

Fully stable categories of "authentic selfhood" and "inauthentic masking" are embedded in Baker's dichotomous "dualisms"; one cannot, at least within Baker's logic, make use of a term like authentic without positing such categories. These dualisms then form the basis for a number of other divisions: public and private, "critic" and "creative writer," "nonsignificant life experiences and their inscribed, artistic significance" (322). These divisions allow Baker to take one further step, illustrated by the idea of mastery in the above quote:" .. . Ellison is a master of such strategies." Mastery of this kind both reinscribes the separation between artist and merchant (Ellison "dons" whichever masks are necessary in his manipulation of the public marketplace), and relegates writing once again to instrumentality (Ellison masters his words to tell a story, represent reality, reform society, etc.). Thus the figure of Ellison as the master mask-man conjoins the related classical ideals of the transcendent Self and instrumentalized writing: Baker's reading of the Trueblood episode vividly articulates the heroic repossession of the once dispossessed Self, and the story it tells after its return.

Plunging History

By Jim Neighbors

(Un)naming Nameability

An alternate set of Ellison's readers challenge, to varying degrees, the logic of sell-possession in Invisible Man. One of the most compelling is provided by Kimberly Benston in his essay "I Yam What I Yarn." (6) Benston's tightly packed reading of the tradition of (un)naming in African American literature points to the problem of meaning in general, a problem of central importance to Ellison's anonymous narrator. (7) As Benston suggests, processes of naming and the function of the name are central to the problem of identity in Invisible Man. I will begin by briefly recounting Benston's argument.

Just as there is no absolute position from which one can identify Hart from Rine--the internal, unmolested Sell from, say, external public projections--the process of naming can never produce "true" names. (8) Benston enumerates various traditions of naming relevant to Ellison's poetics of naming- African American "genealogical revisionism" and "self-creation"; Muslim and Black Muslim movement "nominatione"; and Du Boisian dialectical double- consciousness naming (152-53)-in a larger project of describing both the epistemological conditions of Ellisonian naming and the beginnings of an ethics of (un)naming that derives in part from Ellison's writings. Making use of many of Ellison's noted literary antecedents, Benston schematizes a complex of naming that fundamentally consists of two inextricable components: an Emersonian/Ahabian desire for mastering phenomena and an Ishmaelian/Ellisonian resistance to being mastered by the name (155-56). Ahab and Emerson attempt to transform an otherwise inscrutable whale o r object into "Moby Dick"--a detached and bounded projection of the Poet's Adamic art. By doing so, they totalize the phenomenon within their conceptual or artistic frame.

Conversely, Ishmael and Ellison recognize "that any classification, any figurative 'cetology,' is only a partial, expressive delineation (an 'extract')" of what cannot be totalized (154-55). In other words, for Ellison there is always that which necessarily escapes any act of naming, any attempt at mastery; an impassable epistemological and linguistic gap separates what is named and its name. In Benston's terms, there is always an "un" alongside "naming." (9) But this does not imply or countenance, as Baker argues, an escape or redeemed position from the doubled condition of (un)naming. Benston shows that there is never a Self transcendent from its unnaming, and one can never act and/or write outside of one's history.

Plunging (outside of) History

(Un)Naming History

The question of what makes up history, which is really a question of whose history, which is itself a question of who is naming history, is central to the problem of naming in Invisible Man:

All things, it is said, are duly recorded--all things of importance, that is. But not quite, for actually it is only the known, the seen, the heard and only those events that the recorder regards as important that are put down, those lies his keepers keep their power by. But the cop would be Clifton's historian, his judge, his witness, and his executioner, and I was the only brother in the watching crowd. And I, the only witness for the defense, knew

neither the extent of his guilt nor the nature of his crime. Where were the historians today? And how would they put it down? (IM 439)

The problem of who is writing history and how they are putting it down does not disappear during any of the novel's historiographical modes. Invisible Man presents an array of historiographies, including: the Brotherhood's pseudoMarxist notion of a dialectical "History" in which "realists... and materialists ... determine the direction of events" according to a scientific program (307); the moments of "history" as recording the "clutter of household objects" (271) of the dispossessed tenants; Invisible Man's desire to "get them in, all of them"--to bring the historically unnamed into the "groove of history," to "record" the otherwise "forgotten names" (443) in histories dominated by historians un- or disinterested in African American history. Yet none of these historiographies escapes the problem of writing, which is a problem of naming.

History, thus, in many of its "frequencies" in Invisible Man, records events and names that would otherwise be ignored or obscured (see Callahan). But just as Ellison is unyielding about the necessity for all peoples to have the capacity to record history's events, he is equally adamant in rejecting a thing named "History." Historical events, no matter the degree to which they're "witnessed," are still subject to the activity of "recording." There is no im-mediate history; Clifton's historical and printed "name" will always be, at the very least, inextricably enmeshed in the contingencies of encounters between the recorder's eye and the recorder's writing of what is to be recorded. "Naming history," then, requires at least two distinct though potentially related acts: identifying a name to be recorded, and recording that name. (10)

The problem of naming history reemphasizes the necessity to acquire the power to print and record, which could be taken, as Baker does, as the defining ethical injunction of twentieth-century African American identity. This assumes that if History is always History-For, then it should merely be a matter of gaining control of various print media (acknowledging the particular privileging of print in American political and juridical systems) to produce the necessary conditions for self-definition. According to this logic, individuals should write their own histories, or record the events of their lives, like a masterful Rinehart or Trueblood, who slips outside of history and into a mask to manipulate or take advantage of a given historical context, to define his own identity. Taking Invisible Man's rousing anti-dispossession speech seriously in this way (" 'WE'LL BE DISPOSSESSED NO MORE!' "), individuals who would become, as it were, the "'CITIZENS OF TOMORROW'S WORLD"' (IM346), must therefore complete two prin cipal tasks: (1) transcend--step outside of--History to identify a name, and (2) write a History for-name--the name. The possession of History would then be structurally homologous to the possession of Self: Both presume a transcendability to History and an instrumentality to writing.

This is precisely where Invisible Man runs into trouble with many of its critics, who contend that the novel cannot be coherently converted into grounds for ethical action, or objective historiography. (11) For good reason. Invisible Man, as I will now elucidate, "plunges" both the idea of a transcendental Self--a name existing outside of history--and the instrumentalization of writing--the capacity to unproblematically record or name the transcendent name. Neither writing nor selfhood can escape the divisibility, contingency, or inextricability of writing/naming history; "history," by this logic, is never anything that can be named, or made equal to the

writing of its name: t is not a concept. (12) What happens in Invisible Man is not a "stepping outside of" history; rather, it is a "plunging into" the "chaos" or abyss of the name of history. (13)

Plunging the Abyss of Aristotle

We can now begin to see how this disrupts the Aristotelean logic underlying sell-possessed readings of Invisible Man. Within an Aristotelean logic of metaphoricity, the master "Rinehart" can be seen as extending himself--metaphorizing himself--into a variety of proper names or masks which resemble in some manner his proper sell; each mask serves his needs seamlessly as he "dons" them without concern. The masks will behave: They are mere instruments designed to enable master Rinehart to achieve his ends. The same with Trueblood, and, as Baker argues, with Ellison: Master storytellers use words as tools to manipulate their situation, to achieve Self-possession. In this way, language is mimetic: It re-presents (expresses, describes, illustrates) its referent--it carries over the essence of the referent to the term--as a mirror reflects its image. Sell-possession through language occurs when the Sell is made external to it. Self through the vessel of the name ("Sell"): The Sell recognizes it. Self in its name ("S ell"), as one recognizes the image of oneself in a mirror. The master writer/magician conjures himself (represents himself) in language; language primarily (if not exclusively) "exists" to reflect its master.

But in Invisible Man there is no demonstrable "Self" outside of language, and no unity-of-sell that the notion of Selfhood requires. Both of these claims--that language is inextricably linked to selfhood, and that selfhood itself is disintegrated and plural (itselves)--are not only supported by, but emphatically present in, Invisible Man. Writing is never master-able; it is never subject to the objectivity of pre-linguistic determination: If it serves at all, it does so while exceeding or undermining the "master's" intent. If one utters a sound, speaks a word, signs one's name, then one has plunged into--is shown to have always already been plunging--the differance of language.

Plunging

Both Invisible Man and Derrida's "La Mythologie Blanche" metaphorize linguistic incompleteness and excess as a "plunging." One is, writes Derrida under Alan Bass's translation, "met... en abyme" ('put into abyme'). Bass translates "putting into" also as "to plunge," or "plunged/plunging," "into" abyme. The many functions of abyme include: "infinite reflection" (as mise en abyme), "to ruin" (abimer), and "abime" ('abyss, chasm, depths, chaos, interval, difference, division, etc.'). (14) Plunging into abyme, then, is (in part) plunging into writing, or differance, which is precisely the condition of ruinous sell-dispossession, of writing the self. This conception of writing opens subjectivity up to the potentially infinite play of difference--demonstrates the already-having-been of the play of difference--of a trembling movement of simultaneous making and unmaking. The "generalisation de la metaphoricite par la mise en abyme d'une metaphore determinee" ('the generalization of metaphor by plunging into abyme one determined metaphor') shows the Aristotelean logic of metaphoricity, in which metaphor properly carries over the essence of a pre-linguistic and determining referent (resemblance), as being always already divided (262). Plunging metaphoricity stipulates that meaning will never be made properly present, and any notion of a Self behind the metaphor is a nostalgic idealization. There is no Self outside of

language; all "selves" are divided and dividing metaphors. Claiming self-possession and representing it through writing thus require a blindness to writing and difference.

The first uses of plunge in Invisible Man occur at the point of a name:

WHAT IS YOUR NAME?

A tremor shook me; it was as though he had suddenly given a name to, had organized the vagueness that drifted through my head, and I was overcome with swift shame. I realized that I no longer knew my own name .... I tried again, plunging into the blackness of my mind. (239)

Despite continuing attempts by the "doctors" to elicit his name, Invisible Man merely "lay fretting over [his] identity" until the "Director" calls it, which provokes a "stabbing pain" of recognition (242, 246). The episode concludes with Invisible Man in a state of confusion: 'Things whirled too fast around me. My mind went alternately bright and blank in slow rolling waves. We, he, him--my mind and I--were no longer getting around in the same circles" (249-50).

The factory hospital episode as a whole is one of the transition points in the novel: a movement from one condition or conceptual register to another-- transitions often marked by birth imagery, and always involving some form of paper exchange or transmission. This transition shares the iconography of vertical movement with each of Invisible Man's subsequent transitions (into the subway system, down the stairs of the burning building, onto the "load of coal"): The "train plunged," and he "dropped through the roar, giddy and vacuum-minded, sucked under and out into the later afternoon Harlem" (250). Invisible Man's identity confusion (and/or fusion--at one point he felt "somehow a part of all of [the names], had become submerged within them and lost" [241]) is narrated as a plunging: He plunges his mind unsuccessfully for his name, and his confusion is troped as an underground or submerged subway that stresses agent-less, chaotic transport over active, participatory self-transformation.

The attempt by Invisible Man to remember a name forgotten triggers the instability of an identity crisis. (15) Writing is emphasized throughout the scene: Names are scrawled on placards; his name is written on the set of papers he takes with him from the Director's office. Invisible Man's name is forgotten, painfully recognized, written, and soon lost again in a subterranean confusion of transport. The "burning eye" (232) that plagues Invisible Man is "cured," though with no lasting results, by the announcement of his name. Naming and visibility are linked, of course, throughout the novel, which emphasizes the severity of an eye-dentity crisis: "When I discover who I am, I'll be free"--and thereby be able to see (243). But he leaves without the stability he seeks, even after his name is given: "I had the feeling that I had been talking beyond myself, had used words and expressed attitudes not my own, that I was in the grip of some alien personality lodged deep within me.... It was as though I were acting out a scene from some crazy movie. Or perhaps I was catching up with myself and had put into words feelings which I had hitherto suppressed" (249). These questions are-- unmistakably--left unanswered, open: His movement underground to the plunging trains as "We, he, him--my mind and I" does nothing to stabilize his identity.

We have, then, a juxtaposition of the desire for a stable identity and, even after his name is given, the instability of a continuing identity confusion. This is not an identity confusion leading toward resolution. If the narrator's loss of a proper name were catachrestic--a radical misnaming--then we could posit a potential (re)possession of his proper name by virtue of the presupposed latent proper name in the notion of "misnaming." But Invisible Man's name is precisely never given; he ranks as one of the most well-recognized anonymous characters in American literature. This anonymity emphasizes not the promise of an eventual fulfilling of identity claims by a more appropriate, or totalizing, name, but the necessary unfulfillability of the name for the named. By this logic, there is never a time--and has never been a time-when a proper name would exist; no name would be proper to, or fulfilling of, whatever it failed to name, which is always the impossible condition of naming.

The six remaining uses of plunge that I am focusing on will develop this point.

The second use of plunge reveals the despair in the concept of the potentially infinite unnameability in plunging. Tod Clifton's" 'plunge outside history' "is in this sense an attempt to fix an identity, to stabilize the chaotic swirl of trying to distinguish the 'lies' " of a " 'corrupt ideology' " from the truth of a " 'black king,' "or to know" 'your pahst and where are you going' "--to know your history (375). Ras has settled the issue for himself: He has determined his identity and named it; he has identified his history and acts upon it; he works toward a resolution of his proper name. Clifton is, as yet, unsettled: "'I don't know.... I suppose sometimes a man has to plunge outside history.... Plunge outside, turn his back.... Otherwise he might kill somebody, go nuts' " (377). If you are the black king, then you have stepped outside of history: You can see historical progression; your name is visible, or perhaps you have created your own name. The conditions of your decision make your choice clear bec ause you have reduced the potentially infinite activity of plunging the name of history to a binary condition. Either one goes mad by staying in an infinitely spiraling history, or one steps outside of mad history and into a blinded, and sanitized, concept of history. Ras's sight is actually an occlusion of history.

But another way of seeing Clifton's problem allows for the grammatical ambiguity of the verb has to plunge--both ethics and necessity simultaneously, or the epistemological condition of ethics as necessity. One is always choosing to go mad, and one is always mad in the choosing. Clifton's history is mixed with madness: Already in the pointing--in the choosing of one's history--is a radical undoing of history, an irresolvable destabilizing of history. (16) At the instant of the pointing, history is constructed and deconstructed; as you point to history, you plunge it, you are plunged by it. History, like the problem of a name, cannot exist as a transcendental referent. Clifton is acutely aware of this double pointing/unpointing, and it eventually drives him to the madness in/of his name.

Clifton's anxiety conditions Invisible Man's form of reflection. His name having been plunged, Invisible Man will now be (as he has always been) unnamed. The first several appearances of plunging after Clifton's remarks occur just before Clifton is killed. I will address three separate components of this episode, each of which are "plungings," and each of which functions differently, though all are related to abyme. First, Invisible Man is plunged into anxiety by the sight of Clifton's dolls:

Plunging History

By Jim Neighbors

It was as though he had chosen--how had he put it the night he fought with Ras--to fall outside of history. I stopped in the middle of the walk with the thought. "To plunge," he had said. But he knew that only in the Brotherhood could we make ourselves known, could we avoid being empty Sambo dolls. Such an obscene flouncing of everything human! My God!... I'd overlooked it a thousand times; no matter why I wasn't called. I'd forget it and hold on desperately to Brotherhood with all my strength. For to break away would be to plunge.... To plunge! (434-35)

Clifton's "plunge" is terrifying to Invisible Man: He will go so far as to suffer humiliation to retain the value of (the) Brotherhood. What is valuable in the Brotherhood, what the Brotherhood gives, is a sense of definition, of identity, of history--"make ourselves known." It allows one to become "human," to move out of the degradation of being defined as inhuman, or of no account. But this passage is deeply and bitterly ironized: As Invisible Man will later come to find out, the Brotherhood's interest in its workers, particularly its African American workers, is anything but "human"--at least in the sense that Invisible Man speaks of it here. Thus an anxiety for definition and identification is proleptically apposed to the impossibility of acquiring one, of achieving nameability or knowability. Invisible Man's desire to "hold on desperately to Brotherhood" parallels Derrida's "everything within us that desires a kingdom"--the need to step outside of, to see above, to look over, etc., namelessness, continge ncy, motion; to stop, in other words, the maddening infinity of abyssal reflexivity, to define a stable position (see Derrida, "Differance" 21-22.). Clifton does this definitively a page later, which pushes Invisible Man further, or intensifies his plunging.

Invisible Man begins his revery by "wandering": "I wandered down the subway stairs seeing nothing, my mind plunging" (IM438). As his mind plunges, so does he: "Plunging" here alludes to epic traditions of wandering into the wilderness of chaos and unknowability (17); and it returns to the spatial metaphor of descent introduced by Invisible Man's earlier plunge into the sub-way of an identity crisis. He continues:

Why should a man deliberately plunge outside of history and peddle an obscenity, my mind went on abstractedly. Why should he choose to disarm himself, give up his voice and leave the only organization offering him a chance to "define" himself? The platform vibrated and I looked down. Bits of paper whirled up in the passage of air, settling quickly as a train moved past. (438-39)

Invisible Man is "platformed" outside of the trains, on the edge of the "transitory" trains as they rush by. He understands Clifton's "choice" from the position of an outsider, someone who is not familiar with Clifton's anxiety. The idea of self-definition is still envisionable in Invisible Man's mind, and the Brotherhood is still the catalyst for making oneself "known." While these positions are radically destabilized later in the novel, we do get hints here of what is to come: The platform exists, but it is "vibrating," which links it to the "tremoring" (239) and "trembling" (441) that elsewhere characterizes Invisible Man's movement into uncertainty; his looking "down" suggests a continuation of his plunge(ing); and the association of writing and selfhood is again adumbrated by the "bits of paper" floating up in the train's path. Invisible Man's reflection is, in other words, plunging him further into a destabilizing and abyssal reflexivity, and closer to writing. Both of these movements are advanced by hi s continuing reflection:

Plunging History

By Jim Neighbors

Why had he turned away? Why had he chosen to step off the platform and fall beneath the train? Why did he choose to plunge into nothingness, into the void of faceless faces, of soundless voices, lying outside history? I tried to step away and look at it from a distance of words read in books, half-remembered. For history records the patterns of men's lives.... All things, it is said, are duly recorded--all things of importance, that is. But not quite, for actually it is only the known, the seen, the heard and only those events that the recorder regards as important that are putdown.... (439)

Invisible Man's reflections extend into an explicit consideration of chaos and abyss. Just "outside history" is the abyss of namelessness, of "nothingness": He maintains a distinction between history and abyss, and inside and "outside history," but the oppositions are losing their difference. He "tries" to step away from this form of reflection--he is no longer able to maintain an absolute separation from the "it" of this plunging--indicating his closer proximity to namelessness. He appeals to historical writing for an objective, rational anchor--a buttressing of his platform--but the notion of an objective history is losing its valence: History, as we saw earlier, is subject to the persistent questions of "whose" history and "how would they put it down?"

A different form of "putting it down" (which nicely captures the plunging in/of writing) becomes, at this episode's conclusion, a temporary "platform" for Invisible Man: "I'd been so fascinated by the motion that I'd forgotten to measure what it was bringing forth. I'd been asleep, dreaming" (444). That is, Invisible Man awakens to a form of writing about history that reconstitutes a separation between writing and history, and allows for a "measurable" history to exist outside of writing. But this does not occur until his idea of history has been destabilized. After standing at the platform "with the trains plunging in and out" (439), he sees a group of zoot-suitors and, like Poe's narrator, becomes interested in the men in the crowd:

... They were men outside of historical time, they were untouched, they didn't believe in Brotherhood, no doubt had never heard of it; or perhaps like Clifton would mysteriously have rejected its mysteries; men of transition whose faces were immobile. ... They were men out of time--unless they found Brotherhood. Men out of time, who would soon be gone and forgotten. ... But who knew (and now I began to tremble so violently I had to lean against a refuse can)--who knew but they were the saviors, the true leaders, the bearers of something precious? The stewards of something uncomfortable, burdensome, which they hated because, living outside the realm of history, there was no one to applaud their value and they themselves failed to understand it. What if Brother Jack were wrong? What if history was a gambler, instead of a force in a laboratory experiment, and the boys his ace in the hole? What if history was not a reasonable citizen, but a madman full of paranoid guile and these boys his agents, his big surprise ! His own revenge? For they were outside, in the dark with Sambo, the dancing paper doll; taking it on the lambo with my fallen brother, Tod Clifton (Tod, Tod) running and dodging the forces of history instead of making a dominating stand. (440-41)

"Outside history" has taken on a new suit: Outside no longer simply refers to literal death; it no longer imposes a distinction between history and outside (the zootsuitors are not outside of history, but in a different history). Outside now suggests an ontical dimension, though aporetically ontological by its enigma, for being "outside" of "history" is describable but not knowable. The possibilities, in other words, for being outside of history are becoming brighter, though they involve characteristics that are precisely disruptive to conventional or bounded

notions of ontology (see n12): transitoriness/transition, syncopation or alternate temporal register, aleatory, mad, paranoid, unpredictable, running and dodging. And once a "definition" of zootsuiting outside of history is written, the zootsuitors are gone, dodging, out of time and place.

The possibilities of a zootsuiting history unfold further in Invisible Man as the narrator shows a distinctly different use of plunging after his confrontation with one-eyed Brother Jack and his experience as Rinehart. He recognizes and accepts, as far as he knows it at this point, a form of active "invisibility": "So I'd accept it, I'd explore it, rine and heart. I'd plunge into it with both feet and they'd gag. ... Let them gag on what they refused to see" (508). This conception of plunging history, based as it is on a model of agency or active subjectivity, is later ironized--but here brings the aporetic apposition of deconstruction-construction (writing) into greater relief. Invisible Man is more aware of "that progress goo" that a transcendental history requires, and hence the possibility of teleological movement and linear temporality is challenged: "Not only could you travel upward toward success but you could travel downward as well; up and down, in retreat as well as in advance, crabways and crosswa ys and around in a circle, meeting your old selves coming and going and perhaps all at the same time." This "shattering" of his knowledge systems produces in part a realization of the immense possibility involved in being able to change his "name and never [be] challenged even once" (510). This realization belies the stable and unified Aristotelian Self still lingering behind his name, one capable of writing a "useable history." It takes a riot to destabilize or "tremble" him out of this ideal.

The next appearance of plunging falls during the riot and after Invisible Man's foiled attempt to seduce from Sybil the information necessary to "plunge" the Brotherhood. Invisible Man "plunged down, shaking with fierce excitement," as he helps light an apartment building on fire (549). He is also attempting to plunge away from being recognized. Repeatedly his Brotherhood name is sounded by various people, and he is recognized by those either who are after him (Ras's supporters) or who admire or need him (549-51). Part of his desire to escape their name-calling is tactical: Being recognized in the context of a riot is dangerous; anonymity is preferable for various reasons. But he also is driven away from his name by a "feverish inner need" (549). His movement into the crowd ("I was one with the mass, moving down the littered street over puddles of oil and milk, my personality blasted" [550]) inverts his earlier fascination with, and abstraction from, the zootsuitors in the crowd: He becomes the man in the cr owd, which is to say he moves into the anonymity of the abyss of history and his name. This movement also emphasizes the contingent nature of history: The riot embodies the suspicion of history being a "gambler."

Finally, Invisible Man plunges through the opening of a manhole cover that "for some reason" had been removed: "I felt myself plunge down, down; a long drop that ended upon a load of coal that sent up a cloud of dust, and I lay in the black dark upon the black coal no longer running.. (565). The contingency and unpredictability of history are clearly marked by the contingent appearing of the manhole cover; through them, so to speak, he is shown "the hole he was in" (572), which opens for him to plunge into a "state neither of dreaming nor of waking, but somewhere in between." Once again, this is brought about by Invisible Man facing the outrageous fact of his Self not being his own, of being the running joke or effects of a "stroke of the pen"--of being named by Jack or "anyone at that late date" who "could have named me and set me running" (568). As has been the case throughout the novel, the dispossession of hisSelf has (been) plunged(ing) Invisible Man into

abyme: It has ruined his sense of a coherent, un ified, integrated Self (shown to have always been ruining) by (un)resolving it into an aporetic apposition between a trembling (plat)form and an abyss of infinite self-reflection--the necessary and impossible condition from which Invisible Man could write his unnameability.

Epilogue

One way to view Invisible Man's writings on writing in the "Epilogue" emphasizes a paradoxical logic to the problem of identity declarations and historiography in the novel. Two contradictory forms of writing appear. First, writing is making "passive love to your sickness" or burning "it out" and going "on to the next conflicting phase" (576). Writing is "self-torture," "failure," and exceeds or thwarts or undermines intention: "The very act of trying to put it all down has confused me and negated some of the anger and some of the bitterness" (579); writing is approached "through division"--through love/hate, denouncing/defending (580); writing is "disembodied," "invisible and without substance" (581); and writing is "disarming [oneself] in the process" (580). But, second, writing also brings one to the point of a decision, which implies imminent, "socially responsible" action (580-81), and which presumes some form of "self" that acts: Writing gives "pattern to the chaos" (580), and writing is the "true healt h" of knowing the "division" of invisibility (576). Thus, a self, disembodied and disarmed, writes the condition of its invisibility; self and invisibility, like "man" and "invisible," are the terms opposed to one another in a paradox of declaration.

The difference, however, between a paradox of terms and an aporia of terms lies in difference itself. In a paradox, two contradictory terms are nonetheless paired to reach a new term, which contains them. The logic of the paradox is dialectical, and the full force of the paradox is given at the instant of the resolution of the two contradictory terms. This logic has persisted in readings of Invisible Man. Critics who have acknowledged some of the elements of plunging in the novel have nonetheless ultimately followed a paradoxical logic by trying to resolve the problems they have encountered. For example, Kimberly Benston transforms unnaming into an epistemological condition capable of sustaining an ethics of self-creation, in which "dreams of the hypostatic experience that simultaneously names and unnames itself" resolves into a stance capable of taking "responsibility for the rhythms of self by reconciling them with the intolerable music of [one's] familial past" ("I Yam" 164, 169). (18) This transformation performs a dialectical logic by converting the plurality and difference of "unnaming" into a coherent and unified step leading toward the telos of personal responsibility.

But, as I have tried to demonstrate, Invisible Man does not proceed dialectically. The nature of the relation between possession and dispossession, identity and non-identity, naming and unnaming, visible and invisible, in Invisible Man is an unbounded apposition of imperfected (plunging) terms, not a contradiction of opposed and perfected terms. There is no final, stable "platform," somehow outside of or un-imbricated in the plunging that is Invisible Man, from which to re-view the course of events in such a way as to yield the stability necessary for a proper identification of the opposing forces of a contradictory logic. Every term the novel gives to define a given side or term of the opposition is plunged by the problem of naming in the act of designation. Plurality and difference and aleatoriness and disruption overwhelm and generalize the terms of opposition/contradiction. Invisible Man never gives a proper name to compare his others to (which are also unknown); history never receives a stable referenti al status; and, despite the many indices pointing to a systemic progression of the

narrative from beginning to end, the novel consists of disruptions of sequence and plot and point of view that cannot be resolved into a coherent identity.

The distinction, in short, between I and You is plunged into an aporia of I-You: Any "I" or "You" cannot be properly named; any act of designation will always have fallen short or have exceeded or been exceeded by the possibility of a referent; and the relation between I-You makes possible everything that has nevertheless been written or named up to this point. "One" disappears, becomes invisible, the instant "one" writes or names oneself; "history" disappears the instant it is written or named; and, though there is never a guarantee of a proper direction, nor an escape to an outside of the plunging of writing or naming, history and one's name are always written or named. "Invisible Man" names the impossibility of naming, which is not a dialectical resolution of the problem of the proper name, but a plunging of names in general. Declaring an identity by stating one's name, thus, is an affirmation of the irresolvable and unending plurality and difference constitutive of every name. Though there is never an ex ternal platform or stable ground to stand on--a scaffolding exogenous to and capable of providing relief from the plunging-a proper name is nonetheless impossibly determined and written in the immanence of an uncertain and trembling future.

This plunging of I-You throws the chronological progression of the novel--and this essay's following of the plummet-ing lead/light novel- into abyme: Both reader and narrator are "ruined" into the plurality and difference of one another from the instant "I" is written/seen; the "frightening possibilities" (507) and "abysmal pain" (579) of identity unbounding, of Self being (having always been) destabilized into selves, mark the abyss of infinite reflection. All of which occur -- have always occurred--at the same time, and as such, are time, which is always shown, in boomerang fashion, to be history. Invisible Man, then, is an open-ended, continually disruptive, unaccountable, and aporetic history of naming. At no point can Invisible Man be named; at every point "he" and are abyssally apposed. The syntactical object of the grammar of identity is shown to have always been incomplete, divided, chaotic, "without substance," and, in short, ruining from the (non)start. Which is precisely the absurd condition, as Invisible Man impossibly declares, of the (dis)possession of your self in writing.

The Good Faith of the Invisible Man

Naomi Zack

ABSTRACT: I use Ralph Ellison's Invisible Man to consider the requirements of existentialism to be relevant to racialized experience. Black existentialism is distinguished from white existentialism by its focus on anti-black racism. However, black existentialism is similar to white existentialism in its moral requirement that agents take responsibility so as to be in good faith. Ralph Ellison's invisible man displays good faith at the end of the novel by assuming responsibility for his particular situation. The idiosyncratic development of the novel can be interpreted as an example of the ways in which existentialist values ought to be instantiated through unique individual experience. However, blackness, or any racial identity, is not itself an existential structure because it is not universal. Rather, existentialist requirements for good faith can be applied to racialized situations by both whites and blacks.

American traditions and institutions perpetuate the disadvantaged positions of nonwhites in ways that black people have experienced as personal in particular situations. This importance of race in public and private life, as well as subjective experiences of racism, have drawn to existentialism both black and white philosophers who address racial issues. Indeed, the marginal status of existentialism in philosophy is a good match for the marginal status of racial studies, and the marginal presence of black philosophers. Also, the awareness of human difficulty by existentialists, generally, is relevant to the specific difficulties of the American black experience.

Ralph Ellison has been claimed and interpreted by existentialist theorists and critics, since the mid-1950s. The early existentialist readings of his novel, Invisible Man, look naive today because in their emphasis on the universal dimensions of the narrator's predicaments, which are read as existentialist predicaments, they ignore the extent to which Ellison was addressing white racism. (2) Those racially-neutral readings are no longer credible in the context of the anti-racist scholarship of the second half of the twentieth century, which requires that non-white racial status and the effects of racism on that status be addressed before claims about universal humanity can be made. This requirement blocks the use of universalist claims to protect, conceal and sanitize continuing racism in public action and unspoken belief. (3) The unacceptability of generalizations from black experience, which do not acknowledge the effects of racism on that black experience, to all human experience, is mirrored by the unacceptability of generalizations from white experience to all human experience. The generalizations from white experience neglect the ways in which racism renders black experience different from white, while the generalizations from black experience appropriate and normalize, i.e., "whiten," the effects of white racism on black experience, so that whites can identify with it, as whites. In both cases, racism against blacks is not identified as something distinctive, unjust and uncommon in the broad range of normal human experience. Racism is ignored in both cases.

If existentialism is a universalist type of humanism, this raises the question of where exactly in Invisible Man Ellison's existentialism can be read. Throughout the novel, the narrator explores typical existential

modes of authenticity, alienation, absurdity, and anxiety. The famous "I yam what I am" scene when the narrator reaffirms his black southern "roots" through his rediscovered love of roasted sweet potatoes suggests authenticity — because what he is, is a source of shame for him under white eyes. (4) But he transcends the shameful object that he is by affirming it, so that he is no longer a source of shame to himself. As someone who loves roasted sweat potatoes, he would still be a shameful object under white eyes but what he is under white eyes is something that he has to apprehend through his own eyes. And, he does not have to accept the vision of himself held by whites, or other blacks who see themselves through white eyes. (Although an alternative and perhaps more Sartrean application of the concept of authenticity, here, might locate it the narrator reaffirming his love for roasted sweet potatoes in [deliberate] defiance of how that love is regarded.) (5)

Ellison's narrator experiences alienation, directly from whites and insideously from blacks (beginning with Bledsoe). There is absurdity in the way events in his life cause situations to errupt that have no connection with his intentions, and this gives rise to his chronic and acute anxiety. However, these typical existential structures of authenticity, alienation, absurdity and anxiety are insufficient to constitute an existential awareness without responsiblity. But it is only at the end of the novel that Ellison's narrator assumes responsibility for his situation, when he announces his intention to emerge from his underground refuge. He then tells us he might have "a socially responsible role to play," even as an invisible man. It's ambiguous whether he intends to be responsible to whites, as well as blacks, but it's definite that he is assuming responsiblity for himself. (6) The important point in terms of a specifically black existentialism is that regardless of the existential dimensions of situations caused by the bad faith of others — and authenticity, alienation, absurdity and anxiety are all conditioned by bad faith outside of the narrator's subjectivity — a complete existential awareness would require that one address one's own bad faith, no matter one's position in the oppressive situation. That is, blacks, no less than whites, have to address their own bad faith, where bad faith is a concealment of the freedom one had of not choosing to be in a particular situation. (In Ellison's narrator's case, the choice was acceptance or non-rejection of the white view of black people that made him invisible to whites.)

Unreflective reactions of black people to oppression, such as idealization of whites, self-hatred and acceptance of powerlessness, are richly explored and reflected on by Ellison's narrator throughout the long, loosely plotted story. The existentialist rationale for this kind of exploration and reflection is that racism has individual pyschological effects that have to be processed on an individual psychological level before general intellectual and ethical positions can be authentically assumed by the same individual. That is, the invisible man has to both conceptualize racism and undo its effects on him as a particular individual before he is in a position to play a responsible role: white anti-black racism literally casts him underground in the first place and his hibernation and narration constitute a

psychological processing (or therapy) so that only when he completes telling his story is he free as an "existentialist hero." (7)

The fact that black existence is structured by anti-black racism does not in itself entail that black existence is more existential than white existence or that, on the grounds of race, black existence typifies an existentialist perspective for everyone. Rather, existential philosophical tools can be applied to black (racialized) existence just as they can be applied to white (racist) existence. In the application to black existence, racism, as a complex of daily structures imposed by others, becomes a required subject of analysis. Symmetrically, in the application of existentialist tools to white existence, racism, as a complex of daily structures imposed on others, becomes a required subject of analysis. On both sides of racism, good faith would come out at the end of the analysis, after a process of individual reflection on particular events. That is, racism, for blacks and whites, involves acts of bad faith that in each case belong to particular individuals. Racism, (like death on Heidegger's construction, but without the depth or inevitability of death) is in each case, as either something done to me or something that I do, my own.

The foregoing demand for particular exploration and reflection sets the standard of a careful existentialism on the level of individual existence. The justification for the standard is that existentialism is supposed to pertain to the existence of individuals: Individual existence is always particular, not just as a general abstraction, such that everyone's particularity can be considered the same, but in living fact, such that everyone's particularity is experienced uniquely and needs to be described in its specificity. If the careful standard is accepted, it means that the awareness of responsiblity that avoids bad faith in individual situations does not come automatically to anyone. An existentialist philosopher, such as Sartre, may speak of such acknowledged responsiblity as potentially present and ethically imperative for everyone, but there is no assurance that it is present to anyone, much less to everyone who is aware of the bad faith of others. People do not assume responsibility for themselves in difficult situations unless they have fully experienced their difficulties and accepted them. The pain caused by the difficulties has to be experienced before one can be free of it. Denial of pain is a psychological defense that also blocks release from pain. The burden of having a human psychology that works in this way cannot be avoided any more than the burden of having a human biology that works in its ways can be avoided. Choices of death, anesthetization, or insanity are attempts to avoid the workings of human pyschology (and biology). However, such choices and other forms of evasion have consequences that limit further choice. Evasion in these forms is therefore a self-destructive abrogation of individual freedom, assuming that choice or freedom is an essential part of human identity. Furthermore, even though the consequences of evasion may not be consciously chosen along with the evasion from which they ensue, they become the responsiblity of the evader.

The Good Faith of the Invisible Man

Naomi Zack

I'll close with another example of the relevance of good faith to race. Franz Fanon posits racism as an existential structure when he explains how the internalization of white racism interferes with his bodily self-perceptions or bodily schema. But, why doesn't Fanon reject the overlay of racism on his normal bodily schema? Since he is able to describe that schema without the distortions imposed on it through his perceptions of how white racists perceive him, there is reason to believe he could reject the distortions. (8) And even if he cannot reject them, he ought to realize that there is an important sense in which he is not his body. As described by Sartre, the consciousness that is aware of itself is too non-material and transparent to be identical with anything that could be racialized, i.e., with a body. (9) While few contemporary philosophers would be willing to call such a thin Sartrean-Cartesean consciousness a "self," it can nontheless be guilty of bad faith by lying about its own no-thingness and transparency, that is, its inability to be causally determined by things that are not it, that is, its freedom.

In response to this objection, Fanon might insist that particular existence for whites and blacks entails bodily existence in a sense of identification with the body that cannot be denied. And in that sense, black bodily experience is unjustly burdened by white racism. Thus, while racism might not distort a disembodied sort of Cartesean philosophical self-identity, it undeniably distorts existential identification with one's body for a racialized person. (10) To ignore this distortion is to generalize from white experience to all human experience in a way that has a racist effect precisely because it ignores the ways in which racism makes bodily identification more compelling for black people than white people. That is, it would be easier for a white person, whose bodily schema is unimpeded and whose bodily existence is therefore less problematic than that of a black person, to choose not to identify the self with the body. Nonetheless, this unfairness is a problem of good faith from the perspective of a white person; it does not lift the responsibility of a black person to work out his or her freedom. I have been talking about existentialism as though existentialist philosophers agreed that it derives from Sartre's mid-century writings. Some African American philosophers have suggested that any intellectual focus on a particular type of situation, such as a situation experienced by blacks in a racist culture, is a form of existentialism. I don't mean to dispute the value of narrative — I merely assume that criticism is also valuable.

“The Long Shadow of Invisible Man”

Mr. Pogreba, Helena High

The Long Shadow of Invisible Man
By Lisa Rogers

I am an invisible man. No, I am not a spook like those who haunted Edgar Allan Poe; nor am I one of your Hollywood-movie ectoplasms. I am a man of substance, of flesh and bone, fiber and liquids—and I might even be said to possess a mind. I am invisible, understand, simply because people refuse to see me.
-- Prologue, Invisible Man

So begins one of the most influential American novels of the twentieth century, Ralph Ellison’s Invisible Man. It recounts the epic journey of an unnamed black narrator from his familiar but oppressive home in the South to new, dangerous freedoms in New York City. In 1952 it brought Americans a complex black protagonist, an educated man of broad intellectual curiosity and eloquence. The novel was an instant success and laid the foundation for Ellison’s career over the next forty years. Although he never published another novel during his life, Ellison continued to write and teach, and his views helped shape American society in the second half of the twentieth century.

Ellison, his career, and his time are the subjects of a new documentary by filmmaker Avon Kirkland for the Public Broadcasting Service’s American Masters series. Ralph Ellison: An American Journey explores how Ellison and his writings fit into the milieu of social struggle in America, from the rise of socialism and communism after the Depression to the far-reaching changes brought by the Civil Rights Movement and the rise of black nationalism in the 1960s and 1970s.

“I first had the idea for a documentary in 1996 when I read an article about Ellison and learned for the first time that his career had been quite controversial in the sixties and seventies,” says Kirkland. “Mr. Ellison, as important as he is in our cultural and literary history, has never been the subject of a biography or documentary, and that just doesn't seem right. The arc of his life was extraordinary.”

He was born in Oklahoma in 1914. His parents had recently moved to the new frontier state where discrimination was not yet entrenched and opportunities abounded. The death of Ellison’s father in 1917 brought an end to the family’s rise into middle-class life, but it did not dampen his son’s ambition to expand his intellectual horizons, to become a Renaissance Man, as he put it:

Anything and everything was to be found in the chaos of Oklahoma; thus the concept of the Renaissance Man has lurked long within the shadow of my past, and I shared it with at least a half dozen of my Negro friends. How we actually acquired it I have never learned, and since there is no true sociology of the dispersion of ideas within the American democracy, I doubt if I ever shall. Perhaps we breathed it in with the air of the Negro community of Oklahoma City, the capital of that state whose Negroes were often charged by exasperated white Texans with not knowing their “place.” Perhaps we took it defiantly from one of them. Or perhaps I myself picked it up from some transplanted New Englander whose shoes I had shined of a Saturday afternoon. After all, the most meaningful tips do not always come in the form of money, nor are they intentionally extended.

--Introduction, Shadow and Act

“The Long Shadow of Invisible Man”

Mr. Pogreba, Helena High

Ellison did not at first intend to become a writer. His first love was music. He excelled at the trumpet and idolized the jazz performers of the day. But when he took up a music scholarship to Tuskegee Institute in Alabama in 1933, it was to study classical music, not jazz.

I wanted to be a composer, but not a jazz composer, interestingly enough. I wanted to be a symphonist . . . there wasn’t always this division between the ambitions of jazz musicians and the standards of classical music; the idea was to master both traditions. . . . I suppose my own desire to write symphonies grew out of an attraction to the bigger forms and my awareness that they moved many people as they did me in a different way.

-- ”That Same Pain, That Same Pleasure: An Interview,” Shadow and Act

In 1936, after his third year at Tuskegee, Ellison went to New York City, intending to earn enough money to return to his studies. Instead he met poet Langston Hughes and author Richard Wright. It was Wright who coaxed the musician to try his hand at writing. The realignment was complete by 1938 when Ellison began work with the Federal Writers’ Project. Over the next seven years Ellison wrote reviews and articles for a range of periodicals and published several short stories. In the mid-1940s he began work on the novel that would become Invisible Man. It was published in 1952 to critical acclaim and lasted four months on the bestseller list. In 1953 Ellison won the National Book Award, the first black author to receive it; Alice Walker would be the next, thirty years later.

For Ellison, Invisible Man filled a gap in American literature. In his 1981 introduction to a new printing of the novel, he wondered “why most protagonists of Afro-American fiction (not to mention the black characters in fiction written by whites) were without intellectual depth. Too often they were figures caught up in the most intense forms of social struggle, subject to the most extreme forms of the human predicament but yet seldom able to articulate the issues which tortured them. . . . I felt that one of the ever-present challenges facing the American novelist was that of endow-ing his inarticulate characters, scenes and social processes with eloquence. For it is by such attempts that he fulfills his social responsibility as an American artist.”

While Ellison viewed Invisible Man as a story of affirmation and of the importance of the quest for individual identity, the novel rests on a life-denying concept: social and cultural invisibility.

“Invisibility is Mr. Ellison’s central metaphor,” says Kirkland. “It is a profound explanation of what it is like in the black experience to feel alienated. Ultimately, however, the metaphor of invisibility speaks for all of us -- blacks, whites, women, homosexuals, the handicapped -- anyone who sits at the margin of society, who feels voiceless, whose humanity is not acknowledged. It is a very commonly and widely used metaphor for that kind of situation where people are not seen as fully human.”

By exposing this invisibility to the penetrating light of his novel, Ellison intended to effect social change. As he told the writer Roger Rosenblatt in 1973, “That the Invisible Man writes a story at all makes a social statement. . . .The protagonist’s story is his social bequest. And I’ll tell you something else: The bequest is hopeful.”

“The Long Shadow of Invisible Man”

Mr. Pogreba, Helena High

Literary critic Henry Louis Gates, Jr. describes Ellison as “a militant integrationist.” In the 1960s and 1970s, his vision of “black and white fraternity” put him increasingly at odds with the black nationalist and black arts movements. During this time, Ellison was teaching, first at Bard College, then at Rutgers, and later Yale. Kirkland describes Ellison’s growing isolation from the emotions of the time.

“He really caught hell from the students,” Kirkland says. “He wasn’t acting as they thought he should. He was seen as formal and disengaged. What the poet Amiri Baraka and others at that time wanted was some acknowledgment from blacks in prominent positions or highly thought of across the country. But Ellison was very critical of them. He never got down and talked with them. He was aloof.”

A crisis came in 1967 at what should have been a celebratory party in Iowa. A young black man denounced him as an Uncle Tom. Ellison, always cool and assured in public, broke down and cried. That same year, the draft of his second novel was destroyed when the Ellisons’ summer home burned. “Mr. Ellison and his wife gradually withdrew from many of their friends during the seventies and eighties,” says Kirkland.

Ellison continued to write and teach. Between 1970 and 1980 he was the Albert Schweitzer Professor of Humanities at New York University. He was awarded the National Medal of Freedom, the nation’s highest civilian honor, in 1969. In 1985 he received the National Medal of Arts from President Ronald Reagan. He published his collection of essays, reviews, and interviews called Shadow and Act in 1964. Another collection of essays and reviews, Going to the Territory, appeared in 1986. And Ellison worked on his second novel until he died in 1994.

That second novel was to remain unpublished until 1999. Ellison’s literary executor, John Callahan, sifted through the two thousand manuscript pages to select the story that became Juneteenth. In his introduction, Callahan writes, “Like a great river, perhaps the Mississippi . . . Juneteenth draws from many uniquely African American (and American) tributaries: sermons, folktales, the blues, the dozens, the swing and the velocity of jazz. Its form borrows from the antiphonal call-and-response pattern of the black church and the riffs and bass lines of jazz.”

Jazz is a recurring theme throughout Ellison’s life and work. “It was seminal in his approach to writing,” Kirkland says, “and in jazz he found a metaphor for America. Mr. Ellison thought that a jazz performance in which the individual performer is encouraged to express his individuality within the context of the whole of the musical group is a sort of quintessential metaphor for democracy.”

Ellison scholar Robert O’Meally agrees. “He felt art was an assertion against chaos in general. I think that the idea that a jazz band is a perfect example of democracy is a masterful point in Ellison's writing . . . I think he will be known as the one who said, ‘American culture is jazz shaped.’” For all its influence, Invisible Man has never been made into a movie. Kirkland, when he inquired into the possibility of making a film of the book in the 1980s, discovered why. “I was surprised to learn that the rights were available, but that Mr. Ellison required script control,” Kirkland explains. “That effectively killed the project. I have since come to learn that Mr. Ellison

had received a large number of offers from some of the most successful directors and filmmakers." He turned them all down.

Kirkland worried about what such a restriction would mean to his documentary on Ellison. "We were able to convince the estate . . . that it would be impossible for us to do a show on Ralph Ellison without having some scenes to show the public from the book," he says. "Fortunately the estate . . . agreed to let us do a few scenes, no more than fifteen minutes or so. We were able to keep to the spirit of Mr. Ellison's rule of script control when we agreed to proceed with the production of the scenes adapted from the novel only after the script for those adaptations had been approved by the literary executor, John Callahan." Kirkland's documentary marks the first dramatization of any part of Invisible Man.

Working on the documentary brought Kirkland a couple of surprises. "Mr. Ellison had great talent in a large number of areas," Kirkland explains. "He repaired his own cars. He was an excellent hunter and accomplished fisherman. He made money occasionally by assembling and repairing radios. His haberdasher at the Andover Shop in Cambridge, Massachusetts, said he never met a person who was so well versed in cloth, textiles, and tailoring methods. Ellison even knew various kinds of stitching.

"But the main surprise was that I discovered how wide-ranging and profound had been Mr. Ellison's essays. Mr. Ellison wrote two masterpieces: Invisible Man and Shadow and Act. . . . He wrote essays on the novel and its potential use for reforming democracy, and essays on important black musicians."

As the fiftieth anniversary of Invisible Man approaches, Ellison's influence widens. Books on Ellison are appearing more regularly -- a biography of his early years, a collection of his correspondence with friend and writer Albert Murray, and a study of how Ellison used jazz to form and inform his work. In 1999, Modern Library published surveys of the one hundred best fiction and nonfiction books published in English in the twentieth century. Ralph Ellison is the only author to appear on both lists.

Kirkland points to these surveys as indicators of Ellison's stature. "Mr. Ellison was a very learned man, a man of letters. No mere storyteller, he was an accomplished intellectual."

From Humanities, January/February 2002, Volume 23/Number 1