

ANALYSIS BY CHAPTER

Invisible Man (1952)

Ralph Ellison

(1914-1994)

Ralph Ellison declared modestly in retrospect, “It’s not an important novel. I failed of eloquence and many of the immediate issues are rapidly fading away. If it does last, it will be simply because there are things going on in its depths that are of more permanent interest than on its surface.” On the contrary of course, *Invisible Man* is an eloquent and very important novel. Although some of the issues have faded away, his art has a depth transcending race. His major theme is timeless: The search for identity is “*the American Dream*,” he wrote. “The nature of our society is such that we are prevented from knowing who we are. It is still a young society, and this is an integral part of its development.”

QUOTATIONS

The two epigraphs that introduce the novel are taken from Herman Melville and T. S. Eliot, as Ellison identifies himself with traditional American literature at the highest level of Modernism, rather than with the black protest tradition of Naturalism represented by Richard Wright: “My standards were impossibly high.” The first quotation is from *Benito Cereno*, ironic exclamations by the captain of an American frigate who comes aboard a Spanish slave ship and is too naively racist to recognize that the slaves have revolted and taken over the ship—the blacks are invisible to him except as slaves. Captain Delano manages to save Captain Cereno, but the Spaniard is traumatized by the horrors of the revolt, having experienced invisibility himself at the hands of the vengeful blacks. His reply to ‘What has cast such a shadow upon you?’ is: “The Negro.” Melville makes the black man the Jungian psychological “shadow” that haunts the white man. The quotation from Eliot expresses with intensity the feeling of invisibility experienced by another white man, again indicating that *Invisible Man* transcends race.

Man refers to Man. Before Feminists segregated woman from Man, the concept Man was understood to transcend gender as well—as does *Wo-man*. Ellison illustrates that the Modernist aesthetic value of universality contributes to improving race relations in the spirit of Martin Luther King, Jr., and to gender relations as well—at least among women who have experienced invisibility themselves—in contrast to the Postmodernist separation of people into identity groups, privileging some and demonizing others, as exemplified by Toni Morrison and higher education. Group thinking such as racism and sexism makes the members of differing groups invisible as individuals, as men are to Feminists.

PROLOGUE

The opening sentence of the novel is short like that of Melville’s *Moby-Dick*, where “Call me Ishmael” suggests that he is keeping his true identity invisible: “I am an invisible man. No, I am not a spook like those who haunted Edgar Allan Poe...” The allusion to Poe again places the novel in the mainstream tradition of American literature, but this time the black narrator is differentiated from the white writer. Like Benito Cereno, Poe was traumatized by a slave revolt, the one led by Nat Turner not far from Poe’s home in Virginia, in which rebelling slaves murdered over 50 whites.

Poe reacted to the horror by stereotyping blacks as evil primitives in *The Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym* (1838). Ellison continues the rebuttal to Poe that Melville made in *Moby-Dick* and that Twain made in *Huckleberry Finn*. Like *Moby-Dick* Ellison’s novel is a psychological allegory, or what Melville called “an inside narrative”: “I had discovered unrecognized compulsions of my being—even though I could not answer ‘yes’ to their promptings.” Every character in the book can be understood as an “unrecognized compulsion” in the narrator—as in a nightmare. A psychological allegory sets the author free to be Expressionistic in the tradition of medieval dream allegory. Everything is subjective. This disarms any criticism that the book is stereotyping whites, as in the Battle Royal episode, because all characters are

projections of the young narrator's feelings. Objective reality is established (1) by the opening quotations indicating that invisibility is part of the human condition and not just a problem of blacks; (2) by events; (3) by the implications of dialogue; (4) by accurate correspondence to history as in depicting the Communist Party in Harlem; (5) by the enlightenment of the narrator about his identity symbolized by the many lights in his basement hole; (6) by his manifest psychological growth.

There is transcendence in the narrator's ability to joke about race—his pun on “spook.” Humor is one of the traditional means of transcendence in black literary history, as exemplified for example by some of the poems of Paul Dunbar at the end of the 19th century. The narrator reinforces the point that invisibility transcends skin color: “Nor is my invisibility exactly a matter of a biochemical accident to my epidermis.” Today every adult in a modern society has experiences with bureaucrats that could be described much as this narrator describes his experiences as a black man: “When they approach me they see only my surroundings, themselves, or figments of their imagination—indeed, everything except me.” Like him on the streets of New York many people today feel “constantly being bumped against by those of poor vision,” and like him they react in resentment and “begin to bump people back.”

As a black man in the big white city, the narrator epitomizes modern alienation: “You often doubt if you really exist.” His violence dramatizes what is at stake and intensifies the feelings conveyed by his eloquent prose. Insulted by a white man he bumps into accidentally, he demands an apology, is cursed, brutally head butts the man and knocks him down and kicks him repeatedly “in a frenzy because he still uttered insults though his lips were frothy with blood. Oh yes, I kicked him!” He almost kills him. He stops himself from murder by realizing that he is invisible to the man. This episode encapsulates the plot of the novel, which ends with his realizing and transcending his invisibility.

He represents his race allegorically when he says “Most of the time...I am not so overtly violent.” Likewise his fight with the power company is a metaphor of black subversion of a discriminatory society: “I use their service and pay them nothing at all, and they don't know it.” The main setting is “the jungle of Harlem,” evoking the Naturalism of Richard Wright and other black protest writers. The narrator expresses independence of the deterministic trap of Harlem: “I don't live in Harlem but in a border area.” In the end, as expressed here in the Prologue, he identifies himself with white as well as black cultural values, calling himself “kin to Ford, Edison and Franklin.” At the same time, allegorically as a representative black man he lives in a building “rented strictly to whites, in a section of the basement that was shut off and forgotten during the nineteenth century.” He is the “shadow” repressed and invisible in the collective unconscious of whites, first defined by Melville in *Benito Cereno*.

Ellison explained his Prologue saying “I wanted a foreshadowing through which I hoped the reader would view the actions which took place in the main body of the book.” The invisible man begins in the basement at the end of his story, narrates 25 chapters of flashback, then returns to his position in the basement in an Epilogue. Circular structures are a recurrent characteristic of Modernism—*The Professor's House*, *The Sun Also Rises*, *As I Lay Dying*, *Finnegans Wake*: “the end is in the beginning and lies far ahead” is an echo of T. S. Eliot evoking cyclical renewal in Nature and rebirth of the soul: The narrator compares himself to both a bear in hibernation and an Easter chick that will emerge from its shell in the spring, alluding to Christ. Both comparisons imply eventual rebirth: “I myself...did not become alive until I discovered my invisibility.” The dream in the Prologue “prefigures” characters and events to come, but actually occurs afterward, condensing their meanings in an allegory.

The paragraph emphasizing his inner light—brighter than Broadway—stands out as improvisation. Three parenthetical interruptions and another between dashes mimic the spontaneity of jazz. Ellison played jazz trumpet and said that he improvised in his writing “in the manner of a jazz musician putting a musical theme through a wild star-burst of metamorphosis.” His prose style often mimics improvisational jazz, expressing the free spirit of the narrator after his enlightenment. Thematic motifs such as colors—black, white, red—function like the sounds of musical instruments in a jazz composition. The rhythms and the abundant repetitions in the style owe something also to black pulpit oratory, especially speeches such as the ones at the battle royal and at the eviction in Harlem. The Modernist poet Ezra Pound wrote music and thought poetry should resemble music. Ellison wrote a musical novel.

The form of *Invisible Man* expresses its content. As Ellison explained, “The words of the Prologue contained the germ of the ending as well as that of the beginning.” That is, the Prologue is *synecdoche*—the whole implied in a part. “Light confirms my reality, gives birth to my form.” For “the truth is the light and light is the truth.... I now can see the darkness of lightness.” Inner light, reconciliation of opposites, spiritual rebirth and sense of paradox are characteristics of transcendent consciousness throughout literary history. His metaphor of the world moving as a “boomerang” prefigures the series of reversals he will experience before he dives into his dark hole and paradoxically sees the light.

His muse is the legendary Louis Armstrong, a jazz trumpeter like Ellison, because “he’s made poetry out of being invisible.” Armstrong sings a theme of the novel, “What Did I Do to Be So Black and Blue?” He smokes a reefer and descends via jazz into the deep collective subconscious of his race in America—“like Dante into the depths.” This allusion to Dante’s *Inferno* makes his situation in the basement analogous to being in Purgatory to purge himself of illusions, with levels of Hell below. On a “still lower level” he envisions the depravity of slave trading that haunts black souls.

On a still lower level of Hell he has an extended vision of a conventional black minister preaching a warning to his congregation: In the beginning was blackness and the sun was “bloody red” rather than enlightening. Implicitly blackness will get a black man swallowed into “the WHALE’S BELLY,” like Jonah in the Bible, who rebelled against God. Ellison’s opening quotation of Melville associates his reference here to a whale with Melville’s famous white whale, a pantheistic incarnation of divinity. Jonah saved himself by repenting to “Good God a-mighty!” Or, warns the preacher, “or black will un-make you.” As it has the invisible man. This preacher is a version of the blind preacher at his college, Homer Barbee, urging him to play the subservient role of an Uncle Tom. To conventional blacks, in effect, the white man is God. The trombone speaks for Bledsoe the corrupt Uncle Tom college president: “Git out of here, you fool! Is you ready to commit treason?” Even an old singer of spirituals embodying traditional black culture condemns him: “Go curse your God, boy, and die.”

The young narrator stops the old singer of spirituals and questions his racial heritage, asking her what is wrong. She corresponds to Mary Rambo in that she “dearly loved” her slave master. “He gave me several sons...and because I loved my sons I learned to love the father though I hated him too.” She is in a deeper level of Hell than her sons because she is suffering more due to her greater humanity, from loving her oppressor. She represents the narrator’s own partial transcendence of race—his humanity. It is important to understand that Hell in his vision is of this world, not the next, and that it has been created in the past by “white folks.” Here the old singer of spirituals personifies “an unrecognized compulsion of his being”: “I too have become acquainted with ambivalence.” He thinks “Maybe freedom lies in hating,” anticipating the appearance of Ras the Destroyer, who is prefigured by the sons of the old singer of spirituals: “Them boys woulda tore him to pieces with they homemade knives...they gets to laughing and wants to kill up the white folks. They’s bitter, that’s what they is.” She offers him an alternative way to freedom comparable to the advice he gets from his grandfather: Rather than murder her master openly, “I loved him and give him the poison and he withered away like a frost-bit apple.”

The narrator is followed by footsteps--thoughts of violence. The sons of the old singer become Ras and Rinehart. The jazz trumpet of Louie Armstrong inspires him: “this familiar music had demanded action... A hibernation is a covert preparation for a more overt action.... Could this compulsion to put down in black and white be thus an urge to make music of invisibility?” He returns, circling back to his theme: “I can hear you say, ‘What a horrible, irresponsible bastard!’ And you’re right. I leap to agree with you.... Irresponsibility is part of my invisibility... But to whom can I be responsible, and why should I be, when you refuse to see me?” He even regrets not killing the man he bumped into on the street: “I should have used my knife to protect the higher interests of society. Some day that kind of foolishness will cause us tragic trouble.” This predicts the militant black civil rights movement to come in the 1960s, the riots after the assassination of Martin Luther King in 1968, and racial violence ever since.

The narrator is typical of modern youth in a general way, though not privileged like Holden Caulfield in *Catcher in the Rye* (1951), published the year before *Invisible Man*: “I was naïve. I was looking for

myself... It took me a long time and much boomeranging of my expectations.” The grandson of slaves, he was raised to believe in the myth of equality. “In my pre-invisible days I visualized myself as a potential Booker T. Washington.” But in fact he takes after his grandfather, who advised him to fight back: “Our life is a war... 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.” The preacher in his marijuana vision warned that he might end up “in the WHALE’S BELLY.” Without understanding it the narrator follows his grandfather’s advice “in spite of myself... I was praised by the most lily-white men of the town.” He delivers an Uncle Tom graduation speech declaring that humility is “the very essence of progress,” but he does not believe it—“I only believed that it worked.”

At a smoker for “the town’s leading white citizens”—including the school superintendent and even the pastor—the battle royal is a ritual of racist conditioning. The white men taunt the young black males with a sight of what they can never have, all embodied in “a magnificent blonde—stark naked.” Her eyes smeared with mascara are “the color of a baboon’s butt,” an American flag is tattooed on her belly and “her thighs formed a capital V” for vagina, victory and vulgar. She dances in the cigar smoke, an obscenity reflecting the values of the “leading white citizens.” Some of the white men “threatened us if we looked and others if we did not.” Then the boys must submit to white blindfolds and are forced to fight each other in a boxing ring. “I had no dignity.” They prefigure the rioters in Harlem at the end of the novel: “It was complete anarchy. Everybody fought everybody else... I played one group against the other.”

After the brawl a white man calls the narrator Sambo, like one of the dolls later sold by Tod Clifton. The boys are rewarded with gold coins that turn out to be worthless tokens and bills on an electrified rug that shocks them when they try to pick up their pay. In this episode the narrator represents black history: “It seemed a whole century would pass before I would roll free...heated to the point of explosion.” The battle royal episode intensifies the heat. In T. S. Eliot’s term, this episode is the *objective correlative* for outrage. On demand, his mouth filling with blood, the narrator gives his humble graduation speech to the drunken white men, who pay no attention. Then some begin to interrupt his progress by shouting questions to intimidate him in an exchange that is the opposite in spirit of a black congregation shouting assents to their preacher. When the narrator affirms “social equality” they turn hostile. Chastened, he swallows blood and changes his phrase to “social responsibility, sir.”

“We mean to do right by you,” says the white man, “but you’ve got to know your place at all times.” For his deference he is rewarded with a briefcase containing a college scholarship. But that night the spirit of his grandfather appears in a dream and reveals the true meaning of the scholarship, its futility, which the boy does not yet understand: “Keep This Nigger-Boy Running.”

2

The college is modeled on Tuskegee Institute in Alabama, where Ellison majored in music. The black community romanticizes the school, whereas the narrator senses that the place is actually “a flower-studded wasteland” in the spiritual sense of T. S. Eliot’s famous poem. On campus the one fountain—a symbol of the soul in Hawthorne—is broken and dry. And in his memory no rain falls. He remembers conformity, marching to chapel in uniform with other students, “minds laced up, eyes blind like those of robots to visitors and officials on the low, whitewashed reviewing stand.” The obedient students are blind to what is behind “whitewashed” appearances. The statue of the Founder, corresponding to Booker T. Washington, depicts him lifting a veil from the face of a kneeling slave, but the narrator is unable to decide “whether the veil is really being lifted, or lowered more firmly in place; whether I am witnessing a revelation or a more efficient blinding.” He discovers that he is enrolled in Uncle Tom College.

The influence of the white liberals who fund the school is suggested by the motif of whiteness: white magnolias, the white Home Economics cottage “whiter still in the moonlight” (moonlight traditionally connotes romance) and the “white line” the narrator follows when chauffeuring one of the millionaire founders around, a philanthropist from New England who is compared to Santa Claus—Mr. Norton, “a bearer of the white man’s burden, and for forty years a symbol of the Great Traditions.” Norton asks the narrator if he has studied Emerson, an ardent abolitionist known for advocating self-reliance. “Not yet, sir. We haven’t come to him yet.” This school for black conditioning into white society does not teach self-

reliance. Hence the students are still mentally enslaved. Calling Norton a smoker of cigars associates him with the white town leaders at the battle royal, as does his sexual fantasizing.

Norton tells his driver, an invisible Negro, that “you are my fate, young man.” His image of himself depends on the success of the school. He idealizes his daughter in the tradition of Victorianism (she, moral purity, is dead). In exalting her Norton uses variants of the word *pure* 5 times. “Her beauty was a well-spring of purest water-of-life.” Since she is dead, this image of her as a fountain corresponds to the dead fountain on campus. “She was too pure for this life” and since she died, “I have never forgiven myself. Everything I’ve done since her passing has been a monument to her memory.” Norton feels guilty for not being as good as he purports to be and he compensates for his secret lusts by idealizing his daughter and with philanthropy, like the liberals in “The Celestial Railroad” (1843) by Hawthorne. Norton the liberal represents White Guilt. His customized form of philanthropy for blacks to redeem *himself* only makes them dependent on him and keeps them following the “white line.” His shoes are “white, trimmed with black. They were custom made.” Liberals keep blacks down on the plantation.

Norton is a banker who thinks of the school as a factory and the students as investments. The narrator is a test product. “Half-consciously I followed the white line as I drove.” By accident he comes upon the log cabin of Jim Trueblood, a disgraced sharecropper. Norton lacks authenticity himself and grows excited to see a real log cabin “built during slavery times.” Jim is a figurative descendant of Jim in *Huckleberry Finn*, a simple honest goodhearted black man suffering unjust degradation. He is a *True-blood*, authentic and natural in himself as a black man. Before his disgrace he “had been well liked as a hard worker and took care of his family’s needs.” He sings spirituals like the old woman in the narrator’s marijuana vision. The narrator and the other students have been so dissociated from their spiritual heritage that “We were embarrassed by the earthy harmonies...the crude, high, plaintively animal sounds that Jim Trueblood made as he led the quartet.” Educated to have contempt and hatred for their own true blood, the students have become self-loathing snobs. “How all of us at the college hated...the ‘peasants,’ during those days! We were trying to lift them up and they, like Trueblood, did everything it seemed to pull us down.”

When he reveals to Norton that Jim Trueblood impregnated his own daughter, the narrator wishes they were “back on the other side of the white line” headed back to the college. He does not want Norton to see this side of black life, but Norton is fascinated, his “blue eyes blazing into the black face with something like envy and indignation.” Ironically, the rich and powerful white man envies what he sees as the liberty of the poor black man, his apparent freedom to do anything he feels like doing—an illusion derived from a stereotype. Trueblood tells him “the biggity school folks up on the hill” offered him money to leave the county, then threatened “to turn the white folks loose on me.” Actually, however, the white folks help and defend Trueblood because he validates their racist stereotype. They are like the “fine white gnats [that] swarmed about his wound.”

Jim explains how it all happened: “It was so cold all of us had to sleep together; me, the old lady and the gal.” It was dark in the cabin. “Black as the middle of a bucket of tar.” The simile evokes the fable of Brer Rabbit and the tar baby and getting stuck. Ironically, Jim was worrying about protecting his daughter from a local boy and then got to recalling an old girlfriend “plump and juicy and kinda switchin’ her tail” who called him Daddy, just like his daughter. He turned his back to his daughter and tried to move away but there was not much room in the bed.

His dream is full of the Freudian symbolism influential in the 1950s, by now familiar. He dreamed he was looking for “some fat meat” and went up a hill to get some. The hill evokes the school on the hill and a female body. The dream contradicts Norton’s stereotype of him as amoral: “I goes through the front door! I knows it’s wrong, but I can’t help it. I goes in and I’m standin’ in a big room full of lighted candles...” He feels like he is trespassing in a mansion of white people—violating a great taboo. “I’m standin’ there knowin’ I got no business in there, but there anyhow. It’s a woman’s room too...and all around me I can smell women, can smell it getting’ stronger all the time.” A white lady steps out of a grandfather clock, epitomizing the forbidden like the dancing blonde at the battle royal. He tries to run away but she grabs and holds onto him. A “flock of little white geese flies out of the bed”—a thrill like an orgasm. “And I cain’t stop—although I got a feelin’ somethin’ is wrong.” He enters the grandfather clock,

rebelling as his grandfather urged: "I gits it open and get inside and it's hot and dark in there. I goes up a dark tunnel... It happened while I was asleep." He gets stuck, like on a tar baby.

The exposure of romantic illusions and the contradiction of stereotypes is Realism, the emphasis on deterministic forces such as race and poverty and chance is Naturalism (as in Richard Wright), the vivid symbolic imagery is Impressionism, and the aesthetic mode of the dream is Expressionism. Synthesizing these diverse elements in unity is characteristic of Modernism.

The violent screaming reaction of Kate Trueblood to Jim's atrocity is proof that Norton is wrong, the Truebloods are not at all without morals—very much the opposite: "I'm gon blast your soul to hell!" Jim accepts punishment: "Maybe you owe it to Kate to let her beat you. You ain't guilty, but she thinks you is." She throws things at him, menaces him with a shotgun and chops him in the face with an ax. Then she pukes her guts out. His preacher calls him "the most wicked man he's ever seen." This is why Jim Trueblood ends up singing the blues with the narrator and Louie Armstrong. Contradicting the community judgment of him, however, Jim proves himself a man of integrity by (1) transcending his shame; (2) not deserting his family; and (3) taking responsibility for his acts by refusing to allow abortion in his family: "I cain't leave you, I says. 'I'm a man and man don't leave his family'." Jim proves true to his blood and an exemplar to black males. As in *Huckleberry Finn*, it is ironic that the lowest character in the social order proves to be the highest in the moral order—even after committing *incest!*

Shocked by his story, Norton gives Jim a one-hundred dollar bill for washing his dirty laundry in public for him like that. His face is "chalk white" like the ground around the cabin porch "from where wash water" is thrown. "The niggus up at the school don't like me, but the white folks treats me fine," says Jim, an innocent like Jim grateful for the money at the end of *Huckleberry Finn*. We do not learn why Norton is so upset and sickened by a confession of incest until the next chapter.

3

Norton is so depleted he tells his driver he needs a "stimulant" right away. The only place to get him a whiskey is the Golden Day, a black sporting house named—ironically—after a book by Lewis Mumford glorifying white American culture during slavery. On the way there they encounter black veterans from the nearby mental asylum walking to the brothel at the Golden Day. The narrator sees a hint of his own prospects in life when he notes that many of the institutionalized veterans had been doctors, lawyers, teachers and so on. "One very nutty one had been a psychiatrist... They were supposed to be members of the professions toward which at various times I vaguely aspired myself."

The Golden Day is now a black establishment with values very different from those of white Victorians. The bartender "sliced the white heads off a couple of beers." Supercargo the black attendant who controls the veterans is dressed in white, in a relationship like the Superego to the Id in Freudian psychology: "when he was upstairs they had absolutely no inhibitions." At the moment, Supercargo is drunk upstairs and Norton appears to be dying. One of the blacks claims that Norton is his grandfather Thomas Jefferson "on the 'field-nigger' side." Norton is also mocked as the representative of millionaire John D. Rockefeller; as Mister Eddy the husband of Christian Science founder Mary Baker Eddy, implying that he is effeminate and cures nothing; and as a mock Messiah.

The quotation from *Benito Cereno* that opens the novel points to the scene when a black veteran says of Norton, "Here, some of y'all tilt his head back." Then he pinches the chin "like a barber about to apply a razor." In Melville's novella, after slaves overthrow and slaughter a white Spanish crew, a leader of the revolt named Babo acts as a barber and shaves the terrified white Captain Cereno with a long straight razor—very slowly—verging on but never quite slitting his throat. Norton is analogous to Cereno, the two of them both "innocent" and symbols of enslavement. These black veterans merely taunt Norton. They could kill him but they do not. This limited riot down South prefigures the larger and more violent riot to come up North in Harlem, in neither of which are any whites killed. So far the blacks fight among each other, though at any time they might emerge out of Harlem and riot in white neighborhoods. Here they confine themselves to the Golden Day—once a church, but now "They let us come here once a week to raise a little hell."

Norton merely gets slapped and falls into hysterical shock. Supercargo cannot protect him now. The attendant is a “huge black giant” who serves the white social order against his own people like Bledsoe the college president and Lucius Brockway who tends the boiler in the white paint factory. Like them he wants to keep blacks in their place in order to retain his own position. Supercargo threatens the men with a strait jacket and “You can’t speak your mind when he’s on duty!” Supercargo is “a kind of censor”—superego—who enforces white political correctness: “Sometimes I get so afraid of him I feel that he’s inside my head.” Supercargo gets drunk and strips from his “hard-starved white uniform” to white shorts. The veterans go wild and beat him up. “Men were jumping upon Supercargo with both feet now and I felt such an excitement that I wanted to join them.” They represent more “unrecognized compulsions of my being.” In his own personal hell, one man of mixed blood sees world history as an eternal race war and curses his mulatto mother for being half white, in contrast to the humane ambivalence of the old singer of spirituals in the Prologue and the accommodating Mary Rambo up in Harlem.

Norton unconscious is “a mass of whiteness” representing the white race. “He was like a formless white death” resulting from a race war prefigured by “the madness of the Golden Day.” A real doctor emerges from the chaos and provides some objectivity in the midst of the riot. He calms the narrator down by demystifying Norton: “He’s only a man. Remember that.” He debunks the inflation of Norton into a white God. He helps carry the white man to a bed and tends to him as a professional. Ellison emphasizes the diversity of black responses to Norton. One black prostitute even sees him as innocent and cute, “Just like a little white baby,” whereas another stereotypes him as a greedy white man with monkey glands and goat balls: “These old bastards don’t never git enough. They want to have the whole world.”

The doctor calls Norton a “trustee of consciousness” and counters him with advice intended to save the narrator: “Perhaps had I overheard some of what I’m about to tell you when I was a student up there on the hill, I wouldn’t be the casualty that I am.” The doctor served with the Army Medical Corps in World War I—tending many white soldiers—then he practiced medicine in France. He performed successful brain surgeries but he could not change the minds of white citizens when he returned to America. They beat him with whips and he finally took refuge in the mental asylum: “I learned along with the ulcers that my work could bring me no dignity.” Now, he summarizes the social meaning of Norton to blacks: “To some, you are the great white father; to others the lyncher of souls.

When the young narrator does not understand how Norton could be a lyncher, the doctor diagnoses him: “Behold! A walking zombie! Already he’s learned to repress not only his emotions but his humanity. He’s invisible, a walking personification of the Negative, the most perfect achievement of your dreams, sir! The mechanical man!... To you, he is a mark on the scorecard of your achievement, a thing and not a man... He believes in the false wisdom taught slaves and pragmatists alike, that white is right. I can tell you *his* destiny. He’ll do your bidding, and for that his blindness is his chief asset.” In the end, even the doctor boomerangs and sounds like Ras the Destroyer: “Get out before I do you both the favor of bashing in your heads.” A prostitute adds, “If he’s too good for me, let him pay!” When the narrator finally gets the angry Mr. Norton back into the car, he smells cigar smoke, again associating the white philanthropist with the white town leaders at the battle royal.

4

The steering wheel feels alien because he is simply going where the road goes and has no real control. As the doctor said, he is a mechanical man following “the white line.” Ironically, he blames “Damn Trueblood. It was his fault.... Here within this quiet greenness I possessed the only identity I had ever known, and I was losing it.” He wants to plead with Norton like “a child before his parent... I believed in the principles of the Founder with all my heart and soul.” He envisions the campus as “a world of whiteness,” taking Norton to his rooms in a building “with white pillars like those of an old plantation manor house.” The liberal benefactor is paralleled to a slaveowner on an old plantation.

Dr. Bledsoe is the opposite of the honest doctor in the Golden Day: “he was the example of everything I hoped to be: Influential with wealthy men all over the country; consulted in matters concerning the race; a leader of his people; the possessor of not one, but *two* Cadillacs, a good salary and a soft, good-looking and creamy-complexioned wife.” Dr. Bledsoe drains black students of their true blood, living off them like a vampire, while also evoking the antiquated medical practice of bleeding patients with leeches. Further,

Norton is a faith “healer” who uses Bledsoe the leech to do the bleeding. Bledsoe has been corrupted by the acquisitive materialism, selfishness, envy, lust and greed prevailing in white society.

Ironically, Bledsoe looks at the invisible black boy “as though I’d suddenly told him black was white.” Bledsoe puts on a “bland mask” to confront the angry Norton. Masking is a motif in black literature, appearing for example in the 19th-century poem by Paul Dunbar, “We Wear the Mask” (1892). The old plantation building where Norton stays is implicitly compared to a “feudal castle” in a goldfish bowl. Later Bledsoe says, “I’m still king down here.” However, Norton dictates to Bledsoe like a feudal king to a servant, judging a peasant. The benevolent liberal absolves the narrator of responsibility for his unpleasant experiences, but he also says, “You may send him away, we won’t need him now.”

The plea of the narrator is a traditional major theme in Naturalism, as in Richard Wright’s *Native Son* (1940): “But it was out of my control, sir.” The red sun “lighting the campus” is an Impressionist metaphor of President Bledsoe’s anger and of the narrator’s anger at the doctor in the Golden Day: “He had made Mr. Norton angry.” When Norton tells him “I have explained to Dr. Bledsoe that you were not at fault,” the narrator is so relieved that, like a dependent child, he sees him as a Santa Claus. He promises to read Emerson. “Very good,” says Norton deceptively. “Self-reliance is a most worthy virtue.”

5

The dark asphalt drives on campus are lined with “whitewashed stones.” Evoking a southern plantation under “the new dispensation,” the prose style becomes Faulknerian as in *Absalom, Absalom!* The moon over the campus is not romantic, it is “a white man’s bloodshot eye.” The choir members in the chapel wear uniforms of black and white, the students’ faces are “frozen in solemn masks.” And the narrator seems to hear already their voices “mechanically” raised. The narrator has been taught to prefer educated preachers purged (bled) of “that wild emotion of the crude preachers most of us knew in our home towns and of whom we were deeply ashamed.” Feeling superior to people who do not go to college is characteristic of college students regardless of race, but the effects of elitist snobbery on the lower-class black population caused a catastrophic backlash against education in general, especially among young black males, making them more invisible.

The college replaces the black cultural heritage with the “black rite of Horatio Alger”—the white myth that anyone who works hard can get ahead in America, which is nullified by the underlying message: “the staggering folly of our impatience to rise even higher.” Mocking in retrospect, he calls the campus “this Eden,” making him an American Adam who loses his innocence. He finds the liberal whites’ “regard for our welfare marked by an almost benign and impersonal indifference.” Nevertheless, he becomes a student leader and tries to inspire his fellow students to believe in the Horatio Alger myth—“the promise.” He is like Ellison “a bugler of words, imitating the trumpet and the trombone’s timbre, playing the thematic variations like a baritone horn.”

The enlightened narrator satirizes himself as he was before his enlightenment like Joyce does through Stephen Daedalus in *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* (1916). In italics, with Expressionistic passion he mocks himself for “blaring triumphant sounds empty of triumphs” and “counterfeit notes singing achievements yet unachieved”—“the mere echoes noise of the promise.” He refers to words as “sounds” rather than concepts and as a speaker he made “more sound than sense.” Nevertheless, he has retained his true blood, his only hope of attaining an authentic identity. He speaks in the emotional rhythms of the old black preachers rather than like those schooled to suppress themselves. Though deluded by the Horatio Alger myth, he is sincere. His words rise from his soul—“my fountain, like bright-colored balls in a water spout.” His fountain contrasts with the dry broken fountain on campus and his water spout sustains the whale motif and is a metaphor of the spirit used by Melville in *Moby-Dick* (1851). In search of authenticity he addresses himself not to the faculty or students of the college but to the former slave, the very old Miss Susie Gresham in the back row of his audience, looking to her for inspiration and approval, a “relic of slavery whom the campus loved but did not understand.”

In his deference to white guests on the platform of the chapel, Dr. Bledsoe has the decorum not of a college president but of “a portly head waiter” who “managed to make himself look humble.” Yet to the

black students Bledsoe is “our leading statesman.” They depend upon him. “He was our coal-black daddy of whom we were afraid.” His chosen preacher, Homer A. Barbee, rises to the pulpit in dark glasses. “I had the notion that part of Dr. Bledsoe had arisen and moved forward, leaving his other part smiling in the chair.” Homer, the poet of mythic heroes, was a blind seer. In contrast, Homer A. Barbee is blind both literally and spiritually. He glorifies a false hero and perpetuates the white myth that blinds young blacks. They are invisible to him and he makes them more invisible to themselves. Homer A. Barbee is a *bar* to their psychological growth. The black preacher has a white collar like a slave shackle “dividing his head from his body,” dissociating him from his true blood, and “he made a cage of his hands.” Cages and traps are traditional motifs in Naturalist fiction, as in *Native Son* (1940) by Wright.

The Founder embodies a black version of the Horatio Alger myth—a black American Dream. He passed race leadership and commandments to Dr. Bledsoe before dying on a mountain peak as a black Moses. His body was transported by train like the body of Abraham Lincoln. “A slow train. A sorrowful train.” Except that his body is in a “humble baggage car.” The Founder lives on through the college—a kind of church—“as surely as if the great creator had been resurrected.” He becomes a black God. Reverend Barbee equates Bledsoe with the Founder, or God: “his living agent, his physical presence”—like a black Pope. Barbee urges the students to “pattern yourselves upon him.” Leaving the pulpit Barbee trips over Bledsoe—he never does see him as he is—and is helped up by white men, in accord with his myth. Only then does the narrator see with a Joycean epiphany that Homer A. Barbee is blind.

A cluster of images at the end of the chapter summarizes its themes—the romantic moonlight, dreaming, blindness, mental slavery, submission to a cage, and shadows—motifs throughout the rest of the novel. The mockingbird on the statue of the Founder mocks the myth he embodies, “flipping its moon-mad tail above the head of the eternally kneeling slave.” Ellison is a Realist in debunking the Romantic madness of following “the white line.” The street lamps “glowed brilliant in the moonlit dream of the campus, each light serene in its cage of shadows.”

6

The influence of Hemingway is evident in the Realism and the concrete plain style appealing to the senses so effectively it makes you hungry for simple fresh bread and butter. Ellison then cues another instrument in his literary jazz band and the style becomes Impressionistic and poetic with a vivid simile: “Lights began to appear in the girls’ dormitories, like the bursting of luminous seeds flung broadside by an invisible hand.” On his way to face Bledsoe, who sees him as a traitor like Trueblood, the narrator walks in the shadows of other male students, himself now a shadow in the psychological sense of being what is repressed by the persona, by the Head.

When the narrator faces Bledsoe, half of the president’s face is in shadow, for he has repressed his own blackness and bled himself as dry as the campus fountain. Bledsoe calls the boy “Nigger” like the white men at the battle royal. “It was as though he’d struck me.” Dr. Bledsoe says of the honest doctor in the *Golden Day*, his opposite: “A Negro like that should be under lock and key.” Bledsoe is a representative politically correct black academic collaborating with white liberals in suppressing intellectual diversity, free speech, and the truth.

Bledsoe punishes the narrator like God casting Adam out of Eden: “Boy, I’m getting rid of you.” The narrator stands up to him, but Bledsoe disarms him: “You don’t even know the difference between the way things are and the way they’re supposed to be.” The irony here is the contradiction between Bledsoe’s conception of the way things are supposed to be and the narrator’s. “This is a power set-up, son, and I’m at the controls...which means government power.” The liberal whites control the media: “If they want to tell the world a lie, they can tell it so well that it becomes the truth.” Bledsoe admits, “Yes, I had to act the nigger!” He sees the white world as forever racist and accommodates rather than trying to change it: “I’ve made my place in it and I’ll have every Negro in the country hanging on tree limbs by morning if it means staying where I am.” He is no better than an overseer on a slave plantation wielding a whip. Influential black leaders like Bledsoe do more harm to their race than the Ku Klux Klan.

The black myth of Horatio Alger defined the urban industrial North as the place to get ahead—the “promised land.” The myth inspired the Great Migration of blacks northward from the pastoral South.

Accordingly, Homer Barbee is from Chicago and Bledsoe orders the narrator to go to New York, indicating that he can return to the college next Fall. But the narrator feels expelled and ashamed and goes outside and vomits on the campus, hearing the sound of an old piano playing the blues out of tune. "I would never live down my disgrace." Haunted by his grandfather, he accepts responsibility for what happened. Again he faces Bledsoe, who makes "a cage of his fingers." Touching the shackle from slavery days on his desk, Bledsoe agrees to give him letters of introduction, supposedly to help him get a job. The letters will be sealed, however, and he must promise not to open them.

7

The invisible man boards a bus to New York with a "white driver." He is surprised to see the honest doctor from the Golden Day, the supposedly crazy vet, seated at the back of the bus in custody—"only the rear was reserved for us." He would rather avoid the wise doctor: "I wanted to remember nothing connected with Trueblood or the Golden Day." Ironically, up North in Harlem he will experience true blood and riot on a much larger scale than down here in the South. Paradoxically, in trying to run away, the invisible man will discover himself.

Like most American dreamers he is motivated by money: "I thought I'd make more money in New York." The realistic veteran comments on the Great Migration: "New York!... That's not a place, it's a dream. When I was your age it was Chicago"—represented by Barbee. "Now all the black boys run away to New York. Out of the fire into the melting pot... Deep down you're thinking about the freedom you've heard about up North... But for God's sake, learn to look beneath the surface... Come out of the fog, young man.... Play the game, but don't believe in it." This prefigures the fog later and is the same advice that he got from his grandfather.

The vet uses the puppet metaphor that is a motif culminating in Tod Clifton's Sambo dolls: "the white folks, authority, the gods, fate, circumstances—the force that pulls your strings until you refuse to be pulled any more." The first part of his statement is deterministic Naturalism in the tradition of Richard Wright, attributing Godlike power to whites, as the rioters do to Norton in the Golden Day. Politically, this is defeatism—merely playing the game. But the vet concludes with an assertion of freedom to choose, to "refuse to be pulled any more." And he allows that "You might even beat the game." This view is Existentialism, transcending deterministic forces, as is the vet's final advice, "And remember, the world is possibility if only you'll discover it." The vet embodies the transition from defeatist Naturalism to Existential transcendence—Wright to Ellison.

With irony, the vet exults in the young man's assertion of freedom in going to New York alone at his age: "I can remember when young fellows like him had first to commit a crime, or be accused of one, before they tried such a thing." This alludes to Richard Wright's story "The Man Who Was almost a Man." As he approaches New York, encouraged by his letters of recommendation, the narrator becomes optimistic again and plans to return to the college in the Fall: "I dreamed with my eyes gazing blankly upon the landscape." However, on the subway he gets crushed against other passengers, a woman in particular—"I was trapped." As a black man, he is more vulnerable to accusations—more deterministic forces. The subway car lurches him into movements "against my will."

At a Harlem station he is impelled out the door "feeling like something regurgitated from the belly of a frantic whale." After sinning against the God of Bledsoe, he is saved from being swallowed by a whale like Jonah in the Bible—by the true blood of Harlem: "I had never seen so many black people... My courage returned... The vet had been right: For me this was not a city of realities, but of dreams." He comes upon a gathering around a speaker called Ras who is "shaking his fist angrily over the uplifted faces." Ras personifies violent rebellion—a dream--extending the theme of rioting dramatized in the Golden Day: "It was as though a riot would break out any minute." This scene intensifies the tone of the novel and suspense increases as the action builds toward the final riot in Harlem.

Again the style is plain and simple with a concrete Realism that contrasts with the invisible man's Romantic dreams, his illusions about Bledsoe's letters, and his youthful vanity: "Finally, I went to the mirror and gave myself an admiring smile as I spread the letters upon the dresser like a hand of high trump cards." He decides he must change his "colored people" sense of time and get a watch, a symbol of mechanical society in literature. He decides to "slough off my southern ways of speech," rejecting his true blood and using Bledsoe as his model, as advised by Barbee.

Job hunting with his letters of recommendation on Wall Street he feels more strongly the deterministic force of money. "The streets were full of hurrying people who walked as though they had been wound up and were directed by some unseen control." Regardless of race, everyone seems to be a puppet of the economy. Black couriers remind him of "prisoners carrying their leg irons as they escaped from a chain gang"—"maybe they were chained to money." Waiting outside an office he sees through a window the Statue of Liberty with "her torch almost lost in the fog." This image points ahead to his crossing the bridge in the fog and his experiences at the Liberty Paint factory. His failure to get any responses to his letters of introduction leaves him in a fog of uncertainty, desperate for a job. Ironically, in his greatest dependency, he gets a promising letter from Emerson.

The invisible man is not able to suppress his true blood when he hears a black man pushing a cart full of plans—*blue-prints*—singing the blues. "Why you trying to deny me?" the blues man challenges him. "Somehow he was like one of the vets from the Golden Day." The blues and plans man sustains the bear motif that leads to hibernation in a basement den where the invisible man listens to blues and makes plans: "Man, this Harlem ain't nothing but a bear's den." He tilts "his head to one side like a bear's." He is another of those "unrecognized compulsions of my being."

At an importing firm he keeps his appointment to meet Emerson, who is not there. Instead he is met by a young white man who moves "with a long hip-swinging stride that caused me to frown." On a table is a copy of *Totem and Taboo*. The young man is as swishy as the tropical birds fluttering in a cage. He is evasive, name drops Harvard and tells the narrator, "The only trouble with ambition is that it sometimes blinds one to realities." His reality is connoted by his Club Calamus, a name from Walt Whitman's poetry that is associated today with homosexuality. He wants to get naked. He suggests they "throw off the mask of custom and manners that insulate man from man, and converse in naked honesty and frankness... We're both frustrated, understand? Both of us, and I want to help you..."

The narrator is invisible to the gay predator except as a sex object—an exotic like the caged birds. The naïve boy only wants to prove his identity and get a job. The gay man exclaims, "Identity! My God! Who has any identity any more anyway?" He seems to feel invisible himself, with an identity issue like the black man, but he is also trying to seduce the narrator into giving up his true identity. The upper-class Harvard grad compares himself absurdly with Huckleberry Finn, implying that Huck and Jim had a homosexual relationship, a notion fantasized by a few gay and Freudian critics. He makes his father Emerson equivalent to Pap Finn, a racist crook. The gay son hates his father, implicitly with good reason. In kindness, now seeing the narrator as a person, he shows him Bledsoe's letter, which refers to the narrator's "fall" and asks Emerson in effect to "keep this nigger boy running."

Emerson is parallel to Bledsoe and his gay son is parallel to the invisible man in that he also has been disloyal: "my father would consider my revelation the most extreme treason... You're free of him now. I'm still his prisoner." He is like one of his father's caged birds. Avoiding another cage himself, the invisible man declines his offer of a job without understanding what would be expected of him as the valet of a gay man. A valet is a virtual slave. Still naively blind, he is perplexed: "Everyone seemed to have some plan for me, and beneath that some more secret plan." He is not yet his own plans man, he is like the Robin in the folksong that got his ass plucked instead of getting a worm. "What was young Emerson's plan—and why should it have included me?" He feels like he is getting "hoped to death." Only when he is self-reliant in accord with the original Emerson does he get an acceptable job.

Getting a job is crossing a bridge to a better life, but the invisible young man is still in a fog. The same fog metaphor is used in *Huckleberry Finn*. The young black man is comparable to Jim in *Huck Finn* in being an innocent victim who escapes from captivity but does not understand his identity. The electric sign on the plant “Keep America Pure with Liberty Paints” makes the company symbolic of America and the exhortation to keep the country “Pure” connotes racism, making the claim to liberty ironic. The company trademark is an eagle. Flags on the plant buildings flutter and “it was like watching some vast patriotic ceremony from a distance.” An office boy tells him the company makes “a lot of paint for the government.” The representative black man enters the plant, industrial America, down a “pure white hall.”

After getting hired he learns that he is a scab being used to avoid paying union wages. The office boy refers to Kimbro the boss as a “slave driver.” The invisible man is ordered to add drops of “black dope” to cans of paint being made exclusively for the government and “heading for a national monument” in Washington—“as white as George Washington’s Sunday-go-to-meetin’ wig.” The government needs to look pure and “That’s paint that’ll cover just about anything”—meaning corruption and injustice. There are 7 tanks, “each with a puzzling code stenciled on it,” corresponding to the 7 letters of recommendation that render him invisible like the black dope. The social “melting pot,” an American tradition since the 18th century, is excluding blacks. Without company guidance, the narrator adds remover to the paint, then he accidentally produces gray paint—integration of black and white.

He is reassigned to the boiler room in the “deep basement,” where a black man in dirty overalls “moved out of the shadow.” Lucius Brockway is identified with the black “shadow” repressed in the unconscious of whites, in the sense of Melville and Jung. With “cottony white hair” he is another Uncle Tom, a lower working class version of Bledsoe: “I make up the base...and I know more about this basement than anybody....*we the machines inside the machine*... 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—even helped dig the first foundation.” His wiping the face of a pressure gauge with a white cloth recalls wiping the face of Norton, a pressure gauge that overheated in the Golden Day. Brockway is also like Barbee and the Founder when he boasts that he helped make up the company slogan: “‘If it’s Optic White, It’s the Right White,’ he quoted with an upraised finger, like a preacher quoting holy writ.” Other colors “cain’t get nowhere... If you’re white, you’re right,’ I said. ‘That’s it,’ he said.”

The young narrator blunders into a union meeting in the locker room, where his working with Brockway makes them suspect him of being a fink, a spy for management. When he returns to the deep basement and tells Brockway he ran into a union meeting the old Uncle Tom explodes like a boiler and threatens to kill him. They fight and the narrator calls Brockway an “old-fashioned, slavery-time, mammy-made, handkerchief-headed bastard.” He thinks of him as a Tar Baby to be avoided. While they fight each other like the rioters later in Harlem, a boiler overheats. Brockway yells at him to turn the white valve wheel and runs away laughing. The narrator’s struggle to turn the white power wheel and prevent an explosion is rendered in a long Expressionistic sentence of sensations in slow motion culminating in a “blast of black emptiness that was somehow a bath of whiteness.”

This chapter is the most Expressionistic in the novel. Aesthetically it is in the diverse traditions of Hawthorne, Kafka, and Ionesco and the Theater of the Absurd. The invisible man’s surreal experiences in the company hospital are a psychological allegory depicting the acculturation of the black man in America in the mid-20th century. He is sitting in a “cold, white rigid chair,” wearing “white overalls.” He is being tended by another doctor, this one with a “bright third eye” glowing from his forehead, a traditional image of God—the eye “Inside.” He is blown away, he has lost his identity and now he is internalizing the mechanistic white social order personified in the doctor as the equivalent of God—as the eye inside. This process of acculturation results in a bicameral, divided mind that dissociates the black man from his true blood and enslaves him to the internalized voice of the White Man.

The invisible man has experienced a spiritual death by explosion. Now he is treated like a child, reborn into a white world dominated by machines that control, manipulate, and hurt him. “My mind was blank, as

though I had just begun to live.” He is reborn a machine just as Brockway said—“*we the machines.*” One of his white attendants says “We’re trying to get you started again. Now shut up!” They are bleeding him like Bledsoe. The medical procedure is in the tradition of the mad scientist, as in *Frankenstein* (1813) by Mary Shelley and in “The Birthmark” (1843) and “Rappaccini’s Daughter” (1844) by Hawthorne. “I discovered now that my head was encircled by a piece of cold metal like the iron cap worn by the occupant of an electric chair.” The machine of society will execute his individuality and turn him into a robot, as in a Communist reeducation program or in Feminist sensitivity training. According to the discredited doctrine of cultural determinism, Nature is nothing, Nurture is everything. People are merely putty. This has been the theory of people who want to control other people—behavioral psychologists, Communists, Nazis, Socialists, and Feminists—since the early 20th century.

On the contrary, scientific studies have proven that individual human traits are over 50% genetic and determined by Nature. Ellison satirizes both the myth that basic human nature can be changed and the displacement of faith in God by faith in the Machine—technology: “My little gadget will solve everything! ...from now on do your praying to my little machine. I’ll deliver the cure.” Today liberals like these would have us reduced to little machines within the totalitarian machine of Big Government: “The machine will produce the results of a prefrontal lobotomy”—a complete “change of personality.”

The allegory is evident when it is said that the “case” of the invisible man—the patient—“has been developing some three hundred years.” He has been patient for a very long time. He is subjected to shocks that make him dance like a Sambo doll: “They really do have rhythm, don’t they? Get hot, boy! Get hot!” But he is like a disconnected boiler: “I wanted to be angry, murderously angry. But somehow the pulse of current smashing through my body prevented me. Something had been disconnected.”

Trapped in a glass box under a vast white ceiling, he is a drop of black dope lost in whiteness. He no longer knows his own name. Lobotomized and robotic, he mistakes the scream of a machine for his mother: “A machine my mother?... Clearly, I was out of my head.” But then “I fell to plotting ways of short-circuiting the machine.” He concludes that, “When I discover who I am, I’ll be free.” The theme of rebirth is dramatized when the “head doctor” pulls “the cord which was attached to the stomach node, jerking me forward.” He is dressed in white overalls and told, “Well, boy, it looks as though you’re cured.... You’re a new man.”

He makes involuntary movements that are conditioned reflexes: “I don’t know why I did it.” He is freed from the hospital but fired from his job: “You just aren’t prepared for work under our industrial conditions. Later, perhaps, but not now.” The “new man” feels dissociated: “my mind and I were no longer getting around in the same circles. Nor my body either.” Now he feels “in the grip of some alien personality lodged deep within me.” As if possessed by a demon. He resists, “for knowing now that there was nothing which I could expect from them, there was no reason to be afraid.... And I felt that I would fall, had fallen, moved now as against a current sweeping swiftly against me.”

12

Now reborn, he has “wild, infant’s eyes” and is so weakened by his shocking experiences that he cannot stand on his own two feet. He is saved by the kindly Mary Rambo: “I’ll take care of you like I done a heap of others.” She does for others as she would have them do for her if she needed help—Christian morality. Her warm relations with fellow blacks in Harlem recalls the close interpersonal pastoral life in the Old South among blacks on some plantations so often cruelly disrupted by the slave trade.

The narrator goes along with Mary Rambo “inwardly rejecting and yet accepting her bossing...too tired to resist.” In her place, he feels like he is in “a hole,” yet he cannot deny that he is more comfortable with Mary than at the Men’s House. She gives him more than a place to lie down and good hot soup, she encourages him like his grandfather did: “You got to lead and you got to fight and move us all on up a little higher.” She denounces the likes of Bledsoe: “They finds a place for themselves and forgits the ones on the bottom.” Mary urges him, “Don’t get corrupted.”

Now a “disillusioned dreamer” he feels alienated among young men “still caught up in the illusions that had just been boomeranged out of my head.” He rebels when he sees a fat man from behind he thinks is Bledsoe and dumps a pail of sewage on his head—but he is mistaken—another boomerang. He is kicked out of the Men’s House just as was kicked out of college. So he rents a room from generous Mary Rambo who keeps his hope alive, though “I believed in nothing.” Thematic motifs from the paint factory are sustained, as he is “too much aboil inside...a spot of black anger glowed and threw off a hot red light.” Now he longs for internal harmony: “If only all the contradictory voices shouting inside my head would calm down and sing a song in unison.”

13

The style again becomes plain, concrete and evocative like the typical style of Hemingway, appealing to the senses for the taste and full meaning of the yams. The yam man is authentic like Jim Trueblood and yams represent the black southern heritage—what is most nutritious, filling, warm and sweet. These pastoral values sustain the heart in the mechanical Big City. Sweetness is a strong motif in black fiction. In Toni Morrison and in Alice Walker’s story “To Hell with Dying” for example, sweetness is essential to the survival of the soul. Eating the delicious hot sweet yam in brown syrup is sacramental here, because of all it means, as eating often is in Hemingway. Eating the yam fills the invisible man with “such a surge of homesickness that I turned away to keep my control.”

Eating a yam on a public street sets him free. He stops worrying about what people will think of him for eating a yam. Feeling free, he fantasizes humiliating Bledsoe—“I let out a wild laugh.” Eating the yam gives him a sense of identity that he expresses in a witty paraphrase of God from the Bible: “I yam what I am.” His wit is evidence of transcendence. The implication of his paraphrase is that his sense of identity derives from replacing the authority of the internalized white God with his own true blood, with the unblinded eye inside—the God of black spirituals as sung by the old woman in the Prologue. However, sweetness is not enough. “Continue on the yam level and life would be sweet—though somewhat yellowish.” To live the sweet life with Mary Rambo ignores the sour realities and is somewhat cowardly, hence the “unpleasant taste” in the end, frostbitten by cold awareness.

He comes upon a crowd watching an eviction. White prison “trustees” are carrying furniture out of a building and one says, “I don’t want to do this, I *have* to do it.” The old woman being evicted blames “all the white folks” and the narrator feels “as when a child, seeing the tears of his parents, is moved by both fear and sympathy to cry.” This dispossession becomes a metaphor of the black experience in general, particularized and brought to life by the detailed catalogue of personal objects and mementos, ending with life insurance policies stamped void, a newspaper photo of the real life black protest leader Marcus Garvey upon his deportation, and an old document freeing a slave.

“And it was as though I myself was being dispossessed... And beneath it all there boiled up all the shock-absorbing phrases that I had learned all my life. I seemed to teeter on the edge of a great dark hole.” When the crowd gets violent, he moves forward onto the front steps of the building and makes a speech urging restraint rather than riot. He tells the crowd they need a wise leader, having in mind the Founder of the college, earlier equated with Bledsoe. “‘He was a handkerchief-headed rat!’ a woman screamed, her voice boiling with contempt.” The riot that follows is exploited by white members of the Communist Party, here called The Brotherhood. Chased across the rooftops by Brother Jack, the rabble-rouser arouses “a flight of frantic white birds, suddenly as large as buzzards as they beat furiously against my eyes.” He scares white pigeons on the roof, complacent whites above it all.

Brother Jack the Red has red hair and buys him coffee and cheesecake, praises his eloquence and tries to recruit him to the cause. Using stock political terms that dehumanize them he describes the evicted black couple as “agrarian types, you know. Being ground up by industrial conditions. Thrown on the dump heaps and cast aside.” Cast aside by him as well. Individuals are invisible to collectivists. “You mustn’t waste your emotions on individuals, they don’t count.... History has passed them by. Unfortunate, but there’s nothing to do about them.” This is the opposite of how the narrator feels, but Brother Jack insists that he is just being sentimental: “You have not completely shed that self, that old agrarian self, but it’s dead and you will throw it off completely and emerge something new.”

Ironically, Brother Jack wants to exploit him for his race yet he complains, “Why do you fellows always talk in terms of race!” They both escaped from the cops by running over the rooftops, yet all they have in common is that they are “only going in the same direction.” The narrator calls himself “the better runner,” but Brother Jack is going to “keep this nigger boy running.” It is true that “He only wanted to use me for something,” like the young Emerson. The thematic contrasts between the warm pastoral South and the cold urban North are emphasized by the winter weather. Mary is warmly pastoral like the evicted couple, but she is a survivor of the cold, an exemplar: “Hell, she knew very well how to live here, much better than I was with my college training—training! *Bledsoing*, that was the term.”

14

Mary is short of money and sings the blues. In debt to her and taking her for granted, the invisible man feels guilty for not taking the job offered by Brother Jack. Ironically, Mary Rambo has been invisible to him: “Suddenly I felt an urge to go look at her, perhaps I had really never seen her. I had been acting like a child, not a man.” So he calls Brother Jack and accepts his offer, in order to “pay Mary something of what I owed her.” The Communists gather in the Chthonian hotel, identifying them with ancient gods of the underworld, where the invisible man is welcomed by a woman wearing a clip of “blazing diamonds.” She is a rich Communist, like the entertainer Barbra Streisand for example, a contradiction of egalitarian ideals symptomatic of corruption. Her first name is the same as the famous anarchist “Red Emma” Goldman. The male Reds dress to look downtrodden. “I was struck by the contrast between the richness of the room and their rather poor clothing.”

Emma is a formidable woman with “a direct, what-type-of-mere-man-have-we-here kind of look.” Later the invisible man is asked his opinion of women’s rights. He overhears Emma disapprove of him to Brother Jack: “But don’t you think he should be a little blacker?” Brother Jack asks him, “How would you like to be the new Booker T. Washington?” The invisible man praises the mythic Founder over Washington, but Brother Jack insists that “Booker T. Washington was resurrected today at a certain eviction in Harlem.” On the contrary, Washington was a Christian and a loyal American, whereas the invisible man will be preaching Communist atheism and the overthrow of the government. Brother Jack says, “We are all realists here, and materialists.” Leftist materialism and welfare broke up black churches and black families in the late 20th century, leading to more crime and suffering.

Brother Jack demands like Bledsoe that “You must put aside your past.” Yet he is asked to sing a black spiritual, because “*all* colored people sing.” Transcending the insult with joking and laughter, he is forgiving rather than intolerant as politically correct liberals are today: “Shouldn’t the short man have the right to make a mistake without his motives being considered consciously or unconsciously malicious?” Today he would be condemned forever as a “racist.” Communists and Feminists such as these originated the plague of political correctness in the 20th century.

Desperate for a job, the invisible man agrees to become even more invisible. He must stop writing to his family and accept a new identity contained in a white envelope, like a slave. He must leave Mary Rambo and give up all she represents, though he distrusts the Brotherhood of white Reds and suspects that they may be just like the white trustees in alliance with Bledsoe. His alienation from his true blood is evident in his decision not to face Mary when he leaves. “I shivered in the cold.”

15

On his last day at Mary’s his room loses warmth and he notices near the door an iron bank in the form of a very black Negro with its mouth open, choked full of coins and on its chest the words FEED ME. The image mocks his dependency and his leaving Mary for money. The stereotype infuriates him. He smashes it against a heating pipe and breaks its head spilling coins on the floor, recalling the coins at the battle royal. He yells at the “uncivilized” tenants banging on the cold pipe for having “No respect for the individual.” Ironically, he is going to advocate for Communists with no respect for the individual. Smashing a bank is smashing capitalism, but he cannot get rid of it. He throws it into a garbage can and then drops it in the snow and walks away but each time somebody forces him to take it back or somebody returns it to him. He cannot escape either capitalism or the stereotype of Sambo.

He is picked up in a taxi by Brother Jack and other Reds. One is smoking a pipe that is “a red disk in the dark” like the “angry sun” in an earlier scene. Waiting in a locker room to give his speech, the invisible man is implicitly compared to the photo of a boxer on the wall: “a popular fighter who had lost his sight in the ring. It must have been right here in this arena, I thought.” The boxer had been “beaten blind” in a crooked fight.” Now the invisible man tries “jabbing my suspicions away.” His feeling of inauthenticity leads to an Existentialist epiphany: “It was absurd.” Now he listens to the dissenting voice within himself: “my grandfather part; the cynical disbelieving part—the traitor self that always threatened internal discord.” In his new suit and with his new name “I was becoming someone else.... I was under orders. Even if I met Mary on the street, I’d have to pass her by unrecognized.”

Again he is betraying his true blood. Anticipating his own destination, he envisions from memory an ominous hole used for dumping. Now he sees Brother Jack as a toy bull terrier who resembles a black-and-white bulldog he knew named Master, chained to an apple tree. The term “Master” parallels Brother Jack to a slave overseer who is himself chained to an ideological order, tied to a presumption of knowledge. Coming on stage the invisible man is blinded by a spotlight, recalling the battle royal. The audience chants a slogan and Brother Jack presides “like a bemused father listening to the performance of his adoring children.” The invisible man is the last speaker: “The light was so strong that I could no longer see the audience... I felt the hard, mechanical isolation of the hospital machine and I didn’t like it.”

In his speech he picks up several other thematic motifs of the novel: “They think we’re blind...they’ve dispossessed us each of one eye from the day we’re born. So now we can only see in straight white lines.” He laments that blacks have been fighting amongst themselves: “Let’s reclaim our sight... Let’s get together... I feel that here, after a long and desperate and uncommonly blind journey, I have come home.” The crowd cheers and “Red spots danced before my eyes.” After his speech, “I stumbled as in a game of blindman’s bluff.” He gets pushed around verbally by criticisms from the Brothers, a reversal of his expectations. Brother Jack is pleased with the speech, but the pipe-smoking Red complains that he was politically incorrect. “He pronounced ‘incorrect’ as though the term described the most heinous crime imaginable.” Brother Westrum, explicitly compared to Supercargo, likewise condemns the speech as “unscientific.” This identifies the invisible man with the rioters in the Golden Day.

Defending him—“his red head bristling”—Brother Jack calls the audience a mob that is “boiling over to come along with us.” The argument is resolved by requiring the wildly emotional black man to be “tamed” by political indoctrination. Significantly, he must also “stay completely out of Harlem.” Once again white men are bleeding him of his true blood. At the same time, he is more than a black rabble-rouser, he has become “more human”: “The audience was mixed, their claims broader than race.” They are the poor, the dispossessed. “I would do whatever was necessary to serve them well.” This altruistic public service is his Existentialist “project” in a Postmodern age: “How else could I save myself from disintegration?” His personal *integrity* depends upon *integration* in society. In accord with the Existentialist emphasis on free will, he has transformed himself by force of will, for “I was someone new.”

He has transcended polarization, reconciling opposites in a step toward wholeness and transcendence: “Here was a way...not limited by black and white, but a way which...could lead to the highest possible rewards.... For the first time, lying there in the dark, I could glimpse the possibility of being more than a member of a race. It was no dream, the possibility existed. I had only to learn and survive in order to go to the top.” However, he is not yet fully enlightened. For he dismisses his grandfather as an irrelevant old slave, he is still being used by whites and he is blinded by the Brotherhood.

In the El Toro Bar, bullfight scenes on the wall behind the bar are metaphors: Like a matador Brother Jack with his red hair and Red ideology is controlling a wild black bull with a red cape “so close to his body that man and bull seemed to blend in one swirl of calm, pure motion.” By contrast in another scene “the matador was being swept skyward on the black bull’s horns.” Brother Jack has already been compared to a bull-dog and psychologically he is both matador and bull, in that like a matador he identifies with and

“becomes” the black bull—the invisible man—to anticipate its moves, control it and avoid getting tossed aside and perhaps killed. In a larger sense, the black bull is black Harlem. “‘Master it,’ Brother Jack said.” Mastering the Red ideology means becoming a matador, a master to black people like a blind Barbee or a slave master. In the end the matador sacrifices the bull.

Mastering the people is the goal of all collectivists from liberals to Communists: “‘Say what the people want to hear, but say it in such a way that they’ll do what we wish.’ He laughed. ‘Remember too, that theory always comes after practice. Act first, theorize later’.” This amounts to saying the end justifies the means, the rationale for fascism: Do *anything*, then justify it with rationalizations. This is why Brother Jack has no hesitation in using the invisible man to death if necessary. “He looked at me as though he did not see me.” The individual is merely a tool in the militant collective: “You’re a soldier now,” says Brother Jack, “your health belongs to the organization.”

The district offices of the Brotherhood, the Communist Party, are located in a “converted church,” the main floor of which was occupied by a pawn shop. Faith in the church has been displaced by faith in political action, due to continuing poverty as evinced by the pawn shop, where blacks are pawning their souls. The conflict in the black community is dramatized in the fight between the handsome young idealist Tod Clifton and the wild black nationalist and racist Ras the Exhorter who “has had a monopoly in Harlem.” Clifton punches Ras until he rocks “like a drunken bull... And as I came up Ras tried to bull his way out...” Ras is “bull-angry” and “butting him.” Ras lets Clifton live because he is black. He exhorts him to stop associating with whites and join a race war. He shakes his fist at a plane overhead like Bigger Thomas in *Native Son* (1940) by Wright. “Their money bleed black blood, mahn.” Comparing Clifton to an African king, Ras introduces a slogan that would become popular in the Civil Rights movement of the 1960s: “You black and beautiful.”

The invisible man looks at a picture of the 19th-century black leader Frederick Douglass on the wall of the Party office, “remembering and refusing to hear the echoes of my grandfather’s voice.” Ironically, as a community activist he is using his grandfather’s method of wearing a mask—but he is duping his own people: “I am what they think I am.” Now he models himself not on the mythic Founder but on Douglass as an escaped slave: “Douglass came north to escape and find work...[and] had taken another name.... I was dominated by the all-embracing idea of Brotherhood.”

18

The note of warning not to go too fast in his effort to help his people is a response to his “Rainbow” campaign promoting racial integration, an image still used today by some black leaders. The black Brother Tarp limps from “dragging a chain” on a chain gang and he reminds the narrator of his grandfather. He broke the chain by saying No to a man “who wanted to take something from me.” Tarp gives the invisible man a leg chain link—a link to his heritage—but the black Brother Wrestrum (rest room) is jealous of his success and objects: “Things that don’t make for Brotherhood have to be rooted out.”

The invisible man has accepted the conditioning he got subjected to in the factory hospital: “I’m a cog in a machine.” The Brotherhood is as much a machine as the factory. Becoming prominent for his successes, he is punished by reassignment to lecture “on the Woman Question.” He feels that “I had just been made the butt of an outrageous joke,” but “my main concern was to work my way ahead in the movement.” He interprets his new assignment as reflecting well on the Brotherhood, “proving that they drew no lines even when it came to women.” *Even* when? There are no women in the *Brother*-hood leadership and assigning a black man instead of a woman to lecture on the problems of women shows instead that the Brotherhood does not really give women a high priority. Women are invisible too. Forced to leave Harlem to lecture to white women downtown is removing the invisible man still further from his true blood.

19

After his first lecture a white woman approaches him “glowing” so warmly that he moves her over “near a partly uncoiled firehose.” At her luxurious apartment she slips into a “rich red” gown. He senses the “possibility of a heightened communication.” The vamp in red moves close and lusts after his ideology: “I

wish to embrace the whole of it...it's so vital and alive... I always thrill to hear you speak, somehow you convey the great throbbing vitality of the movement... It's so powerful, so—so *primitive!*... At times you have tom-toms beating in your voice.... It has so much naked power that it goes straight through one. I tremble just to think of such vitality.” Interested in “uplifting things,” she is intent on proving that “Women should be absolutely as free as men”—as if *he* is free.

Another irony of the episode is that this white woman has wealth, status, freedom, and equality in her marriage. White women were then—and still may be—the richest gender/ethnic group because so many white wives outlive rich husbands. What need has this rich white woman of more rights as compared to the invisible man? Since the 19th century this has been a source of black resentment toward white Feminists and is one source of “White Guilt.” The woman in this episode just wants to use the black man, like young Emerson and Brother Jack. Their superficial union is a metaphor of the unbalanced coalition between blacks and white Feminists since the example of Frederick Douglass.

20

He goes to look for Brother Maceo in a “dark hole of a bar and grill,” where he learns that Maceo lost his position in the Brotherhood. He is bewildered when a patron accuses him of getting “white fever” and abandoning the black community. Back in Harlem at the district office of the Brotherhood, he discovers that Brother Tarp also is gone, along with the portrait of Douglass. Tod Clifton also, representing the best hope of the black community, is gone: “Clifton was forgotten.”

The Brotherhood has betrayed Harlem: “There had been, to my surprise, a switch in emphasis from local issues to those more national and international in scope, and it was felt that for the moment, the interests of Harlem were not of first importance.” The invisible man says No. He breaks his chain like Brother Tarp: “I would do no more running downtown.” Appropriately, he buys a new pair of shoes downtown and “it was here that things began to boil.”

On the street he comes upon a crowd gathered around something. A dancing black doll with a “mask-like face” is “throwing itself about with the fierce defiance of someone performing a degrading act in public.” The doll recalls the Sambo bank he could not destroy nor get rid of. Now he is shocked to recognize Tod Clifton as the one manipulating the dancing doll and regaling the crowd with a sarcastic lyrical spiel extolling Sambo: “For a second our eyes met and he gave me a contemptuous smile, then he spied again. I felt betrayed.” The Brotherhood youth director is selling Sambos in a cynical expression of bitter disillusionment. The invisible man still clings to faith because Tod seems to prove that only in the Brotherhood “could we avoid being empty Sambo dolls.”

The death of Tod Clifton, whose first name in German means death, is rendered “like a slow-motion movie run off with the sound track dead.” Poe was the first to use the device of extreme slow motion, in describing an explosion in *Pym*. The action is swift, the rendering long: A policeman taking Clifton into custody pushes him too far—several times—until Clifton finally turns and slugs him, knocking him down—a suicidal provocation. From a sitting position, the cop shoots Clifton several times. “The sun seemed to scream... Everything seemed slowed down.” The cop says, “He’s a cooked pigeon, Mac.” The connotation of a pigeon as a gullible person applies to both Clifton and the invisible man for believing in the Brotherhood—“birds of passage.” Clifton is an allegorical personification of hope.

The invisible man sees the disillusioned Clifton as one of many black American Adams who fall outside of history because they “fail to understand it.... For they were on the outside, in the dark with Sambo.” He realizes that “All our work had been very little, no great change had been made. And it was all my fault... I’d been asleep, dreaming.” He had been still down on the liberal plantation of his college dreams. His disillusionment with Communism, especially after Stalin signed a pact with Hitler in 1939, was common among many liberals and leftist writers including Richard Wright.

Like the funeral march for Martin Luther King, jr. over a decade later, the march for Tod Clifton transcends race: “Even white brothers and sisters were joining in.” Yet in his heart he blames all whites: “For they had the power to use a paper doll, first to destroy his integrity and then as an excuse for killing him.” Later in his funeral oration, however, he becomes objective: “He was full of illusions.... He was shot for a simple mistake of judgment... He lost his hold on reality.” The invisible man makes Tod in his coffin a symbol of blacks in a social box: “Our hope shot down.” The passionate intensity of that hope and its loss is conveyed in the agonized eulogy by the invisible man. In the end Tod goes “underground,” as the invisible man will be soon in his own hole.

Just as he angered management by mixing paint incorrectly because they gave him no guidance, now the invisible man has angered the Brotherhood by mixing races and speaking incorrectly because they excluded him from a strategy meeting and gave him no guidance. The Brotherhood berates and ridicules him and calls Tod Clifton a racist traitor. He defends Tod: “He was shot because he was black and because he resisted. Mainly because he was black.... If he’d been white, he’d be alive. Or if he’d accepted being pushed around.” Brother Jack says “You were not hired to think.” The invisible man begins returning their sarcasm: “Things have been so brotherly I had forgotten my place.” For presuming to speak from the heart in his eulogy Brother Tobitt (two bits) accuses him of thinking he is “The black God.”

Brother Jack says the organization does not give “undue importance to the mistaken notions of the people... Our job is not to *ask* them what they think but to *tell* them.” That is, Communists are dictators who do not tolerate democracy or individual rights. The invisible man tells them blacks are saying that the Brotherhood betrayed them...and that is why Brother Clifton disappeared. He accuses Brother Jack of acting like “the great white father”—like Norton, or like a slave plantation owner, or like a white President to dispossessed Indians. “Wouldn’t it be better if they called you Marse Jack?”

Infuriated at being compared to a slave master Jack turns redder, lapses “into a foreign language”—probably Russian—and his glass eye pops out of its socket. The leftist is blind in his “left eye.” In contrast, the invisible man feels that “I was just awakening from a dream. I had boomeranged around.” But if he leaves the Brotherhood, “I’d be nowhere... Some of me, too, had died with Tod Clifton.”

Now that hope is dead, the cynical Ras the black nationalist is rising in influence, calling for race war. Opposing him, the invisible man speaks to the crowd advocating racial integration--the “melting pot”--and true brotherhood: “We are Americans, all of us, whether black or white.” His black and white shoes and later his dark glasses and white hat reconcile opposites. The white hat also connotes a mock hero. The polarized Ras calls him a “paid stooge of the white enslaver!” He is beaten by followers of Ras and escapes by disguising himself with a pair of dark glasses tinted green: “I could barely see.” The strong thematic motif of blindness in the novel discredits these glasses from the outset, but they do prove useful and the green tint suggests that they help him to grow, to become visible to himself.

He is mistaken for somebody named Rinehart by a woman who calls him “Rine.” The name suggests a mask—a fake persona concealing the heart. She also calls him “baby,” as if he has been reborn again. The dark glasses turn his vision “sinister” and he adds a wide hat to his hipster disguise: “In the angry period to come I would be able to move about.” He is so changed that he is not recognized by Brother Maceo and gets into a fight with him—“it was absurd.” Now he is fighting the Brotherhood. The feeling of absurdity is a signature of Existentialism. As Rinehart the invisible man seems to be the ultimate Existentialist protagonist, creating not just one but a number of different identities, but none of them are authentic: “Rine the runner and Rine the gambler and Rine the briber and Rine the lover and Rine the Reverend.” To be the real Rinehart he would “have to have a heartless heart and be ready to do anything.... Could he himself be both rind and heart?”

Seeing on the church wall the words “LET THERE BE LIGHT!” he takes off his dark glasses and white hat. This paragraph is informed by the original Emerson in *Nature* (1836), especially by its last paragraph defining reality as fluid and its concluding sentence “Build therefore your own world.” The invisible man says “The world in which we lived was without boundaries. A vast seething, hot world of fluidity...” In the 20th century this Emersonian tradition got stripped of its Transcendentalism and became Existentialism: “His world was possibility and he knew it.... You could actually make yourself anew.... All boundaries down, freedom was not only the recognition of necessity, it was the recognition of possibility.”

He sees himself as having been naïve before—“crazy and blind.” Rinehart teaches him that he is free to create his own identity, a complete reversal of the deterministic Naturalism that has governed the novel up to this point. However, he is still limited by his political vision as symbolized by the false eye of Brother Jack: “Perhaps, I thought, the whole thing should roll off me like drops of water rolling off Jack’s glass eye. I should search out the proper political classification, label Rinehart and his situation and quickly forget it. I hurried away from the church.” Still thinking in reductive political terms, he returns to the Brotherhood office and then goes on to Hambro for more indoctrination. His replacement of faith in the church with faith in politics is Postmodernist, as is his urbanism, seeing the big city as the place “You could actually make yourself anew.”

Rinehart has further subverted his faith in the Brotherhood. Now he criticizes his indoctrinator Hambro for being too reductive and “narrowly logical. He’d see Rinehart simply as a criminal, my obsession as a fall into pure mysticism.” The intellectual level of Hambro’s Communist indoctrination is implicitly compared to the nursery songs being sung in the apartment by his small children. Hambro tells the black narrator that black people “will have to be sacrificed.” He says “The trick is to take advantage of them in their own best interest.” His indoctrinator Hambro turns out to be another Bledsoe, and another Rinehart—a cynical charlatan. The invisible man feels himself back in the hospital machine again getting another shock treatment. “Everywhere I’ve turned somebody has wanted to sacrifice me for my own good—only *they* were the ones who benefited.”

Feeling invisible to all, “I’d have to do a Rinehart.” His fragmentary experiences begin to coalesce: “It was a joke, an absurd joke. And now I looked around a corner of my mind and saw Jack and Norton and Emerson merge into one single white figure.” He decides to live by the advice of his grandfather to “overcome them with yeses, undermine them with grins, I’d agree them to death and destruction. Yes, and I’d let them swallow me [the whale motif] until they vomited or burst wide open.” He decides to use Rinehart methods to destroy the Brotherhood in Harlem and plans to begin by seducing Emma—Jack’s mistress—at the party to follow a meeting the next day at the Chthonian hotel.

24

While Ras is provoking violence “actually being directed against the community itself,” the invisible man begins duping the Brotherhood: “I was to be a justifier, my task would be to deny the unpredictable human element of all Harlem so that they could ignore it when it in any way interfered with their plans...if other minorities loved the country despite their grievances, I would assure the committee that we, immune to such absurdly human and mixed reactions, hated it absolutely.” By now he has learned that Communists and liberals—blind in the left eye like Brother Jack--believe their own propaganda.

The invisible man decides that Emma is too loyal to Jack to seduce into becoming his informant. Acting as a Rinehart, he instead seduces Sybil, the lonely wife of another Brotherhood leader. She is named after the legendary psychic informant in ancient Greece--“a leathery old girl.” The name becomes increasingly ironic as she displays her stupidity. She proves to be completely ignorant of politics, for a start, hence of no use to the invisible man, who feels increasingly guilty as a Rinehart. Sybil sees him only as “Brother Taboo with-whom-all-things-are-possible.” Her husband “talks a lot about women’s rights, but what does he know about what a woman needs?” By now a slurring horny drunk, she calls her husband “blind ‘sa mole in a hole.” She begs the exotic black brother to rape her—“Threaten to kill me if I don’t give in.... I think I’m a nymphomaniac.” She calls him “boo’ful,” a conflation of beautiful and scary—*boo!* Scary in a childish way. “Was she calling me beautiful or boogieful?”

Sybil sees the black Brother as “A domesticated rapist, obviously, an expert on the woman question.” As a Rinehart he mocks her by playing a role similar to the suicidal one played by Tod Clifton selling the dancing Sambo dolls: “Don’t worry,” he tells her, “I rapes real good when I’m drunk.” Again reduced to a degrading stereotype he is reminded of the film *Birth of a Nation*. He rejects the role of Rinehart the rapist and uses her lipstick to write on her belly “SIBYL, YOU WERE RAPED BY SANTA CLAUS.” This is a sarcastic gift to her, since she is unconscious and will suppose he fulfilled her fantasy. Then he is honest enough to wash it off, then kind enough to lie when she comes to and asks him hopefully, saying yes he raped her. Feminists who deny that such women exist are angered by this woman character, dismissing the experience of the black male—like Emma the Red.

He cannot get rid of Sibyl nor her stereotype of him just as he could not get rid of the Sambo bank belonging to Mary Rambo. He feels like accepting white people is accepting racism—being a Rambo Sambo. Nevertheless, he has a heart, like Mary. The longer he is with Sibyl the sorrier he feels for her. He does her a favor by sending her away from Harlem before the riot explodes and back downtown by taxi, back to her illusions. Acting from the heart instead of from the head, he transcends race but he remains invisible. At the end he is still a nigger boy running and even the birds are dropping on him.

25

Gunfire is compared ironically to a celebration of the Fourth of July, as though blacks in Harlem are declaring their own independence, a collective expression of what the invisible man is experiencing. The parallel makes him to some extent an allegorical personification of his race in this episode. It is “A holy holiday for Clifton.” Shooting and looting, “The crowd was working in and out of the stores like ants around spilled sugar.” As the riot grows larger the sentences lengthen and swell, the continuous action is intensified and the vivid style becomes increasingly Expressionistic. To the invisible man it is all “like a blue dream” that becomes a nightmare. Someone notices his flesh wound and says of him, “He’s got a hole in his head!”—a detail pointing toward his basement hole in the end.

He is swept along by the deterministic force of the rioting crowd: “I was one with the mass.” A squad of police arrives in white helmets. They get showered with bricks from the rooftops and begin shooting. “The committee had planned it. And I had helped, had been a tool.... By pretending to agree I *had* agreed.” His guilt increases when he mistakes naked mannequins hanging outside a store for real white women and in horror wonders if one of the “dummies” is Sibyl, with whose corruption, as with the Brotherhood, he had become complicit by pretending to agree. “My grandfather had been wrong about yessing them to death and destruction or else things had changed too much since his day.”

Ras the Destroyer appears on a great black horse in a cape of wild animal skin, leading his barbarians with a “haughty, vulgar dignity.” He is alien to America in being a native of the West Indies who dresses like an Abyssinian chieftain. Ras is absurdly primitive, insane actually, preparing to attack massed police officers with a spear. The invisible man pulls Tarp’s leg chain out of his briefcase and slips it over his knuckles as he does when linking himself to slavery, “with a new sense of self.” Ras throws his spear at him piercing one of the white female dummies hanging outside the store. The invisible man declares himself no longer a slave in the Brotherhood. He opposes this self-destructive riot. In your face, Ras. In response Ras orders him hung with the white dummies, exhorting: “No more Uncle Toms.” Ras is parallel to a murderous white racist, as he incites a mob to lynch an innocent black man. Again, black people are fighting among themselves and dancing to the tune of the white man like Sambos.

The invisible man is “still running.” His sense of absurdity intensifies as forms of the word *absurd* appear four times in the paragraph about getting lynched by one of his own people. He has another Existentialist epiphany when he decides “that it was better to live out one’s own absurdity than to die for that of others, whether for Ras’s or Jack’s.” With this, he attains his independence on the Fourth of July. He frees himself from Ras. In the psychological allegory, Ras is another “unrecognized compulsion” in himself, embodying his own boiling anger, hatred and primitive compulsion for revenge. Overcoming the Ras within himself is comparable to Ishmael overcoming the Ahab in himself in *Moby-Dick*, a parallel suggested by opening the novel with a quotation from Melville. Ras is like the white whale in seeking

revenge, but more like Ahab in his madness. The invisible man flings the spear like a harpoon through the jaw of Ras, silencing him. Again reborn, "I had surrendered my life and begun to live again."

Ironically, Ras's men chase him like Klansmen: "It was important to them that they hang me, lynch me even, since that was the way they ran, had been taught to run." Melville dramatizes the same theme in *Benito Cereno*, where the slaves have been educated by their white masters to be brutal, unjust, and savage. The invisible man, reborn independent, runs away from the madness of race war toward the peaceful good place of Mary Rambo, identified with pastoral values of the heart transcending race. "As I ran I was trying to get to Mary's." The way to her is "over puddles of milk in the black street." Mary represents integration and the milk of human kindness—spilled milk. With her he can "stop running and respect and love one another." On the way to her he is cleansed by the spray from a broken water main.

But then the Ras within him rises again and his anger boomerangs into a compulsion to take revenge on Brother Jack. He traps himself. On the way to punish a white man the riot boomerangs against him and he becomes a victim of white men once again. He gets chased by white thugs wielding a baseball bat and falls down an open manhole like Alice into the rabbit hole and shoots down a chute into a coal cellar. "Nigger in the coal pile, eh, Joe?" says one white thug to another. Black on black in the dark hole, he is invisible. They replace the manhole cover, trapping him down there. Traps are a motif in Naturalism. The invisible man has been working his way out of traps throughout the novel.

In the dark "I had to have a light." He finds matches and makes a torch of liberty by burning his high school diploma, the Sambo doll and other symbols of false identity he has been carrying around in his briefcase—all traps. The basement is a potential tomb and his situation "a death alive." He is like the man in "The Premature Burial" by Poe, the man in *Notes from Underground* by Dostoevsky, and the black man in the basement in "Black Tambourine" by Hart Crane. As a setting in the archetypal individuation process, the basement is in the City but because it is underground and dark it corresponds to Wilderness, the location of a possible death/rebirth leading to wholeness and transcendence. Furthermore, Harlem has been described as a "jungle." The invisible man passed through the Garden phase of development at college and when he was an American Adam living with Mary Rambo. He "fell" when Tod Clifton fell dead and he realized his own complicity in the Brotherhood's betrayal of the black people in Harlem. Now that he has lost the innocence of the Garden, he cannot go back to live with Mary.

He has a nightmare that Norton, Bledsoe, Emerson, Ras and others prevent him from crossing the bridge to a better life, recalling when he crossed the bridge to the Liberty Paint factory only to be disillusioned. They castrate him to "free him of illusions." In the intense pain of awareness he sees "a glittering butterfly circle three times around my blood red parts, up there beneath the bridge's high arch." The butterfly is a traditional Christian symbol of the soul, as in Hawthorne's "The Artist of the Beautiful," poems by Emily Dickinson and Willa Cather's *O Pioneers!* The high arch, as in a church, gives the bridge to a better life the connotation of faith, though the bridge is *not* a church. The invisible man exhibits transcendence by laughing at his tormenters: "I'm not afraid now." Brother Tobitt scorns him: "I knew he was a mystic idealist!" This turns the bridge into a symbol of lost faith in a better life through Communism, for "the bridge seemed to move off to where I could not see, striding like a robot, an iron man, whose iron legs clanged doomfully as it moved. And then I struggled up, full of sorrow and pain, shouting, "No, no, we must stop him!" This mechanical monster is a version of the famous metaphor of Karl Marx, "There is a specter stalking Europe."

The invisible man is "Fully awake now... I was whole." His psychological wholeness is evident in his dream of transcendence. The ending of the novel exhibits characteristics of literature in the transcendental mode including: (1) quest into the Wilderness, the individuation process; (2) sense of responsibility to save one's own soul, psyche or Self, the Existentialist project; (3) Christ-evoking figure as exemplar, Tod Clifton until he goes crazy; (4) wise old man as spiritual guide, his grandfather; (5) ultimate solitude and self-reliance in tradition of Emerson; (6) confrontation with ultimate truth; (7) spiritual death and rebirth; (8) atonement with Nature, as in comparing himself to a bear and a snake and his soul to a butterfly; (9) reconciliation of opposites, black and white; (10) circular structure; (11) inner light, symbolized by all the lightbulbs; (12) intensity; (13) sense of paradox—"The end was the beginning"; (14) transcendence of time and space—"I lost all sense of time"; (15) holistic perception.

Epilogue

“Thus I have come a long way and returned and boomeranged a long way from the point in society toward which I originally aspired.” His thoughts revolve back again to his grandfather and he finally understands the principle of liberty “on which the country was built and not the men...because he knew that the principle was greater than the men.” The style becomes Faulknerian as he affirms the need to accept responsibility for the human nature we share with others, white and black alike, for the goods and evils that transcend race, because we “could only thus find transcendence.” Speaking to fellow blacks the invisible man asks, “Weren’t we *part of them* as well as apart from them and subject to die when they died?” We are all “linked to all the others,” as Hawthorne expressed by his metaphor of the “magnetic chain of humanity.” However, the links metaphor in *Invisible Man* includes the ironic implication that we are linked like a chain gang in a mechanized society—all of us invisible now.

In the end, the invisible man is forgiving: “I’m not blaming anyone for this state of affairs...at least half of it lay within me.” He accepts responsibility. His malaise of disillusionment is a “sickness” he cures with an upbeat Existentialism that is characteristically American: “My world has become one of infinite possibilities.” This is in the tradition of the original Emerson and Walt Whitman: “Sometimes I feel the need to reaffirm all of it, the whole unhappy territory and all the things loved and unlovable in it, for all of it is part of me.” On the other hand, at the same time Ellison differs from the universality of Emerson and Whitman in his sense of ethnic division, as the invisible man concludes, “Now I know men are different and that all life is divided and that only in division is there true health.... America is woven of many strands; I would recognize them and let it so remain.” Ellison’s theme of psychological integration is Modernist, whereas his belief in cultural separation within a racially integrated society is postmodernist, in an historical rather than a negative sense.

One day he encounters Norton in the subway. The white liberal is lost and does not know how to get where he wants to go—Centre Street. Still invisible to the self-absorbed white liberal, the narrator refuses to be his guide again, as he was back in college. He warns Norton by quoting him: “I’m your destiny.” Now representing his race, the invisible man tells the white liberal that whatever train he takes, whatever track he rides, “they all go to the Golden D--” To rioting and race war. The railroad had been a cultural symbol of progress for over a century. Liberals are depicted here as they are in “The Celestial Railroad” (1843) by Hawthorne—riding a train to Hell. Ellison warns the reader just as his narrator warns Norton, that whites had better understand blacks, for “death waits for both of us if you don’t.”

Although he is psychologically whole now, visible to himself and transcendent within himself, his perspective on his situation remains Existentialist: “This is as far as I’ve ever gotten, for all life seen from the hole of invisibility is absurd.” He reminds us that his book is a dream allegory, what Melville called an “inside narrative,” asking “Why should I be the one to dream this nightmare?” The aesthetic mode of a dream is Expressionism, like “The Celestial Railroad.” The narrator confesses that writing his book “has confused me and negated some of the anger and some of the bitterness.” And “in spite of all I find that I love,” because “too much of your life will be lost, its meaning lost, unless you approach it as much through love as through hate.” Now, having identified with a bear, “The hibernation is over.” In his spiritual transformation, confessing sins and purging himself, he identifies with the traditional icon of evil: “I’m shaking off the old skin.”

He feels compelled to come up out of his hole “since there’s a possibility that even an invisible man has a socially responsible role to play.” This rejects Rinehart and Ras in particular. In the Prologue he is angry and “irresponsible,” whereas in the Epilogue he intends to become “responsible.” The responsible vision of humanity transcends race and the final line of the novel has the resonance of a final note combining all the instruments in a jazz band: “Who knows but that, on the lower frequencies, I speak for you?” This spirit of common humanity was personified in the next decade by Martin Luther King, Jr.

Michael Hollister (2013)