

**Ralph Ellison's Blues:
Race, Individualism, and American
Cultural Identity in *Invisible Man***
ความระทมทุกข์ของราล์ฟ เอลลิสัน:
การแบ่งแยกสีผิว ปัจเจกนิยม
และอัตลักษณ์ทางวัฒนธรรมอเมริกัน
ใน *Invisible Man*

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Abstract

The article will explore Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man* as a novel about identity. However, it is not just Black identity in the United States but also the much broader definition of American identity itself. Ellison was not afraid to utilize existing modernist literary techniques in writing *Invisible Man*. However, Ellison relates to the black experience as a truly American experience and thus incorporates certain African American folk traditions into his text. Ellison cleverly interweaves these seemingly disparate components of high art and folk culture to create an American whole that stimulates new perceptions about what is history and what is myth.

Through textual analysis and by considering Ellison's use

of history and myth, I will discuss *Invisible Man* as a visionary piece of work that contributes to a deeper understanding of race and identity in the United States.

บทคัดย่อ

บทความนี้ศึกษาวรรณกรรมเรื่อง *Invisible Man* ของ ราล์ฟ เอลลิสัน ในฐานะที่เป็นวรรณกรรมเกี่ยวกับ อัตลักษณ์ แต่มีใช้เฉพาะอัตลักษณ์ของคนดำในสหรัฐอเมริกาเท่านั้น หากเป็นอัตลักษณ์ในนิยามที่กว้างกว่าซึ่งครอบคลุมถึงอัตลักษณ์ของชนชาติอเมริกันด้วย เอลลิสันมีความกล้าหาญที่ใช้เทคนิควรรณกรรมสมัยใหม่ในการเขียน *Invisible Man* และได้เชื่อมโยงประสบการณ์คนผิวดำในฐานะที่เป็นประสบการณ์แบบอเมริกันที่แท้จริงพร้อมทั้งได้สอดแทรกประเพณีพื้นถิ่นแบบแอฟริกัน-อเมริกันเข้าไปในเนื้อหาวรรณกรรมด้วย เอลลิสันได้ถักทอองค์ประกอบศิลปะชั้นสูงและวัฒนธรรมพื้นถิ่นที่ดูเหมือนจะแตกต่างกันอย่างสิ้นเชิงเข้าไปด้วยกันได้อย่างชาญฉลาดเพื่อสร้างองค์รวมความเป็นอเมริกันที่กระตุ้นให้เกิดแนวคิดใหม่เกี่ยวกับว่าอะไรคือประวัติศาสตร์และอะไรคือเรื่องเล่า

ด้วยการวิเคราะห์ตัวบทและด้วยการพิจารณาการใช้ประวัติศาสตร์และเรื่องเล่าของเอลลิสัน ผู้เขียนจะกล่าวถึง *Invisible Man* ในฐานะผลงานวรรณกรรมที่ล้ำสมัยเกินยุคของตนซึ่งช่วยให้เกิดความเข้าใจเรื่องการแบ่งแยกสีผิวและอัตลักษณ์ในสหรัฐอเมริกาได้ลึกซึ้งขึ้น

Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man* was first published in 1952 and remained the only novel completed by the African American author until his death in 1994. While Ellison would continue to write prolifically after *Invisible Man*, the bulk of his output tended toward essays and articles. A jazz critic and an accomplished literary scholar as well as a keen observer of American race and society, Ellison's collected essays

would appear in the two well-received volumes *Shadow and Act* [1964] and *Going to the Territory* [1987]. A second novel though never materialized during Ellison's lifetime and it was only with the posthumous publication of *Juneteenth* [1999] that something approaching a sequel to *Invisible Man* finally appeared. Serving as a viable if incomplete testament, which Ellison had compiled over a 30-year period, *Juneteenth* was basically condensed from some two thousand pages of notes through the efforts of the author's literary editor John Callahan. *Juneteenth* helps to demonstrate the problems Ellison confronted in trying to eclipse *Invisible Man* - one of the great American novels of the twentieth century

There are visionary elements within *Invisible Man* that give it an enduring universal quality and a convincing successor to the novel was always going to be difficult to deliver. In *Invisible Man*, Ellison recognized the multiculturalism of modern America long before the multicultural model became fashionable. Moreover, as the prospect of an African American president of the United States has now become a reality, Ellison's emphasis upon individual identity within a racist society, ensures that *Invisible Man* retains a contemporary relevance that totally justifies its American classic status. Equally, Ellison's definition of an American culture fully recognized the symbiosis between black and white that informs the very idea of a genuine cultural identity. While Ellison was rooted in the Western literary tradition represented through great Modernist writers such as Hemingway, Fitzgerald, and Eliot, *Invisible Man* could not have been completed in its presented form without the cultural influence of black America. By building on the foundations laid by Harlem Renaissance authors and poets such as

Zora Neale Hurston and Langston Hughes¹, Ellison elevated African American literary sophistication to an unparalleled level. *Invisible Man* succeeds in bridging the African American oral tradition of the blues and the folk tale with American individualism and contemporary philosophy. Simply put, Ellison embraces different facets of the vast cultural landscape at his disposal to create a piece of art that is truly original and quintessentially American.

Before the civil rights era, Ellison understood that America and American culture is what it is *because of and not in spite of* African Americans and that African Americans themselves were *American* before they were anything else. As a cultural as well as social integrationist, Ellison did court unpopularity among the Black Arts movement of the 1960's when he was often criticized as someone akin to an old guard 'Uncle Tom' conservative. But the message of *Invisible Man* is that while issues of race may well still polarize American society, diversity and individualism underpin the uniqueness of American cultural expression. That to be an American encapsulates a broad range of cultural characteristics that even today most Americans are not wholly aware of. What follows is an attempt to demonstrate how *Invisible Man* fits into this American cultural context by examining

¹ Both Langston Hughes and Zora Neale Hurston incorporated strong folk elements into their work. Hughes regularly used the blues as a poetic form while Hurston utilised her anthropological research into black folklore in her noted novel about life in an all-black township, *Their Eyes were watching God* [1937]. Ellison was also indebted to other earlier black writers. These other writers would include James Weldon Johnson whose *Autobiography of an ex-Colored Man* [1915] could almost be viewed as a prototype for Ellison's novel and Richard Wright who, up until Ellison, was responsible for the most prestigious novel by a black writer, *Native Son* [1940]

how Ellison's fictitious account of an anonymous black man actually predicated a powerful history of the search for an American identity.

In the prologue to *Invisible Man*, the nameless protagonist sits alone in his subterranean sanctuary free from the chaos that dominates his life above. In a world of alienation, where true identity is obscured by postulations, misconceptions, and stereotyping, it is ironic that only in the solitude of his illuminated man-hole can the narrator reflect upon his invisibility and begin to realise the nature of his identity as an African American. It is indicative of the novel that Louis Armstrong's version of 'Black and Blue' should represent a spiritual release in which the narrator, under the influence of marijuana [at the time a substance synonymous with jazz musicians], becomes immersed in his own past where history and myth are interchangeable and where the search for truth and self identity becomes a quest for the very soul of his culture:

. . . That night I found myself hearing not only in time, but in space as well. I not only entered the music but descended, like Dante, into its depths. (Ellison, 1952: 11)

By alluding to Dante, Ellison invokes the perceived hell of that unwritten history which is contained within oral folk-tales, religious spirituals, and secular blues. The "lyrical sound" of Louis Armstrong's trumpet is both voiceless and articulate, encapsulating the despair and frustration of a people made invisible through segregation, discrimination, and brutality. For, although Ellison may well have drawn on numerous white literary influences, *Invisible Man* constantly employs

the imagery and terminology of the blues to reflect a past that, as Lawrence W. Levine proposed, “historians have rendered inarticulate through their neglect.” (Levine, 1993: 95)

In his presentation of an inclusive American history, it seems appropriate that Ellison should take what was initially a novelty song composed by the American born son of a Madagascan nobleman, Andy Razaf, to help illustrate the crisis of identity confronted by African Americans condemned to the margins of what was a fundamentally racist society. ‘[What did I do to be so] Black and Blue’ has a bizarre and chequered history², but Louis Armstrong’s 1929 recording cited in the novel is the song’s definitive version. Armstrong himself can be perceived as the kind of trickster figure³ often evoked within the pages of *Invisible Man* and, indeed, his duplicitous existence entailed that, at the time of the novel’s publication in 1952, Armstrong’s position

² Written by Thomas ‘Fats’ Waller, Harry Brooks, and lyricist Andy Razaf, ‘Black and Blue’ was first performed by the African American female artist Edith Wilson in 1927 at a pre-Broadway “tryout” for *Hot Chocolates*, a musical review funded by Dutch Schultz, the notorious Jewish gangster. It is Louis Armstrong’s recording of ‘Black and Blue’ in New York on July 19, 1929 that has given the song its enduring appeal. See Barry Singer, *Black and Blue: The Life and Lyrics of Andy Razaf* (New York: Macmillan, 1992) 216-221. The recording of Armstrong’s version of ‘Black and Blue’ can be found on *Louis Armstrong -Hot Fives and Sevens Vol. 4* (JSP Records, 1999).

³ The trickster figure is a constant feature of Ellison’s novel and demonstrates the author’s ability to employ folk forms in his art. Tricksters are to be found in many folk cultures and with African Americans the trickster is evident in folk tales from slavery. Joel Chandler Harris was a white writer who in the late 19th century incorporated plantation stories of Br’er Rabbit and Br’er Fox into his Uncle Remus stories. Br’er is an abbreviation of brother and, in *Invisible Man*, the ‘Br’er’/brother figure resonates through the organization of ‘the Brotherhood’, Ellison’s lampoon of the far left.

as perhaps the greatest living exponent of the jazz cornet had been overshadowed by his gravitation to the “mainstream” of American show business. In this context, there is a parallel to be drawn between Armstrong and Ellison’s narrator as they had both become token “Negroes” or social constructs within what were predominantly white worlds. Indeed, ‘Black and Blue’ attempts to address the dichotomy of racial identity in America by echoing W. E. B. Du Bois’s “Double Consciousness”⁴ as well as tapping into the blackface minstrelsy phenomenon that, though in decline by the late 1920s, lay at the heart of the American entertainment industry and, in a cultural sense, America itself:

I’m white...inside...but, that don’t help my case
 That’s life...can’t hide...can’t hide what is inside my face
 How would it end...ain’t got a friend
 My only sin...is in my skin
 What did I do...to be so black and blue

⁴ In a series of essays collectively known as *The Souls of Black Folk* first published in 1901, Du Bois addresses the crisis of identity that he believed confronted black Americans in the South after the failure of post-bellum Reconstruction. For Du Bois, ‘double consciousness’ is how African Americans – deprived of education, opportunity, and political representation – can only perceive themselves through the constructs imposed upon them by the dominant white society; that ‘Negros’ are born and raised in America but are rejected as Americans. It is also worth noting that Du Bois was a fierce opponent of Booker T. Washington’s accommodation of Southern racism and that TSOBF was very much a response to Washington’s earlier *Up from Slavery*. See W. E. B. Du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folk*. 1901. New York: Dover Publishers Ltd., 1994

Furthermore, the pathos which ‘Black and blue’ exudes indicates the blues. That is the blues as an African American folk form that is not just foundational to American popular music but also acts as an individual response to a world of trouble - what Ellison described as “an autobiographical chronicle of personal catastrophe expressed lyrically.” (Ellison, 1945a: 129) The blues lingers below and above the surface of *Invisible Man* and clearly acts as an alternative source for a more inclusive history of the United States. That is, when Ellison’s novel was first published in 1952, American history as it was taught in schools and universities confined itself to Eurocentric perspectives that either misrepresented African Americans or hardly represented them at all. Ellison placed himself firmly as an American but realised that American identity in its truest cultural manifestation had been continually denied because of racism and segregation. As Ellison would comment in an essay he would write some years later: “whatever else the true American is, he is also somehow black.” (Ellison, 1970: 583)

Of all the characters who appear in the early chapters of *Invisible Man* it is Jim Trueblood, the poor southern sharecropper, who represents this “other history”. Trueblood is the classic storyteller, the country blues singer whose cultural foray into stream of consciousness orality conveys much more realistically the black folk tradition than the romantic demagoguery of the nationalist Ras the Exhorter/Destroyer. Ras, it must be emphasised, is a character who emerges in the second ‘Harlem’ section of the book and who has more than a passing resemblance to Marcus Garvey the black separatist Jamaican who formed the Back to Africa Movement and gained a big following in Harlem

during the 1920s.⁵

In contrast to Ras, Trueblood is a product of the American South and the account of his incestuous exploits with his teenage daughter leaves the white philanthropist Mr. Norton dumbstruck but fascinated – “his face drained of colour.” (Ellison, 1952: 62) Trueblood has not just survived; he has flourished in the face of adversity with his self-identity firmly intact. “You have looked upon chaos and are not destroyed!” (Ellison, 1952: 46), Norton proclaims on their first encounter and, indeed, the trickster Trueblood has profited from his own infamy. “Why did the white folks help Jim”, the narrator wonders, “perhaps because he lived up to their expectations”. (Ellison, 1952: 60) As with Bledsoe, the dictatorial principal of the narrator’s school, who “tells the white folks how to think” (Ellison, 1952: 120), Trueblood has gained stability through superficial subservience. As with many poor rural blacks in the still semi-feudal South and unlike the philosophers and seers that constitute the vets of the *Golden Day*, Trueblood does not question or challenge the system. Instead and in contrast to the Invisible Man, he is faithful to himself and for this reason Trueblood is his own creation.

Ellison employs the encounter between Trueblood and Norton to symbolise the dichotomy of race and class that confronts the *Invisible Man* and, indeed, other actual African Americans who, during the era of Jim Crow and white supremacy, aspired toward a respectable if

⁵ Marcus Garvey came to New York from Jamaica in 1918. He was the prime figure in United Negro Improvement Association which gained a considerable following especially in Harlem during the 1920s. With its emphasis on black achievement and African civilization, Garvey’s movement anticipated Black Nationalist organisations such as the Nation of Islam.

subordinate existence. As Ellison once commented: “only the lower-class Negroes create their own values, the middle class seeks to live up to those of the whites” (Ellison, 1945b: 343) and Ellison’s version of W. E. B. Du Bois’s Double Consciousness is represented through the narrator’s confusion of identity as he finds himself sat between Trueblood and Norton, both of whom represent very different versions of black history. Norton, in this sense, is cast as an aristocratic missionary figure or a paragon of reformist virtue whose image of black people appears to be confined to the artificial environment of the college. Norton’s notion of a shared destiny is actually a euphemism for the preservation of a structured hierarchy that sustains the racial and economic status quo. In addition, Norton’s evocation of self-importance ensures that he, in common with other white figures in the novel, wishes to claim his position on the “stage of history”. Of course the history that Norton alludes to is the standard version constructed through the dominant culture and accommodated by black leaders such as Booker T. Washington [on whom “the founder” of the narrator’s college is at least partly based].

As an educator and the most prominent and powerful African American of the early twentieth century, Washington ignored the existence of an African past and pandered to white elites whose paternalism extended to funding technical colleges [such as Washington’s own college Tuskegee] in order to create a readymade industrial/agricultural work force to aid both the South’s revival and America’s economic prosperity in a period of spiralling and often brutal capitalism. It is this era - after Reconstruction when the South regressed into Jim Crow and segregation - that Norton suggests when he initially engages

with the narrator:

. . . Your people did not know in what direction to turn and, I must confess, many of mine didn't either. But your great founder did. He was my friend and I believed in his vision. So much so, that sometimes I don't know whether it was his vision or mine . . . (Ellison, 1952: 41)

Trueblood, though, shatters the “vision” of the white benefactor by singing “some blues that . . . ain't never been sang before” (Ellison, 1952: 59). In other words, Trueblood connects with and contributes to an African American oral tradition – an unwritten history - that is manifested through a musical form which, as I contended earlier, is fundamental not only to African American expression but also to a wider American cultural identity. In this respect, Trueblood represents the primordial that predates the Founder himself. History begins with the Founder who is portrayed by the blind preacher, Reverend Barbee, as a sacred icon whose life experience can be compared to those of Jesus Christ, Moses, and Saint Paul, as well as Abraham Lincoln and most obviously Booker T. Washington. The Founder, then, is a mythical figure or a “living parable” (Ellison, 1952: 101) that appeases the white master as much as it appeals to the religious sensibilities of southern blacks. And yet, the Founder and his acolytes, Barbee and Bledsoe, are similar to Trueblood if only because they are archetypal trickster figures who employ myth to create their own history – authors of what Robert B. Steptoe referred to as “supreme fiction” (Steptoe, 1979: 181). For example, Bledsoe's expelling of the Invisible Man from the college and the bogus letter

which denies him employment fulfil the narrator's nightmare of his grandfather:

Then later he told me to open my brief case and read what was inside and I did, finding an official envelope stamped with the state seal; and inside the envelope I found another and another, endlessly, and, I thought I would fall of weariness. 'Them's yours,' he said. 'Now open that one.' And I did and in it I found an engraved document containing a short message in letters of gold. 'Read it,' my grandfather said. 'Out loud.'

'To Whom I May Concern,' I intoned. 'Keep this Nigger-Boy Running'

I awoke with the old man's laughter ringing in my ears. (Ellison, 1952: 31-32)

In common with the grandfather's "overcome 'em with yeses, undermine 'em with grins, agree 'em to death and destruction" (Ellison, 1952: 17), Bledsoe feigns sycophancy towards the whites though his cultural identity is never totally suppressed. This illusion of subordination permeates much of the first half of Ellison's novel and helps to promote an underlying sense of history being redirected in order to represent a very different reality. Exactly who is "pulling the strings" becomes increasingly uncertain. Many sentences, phrases and passages in *Invisible Man* contain metaphor, symbolism and intertextuality that suggest both black and white exist in a symbiotic cultural state from which modern America is emerging. As with the "optical white" in the Liberty Paints episode, "blackness" cannot be ignored and so it is after the Reverend Barbee's oratory:

Then the orchestra played from Dvorak's 'New World Symphony' and I kept hearing 'Swing Low Sweet Chariot' resounding through its dominant theme. (Ellison, 1952: 113)

The narrator's allusion to Antonin Dvorak's 'New World Symphony' is significant when considering the cultural context of *Invisible Man*. The Czech composer wrote his famous orchestral piece in 1893 and purposely incorporated African American folk melodies he believed represented the true essence of an original American culture. During the same period, another 'high culture' figure, Mark Twain - whose *Huckleberry Finn* explored the relationship between a poor white boy and an escaped slave⁶ - was promoting all-black vocal groups such as the Fisk Singers that were achieving a considerable degree of respectability at that time as they performed refined versions of the Negro Spiritual before presidents and monarchs in the United States and Europe. Thus American cultural expression is exposed as an inconstant and swirling entity in which different components (that in themselves rely upon and inform each other) traverse back and forth across the racial threshold W. E. B. Du Bois referred to as the Colour line. Within *Invisible Man* it becomes increasingly clear that any definition of America and American identity must contain this "blackness" that, though often suppressed, can never be ignored.

⁶ For the influence of black culture and black vernacular in Twain's fictional characterisations and on Twain himself see Shelley Fisher Fishkin, *Was Huck Black: Mark Twain and African-American Voices*. [London: Oxford University Press, 1994]

Ellison's integrationist view is then established very early in the novel and the narrator is a character whose personal history mirrors that of a black experience that cannot be detached from the growth and development of America itself. Echoing the naturalist devices employed by novelists during the early twentieth century, Ellison's protagonist is driven by forces beyond his control. Consequently, the narrator's journey takes him through education, urbanisation, wage slavery, trade unionism, and eventual politicisation. The symbolic migration from South to North, from servility/slavery to "freedom", from a conservative black college to radical Harlem, serves only to intensify the confusion of the self.

It is in Harlem where the second part of *Invisible Man* is concentrated and it is Harlem where the narrator's quest for identity is aggravated by the political polarities confronting him on his arrival. Writing some years before the publication of *Invisible Man*, Ellison's perception of Harlem differed markedly from, for instance, Langston Hughes' paeon to New York's black quarter as the "greatest Negro city in the world." (Huggins, 1971: 52) In an unpublished essay, Ellison erased the preferred image of Harlem as an exotic and exciting place charged by the pure dynamism of African American creativity. Instead, he invoked a troubled and dislocated landscape, which represented "the scene and symbol of the Negro's perpetual alienation in the land of his birth." (Ellison, 1948: 321) Resembling the blindfolded boxers of the first chapter, it is Harlem where the factionalised meet head on to throw up a cacophony of ideologies and idealisms that ultimately can only hinder the development of a specific racial and cultural self definition. Thus, Harlem becomes a semi-mythical place where, as Ellison

explained,

The grandchildren of those who possessed no written literature examine their lives through the eyes of Freud and Marx, Kierkegaard and Kafka, Malvaux and Sartre. It explains the nature of a world so fluid and shifting that often within the mind the real and the unreal merge, and the marvellous beckons from behind the same sordid reality that denies its existence. (Ellison, 1948: 322)

The myth/reality dialectic that Ellison grapples with throughout *Invisible Man* is embodied within the character of Peetie Wheatstraw, the blues singer who the narrator encounters soon after his arrival in Harlem. Although presented by Ellison in a wholly fictional way, Wheatstraw was someone who actually existed. His soubriquet, ‘The Devil’s Son-in-law’, suggests a variation on the African American/Faustian myth of entering into a pact with Satan in order to gain earthly reward.⁷ This unholy bargain is most famously represented within the mythology of the blues through Robert Johnson whose virtuoso guitar style was supposedly gifted to him because he sold his soul to the Devil at the ‘crossroads’. Certainly, the Johnson legend incorporates elements of African folklore though it remains an essentially American myth that

⁷ The idea of selling your soul to the Devil can be located in both European literary tradition and African folklore. In this sense, Ellison’s approach to American cultural identity as an integrated whole consisting of different component parts is well represented through American musical forms such as the blues which draws on black and white – African and European – influences but is purely American.

continues to resonate throughout the western world.⁸ An artist such as Wheatstraw who enjoyed considerable popularity during the 1930s would have influenced Johnson, whose death in 1937 is still shrouded in mystery. Within Ellison's perception of the African American world, Wheatstraw can be linked to Trueblood ["the blues singer"] if only because he is a perpetuator of the oral tradition. In contrast to Trueblood though, Wheatstraw possesses the shamanistic quality of being able to project, simultaneously, different aspects of the black experience.⁹ For this reason, Wheatstraw, in the eyes of the narrator and in terms of the African American experience, evokes the past whilst indicating the future with, for example, his speech mannerisms alternating between folkloric elements and the 'jive talk' of the ghetto black. Consequently, Wheatstraw is culturally situated somewhere between Trueblood and the later hipster characterisation of Rhinehart and, as befits the notion of the free spirited itinerant outsider, he is an ephemeral figure who can be seen as emblematic of the African American in transition.

To return to the travails of the narrator himself, his descent into invisibility takes him through the accident at the paint factory and

⁸ Johnson is highly influential in the development of modern American popular music and for perhaps the definitive account of Johnson and his cultural meaning see, Greil Marcus, *Mystery Train*. [London: Faber and Faber, 2001] 20-40.

⁹ It would not have been surprising to find a figure such as Wheatstraw in Harlem as, by the late 1920s and 1930s, southern blues singers such as Big Bill Broonzy and Leroy Carr were making their way to New York and Chicago to record on the various specialist 'race' labels that were flourishing in the northern cities. They retained the raw blues of the Mississippi delta but urban influences meant that their music became more sophisticated and commercial

the nightmare experience of the hospital where his temporary amnesia allows him only glimpses of a past in which folk memory and reality intertwine. At this pivotal point in the novel, the pain of regeneration is suggested in what is one of Ellison's numerous references to 'The Wasteland'. However, another interpretation could be also be considered, that of mental reconditioning in which the spurious idealisms of Raz and the Brotherhood are, for the narrator, about to supersede the reality of human experience as represented through memory. The narrator's amnesia points toward a loss of history and thus rekindles the supposed mental darkness of slavery through the contemporary guise of political dogma and fake idealism - that the master/slave symbiosis has taken on a modern, much more subtle incarnation. As with the old woman in the reefer dream of the prologue who believed freedom "ain't nothing but knowing how to say what I got in my head" (Ellison, 1952: 14), the Invisible Man becomes perplexed by his inability to define himself:

There was no getting round it. I could no more escape than I could think of my own identity . . . When I discover who I am I'll be free. (Ellison, 1952: 198)

From this new beginning the past is of no consequence and resembles Booker T. Washington's "wilderness" of chattel slavery. (Washington, 1901: 17) In this context, the Invisible Man, as the operation in the factory hospital suggests, appears to be moulded by external forces and is thus only able to perceive himself as others perceive him. In other words, he had become what the "fat man" in the *Golden Day* referred to as a "walking zombie" who has "learned to repress not only his emotions but his humanity" (Ellison, 1952: 81).

Equally, the narrator's ideological transmogrification could just as much represent an integral aspect of his ongoing quest for self-emanicipation. Indeed, the Invisible Man's eventual rejection of scientific historical materialism would indicate that this specific episode could easily be read as yet another rite of passage.

Ellison's parodying of the Communist Party through his portrayal of 'The Brotherhood' – a pseudo-revolutionary group that are, in the novel, attempting to organise in Harlem¹⁰ – reflects both upon the Cold War climate of the period *Invisible Man* was first published [1952] and Ellison's own developing post war 'jazz' individualism that did not fit comfortably with the old left idealism of the 1930's.¹¹ Ellison's clear disdain for cultural and political hegemony is most obviously illustrated through the figure of Brother Jack who dismisses culture and identity as non-scientific and whose version of the past disregards basic characteristics of the oral tradition such as human experience and individual perception:

¹⁰ In the 1920s and 1930s, the American Communist Party did organise in Harlem and received support from some black intellectuals including Paul Robeson and Richard Wright. Ellison himself flirted with the left in the 1930s and wrote articles for radical publications such as *New Masses*. As the 1930s progressed there was a creeping disillusionment with the CPUSA displayed by many blacks [including Wright] because they believed their interests were not being truly represented.

¹¹ The 'old left' - as opposed to the New Left of the 1960s - are those who idealised the Soviet Union as the ultimate political model during the Great Depression of the 1930s.

“You have not completely shed that self, that old agrarian self, but its dead and you will throw it off completely and emerge as something new. History has been born in your brain.” (Ellison, 1952: 237)

The agenda of the Brotherhood conflicts with both American ideals of individualism and African American notions of emancipation. By writing *Invisible Man* during the immediate post war era when the future of the planet was linked to the ideological power struggle between US liberalism and Soviet communism, Ellison clearly makes a case for the flawed democracy of his homeland. Thus, the Brotherhood is portrayed as totalitarian in its ideals and, as Brother Jack’s glass eye symbolises, myopic in its vision. Yet Ellison juxtaposes folkloric and political elements and positions the Brotherhood among a cast of power seekers that includes numerous ostensibly disparate characters who are actually far closer to one another than initial impressions would suggest. For instance, Bledsoe’s ability to impose control by telling the “white folks how to think” is echoed through Brother Jack’s disclosure concerning the collective strategy of his organisation:

“We do not shape our policies to the mistaken and infantile notions of the man in the street. Our job is not to ask them what to think but to tell them!” (Ellison, 1952: 380)

The Invisible Man’s realisation that “The Brotherhood had both history and science under control” (Ellison, 1952: 308) indicates a resistance to the kind of mind manipulation that anti- communists of the McCarthy era perceived as a threat to the social and political

stability of the nation. However, in his quest for self-identity, it could also be argued that Ellison was resurrecting ideals of American individualism as invoked by Emerson and Thoreau and linking these ideals to existentialist trends that were emerging after World War II.¹² The need to recognize truth through individual perception means that artefacts such as Brother Tarp's leg chain, Mary Rambo's 'Sambo' coin bank and the scattered possessions of the evicted old couple all combine to remind the narrator of a racial heritage which has been obscured by grandiose versions of history. Brother Jack wants the *Invisible Man* to become "the new Booker T. Washington" (Ellison, 1952: 247), but was not Washington a conservative accommodationist who also chose to ignore the brutalities of slavery and its aftermath? Jack, in this sense, is yet another of Ellison's tricksters, who pretends to apply scientific rationale but who, in effect, is depicting an exclusivist and somewhat romanticised view of the past:

"Right now in this country, with its many national groups, all the old heroes are being called back to life – Jefferson, Jackson, Pulaski, Garibaldi, Booker T. Washington, Sun Yat-ten, Danny O'Connell, Abraham Lincoln and countless others are being asked once again to step on the stage of history." (Ellison, 1952: 248)

¹² That of all the symbolic journeys taken in the narrator's bildungsroman, *Invisible Man* also represents Ellison's own stylistic traversing from the Naturalism of the early chapters to the Existentialist posturing that occupies the closing pages.

As with the paternalistic philanthropist Norton, Brother Jack wishes “to step on the stage of history”. His lust for power and his need to control society within the doctrinal confines of some ersatz socialistic ideal makes Jack an elitist whose top-down historical perspective identifies more with leaders than it does with the masses. With this in mind, Jack’s ultimate act can only be one of betrayal.

The tragic consequences of ideological indoctrination and the complex issues raised through African American identity are personified through Tod Clifton, the Brotherhood’s zoot-suited youth leader. “I suppose sometimes a man must plunge outside of history”, Tod tells the narrator after the street riot with Ras’s nationalists; “otherwise he might kill somebody, go nuts.” (Ellison, 1952: 305) Yet Tod does go crazy, he is torn between two extreme factions, which only serve to exacerbate his existing “double consciousness”. Ras labels Tod Clifton a “black king” and immediately places Tod in a historical context that evokes Marcus Garvey’s glorification of an African past and which has little do to with the American here-and-now. Ras’s configuration of Tod Clifton’s cultural identity conflicts with Tod’s role as youth leader within the Brotherhood and causes the subsequent mental capitulation that plunges Tod into a psychotic state of confusion and pathetic self-parody. Tod, the leader/king, is reduced to controlling the two-faced ‘sambo puppets’ in much the same way that both The Brotherhood and Norton regulate the actions of the *Invisible Man*. Unlike, for example, The Founder - the nameless God-figure who was preserved for ever in the blind eloquence of Barbee’s mythology – Tod Clifton could not exist outside of history. He is eventually killed resisting arrest and branded a traitor to his race by those not of his

race. “His name was Clifton and he was black and they shot him” (Ellison, 1952: 370), the narrator tells the crowd at Tod’s funeral; perhaps encompassing in one succinct phrase, the reality and the tragedy of the African American experience prior to the civil rights era.

Tod is a victim of his own invisibility - a construct of both The Brotherhood and their arch-rival Ras. The Stalinist nature of Jack and the Brotherhood only serves to diminish any sense of cultural identity while Ras, despite all of his nationalist rhetoric, is an anachronism within the context of Ellison’s world – a representation of repression and a throwback to a colonial past that is of little relevance to a specifically African American history. In the words of Houston A. Baker: “Ras’s attire as an African chief illustrates the absurdity of Afro-Americans trying to connect with society.” (Baker, 1984: 170) What Ras advocates is an essentialist form of prejudice which emerges from bogus ideas of racial purity and which relies on the myth of lineage and ancestry for its supposed historical resonance. Although there is a certain dichotomy that renders such myth as both “wrong and justified” (Ellison, 1952: 383), within Ellison’s American context only confusion and division prevail.

Characters such as Ras, Jack, Bledsoe, and Norton whose presence within *Invisible Man* create a constant nexus between Ellison’s folkloric excesses and actual events, represent the diverse forces that bombard what Ellison himself described as the “aching consciousness” (Ellison, 1945a: 131) of African Americans. The quest for self-identity will perhaps be realised when these dynamics are transcended and it is only when the narrator is mistaken for Rhinehart that he can begin to glimpse his own emancipation.

As the ubiquitous trickster figure who stalks Harlem, there is a quintessential quality about Rhinehart, which renders him as a true modernist American/African American who lives up to the expectations of others by retaining his cultural identity and by perpetuating his own myth through reinvention. Hipster, preacher, lover, gambler, rounder and more, Rhinehart appears as a singular embodiment of the vibrancy of Harlem itself. Subsequently, Rhinehart can perhaps be viewed as a symbol of black positivity or, as Ellison later disclosed, someone “intended to represent America and change. He has lived so long with chaos he knows how to manipulate it.” (Ellison, 1955: 223) Through Rhinehart, the Invisible Man can, incognito, penetrate through the societal veils that separate not only colour but also class. For this reason, the narrator is able to recognise the failings of his previous perceptions and begin to realise his future possibilities:

. . . I must have been crazy and blind. The world in which we live is without boundaries. A vast seething hot world of fluidity . . . It was unbelievable, but perhaps the unbelievable could be believed. Perhaps the truth was always a lie. (Ellison, 1952: 401)

Ellison’s protagonist comprehends that “life has to be lived” and, as with history, “not controlled” (Ellison, 1952: 465). His descent into the manhole – his escape from the chaos that surrounded him above, can be related to the continuum of individual and societal change. As one of Ellison’s literary progenitors T. S. Eliot proposes in ‘The Waste Land’, regeneration can be both violent and painful. In *Invisible Man*, the exploits of the narrator necessitates him to experience

a succession of agonising and often traumatic processes that eventually result in the salvation of self-realisation.

Ellison ultimately positions himself within an American literary tradition that owes its inimitability to the presence and input of African Americans. Like some of the great jazz innovators he so much admired, Ellison created a richly textured work of wonderful ambiguity – a distorted version of something vaguely familiar. The protagonist’s journey across the nuanced shades that make up the light and dark of a nation in transition reflects the incredulity of the black experience in America through the eyes of one who is “never quite on the beat”. (Ellison, 1952: 7) Although Ellison’s world is one of hypocrisy, paradox, chaos and confusion, *Invisible Man* can be viewed as a celebration of a diverse culture, which despite flourishing outside of the constraints imposed by ideological and social conformity, reflects the enduring spirit of a truly American people.

Considering that *Invisible Man* was first published shortly before *Brown v Board of Education* and the dawning of the Civil Rights era, the novel is a remarkable achievement if only because it delves into the psychological anguish of the African American past in order to convey the promise as well as the uncertainties of an American future.

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