I Speak For You:

Issues of Identification and Persuasion in Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man*

by

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Abstract

Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man*–though critically acclaimed and widely regarded as one of the great novels by an African-American author–has been attacked in various ways since its publication in 1952 for its alleged disconnection from the tumultuous political and social environment in which it was written. In this project, I will be using Ellison's essay "Society, Morality, and the Novel" to interpret the inherent social commentary of *Invisible Man*, arguing that the novel indeed persuades readers to accept a significant system of moral and political principles, based on an intrinsic identification with its protagonist. In addition, I will be contrasting Ellison's method of identification and narrative persuasion with the divergent techniques used by two of his contemporaries to translate concerns of politics and race into their novels. After considering selections from nonfiction texts by Richard Wright and James Baldwin, I will conclude that Ellison's method ultimately offers a more effective avenue for constructing identity and communicating social critique.

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I. Introduction

In 1896, the Supreme Court of the United States of America ruled,

> Legislation is powerless to eradicate racial instincts or to abolish distinctions based upon physical differences, and the attempt to do so can only result in accentuating the difficulties of the present situation. If the civil and political rights of both races be equal one cannot be inferior to another civilly or politically. If one race be inferior to the other socially, the Constitution of the United States cannot put them on the same plane.[1]

Although the case in question, *Plessy v. Ferguson*, dealt with interstate rail transit, the "separate but equal" precedent that it introduced allowed Southern states to pass so-called Jim Crow laws that applied to all sites of possible social interaction between blacks and whites. In the years following the landmark ruling, states across the American South created laws to segregate taxicabs, airport waiting rooms, schools, colleges, water fountains, sports and recreation facilities, public parks, orphanages, prisons, asylums, funeral homes, morgues, and cemeteries according to race (*CRA*, 48). As a result, black Americans–who had been declared full citizens of this country thirty-three years earlier–were legally assigned to facilities that were almost always inferior to those of their white counterparts, in which the services offered were fewer and of lower quality (*CRA*, 48).

Perhaps even more significant, the tone of the Supreme Court's opinion aptly illustrates popular American sentiment regarding race in the late 19th and early 20th century: the misinformed, racially-biased attitude of the majority that would allow legalized discrimination to remain in place for nearly sixty years. Beginning in the mid 1800's, leading American

anthropologists fervently contended that human racial groups had different biological origins, a notion that was easily adopted by social and political leaders in defense of slavery.[2] Yet this pseudoscientific viewpoint retained popularity well after abolition, when it served as a popular justification for social segregation, black political disenfranchisement, and the violence of racist organizations like the Ku Klux Klan. For instance, a set of instructions to one South Carolina hate group reads, "Treat them so as to show them, you are the superior race, and that their natural position is that of subordination to the white man" (*CRA*, 41). Thus, with scientific warrant and popular support, a system of segregation that deprived blacks of their legal rights, protections and privileges as a matter of course was not only an acceptable part of society but an expected one. In fact, President Woodrow Wilson declared in 1914, "Segregation is not humiliating but a benefit, and ought to be so regarded" (*CRA*, 56).

By the middle of the 20th century, however, the intellectual and social consensus on race in America was beginning to change. The theory of multiple human origins had fallen out of favor in the scientific community, and American culture was starting to reflect a new spirit of cautious inclusion (*RHE*, 96). The "Great Migration" of African-American laborers from the rural South to the industrialized North took place in the years between World War I and the Great Depression, and gave more than one million black workers a measure of economic and political relief along with their relocation (*CRA*, 73). Increased visibility in popular culture during the 1930's and 1940's also afforded black musicians, poets, athletes, and actors more recognition and a degree of acceptance among mainstream audiences. Additionally, black political leaders like W.E.B. DuBois and Marcus Garvey gained popularity among black Americans, as they openly argued against racial discrimination. Likewise, the NAACP (began thirty-one years earlier with

DuBois' influence) started to achieve mass membership by the 1940's after many years of relative obscurity (*CRA*, 62).

Finally, at the end of World War II, political pressure from black Americans forced the government to confront the constitutionality of legalized discrimination. After pressure from black activists in the 1941 "Double V" campaign, President Franklin D. Roosevelt passed the first presidential directive on race since Reconstruction, which prohibited racial discrimination in the employment practices of Federal agencies and all unions and companies doing war-related work (*CRA*, 76). Black plaintiffs also gained momentum in challenging segregation through the federal court system, and in 1954 the Supreme Court heard the case of *Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka, Kansas*. In a clear departure from past ideologies, the Court stated,

> We conclude that in the field of public education the doctrine of 'separate but equal' has no place. Separate educational facilities are inherently unequal. Therefore, we hold that the plaintiffs and others similarly situated for whom the actions have been brought are, by reason of segregation complained of, deprived of the equal protection of the laws guaranteed by the Fourteenth Amendment.[3]

With this decision, the Supreme Court reversed its earlier ruling in *Plessy v. Ferguson* and altered the course of American history. *Brown v. Board of Ed.* made separate public educational facilities for black and white students illegal, and civil rights crusaders went on to use this victory to attack segregation in all social arenas. Still, dismantling institutionalized discrimination was hardly an easy or rapid process for those involved. In the decades following *Brown v. Board of Ed.*, black Americans encountered staunch resistance from governing forces and other citizens alike in the long, uncertain, and often dangerous process of reclaiming their rights.

II.

Ralph Ellison's lengthy, ambitious novel *Invisible Man* was published in 1952, just two years before *Brown v. Board of Ed.* and the official beginnings of the Civil Rights movement. Its unique style, along with its content–the tumultuous, surreal coming-of-age story of a young black man–made *Invisible Man* and its previously unknown African-American author instantly noteworthy. In fact, after widespread readership and critical recognition, Ellison's novel won the prestigious National Book Award in 1953. Today, *Invisible Man* is frequently taught in schools and universities alongside other classic American novels, and Ellison is regarded as one of the leading authors of the 20th century, though he never published another full-length novel in his lifetime. Despite its numerous successes, however, Ellison's novel has also had its share of detractors who have variously criticized the novel's seeming disconnection from the tense political and social atmosphere in which it was written. Specifically, literary critics of the 1950's faulted Ellison for his surprising endorsement of democracy over his earlier socialist sympathies and for his use of characters supposedly based on offensive stereotypes (*CC*, 12). With the advent of the Black Arts movement in the 1960's, critics also attacked Ellison for offering a version of black identity that apparently rejected ties with Africa (*CC*, 12). Famously, in the 1960's as well, prominent liberal critic Irving Howe accused Ellison of writing an overly stylized and unrealistic novel that ignored "the ideological and emotional penalties suffered by Negroes in this country" (*CC*, 13).

For his part, Ellison responds to critics by saying in a 1955 interview, "I wasn't, and am not, primarily concerned with injustice, but with art."[4] But he continues, "I recognize no

dichotomy between art and protest" (*SA*, 169). To understand exactly what Ellison means by this statement, it is necessary to consider his conceptions of race in American society and his personal political beliefs, and to examine how those viewpoints are translated into *Invisible Man*. Indeed, Ellison composed numerous reflections over the span of his career that speak to such autobiographical issues, but the most useful and provocative template for drawing out the political and social commentary of *Invisible Man* actually comes from an essay in which Ellison deals with the work of other authors (namely, celebrated 19th century writers Melville, Hawthorne, Twain, and Faulkner). Written in 1957, "Society, Morality, and the Novel" argues that, at its core, the novel always serves as a means of communication between an author and his readers. According to Ellison, the novelist offers readers a "vision of experience," a subjective version of reality translated into fictional characters and situations. Further, in order for the novelist's artistic interpretation of reality to be most compelling, Ellison states that it should be rooted in familiar experiences that readers can recognize from the world around them. He writes,

> Between the novelist and his most receptive reader (really a most necessary collaborator who must participate in bringing the fiction to life), there must exist a body of shared assumptions–concerning reality and necessity, possibility and freedom, personality and value–along with a body of feelings, both rational and irrational, which arise from the particular circumstances of their mutual society.[5]

Therefore, the novelist's challenge is to create a fictional work in which readers will become intellectually and emotionally involved because of its apparent relevancy to their lives. In this way, Ellison regards the novel as a rhetorical medium. He writes, "It is by appealing to our sense of experience and playing upon our shared assumptions that the novelist is able to reveal to us

that which we do not know–that is, the unfamiliar within the familiar–and affirm that which we assume to be truth and to reveal to us his own hard won vision of the truth" (*GT*, 243).

In addition, Ellison states that the novel has historically been obsessed with social change and its effects on individual personalities. Since its origins as an artistic genre in the 18th century, Ellison claims that the novel has helped readers to confront the complexities and anxieties of a continually changing, socially unstable world. He writes, "Perhaps the novel evolved in order to deal with man's growing awareness that behind that facade of social organization, manners, customs, myths, rituals, religions of the post-Christian era, lies chaos" (*GT*, 245). In the midst of this chaos, Ellison finds the novel to have a special advantage among other types of art in reconciling human identity. He writes, "In our time, the most articulate art form for defining ourselves and for asserting our humanity is the novel. Certainly it is our most rational art form for dealing with the irrational" (*GT*, 247). In other words, the novel permits a personal connection between its otherwise isolated writer and reader, allowing them to undertake a uniquely balanced and productive communication beyond the confusion of their common society. Through this exchange, the reader can explore the emotions and intellectual content of a character who is imaginary, but representative in many ways of the reader himself. Then, after fully surveying and accepting both the familiarity and variance of the character's mentality, the reader may come away with new insight into their shared world.

Moreover, Ellison states that the novel is an ideal American form because of the constant social turbulence in this nation. He explains, "In no other country was change such a given factor of existence; in no other country were the class lines so fluid and change so swift and continuous *and intentional* (*GT*, 248, italics original). Answering critics who have faulted the American

novel for its lack of overt morality, Ellison states that fiction in this country has always reflected a system of morals specific to its era and attempted to create a "national type" under those terms. Thus, by analyzing the vision of experience and the character development presented in a great American novel, Ellison claims that a reader can uncover a reliable sample of social, political, and moral concerns that is representative of the time period in which the novel was written. He argues, "The moral imperatives that are implicit in the Declaration of Independence, the Constitution, and the Bill of Rights were a part of both the individual consciousness and the conscience of those writers who created what we consider our classic novels . . . [and] they still are" (*GT*, 248). Further, Ellison asserts that the novel will continue to play a significant role in the transmission of American identity, as society becomes more and more unstable. Therefore, in their characters and their differing presentations of invented experiences, American novels will confront fundamental questions of culture, personality, tradition, and freedom.

For this reason, Ellison believes that American novelists must keep in mind the rhetorical possibilities of their medium. In its transmission of experience, character, and national identity, Ellison stresses that the novel has the power to make its readers feel a sense of empathy and familiarity, in the same way that an orator can stir up inspiring feelings of understanding in his audience. Depending on the subject matter and implied system of morals that novelists project in their appeal, Ellison also argues that a feeling of identification with these works can affect readers' actions in different ways. On these grounds, Ellison cautions that while great novels can lead their readers to a better understanding of themselves and others within the frame of society, some novels can actually "help create that fragile state of human certainty and stability" that tends to impede social change (*GT*, 247). Nonetheless, Ellison states that the successful novel

influences readers "by amplifying and giving resonance to a specific complex of experience until, through the eloquence of its statement, that specific part of life speaks metaphorically for the whole" (*GT*, 242). Although there is no foolproof formula for writers to follow to ensure this outcome, Ellison ends his essay with a series of questions that suggest the most promising techniques for meaningful communication in fiction. For instance, he asks, "How does one in the novel (the novel which is a work of art and not a disguised piece of sociology) persuade the American reader to identify that which is basic in man beyond all differences of class, race, wealth, or formal education?" (*GT*, 273)

Therefore, Ellison ends his essay by pointing out the crucial importance of identification and persuasion in the American novel. While these concepts serve as the implicit groundwork for his evaluation of several well-known works within "Society, Morality, and the Novel," they also guide Ellison's own *Invisible Man*. Ellison's novel goes to great lengths to convince readers of their essential human similarity and their unexplored possibilities in its psychological focus and rhetorical structure. First of all, the protagonist and first-person narrator of *Invisible Man* speaks as directly as possible to readers in conveying his vision of experience, since the book is actually crafted as his memoirs. The narrator's focused reflection and inner revelation communicates a body of shared assumptions and feelings that immediately allow readers to see past his racial and social status and to identify instead with his universal emotional and intellectual qualities. Further, after accepting his inherent similarities, readers are apt to receive the common lessons that the narrator presents as well. In short, Ellison's readers make an intrinsic identification with the protagonist, which releases the persuasive power of the narrative as a whole. Thus, a careful analysis of the novel's protagonist in the Epilogue and Prologue

reveals not only that Ellison is attempting to convince readers of certain social, political, and moral values in *Invisible Man*, but that these principles are thoroughly incorporated with and integral to his novel's final effect. Moreover, by comparing Ellison's technique of identification and narrative persuasion with his literary peers, it becomes clear that Ellison's approach is preferable to a more forthright style of fictional protest.

At the conclusion of *Invisible Man*, in the midst of the Harlem riots, Ellison's nameless protagonist falls through an open manhole while fleeing a band of looters. Stranded in a dark coal cellar, the protagonist unloads his prized suitcase and systematically burns its symbolic contents in a desperate attempt to illuminate the pitch black of his surroundings. Still, he cannot escape from the cellar and becomes extremely agitated by his confinement and the circumstances that brought him to it. Reliving the abuse he suffered at the hands of Jack, Bledsoe, Ras, and all the rest, the narrator says, "I continued to roll about the floor in my outrage. How long this kept up, I do not know. It might have been days, weeks; I lost all sense of time. And everytime I paused to rest, the outrage revived and I went off again."[6] To end his misery, however, the protagonist has a vivid dream of his own castration at the hands of his former oppressors. The intensity of this experience literally paralyzes him, but also sharpens his resolve to stay underground. He writes, "I could only lie on the floor, reliving the dream . . . They were all up there somewhere, making a mess of the world. Well, let them. I was through and, in spite of the dream, I was whole" (*IM*, 571). Therefore, Ellison's protagonist makes a conscious decision to stay below ground, leaving behind all of the various settings of his previous life in favor of an isolated, unknown space.

Within the placid grounds of the Negro college, the cryptic Liberty Paint Factory, the

comfort of Mary's Harlem boarding house, and the quiet deception of the Brotherhood, the narrator's identity was created in some way by those around him. After his fall into the cellar and his prophetic dream, however, the narrator realizes that he must define himself on his own terms and reassume control over his "whole" self. In his dream, he declares, "'At a price I now see that which I couldn't see . . . I'm not afraid now'" (*IM*, 570). Indeed, the protagonist's vision graphically dramatizes the exploitation that he suffered in following the false guidance of others, and the fact that he witnesses himself surviving this torment in the dream gives him the strength to persevere in real life. And yet, because the protagonist ends his journey without ever having had the occasion or the liberty to independently define his own path and personal identity, he retreats underground in order to figure out how to speak for himself. Of his decision to stay in his hiding place, the narrator writes, "I could approach it only from the outside . . . I could only move ahead or stay here, underground. So I would stay here until I was chased out. Here, at least, I could think things out in peace, or if not in peace, in quiet" (*IM*, 571).

In the novel's Prologue, the protagonist tells readers that he eventually settled into a more comfortable underground dwelling place than the coal cellar. He writes, "I live rent-free in a building rented strictly to whites, in a section of the basement that was shut off and forgotten during the nineteenth century" (*IM*, 7). In this forbidden and secret place, the narrator creates surroundings that are symbolically indicative of what he is trying to accomplish below ground. From the pitch dark of the coal cellar, the narrator establishes himself in a subterranean hiding place that he keeps brightly illuminated with "exactly 1,369 lights." He says, "My hole is warm and full of light. Yes, *full* of light. I doubt if there is a brighter spot in all New York than this hole of mine, and I do not exclude Broadway" (*IM*, 6). Besides, the protagonist explains that

light is an intellectual necessity for him. He states, "Nothing, storm or flood, must get in the way of our need for light. The truth is the light and light is the truth" (*IM*, 7). Therefore, as Ellison's narrator begins his personal search for truth, he creates a setting that is visually representative of knowledge and understanding. Bringing light into his underground hole, which seemed doomed to remain a dark and inhospitable trap, reveals the potential for the narrator to reach his own personal enlightenment.

Furthermore, the narrator reveals that he has diverted a power line from the rest of the building to run his lights and he refers to his theft of energy as "an act of sabotage." Explaining his motivations for stealing from Monopolated Light & Power, the narrator says, "It allows me to feel my vital aliveness. I also fight them for taking so much of my money before I learned to protect myself" (*IM*, 7). Thus, bringing his lightbulbs to life, and basking in the truth they emit, requires an appropriation of a means of power that should be off-limits to the protagonist. But at the same time, the narrator's outrage at conventional social structures gives him a sense of entitlement, and he rebels against the power company in order to reclaim some of the dignity that he feels owed by the outside world. So, from burning his few belongings to setting up an elaborate system of stolen lights, the narrator manages to create a safe, warm underground space that stimulates the senses and the intellect. Moreover, asserting himself to Monopolated Light & Power also helps the narrator to feel viable as a person again, since he sees his actions bringing about a tangible change in the quality of his life. In fact, the narrator claims that his pursuit of light is a vital part of his personal development. He explains, "Light confirms my reality, gives birth to my form" (*IM*, 6). As an undefined character who has rejected his prescribed role, the narrator renounces society's traditional boundaries in order to explore his own possibilities as an

individual. Within his inspiring surroundings, however, Ellison's narrator becomes aware that bringing his own desires to life will require a serious subversion that is unlike anything he has undertaken before.

Outside of society's confines, the narrator begins his subversive task by focusing entirely on himself. For the first time in the novel, the protagonist closely considers his own thoughts, feelings, and desires, using all of his energies to restore his fragmented psyche to health. He writes, "So I took to the cellar; I hibernated. I got away from it all. But that wasn't enough. I couldn't be still even in hibernation. Because, damn it, there's the mind, the *mind*. It wouldn't let me rest" (*IM*, 573). In a desperate attempt to quiet his unsettled mind, the narrator considers the people and places that he knew in the outside world and contemplates their significance in light of his current situation. In particular, the narrator is plagued by the deathbed counsel of his grandfather, a freed slave and mild-mannered man, who uncharacteristically urged, "'Live with your head in the lion's mouth. I want you to overcome 'em with yeses, undermine 'em with grins, agree 'em to death and destruction'" (*IM*, 575). In his hole in the ground, the protagonist can make sense no more sense of this strange statement than he could on the outside, since at this low point in his life he can hardly imagine affirming a society that has hurt him so deeply. Still, the narrator does not dismiss the advice either, as he detects a resistance in the old man's paradoxical words that is in accordance with his underground efforts.

Nonetheless, reflecting on his grandfather, himself, and his life does not bring the narrator peace; it confuses and frustrates him into writing the personal account we have just finished reading. In his writing, the narrator searches for the significance behind his experiences, always with his grandfather's puzzling words in mind. Though this exercise provides the protagonist

with no easy answers about his life, it does allow him to gain a perspective on himself that he could not have achieved by continuing to participate in society. After reconstructing his life in prose, the narrator realizes that he ended up underground because he is invisible to other people. He explains, "I am invisible, understand, simply because people refuse to see me . . . When they approach me they see only my surroundings, themselves, or figments of their imagination–indeed, everything and anything except me" (*IM,* 3). The protagonist's declaration of invisibility is, then, a metaphorical way to make sense of the incredible abuse that he experienced as a boy in the segregated South and a young man in the racially divided North. From the cruel farce of the Battle Royal, to the lies of Bledsoe, to the poking and prying of the factory hospital, and to his betrayal at the hands of Jack and the Brotherhood, the narrator does not lay the blame for the countless hurtful events that he endured entirely on himself or even directly on those who hurt him. Instead, he attributes it to a unique social blindness that handicaps his interactions with others–a disfunction of their "inner eyes." Other people cannot begin to treat the narrator as they would expect to be treated because they do not recognize him as a human being possessing thoughts, feelings, rights, or privileges. However, it is the protagonist's unenviable task in writing to force readers to recognize his ability to think, feel, and act in the same ways that they do. In the novel's Prologue, he says of being invisible, "You ache with the need to convince yourself that you do exist in the real world, that you're a part of all the sound and anguish, and you strike out with your fists, you curse and you swear to make them recognize you. And alas, it's seldom successful" (*IM*, 4).

In addition, after becoming aware of his invisibility, the protagonist reconsiders his every action, observation, and emotion through its lens. Near the end of the novel, he admits, "I carried

my sickness and though for a long time I tried to place it in the outside world, the attempt to write it down shows me that at least half of it lay within me" (*IM*, 575). By facing his experiences in an objective way, the narrator understands that he played an active part in his social oppression by holding onto a "sickness" of anger, frustration, and confusion. After accepting responsibility for constantly assuming the role of the helpless victim, the narrator directs less rage toward other people and looks critically at himself for once. He writes, "At first you tell yourself that it's all a dirty joke, or that it's due to the 'political situation.' But deep down you come to suspect that you're yourself to blame, and you stand naked and shivering before the millions of eyes who look through you unseeingly" (*IM*, 575). Thus, from a comfortable intellectual distance, Ellison's narrator sees that his personal development was not only stunted by his circumstances, but by his own unquestioning submission to those circumstances. Content, until now, to remain invisible and to serve as a means to other peoples' ends, the protagonist succeeded in repressing his own personality until it ceased to exist altogether. In his writing, he attempts to make himself credible to his audience, creating a dynamic and independent persona in words that he could not cultivate in life above ground.

The protagonist also gains a great deal of fresh insight about society in composing his memoirs, and in the end, he offers readers an evaluation of American democracy that reflects a surprising amount of tolerance and forgiveness. He writes in the Epilogue, "America is woven of many strands; I would recognize them and let it so remain. It's 'winner-take-nothing' that is the great truth of our country or of any country" (*IM*, 577). In committing his life story to paper, the narrator recognizes himself as an integral, though ignored, contributor to a complex and cooperative social system. The narrator knows, however, that he has not enjoyed the same

benefits in his life as other Americans, and that there were plenty of times when he was unjustly deprived of his political, social, and personal freedoms at the whim of others, like Jack and Norton, who enjoyed more social clout than himself. Still, he continues, "Life is to be lived, not controlled; and humanity is won by continuing to play in the face of certain defeat" (*IM*, 577). Therefore, as his grandfather advised, the protagonist is not giving up his struggle against an unfair society by ending his memoirs with a positive message. By presenting and commenting on his experiences, the narrator sheds light on many flaws in American society but realizes its immeasurable possibilities as well. As a social critic on the fringes of civilization, the narrator's objective is not to tear down society, but to build it up by pointing out its shortcomings and potential sites of improvement. Thus, while he condemns the social restriction and "passion toward conformity" that brought him to his hole in the ground, the narrator endorses a vision of diversity and mutual understanding as a way out.

Moreover, the narrator's act of writing fundamentally changes his way of thinking. Namely, the truths that he uncovers about himself and society force Ellison's protagonist to adopt a flexible and conflicted mindset that reflects the influence of his grandfather's final words. He states, "The very act of trying to put it all down has confused me and negated some of the bitterness. So it is now that I denounce and defend, or feel prepared to defend. I commend and affirm, say no and say yes, say yes and say no" (*IM*, 579). He continues, however, "I sell you no phony forgiveness, I'm a desperate man–but too much of your life will be lost, its meaning lost unless you approach it as much through love as through hate . . . So I denounce and defend and I hate and I love" (*IM*, 580). Thus, examining his life closely through writing demonstrates to the narrator that it is possible, and indeed preferable, to embrace society as a whole even though he

rejects some of its destructive parts. By presenting himself and his experiences in writing, the narrator manages to defy society in an indirect but significant way; he defines himself against the desires of a world that wants to keep him silent and invisible. In this way, the narrator succeeds in living "with his head in the lion's mouth" as his grandfather advised, but thanks to the emotional and intellectual catharsis provided by his symbolic rebellion, he can carry on living without the hatred or anger that he used to possess. In fact, the narrator writes in the Epilogue, "The very disarmament has brought me to a decision. The hibernation is over. I must shake off the old skin and come up for breath" (*IM*, 580). At the end of his reclusive writing experiment, therefore, the narrator cultivates the ambivalent mindset that lets him accept his past trauma and move on with his life.

Also, the narrator experiences underground the amazing possibilities for personal development that exist within every individual and is determined to share his experiences and insights with others in order to tap into their capacities for compassion and growth. He asks in the Epilogue, "Why should I be the one to dream this nightmare? Why should I be dedicated and set aside–yes if not to at least *tell* a few people about it" (*IM*, 579). As a writer, the narrator is able to join in a meaningful and ongoing conversation about race and identity with other American artists and intellectuals, a discourse in which he and other black citizens of the time were discouraged from participating. More important, the narrator's work within this context is bound to reach a large and varied audience and he is driven to connect with these readers out of an overwhelming desire to prove that his struggles are related to their own. According to the narrator, "Our fate is to become one, and yet many" (*IM*, 577). Still, he reflects in the Epilogue, "You won't believe in my invisibility and you'll fail to see how any principle that applies to you

could apply to me. You'll fail to see it even though death waits for us both if you don't" (*IM*, 580). Despite the seemingly insurmountable challenge of his task, Ellison's narrator understands that he needs to convey his thoughts and feelings to his readers because the lessons that he has learned are not singular. On the contrary, he is convinced that his voice contains a vast capacity for revealing such commonality to anyone who will listen. In the final line of the novel, he queries confidently to his audience, "Who knows but that, on the lower frequencies, I speak for you?" (*IM*, 581).

Even so, Ellison's narrator faces another remarkable challenge in getting through to his readers, since his chief characteristic is his invisibility. Making himself literally invisible to his readers, the narrator composes his tale as a completely anonymous author and offers very little physical description of himself in his account. In the first line of his memoirs, situated in the novel's Prologue, he simply states, "I am an invisible man" (*IM*, 3). He goes on to say, "No, I am not a spook like those who haunted Edgar Allen Poe, nor am I one of your Hollywood-movie ectoplasms. I am a man of substance, of flesh and bone, fiber and liquids–and I might even be said to possess a mind" (*IM*, 3). From the very beginning of his narrative, readers are intentionally left without any typical markers of identity to apply to the protagonist. Since he is a man that no one, including his readers, should be able to see, information about the narrator's name and appearance would be irrelevant to his story. Instead, the narrator uses his physical invisibility to enhance the metaphoric invisibility that he uncovers in his underground search for self. The narrator even offers readers two alternate labels to apply to his newly formed persona. He writes in the Prologue, "Call me Jack-the-Bear, for I am in a state of hibernation" and "call me, since I have a theory and a concept, a 'thinker-tinker'" (*IM*, 6-7). Therefore, although he

lacks a traditional first name and surname, the protagonist creates nicknames that reflect his current mentality. He is an innovator and an intellectual, but he is hidden from society and living in a dormant state. By creating his own version of identity on a newly blank slate, Ellison's narrator thus uses his anonymity to his advantage.

Additionally, because the narrator is a "disembodied voice," he needs a hook to draw readers into his tale. Luckily, his invisibility actually permits him to enhance the aesthetics of his story in several ways. To begin, the narrator remarks on the music, speech, and song of people around him throughout his memoirs, and it is clear that he has been fascinated and influenced by the self-expression of others in the making of his own project. For example, early in his narrative the protagonist relates his reaction to a young woman who performs at a special service in the campus chapel. He comments on the intensity of her singing by observing, "Gradually, she increased its volume, until at times the voice seemed to become a disembodied force that sought to enter her, to violate her, shaking her, rocking her rhythmically, as though it had become the source of her being, rather than the fluid web of her own creation" (*IM*, 116). Realizing the power of the song as its own entity, the narrator uses violent, sexualized language to describe its nearly antagonistic relationship to the singer. As an audience member, the protagonist is deeply moved by the raw emotional quality of the song. He writes, "I could not understand the words, but only the mood, sorrowful, vague and ethereal, of the singing. It throbbed with nostalgia, regret and repentance, and I sat with a lump in my throat" (*IM*, 117). Forced by the singer's performance to internalize the song's intense emotion, the protagonist recalls his own guilt and unhappiness, and the experience becomes all the more powerful to him because of this deeply personal response.

Later in the novel, however, the protagonist has a different, more complicated reaction to music when he encounters Peter Wheatstraw, a cryptic bluesman, on the streets of Harlem. After listening to Wheatstraw's blues song and jive talk, the narrator is consumed by utterly mixed feelings. He writes,

> I strode along, hearing the cartman's song become a lonesome, broad-toned whistle now that flowered at the end of each phrase into a tremulous, blue-toned chord . . . God damn, I thought, they're a hell of a people! And I didn't know whether it was pride or disgust that suddenly flashed over me. (*IM*, 177)

When the narrator meets Wheatstraw, he is unsettled by the message of that the bluesman offers– as Wheatstraw sings a chorus from "Boogie Woogie Blues," refers to the folk characters of Jack the Rabbit and Jack the Bear, and constructs a thirty-five syllable word alluding to African beliefs of black magic (*CC*, 123). In Wheatstraw's traditional songs and unorthodox vernacular, the narrator recognizes an embarrassing return to the kind of down-home Southern culture that he is trying so hard to leave behind. In addition, the narrator is confused by Wheatstraw's frequent use of riddles and rhymes and is unable to respond to them with the intellectual creativity that they demand. Therefore, because the protagonist cannot fully relate to bluesman's message, he finds that his reaction does not validate and enhance Wheatstraw's performance in the same way that it did for the gospel song. Nevertheless, the narrator is able to find some comfort and amusement in Wheatstraw's lively song and offbeat humor and gravitates toward this character because Wheatstraw possesses the creative self-representation that the narrator himself lacks.

In his written dialogue with readers, the narrator seeks to emulate the intense emotional impact of the gospel singer, as well as the personalized and irreverent style of Wheatstraw. First,

Ellison's protagonist makes his prose as emotionally and intellectually salient as possible to his audience by speaking directly, in all senses of the word. Most obviously, the protagonist's words are transmitted to readers without the delay or alteration of any intermediary, since he writes from a first-person point of view. After completing his tale, the narrator declares in the Epilogue, "So there you have all of it that's important . . . I'm an invisible man and it placed me in a hole–or showed me the hole I was in, if you will–and I reluctantly accepted the fact. What else could I have done?" (*IM*, 572). Thus, the narrator addresses readers freely, summing up his narrative one more time just as he finishes relating it, with the immediacy and clarity of someone who is involved in the action. He even anticipates the skeptical reactions of readers with his final question, asking for the understanding and compassion of his audience. The protagonist also tends to speak to readers explicitly through the use of "you," "our," "we" and "us" in the Epilogue. For instance, he writes in various places in his conclusion, "let me be honest with you," "through no fault of our own," and "you might sneer at this" (*IM*, 572-574). These inclusive words and phrases continue to demonstrate the narrator's perceived connection with his readers, automatically and unexpectedly engaging them in an extended conversation with him.

The narrator's writing is also direct in the sense that it is candid and sincere. About his experiences and the world around him, the protagonist speaks frankly and without hesitation. For instance, he states, "Once you get used to it, reality is as irresistible as a club" (*IM*, 572). Later, he also declares, "I have been hurt to the point of abysmal pain" (*IM*, 580). Clearly, the protagonist is brutally honest in his writing, using descriptions that are both sparing and incredibly vivid. He seeks to communicate his feelings to readers as exactly as possible, making his eventual translation as compelling as it is precise. Ellison's narrator is also upfront in

acknowledging his shortcomings in his memoirs. For instance, he says, "Even hibernations can be overdone, come to think of it. Perhaps that's my greatest social crime, I've overstayed my hibernation" (*IM*, 581). Again, the narrator is remarkably direct with his readers in the Epilogue, honestly commenting on himself, his circumstances, and his faults. Considering that he has already related his entire life story in the novel, the narrator's final remarks prove his total commitment to revealing himself to readers. The straightforward, uninhibited tone of this final section draws readers even farther into the protagonist's work of autobiography, allowing them to experience as much of his psyche as they can after already taking in his experiences.

In this manner, the protagonist knowingly persuades his readers to accept the truth of the story that he is telling. His style of direct address appeals to readers on an intellectual and emotional level, asking them to identify with him as a peer who is deserving of their trust. The confident stance and direct structure of his memoirs shows readers that the narrator takes pride in his words and that he wants them to understand his experiences clearly and completely. In addition, the forthright nature of his commentary demonstrates to readers that the narrator is comfortable with his system of values and that he can create his own viewpoints without any trouble. Further convincing his audience that he is a speaker worthy of their attention, the narrator's rhetorical questions, inclusive language, and self-deprecating quips also show readers that he respects their opinions and beliefs as much as his own. Therefore, the rhetorical style of the narrator's prose reveals the intellectual assumptions and personal feelings that he holds in common with his readers, engaging them deeply and intimately in his memoirs. In the narrator's projection of his own personality, readers see a reflection of their own intrinsic feelings of self-importance, pride, openness, security and confidence, and they believe in the trustworthiness of

the narrator's words on this basis.

To further compound the persuasive impact of his language and technique on readers, however, Ellison's protagonist uses jazz music as a central metaphor for his narrative. In the Prologue of the novel, the narrator introduces readers to the jazz of Louis Armstrong as a form of expression that is analogous to his own. He writes,

> Perhaps I like Louis Armstrong because he's made poetry out of being invisible . . . Invisibility, let me explain, gives one a slightly different sense of time, you're never quite on the beat. Sometimes you're ahead and sometimes behind. Instead of the swift and imperceptible flowing of time, you are aware of its nodes, those points where time stands still or from which it leaps ahead. And you slip into the breaks and look around. (*IM*, 8)

In the deceptively simple melodies and syncopated rhythms of Armstrong's jazz music, the narrator sees a reflection of his own life. Ellison's protagonist senses that his perceptions are out of sync with the majority and knows that the course of his life does not follow a typically logical pattern. However, he no longer feels the need to conform to the expected rhythms and structures of society and he uses jazz in his memoir to signal this resistance. Beyond any technical considerations of form, jazz is concerned with the creative expression of an emotion or experience. Individuals within a jazz ensemble usually have the opportunity to speak on their own, through improvised solos that showcase the talent of each musician and often answer back and forth to one another.[7] In his writing, the protagonist demonstrates his own personal style and intellectual capability in a long-awaited solo performance, expecting his readers to answer his assertions with their own estimations of his material.

The narrator also intends for his creation to be unique and surprising in the same manner

as jazz music. He writes, "And so I play the invisible music of my isolation. That last statement doesn't seem just right, does it? But it is; you here this music simply because music is heard and seldom seen, except by musicians" (*IM*, 13). In this statement, the narrator sums up his task underground. Like a musician looking at a page of sheet music, only the narrator knows the precise meaning of the coded language that he writes down. All readers can do is interpret the flow of events and commentary according to their own perceptions of his story, accepting unexpected changes in its tone and texture as they would an eclectic line of jazz music. So, where the events do not seem to make sense and the flow of time seems to be incorrect, readers are invited to create their own time lines and interpretations of the protagonist's plot. When the narrator's voice rises and falls in intensity and jumps quickly from subject to subject, readers can note these changes to get a better sense of his personality. Therefore, the protagonist establishes an aesthetically significant tone for his book by using jazz as a creative jumping-off point for his writing.

Additionally, the narrator uses the Prologue to meditate on a single, thematic question drawn from jazz that will guide the rest of his memoirs. Louis Armstrong's "What Did I Do to Be So Black and Blue?" resonates deeply with the protagonist, who can relate with the simple, hopeless question that serves as the song's title. In fact, Armstrong's 1929 recording of the song (which was originally composed for a female singer in the black musical *Hot Chocolates*) is recognized as the first example of racial protest in American popular music (*CC*, 115). The protagonist says of listening to Armstrong's song, "At first I was afraid, this familiar music had demanded action, the kind of which I was incapable, and yet had I lingered there beneath the surface I might have attempted to act. Nevertheless, I know now that few really listen to this

music" (*IM*, 12). "What Did I Do to Be So Black and Blue?" takes a slow, ponderous tempo and a plaintive tone in phrasing its repeated question to listeners. After a relatively lengthy instrumental introduction, Armstrong's raspy vocals are echoed by his trumpet, which riffs on the melody of the central question in a different way. Since the song does not come up with any answers to Armstrong's question, the narrator feels a commitment to reply to its riddle himself, although he knows that there is no single answer to its plea. As an invisible man with nothing left to lose, the protagonist is free to puzzle the question anyway, looking instead for multiple, complicated explanations from his own life to fulfill its inquiry. In fact, the narrator begins the retelling of his life, and the plot line of the novel, with a question phrased in the words Armstrong's song. He asks, "But what did *I* do to be so blue? Bear with me" (*IM*, 14). Therefore, Ellison's narrator uses "What Did I Do to Be So Black and Blue?" as a frame for his story, hoping that readers will struggle with the song's question in the same way that he has, formulating their own answers to that question by the end of his tale.

Once again, the narrator's metaphorical use of jazz is designed to convince readers to personally identify with his story, as he appeals to sensibilities that are beyond the scope of traditional logic. With its irregular structure, unsteady tone, and individualized focus, the narrator's memoir is bound to catch readers off guard. In deciphering the protagonist's use of Armstrong's song, too, the audience is likely to be challenged and somewhat confused. Still, the unusual effect of music on the narrative is more intriguing than it is bothersome, and the protagonist's creative gesture actually amplifies the rhetorical effects of the narrative. Like anyone else, the narrator's personality and state of mind are reflected in the type of music that he enjoys. In his writing, the narrator also borrows the language of jazz to articulate the thoughts

and emotions that he is unable to put into his own voice. Therefore, the protagonist's invocation of jazz reveals his inner flexibility, ambitiousness, and sense of humor, as well as his uncertainty and frustration. Through the narrator's use of jazz, readers can recognize their own alternating feelings of certainty and confusion, as well as their desperate attempts to cope with their respective realities through art or music. The narrator's indirect expression of these shared feelings persuades readers to become even more personally invested in his story.

Invisible Man, then, is a work of fiction that carefully creates a unique vision of reality for readers through its first-person narrator. Furthermore, the protagonist's vision of experience, and by extension the overall vision of the novel, is driven by his psychological metamorphosis. As he attempts to make sense of himself within the social chaos of mid 20th century America, the narrator engages in an isolated writing process that helps him to better understand himself and society. After sorting out these new realizations in writing, the narrator also ends his memoirs with a new outlook and a desire to broadcast to others the universal lessons that he has learned. In addition, the narrator makes his story credible to readers by incorporating elements into his prose to which they can easily relate. With a style of direct address and a clever use of musical language, the narrator communicates a distinct set of experiences in a rhetorically effective way. Near the end of his account, he confides, "No indeed, the world is just as concrete, ornery, vile, and sublimely wonderful as before, only now I better understand my relation to it and it to me" (*IM*, 576). Therefore, by sharing his memoirs, the narrator hopes to give other people a clearer understanding of their relationships to society, bringing them to the same enlightenment that he has gained.

Consequently, through the expression of its protagonist, Ellison's novel perfectly

illustrates the guidelines that he laid out in "Society, Morality, and the Novel." In readers' intrinsic identification with the narrator's personal development, Ellison forces his audience to look beyond any differences of race, class, or education that may set them apart from the novel's narrator and acknowledge their essential similarities instead. Significantly, the novel also leads readers to realize that they share the narrator's assumptions and emotions because of their common social environment. For instance, readers take for granted the same typically American beliefs that the protagonist does–that freedom is a basic necessity, that people have control over their own personalities, and that furthering the intellect is a desirable goal–and they routinely experience the same range of self-interested emotions that he feels. Therefore, despite the social stigma against such association, readers come to regard Ellison's black narrator as a character who represents central aspects of themselves. In following his fictional development in such a personal way, readers experience a uniquely meaningful communication with the narrator about their shared society.

In addition, the novel's protagonist not only evolves into a more complex character by the end of the novel; he becomes a character with an unmistakable message and a significant purpose. Thanks to his many foolish attempts at oration in the novel, the narrator knows that his words will not immediately cause circumstances to change, but he also has faith that his story can inspire others in a myriad of different ways. By delivering his vision of identity and experience in the rhetorically adept way that he does, the narrator cunningly persuades readers to recognize him as a social equal. With superficial distinctions aside, readers are made to see the irrational and unfair nature of the narrator's suffering and come to rationally view his oppression as the unnecessary condition that it is. After they accept this fact, the narrator alternately urges his

audience to recognize and appreciate the many levels of diversity (including that of race) that are present in American society. Thus, in a remarkably skilled and powerful way, Ellison creates a character with a powerful capacity to communicate a singular experience and its universal lessons to many readers. Still, as a writer and not a political speaker, the narrator does not argue for his audience to take any particular action after hearing him out. Instead, he trusts that their intimate knowledge of his struggle and their own emotional and intellectual responses to his appeal will guide them to make the social changes that they deem necessary. Thus, Ellison's *Invisible Man* is an instance of narrative persuasion, in which a direct appeal from a central character initiates a meaningful personal identification and a recognition of individual possibility.

III.

In a 1969 address at West Point Military Academy titled "On Initiation Rites and Power," Ralph Ellison discusses the nature of social and political power in American society, revealing that his personal views on politics and social morality run parallel with those of his protagonist in *Invisible Man*. In reference to his novel, Ellison claims that his narrator is deprived of any measurable influence in American society through different rites of passage that reinforce his marginalization. Likewise, Ellison says, "I was very much involved with the question of just why our Negro leadership was never able to enforce its will. Just what was there about the structure of American society that prevented Negroes from throwing up effective leaders?" (*GT*, 44). Therefore, in creating a protagonist who fails as a leader in the outside world, Ellison explores the political and social barriers faced by ambitious black citizens. He explains,

> And so my little book starts of by taking a young man who has an infinite capacity for making mistakes (and being a fool, I think), and who–in his *passion* for leadership, in his *passion* to prove himself within the limitations of a segregated society–blunders from one point to another until he realizes that American society cannot define the role of the individual, or at least not that of the *responsible* individual. For it is our fate as Americans to achieve that sense of self-consciousness through our own efforts. (*GT*, 49)

In Ellison's opinion, the narrator's intense scrutiny of himself and his resulting willingness to operate outside of society's expectations gives him the capacity to become both a self-sufficient individual and a uniquely powerful leader. With this example, Ellison suggests to his audience that black citizens in American society ought to forge their own identities and agendas, avoiding

the social customs and traditional ideologies that exist to neutralize their influence.

Furthermore, Ellison champions the same inclusive vision of American society that his narrator expresses in his novel. He declares, "In these United States, the crucial question is not one of having a perfect society, or even having at any given moment a viable–as they say–society. Rather, it is to keep struggling, to keep trying to reduce to consciousness all of the complex experience which ceaselessly unfolds within this great nation" (*GT*, 53). Within this complex experience, Ellison sees limitless possibilities for understanding and collaboration between Americans. Like his anonymous narrator, Ellison recognizes American culture as vast and cooperative, and he has no doubt that it can be continuously changed by the will of its citizens. Ellison is, however, realistic in asserting that Americans take advantage of these opportunities for synergy less often than they should and he sees his task in writing to be tied up with communicating the largely ignored benefits of democratic diversity. He says, "I believed that unless we continually explored the network of complex relationships which bind us together, we would continue being the victims of various inadequate conceptions of ourselves, both as individuals and as citizens of a nation of diverse peoples" (*GT*, 42).

Ellison also states that appealing to Americans as a disjointed whole provides artists, intellectuals, and average citizens with the best chance of changing society's status quo. He states, "Relying upon race, class, and religion as guides, we underestimate the impact of ideas and the power of lifestyles and fashion to upset custom and tradition" (*GT*, 52). In this way, Ellison suggests that a push for change can come from anywhere in the social structure, and that it is the eloquence of the appeal and not its source which determines its final success. He also cautions, "Our failure to grasp the mysterious possibilities generated by our unity within diversity

and our freedom within unfreedom can lead to great confusion . . . just as our failure to recognize the social implications of cultural developments taking place on the lower levels of the social hierarchy can lead to social confrontations which can rock society to its very summit" (*GT*, 52). Thus, Ellison's novel is a skillful seizure of intellectual and political freedom within a setting of intense social constraint. Its hero manages to subvert the restrictions of society to become a critical, savvy, and independent personality with the talent and resolve to convince others to follow his path. Obviously, then, Ellison sees a great potential for his narrator and other creative individuals like him at the bottom of the social hierarchy to make real changes in an unsuspecting society through the same techniques of identification and persuasion.

At the same time, it is not difficult to see how Ellison's individualistic political philosophy and endorsement of American diversity, as well as his artistic treatment of racial issues in his novel, open him up to such criticism. The social commentary and persuasive overtures in *Invisible Man* operate strictly below the surface of the work, completely intertwined with its structure and fictional content. And although Ellison's narrator attempts to lead readers in a certain intellectual direction, he does so in a natural and almost soothing way. In the end, *Invisible Man* is controlled by nothing outside of its aesthetic aspirations; but without fully exploring the novel's extraordinarily rich artistic accomplishments, readers could easily miss its inherent social critique. Moreover, literary critics who attacked Ellison's novel had the example of other influential black writers to endorse instead. In the nascent Civil Rights period, Ellison's artistic, stylized technique was unique among several other well-known African-American authors who published prominent novels with more apparent social motivations, explicitly addressing politics, stereotypes, and social difference. Still, by comparing Ellison's method of

intrinsic identification and narrative persuasion with the stated approaches of two of his famous contemporaries, Richard Wright and James Baldwin, it becomes clear that Ellison's technique is at once completely different and much more effective than that of his peers.

An early mentor of Ellison, Richard Wright is another indisputably central figure to modern African-American literature. His fiction, including the acclaimed novels *Black Boy* and *Native Son*, defined the genre of the black "protest novel" with their publication in the 1940's.[8] Wright's novels focus on exposing social inequality in simple, vivid terms and motivating change in their readers based on the frustrating scenarios that they create. In his novels, Wright's raw depictions of racial discrimination and human suffering tend to be starkly realistic and plot-driven, but much less aesthetically dense and intellectually complex than Ellison's fiction. Regardless, Wright's first novel, *Native Son*, remains as a startling and significant work to modern readers, and one that changed the face American literature the moment it was published. In addition, Wright's nonfiction writing makes clear that his all of his work is openly guided by a specific set of politics–a Marxist perspective acquired from a brief but influential alliance with the American Communist party. Within this theoretical framework, Wright's analyses emphasize the heroic struggles of the black working class, likening their circumstances to the plight of minorities across the world that are victimized by white aggressors.

Accordingly, Wright offers well-defined ideas concerning the appropriate social function of literature in his 1938 essay "Blueprint for Negro Writing." The piece, which originally appeared in a short-lived leftist magazine called *New Challenge*, states that because of the failure of religious and political leaders, black writers are "being called upon to do no less than create values by which his race is to struggle, live, and die" (*RWR*, 43). In fulfilling this weighty

responsibility, Wright argues that black authors should illustrate the sufferings of African-Americans through a mode of social realism informed by Marxist thought. He claims that this rhetorical strategy will give the writer "the maximum degree of freedom in thought and feeling" and that it "endows the writer with a sense of dignity which no other vision can give" (*RWR*, 44). Moreover, Wright believes that his personal philosophy will enhance the writer's direct influence on society. Of Marxism, he writes, "It creates a picture which, when placed before the eyes of the writer, should unify his personality, organize his emotions, buttress him with a tense and obdurate will to change the world" (*RWR*, 44). Further, Wright says of the black author of the past, "Rarely was the best of his writing addressed to the Negro himself, his needs, his sufferings, his aspirations" (*RWR*, 38). Thus, Wright argues that the average black American is just waiting to be led by the correctly formulated piece of literature that speaks directly to his concerns. As a result, Wright prescribes a new socially conscious direction for black writers, arguing that they should be inspired by his political ideology and a sense of duty to their race.

Additionally, in a 1957 collection of essays entitled *White Man, Listen!*, Wright more fully explains what he sees to be the effect of socially and economically unequal societies on the individuals that they exclude. Claiming that the underclass adopts a "frog perspective" in coping with its circumstances, Wright asserts that society creates an artificial sense of distance between its high and low components. He writes,

> A certain degree of hate combined with love (ambivalence) is always involved in this looking from below upward and the object against which the subject is measuring himself undergoes constant change. He loves the object because he would like to resemble it; he hates the object because his chances of resembling it are remoter, slight.[9]

Of course, the division that Wright describes is not physical but psychological, since African-Americans of his era could live side by side whites and still be treated differently. Nevertheless, this imagined distance causes a great deal of real hurt and confusion to the people on the bottom of the social scale, as the oppressed fixate on their relationship to their oppressors and become controlled by "a feeling that one must regain something lost" (*WML*, 28).

When black writers succeed in exposing the collective misery of the underclass, Wright argues that they have the power to bring about change in society. After all, Wright points out that the frog perspective supports an unnatural hierarchy. He writes, "We are dealing here with values evoked by social systems or colonial regimes which make men feel that they are dominated by powers stronger than they are" (*WML*, 29). If writers reveal the false nature of these restrictive systems, they can provoke oppressed people to dismantle the social structures that keep them powerless. As he explained earlier in "Blueprint for Negro Writing," minorities have the power to change their social circumstances if they embrace a nationalistic spirit. With this in mind, Wright explains, "The Negro writer must realize within the area of his own personal experience those impulses which, when prefigured in terms of broad social movements, constitute the stuff of nationalism" (*RWR*, 43). Therefore, the more carefully the black author crafts his experience into a piece of protest literature that many people can understand, the more effective he will be in influencing his audience. Wright states, "And at the moment this process starts, at the moment when a people begin to realize a *meaning* in their suffering, the civilization that engenders that suffering is doomed" (*RWR*, 41).

Strongly disagreeing with Wright's strict, sociologically minded model of literature is another contemporary of Ellison's, James Baldwin. As a playwright, novelist, and essayist,

Baldwin's prolific career began in the late 1940's. Sixteen years younger than Wright and ten years younger than Ellison, he published his celebrated, semi-autobiographical novel *Go Tell it on the Mountain* in 1953 and used his fame to become an eloquent and unapologetic spokesman for the Civil Rights struggle, especially in his essays. Yet in "Everybody's Protest Novel," from *Notes of a Native Son*, Baldwin demonstrates an early break with Wright's literary method. Published in 1955, Baldwin's essay likens Wright's *Native Son* to the most famously sentimental and contrived 19th century literary representation of African-American characters, Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin*. Although Wright's main character is vastly different from Stowe's ignorant and kindly Uncle Tom, Baldwin claims that Wright's protagonist has similarly "accepted a theology that denies him life" because he "admits the possibility of his being sub-human."[10] Based on this damning shared characteristic, Baldwin classifies the protest novels of both Stowe and Wright as "a mirror of our confusion, dishonesty, panic, trapped and immobilized in the sunlit prison of the American dream" (*NNS*, 19). Furthermore, Baldwin claims that the provocative power of protest fiction is an illusion and that such books have become nothing more than an expected and comforting part of the literary scene.

At the conclusion of "Everybody's Protest Novel" Baldwin identifies what he sees as the central flaw of Wright's medium. He writes, "The failure of the protest novel lies in its rejection of life, the human being, the denial of his beauty, dread, power, in its insistence that it is his categorization alone which is real and cannot be transcended" (*NNS*, 23). Instead of urging the oppressed to fight for a society with completely new rules of organization as the "badly written and wildly improbable" protest novel does, Baldwin believes that black writers should show people how recognize their own intellectual and emotional worth despite their arbitrarily

assigned social status (*NNS*, 18). He writes, "Our humanity is our burden, our life; we need not battle for it; we need only to do what is infinitely more difficult–that is, accept it" (*NNS*, 23). So, Baldwin makes a weightier demand of his audience members than Wright does; one that is also more similar to Ellison's model. Instead of simply asking his readers to fight blindly against the powerful forces that oppress them, Baldwin asks his readers to first consider their own value within their social confines and come to recognize those confines as artificial and unnecessary. After gaining a deeper understanding of the unjust nature of their confinement, Baldwin uses his fiction to urge readers to abolish the random restrictions on their freedom and work together to create a more equitable society that is reflective of their own human value.

Still, Baldwin's later essays reveal an obvious revolutionary slant that will limit the far-reaching impact of his novels. For instance, *The Fire Next Time* (which was published in 1962) is made up of two essays that illustrate Baldwin's talent for leading an audience, developed as a former preacher, and his reliance on sensational, individualized appeals. In "My Dungeon Shook: Letter to My Nephew on the One Hundredth Anniversary of the Emancipation," Baldwin writes, "This is the crime of which I accuse my country and my countrymen, and for which neither I nor time nor history will ever forgive them, that they have destroyed and are destroying hundreds of thousands of lives and do not know it and do not want to know it."[11] Later on, he also declares to his nephew, "You were born where you were born and faced the future that you faced because you were black and *for no other reason*" (*FNT*, 19, italics original). Thus, Baldwin's inflammatory prose makes a sweeping indictment of American society as he speaks freely and unrelentingly to his nephew and the rest of his audience. Holding no emotion back in his writing, Baldwin also bases his statements purely on his own opinions and experiences, since

he is writing a personal letter to his nephew and leaves out any mention of a specific sociological or political theory.

In the second essay in *The Fire Next Time*, "Down at the Cross: Letter from a Region in My Mind" Baldwin carries on with his unrestrained, incendiary style in describing the state of race relations in America. To illustrate, he claims, "White people were astounded by the holocaust in Germany. They did not know that they could act that way. But I very much doubt whether black people were astounded" (*FNT*, 74). In "Down at the Cross," however, Baldwin also rejects two standardized ways of approaching injustice of American society, in the Christianity of his childhood and the newly popular Nation of Islam. Finding the promise of religion, and even religion with pronounced social goals, inadequate for dealing with the deep moral failings of American society, Baldwin instead creates his own method of response. Near the end of the essay, Baldwin writes, "The Negroes of this country may never be able to rise to power, but they are very well placed indeed to precipitate chaos and ring down the curtain on the American dream" (*FNT*, 119). With this claim, Baldwin shifts a heavy responsibility onto his own shoulders. As a writer, he has the power to motivate his audience to instigate extreme social change, and he seems more than willing to lead his readers along these lines. Of his fellow black citizens who suffered under segregation, Baldwin writes, "I am proud of these people not because of their color but because of their intelligence and their spiritual force and their beauty. The country should be proud of them too, but, alas, not many people in this country even know of their existence" (*FNT*, 135). Therefore, Baldwin's goals as a writer center around making his readers aware of the necessity of change in society, through vivid representations of the human potential for growth. Not surprisingly, Baldwin's novels contain characters who operate in

pursuit of free expression–of personality, spirituality, and sexuality. Outside of any political, religious, or social doctrine, Baldwin emphasizes the role of the individual as the site of emotional complexity and infinite intellectual and spiritual development.

Without a doubt, then, Baldwin and Wright's nonfiction analyses in "Blueprint for Negro Writing," *White Man, Listen!,* "Everybody's Protest Novel," and *The Fire Next Time* display differing conceptions of race and politics in American society, and the authors' divergent methods for translating those concerns into their work. Where Wright sees his readers as afflicted by a sociological "frog perspective" which gives them the desire to overthrow the unjust American social hierarchy, Baldwin envisions his audience as consisting of self-aware black readers who want to seize the rights that they deserve in their current circumstances. As a result, Wright stresses the importance of a style of social realism and Marxist commentary in his protest literature, hoping to show readers the way to lasting social change through his fictional representations of oppression. On the other hand, Baldwin openly takes issue with Wright's method of composition on the grounds that it reduces literature to a question of social science. Claiming that Wright discounts readers' faculty for intellectual and emotional deliberation, Baldwin crafts his own fiction around an outright, individualized, and emotionally charged call for action. Though Baldwin chooses no particular political ideology to translate into his fiction, the unrestricted content and outspoken tone of his writing itself lends it an intentional political rebelliousness.

In addition, both of these approaches oppose Ellison's method of intrinsic identification and narrative persuasion, and establish the final desirability of Ellison's approach. First, although Baldwin and Wright directly reveal their political grievances in their nonfiction work

and openly incorporate goals of social change into their fiction, they also risk alienating some readers with their straightforward style of social commentary. Indeed, from Baldwin and Wright's essays, it is clear that the authors' most receptive readers would be liberal-minded black citizens who are already sympathetic to the writers' individual agendas. Non-black readers would certainly have very little reason to sympathize with Wright's plot-driven protest novels, since they have not experienced the exploitation that they portray and have no reason to project their concerns onto the fiction. Even Baldwin's novels, which contain characters who display aspects of universal thoughts and feelings, allow their fictionalized inhabitants to act out their freedom in such an extreme way that many conservative readers would be offended. Also, the upfront social commentary in the fiction of Wright and Baldwin ultimately interferes with their artistic worth of their work. Wright's protest novels are designed to be as realistic and logically persuasive in their plot lines as possible, with little concern for aesthetic ornamentation and intellectual ambiguity. Baldwin sets out to avoid the simplistic conventionality of Wright's protest model and succeeds in creating novels full of flowing prose, fiery opinions, and provocative plot lines. Still, Baldwin's fiction is controlled by his own brand of provocative moral commentary, as his characters show readers how to become better aware of their human sensitivities. In contrast to Ellison, however, Baldwin does not make sustained artistic efforts to compel readers to identify with his characters' thoughts and feelings. As a result, Baldwin's fictional personalities are far less impressive and engaging than their author's own authoritative voice, which is always prominent in the background of the narrative. In this way, attempts by Baldwin and Wright to incorporate political activism into their fiction narrow their potential audiences and make their work less aesthetically rich, illustrating the ultimate value of Ellison's

technique.

In conclusion, the great potential for identification and persuasion that exists in Ellison's novel makes *Invisible Man* both endlessly challenging and widely appealing. On these merits, the book endures as a highly esteemed work of American literature, and not just an example of racial protest. In fact, as described in his essay, Ellison's protagonist becomes a "national type" by the end of the novel. Thus, the protagonist serves as a sample of beliefs, assumptions, and emotions held by American society in the 1940's and early 1950's. As a fictional mirror of the confusion, insecurity, and hope faced by real individuals living in this historical era, the narrator endures as an artistic representation of the effects of the political, social, and moral reality of his time. He is, however, a remarkable embodiment of American identity, since Ellison's narrator is essentially a social outcast who suffers through a life of brutal racial discrimination. Yet the narrator's struggles are representative of many African-American citizens of his era, and Ellison proves that those experiences are relevant to a diverse audience in communicating the narrative. In this way, Ellison's "national type" issues a significant challenge to the dominant social and political customs of its time and also illustrates final success of the novel's persuasion. Since his narrator endures as a believable representative of American identity, Ellison's past and present audiences must be able to identify with the protagonist as an intellectual and emotional equal. Therefore, Ellison's narrator is an invisible man living under segregation that, by the good fortune of being immortalized on paper, receives a well-deserved place in the American literary canon and cultural consciousness. And it is the quality and complexity of Ellison's novel that gets him there.

III. Conclusion

As Ellison discusses in "Society, Morality, and the Novel," fiction writing is inevitably tied up with issues of communication and persuasion. Successful novels will always be most compelling to an audience when they resemble everyday reality so closely that readers lose track of fact and fiction, and become completely immersed in the world that the author creates. Of Ellison, Baldwin, and Wright, all three authors aspire to craft novels that will captivate and control a reader's attention in this manner. With varying degrees of success, each author tries to establish a meaningful exchange in his work, hopeful that readers will internalize and interpret the fictional ideal that he presents. Further, when such total identification takes place, authors can take advantage of a unique opportunity to manipulate readers' thoughts and feelings in the direction they choose. Unlike traditional rhetors, however, fiction writers are not bound by conventions of form or content. They are at liberty to creatively shape their narratives in the way that they feel will be most engaging to a wide range of readers. Clearly, Ellison, Baldwin, and Wright achieve varying degrees of eloquence with their own attempts, and Ellison comes out ahead of the rest because of the skillful way that he integrates some rhetorical techniques into the content of his intellectually dense and aesthetically graceful novel.

Moreover, in light of the unequal social conditions faced by black citizens in the early Civil Rights era, it is no surprise that leading black writers tried to use fictional association, by whatever means, to bring about real action in their readers. The writing of fiction provided black authors with a freedom of expression and an air of authority that they could not count on as regular African-American citizens. Like Ellison's anonymous narrator, black artists were often

isolated and excluded from mainstream culture, but they possessed the unusual ability to speak their minds without fear of social restraint or retaliation. Thus, in their fictional representations of identity, Ellison, Wright, and Baldwin air deep grievances and issue startling demands that they could not have effectively communicated outside of their novels. For instance, the writers' nonfiction texts considered in this project, which were produced between 1938 and 1969, span a considerable period of time and voice opinions that remain consistently controversial throughout decades of social turmoil. In spite of their provocative content, however, the reflections of Ellison, Baldwin, and Wright would be of little interest if not for their novels, which initially provided them with the notoriety and the credibility to speak in candid terms about their artistic, social, and political views.

Additionally, novelists have the distinct opportunity to reach a virtually unlimited number of people on an individual basis, communicating with them in a permanent and lasting way that is above and beyond the typical reach of political leaders or social activists. So instead of simply writing letters, organizing demonstrations, or making speeches, black authors like Ellison, Wright, and Baldwin translated their social objections into fiction during the early Civil Rights era. Enduring as part of the rich literary tradition in this country, the authors' moral and political commentary is accessible and relevant to readers today. Further, the most famous works by Ellison, Baldwin, and Wright (including *Invisible Man*) all contain underlying autobiographical elements, bringing the authors' private concerns and individual struggles into the public eye for the first time. With the ability to speak for themselves and the other black citizens at last, the writers' fictional translations of actual injustice persist as original appeals for empathy and calls for change. Published between 1940 and 1953, these early and influential novels–including

Invisible Man, *Native Son*, and *Go Tell it on the Mountain*–will remain as foundational examples of African-American literature, epitomizing the values of their talented authors and their turbulent era.

Notes

1. Ron Field. *Civil Rights in America, 1865-1980* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 54. Hereafter cited in the text with the prefix *"CRA."*

2. Milford Wolpoff and Rachel Caspari. *Race and Human Evolution* (Boulder: Westview Press, 1997), 84. Hereafter cited in the text with the prefix *"RHE."*

3. Eric J. Sundquist. *Cultural Contexts for Ralph Ellison's Invisible Man* (Boston: Bedford/St. Martin's Press, 1995), 76. Hereafter cited in the text with the prefix *"CC."*

4. Ralph Ellison. *Shadow and Act.* (New York: Random House, 1964), 169. Hereafter cited in the text with the prefix *"SA."*

5. Ralph Ellison. *Going to the Territory* (New York: Random House, 1986), 242. Hereafter cited in the text with the prefix *"GT."*

6. Ralph Ellison. *Invisible Man* (New York: Vintage Books, a division of Random House Inc., 1995) 568. Hereafter cited in the text with the prefix *"IM."*

7. Robert O'Meally. *The Jazz Cadence of American Culture* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1998), Introduction.

8. Ellen Wright and Michael Fabre, eds. *Richard Wright Reader* (New York: Harper & Row, 1978), 3. Hereafter cited in the text with the prefix *"RWR."*

9. Richard Wright. *White Man, Listen!* (Westport: Greenview Press, 1978), 28. Hereafter cited in the text with the prefix *"WML."*

10. James Baldwin. *Notes of a Native Son* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1984), 23. Hereafter cited in the text with the prefix *"NNS."*

11. James Baldwin. *The Fire Next Time* (New York: Dell Publishing, 1962), 15. Hereafter cited in the text with the prefix *"FNT."*

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