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INVISIBLE MAN AND NATIVE SON - A COMPARISON

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Elaine Bradley Collins

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I N T R O D U C T I O N

A predominant issue in the writings of the minority group, be they Jews, Indians, or Blacks, is whether they in their writings should attempt to further the particular cause of their group, or through observation and self-expression throw light on the universal human condition. These two goals are not always mutually exclusive. Few writers are able to avoid taking a stand on one position or the other at some time during their writing careers.

Broadly speaking, the early types of writings produced by American Blacks fell into three categories. One was an imitative kind of writing attempting to demonstrate that in spite of reputed inferiority, Blacks too could produce literature. If they could not produce it on a level equal to that of white writers, they wanted at least to show that they possessed the intelligence and capacity to make a good effort. Phillis Wheatley falls into this category. There were, in the second category, the subservient types of writings on the parts of ever respectful Black writers, their main object being that of demonstrating continued humility and the desire to serve. These wanted to show their loyal readiness to follow whatever bidding requested of them by the white establishment, as in the case of Jupiter Hammon. The last of these were the stirring, frequently poetic, autobiographical narratives by ex-slaves such as Frederick Douglass. These had the purpose of attacking the cold indifference of whites to the Black condition and of claiming the right to be recognized as human beings.

From the post-Reconstruction period up to the 1920s, Black literature attempted to identify with white middle class values and ideologies. If Blacks could not afford the material comforts of the white middle class, they could at least smile and show no resentment. They could manifest a willingness to wait their turn. Meanwhile, they were happy as they were.

One of the problems reckoned with by the Black writer was the great lack of receptiveness on the part of white critics and publishing houses. The standards for accepted works were established by how well they adhered to elegance of language in the Dryden to T. S. Eliot traditions.

With the establishment of the Harlem School in the early 1920s, there appeared a turn about in Black literary consciousness. Its poets and writers turned their backs on accepted writing canons, emphasizing self-expression with an element of protest strongly presented, expressed with bold openness. None the less, these attempts went largely unnoticed by the white establishment. Black literature, at best, was considered a separate genre, although the works of some Black authors as Willard Motley and Frank Yerby received reasonable acceptance. These being in their contents, without racial tones or references.

In the late 1920s, Harlem became the melting pot in which all economic and cultural strata of the Black American society came together. Its Black inhabitants ranged from

social outcasts to businessmen, from intellectuals to artists. All coexisting in one geographical nucleus for the first time in American history. The dynamics of this potpourri of social classes is credited with bringing about a new awareness, which contributed to the coming about of the Harlem Renaissance. With the Renaissance, political protest now became secondary to the Black writer.¹ Self expression took precedence, becoming his principle concern. Protest became submerged in his art. It was there, but less blatantly. The reader was to draw his own conclusions.

This ideology of self-expression through art is made apparent in Ralph Ellison's remarks:

If Invisible Man is even "apparently" free from "the ideological and emotional penalties suffered by Negroes in this country," it is because I tried to the best of my ability to transform these elements into art. My goal was not to escape, or hold back, but to work through; to transcend, as the blues transcend the painful conditions with which they deal. The protest is there, not because I was helpless before my racial condition, but because I put it there. If there is anything "miraculous" about the book it is the result of hard work undertaken in the belief that the work of art is important in itself, that it is a social action in itself.²

1 See John Wiley and Sons, eds. The Negro Almanac - A Reference Work on the Afro-American (New York: Wiley Interscience Publications, 1973), pp. 965-966.

2 Ralph Ellison, Shadow and Act (New York: Random House, 1953), p. 142.

Ellison's remarks speak for themselves. In Invisible Man, the Black dilemma is pointed out with its ramifications of racism, in its socio-psychological aspects, but not at the expense of forfeiting their relationship and inclusion into the vastness of other human emotions and experiences.

Ellison feels that a novel should be a portrait of life's failures and despairs, but at the same time the novel should cast a ray of light upon these, a joyous and hope-filled ray of light in celebration of that life, for the simple fact of it being life. This is Invisible Man's purpose according to Ellison. It is not that he desired to ignore or diminish the significance of these failures and despairs, but to transform them and to give significance to them through their voicing on an aesthetic and artistic level.

Richard Wright's stand in this respect was very different from that of Ellison. In the numerous books written by him, his greatest preoccupation is protest. He felt that "art for art's sake"³ was a privilege the Black writer could not afford. Black alienation and rejection constituted the strongest themes in his writings. Here in his introductory remarks to Native Son, he asserts:

There was yet another level of reality in Bigger's life: the impliedly political. I've already mentioned that Bigger had in him impulses which I had felt were present in the vast upheavals of Russia and Germany. Well, somehow, I had to make these political felt by the reader in terms of Bigger's daily actions,

3 John Wiley and Sons, ed., op cit., p. 967.

keeping in mind as I did so the probable danger of my being branded as a propagandist by those who would not like the subject matter. Then there was Bigger's relationship with White America, both North and South, which I had to depict, which I had to make known once again, alas; a relationship whose effects are carried by every Negro, like scars, somewhere in his body and mind.⁴

In this dissertation, it is my objective to establish the intention of Ralph Ellison in the writing of Invisible Man. Then through an analysis of its main character, to ascertain whether this intention is realized. I will then repeat the same procedure in the novel, Native Son, written by Richard Wright through the analysis of its main character, Bigger Thomas. I propose at the same time to pinpoint some similarities and differences between the two writers and to explore how these factors influenced their writings and visions of the Black American experience in the United States.

Both Richard Wright and Ralph Ellison were born in the South. Both were fatherless, although at this point there are significant differences in their backgrounds. Ellison's background included innovational elements such as meaningful contacts with middle class whites in the persons of teachers, friends, and close associations with individuals connected with the artistic world. He had access to creative pastimes and cultural enrichments. He built model radios, sang in choirs, and studied music. In Shadow and Act, about his early life,

⁴ Richard Wright, Native Son (New York: Penguin Books, 1972) p. 29.

he candidly remarks:

And for me none of this . . . [self cultivation and education] . . . was hopelessly beyond the reach of my Negro world, really; because if you worked and you fought for your rights, and so on, you could finally achieve it.⁵

Another great difference between the two writers' backgrounds is that they were from different regions of the South. Ellison was from the "new South." He was born in the state of Oklahoma which had become part of the Union only seven years prior to his birth. This accounts for an environment of less conflicts between the races and less institutionalized racism. These factors in his earlier life must have influenced his characterization of the main character in Invisible Man, the idealistic way of viewing the world, the humour, the emphasis on jazz, and the novel's aesthetic relations in language. And too, like his main character, he attended an all Black university, Tuskegee Institute, for three years and then migrated to New York.

Richard Wright, on the other hand, spent a bitter deprived childhood in Mississippi, a notorious "nigger lynching" state. He received only a ninth grade education, then lived in Memphis for a time. His autobiography, Black Boy, is a chronicle of the cruelties and humiliations he suffered from Mississippi whites. It is also a testimony to the abject poverty and callous ignorance in which he was brought up.

5 Ralph Ellison, op cit., p. 26.

About this period in his life, he muses:

After I had outlived the shocks of childhood, after the habit of reflection had been born in me, I used to mull over the strange absence of real kindness in Negroes, how unstable was our tenderness, how lacking in genuine passion we were, how void of great hope, how timid our joy, how bare our traditions, how hollow our memories, how lacking we were in those intangible sentiments that bind man to man, and how shallow was even our despair.⁶

Wright subsequently moved on to Chicago where he worked in an assortment of unskilled jobs. It was at this stage in his life that the figure of Bigger Thomas began to take form in his mind.

On perusing biographical data written by each writer, respectively, marked personality differences are perceived giving further proof of their diversities. Wright is somber and dead serious, as if every word he utters is first examined to see if it really expresses what he wishes it to. Ellison is light and poetic with humorous tones. All of his utterances seem to have a deeper philosophical meaning.

As expected, these distinct differences in personalities are clearly reflected in the works of the two authors. Native Son, in the person of the main protagonist, mirrors in a depraved and distorted way, Wright's somberness of character. Bigger is totally devoid of all semblances of joy and humour.

⁶ Richard Wright, Black Boy (New York: Harper and Row, 1945), p. 45.

In keeping with Ellison's personality, on the other hand, his leading character looks at life with a certain optimism and philosophical calm even in his darkest moments. These differences together with individual backgrounds and personal outlooks form the basis of the divergencies encountered in the two works and treated in my dissertation on these two Black writers.

RALPH ELLISON AND INVISIBLE MAN

Nathan A. Scott, Jr., states in his review of Invisible Man:

To read such a book, for example, as Ralph Ellison's brilliant novel of 1952, Invisible Man, is to find, among one's richest satisfactions, the sense of immersion in all the concrete materialities of Negro life.⁷

Through his first and only novel, Invisible Man, Ralph Ellison won the National Book Award and recognition as an up and coming Black novelist. A key aspect of the novel's theme is lack of identity. Ellison never discloses the main character's name, turning this aspect into an enigma. The search carried out in the person of the young Black man for his identity becomes not only his search, or that of the single individual; Ellison makes it every man's search for identity. It is a search for place in the universal scheme of things and for self.

Ellison proves himself a master of irony, description, and humour in this multi-faceted novel. While he treats a profoundly human theme, a great deal of the novel is taken up by his minutely detailed descriptions of humorous Black Americana such as its contemporary manifestations in personality traits and idiosyncrasies. All of which he unflinchingly treats with insight and respect. When he describes a sweet potato vendor peddling his wares, one can almost smell and taste them. By

7 Nathan A. Scott, Jr., "The Dark and Haunted Tower of Richard Wright," in Contemporary Literary Criticism, vol. I (Detroit, Michigan: Goli Research Co., 1973), p. 128.

means of his descriptions of the konked haired zoot suiters, the reader shares in the visualization as if he were there, as they strut cockily down a Harlem thoroughfare.

Throughout Invisible Man's development, the nameless young man, the main protagonist is subjected to trial after trial and one humiliation after another, but he always emerges to carry on to the next episode. Many of these have no connection with the ones prior to them. Through it all, our nameless hero marches on to the conclusion, growing with each step as he passes on to a higher plain of consciousness and growth.

In Ralph Ellison's remarks as to what his aims were in writing Invisible Man, he states:

. . . I believe that true novels, even when most pessimistic and bitter, arise out of an impulse to celebrate human life and therefore are ritualistic and ceremonial at their core. Thus they would preserve as they destroy, affirm as they reject.⁸

In Invisible Man, Ellison treats the existence of one Black man. Through the existential complexities of this single individual, he attempts to throw light on the whole of human existence. At the same time, he implies that these, life's absurdities and cruel ironies all form part of that life, as bitter as they are. And as such, they are part of the human condition, they are at core a rejoicing of living and of life in general. Through Invisible Man, this is what Ellison attempts to communicate.

⁸ Ralph Ellison, op cit., p. 121.

The hero of Ellison's novel is a youth in his early twenties. His life's objective is to get a good education and to climb the social ladder to become a good standing member of the "proper Negro" set in his small southern town. The novel's setting is around the 1930s concluded by the fact that his grandparents were ex-slaves. The hero's psychological makeup manifests those conflicts, rooted in feelings of inferiority and inadequacy, experienced by the lower class of an ethnic group. These feelings are provoked by its contact with other more affluent members of that group. These affluent members set the social norms and demand conformity on the part of the lower class in order to be accepted. On the other hand, his conflicts are all the more aggravated by the historical stigma of slavery.

Included in his psychological conflicts are his fear of appearing "field niggerish" (all and anything related to common Black outlooks and customs) and the possibility of not being permitted to climb the ladder of education; the ladder that would provide him further escape from this "field niggerishness" (his origins).

Through a series of blunders, mis-understandings, and eventual enlightenment, he ultimately comes to terms with himself and with the world. Ellison's handling of the steps toward this final unfoldment constitute what he calls "the celebration of human life" that results in the novel's artistic appeal.

What are the elements that constitute this celebration by Ellison? This book first and foremost is a monument of exquisite description. The yam eating episode and the character's thoughts during it are unrivaled in detail and robustness. Ellison is probably the first author to handle Black folklore in such an open, elegant and unabashed way. In the hands of another Black writer, it could have been a theme to skip over rapidly or to play down. This in itself gives the book a great part of its appeal. How can the essence of a people be recorded if their customs and actions are considered by the author too lacking in importance to take into account in relation to his main theme? If he fails to perceive the importance of these sociological odds and ends, seemingly unworthy of his attention, is he not losing in his account a great part of the substance of that group? Ellison felt this, and handled these aspects in an open, matter of fact, humourous way, giving it naturalness and respect in the manner in which every people's customs should be treated. As a consequence, the reader assimilates the same attitude he projects in its creation, naturalness.

Irony

Ellison's handling of irony is superb. The more significant incidents are heavily ladden with it. The minor incidents also receive a generous portion. The most notable is the battle royal, where the young protagonist is almost killed thinking

he has come to make a speech on humility. As a reward for his eloquent graduation speech on humility (a very important quality necessary to Black survival in the South), he is invited to a banquet to repeat this same speech before the town's distinguished white male citizens. In his idealistic naivete, he gives only passing importance to the battle he is asked to participate in while present.

Blindfolded, he is cruelly prodded into battling in a frenzied free-for-all against other Black youths. Throughout all the battering he receives, he still longs to give his speech. Bloodied and incoherent, he finally has the opportunity to give it.

The greatest irony in this incident lies in the fact that unknown to the protagonist, he is there to be pummeled for the distinguished audience's enjoyment. He is only allowed to give his speech as a compensation for his physical humiliation. He then voices his humility in the gravest of tones. That is to say, he inadvertently demonstrates that which so pleases his white audience in the Black behavior, humiliation followed by humility. As a prize, he is given a calf-skin briefcase. The briefcase has the subsequent role of perpetuating his humiliations further on and it continues to play a symbolic role on to the novel's end.

Next there is the Trueblood incident. The irony of the episode is symbolized first by the name of the Black sharecropper,

"Trueblood." He cohabits with his wife and daughter rendering each with child. Assuming an attitude of naivete, he recounts his predicament to the white trustee, Norton, who is accompanied by the protagonist. He points out that before his incestuous relation with his daughter, he was unable to find work to sustain his family. Unexplainably, the moment the situation became known to the white folk, he was miraculously inundated with all the work he could handle.

The white trustee is exceedingly interested in Trueblood's tale. His absorption and amazement is so intense that he becomes ill. Norton's exaggerated reaction and recounting of the delicate virginal beauty of his own daughter points an accusing finger at his same offense with the dead girl. The protagonist as always remains unsuspecting, adding to the incident's irony.

Perhaps the irony of greatest impact involves the letter written by the college dean. Our nameless protagonist carries it about with the utmost care and reverence thinking it to be a key to his future. The reality of the letter's contents are the contrary. Dean Eledsoe's letter is deliberately composed to bring about his downfall. It is on finally reading its perverse message that the young man fully comprehends the gravity of his predicament. The awesome and venerated Eledsoe has sealed his doom with slips of paper.

The fact that slips of paper play an important role throughout the story line is notable. In a dream, he envisions

opening up an endless series of envelopes until ultimately coming to a short engraved message stating "To Whom It May Concern: Keep this NiggerBoy running."⁹ This letter in his dream sets the pace for the role of the continuing written documents: his high school diploma, Eledsoe's letters, the slip of paper with his party name, and then Brother Jack's anonymous letter. He is to be kept as Eledsoe put it in his letter, searching for "that promise which, like the horizon, recedes ever brightly and distantly beyond the hopeful traveller."¹⁰

When the protagonist is escaping pursuers during a mob incident, he accidentally falls into the open manhole that begins his underground hibernation. Without a source of light to find his way in the pitch darkness, he searches in the fateful briefcase for something to burn. He symbolically begins to burn all the remaining vestiges of his idealistic illusions.

The first to go is his high school diploma; representative of the beginning of his educational illusions, then follows his dead comrade Clifton's Sambo doll; the symbol of Clifton's disillusionment with the Brotherhood and later his own. Then on burning the final two remaining scraps of paper,

9 Ralph Ellison, *Invisible Man* (New York: Penguin Books, 1965), p. 32.

10 Ibid., p. 156.

his party name and an anonymous letter, by coincidence he compares the handwritings and realizes them both to be written by Brother Jack. He is struck by the stark irony of the two strips of paper.

In the first, Brother Jack is opening the doors of the Brotherhood by providing him a party name. He is paving the way for him to realize himself as a man and to defend his race. He is giving him a seal of equality. In short, through this act of approval, the protagonist can put his idealistic aspirations into practice working on an equal level with whites and other Blacks. On the other hand, in the anonymous letter, Brother Jack dispatches a Klu Klux Klan type warning; a regression back to the traditional white versus Black role of superior and inferior. The protagonist is to stay in his place or rather in the place appointed him by the Brotherhood. He is not to forget that he is a Black man in a white man's world.

The incident concerning Brother Jack and the paper slips is comparable to the Bledsoe letters. Although Bledsoe sternly reproves the young man's conduct in the Trueblood and Golden Day Tavern incident (the protagonist is responsible for the meeting between Norton and Trueblood and then for taking him to the Golden Day to recuperate), in what is interpreted as good faith, he writes him the damning letters of recommendation that begin his running.

To discover that Brother Jack has repeated the same deed is almost too hard to bare. In both cases he has been led on into building up his idealistic illusions to greater heights. In both cases they are then crushed down by his confrontation with the truth. His discarding and destruction of these documents constitute an awakening to the light. In the total darkness of the underground, he finally perceives the light.

Role Figures and Role Models

All important characters and episodes in Invisible Man are separate and sealed off each from the other. However, each is symbolic and has a specific function in the hero's continued growth. The dying grandfather is the first role figure. He serves as an admonisher and forewarner. From his deathbed, he prescribes to his grandson the appropriate attitude and conduct he must assume if he is to avoid falling into confusion's depths. But the young man is too inexperienced to comprehend and gives no heed.

The second important role figure is the vet in the Golden Day Tavern to which the hero takes Norton to recover from his sudden illness. The psychopathic vet's warning is very emphatic:

Already he's learned to repress not only his emotions, but his humanity. He's invisible, a walking personification of the Negative, . . . 11

11 Ralph Ellison, Invisible Man, p. 81.

The vet further remarks of the young hero:

He believes in that great false wisdom taught slaves and pragmatists alike, that white is right. I can tell you his destiny. He'll do your Norton's bidding, and for that, his blindness is his chief asset. He's your man, friend.¹²

The vet takes care to say he is more of a clown than a fool. This is reminiscent of Shakespeare's treatment of clowns and jesters as soothsayers and speaker's of wisdom. The truth is oft spoken most clearly through the lips of the demented.

There follows a series of role models the protagonist may select if he chooses not to heed the fool's warning. First, there is Bledsoe, the Black demi-god of academists. In Bledsoe he sees the incarnation of his grandfather's deathbed message:

Son, after I'm gone I want you to overcome 'em with yeses, undermine 'em with grins, agree 'em to death and destruction, let 'em swoller you till they vomit or bust wide open.¹³

But, Bledsoe is a "yes suh" man in the most corrupt sense, not for the sake of survival. His fawning servility is for the purpose of ruthless self engrandisement.

The character Lucious Brockway presents another option. He is a repetition of the Bledsoe "white is right" theme albeit on a brutish and cruder level. Lucious uses his long acquaintance

12 Ralph Ellison, Ibid., p. 82.

13 Ibid., p. 17.

with the "old man," the owner, to ensure his position in the paint factory. He is the urban contemporary version of the old slave, who due to his long time faithfulness to the master, enjoys certain privileges and will fight jealously to retain them.

Rhinehart is his last role model on his road to awakening. Rhinehart is a hustler and confidence man. He himself is never seen but his tracks and footprints are spread out over the protagonist's nocturnal path through the ghetto. Just as the protagonist cannot become a puppet whose movements are totally decided by others, neither can he abandon himself to total chaos, a creature completely lacking in conscience and scruples like Rhinehart.

Final Growth

It is during the yam eating segment that the protagonist has a revelation which leads to his first stage of growth. While walking in the open street, he delightedly savors this typically Black soul food, devouring the yam gluttonously. This triggers his reflections on other foods that form part of the Black diet. He then thinks of the manner in which these foods are consumed. Though all are partaken of with great relish and enjoyment, they are eaten furtively and with shame because of their connection with blackness and poverty. He thinks disgustedly of Bledsoe as an example of a person who would have this behavior. He decides he has denied himself an important part of life's meaning and savour by imposing this limitation on his existence. He vows that from there on, he will set the standards as to what he will accept or reject guided by his own likes and preferences.

It is his experience with the Brotherhood that sparks the beginnings of his second stage of growth. This experience with Brother Jack and the Brotherhood convinces him that Marxism is not for him because it only offers a continuation of what he has been up to now, an automaton, with his actions and thoughts determined by outside forces. Up to this point, he has trudged along on a path making stops at various points,

seeing but not feeling as foretold by the vet. He is blinded and rendered invisible by his ever present ideals.

In the brightly illuminated surroundings of his underground retreat, he reflects on his life up to this moment, attempting to decide where the fault of his invisibility lies; if in the outer world or within himself.

At a certain moment, he decides to resume residence in the world above. His dark place of hibernation illuminated by its abundant light has served to bring light to his invisibility. He concludes that part of life's meaning lies in its contradictions and divergencies. His great mistake was his idealistic search to conform to a pattern. He decides that diversity is a necessary ingredient of life. He decides to return above, most of all, because he concludes that the true value of life lies in life itself; that human existence with all its adversities and diversities is precious and dear just because it is life.

Richard Wright and Native Son

In his biographical notes, Abraham Chapman, in Black Voices writes the following in reference to Richard Wright:

Going far beyond the "protest novel" label which has been tagged to his fiction by some critics, Richard Wright brought into American literature in a radically new way, the feeling and the texture of the complex psychological tensions simmering in the black ghetto of urban America. Bigger Thomas in Native Son is a literary archetype of the hemmed-in, frustrated, and rejected black American in the ghetto who is propelled into violence by overwhelming conditions and forces.¹⁴

Richard Wright has been called a protest novelist and an activist. Both terms are applied to him probably because of the great critically charged social context of the bulk of his writings. Wright, unlike Ellison, was the author of numerous works. Two of his better known and most acclaimed are Black Boy, an autobiography written in 1945, and Native Son on which part of this dissertation is based, written in 1940. Native Son became a best seller and was consequently made into a moving picture. Another, a novella first written in 1942, Man Gone Underground, done in a somewhat surrealistic style, is considered by critics to be of equal literary stature to the two above mentioned works.

It is my purpose here to ascertain the objectives of Richard Wright in the writing of Native Son and then to analyze whether they were realized through the character of Bigger Thomas, its main protagonist.

¹⁴ Abraham Chapman, ed. Black Voices (New York: The New American Library, 1968), p. 113.

A comparison of Wright's life and the context of his works shows marked similarities in aspects such as his early traumatic exposure to racism, his lack of family warmth and alienation toward society in general. This might explain why his writings are so immediate and intensely personal. In Native Son, the character of Bigger is so real and big, Wright makes him so palpable that the reader gets the impression that Wright is explaining a part of his own personality, a sort of Jekyll and Hyde, a part totally lacking in human morals and ethics.

In determining Wright's objectives in his depiction of Bigger Thomas as stated in the introduction of Native Son, "How Bigger was born," he explains:

Reluctantly, he [the writer] comes to the conclusion that to account for his book is to account for his life, and he knows that that is impossible. Yet, some curious, way-ward motive urges him to supply the answer, for there is the feeling that his dignity as a living being is challenged by something within him that is not understood.¹⁵

Wright's thoughts stated in somewhat metaphysical terms appear to mean that the writing of Native Son was a kind of exploration of hereto unformulated forces struggling within him

15 Richard Wright, Native Son, p. 10.

to be defined. In reflecting on the absence of available material to refer to on the theme he desired to develop, he states:

This association with white writers was the life preserver of my hope to depict Negro life in fiction, for my race possessed no fictional works dealing with such problems, had no background in such sharp and critical testing of experience, no novels that went with a deep and fearless will down to the dark roots of life.¹⁶

Wright then affirms that his original guide for the development of Bigger was indeed himself and his own emotions placed in an imaginary experimental type situation:

Why should I not try to work out on paper like a scientist in a laboratory, use my imagination and invent test-tube situations, place Bigger in them, and, following the guidance of my own hopes and fears, what I had learned and remembered, work out in fictional form, an emotional statement and resolution of this problem.¹⁷

On continuing, he remarks:

. . . my task, as I felt it, was to free myself of this burden of impressions and feelings, recast them into the image of Bigger and make him true. Lastly, I felt that a right more immediately deeper than that of politics or race was at stake; that is, a human right, the right of a man to think and feel honestly.¹⁸

16 Ibid., p. 19.

17 Ibid., p. 24.

18 Ibid., p. 25.

Here Wright again, clearly affirms that his guide to Eligger's emotions were his own. In doing so, and through realizing the creation of Eligger, Wright hoped to purge himself, so to speak by, giving vent to feelings resulting from the emotional toll exacted upon him through his earlier life in the repressive racist atmosphere of the deep South and the more subtle but equally repressive environment of the northern urban center, Chicago. However, as inferred by Wright this was not just to express the personal damages done to him by racism, his principle wish through Eligger was to express the injustices perpetrated against a group, the Black people, by means of a literary work.

In referring back to the two focuses in minority literature, that of furthering the particular cause of the group or that of throwing light on the universal human condition, it is apparent from Wright's comments that his principle aim is to further the cause of that of his group, the American Black people. It is important to remember that Wright wrote this book at a period in literary history in the United States when there were few precedents to follow.

On the Socio-economic and political scene, great strides had been made since World War I nationwide. On the other hand, the socio-economic and political panorama of the Black population had not changed significantly since the days of the Reconstruction. Geographically, one fourth of the Black population lived in the North and West. The bulk of their numbers continued to live in the South at this period.

According to the Tuskegee Institute, during the period of 1882 to 1940, 3,097 Blacks were lynched in the United States. In 1934, the antilynch bill failed to pass due to the non-support of Franklin Delano Roosevelt. In St. Louis, 1935, the NAACP harshly criticized Roosevelt after his reelection when he refused to support civil right legislation. In 1939, Marion Anderson, one of the world's greatest contraltos, was refused performance in Constitution Hall because she was Black. In 1940, Washington D.C., a census established Black life expectancy at 51 while that of whites at 62. Considering the generally prevailing circumstances affecting the Black condition, it is surprising that a work of this impact did not appear until 1940.¹⁹

In Native Son, Wright through three stages titled Fear, Flight, and Fate, produces a masterpiece in sociological phenomena in the probing of the psyche of a twenty year old Black ghetto dweller during three crucial days in his life. The probe is done of Eigger's emotional reactions to family, peers, the white upper class family he is hired to work for, and ultimately of his emotions on being jailed and convicted of two murders.

Wright's technique is to unfold the tale to the reader step by step as it is seen through the eyes of Eigger. Eigger feels and reacts always in the present. The only details known

19 See John Wiley and Sons, ed., op. cit., pp. 28-29.

of his past are through the characters who interview and interrogate him. This gives a feeling of living and experiencing what Bigger feels right along with him.

At the beginning, we are not sure what it is that makes Bigger react the way he does. We only know that his life is completely devoid of all warmth and sense of direction and that his response to situations confronting him is to run away in fear or to use violence. It is not until the third stage of the novel, Fate, when he is apprehended by the law for his crimes and befriended by Max, his humane defender, that we hear Bigger attempt to express himself. He expresses all the pent up rage, helplessness, and frustration he has felt all his life in his condition as a poor hopeless Black.

It is apparent that Wright produced Native Son as a catharsis, in doing so, he made a prophetic account of what was then taking embryonic form in the urban settings of the United States and is now a rampaging epidemic that American society is seemingly unable to contain.

According to the conclusions in Daniel P. Moynihan's book entitled Violent Crime twenty nine years later, he summarizes:

At the beginning of this century there was an upsurge in violent crime. Violent crimes are chiefly a problem of the cities of the nation, and there violent crimes are committed mainly by the young, poor, male inhabitants of the ghetto slum. In the slums increasingly

powerful social forces are generating rising levels of violent crime which, unless checked threatens to turn our cities into defensive, fearful societies. An improved criminal-justice system is required to contain the growth of violent crime, but only progress toward urban reconstruction can reduce the strength of the crime causing forces in the inner city and thus reverse the direction of present crime trends. Warring on poverty, inadequate housing and unemployment, is warring on crime. A civil rights law is a law against crime. Money for schools is money against crime. Medical, psychiatric, and family-counseling services are services against crime. More broadly and most importantly every effort to improve life in America's "inner cities" is an effort against crime.²⁰

Bigger and his family live in a small area called the Black Belt. They are limited to this part of the city through housing discrimination. He, his mother, his brother, and sister all occupy a shabby rat infested one room together. For this one room, they are obliged to pay higher rent than a white family would for the same space. Food sold in the Black Belt is of notoriously poor quality. They must also pay more for this than their white counterparts. As for employment, there is a marked higher unemployment rate among Blacks. Only service jobs are open to them. They are the last to be hired and the first to be fired.

Moynihan, on remarking on his non-fictional research findings, is corroborating what in essence is developed by Wright in the year 1940 in fictional form.

In *Bigger Thomas* we observe the beginnings of what is now an everyday occurrence. Wright with amazing perception

²⁰ Daniel P. Moynihan, Violent Crime - The Challenge of our Cities (New York: George Brazillier, Inc., 1969), p. 82.

and intuitiveness creates a boy who progresses before our eyes from a sullen uncommunicative sociopath to an unscrupulous calculating killer. He is incapable of remorse. His emotions and responses are ruled by destructive anger and the instinct of self-preservation. Sealed in and rendered incapable of carrying on creative activities by his environment, he kills the first time accidentally. His reflections on having committed the deed are very illustrative of the pathological behavior. His reaction is that of being intensely alive for the first time and in full contact with life. In essence, when a human being is hemmed in and unable to make use of his faculties in a productive manner, he will become destructive:

I am not referring here to occasional frustrations of this or that desire but to the blockage of spontaneous expression of man's sensory, emotional, physical, and intellectual capacities, to the thwarting of his productive potentialities. If life's tendency to grow, to be lived, is thwarted, the energy thus blocked undergoes a process of change and is transformed into life-destructive energy. Destructiveness is the outcome of un-lived life. Those individual and social conditions which make for the blocking of life-furthering energy produce destructiveness which in turn is the source from which the various manifestations of evil spring.²¹

Bigger finds it necessary to commit his second murder to protect himself from detection in the first. This time it is

21 Erich Fromm, Man for Himself (Greenwich, Connecticut: Fawcett Publications, Inc., 1947), p. 218.

carried out in cold blood with full awareness and intent. It is all the more heinous because it is to his female companion. He feels no remorse, he is only ruled by the primeval principle of self-preservation. He is consequently arrested and sentenced to death in the electric chair.

Ellison's artistic devices such as irony and his clown (the vet), embellish his novel and place it in a literary tradition. Wright, on the other hand, due to his novel's sociological and protest theme, uses devices with other objectives in mind. If his theme is stark and brutal, his devices, though few, attempt to make it more so.

The Fool

The fool's presence is announced by his indignant screams, on being dragged into Rigger's cell, where he is awaiting his date of jury trial. The fool is dumped loudly on the floor. His dragging introduction into the cell is carried out by six uniformed white officers. The reasons for his detention are shortly made clear through the fool's own lips. It appears he is a student at the University of Chicago; he furiously accuses his professor of stealing his book of research on the causes of the Black condition. He angrily demands to speak to the President about the findings of his investigation. He insistently asserts that the causes of the Black condition are their deplorable living circumstances, their rat infested flats, the inflated

rents, the higher costs for poorer quality food, the absence of hospital and school installations for the Black taxes, and the overcrowding of existing schools that produce only perverts.

The white inmates in the neighboring cells have now had enough, they clamor for his removal, they refuse to put up with the babblings of this idiot any longer. No sooner said than done. The cell door is abruptly opened and he is hurriedly picked up on a cart by men dressed in white and whisked out to the psycho ward.

Imagery and Symbolism

To achieve imagery and symbolism, Wright uses three colors, black, white, and red. In keeping with his black and white theme, these are the principle color symbols.²² Red is a secondary color. No other colors receive importance.

22 Where Wright's color scheme is harsh and overt, Ellison's use of the black white color scheme is more diffuse and refined. Wright's colors serve to back up his novel's equally harsh theme, forming a symbolism within itself. Ellison's is more intricately woven into the integral symbolism of his theme. For instance, the electrical powerhouse supplying the white buildings of the college campus is black. The plant that produces the dazzlingly white paint for the government monuments "optic white," an optical illusion, is given its glowing color by applying ten drops of black. Lucious Brockway, the Black illiterate janitor, is the literal life line behind the industry. Ellison's black and white imagery point to a recurrent pet theme in his writings: The cultural and economic status of the United States was brought about through the combined efforts of both races, Black and white.

We might observe first the omnipresent white snow and frigid weather, so typical of the city of Chicago with its sub-zero temperatures. On Bigger's arrival at the Dalton's residence, the world becomes blanketed with a heavy white snow fall. It continues to fall during the three fatal days of his life. It is this snow that ultimately impedes his movements and means of escape. The snow and cold force him to seclude himself in a vacated flat, which leads to his capture.

The Daltons are also important in the white color scheme. They are the family that hires Bigger as their chauffeur. Repeated references are made to their white semblances. Each has white hair and Mrs. Dalton always dresses in white. There is a slight religious theme here too. This is conveyed through Mrs. Dalton's all white appearance, her quiet demeanor with folded hands, and her heaven turned glance. There is a huge white cat owned by them that jumps accusingly on Bigger's shoulder during the scene before the bones of Mary, their daughter, are discovered in the incinerator where Bigger has placed her corpse to destroy evidence. The Dalton's house is totally white. Their furnishings are also white.

What does Wright attempt to convey through his extensive use of white? The powerful white frigidity of the weather, he so stresses, is symbolic of the white superstructure. Both hem Bigger in. Both impossibilitate his movements and limit his freedom.

As for the Dalton family, their whiteness stands for wealth, power, and pious goodness. On the other hand, their pious goodness is questionable. Mr. Dalton as a prosperous realtor rents flats for exorbitant prices in subhuman conditions to Blacks. He then returns sums of it back to the Black community through philanthropic endeavors such as presenting boys clubs with ping pong tables.

Mary Dalton forms part of the white color scheme. On the other hand, she introduces the red there and reinforces the Black. Red symbolizes communism and blood. In a romantically naive way, she is interested in the Black racial question. Her demonstration of this interest to Bigger is what enrages him and turns him against her. She is in love with a "red" (a communist) and sympathetic to the Communist Party. The symbols of these are the many references to her red mouth, white face, and curly black hair. Bigger's principle manifestation of having a conscience are the recurrent flashbacks of Mary's head; its black curly hair, red mouth, and bloody neck after he decapitates her. More references to blood are related to Bessie's battered head (his female companion) and Bigger's bloodied hands after his intent to kill her.

Lastly, red symbolizes salvation or an alternative to the Black racial plight. It is important to remember that Wright

was a member of the Communist Party when he wrote Native Son. Max and Jan, who are members of the Party, are the only humane characters. It is Max who gives Bigger fortitude before he is to meet his death.

Black is Wright's most complex color scheme because of its diverse meanings. His blacks admit no mixtures. There are no browns, tans, or yellows, except the fool. His blacks are stark and without respite. In general, it retains much of its master slave connotations; servility and inferiority. At the same time, it symbolizes doom and condemnation:

He was tensely eager to stay and see how it would all end, even if that end swallowed him in blackness.²³

In this example black seems to mean undesirability and inferiority:

He had not thought that any one would dare think that he, a black Negro, would be Jan's partner.²⁴

Blindness is another symbol. Mary's mother, Mrs. Dalton is blind. She is present in the same room when Bigger smothers Mary to death. She is unaware because she is blind. Bigger later describes the rest of the characters as blind too. His family and Bessie are blind because they go about their desolate routine existences without seeing. Mr. Dalton and Britten,

23 Richard Wright, Native Son, p. 228.

24 Ibid., p. 200.

the detective, are blind because they can't see or even imagine that Mary is burning inside the furnace and that he did it. Bigger feels he is the only one who is not blind. In fact, for the first time, he sees very clearly.²⁵

Bigger's End

Bigger, unlike Ellison's anonymous main character, has no final growth. What he does acquire are the beginnings of self-understanding and fortitude to meet his final end peacefully. Wright ends the novel in the section called "fate". Max, Bigger's defender, in a lengthy address to the court and the jury, pleads for Bigger's life in consideration of his deprived background on humanitarian grounds. His attempts fail. On the other hand, he does succeed in giving Bigger an understanding of himself through some of the talks they have. Bigger's last words, before Max leaves his cell on the last evening, are that he is reconciled to his fate and that his family is not to worry.

25 Note the significance given to the sense of sight in both Native Son and Invisible Man, seeing, blindness, and invisibility. All signify the presence or absence of inner spiritual perception and at the same time, outward optical perception. Ellison's character, as the vet states, is blind and invisible. He is invisible because he is blind. His blindness is caused by false ideals and values. His inner and outward visibility come about naturally when he puts his idealism behind him. Bigger, on the other hand, only after committing the ultimate atrocity, murder, sees. He glories in his heightened senses and visibility, his ability to live and move about at the scene of the crime unsuspected, because to him, everyone else is blind.

Some Pertinent Remarks

In *Native Son*, Richard Wright not only wrote a daringly social charged chronicle of Black ghetto life, but also opened the way for Black writers to come. Two of the better known ones are James Baldwin, and the other was Ralph Ellison. Both admittedly influenced by his work.

I feel it worthwhile to treat here some parallel points encountered during my research reading on Wright and Ellison. Before beginning, I bring to mind again, Wright was a pioneer. Pioneers, if not copied, are at best imitated or borrowed from. Ellison's inspiration for the title of Invisible Man and some of its themes were from Wright's The Man Who Lived Underground. Wright, in turn, had received his inspiration from Dostoevsky's Notes From the Underground.

During my research, four parallels came to my attention. In Black Boy, Wright's autobiography, an argument ensues between he and his school director. The director, a lackey for the leading white citizens on which the school depends for support, disapproves of the valedictorian speech Wright has prepared and is to deliver on graduation. The director disapproves because he feels the speech lacks humility. Needless to say, Wright headstrongly delivers it in spite of the director's objections for which he is ostracized and criticized by his family and classmates. There is an undeniable parallel here between Ellison's Bledsoe character in combination with the humility speech.

Wright's grandfather utters his last words before abandoning the world of the living, but part of his message remains incomplete. Wright, unable to contain his childish curiosity over the unspoken portion, inquires of his grandmother. She, as was her way, answers first with a swift slap across his face then reveals the unfinished part of the old man's last words. Ellison gives his version a more dramatic turn and makes it one of the main enigmas of his novel.

The battle royal was patterned after the bloody scuffles that white businessmen sometimes provoked for their amusement between two unsuspecting cleaning boys in the vecinities. Wright tells of an incident in which one of these men, on the pretense of friendship, tells another boy that Wright is looking for him with a knife. Another man does the same with Wright. Wright tells him he does not possess a knife. The man tells him that that's no problem, he will supply him with one. Luckily, Wright saw through the complot and communicated the situation to the other boy, thereby avoiding a possible tragedy. One assumes these men would have rooted and bet on their favorite to win.

The last parallel is that of Mary Rambo, the woman who takes Ellison's hero in when he is without economic resources. The same situation happens to Wright, on his first day roaming the streets of Memphis, looking for a place to live after escaping Jackson, Mississippi.

The overall innocence and naivete of Ellison's character is also reminiscent of Wright's general attitude in Black Boy, as a youth. Although an aggressive individual, he never purposefully wrongs anyone and never expects the worse from those around him. On the other hand, he almost always finds it without having to look very far.

Conclusion

I have already stated that Richard Wright wrote Native Son mainly as a catharsis. I have attempted to establish that it is a study of cause and effect in psychological and socio-economic phenomena in novel form. Its importance lies in its foresight, its artistry in the development of its main-character, and the hard hitting impact of its theme. This novel's role in making the break through for the works of other Black authors into mainstream literature, I think, cannot be over emphasized.

Invisible Man, on the other hand, might appeal to a wider reading public. Its theme remains contemporary, even though it was first published in 1952. In spite of the fact that it focuses mainly on the existential problems of an individual belonging to a repressed minority, one of its important themes is the dilemma facing 20th Century man; his problems of isolation, his lack of direction, his repression as an individual and as member of a group; his reduction to a state of invisibility within the vast complexities of modern industrialization.

Ellison's character breaks with the Communist Party on discovering the same domineering follow-the-leader attitude within its ranks that he is attempting to escape. This might be another point in the favor of Invisible Man's reception and approval by the critics. Ellison, in a way, is heralding the era of free choice, or that of no choice, one of the preoccupations of the Sixties.

Wright's character, on the other hand, is presented his only hope of salvation through the hands of a communist, Max his defender. Broadly speaking, communism does not have the same appeal in the United States today as when Wright wrote Native Son in 1940. It should be remembered again, that the Black horizon was indeed black at the time Native Son was written. The Second World War was then darkening that horizon, contributing to the blackness. Wright thought an answer to the socio-political issues of his people might be found in the Communist Party. However, he later broke with it himself.

Ellison's irony, his symbolism, his buffoon in the person of the vet, and his role figures and models enrich and make Invisible Man more aesthetically attractive. Recognition must be conceded to his imaginative writing style, tremendous sense of humor and genial managing of Black folklore. Its secluded and encapsulated episodes are minor defects

On returning to my observations on Native Son, its great difference in focus as compared to that of Invisible Man is readily noticeable. As I have mentioned, Native Son is masterfully executed with its main figure Bigger, as big as life. However, due to Native Son's very theme, so starkly raw and pulsating; its blatant protest theme, its embracing of the Communist Party; contemporary segments of the reading public might not take to it as warmly as to Invisible Man. At the same time, its description of Chicago's setting so aptly depicted in its bleak cold squalor might meet the disapproval of some.

Some of Wright's defects lie in his over romanticism of the Communist Party, sometimes Bigger seems to get too big for him, and some scenes do not seem to flow smoothly into others. But, as in the case of Ellison, I feel these defects are minor ones.

In short, both of these Black writers were pioneers in their specific types of literature; Ellison's a kind of celebration of the conquest of life's arbitrary forces influencing the individual's life, extended to the universal man. Wright, on the other hand, a voicing of the suffering of the individual in representation of that of a specific group. The differences in styles and outlooks came about as products of both writers' individual experiences and literary focuses; thus their different interpretations of the American Black experience. It is my opinion that both are successful in their attempts to achieve their objectives, to set these interpretations to literature.

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