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UP FROM THE UNDERGROUND: ELLISON ON EQUALITY

We began as a nation not through the accidents of race or religion or geography ..., but when a group of men, *some* of them political philosophers put down, upon what we now recognize as sacred papers, their conception of the nation they intended to establish on these shores. They ... committed themselves to certain ideas of justice, just as they committed us to a system which would guarantee all of its citizens equality of opportunity.

I need not describe the problems which have arisen from these beginnings. I need only remind you that the contradiction between these noble ideals and the actualities of our conduct generated a guilt ... from the very beginning, and that the American novel at its best has always been concerned with this basic moral predicament. During Melville's time and Twain's, it was an implicit aspect of their major themes; by the twentieth century and after the discouraging and traumatic effect of the Civil War and the Reconstruction it had gone underground. ... Nevertheless it did not disappear completely, and it is to be found ... in the work of Henry James as well as that of Hemingway and Fitzgerald. And as one who believes in the impelling moral function of the novel and who believes in the moral seriousness of the form, it pleases me no end that it then comes into explicit statement again in the works of Richard Wright and William Faulkner, writers who lived close to moral and political problems which would not stay put underground.

Ralph Ellison, *Hidden Name and Complex Fate: The Writer's Experience in the United States*

In *Invisible Man* Ralph Ellison depicts the many ways in which white Americans in the North as well as the South have failed to realize the post-Civil War promise to treat their black fellow citizens as equals. Ellison reminds his readers, in other words, that the history was not promising. On the other hand, by means of his "invisible" narrator, Ellison shows not merely how, but that African-Americans are or

at least can be the equals not merely of whites in general, but of our greatest literary geniuses. Through his own work the novelist thus hopes to change the perceptions not only that whites have of blacks, but also that blacks have of themselves. Fiction does not need simply to reflect its factual context or provide readers with a means of escape. It can have an effect on its readers and so on the "facts."

The Sad History of Racial Inequality in Modern America

"Like almost everyone else in our country," the narrator reports, "I started out with my share of optimism. I believed in hard work and progress and action" (p. 576).[1] He began life, therefore, by trying to improve not merely his own lot, but that of his people by doing what was expected. He didn't quite understand what his dying grandfather meant when he urged him to "keep up the good fight. I never told you, but our life is a war and I have been a traitor all my born days, a spy in the enemy's country ever since I give up my gun back in the Reconstruction. Live with your head in the lion's mouth. I want you to overcome 'em with yeses, undermine 'em with grins, agree 'em to death and destruction, let 'em swoller you till they vomit or bust wide open" (p. 16). The youth did obey the authorities around him, both white and black, out of fear as much as out of conviction. He was not treated with dignity or respect, but he did gain some compensation for his docility and hard work.

We first see the narrator humiliated along with nine other "black boys" when they are forced to box blind-folded and then scramble for money on an electrified carpet as entertainment for a gathering of drunk white businessmen. Only after he has been bloodied and beaten is the youth allowed to deliver the high school graduation speech in which he argues that humility is the key to progress.[2] When he stumbles and substitutes "social equality" for "social responsibility," the room becomes silent and the audience menacing. Having convinced them it was a mistake, however, he is rewarded with applause and a scholarship to the state college for Negroes.

For the young black–as for most Americans dating back at least to Thomas Jefferson–the chance to acquire a college education appears to be the equivalent of promising him an opportunity to become a future leader of his people. However, when the boy is expelled for inadvertently having exposed a white trustee named Norton to a tale of black incest and the persecution of a black physician by the Ku Klux Klan, readers are also reminded of the way in which ambitious blacks contributed to the oppression of their own race not only by playing "Uncle Tom" themselves but also by insisting that others play the same role or game in order to

[1] Citations to R. Ellison, *Invisible Man*, 2nd ed., New York 1980.

[2] "I visualized myself as a potential Booker T. Washington" (p. 18), the narrator says. In his speech he thus quoted his idol's famous advice, "Cast down your bucket where you are" (p. 29). Cf. R. Kostelanetz, *Politics in the African-American Novel*, New York 1991, p. 109–14.

acquire wealth, status and education. Even though the white trustee tells the black president of the college that the boy didn't do anything wrong, Dr. Bledsoe insists that the young man be disciplined severely. He has endangered future support for the school.[3]

Purportedly to help him find a job to pay next year's tuition, Bledsoe gives the young man letters of introduction to "friends of the college" in New York. Those letters inform their recipients that the bearer will under no circumstances be returning to the college, but that he must not be allowed to know it. When the son of the last "friend" named Emerson lets the young man read the letter, one set of illusions are destroyed. He will never return home and become a future leader of the college.

Taking a suggestion from the young Emerson, who wants to play Huckleberry Finn, and demonstrating some of the "self-reliance" about which the first white trustee had urged him to read, the black youth does get a job for a day at a paint factory (ironically called "Liberty").[4] There he incurs the animosity not only of the white workers who view him as a "scab" brought in to break the union but also of the older black engineer who suspects the whites of trying to replace him. As in the south, so in the north the young black is humiliated and physically threatened by both whites and blacks, who see him (correctly, although not yet intentionally on his part) as a threat to the gains they have made by bowing and scraping to their white superiors. Neither the white nor the black workers willingly accept him as a trusted associate or equal.

Instead, the narrator has his old ideas or illusions about the effectiveness of hard work, progress and action literally blown and then burned out of him when he loses his memory as a result of an explosion engineered by the old black and undergoes electro-shock treatments in the factory hospital. (They seem, indeed, to be experimenting on him as if he were an animal.) Unable to remember his name as a result, he begins to question his own identity. That question produces the quest

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[3] Protesting the injustice, the youth threatens to tell others the truth; and Bledsoe laughs: "You're nobody, son. You don't exist–can't you see that? The white folk tell everybody what to think–except men like me. I tell *them* ... It's a nasty deal and I don't always like it myself. I didn't make it, and I know that I can't change it. But I've made my place in it and I'll have every Negro in the country hanging on tree limbs by morning if it means staying where I am." He added, "Yes, I had to act the nigger! ... I don't even insist that it was worth it, but now I'm here and I mean to stay" (p. 143). Dignity is for whites. "Negroes" should seek power. Even the persecuted physician urges the young black to "play the game."

[4] The literary allusions are complex, but important. While they are driving, Norton asks (p. 41) the young man whether he has studied Ralph Waldo Emerson. The young man was embarrassed that he had not. We realize, however, from his later conversation with Bledsoe that he would not have his students exposed to such potentially unsettling ideas. (Ralph Ellison himself was named for Ralph Waldo Emerson by his father, who, his mother later claimed, wanted his son to be a poet. "Hidden Name and Complex Fate," *Collected Essays*, New York 1995, p. 195–196). In the later conversation with the young "Emerson," we also see Ellison comment on the relevance or truth of Twain's masterpiece. Not merely does the young black fail to see the relevance of that "kid's story" (p. 188). He also does not want as job as the young white's valet. That is, he will not accept the personal intimacy of the relation between Huck and Jim on the old terms of superior and inferior on the outskirts of respectable society. (The young Emerson is rebelling, if somewhat weakly and ineffectively, against his father by associating with blacks, e.g., jazz musicians.)

that occupies the remainder of his story. Although the doctor tells him his name as he dismisses and so "frees" him from the hospital, the young man recognizes that a name, given him by others, is not his own. Who is he? Where has he come from and why? "In the South," he later reflects, "everyone knew you, but coming North was a jump into the unknown. How many days could you walk the streets of the big city without encountering anyone who knew you ... You could actually make yourself anew" (p. 499). But into what?

Almost fainting as he gets off the subway on his return to Harlem, he is taken in by a woman named Mary Rambo, who continues to lodge and feed him after his "compensation" from the factory runs out. Grateful for her charity, but ashamed of needing or taking it, the narrator vacillates between a desire for "revengeful action and Mary's silent pressure" for him to become a credit to the race. (p. 259)[5] He is sure that he can do something; but he has no friends or contacts, and believes in nothing. Leaving the boardinghouse in an attempt to escape his own mental and emotional agitation, he chances upon an old couple being evicted from the apartment they had occupied for more than twenty years, and his contradictory emotions erupt in a speech. First he urges the crowd assembled on the side-walk not to resist the law and then, feeling their anger, to do so. He is, as a result, recruited as a speaker for the "Brotherhood," and after some training in their scientific historical ideology, put in charge of operations in Harlem where he proves to be an amazing success. He believes that he has now begun to realize his earlier dreams to become a leader of his people. He hopes to become not merely a new Booker T. Washington, Marcus Garvey or Frederick Douglass, but an entirely new kind of leader, who not only speaks for his people but also works to benefit humanity as a whole.

The narrator does so well making alliances with other civic leaders and recruiting new members that he arouses the jealousy of another black on the committee. Although the committee decides that he was not attempting to make himself a dictator, as charged, he is nevertheless reassigned "downtown" to speak on women's issues. The Brotherhood–which is obviously a version of the Communist Party–doesn't want any individual to get too big or too powerful with any specific group. Everyone is equally part of the people. The narrator chooses to interpret the reassignment as a sign of their confidence in his general abilities. He has not yet learned that those who seek color-blind fraternity or friendship are themselves blind.[6]

After he leaves without saying goodbye or explaining his actions to his fellows in Harlem, they conclude that he has defected to serve the whites. (Like the

[5] "It's you young folks what's going to make the changes," she said. "Y'll's the ones. You got to lead and you got to fight and move us all on up a little higher. And ... it's the ones from the South that's got to do it, them what knows the fire and ain't forgot how it burns. Up here too many forgits. They finds a place for theyselves and forgits the ones on the bottom" (p. 255).

[6] The first literally blind character is the Reverend Homer Barbee who gives the speech praising the work of the founder of the college and his successor Bledsoe. Living in Chicago he can't see what is actually going on in the South. Brother Jack proves to have a glass eye; having lost one in serving the Brotherhood, he is half-blind. He understands the evils of poverty but not race.

narrator himself, they have had too much experience with leaders who do.) When he is later ordered to return, he thus finds the membership has declined drastically. People for whom they had found employment are now back on the streets. The committee had decided that the interests of the blacks must wait or be sacrificed for the moment. When one of his disillusioned former co-workers is killed by a policeman and the narrator organizes a huge public funeral in his honor, the "committee" rebukes the narrator for doing things on his own "personal responsibility" instead of letting them do the thinking for him. He is confronted by the fact that they have never recognized him as their intellectual equal, much less as a leader. The people of Harlem riot.

Glorying initially in the people's taking action on their own behalf by burning down a rat-infested tenement, the narrator comes to see that the violence is suicidal when the police begin shooting at unarmed men. It was not an equal fight. There were not even guns for sale (or available to the looters) in pawnshops. "It was not suicide," he corrected himself, "but murder. The committee had planned it." They had taken him out of Harlem in order to let the black nationalists take over. "And [he] had helped, had been a tool. A tool just at the very moment I had thought myself free" (p. 553).

Reflecting on his experience with the Brotherhood, he concluded: "It was all a swindle, an obscene swindle!" They claimed to know the necessary direction of history and to have an objective science. "What did they know of us, except that we numbered so many, worked on certain jobs, offered so many votes, and provided so many marchers for some protest parade of theirs? ... They were blind." They had no idea what he or people like him felt or thought.[7] He had imagined that they accepted him "because they felt that color made no difference, when in reality it made no difference because they didn't see either color or men" (p. 507–508).

Attempting to escape the goons sent by the black nationalist leader to hang the white toady, the narrator learns yet another lesson about his identity. Donning a pair of sunglasses and a hat as a make-shift disguise, he discovers a plethora of potential identities when he is repeatedly mistaken for a fellow named "Rinehart" who is, apparently, a pimp, a numbers runner, a drug dealer, a violent hoodlum, a lover, and a reverend–all at once. The narrator had gradually come to see himself as part of his people, sharing their sufferings, humiliation, dispossession and hope. Now he has to recognize that even his own people--blacks as well as whites–see only the externals, and they understand these externals in terms of their own expectations or stereotypes. If we have an identity, he comes to see, that identity consists of our own experiences. Since those experiences, especially the feelings and thoughts they provoke, are internal, one's identity is necessarily and essentially invisible.

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[7] Ellison extended his narrator's critique of the Brotherhood to social scientific studies of the "American Negro" in his critique of G. Myrdal, *An American Dilemma*: *A Review*, *The Collected Essays of Ralph Ellison*, p. 328–340.

Standing in a fire-lit street of riot torn Harlem, the narrator "recognized the absurdity of the whole night and of the simple yet confoundingly complex arrangement of hope and desire, fear and hate, that ... had brought [him] here." Understanding that complexity of emotion, he now knew, however, who he is and where he is. He knew, too, that he no longer had "to run for or from the Jacks [leader of the Brotherhood] and the Emersons and the Bledsoes and Nortons, but only from their confusion, impatience, and refusal to recognize the beautiful absurdity of their American identity and [his]." He had learned that he is invisible. And in invisibility, it seems, there is a certain kind of freedom. No one–black or white–can see him as who he is. They see only what they want to see in terms of a pre-existing stereotype or role. Rather than letting the nationalists hang him, "which would not bring [him] to visibility, even in their eyes, since they wanted [his] death not for [him] self alone but for the chase [he'd] been on all [his] life" (p. 559), he thus flees down a manhole.[8] When he awakes, he crawls into the basement apartment in which he is "hibernating" at the beginning of his tale.[9]

With regard to the possibilities of political action or reform as a means of blacks achieving equality in America, the story the narrator relates is bleak. He seems to have tried most, if not all the promised ways of improving his own and his people's condition–education, labor, protest, organization, rainbow coalitions, strict party discipline, nationalist violence–and found that all merely became means of maintaining, if not increasing white dominance and black subservience.[10] The narrator has learned and would have his readers learn, however, that humanity and worth are not measured by votes or protests. The novel thus ends on a somewhat positive, perhaps even optimistic note. The narrator claims to have discovered who he is. In an epilogue he even presents his hibernation as a prelude to action. What is Ellison's narrator affirming, we are led to ask? What sort of action does he contemplate? How can blacks in America achieve the equality so long denied them?

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[8] Apparently seeing that their desire to return to Africa is unrealistic, if not inappropriate for African-Americans, the narrator never sympathizes with the black nationalists. Their fictional leader, Ras the Extorter, appears to be a prototype. Like Marcus Garvey, Kostelanetz points out, p. 132, Ras has a West Indian accent, but favors resettlement in Abyssinia ("Ras" is the Abyssinian word for prince). Among the belongings of the old couple cast on the street is an old newspaper clipping of the report of Garvey's deportation.

[9] He dreams (p. 569–570) that he has been castrated by Brother Jack, Emerson, Bledsoe, Norton and Ras, but he awakens from his nightmare and reaffirms his newly discovered invisible identity.

[10] Writing in the late 1940's Ellison did not predict *Brown v. Board* or the pacifist civil rights movement the Reverend Martin Luther King led successfully out of the south. In 1964 he wrote of "the events set in motion by the Supreme Court decision of 1954 and accelerated by the Civil Rights Act of 1964" as "transforming not only the South but the entire nation" by "creating a revolution not only in our race relations but in our political morality." Nevertheless, he also insisted that "for Negroes the Supreme Court Decision of 1954 and the Civil Rights Act of 1964 induced no sudden transformation of character; it provided the stage upon which they could reveal themselves for what their experiences have made them, and for what they have made of their experiences." "If the Twain Shall Meet," *Collected Essays*, p. 565–566, 575.

On the Need to Write One's Own Story

A. The Invisibility of the Narrator

The first step toward truly achieving equality, Ellison suggests in both the organization and the content of his novel, consists in the recognition that no one else can give a person or a people its identity or definition. That power belongs solely to oneself, although it has to be articulated to others. This is fundamentally what the narrator has learned when he concludes that he is "invisible." He cannot be seen, but he can be heard. In telling his story, he not only shows who he is. He also allows others to see the extent to which they share in his story. That is, he helps his people understand who they are at the same time he learns about his own identity, both in contrast to and in conjunction with them.

Introducing himself as "an invisible man" in the prologue, the narrator explains that does not mean he is a "spook," a ghost or a spirit; he is "a man of substance, of flesh and bone, fiber and liquids–[who] might even be said to possess a mind." He is invisible "simply because people refuse to see [him]" (p. 3). So defined, invisibility initially appears to be a negative definition or value.

Invisibility initially seems, indeed, to consist in lack of social recognition. When he accidentally bumped into a blond man, who responded with an insulting name and then refused to apologize, even when pummeled and threatened with a knife, the narrator realized, the man couldn't see his assailant. According to Hegel, masters recognize as their equals and thus as truly human, only those who are willing to risk their lives rather than be made slaves. But, Ellison suggests, former black slaves who act like masters, risk their own lives and threaten those of others, are still not recognized or "seen" as human beings by their former white masters. What, then, does it take to be seen as human? To be recognized as equal? Or, is recognition perhaps a false definition of equality? Ellison suggests that it is.

At the beginning of his tale the narrator connects his invisibility with his blackness. He has filled the black "hole" of the basement apartment into which he has retreated with a flood of light from exactly 1,369 bulbs–to highlight both his blackness and the invisibility that follows from it. Not having a socially recognized identity or "place," he has learned that he does not have to pay Monopolated Light & Power for the energy he uses. If the company, its board, managers, stock-holders or the citizens who regulate it recognized his existence as a human being, things might be different. So long as they do not, he engages in a kind of sabotage–seizing power and diverting it to a place and use of which they have no knowledge. He plans to add music from five phonographs rather than mere one he now has. He wants not just to hear but to feel the vibrations of Louis Armstrong playing and singing "What Did I Do to be so Black and Blue"? Hearing and feeling give us better access to who we really are than seeing or, even more, being seen by others.

The narrator's answer to the question posed by the song is to be found in his story. What he "did," we have seen, is to allow both whites and blacks "to keep that

nigger boy running" (p. 33) with promises of future recognition and gain, for himself and for his people. Having become disillusioned about the credibility of such promises, he has learned in the meantime who he is and where he is. Rather than try to overcome the heritage or shame of slavery and pull himself, if not others up by the proverbial bootstraps, he says in the end that "all past humiliations became precious parts of my experience." After his disillusionment with the Brotherhood, he "began to accept [his] past. ... [I]mages of past humiliations flickered through my head, ... and I saw that they were more than separate experiences. They were me; they defined me. I was my experiences and my experiences were me, and no blind men, no matter how powerful they became ... could take that, or change one single itch, taunt, laugh, cry, scar, ache, rage or pain of it" (p. 507–508). Because our identity consists in the combination of these experiences, it is internal and invisible. It is not subject to the control, expropriation, or definition of others–unless we ourselves allow it to be so controlled, expropriated, and defined.

At the same time he discovered his own identity, the narrator says, he also discovered "where he was." He was, of course, literally in Harlem. That is, he was in the midst of a group of people who had shared the same kinds of humiliation and sought to rise above it in many of the same ways he had. He had recognized his relation to the old couple being evicted, for example, but it wasn't merely a matter of "race" or color, as Brother Jack thought. The narrator understood, if initially in a somewhat confused manner, that he himself shared in their sorrow and their anger. That was the reason he proved to be such an effective speaker; he could arouse others to action, because he himself felt and thus could express their pain and rage. He felt a similar shock of recognition when he heard old songs or ditties from his youth. It was possible–he and his people have proved it was possible–to grab pleasure out of pain. The problem was that they did not recognize or understand their own achievement. Overcome by the odor of baking yams and the thrill of walking down the street, eating one in public, the narrator had reflected: "What a group of people we were. ... Why, you could cause us the greatest humiliation simply by confronting us with something we liked. Not *all* of us, but so many" (p. 264). Those like Bledsoe who sought to overcome the stigma of being black refused to recognize their own or what was good as well as bad in the black experience. Instead of looking to whites, the narrator gradually learned, he and his people needed to listen to themselves, to think about what they had actually experienced, and to give that experience expression or voice. In learning "where he was," the narrator thus recognized not only that he was in Harlem, but also that he was in the United States. He and his people were part of a larger whole. They shared in what he calls "the beautiful absurdity" of the "American identity." But he was then led to ask, what is that American identity? That is as much as to say, what is the American experience? Is it "the principle on which the country was built and not the men," at least not the men who used violence to corrupt that principle? Americans may not always or even often have acted as if they "hold these truths to be self-evident,

that all men are created equal," but one can still affirm the principle and the hope it contains. Does that mean blacks should take responsibility for all of American history, because they are the heirs who most need to believe in the principle, to affirm it, and to see it put into action? Precisely because of their suffering, William Faulkner suggested, blacks are better than whites; they are "older" in the sense of having learned what it takes to live in the world with others and having been freed by exhaustion from the human greed and superstition that keeps others running.[11] Ellison's narrator is not willing to privilege or burden his people and their experience in this way. Blacks have unfortunately contributed to their own oppression. They are not and should not seek to be recognized as better than whites any more than they should accept a social and political definition as inferior to whites. So he finally asks, should we "affirm the principle because we, through no fault of our own, were linked to all the others? Weren't we *part of them* as well as apart from them and subject to die when they died?" (p. 574–575). If so, the task is to show what blacks and whites share not simply as Americans, but as human beings, and yet at the same time to retain a sense of their different experiences.[12] "America is woven of many strands," he affirms. "Our fate is to become one, and yet many–this is not prophecy, but description" (p. 577).[13]

Ellison's narrator does not blame all his sufferings or humiliations on others, black or white. Nor does he simply blame himself. "I'm not blaming anyone for this state of affairs, nor merely crying *mea culpa*. The fact is that you carry part of your sickness within you, at least I do as an invisible man. 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" (p. 575). He had accepted and internalized the "roles" or definitions others had given him.

If an individual can free himself from the definitions imposed upon him by others only by writing down his own experience and so confronting it himself at the same time he communicates his inner thoughts and feelings to others, so a people can shake off the subordinate status others would place upon it and give itself its own definition only by writing its own story or history. At the end of the epilogue

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[11] Cf. *Go Down, Moses*, New York 1973, p. 294.

[12] In "Going to the Territory," Ellison wrote: "No matter how we choose to view ourselves in the abstract, in the world of work and politics Americans live in a constant state of debate and contention. We do so no matter what kinds of narrative, oral or written, are made in the reconstruction of our common experience. American democracy is a most dramatic form of social organization, and in that drama each of us enacts his role by asserting his own and his group's values and traditions against those of his fellow citizens. Indeed, a battle-royal conflict of interests appears to be basic to our conception of freedom, and the drama of democracy proceeds through a warfare of words and symbolic actions by which we seek to advance our private interests while resolving our political differences. Since the Civil War this form of symbolic action has served as a moral substitute for armed warfare, and we have managed to restrain ourselves to a debate which we carry on in the not always justified faith that the outcome will serve the larger interests of democracy" (*Collected Essays*, p. 595).

[13] Homogenization is not the answer. Ironically predicting the era of the spread of drug-use and "rap" music into the suburbs, the narrator observes: "One of the greatest jokes in the world is the spectacle of the whites busy escaping blackness and becoming blacker every day, and the blacks striving toward whiteness, becoming quite dull and gray. None of us seems to know who he is or where he is going" (p. 577).

to the novel the narrator thus tells his readers that he had decided that it is time for him to come out of hibernation, "since there's a possibility that even an invisible man has a socially responsible role to play." An invisible man can make not merely his own experience or identity but that of his people known to others by making himself, like both the narrator and the author of this novel, into a "disembodied voice" (p. 581).

B. The Intention of the Author

Human beings have been distinguished from beasts, from the time of Aristotle at least, by their distinctive faculty of *logos* (which can be translated as either speech or reason). To show that blacks and whites are equally human, Ellison saw that he not merely had to make his black narrator "invisible," so that he would no longer defined simply visibly by the color of his skin, but audibly by the sound of his voice. That voice would also have to be intellectual. In other words, he had "to create a narrator who could think as well as act" (p. xxi).

Afro-Americans were not the political equals of whites, Ellison observed. No black could realistically hope to be elected President. There was a not very transparent ceiling on the ambition of any young black to become a leader of his people. But it was still possible to dream, and dreams were the substance of fiction. "Mark Twain had demonstrated that the novel *could* serve as a comic antidote to the ailments of politics, and since in 1945, as well as now, Afro-Americans were usually defeated in their bouts with circumstance, there was no reason why they, like Brer Rabbit and his more literary cousins, the great heroes of tragedy and comedy, shouldn't be allowed to snatch the victory of conscious perception from the forces that overwhelmed them" (p. xxi). By writing a self-reflective first-person narrative that encompassed the entire history of his people from Reconstruction to the present, Ellison himself could demonstrate not only that they understood their situation–that they had been unjustly oppressed and that they themselves had contributed to this oppression by accepting the inferior status to which the whites had relegated them–but also that they could equal the greatest intellectual and artistic achievements of the whites.

Ellison's task, as he understood it, "was one of revealing the human universals hidden within the plight of one who was both black and American, and not only as a means of conveying my personal vision of possibility, but as a way of dealing with the sheer rhetorical challenge involved in communicating across our barriers of race and religion, class, color and region–barriers which consists of the many strategies of division that were designed, and still function, to prevent what would otherwise have been a more or less natural recognition of the reality of black and white fraternity." To defeat his nation's tendency to deny the common humanity of blacks and whites, he provided his narrator with "a worldview" or "consciousness in which serious philosophical questions could be raised." Just as the first-person narrator of Herman Melville's masterpiece, *Moby-Dick,* presents Father Mapple's

sermon on the significance of Jonah and his own meditations on the fearful "whiteness of the whale," so Ellison's first person narrator relates his marijuana induced dream about the blackness of blackness (p. 9–14), which also takes the form of a sermon on the complex intertwining of love and hate between whites and blacks.[14] Like Twain in his *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, Ellison thought that he had to provide his first-person narrator "with a range of diction that could play upon the richness of our readily shared vernacular speech and construct a plot that would bring him in contact with a variety of American types as they operated on various levels of society." The narrative had to be not only intimate and intellectual, but also sweeping in its social and historical scope. Like Twain, Ellison also saw that he "would have to approach racial stereotypes as a given fact of the social process and proceed, while gambling with the reader's capacity for fictional truth, to reveal the human complexity which stereotypes are intended to conceal" (p. xxii).

Like Melville and Twain, in his literary masterpiece Ellison affirms the common humanity of people of color and whites. In contrast to both these authors, however, Ellison shows that human community does not and cannot take the form of a trans-racial or trans-cultural friendship like that of Huck and Jim or Ishmael and Queequeg. On the contrary, he insists that there is a distinctively Afro-American story that needs to be told, and that story is one of separation and alienation among as well as from the people(s) who should be and perhaps will be fellows in the future. Jim always remained subject to the laws, if not lawless force of the whites; and Ishmael returned alone to tell his tale. In order to be treated equally in the future, Ellison suggests, blacks must insist that they have been treated unequally in the past. They know the truth. They know what inequality is and means–and they can tell others!

[14] Like the whiteness of the whale, blackness can be fearful, but it is not simply fearful. By prefacing his novel with a quotation from Melville's *Benito Cereno*, Ellison reminds his readers that he has provided blacks the voice Babo was denied.