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Triangulating Agency: Identity, Society and Politics in Ralph Ellison's
Invisible Man

BAKALÁŘSKÁ PRÁCE

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I declare that the following BA thesis is my own work for which I used only the sources and literature mentioned, and that this thesis has not been used in the source of other university studies or in order to acquire the same or another type of diploma.

V Praze dne 4. 8. 2019

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Permission

Souhlasím se zapůjčením bakalářské práce ke studijním účelům.

I have no objections to the BA thesis being borrowed and used for study purposes.

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Abstract

While conventional readings of *Invisible Man* primarily focus on its status as a race-critical novel, this BA thesis will discuss and develop the notion that the novel is in fact an experimental Bildungsroman whose narrator is a universal figure and whose development across the narrative is analogical to that of any person building their identity in today's late capitalist society. By analyzing key moments in the novel with the help of late-20th-century and contemporary critical, cultural and political theories, the text will arrive at an original reading that synthesizes those approaches, and which can be used to better understand even contemporary life. The first chapter will establish what precisely makes the text an experimental coming-of-age novel by introducing the genre's conventions that started in German Romanticism with Goethe, and will then trace these features and their distinctive emergences in *Invisible Man*. The second chapter will then consist of an analysis of the social system as it is presented in the novel, exploring the oppressive capitalist power structure that both requires and prevents the narrator's assimilation, and highlighting how specific characters in the novel cling to their power with no regard for the experience of others. This will be supported by theories and concepts critical of capitalist society and culture and I will show how these theories specifically apply in the novel, alongside some excursions into the unavoidable question of racism. The method will consist of a linear re-reading of important moments in the novel which elucidate the true nature of the authoritative powers that the narrator comes into direct contact with. The third chapter will then introduce contemporary political theory to dissect the ideologies present in the novel in the context of its other two layers of the individual and social, and to prove the text was ahead of its time not only in style, but also in content, when even theories developed more than 60 years later are very much useful in its interpretation. It will be shown how the novel implicitly argues that radical politics cannot ultimately accommodate the rich inner experience of an individual and that such political approaches by nature provide only an illusory semblance of agency to their supporters, as these ideologies are two-faced entities set on convincing the less experienced to join their cause without resolving the inherently negative consequences of the means they employ to achieve their purported goals. The ultimate goal of the thesis is thus to transcend the conventional reading of *Invisible Man* as the story of an Afro-American in a racist society to show that there are in fact multiple layers of experience at play simultaneously, just like in real life, and it is through a spectrum of critical, cultural and political theories that these semantic planes will be decoded.

Key Words

Ralph Ellison, *Invisible Man*, individuality, Bildungsroman, personal development, psychology, identity, naivety, innocence, universality, society, capitalism, oppression, racism, injustice, exploitation, cruelty, alienation, hegemony, community, politics, communism, fascism, ideology, subject, postmodernism

Abstrakt

Zatímco mnohá čtení románu *Invisible Man* prioritizují stav knihy jakožto román reprezentující kritiku rasistické společnosti, tato bakalářská práce se zaměří na rozvinutí názoru, že kniha je ve skutečnosti experimentální Bildungsroman jehož vypravěč je univerzální postava, a jehož vývoj napříč narativem je analogický s vývojem kohokoliv kdo vytváří svou identitu v dnešní pozdně kapitalistické společnosti. Skrze analýzu klíčových momentů v románu se za pomoci kritické, kulturní a politické teorie pozdně dvacátého století současnosti text dopracuje originálnímu čtení které propojuje všechny tyto přístupy, a které lze také aplikovat k lepšímu pochopení současného světa. První kapitola ustanoví, čím přesně je román experimentální Bildungsroman za pomoci teorie tohoto žánru, jehož konvence vznikly během německého romantismu s Goethem, a poté vysleduje tyto charakteristiky v jejich specifických manifestacích v románu *Invisible Man*. Druhá kapitola pak bude spočívat v analýze společenského systému prezentovaného v textu, který se jeví být opresivní kapitalistickou strukturou moci, která zároveň vyžaduje i preventuje asimilaci jedince, a jak se konkrétní postavy v knize drží své moci zcela na úkor ostatních. Tyto argumenty budou podpořeny teoriemi a koncepty používaných ke kritické analýze kapitalistické společnosti a kultury a jak je lze využít ke čtení tohoto románu, společně s vhledy do nevyhnutelné otázky rasismu. Tato metoda spočívá v lineárním čtení zásadních momentů v textu, které poskytují vhled do opravdové podstaty ustanovených mocností, se kterými vypravěč přichází do styku. Třetí kapitola pak využije současnou politickou teorii k rozboru ideologií v knize na pozadí kontextu získaného předchozími dvěma kapitolami o osobnosti a společnosti aby bylo dokázáno, že text nebyl napřed jenom svou formou, ale i obsahem, když teorie vyvinuté i 60 let po jeho vydání lze přímo aplikovat k jeho interpretaci. Bude prokázáno jak román implicitně tvrdí, že radikální politika nemůže ve výsledku akomodovat bohatou vnitřní zkušenost jedince a že takovéto politické přístupy ze svého principu poskytují pouze iluzorní náznak síly svým podporovatelům, neboť tyto ideologie jsou dvojhlavé entity usilující o přesvědčení méně zkušených jedinců k přidání se v jejich boji bez vyřešení nutně negativních důsledků svých metod při dosahování cílů které si nárokují. Konečným cílem eseje je tedy překonat konvenční čtení románu *Invisible Man* jakožto příběhu Afroameričana v rasistické společnosti, aby bylo prokázáno že v textu současně probíhají různé úrovně zkušenosti, tak jako v reálném životě, a toto bude dekodováno za pomoci spektra kritických, kulturních a politických teorií.

Klíčová slova

Ralph Ellison, *Invisible Man*, individualita, Bildungsroman, osobní vývoj, psychologie, identita, naivita, nevinnost, univerzalita, společnost, kapitalismus, oprese, rasismus, nespravedlnost, zneužívání, krutost, odcizení, hegemonie, komunita, politika, komunismus, fašismus, ideologie, subjekt, postmodernismus

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Ralph Ellison once said of *Invisible Man* that its experimental stance constitutes its chief significance.¹ In part because it was published in 1952, at the beginning of the struggle for Civil Rights in the United States, some of the novel's prominent readings and criticisms have focused on its race-critical aspects,² nonetheless there is more hidden between the lines. The novel is a universal text about reaching agency, and comments on the interactions between the individual, social and political layers of experience. These will be analyzed respectively after the essay has discussed the effects of employing the Bildungsroman format; establishing that the novel is a coming-of-age novel is an important departure point for the rest of the essay because it is within this paradigm that the other three aforementioned layers fall into place. As such, the first chapter intertwines the topics of the individual and his development within the paradigm of the Bildungsroman, the second chapter develops upon these findings by analyzing the societal status quo as presented in the novel while also discussing the question of racism, which will not be the focal point, for the sake of fulfilling the ambition of exploring the novel's universal nature, and the third and final chapter will discuss politics in the novel in the context of the previous two chapters, analyzing how radical politics interact with the individual and social layers in the novel.

Invisible Man contains several moments during which something dramatic happens to the narrator, who then contemplates the particular event's effect on his life and personality. As such, the reader is provided his reflections and thoughts which, as the novel progresses, are both the manifestations of and pointers towards his development. This essay will trace these in chronological fashion and discuss what they mean in the context of the narrator's maturation. Furthermore, as language itself is an important theme of the book that aligns with this essay's

¹ Thomas Schaub, "Ellison's Masks and the Novel of Reality," *New Essays on Invisible Man*, ed. Robert O'Meally (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998) 124.

² Valerie Smith, "The Meaning of Narration in *Invisible Man*," *New Essays on Invisible Man*, ed. Robert O'Meally (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998) 26.

aims, its effects and changes will be discussed where relevant; and, seeing as the novel essentially begins at its plot's ending, analyzing the narrator's specific mental developments becomes simpler in that the start- and end-points are linearly juxtaposed and contrasted. The entire plot is as such constructed as a chronological reinterpretation of the narrator's experiences, and for that sake the essay's analysis will work in a linear fashion, with each new chapter boomeranging back to the beginning, not unlike the narrator's own experience.

The text will then arrive at a conclusion that puts to use the discoveries unearthed in the process of analysis to provide further insights into the narrator's final state of mind, which is the end-goal of the novel's entire trajectory. Because *Invisible Man* is actually a re-telling of the narrator's history, meta-narration is a common trope and will be discussed where relevant. Even though the narrator's journey ends underground with him detached from society, it is "significant to note that the narrator does not seek permanent refuge in the secure confines of a remote underground world. He wisely and skillfully learns to use all the knowledge he has acquired in the course of his journey."³ He undergoes various developments as direct result of his experience, and it is through the insights he gains in the process that his perspective changes until he ultimately arrives at agency.

³ Nibir K. Ghosh, "Democracy and Dilemma: Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man*," *IUP Journal of English Studies* 14.2 (2019): 7, EBSCO <http://eds.b.ebscohost.com/eds/pdfviewer/pdfviewer?vid=0&sid=2d134e00-47be-4418-a3c8-7cf71e28f5ba%40sessionmgr102>, 3. 8. 2019. All further references will be included in parentheses in the text.

Chapter I: The Individual and the Bildungsroman

Invisible Man is not only a piercing fictionalization of the experiences of a black man living in America; it is also the actualization of a traditional Western genre, the Bildungsroman, or, the coming-of-age novel. As such, the text on the one hand offers a critique of the treatment and living conditions of blacks in post-war America, but on the other also the story of an individual's search for an authentic identity. On this search, the narrator experiences many difficult moments, but in the end he realizes that this journey is precisely that which defines him as a person.⁴ Seen through this lens, his search as presented in the novel, including all the times he has been wronged, ultimately does him good in his quest for individuation. As such, the focal point is his maturation, but the way the novel is framed leads to, as side effect, it also critiquing the social and political aspects of the society he lives in. It is thus necessary to align the narrator's narrative arc with that of the conventional coming-of-age novel, which stresses the "bourgeois education of a young man,"⁵ using a "guiding, masculine figure" (Avery, 9) and representing "buildings as centers of knowledge." (Avery, 8) The specific differences and their implications will be then inferred in the context of *Invisible Man* being a universal figure interwoven into the three aforementioned layers represented across the text.

It is by now almost a cliché to compare the text's features to jazz improvisation, nonetheless in its treatment of the Bildungsroman genre the characterization is applicable. That is because like a jamming musician the author takes what tradition has to offer and appropriates it to his own unique artistic expression: "In the traditional Bildungsroman, the narrator's goal is to find a meaningful position within the production of capitalism through bourgeois

⁴ Ralph Ellison, *Invisible Man* (London: Penguin Books, 2016) 489. All further references will be included in parentheses in the text.

⁵ Tamlyn E. Avery, "The Crisis of Coming of Age in Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man* and the Late Harlem Bildungsroman." *Limina*, vol. 20, no. 2. (2014): 17. EBSCO: <http://eds.b.ebscohost.com/eds/pdfviewer/pdfviewer?vid=2&sid=e3c290c4-4cc0-4a00-926f-a700f68ba9f2%40sessionmgr101> 1. 8. 2019. All further references will be included in parentheses in the text.

employment, and adherence to the social institutions of marriage and the nuclear family.” (Avery, 3) The spin *Invisible Man* puts on this is that not only does the narrator get money from odd jobs, charitable individuals and political organizations instead of a fully-fledged “employment,” but also because the social institutions such as “the family, the church, education, political organization had suppressed the individual,”⁶ which is why after the prologue he starts out devoid of agency and a sense of self. The trajectory of the narrator’s “maturation” is then not becoming one with the system, as the traditional Bildungsroman would typically illustrate, but learning to both cope with and to use to his advantage his social castration and heterogeneous identity in the melting pot of America. And, through the hardships endured, he ultimately does just that: “I am not complaining, nor am I protesting either. It is sometimes advantageous to be unseen, although it is most often rather wearing on the nerves.” (Ellison, 3)

“Each new experience that the narrator undergoes makes him aware of a reality which constantly reveals itself as the reverse of what it had appeared to him initially.” (Ghosh, 4) He is at first a naïve, “submissive boy and aspiring student in the South”⁷ that feels completely beholden to white men for his chance at education. This naivety is first represented by the fact that even just to receive an education he had to be first injured and humiliated at the Battle Royale, and his expulsion from college is the result of conflicting orders of his superiors (Ellison, 139) – and it takes this for him to start realizing that he is being manipulated. As the narrative progresses, he gets into similar situations where he is under somebody else’s authority, and receives orders conflicting either with other orders or his own morality, which always results in him getting into trouble, through which he then reflects what had just

⁶ Marcus Klein, *After Alienation* (Cleveland: World Publishing Company, 1965) 81. All further references will be included in parentheses in the text.

⁷ Justin Quinn et. al., *Lectures on American Literature* (Prague: Karolinum, 2011) 257. All further references will be included in parentheses in the text.

happened and furthers his sense of self; those specific moments will be analyzed in the following sections, nonetheless what is at heart of the issue is that in this particular text the Bildungsroman trajectory intermittently requires a dynamo in the form of the individual entering liminal states of being that push him towards self-realization and maturation.

The expulsion from college is a major diversion from the Bildungsroman, even an ironizing of its conventions, because it “does not hold fast to the generic constraints of the Goethean [sic] Bildungsroman prototype of representing the bourgeois education of a young man.” (Avery, 17) An analogical inversion of the role of a Bildungsheld’s education is located in the episode that leads to Invisible Man’s expulsion – when he drives Mr. Norton, “a self-aggrandizing patriarch who sees his 'fate connected to that of the narrator’”⁸ to Trueblood. Mr. Norton is at first presented as the conventional “guiding, masculine figure attempting to mould the destiny of the young protagonist,” (Avery, 9) only to be himself taught a lesson in life from Trueblood, one he has serious problems processing. This is another instance where the narrative takes the genre’s conventions and appropriates them to question the status quo that the narrator had originally taken for granted, and it is one of the first steps in his individuation process.

Up to that point, the narrator had been brought up in the college environment with high standards on blacks. After encountering the incestuous yet fascinating farmer, (Ellison, 67) he grows to resent him; “by naming his character as Trueblood, Ellison is playing with the stereotype of a Black man with excessive sexuality” (Komal, 3) and who admits that ever since his act he has been supported by local whites, which goes completely against the expectations set by the college education. The narrator then “does not understand why the white folks treat

⁸ Yadav, Komal. “Representation of Race and History in Invisible Man.” *Literary Endeavour*, vol. 10, no. 1, (2019): 2-3, EBSCO <http://eds.b.ebscohost.com/eds/pdfviewer/pdfviewer?vid=0&sid=1ed650ec-3eeb-45ec-abe5-62db664fa0f8%40sessionmgr1011>, 3. 8. 2019. All further references will be included in parentheses in the text.

Jim Trueblood, the sharecropper who had brought disgrace upon the black community, with compassion and sympathy,” (Ghosh, 4) and Mr. Norton even gives Trueblood a hundred-dollar bill before leaving, something seemingly out of place for a prestigious associate of the Southern college, angering the narrator. Furthermore, the institution’s headmaster Bledsoe “acts as a despot, the college's presiding tyrant known to students as ‘Old Bucket-head’.”⁹ This is another spin on Bildungsroman conventions because the genre traditionally “romanticizes buildings as centers of knowledge” (Avery, 8) yet in the novel the college is portrayed in a paradoxical manner of being run by questionable individuals and of being both the source of education and of agency-suppressing perspectives.

This leads into another feature of *Invisible Man* in which Bildungsroman strategies are employed ironically: in the way the narrator’s inner world relates to the outer one. Traditional coming-of-age novels typically have a protagonist who is “at once ordinary and extraordinary.”¹⁰ While he is ordinary in that he starts out as a conformist Afro-American fearing and following the status quo, he is also very different from many other people, which is seen not only in his capacity for delivering moving speeches, but also a more general use of language – the speech of other Afro-Americans in the novel is in marked Afro-American dialect, yet he himself speaks in the Standard American variety. Furthermore, the distinction does not end with language, but also a general good heartedness, which is displayed towards him only by the US veteran and Mary Rambo, as will be further discussed below. He is as such both ordinary and extraordinary, and it has direct implications in his attainment of identity. This is another diversion from the conventional Bildungsroman, because his extra-ordinariness problematizes his maturation despite being an essential ingredient to it.

⁹ Robert A. Lee, “Invisible Man: Analysis of Major Characters,” *Salem Press Encyclopedia of Literature*, 2008. EBSCO

<http://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&AuthType=ip.shib&db=ers&AN=113243751&lang=cs&site=eds-live&scope=site> 3. 8. 2016.

¹⁰ Barbara Foley, *Radical Representations: Politics and Form in U.S. Proletarian Fiction, 1929-1941* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 1993) 321.

Although part of the narrator's maturation is learning to deliver speeches, there is also the inverted question of the effect of speeches on the narrator and his development, and here comes into play the US veteran, who "arouses the narrator to "'become his own father.'" He is the one who sees through the falseness of Mr. Norton's behavior. He attempts to dismantle the narrator's acceptance of the pre-ordained role of black men," (Komal, 3) saying "come out of the fog," "play the game, but don't believe in it," "learn how it operates, learn how *you* operate." (Ellison, 149) Because this is such blatantly transgressive advice the narrator does not respond or reflect upon the words much, but they precisely foreshadow his entire individuation process, this as such being an instance of indirect meta-narration. The fog can be read as a metaphor for the narrator's agency-suppressing upbringing, the game as life in an unjust society and the coming-of-age advice really is for him to stop helping those who keep him down. As such, it is on the one hand a person aiming to be another "guiding masculine figure" of authority in his life and one the narrator does not pay much attention to, but on the other it is advice that sums up his later development, and it aligns with the words of somebody very close to the narrator.

Earlier in the novel there is the speech of the narrator's grandfather which may have been what by a large margin had set in motion the narrator's maturation:

I want you 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. (Ellison, 16)

The narrator then admits that these instructions caused him "much anxiety." (Ellison, 16) It was possibly the single most transgressive approach to the status quo he has heard up to that time and coming from his grandfather the words were all the more impactful, and contributive

to the narrator's self-reflection and progressive development. When seen in the context of the entire novel, he not only ends up living up to these words, but he takes their meaning to a whole new level by isolating himself from society and paving his own way. His grandfather's "advice to overturn the colonialist by the appearance of agreement" (Komal, 4) recurs several times across the narrative and Invisible Man learns to understand it, which is another instance when he shifts from the coming-of-age novel's conventions: the system is rigged against him, so he decides to stop playing by its rules and takes matters into his own hands.

Before managing to do that, he must first experience other difficulties. When he leaves college, he manages to get an odd job at a color plant, but after coming under conflicting orders there is an accident and he ends up in the factory hospital. This part further illustrates the importance of his individuation:

The existential dilemmas of the typical coming-of-age genre are playfully literalised as the doctors eventually try to identify their patient. They hold up cards asking questions such as, 'WHAT IS YOUR NAME?', 'WHO... ARE... YOU?', and 'WHO WAS BUCKEYE THE RABBIT?' in reference to a popular children's song. Invisible Man is left alone on his hospital bed, trapped in a daze and, 'fretting over [his] identity'. (Avery, 13)

It is a moment of meta-narration because it reveals the narrator's primary concern, while being asked by the tortuous medical staff, creating an ironic undertone. He is later discharged from the hospital, and realizes an important thing: he is no longer afraid of important men, because he cannot expect anything of them. (Ellison, 241) This marks an important change in his attitude, because it sharply contrasts with his previous subservience. While he remains naïve, he has started to become himself and admits to his emotions flowing freer, something of great importance in the context of him having been brought up to serve others, and it took him getting injured both on the levels of his dignity and bodily health to realize this, which is another

instance of a liminal state being the departure point for self-reflection and important realizations on the way to maturation.

After leaving the hospital the narrator starts coming under the influence of his Afro-American landlady, Mary Rambo, who is another ambivalent character in the novel who plays an important role in his development. She is one of those characters who in fact tell him things that are in line with his eventual personality changes, following the grandfather and the US veteran. She provides him with accommodation without asking for much in return, and is lenient with his debts towards her (Ellison, 312) – this is a rare instance of people actually wanting to help him, but that is not all: she keeps telling him about how the young generation have to take leadership and responsibility, (Ellison, 251) which is precisely what he later starts doing, and this qualifies as another meta-narrative foreshadowing. It is also a play on Bildungsroman conventions because here the “guiding, masculine figure” is in fact a good-hearted Afro-American woman. Nonetheless, it also demonstrates how “all along in his journey, the narrator assumes the identities that have been thrust upon him by others.” (Ghosh, 4) So while this is another instance of him being under the influence of others’ wishes, it also shows that when one is with the right people, they may have things to say which are those one precisely needs to hear at a given point in life in order to advance as a person.

Another epiphany takes place when the narrator has yams from a street stall. After eating the food from his childhood, he becomes more in touch with himself. (Ellison, 256) The scene is important in that in previous chapters he would get offended by Afro-Americans not behaving as the powers would like them to (as with Trueblood), yet as he eats the messy food in the middle of the street he realizes he is completely unashamed for enjoying this particular food due to its “swift stab of nostalgia.” (Ellison, 252) Yams are considered lowly, yet he enjoys them, and decides he wants to live that way from now on. (Ellison, 256) This revelation is another moment when he sheds some of the standards he had learned to take for his own,

despite them being imposed upon him by others. It is a moment of conflict between the individual and society, and a turn from the traditional Bildungsroman trajectory as he realizes he feels more authentic when he does not follow some of society's notions of decency, which seems to go quite against the "bourgeois education of a young man" (Avery, 17) of the conventional coming-of-age novel: he in fact needs to unlearn some the larger structure's standards to feel authentic.

The theme of assimilation into a larger structure is also relevant in the context of an entity that has a huge impact on his persona after the yam scene: The Brotherhood. He first comes into contact with Brother Jack after spontaneously giving a speech during the eviction of a black family; it is not the content but the form which impresses Jack, and the scene is symbolic of the stage of his development: when violence is about to break out, it "activates" his "learned shock-absorbing phrases" (Ellison, 265) to keep chaos at bay, in the process of which he essentially takes a stand for the white evictors' cause, as "he improvises *against* the crowd's potential for action,"¹¹ but as violence inevitably happens and the blacks rush inside the house, he joins, "dashing down the steps and seizing a chair and starting back, no longer struggling against or thinking about the nature of my action." (Ellison, 271) Not only does he go against the societal constructs that a conventional Bildungsroman protagonist would assimilate into, it also shows the ambivalent forces inside him in conflict; furthermore, it is ironic that Jack chooses him for the organization afterwards, because the speech was against what the organization purports to stand for.

The narrator joins the Brotherhood on the basis of it offering his dream job of being an orator as "he sets out to be a leader whose speech is action." (Callahan, 60) Jack "recruits

¹¹ John F. Callahan, "Frequencies of Eloquence: The Performance and Composition of *Invisible Man*," *New Essays on Invisible Man*, ed. Robert O'Meally (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998) 66. All further references will be included in parentheses in the text.

Invisible Man for the Brotherhood organization because he has use for the young man's vagrant, unfocused, uncontextualized capacity for eloquence," (Callahan, 69) but the narrator has his doubts about Jack (Ellison, 283-4) and the organization (Ellison, 323) from the beginning, as they essentially offer him everything he ever wanted, but at a cost – he has to perfectly learn their ways, politics and manners. (Ellison, 293) Since his journey is one of moving "from childhood to the age of manhood, and from the South to the North, and he is one of those heroes who move from the provinces to the capital, to the center of power, from innocence to experience," (Klein, 109) it is a step illustrating that despite the fact that by now he has already come quite a long way from the start, he still has not completely lost his naivety, attained agency or understood identity, because he believes somebody else can imbue him with these instead of taking matters completely into his own hands.

This repeated fallacy of believing that he may attain identity through others is manifest when he is outfitted by the Brotherhood with a new name and clothing: "The new suit imparted a newness to me. It was the clothes and the new name and the circumstances. It was a newness too subtle to put into thought, but there it was. I was becoming someone else." (Ellison, 323) It is a paradox of the individual because he feels as if he is changing because of these new things, yet he is repeating a pattern he had been falling for the whole time, and he mistakes external changes for internal ones. This shows how at this point of the narrative he is more self-aware, but his naivety, personal ambition and lack of experience still lead him to fulfilling the wishes of the Brotherhood which promises him a future. In reality, he is only being given yet another uniform of a power structure (as opposed to actually meaningful changes in his behavior induced by dressing as Rinehart, a sovereign individual, later in the novel), but thanks to his previous experiences he at least reflects his own status within it. In fact, he frets over whether he will "become someone else," (Ellison, 323) which in a roundabout way points to

his inner desire to become himself. This is another of the ways the Brotherhood has an important impact on his personal development within the Bildungsroman.

The genre's conventions are commented upon in another instance of meta-narration, where after his first speech for the Brotherhood he claims that "my technique was old but I was saying new things." (Ellison, 340) It can be read as a reference to how the novel works with previous formal traditions but with different aims. The speech itself is important in the genre's context because it is another moment when the narrator develops as a person: he improvises in the heat of the moment, and following a stream of consciousness he confesses to "feeling more human," (Ellison, 334) having been possessed by words without exactly understanding them, as he "generates the preliminary electricity of action by virtue of his sudden authority as an articulate presence and personality." (Callahan, 71) This moment of revelation and development is enabled by coming into contact with the community, and again it has required a liminal state, being left to his own devices in the middle of an emotional speech to realize something important for himself. Here the Brotherhood has provided him a platform for personal development, but the whole thing ultimately does turn out to be too good to be true.

With time, Invisible Man outgrows the organization as he starts realizing they are merely using him to their ends. He is first turned off by the worry of a Brotherhood member "if he is black enough" (Ellison, 291) to do his job, and the breaking point is during one meeting where he is told "you were not hired to think" (Ellison, 451) after having organized a funeral for Tod Clifton. Being scolded for doing something out of best intentions for the community lays bare the cold machinery of the organization which purports to be aiming to help the same community. At first, he was "greatly impressed," (Ellison, 295) but this state "does not last long as he is quickly made to realize that 'individuals don't count for much; it's what the group wants, what the group does. Everyone here submerges his personal ambitions for the common achievement'." (Ghosh, 4) Having realized this, he no longer equates his identity with the

Brotherhood and is finally set to become a sovereign individual on his own terms, following the updated Bildungsroman trajectory towards his individuation.

A decisive development of his personality takes place after leaving the Brotherhood when the narrator tries on different clothes and is taken aback by how much it changes in others' perception of his persona: after donning a hat and sunglasses he is being mistaken for the local preacher-hustler Rinehart, who "represents an alterable conception of identity in which a person's identity is a function of a situation." (Komal, 4) As this discovery completely changes his idea of selfhood, he decides to be more cynical, like he imagines Rinehart to be. (Ellison, 488) "By attempting to come to terms with Rinehart as a phenomenon, the hero steps toward articulating his own autonomous desire"¹² and that is the breaking point in his development, because he no longer needs to be imbued with identity and agency by others. He realizes his invisibility, later symbolically underscored in admitting to losing his identity in a crowd during a race riot, (Ellison, 530) which was initiated by one important adversary: Ras the Exhorter turned Ras the Destroyer.

Ras is a peculiar character in that he is the Afro-American stoking emotion in Harlem with powerful, emotional speeches that urge blacks to take up arms against the whites. (Ellison, 359) He is important in the context of the narrator's development because not only is he the ideological opponent of the Brotherhood and the indirect causer of Tod Clifton's death, but in that much of what he says makes sense to the narrator regarding the conditions of Afro-Americans in a white society, (Ellison, 358) but he is simply too much to be taken at face value. That is because he "rejects everything associated with white American culture and instead adopts an identity based on his internalized image of Africa--one that is, ironically, also

¹² Lawrence P. Jackson. "Ralph Ellison, Sharpies, Rinehart, and Politics in 'Invisible Man.'" *The Massachusetts Review*, vol. 40, no. 1, (1999): 19, EBSCO
<http://eds.a.ebscohost.com/eds/pdfviewer/pdfviewer?vid=0&sid=fae9ccc0-a46c-4310-a209-752794d6e100%40sessionmgr4008> 2. 8. 2019. All further references will be included in parentheses in the text.

determined by the white gaze.”¹³ This is symbolized in one of the final scenes where he dresses up in a Chieftain costume during the riot, wreaking havoc left and right. As such he becomes an untenable role model because he “represents complete rejection of life under the dominant white culture,” (Nyikos, 1) which is impossible given the circumstances, and his capacity for mobilizing people is taken away from him when the narrator throws back a spear at him, piercing both his cheeks and stripping him of the instruments of his eloquence.

The final race riot fulfills the narrator’s development because he recognizes the “beautiful absurdity of their American identity and mine.” (Ellison, 539) It is a climactic moment because he finally sees beyond the divisive fragmentation of society and individual opinions and claims on truth. He learns the complex spirit of America and adopts it as his own in his unique way, achieving freedom. That is at heart of his trajectory; the city is a melting pot that confuses people in their perception of selfhood.

By recognizing the absurdity of society, the narrator has succeeded to a large extent in freeing himself from the prison of a reflected image formed of the stereotypes of the white imagination, reinforced, at times, by the attitudes of people like Bledsoe. His freedom to live out his own absurdity has, ultimately, enabled him to study the lesson of his own life. He has explored innumerable possibilities of carving out a meaningful existence for himself and he knows that he can only move ahead or stay underground. (Ghosh, 4)

His journey ends when he falls down a dark manhole, where he “attains symbolic freedom when during the riots he burns down all the documents to get some light.” (Komal, 4) That is the conclusion to his exhilarating journey.

¹³ Daniel Nyikos, “Hey Ras. ... Is it You, Destroyer? Rinehart??: The Ideological Choice between Rinehart and Ras in Ralph Ellison’s *Invisible Man*.” *Americana: E-Journal of American Studies in Hungary* 12.2 (2016): 1, EBSCO <http://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&AuthType=ip.shib&db=asn&AN=121464911&lang=cs&site=eds-live&scope=site> 3. 8. 2019. All further references will be included in parentheses in the text.

The question thus arises what it is exactly that Invisible Man has learned, and how he has changed. As has been discovered, he cannot live a fulfilling life when living on other people's terms:

His experiences teach him that the act of naming is linked inextricably to issues of power and control. When he attempts to live according to the dictates of others, he loses his autonomy and suffers repeated betrayals. He discovers the true meaning of his life only after he assumes responsibility for naming himself by telling his own story.¹⁴

It was his quest to interpret and integrate his grandfather's words into his experience, and the only possible way to do so is to stop reading his story as the people who only wish to dominate him have written it, and to write it himself instead. But in order to do that he needs to learn the hard way, to temper his naivety through experience, because "each time he has met with the despair of betrayal and duplicity, he has come a step closer to recognizing his potentialities for coping with the pressures of life," (Ghosh, 5) becoming stronger as a whole. "He is no longer blind, for he has learned to see and understand things for himself instead of blindly following the path cut out for him by others," (Ghosh, 4) and that is the final proof of the novel's status as an experimental Bildungsroman: when tradition and habit no longer reflect the dynamism of reality, it takes artistic reimagination to salvage what is relevant and to find new textures of difference. It has thus been shown how conventional Bildungsroman tropes are employed differently and sometimes even ironically: he cannot undergo bourgeois maturation to assimilate into the system because he is discriminated against, his state of being both ordinary and extra-ordinary problematizes his development, and the roles of masculine mentors are inverted. As such the novel is made impactful by its form and content aligning in transgression

¹⁴ Valerie Smith et. al., *The Meaning of Narration in Invisible Man*. "New Essays on Invisible Man." (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994) 27.

of convention, one that may help shed new light on the human condition in more contemporary times.

The stress on personal development is also what makes the narrator a timeless, universal figure. He is, after all, on a path for freedom and identity, and “these are not only Afro-American quests.”¹⁵ The narrator’s encounters with people and organizations that claim to be acting to the individual’s benefit can be read analogously to the world of mass media where one is seemingly provided with a platform to define their identity, only to later realize that the deal was too good to be true and that these same organizations are using the individual to their own economic and political benefit. Any person entering the world of today is faced with these issues and it is one of the merits of the *Invisible Man* Bildungsroman that it shows the difficulty of navigating a complex post-industrial society, and the importance of personal experience to attaining selfhood and agency.

Chapter 2: A Society of Oppression

It is by now evident that the society and the way it is organized as portrayed in *Invisible Man* is deeply flawed and set against an individual who transgresses the boundaries set by those in power. This is the moment when the angle of individual experience interacts with the one of the social as represented in the novel. This chapter thus aims to go into deeper detail in regard to the “powers that be,” how their mechanisms operate, where that leaves the individual beyond the Bildungsroman trajectory and how the way the society is represented in the novel shows Ellison’s criticism of its unjust conditions. Analyzing the presented layer of society will require involving more complex theory and a new linear reading of the text, focusing instead

¹⁵ Robert O’Meally et. al., *Introduction*. “New Essays on Invisible Man”. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994) 8. All further references will be included in parentheses in the text.

on manifestations of the other in the novel, and how the social layer of experience affects the hero: “he is thrust into a nightmare not, despite the fact that Ellison has said it, because the frustration of identity is peculiarly the American theme. He is condemned first of all because he is black.” (Klein, 83)

The very first chapter contains the Battle Royale scene during which the narrator and several of his classmates are first sexually tortured by the sight of a naked blonde and then blindfolded and sent into a ring to fight one another. (Ellison, 20) “A great part of the novel, indeed, is in that initial episode. What is revealed here is what is going to be revealed to the hero, in different circumstances, but with not much modification, in his every subsequent adventure.” (Klein, 115) This is because the blacks are given a sense of agency, but it is illusory and only works to the benefit and entertainment of the powerful, a setting indeed recurrent across the novel stemming the narrator’s naivety. It is his signature personality trait that plays an important role in his interactions with the social layer of experience: “From the start he is anxious about the battle: ‘I suspected that fighting a battle royal might detract from the dignity of my speech’,” (Jarenski, 5) and as will be later shown, the shedding of this naivety also changes his conduct during social interactions.

During the Battle Royal scene, the cruelty the powerful men project on the young black boys is three-fold: sexual, moral and economic. (Klein, 117) Sexual cruelty is manifest in the naked blonde, who is actually the precursor to the Battle Royal, functioning as an arouser of emotions in the boys as “juxtaposition of black men and white women as visual objects of America’s racial and sexual fantasies.” (Jarenski, 2) Moral cruelty then takes place in that the whites make them the “agents of, and at the time sacrifices to, the forbidden, everything that is dark, their irrational craving for cruelty, their greed and their sex and their itch for self-destruction, the swoon of the id.” (Klein, 117) What is happening is that the powerful men vicariously experience all these things through the blacks without partaking in the same actions,

thus effectively relieving their conscience and morality. The third form of cruelty is the economic exploitation, which is present in the blacks “being made to scramble for coins on an electrified rug” (Klein, 116) which also has the side effect of preventing the blacks from becoming allies in the ring, as the sight of money activates their selfish impulses and they are rendered incapable of fighting back against their common enemy.

Because “power is not merely physical force but a pervasive human dynamic determining our relationships to others,”¹⁶ it can be seen how it is at play during the Battle Royale. It is used to make the black students do the bidding of the rich who use their power to force the “entertainers” into a liminal state while preventing any backlash, and this microcosmic scene can be read as a reflection of a wider image of the entire society in the novel. Furthermore, by presenting the event as a competition for a scholarship, this treatment of the marginalized also has the effect of reinforcing hegemony, which “refers to the process by which dominant culture maintains a dominant position: for example, the use of institutions to formalize power and” ... “the inculcation of the populace in the ideals of the hegemonic group through education.” (Felluga, 127) As such, the white overlords have great influence across a wide array of tools to maintain their position, and this is manifest further in the fact that after the battle and his subsequent speech, the narrator receives the reward of a scholarship at a school that reinforces the status quo via its education, in effect intertwining the social and individual layers of experience and directly invoking another association in regards to the society in *Invisible Man*.

The problem is that even had the narrator completed his education at the school, his achievements would have been alienated from him: “alienation is the process whereby workers are made to feel foreign to the products of their own labor” ... and are “alienated from their

¹⁶ Dino Franco Felluga, *Critical Theory: The Key Concepts* (Oxon & New York: Routledge, 2015). 237. All further references will be included in parentheses in the text.

product precisely because they no longer own the product.” (Felluga, 15) Seeing as the narrator works very laboriously to attain a sense of identity, had this goal been achieved through the organizations attempting to mold him and to take away his agency, they would not allow him to harvest that fruit fully, as there would always be the threat of being punished had he stepped out of line. One such instance is the college, where the black students are taught to follow the racist status quo, and another is the Brotherhood which brainwashes its members with propaganda, also requiring that they submit their individuality to the organization and do not go beyond party policy. (Ellison, 451) In both instances the individuals trapped within the gears of the respective institutions are exploited to benefit the elements of power within the social layer that the novel represents.

The initial catalyst to the narrator’s expulsion from college were the conflicting orders, since “without considering the implicit meaning in his grandfather's message, the narrator starts believing that the only way to become a part of history is to follow the person in power,” (Komal, 2) and this naivety leads to a rude awakening. That this actually led to him being kicked out shows just how much these particular authorities are in fact oppressive and totalitarian: “The college perpetuates hierarchical ideology, where the individual talents and thinking are prohibited,” (Komal, 3) discarding those who do not produce the desired effects. As Ihab Hassan goes on to argue, “the contemporary world presents a continued affront to man, and that his response must therefore be the response of the rebel or victim, living under the shadow of death”¹⁷ and that is precisely the condition *Invisible Man*’s narrator is in. “His expectations boomerang because they are not based on reality. His inherited views of the world do not allow him to visualize the true nature of things.” (Ghosh, 4) He is constantly being wronged across the narrative, sometimes even coming close to dying, and he ends up living in

¹⁷ Ihab Habib Hassan, *Radical Innocence: Studies in the Contemporary American Novel* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1971) 5.

the shadow indeed, until he moves into a spotlight of his own making. But until he adjusts to this unjust world, he must learn the workings of power the hard way.

When the narrator comes to the headmaster's office to find out about the expulsion, the nature of the powerful man is exposed: "Dr. Bledsoe who stands as 'an example to his race' is presented as an opportunist black man who sustains his authority by perpetuating the prejudice of whites about blacks," (Komal, 3) and he calls the narrator racist epithets, only to finally divulge on a distressing aspect of his power: "Negroes don't control this school or much of anything else—haven't you learned even that? No, sir, they don't control this school, nor white folk either. I control it I'm still the king down here" (Ellison, 139) and continues with "It's a nasty deal and I don't always like it myself. But you listen to me: I didn't make it, and I know 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." (Ellison, 140) This shows just where Bledsoe's priorities lay, and the narrator's experience is important proof of how power in society can actively work against him.

The only thing Bledsoe cares for is his position and the power that comes with it. The narrator is expelled because he crossed the line, out of naivety, but he is dependent on the institution because it directly affects his chances at upward social mobility; he simply wasn't aware that the headmaster "sees himself as outside of the rank and file of the 'we' that would be comprised of southern blacks. He also sees himself outside of the white power structure, which only lends him the authority to run the school."¹⁸ This shows how complex a matrix of power Bledsoe is, and how his influence stands beyond the black/white dichotomy. By wronging him the narrator wronged power, and the result reverberates far into the novel, as the

¹⁸ Barbara A. Baker, "Power and the Fluidity of Privilege and Oppression: The Case of Tuskegee and Invisible Man". *Interdisciplinary Humanities* 26.1 (2009): 9, EBSCO: <http://eds.b.ebscohost.com/eds/pdfviewer/pdfviewer?vid=3&sid=08418c31-f14b-4f24-87e6-91836d95e6f8%40sessionmgr102>. 1. 8. 2019

“letters of recommendation” provided are actually further means of directly undermining his genuine attempts at getting a foothold in New York, and Bledsoe thus becomes a symbol of unjust treatment and lust for absolute hegemony at the expense of others. The individual is thus directly suppressed by the power embedded into the social.

The narrator’s agency-suppressing upbringing is later even made into a metaphor at the Golden Day when the veteran tells him to “come out from the fog,” (Ellison, 149) and the narrator’s reflections of the statue by the school provide an area for further analysis of the institution as a whole:

In my mind's eye I see the bronze statue of the college Founder, the cold Father symbol, his hands outstretched in the breathtaking gesture of lifting a veil that flutters in hard, metallic folds above the face of a kneeling slave; and I am standing puzzled, unable to decide whether the veil is really being lifted, or lowered more firmly in place. (Ellison, 39)

This is a symbolical representation of how while on the one hand, the college attempts to represent itself as a structure that in some way awakens its black students, it on the other actually makes their life a lot more difficult. As such the statue is a summarization of the dual effect institutions and power have in the novel and in the narrator’s life – they present themselves as helpful, but the truth may be entirely different; the reflection on this aspect of the statue is also the literal departure point for his journey through society, as he is just leaving the South for New York. “The shift in setting in the second part to Harlem again foregrounds the motif of movement” (Komal, 4) which shows how the narrator follows the trend of American society, where “the first half of the 20th century was marked by a massive redistribution of the U.S. population, with millions leaving the rural South in favor of industrial

centers in the Northeast, Midwest, and West,”¹⁹ unaware of the fact his attempt to use migration “as a mechanism for attaining higher absolute earnings or occupational status” (Flippen, 3) were undermined from the start by Bledsoe’s power projected through the envelopes he is provided.

After initial failures caused by the “recommendation letters” the narrator manages to get a job at Liberty Paints known for its Optic White paint, which is sold to the government. (Ellison, 190) The narrator learns the famed paint is made of white and one drop of black dope, and “the ironical situation is made more apparent when the narrator confides to his readers that the paint is going to be applied to a government building, envisaging the subscription of government authorities in this discriminatory practice.” (Komal, 3) And of course, it doesn’t take him long until to get into trouble again: “He is not the right dope. He is an innocent who cannot quite meet the precarious propriety established in the industrial North between black and white.” (Klein, 119) After being sent off for lunch by his superintendent he inadvertently runs into the union, for which reason the same man then threatens to kill him. However, “the hero is an innocent who in his innocence will choose neither side. He is therefore a traitor to both sides, and so he brings about an explosion” (Klein, 119) which is again a direct result of conflicting orders without him being at fault of bringing it upon himself – apart from not having yet ridded himself of naivety.

The fact that the narrator keeps running into trouble is inherently embedded into his journey because his trajectory is not, as has been asserted, of assimilating into the system, but of reaching a state of freedom and capacity to act:

These initiatory incidents season him for a
society of violently quick changes, phony
appearances, disappointments and foul caprice.

¹⁹ Chenoa Flippen “U.S. Internal Migration and Occupational Attainment: Assessing Absolute and Relative Outcomes by Region and Race.” *Population Research and Policy Review*, 33.1 (2014) 2. EBSCO <http://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&AuthType=ip.shib&db=edsjsr&AN=edsjsr.43672152&lang=cs&site=eds-live&scope=site> 3. 8. 2019. All further references will be included in parentheses in the text.

As such an uncautious dupe, Invisible Man stands in a very long line of American innocents, earnest seekers of success who find their faces in the dust. (O'Meally, 15-16)

The scene in the factory is another moment of alienation from other blacks and people of similar social standing, because both of these parties were automatically hostile to him. With the union, the reason is the discord planted into the employees by their employers because “the plant has typically been hiring negroes in order to undersell its union labor,” (Klein, 119) and Brockway hates him for meeting with the union as he fears they are after his job (Ellison, 220) – which is in reality an echo of Bledsoe and the obsession with one’s standing in an oppressive institution. This is how the factory scene further illustrates the exploitation of individuals by those in power, showing how *Invisible Man* represents the difficult interactions of the social with the individual layers of experience in an unjust society.

After the explosion in the factory he ends up in the hospital, which is another scene where the established institutions exert cruelty over the marginalized: the doctors “believe, as he is an unidentified African American male, he must be a criminal whose personality they can remould through the wonder of medical science.” (Avery, 13) They call him racist names and want to lobotomize him so he will “live as he has to live and with absolute integrity,” (Ellison, 228) which is a major diversion from what medical staff ought to be doing. This grotesque representation further develops the image of societal institutions as interwoven into the fabric of hegemonic power, because that “absolute integrity” would most likely be a state of complete empty-headedness, where the affected does not reflect critically on the status quo but merely follows its whims, unable to fight or even think back. The scene illustrates how the industry, business and medical authority are in fact one intertwined racist social entity, the same Other constantly keeping the individual down. Nonetheless, it is not such a simple binary opposition.

Once the narrator reaches New York he comes across the scene of an eviction of blacks from their home by white authorities (Ellison, 257) and tries to prevent violence from erupting by delivering a speech, but it ultimately ends in violence anyway and the police arrive. (Ellison, 272) The final result isn't known as he escapes, but what is interesting and has been noted in the previous chapter is that here the narrator is in the position of an instrument of the oppressive status quo, and "because his words contradict the people's mood, his speech has briefly the effect he desires." (Callahan, 66) This illustrates just how effectively the social has indoctrinated the individual via college, and how he in naivety unwittingly projected the will of the very powers that oppress him. Nonetheless as the violence erupts he joins the cause of the Afro-Americans, and as such literally becomes the epitome of the clash of authority's powerful hooks and the marginalized people's raw energy, thus reflecting a wider problem in the society in the one given scene. He then escapes the scene with the help of the Brotherhood.

Although the actual politics of the Brotherhood are to be discussed in the following chapter, it is from the very beginning clear of their interaction with the narrator that they are another powerful institution that wants to use him to their ends; Jack first believes the narrator had "aroused them so quickly to action," (Ellison, 279) which shows how he

because of his collectivist, scientific ideology refuses to recognize that a personal, emotional bond galvanizes Invisible Man and the other black individuals into a sense of community. To Jack, Invisible Man is nothing more or less than a black *voice* worthy only to serve the Brotherhood's program. (Callahan, 69)

Furthermore, the narrator reflects that Jack "gave the impression that he understood much and spoke out of a knowledge far deeper than appeared on the surface of his words," (Ellison, 283) likely because Jack uses the "scientific" Brotherhood lingo and is in fact a propaganda machine that recruits unwitting marginalized people by promising them emancipation. That is Jack's source of power and also the means by which it reduplicates itself. And since "power is always

...tied to the actions of individual people as delimited by the various discourses and disciplines of a given time period” (Felluga, 121) he through his use of language attempts to give the impression of a deeper knowledge that he may in the future share with others, and when Jack is read as a metonymical part of the organization, the social here confuses the individual with signifiers convincing the less experienced into joining.

An issue that arises from the narrator entering the organization are his motives. His mental process regarding joining is “if I refused to join them, where would I go – to a job as porter at the railroad station? At least here was a chance to speak,” (Ellison, 296) where he “defines his freedom and ambition in terms of public speaking but leaves others to define language, leadership and power.” (Callahan, 69) This is a problematic attitude associated with his naivety which tends to gets him into trouble, and he did at first intend to refuse the job (Ellison, 284) – but then there returns a familiar issue when he smells Mary Rambo preparing cabbage again: “this was the third time within the week and it dawned on me that Mary must be short of money. And here I’ve been congratulating myself for refusing a job, I thought, when I don’t even know how much money I owe her.” (Ellison, 285) His sense of morality is disturbed as he realizes joining the Brotherhood would provide him with the necessary finances to pay off his debts. So even though he had been set on not joining, the economic issue is the deciding factor, and it is another way in which Ellison represents how the established social power structures exploit the individual to do their bidding.

Once he is officially part of the Brotherhood, he is invited to a dinner party to be presented to the rest of the organization, (Ellison, 287) whose real workings become even more clear:

I heard a series of rich arpeggios sound on the piano behind me and I turned to look, hearing the woman Emma say not quite softly enough, ‘But don’t you think he should be a little

blacker?' 'Shh, don't be a damn fool,' Brother Jack said sharply. 'We're not interested in his looks but in his voice'. (Ellison, 291)

He is stunned to hear this and thinks in silence by the window: "Who is she anyway, Brother Jack's wife, his girl friend? Maybe she wants to see me sweat coal tar, ink, shoe polish, graphite. What was I, a man or a natural resource?" (Ellison, 292) This is a fitting contemplation because he likens how people exploit him the way capitalism exploits nature, a man-made construct draining something innocent of energy. It also illustrates how full of empty promises and superficiality the organization really is. However, he does not bring the racist remarks up and continues conversing with the others.

It is during the party that he starts being brainwashed by this power structure, and it is through Jack: "Did you study economics?' 'Some.' 'Sociology?' 'Yes.' 'Well, let me advise you to forget it. You'll be given books to read along with some material that explains our program in detail.'" (Ellison, 293) This is precisely how the organization instills its power over him – by means of inculcating the "scientific" approach to society and their view of the world. It is another instance where the narrator falls for a party attempting to use him to their goal, yet here the implications are even bigger than with some of the previous instances, because here he starts getting involved in politics and adjusts his language and method according to the Brotherhood's expectations. He is then even given a new name – however, "the fact that the narrator is given a new identity while joining indicates that the organisation does not commemorate his individuality" (Komal, 3-4) and is only trying to exploit his talents in their pursuits – another illustration of how power embedded into the social layer in the novel directly works against the individual.

The purported aim of the Brotherhood is "working for a better world for all people. It's that simple. Too many have been dispossessed of their heritage, and we have banded together in brotherhood to do something about it." (Ellison, 292-3) That is however a very general

ambition that is to be achieved by “moving them to action just as you did this morning” (Ellison, 293) – which, as has been ascertained, was a complete misrepresentation on Jack’s part. Even though the narrator later manages to effectively raise the crowd’s emotions to Jack’s satisfaction, “the pure ideologues resist Jack’s non sequitur and accuse Invisible Man of a ‘wild, hysterical, politically irresponsible and dangerous speech’ antithetical to the Brotherhood’s ideology,” (Callahan, 71) because he wasn’t yet too familiar with the pamphlets. This goes on to show how the organization has inner struggles because even the “scientific methods” seem to vary from member to member, and it reveals how ultimately the organization is not as unified as it presents itself, which is a foreshadowing of the internal issues that in the end cause the narrator to outgrow the Brotherhood.

In concluding the question of the effects of society on the narrator, it is necessary to intertwine the social layer with that of the individual as presented in the novel: the social institutions in *Invisible Man* torture marginalized people through sexuality, morals and economic status. They inculcate beliefs via education in a manner that benefits them, not the educated, and alienate individuals from their achievements or punish them if they step out of line. This often leads to shock in the narrator because “he does not realize that there is a gaping breach, most particularly for blacks, dividing American’s ideals or ‘sacred documents’” ... “from the way people really treat one another.” (O’Meally, 15) It is within this difficult environment that he must learn that “by viewing the world comically, not only can Invisible Man ‘grin ‘em to death’, but he can also nurture his own life, taking all things, however absurdly baffling, as they come.” (O’Meally, 18) As such, humor is an important bridging element which he learns to use to his advantage in interacting with the social layer, and is a way in which the individual finally goes against the sharp angle of the social, having made these important realizations and lost his naivety.

As Sigmund Freud writes in *Civilization and its Discontents*, “the urge for freedom is directed against particular forms and demands of civilization, or against it altogether.”²⁰ This is particularly palpable in *Invisible Man* because as has been shown, the particular demands of civilization are that the narrator stays in line and does not overstep the position he has been designed by the society, which inherently clashes with his desire for freedom. By isolating himself underground and by coming to terms with his grandfather’s advice he shifts his rebellious position from that of trying to find his identity within the society’s paradigm to one of realizing his identity cannot come from within the outside, because such self-definition is associated with eventual alienation from the products of said labor. He must abolish his attempts to negotiate with civilization to finalize his individual development. “He rejects, thereby, the definitions imposed on him by his social environment,” (Ghosh, 6) which is a radical shift in the relationship between the individual and the society he lives in.

It is because, as has been shown, the interactions of the social and individual layers as presented in the novel show a deeply problematic environment suffused with racism and injustice projected by those in power in order to fortify their hegemony. “A good part of the struggles of mankind center round the single task of finding an expedient accommodation ... between this claim of the individual and the cultural claims of the group” (Freud, 43) – and *Invisible Man* shows that in the context of marginalized groups whose education is based around maintaining the status quo, the conflict is all the more heated because the collective will seems intensively poised against the desire for freedom of those who stand at the other side of the barrier – “and no society can tolerate a position of real desire without its structures of exploitation, servitude, and hierarchy being compromised.”²¹ This chapter has thus shown the problematics of the interactions between the individual and social layers in the novel, and the

²⁰ Sigmund Freud, *Civilization and its Discontents* (New York: Norton, 1961) 43. All further references will be included in parentheses in the text.

²¹ Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, *Anti-Oedipus* (London and New York: Continuum, 2004) 36-37.

interplay shows Ellison's criticism of the societal arrangement without turning the text into an overt protest novel. In dealing with the difficult society the narrator "moves, moreover, through what seems at all points a linear exploration of the "Negro problem," through ideologies by which it might be approached." (Klein, 108) This leads into the third layer of experience that the novel explores: politics.

Chapter 3: The Radical Politics of Manipulation

Even though the actual political stances of the two ideologies used to approach the race question in *Invisible Man* are not explicitly stated, the perspectives and manners of speaking that the Brotherhood and Ras display can be analyzed in order to ascertain their political stances on the Left-Right continuum, and how they retroactively interact with the individual and social layers of experience in the novel. "The narrator's deep sense of commitment to the cause of the underprivileged" (Ghosh, 4) is the reason why he gets involved in politics and it is the conduit to the novel treating the issue. It is thus the goal of this chapter to discuss the represented ideologies that compete for Harlem's following, what means they use to gain it, and how the way the political layer of experience is represented in *Invisible Man* shows Ellison's covert criticism of radical politics. It will be illustrated how the parties operate to gain members, how they influence the narrator, and how he creates his politics after having experienced public political life.

As the previous chapters have demonstrated, the powers and institutions in the novel marginalize and exploit particular groups and individuals. It can be thus argued that racism is one of the aspects of the dominant ideology. To define the term, "ideology functions as the superstructure of a civilization: the conventions and culture that make up the dominant ideas of a society." (Felluga, 146) However, in essence the novel presents a clash of ideologies, or,

a hegemonic one colliding with alternative ideologies, and the narrator partakes in the attempt to restructure society by participating in the Brotherhood's political activity. As has been shown, he initially does not take the political level of experience into consideration as having a major impact on his life, but after meeting Brother Jack he becomes a prominent speaker of the organization and everything changes quickly.

In defining this layer of experience, "politics is viewed as a struggle for power, between those who seek to assert and maintain their power and those who seek to resist it."²² That both the Brotherhood and Ras are engaged in politics is thus visible in the fact that both parties compete for the following of Harlemites via various means, offering alternatives to the hegemonic ideology. "On the other hand, politics is viewed as cooperation" (Chilton, 3) and this is present in the novel in that the Brotherhood holds meetings and actively communicates in their pursuit of power. The group around Ras has similar strategies in that they work together to organize riots, even though in the novel it is primarily Ras who represents his organization as the narrator does not cooperate with his side. Neither of the two parties is involved in the political process by means of legislation or elections as they both primarily strive to gain new members for their cause. And because this process is enabled via persuasion, the importance of language is a common denominator for both factions.

As Chilton goes to argue, "the political process typically involves persuasion and bargaining." (Chilton, 4) This is exactly what happens on a micro-level when Jack convinces the narrator to join the Brotherhood, (Ellison, 274) offering him the position of a speaker. His persuasion tactics involve the invoking of historical figures like "Jefferson, Jackson, Pulaski, Garibaldi, Booker T. Washington, Sun Yat-sen, Danny O'Connell, Abraham Lincoln" (Ellison, 295) and applying the Brotherhood lingo to create a sense of inevitability in the narrator: "I

²² Paul Chilton, *Analysing Political Discourse: Theory and Practice* (Oxon and New York: Routledge, 2004) 3.

can't say too emphatically that we stand at a terminal point in history, at a moment of supreme world crisis. Destruction lies ahead unless things are changed. And things *must* be changed.” (Ellison, 295) By combining those two approaches Jack appeals to the narrator's reason and sentiment, and indeed the narrator admits to being “greatly impressed.” (Ellison, 295) Furthermore, as has been ascertained in the previous chapter, the economical motive also plays a large role in convincing Invisible Man to join this organization, which affirms the bargaining nature of politics in the novel; he later undergoes further training, not unlike brainwashing, to become a real member.

A salient feature for analysis of the Brotherhood is their language, which is presented as standing beyond casual discourse – it is supposedly scientific: “I wish only to point out that a scientific terminology exists’ the man said, emphasizing his words with his pipe. ‘After all, we call ourselves scientists here. Let us speak as scientists’.” (Ellison, 295) The reason for this approach is because “Political discourse involves, among other things, the promotion of representations, and a pervasive feature of representation is the evident need for political speakers to imbue their utterances with evidence, authority and truth.” (Chilton, 23) The use of “scientific language” in the context of gaining new members and establishing a foothold in New York may increase the authority and truthful appearance of the organization. That is because by attempting scientific discourse they are attempting objective truth. This is another method the Brotherhood uses to convince non-members of its legitimacy.

Despite the relatively quick process of absorbing the narrator into the organization, he doubts the Brotherhood from the beginning, as the previous chapters have argued. He even finds their methodology funny: “Suddenly I felt laughter bubbling inside me. I'd have to catch up with this science of history business.” (Ellison, 299) At this point he keeps an ironic distance towards the organization, yet he also aims to become a fully-fledged member, as “the episode of joining the Brotherhood not just provides him with an opportunity to dwell deeper into his

quest for identity. He also utilizes this to scrutinize certain political alternatives available to Blacks,” (Komal, 3) but things do not develop smoothly and even after effective speeches his method is criticized as “wild, hysterical, politically irresponsible and dangerous.” (Callahan, 71) This shows that they are a rigidly organized group with high ambitions, and a crossroads of the layers of the narrator’s individual, social and political experience.

The Brotherhood’s aims are presented as “working for a better world for all people” (Ellison, 292) through “moving them to action.” (Ellison, 293) Their grand scheme requires sacrifice (Ellison, 484) “until a new society is formed.” (Ellison, 484) And since “it is *shared* perceptions of values that defines political associations,” (Chilton, 5) the narrator joins as he identifies with the ideal to change society for the better, and he studies their objective methodology. This retroactively confirms his naivety and optimism, which, as has been shown before, often lead him into trouble. Nonetheless, these are precisely the character traits which, in combination with his growing capacity to critically assess how he is often being taken advantage of (Ellison, 292) and how “with all people I’ll have to be careful” (Ellison, 292) later lead to him discovering some unpleasant truths about the organization.

The Brotherhood’s method of a scientific molding of history is paradoxical, because “history as a discipline began as a confrontation with war propaganda”²³, yet their propaganda is based upon claiming they are at a “terminal point in history” (Ellison, 295) and claim only they know how to mold it; furthermore, the objective attitude ultimately proves their greatest weakness, because “objectivity is a way of speaking in which the bond of solidarity is broken and whose most effective form is the concentration camp. To a man of objectivity, the representant of the ‘thing in itself’, solidarity is only a temptation he must learn to avoid.”²⁴ This becomes particularly palpable later in the story, after the narrator gains a foothold in

²³ Timothy Snyder, *The Road to Unfreedom* (London: Vintage, 2019) 9. All further references will be included in parentheses in the text.

²⁴ Václav Bělohradský, “Kam vedou cesty z postmodernismu,” *Podzim postmodernismu*, ed. Roman Kanda (Prague: Filosofía, 2016) 27. My translation.

Harlem and becomes the spokesman for the community, and the Brotherhood in their grand scientism decide to stop focusing on the district and its inhabitants (Ellison, 482) which is the moment Invisible Man becomes completely disillusioned with the organization as the ideals of building a better society for all people crumbles under behind-the-door decisions. That is a defining moment for both the narrator's development and the organization itself, because it reveals the other side of the scientific attitude: it is a cold and detached apparatus, and this further problematizes the interactions between the novel's individual and political layers.

Hanzi Freinacht argues that "the Left somehow believes, in a subtle but pervasive manner, that solidarity is the highest truth."²⁵ As solidarity and compassion are completely omitted in the Brotherhood, the only thing that is left is their power-mongering and striving for a revolution. That too can be seen from brother Jack's reaction to the galvanized crowds after Invisible Man's speech: "'Listen to them,' he said. 'Just waiting to be told what to do!'" (Ellison, 335) It can be thus argued that the Brotherhood are radical leftists, e.g. communists, because "communist groups believe that a social revolution is necessary to create the idealized state"²⁶ and that is what the Brotherhood is ultimately after all along. This is underpinned by the ascertained mechanisms and behavior of its leading member.

Those effects encourage the narrator to leave. The sterile, radical and detached attitude is something he no longer identifies with as "his questioning of the authorities is a pathway towards achieving higher goals." (Komal, 4) Furthermore "human linguistic and social abilities are not a straitjacket; rather language is linked to the human cognitive ability to engage in free critique and criticism," (Chilton, 29) but the organization is too caught up in inner arguments on proper policy instead of genuinely working towards their professed goal of making a better

²⁵ Hanzi Freinacht, "Beyond Left and Right, At Last", *Metamoderna*. Metamoderna, May 2017 <https://metamoderna.org/beyond-left-and-right-at-long-last> 2. 8. 2019

²⁶ Issitt, Micah. "Communist State." *Salem Press Encyclopedia*, 2019. EBSCO, <https://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&AuthType=ip,shib&db=ers&AN=88390978&lang=cs&site=eds-live&scope=site> 2. 8. 2019

world for everyone, showing Ellison's criticism of leftist radical politics. Even their political gains seem to evaporate because "by pulling its organizers out of Harlem during growing unrest, the Brotherhood has allowed the black Nationalists to redirect energies of Harlemites from forceful political agitation to fruitless violence." (Jackson, 71) This turns the topic to the opposing faction, Ras the Exhorder, later dubbed Destroyer.

As presented in *Invisible Man*, the alternative to communism in regard to Afro-American rights is Ras,

whose name phonetically resembles 'race the destroyer', stands for Black Nationalism in the novel. Ellison underlines the irony in the agenda of nationalism by stating that Ras considers Blacks as a category like 'The Brotherhood'. Ras attains power by adhering to the prescribed identities weaved by others. He even propels people to follow it and thereby hampers the progress and empowerment of the Black community. (Komal, 4)

His method of gaining political power and followers is by means of a rhetoric that confuses even the brainwashed Tod Clifton and narrator. (Ellison, 358) This is a different take on using the power of language from that of the Brotherhood, nonetheless since "the doing of politics is predominantly constituted in language" (Chilton, 6) it is effective in its own right. His stated political aim is that blacks should stick together for the sake of their race, and to not collaborate with whites at all, (Ellison, 357) and that the use of violence is a legitimate means of achieving political goals: "It's three hundred years of black blood to build this white mahn's civilization and wahn't be wiped out in a minute. Blood calls for blood! You remember that." (Ellison, 362) By using this language, Ras appeals primarily to emotion, and not to reason, as he invokes feelings of pride and injustice in the black men.

As such, Ras's construction of political identity is primarily achieved by defining and making acute the binary opposition between black and white, and he advocates a race war.

“The conservative and the fascist believe in their hearts that fierce competition” ... “ultimately defines social reality.”²⁷ Ras with his raw violence, powerful rhetoric and advocating of violence against whites thus represents the binary opposition to the communist Brotherhood and its scientific, scheming approach to politics, and the narrator navigates between the two poles. To reiterate, “political actors recognize the role of language because its use has effects, and because politics *is* very largely the use of language,” (Chilton, 14) and *Invisible Man* makes this very palpable – Tod Clifton is ultimately torn apart by the powerful polarities as he decides to leave the Brotherhood, “plunge outside history” (Ellison, 364) and is later shot dead during a riot selling dolls that symbolically represent how blacks are manipulated by the Brotherhood, a feature of the novel’s political layer directly affecting that of the individual.

As Timothy Snyder argues in his 2019 *The Road to Unfreedom*, “fascism of the 1920s and 1930s, Ilyin’s era, had three core features: it celebrated will and violence over reason and law; it proposed a leader with a mystical connection to his people; and it characterized globalization as a conspiracy rather than a set of problems.” (Snyder, 16) As has been previously shown, Ras indeed prioritizes will and violence over reason and law in the struggle of Afro-Americans against the whites. Furthermore, his epitomizing of racial stereotypes and donning of a chieftain costume during the final riot can be read as him attempting to invoke a mystical connection with the blacks. And, finally, he does make a statement bordering on defining a white conspiracy against the blacks: “So now he use the dregs and wahnt you black young men to do his dirty work. They betray you and you betray the black people. They tricking you, mahn.” (Ellison, 359) And even though on one level he is right in that in the novel the white establishment exploits Afro-Americans, it still also proves that Ras fulfills the criteria to be considered a fascist because he uses these methods to further his political cause. This proves

²⁷ Hanzi Freinacht, “Beyond Left and Right, At Last”, *Metamoderna*. Metamoderna, May 2017 <https://metamoderna.org/beyond-left-and-right-at-long-last> 2. 8. 2019

that the two ideologies used to approach the race question in *Invisible Man* are extremist by nature, which then has the result of the narrator leaving political life and hiding underground.

Looking back at the socio-political system in *Invisible Man*, “their society is one that tells them they must play certain racial stereotypes, advocating oppressive white capitalist ideology, violent black nationalism, or radical leftism.” (Avery, 2) The narrator navigates through these in the span of his narration and to various degrees identifies with them. His involvement in them is mediated via language, but he never fully identifies with any party. “Humans do not always, or are not always able, to resist the constraints of social conventions or political ideologies for the use of language, the ready-made molds for the thinking of thoughts” (Chilton, 27) and the narrator is the exception to this rule, because since he is constantly in motion forward due to the Bildungsroman dynamic, he overcomes these constraints and social conventions, showing how the individual in the novel is larger than the social or political in his own right. It is ultimately the pure chaos of Rinehartism that serves as the catalyst for him leaving public political life and to a forging of a personal politics.

It is during the final visit to Brother Hambro that the narrator realizes he can no longer identify with the ideology: “I could feel some deep change. It was as though my discovery of Rinehart had opened a gulf between us over which, though we sat within touching distance, our voices barely carried and then fell flat, without an echo.” (Ellison, 482) It is the tipping point for his final disillusionment with public politics, because after “becoming Rinehart” he realizes how

Rinehart is myth and dash, being and non-being, a well-known Harlemite who experiences life in competing modalities, a man who crosses boundaries sacred and secular, an image of confrontation and reserve, a man whose life is a continuum of intensity. He holds the offices of numbers runner, pimp, gambler, preacher, nurturer of the spiritual and

material comfort, arbiter of dreams. (Jackson, 14)

Contemplating Rinehart further, he figures out that “his world was possibility and he knew it. He was years ahead of me and I was a fool.” ... “The world in which we lived was without boundaries. A vast seething, hot world of fluidity, and Rine the rascal was at home.” (Ellison, 479) He discovers the world beyond the discourse of politics, a world of genuine agency and thus freedom. That is to become his personal politics, and it is genuine because he had come into close contact with the other available options yet not a single one of them would affirm him as a person, thus transcending the limited realms of binary politics in an unjust society and achieving essentially infinite possibility within the realm of the individual.

To conclude the system of politics in the novel, the way it is presented lends credit to the reading of it being a layer of experience intimately interwoven with the layer of the society, but it ultimately cannot accommodate the variegated inner experience of an individual. It is Ellison’s critique of radical politics which present themselves as emancipatory, but which in reality are mere means for manipulating the masses or instigating senseless violence. “The narrator’s stance, therefore, is not indicative of a politics of retreat but of the politics of affirming, perhaps as a spokesman, the identity which he comes to be increasingly aware of during his long voyage of self-discovery.” (Ghosh, 6) It is because the available options are too radical and requiring a loss of individuality that the narrator comes to realize he cannot genuinely solve the burning questions of his time through them. On the backdrop of the complex interaction of the individual and political layers, Ellison uses a show-don’t-tell manner to answer the narrator’s question “could politics ever be an expression of love?” (Ellison, 435) by illustrating how the individual cannot trust the political, because the political is only manipulating him while being inherently embedded into the social, which, as has been shown, is also poised against the individual.

Conclusion

This brings the analysis to full circle. By means of employing the Bildungsroman format, *Invisible Man* does not only serve to critique an unjust society that purports to be free; it shows the paradoxes and clashes between the layers of personal maturation, societal influence and political life on the example of one person. The narrator learns his value through direct experience with those who perceive him as having none. “The virtue of individualism becomes visible in the throes of our moment, but it will abide only if we see history and ourselves within it, and accept our share of responsibility.” (Snyder, 35) It cannot be, however, through the authority of others – it requires that one traverses the labyrinth of the contemporary world and learns to triangulate themselves on their own terms, even if it requires shutting oneself off from the world under a manhole.

The individual eventually isolates himself from the social and political layers of experience. While this was the logical step for him to undertake to conclude his trajectory, there is also the counterargument of Martin Škabraha:

When the postmodern subject resigns on his responsibility for forming the world, he can be *cool*, relaxed, because nobody wants any sacrifices of him; he just enjoys life. But it is precisely not having that something worth sacrificing when life loses meaning and the subject, as result of “relaxedness” falls into skepticism and nihilism. The way out should obviously be the subject gaining courage to identify with something once again. That, primarily, requires identifying with one’s life, no matter how much it stares right into the face of death.²⁸

This too the narrator realizes as he reflects that “perhaps that’s my greatest social crime, I’ve overstayed my hibernation, since there is a possibility that even an invisible man has a socially

²⁸ Martin Škabraha, “Osamělé průlomky,” *Podzim postmodernismu*, ed. Roman Kanda (Praha: Filosofia, 2016): 35. My translation.

responsible role to play.” (Ellison, 561) At the height of his understanding he is aware that he cannot live underground forever, that he may have something to offer to the world without repeating the mistakes he had been doing across the span of his maturation. His future is speculative because “the reader never actually witnesses his reemergence. At the novel’s end, we are left to wonder if these repeated intentions will be fulfilled,” (Jarenski, 20) but one thing is for certain: he is no longer a naïve pawn that follows authority, but a fully-fledged self-aware agent in the melting pot of civilization.

By the end of the novel, the narrator has experienced many often-unpleasant moments through which he matured. “His disappointments have made him wiser for he has learned to see beneath the surface. He has very well understood what it meant to play the game without believing in it” (Ghosh, 5) because he has integrated his grandfather’s advice, and with that the circle of the plot and framework comes full circle when he comes to equate his identity with invisibility. And “while invisibility may seem like a position of powerlessness, the narrator recognizes the need to reclaim invisibility as agency after witnessing the appropriative results of visibility in the psychosocial and economic spheres.” (Jarenski, 17) He is the crossroads of the three prominent layers of experience in the novel, and his developmental trajectory was always going to lead to his realizing of his paradoxical state in society, because “it is only after he discovers his invisibility that he finds his life assuming meaning and significance.” (Ghosh 3)

Invisible Man is ultimately an encapsulation of any person’s search for identity in an uncaring world. The author’s choice of genre for the novel is effective in that it “facilitates Ellison’s didactic intention to represent an African American subject who is at once a complex individual, an allegorical universal figure, and most significantly to the text’s themes, an authentic representation of what it means to be an American.” (Avery, 2) However, it is also a modern variation on the theme of growing up and shedding one’s illusions regarding the

workings of society and politics through direct experience. What makes the nameless narrator a fresher and ultimately more real example is that he learns that reinforcing deep-rooted oppressive power structures is nothing next to the empowering state of being a living, breathing, sovereign individual. His example shows that this state is attainable, and it is all the more valid as most will never have to grapple with even half of the difficulties the narrator was forced to endure in Ellison's novel.

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