

To My Mother

The woman who introduced me to our own stories, and taught me to create my own.

Drew University
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Wright and Ellison:
Icons of African American Protest Literature

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By

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ABSTRACT

Wright and Ellison: Icons of African American Protest Literature analyzes the novels *Native Son* by Richard Wright (1940) and *Invisible Man* by Ralph Ellison (1952), and tries to determine the traits that make a successful African American protest novel. Both these novels are part of the African American literary canon and are noteworthy for challenging the previous conventions of African American literature, both in form and in content. Wright wrote *Native Son* with the explicit intent of creating a work of protest literature. However, the novel's deterministic tone and construction of a violent, aggressive, and static central character worked only to reinforce racist stereotypes rather than challenge them. On the other hand, the more philosophical and satirical tone of *Invisible Man*, and its educated, rational, and dynamic protagonist are more effective in confronting racist attitudes. Based on the analysis of these two novels, it becomes clear that a successful African American protest novel opposes and undermines the ideologies that perpetuate American racism. To this end, it is well served if it constructs a dynamic agent of protest who not only challenges negative stereotypes, but also changes over the course of the novel, or takes action, thereby inviting the reader to shift his or her thinking and actively participate in protesting racial injustice.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

i.	Introduction	1
ii.	Chapter I - Bigger Thomas: A Self-Fulfilling Prophecy	10
iii.	Chapter II - The Invisible Man: The Protester	36
iv.	Conclusion	69
v.	Bibliography	73

INTRODUCTION

The protest novel, which falls into the category of protest literature, is a response to a prevailing oppressive problem. This includes, but is not limited to, gender, race, sexuality, socio-economics, politics, and age. *1984*, *The Jungle*, *The Bluest Eye*, *The Yellow Wallpaper*, and even *The Scarlet Letter* are all examples of protest literature. The aim of this type of work is to provoke thought and change within its readers to hopefully cause action against preexisting oppressive conditions. Many protest novels have been banned or challenged by schools throughout the United States on account of their content or message. Many of these challenged or banned books have been part of the African American literary canon.

The protest novel has been a major part of African American literature since African American literature came into existence. African American protest literature usually focuses on racial inequality in America, challenges negative stereotypes, and often offers solutions to inequality. Some even argue that the very existence of African American literature falls under the category of protest literature because it presents an alternative to the white view of African Americans, which in turn is a protest against racism (Bruce 601). African American protest literature dates as far back as the mid-eighteenth century, originating with the work of female poet Phillis Wheatley. During the antebellum period there was an explosion of slave narratives, supporting abolition, and falling squarely into the category of protest literature.

By offering society a different view of African Americans, authors challenge the collective thought of white America. Slave narratives such as *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave* where Frederick Douglas details his self-education and emancipation, or novels such as *Quicksand* and *Passing* by Nella Larson that provide a window

into upper-class African American life allow readers to step into a world of educated, self-reflecting African Americans, a far cry from stereotypical images of them. But just because a work of protest literature protests against racism, it does not mean that it is successful. Most novels of any genre use a main character to represent the morals or values that the author is trying to convey. This is especially true for African American protest literature because the main character will typically be the agent that challenges audiences. The main character then becomes vital to the success of the protest novel.

Richard Wright and Ralph Ellison arguably have written two of the most important examples of African American protest literature of the twentieth century: *Native Son* and *Invisible Man*, respectively. First published in 1940, *Native Son* tells the story of a young black man in the 1930s named Bigger Thomas, who is tried for murder because he kills the daughter of a rich, white family. Ellison's *Invisible Man*, published in 1952 and set in the 1920s to 1930s, traces the journey of a nameless African American protagonist as he tries to find a purpose in life. To answer the question of what constitutes a successful protest novel I will look at these two icons of the African American protest canon, focus on the function and agency of the main characters and the potential effects that they could have on readers.

Scholars such as Irving Howe argue that *Native Son* is a piece of naturalistic literature (Howe 355). Naturalism is a style of writing that uses realism to explore how the environment can shape a person, and writers were influenced by Charles Darwin's ideas on evolution. Wright was extremely focused on stressing that the environment in early twentieth-century America had negative effects on African Americans. Using Chicago as a microcosm for America, Wright illustrates the adverse effects racism has on an African American, specifically a young black man. Though Wright never stated who his intended audience was, because of the style and tone

of the novel, as well as some insight from some of his essays, one can infer that he was directing this novel towards a white audience. *Native Son* is meant to serve as a warning for white America by presenting the potential consequences of its racial inequality. Wright's *Native Son* has an aggressive tone, continuously reminding the reader of the effects that racial inequality has on an African American man, and the terrible results that it can produce not only for the individual but also for the community.

Wright came to the decision to write in such a tone based on the response of his previous book. Before *Native Son* he wrote *Uncle Tom's Children*, which was a collection of short stories. Wright believed it failed as a form of protest literature because even "bankers' daughters were able to cry over it". He was disappointed with the response because he believed that people were only affected by these stories through their emotions, which are fleeting and quick to change, rather than prompted to take real action "I swore to myself," he writes, "that if I ever wrote another book, no one would weep over it; that it would be so hard and deep that they would have to face it without the consolation of tears" (Wright 454).

While *Native Son* does have characteristics similar to naturalistic fiction, Irving Howe also explains Wright's departure from this genre in his essay "Black Boys and Native Sons." Howe writes,

The usual naturalistic novel is written with detachment, as if by a scientist surveying a field of operations; it is a novel in which the writer withdraws from a detested world and coldly piles up the evidence for detesting it. *Native Son*, though preserving some of the devices of the naturalistic novel, deviates sharply from its characteristic tone...*Native Son* is a work of assault rather than withdrawal; the author yields himself in part to a vision of nightmare. (356)

There is definitely a deviation from the traditional tone of the naturalistic novel, as evidenced by many of Wright's passages, including Bessie's rape scene. Wright falls into the horror of the nightmare, and the novel spends most of its energy on conveying this horror to the audience. Wright is targeting a white audience and wants them to face the cold, hard facts of racism in a rational manner. This backfires because *Native Son* sensationalizes the African American experience in America, the tone akin to a thriller or crime novel.

Commenting on the novel's effects on white and black readers, Howe writes, "A blow at the white man, the novel forced him to recognize himself as an oppressor. A blow at the black man, the novel forced him to recognize the cost of his submission..." (355). I agree that *Native Son* has the potential to show African Americans their complicity in their own subjugation; however, Bigger's characterization as a violent, aggressive, murdering rapist who is rightfully convicted for his crimes undermines Wright's protest because he resembles stereotypical representations of black men. Bigger's actions seem more of an animalistic attack which, to white America, is only horror and not an act that needs to be examined in its social and historical context.

While Wright was explicitly writing a protest novel, Ellison argued that he was trying to create a work of art instead of limiting it to one specific goal. *Invisible Man* is considered a part of protest literature, though not all agree that it is a protest novel. On *Invisible Man*, Dickson D. Bruce, Jr., writes "Although not primarily a protest novel, an exposé and indictment of racism was central to its significance" (603). I disagree with Bruce, and believe that *Invisible Man* is a protest novel, both in form and content. The significant factor in protest literature is the challenging of racial stereotypes which Ellison does effectively with his main character. Educated, well-mannered, and motivated, Ellison's protagonist has the ability to reflect, which

allows him to change internally over the course of the novel. Also, the very style of *Invisible Man* is different from its predecessors and changed how black authors would write afterwards. Ralph Reckley, Sr., believes that “Ralph Ellison, more so than any other Black writer, brought change to the African American (and also to the American) literary canon because he refused to accept prescribed formulas for depicting the Black American (254); and Danielle C. Heard writes that the *Invisible Man* “...paved the way for a new kind of satirical novel that employed African American comic sensibilities to deeply explore the absurdity of American racism and critique the problems of black protest without restraint or fear of censorship” (393). Breaking away from the naturalist formula where authors would describe the horrors of being black in America, Ellison chose to look at humanity, and how black America fits within it. Ellison explains, “...what else was there to sustain our will to persevere but laughter? And could it be that there was a subtle triumph hidden in such laughter that I had missed, but one which still was more affirmative than raw anger?” (“Introduction” xvi). His style of writing challenged the previous formulas of protest novels, which is in itself a protest.

Invisible Man harkens back to the works of Hemingway, Faulkner, and Malraux, as well as slave narratives, all of which were Ellison’s inspirations and muses. In his interviews and essays, Ellison never stated for whom he was writing this novel. Based on the text, as well as the aims of the narrator, I believe that Ellison was writing for a black audience. *Native Son* was a warning bell for white America to wake up, and *Invisible Man* does the same for black America. To write such a novel, Ellison explains:

...I was forced to conceive of a novel unburdened by the narrow naturalism which has led, after so many triumphs, to the final and unrelieved despair which marks so much of our current fiction. I was to dream of a prose which was flexible, and

swift as American change is swift, confronting the inequalities and brutalities of our society forthrightly, but yet thrusting forth its images of hope, human fraternity and individual self-realization. (“Introduction” 105)

Ellison believed that naturalism was too narrow a genre in which to truly explore the African American experience. One can see this belief reflected in *Invisible Man*, especially with the personality of the main character. Ellison desired a “flexible” form of writing that could truly respond to American change. His main character is constantly changing, and even by the end of the novel goes through a superficial change when he takes on the visage of Rinehart, a man who is a runner, a gambler, a pimp, and a preacher all in one. By constantly reacting and adapting to situations, the Invisible Man is able to realize Ellison’s goal of creating a thought-provoking novel.

Ellison’s main character internalizes overt racism as well as microaggressions, and uses his knowledge to determine one thing: he has to make a change. The novel is a bildungsroman, a coming of age epic where the protagonist learns more about his society, and more importantly, himself along the way. He concludes that he needs to separate himself from society to find his identity, and in doing so realizes that he needs to make himself visible. This self-responsibility is meant to serve as an example for black America to follow. African Americans are rendered invisible not only by white America, but also because they allow themselves to be oppressed. In his novel, Ellison advocates for intelligent and rational protest, vastly different from Wright’s protest of aggression and violence. The tone of *Invisible Man* is much more sedate and calm than that of *Native Son*, and the main character is one with whom the audience would be able to identify. The main character Wright produced was one that the audience would want to avoid

and would therefore begin to change their opinions and actions, while Ellison tried to create a rational character to garner sympathy and understanding.

Young enough to be the children or grandchildren of slaves, Wright and Ellison wrote in a time when racism could not be ignored. The Jim Crow laws were still in effect, beginning in the South in 1877, and maintaining hold on much of Southern Society until the Civil Rights Act of 1964. The Jim Crow laws enforced "...social separation of the races, but more brutally included lynching and mob violence, the manipulation of the justice system, inequality of education, economic subjugation, and the elimination of black suffrage" (Ring 417). Both Ellison and Wright were born and raised in the South, very much aware of separatism and racism. It was the Jim Crow laws that allowed tragedies such as the Scottsboro Boys in 1931 who were falsely accused and wrongfully tried for raping a white woman, and Emmett Till in 1955 who was brutally tortured and murdered by two white men for supposedly flirting with a white woman. Because of the codified racism in America, these young men did not receive a fair trial, nor were they protected during or after their trials. During this period there was an increase in lynching. The Ku Klux Klan was heavily active as well. There was also a proliferation of race riots. According to Timothy B. Tyson, "Researchers at Fisk University recorded 242 racial battles in forty-seven cities in 1943 alone. On 20 June, a riot in Detroit left thirty-four dead and hundreds injured. Less than two months later, six African Americans were killed, hundreds injured, and an estimated five million dollars worth of property destroyed during an upheaval in Harlem" (148).

One can see the influence of such events in Wright's and Ellison's novels. Similar to the tragedy of the Scottsboro Boys, Wright's novel includes a trial where the main character is accused of raping a white woman, and Ellison includes an interaction between his protagonist

and a white woman where she asks him to fulfill her black rapist fantasy. Ellison illustrates a scene where there is a row of streetlamps with white bodies hanging from them—mannequins that some boys strung up as a joke, and possibly even a warning. Both novels include riots; *Native Son* implies that there are riots happening during the trial, and *Invisible Man* has the main character actively participate in a riot. Both novels are saturated with allusions to real life events, which is what makes them even more powerful.

I argue that of these two iconic novels, it is Ellison's *Invisible Man* that truly succeeds as a protest novel, and that though *Native Son* is a piece of literature that will always be important in the African American canon of protest literature, it ultimately falls short as a protest novel. Wright's and Ellison's main agents of protest are their main characters, young black men of the same age who struggle to live in the North. Wright's central character does not protest so much as he illustrates and reinforces negative stereotypes. The novel presents an example of what the black youth of America will come to because of their environment, but Wright offers no alternative to this lifestyle. Because of the fatalist tone set at the beginning of the novel, Wright does not allow the reader to be able to critique the system that Bigger is a part of. Because Bigger is doomed to fail at the beginning, this suggests that there is no way out. Everywhere there was the fear of the black rapist, black murderer; this was a stereotype accepted by white supremacists and spread as propaganda against African Americans. This story does not inspire action against the system, just horror and a compelling-grotesque. By using these same stereotypes to create a character, Wright reinforces them instead of challenging them. In a way, Wright is doing nothing more than telling the tragic story of a young black man and evoking emotions of pity and fear rather than action.

Ellison does the opposite. He challenges negative stereotypes by offering a character who is articulate and rational. While he is naïve at the beginning of the novel, by the end he learns and grows. This change is meant to inspire change in the reader, especially black readers, and this allows us to critique the system which holds African Americans down. I agree with Ellison about the limitations of naturalism. Wright's use of the genre led him to create a character that lacks the agency to conduct a protest. While Wright illustrates the unjustness of racist America without offering an alternative to this stereotype, or a solution to inequality, Ellison highlights the subjectivity of his dynamic character who acts as an agent of change. The Jim Crow Laws ended because of the Civil Rights Movement, predominantly led by black leaders, and the movement, too, was predominantly black. It was the black community that had to move and initiate change. Ellison's novel might be seen as a guideline for such change.

CHAPTER I

Bigger Thomas: A Self-Fulfilling Prophecy

Native Son, by Richard Wright, was first published in 1940, and gained success after being mentioned in the Book-Of-The-Month-Club, a monthly sales club where patrons could order new books each month, where more than 200,000 copies were sold, the equivalent of half a million today (Rampersad xxi). Richard Wright wrote this novel to be a protest novel, focusing on the plight of African Americans through a fictional narrative. Wright was raging against the social conditions of African Americans during his time period, and this novel was his response. In *Native Son* Wright's intention was to show that the violence and hatred that America directs towards African Americans will lead to violent actions by African Americans. His main character, Bigger Thomas, is his agent of protest. Afraid that people would misread Bigger's actions, Wright stated,

I felt that if I drew the picture of Bigger truthfully, there would be many reactionary whites who would try to make of him something I did not intend. And yet, and this is what made it difficult, I knew that I could not write Bigger convincingly if I did not depict him as he *was*: that is, resentful towards whites, sullen, angry, ignorant, emotionally unstable, depressed and unaccountably elated at times, and unable even, because of his own lack of inner organization which American oppression has fostered in him, to unite with the members of his own race. ("How Bigger Was Born" 448)

This portrayal of Bigger, however, results in a stereotypical narrative of a dangerous, murderous, rapist black boy, a popular choice in naturalist African American protest literature.

Native Son is divided into three books: “Fear,” “Flight,” and “Fate.” Each book contains key turning points in Bigger’s life. In “Fear” we are introduced to Bigger and his world, and we see the murder of Mary Dalton, the daughter of an influential family for whom Bigger works. In “Flight” Bigger escapes suspicion from the murder, includes his girlfriend Bessie in his plan, whom he later rapes and kills, and is finally caught by the police after a rooftop chase. In the final book, “Fate,” Bigger is tried and convicted for his murders, but is defended by a communist lawyer, Max, who performs a philosophically reflective defense on Bigger’s behalf. Max tries to reconcile Bigger’s actions with his social environment, justifying his crimes. Still, despite this defense, the list of crimes piled behind Bigger, as well as his adamant justifications for his actions, pushes Bigger into the role of an unsympathetic character. At the beginning of the novel Wright presents Bigger as a sympathetic character, but as the novel progresses he becomes less and less relatable and sympathy gives way to contempt.

Though Wright may have created a triumph in African American literature, Bigger’s character arguably undermines Wright’s goal to create an African American protest novel. Instead of presenting to America the future result of its racism, Wright’s protagonist is too unforgivable to be sympathetic. James Robert Saunders explains that as Wright “...gives Thomas a certain capacity for insight, we are made to question the motivation for violent action and made to perceive how alienation can result in catastrophic social harm” (36). While Wright invites the reader to speculate why Bigger would go to such extreme lengths, this reflection on Bigger’s social conditions is tempered by his depraved actions. In other words, *Native Son* is a powerful novel, yet is one that fails to engender an emotional connection between the reader and

Bigger that would encourage the reader to question the social condition in which African Americans were living.

From the very opening of the novel you can see that Bigger Thomas is two things: black and doomed. Wright begins *Native Son* with a domestic scene in the Thomas' home. They all share a one room apartment forcing brothers Buddy and Bigger to turn away from their sister and mother, Vera and Mrs. Thomas, as they change clothes. Wright takes the time to specifically describe the color of Bigger and Buddy, Bigger's brother, as "black," though Vera is "brown-skinned" (Wright 4). Further into the novel it becomes apparent that Mrs. Thomas favors Vera while she scorns Bigger, and seems to be worried about Buddy following in Bigger's footsteps; we see the dichotomy between Bigger's blackness and Vera's "brownness." Because Wright makes a distinction between their skin colors, the readers can infer that there is a correlation between the favoritism of the children and the lightness of their skin color. Throughout the novel the word "black" is continuously used in reference to Bigger. His mother describes him as "Just plain dumb black crazy" (8).

After we meet the Thomases, a new character is introduced, a rat. Not just any rat, but a huge "black rat" with long, yellow tusks (5). After some commotion, Bigger kills the rat by throwing a skillet at it and then proceeds to pummel its head with a shoe, cursing at it all the while; "He kicked the splintered box out of the way and the flat black body of the rat lay exposed, its two long yellow tusks showing distinctly. Bigger took a shoe and pounded the rat's head, crushing it, cursing hysterically: 'You sonofabitch'" (6). Including the description of the "black" rat causes an association between Bigger and the rat. Bigger becomes the rat. His killing the rat with excessive force is not only an example of the rage and violence that lives right underneath Bigger's skin, but also a warning of what is to come; Bigger will be his own demise.

Wright uses similar language to describe the rat and Bigger. In its last moments of defiance “The rat’s belly pulsed with fear” (6). When Bigger believes that Gus will agree with the plan to rob Blum’s store, Bigger’s “...stomach tightened as though he were expecting a blow...” (26). Both the rat and Bigger have similar situations of fear and violence and their physical reactions are similar as well.

The readers are thrown into Bigger’s world, and his first appearance demonstrates his potential for violence. Looking at Bigger’s actions over the course of the novel, readers see that the killing of the rat is arguably the action which he has performed that can be considered “good.” The Thomases live in a cramped, one-room apartment in the ghetto of Chicago’s Southside. The living conditions are almost inhumane with rats being a common sight; Wright states that his inspiration for the opening scene came from seeing them all over Chicago, and hearing stories about “children being bitten by rats in their bed” (“How Bigger Was Born” 460). Bigger is doing his family a great service by killing the rat. This also demonstrates Bigger’s ability to become physically active when needed. But this small victory is only won with violence. Bigger is only able to communicate through violence and hatred, which eventually leads to murder and rape. Furthermore, after the rat is killed, Bigger picks it up and taunts Vera with it, causing her to faint, which sparks a rant about Bigger from their mother. She blames their family’s poverty on Bigger’s lack of responsibility, and even goes so far as to tell Bigger “...Sometimes I wonder why I birthed you” (Wright 8). Mrs. Thomas also points out that Bigger is selfish. He has been offered a relief job, and the only reason he is taking it is because of threats to cut off the family’s food. Wright offers a small amount of redemption for Bigger when he privately acknowledges his own helplessness:

He hated his family because he knew that they were suffering and that he was powerless to help them. He knew that the moment he allowed himself to feel to its fullness how they lived, the shame and misery of their lives, he would be swept out of himself with fear and despair...He knew that the moment he allowed what his life meant to enter fully into his consciousness, he would either kill himself or someone else. So he denied himself and acted tough. (10)

As a young African American man in the 1930s, Bigger's options for supporting his family are far and few between. Ralph Ellison, a contemporary and close friend of Wright, explains in his essay "Richard Wright's Blues" that black men during that time period had little to no choice in their futures, and that Wright reflects that in his novels:

They could accept the role created for them by the white and perpetually resolve the resulting conflicts through the hope and emotional catharsis of Negro religion; they could repress their dislike of Jim Crow social relations while striving for a middle way of respectability, becoming – consciously or unconsciously – the accomplices of the white in oppressing their brothers; or they could reject the situation, adopt a criminal attitude, and carry on an unceasing psychological scrimmage with the whites, which often flared forth into physical violence (65).

Bigger rejects all options but the last; he rejects his situation, adopts a criminal attitude, and has a psychological scrimmage with Mary Dalton, which escalated to physical violence, though Mary is not aware of Bigger's antagonism towards her. Mrs. Thomas implies that Bigger has been offered several job opportunities before and has turned down all of them. To accept a relief job is to admit that Bigger's life is limited and controlled by everyone else besides him; that is, he is accepting his life based on the terms and conditions of others. Bigger's pride is what is keeping

him from helping his family but Bigger refuses to accept his situation, and refuses to affect positive change. Bigger rejects the jobs because that would be the acceptance of his social conditions, which would be an acknowledgement of his own helplessness. Instead he chooses to block out reality, which will later prove to be a fatal flaw.

While this situation is pitiable, Bigger still refuses to be a proactive character. Although the reader may be able to sympathize with Bigger and even relate to his situation, the reader may also feel frustrated by his stasis. As a contemporary reader of the novel, I can understand that Wright is painting a picture of a rock and a hard place for African Americans in the 1930s. Wright even provides Bigger with a dream, wanting to become a pilot, though Bigger understands that he will never be able to achieve this: “We live here and they live there. We black and they white. They got things and we ain’t. They do things and we can’t” (20). Bigger has an understanding of his lack of mobility, but despite this, Bigger is extremely one dimensional and though he is “occasionally cunning...there is little that is subtle about his intelligence or refined about his emotions” (Rampersad xi). This lack of character depth can prove to be frustrating for the reader because of his lack of insight; it is hard to connect to a character with little emotional or intellectual depth when written in such a way as Bigger is. Bigger understands his position, but does not seriously question it. It is evident by his actions, such as theft, that Bigger is willing to react to a situation, but never stops to think of the consequences.

Within the next few pages, we see that Bigger projects his own fear and shortcomings onto his friend Gus. Bigger and his friends, Jack, G.H., and Gus, have been robbing from black store owners; Blum would be their first white store owner victim. Bigger’s decision to pull off this robbery that day was made by a combination of frustration with his situation, and the need to

reestablish himself as a man of action. In other words, Bigger's drive behind robbing Blum is a way to prove to himself that he has some sort of agency against his social environment. Almost immediately after telling his group of friends he wants to rob the bank, Bigger changes his mind because he *is* scared. Gus would be the only person of the group to go against Bigger's words, and Bigger is afraid of this. If Gus were to say yes, then they would have to go through with the plan. If Gus were to say no, Bigger could unload his emotional frustration onto Gus. Gus picks up on Bigger's emotions and calls Bigger out on his fear and his temper. In response, Bigger's thoughts are filled with violent images: "He could stab Gus with his knife; he could slap him; he could kick him; he could trip him up and send him sprawling on his face. He could do a lot of things to Gus for making him feel this way" (Wright 27). Instead of reflecting on his emotions, Bigger targets Gus. He also tries to justify his fear by making the entire plan seem foolish. He reasons that his job at the Daltons would be a much better payoff than robbing a small store, and he wouldn't want to ruin this job opportunity by getting caught. Bigger is only willing to change his position on accepting a relief job when it is his emotional security at stake. He now chooses to see the positives of having a job over robbing a white man. Bigger is so stricken by fear of robbing a white man that he is willing to strip himself of his previous pride and dignity.

One could argue that Bigger has learned to live his life in such a way that anger is his only form of expression. Yet we see that Jack, G.H., and Gus, boys who must have had very similar lives, are better able to handle themselves. In fact, some of the boys even expressed their uneasiness at robbing a white store owner. G.H. says, "I thought we said we wasn't never going to use a gun...And we ain't bothered no white folks before" (24). Bigger argues against their fears not because he wants the money, but because of the affirmation it will give him. Bigger is alienating himself from his only group of friends; he is isolating himself from his race. We see

that Bigger has truly severed all ties from his group after he threatens Gus with his knife and makes Gus show subordination by licking the knife, simply because Gus arrived four minutes after the agreed meeting time, still giving them plenty of time to rob the store. Bigger seizes upon Gus' tardiness. He feels relief at not having to go through with the plan, and anger that he *does* feel relief. It is here that Bigger breaks his connections: "...he knew that what had happened today put an end to his being with them in any more jobs" (42). This isolation causes Bigger to become an anomaly; he is a black man in a white man's world and doesn't belong, but also he cannot accept his position among his own, and he separates himself from them. James Baldwin purports that Wright's novel "...reflect(s) – and at no point interprets- ... the isolation of the Negro within his own group and the resulting fury of impatient scorn" (Baldwin 35). I agree that Bigger is an isolated character, but I also disagree with Baldwin, in part, because Wright does interpret this isolation by not only isolating him emotionally, but also physically. By Baldwin's standard, Wright does not interpret the psychological reason for this isolation, but because of Bigger's physical and emotional distance, it is clearly understood that he is an island. Bigger is not a person who truly wants to relate to anyone but himself, which is why he is separate from his family, shunned from his gang, left alone in his scheme after he kills Bessie, and thus left alone at the end of the novel.

While Bigger's isolation is a technique Wright uses to garner sympathy from readers, it is tempered by the fact that Bigger has placed himself in that position. Again, this contradiction allows the reader to potentially fault Bigger for being selfish and not being an agent of change. While Baldwin believes that Wright demonstrates the social conditions of African Americans without giving pause for reflection, I argue that Wright didn't allow for reflection, but actually unintentionally pushes against it. Baldwin agrees that Bigger is a character that could have been

the figure that Wright intended him to be. Baldwin purports, “The idea of Bigger as a warning boomerangs...*Native Son* does not convey the altogether savage paradox of the American Negro’s situation...” (42). Wright grants Bigger a lot of power by giving him the ability to choose, though the choices are slim. Bigger *chooses* to rob Blum and then *chooses* not to, just as he *chooses* to go work for the Daltons. Because Bigger is granted these options but continuously reinforces negative stereotypes of African American men, he is not an admirable character. Because Bigger is Wright’s agent of protest in the novel, the protest is centered on Bigger, his actions, and his thoughts. Wright tries to explain all of Bigger’s actions by the end of the novel, but as a whole, Bigger is not a character who successfully conveyed Wright’s intentions. Rather Bigger, as Baldwin stated, produced a boomerang effect.

The first major turning point of the novel is when Bigger accidentally murders Mary Dalton. The entire situation came about because Mary was drunk and needed help to her room. Wright is very descriptive in his passage, illustrating minute details that thrust the reader into Bigger’s thoughts during the scene: “He held her in his arms again, listening in the darkness. His senses reeled from the scent of her hair and skin. She was much smaller than Bessie, his girl, but much softer. Her face was buried in his shoulder; his arms tightened about her” (Wright 84). Wright clearly illustrates that to Bigger, Mary Dalton is the “other.” Since he met her, he held this fearful fascination for her, scared of her power and fascinated by her otherness. All his life Bigger has never felt in control of his future or actions because, during that time, his race was a handicap. Now he has a physical representation of all that suppresses him in his hands. For this one moment, Bigger ignores the danger he is in; he is completely absorbed by Mary. His only way to get over his fear of the other is to dominate it, and he does so through Mary.

There has been a wide range of commentary on the issue of sexual relations between black men and white women. Shelly Jarenski wrote extensively on the issue of black men's bodies in *Invisible Man* and I find her discussion to transfer quite well to *Native Son*. Jarenski shares the thought with other scholars that white women represent America. Jarenski notes the blonde at the battle royale in *Invisible Man* who has a small tattoo of the American flag painted on her lower stomach, or over her womb. The Invisible Man writes on the stomach of Sybil after she passes out drunk. Mary Dalton is seen in a commercial at the movie theatre, representing the perfect American female;

Then Bigger saw in close-up the picture of a slight, smiling white girl whose waist was encircled by the arms of a man. He heard the commentator's voice: *Mary Dalton, daughter of Chicago's Henry Dalton, 4605 Drexel Boulevard, shocks society by spurning the boys of La Salle Street and the Gold Coast and accepting the attentions of a well-known radical while on her recent winter vacation in Florida.* (32)

Though this is a more scandalous depiction of Mary, she is the typical upper-class girl who is rebelling against her parents. Yet she is still representative of the stereotypical rich, white America. Even further than that, a more biological and ethnographical side of this is the female reproductive system. Jarenski purports that white females are able to have both white and black children, and are therefore able to carry on the white American legacy or the black. Jarenski writes:

It has been argued that white male concern about miscegenation stemmed from fears about the mythical "purity" of the white race. Lewis R. Gordon suggests that cultural taboos and legal bans against sexual relations between black men and

white women were linked to the fear that white women can give birth to both black and white babies, which makes control of their sexuality central to white male power...Gordon's argument runs counter to the traditional assessments about the idealization of white femininity in American culture, because he believes idealization is really fear and disgust in disguise. (91)

Because these female bodies are representative of America, anything that Bigger or the Invisible Man does to them is symbolic of what they do, or would like to do, to America. Though Bigger does not rape Mary, he suffocates hers, beheads and then burns her body. There is no other way to look at this act other than one of violence and anger. To Bigger, Mary was representative of all the dreams he could not reach, the goals he could not fulfill, and the stagnant life that he lived. Wright illustrated what will happen to America symbolically through Bigger and Mary.

Bigger's dominating feeling quickly shifts to fear when Mrs. Dalton comes in to check on her daughter. Mary begins to make noise. Bigger tries to quiet her first with his hand and then smothers her face with a pillow. Of course as a black man, being caught with the white daughter of his boss would have a deep impact on Bigger's life; however, we have seen that the Daltons are at least trying to make steps towards understanding African Americans. The first thought that would come to the contemporary white mind of his society is that he, as a black man, is about to rape her. In fact, Wright must bet on a white audience jumping to that conclusion for when Max defends Bigger, and Bigger adamantly denies allegations of rape, his situation seems even more unfair because we know for a fact that he did not rape Mary. This assumed knowledge of Bigger raping Mary highlights the injustice of the trial, and in society.

At this point, readers cannot say whether that was his intention or not, though we do understand that he was captivated by Mary and his feeling of dominance is enough to push

reality to the back of his mind. As the main character whose situation would possibly evoke sympathy, a reader might be inclined to believe that Bigger wouldn't go so far as to rape Mary. However, that reader would be proven wrong when Bigger rapes and murders Bessie. That is a topic that we will come back to later.

As Mrs. Dalton, who is blind, tries to discern her daughter's condition, Bigger is smothering her. Not once during that entire episode did Bigger think about his actions and the effect it would have on Mary, but only on himself:

He held his hand over her mouth and his head was cocked at an angle that enabled him to see Mary and Mrs. Dalton by merely shifting his eyes. Mary mumbled and tried to rise again. Frantically, he caught a corner of the pillow and brought it to her lips. He had to stop her from mumbling or he would be caught...Mary's fingernails tore at his hands and he caught the pillow and covered her entire face with it, firmly. Mary's body surged upward and he pushed downward upon the pillow with all of his weight, determined that she must not move or make any sound that would betray him. (Wright 85)

Bigger does not give a single thought towards Mary. It is not as if Mary didn't give Bigger any indication that she was struggling. She scratches at him, tries to get up off the bed, mumbles and moans. It is not until the danger has passed that Bigger wonders "Had he hurt her?" (87). Bigger is asking himself if he hurt Mary after pulling a pillow over her head and holding it down until she went still. While the passage of time is unclear, Mary had to be under the pillow at least a minute since the time Bigger had tried to cover her mouth. He does not try to revive her but checks to see if she is dead; Bigger does not think to see if Mary is alive, but if she is dead, another indication of his violent personality. Though Bigger is responding out of fear, he

continuously does so in a violent manner. His biggest response is to the lack of movement in her chest: “Her bosom, her bosom, her – her bosom was not moving!” (87). It was her “bosom” that he focused on. He checked her eyes, her mouth was gaping, he lifted her arm to watch it fall back to the bed, but it was her “bosom” which he had been touching just a few moments ago that gave him pause. That is when he begins to listen to her breath. Even now, Bigger is still sexualizing Mary, focusing on her chest and the lack of movement, something he gloried in not too long ago. And following in the pattern of Bigger, he does not stop to think what this will mean to the family, what this means for Mary, or even what this means for his conscience. His first thought is how the public will brand him, “The reality of the room fell from him; the vast city of white people that sprawled outside took its place. She was dead and he had killed her. He was a murderer, a Negro murderer, a black murderer. He had killed a white woman” (87). As shown before, Bigger’s mask of hatred and indifference is crucial to his survival; his appearance and others’ perception of him are key. His first thought is to go home and say that he had left Mary outside. This is the simplest plan. Bigger’s initial reason for being in Mary’s room is that a) she was having a hard time moving because of her intoxication, and more importantly b) he didn’t want her waking up her parents to find her drunk, and somehow render Bigger responsible for it. However, these fears are void because of Mary’s death.

But Bigger isn’t thinking about a conceivable plan of action. Bigger is thinking of something better. He wants to not only be free of suspicion, but he also wants to place the blame on someone else entirely: Jan. The reasoning behind this is that Jan is a Red, something that Bigger knows people hate even if he doesn’t understand why. Bigger reasons that a poor, young, foolish, black boy’s word will be held in higher regard than a Red’s word. And this is the crux of Bigger’s problem, and the driving force throughout the entire novel. Bigger is still refusing to

accept his situation and continues to live in denial; he understands that people hate him because he is black, but he has never really thought of why, or what that means beyond his own immediate needs. Even though Jan is a communist, he is still white. While Wright did believe in the Communist Party for the betterment of African Americans, he constantly questioned the movement, pointing out its flaws in leadership, and gradually shifted more towards focusing on the Civil Rights movement. “*Uncle Tom’s Children* and *Native Son* both instruct the party about its failures in addressing African Americans, thus implying its pathetic lack of knowledge and understanding of black history, culture, and life” (Gibson 794). Wright’s focus in this novel is race relations rather than overall social justice. In other words, the Communist Party focused on the betterment of African Americans because having equality for all was a milestone towards that goal. Instead of focusing on this all-for-one and one-for-all idea, Wright hones in on African American equality. Bigger has spent his life and will spend the rest of the novel trying to find a way to grant power to himself. With the knowledge of the general hatred for the “Reds,” Bigger feels that he, as a young black man, is higher in the social hierarchy and clings to it.

We especially see this arrogance in the next section of the novel, “Flight.” Mrs. Dalton is technically a witness to Mary’s murder, and she has the most power to expose Bigger. But Bigger believes he is safe: “He trembled with excitement. She was white and he was black; she was rich and he was poor; she was old and he was young; she was the boss and he was the worker. He was safe; yes” (128). Bigger has now turned the entire power dynamic in which he has grown up on its head. It is because he is black, poor, and a worker that he feels that he can avoid suspicion. He is now picturing himself as others see him: a dumb, ignorant, black boy with nowhere to go and nothing to do besides serve others.

Richard Wright focuses on “blindness” in his novel, and has a physical representative of the blind, Mrs. Dalton. After Bigger has murdered Mary, he believes that he has been stripped of his own blindness, and is able to see the blindness of others: “No, he did not have to hide behind a wall or a curtain now; he had a safer way of being safe, an easier way. What he had done last night had proved that. Jan was blind. Mary had been blind. Mr. Dalton was blind. And Mrs. Dalton was blind; yes, in more ways than one....Bigger felt that a lot of people were like Mrs. Dalton, blind....”(Wright 10). Bigger believes that he got away with murder because everyone else was blind. Out of all of the negative stereotypes in the novel that Wright didn’t challenge, this instance is probably the only time that he did. Bigger actually believes that he can live and get away with killing a white woman, because everyone else was blind, and is unable to see his crime because he is a simple, black boy.

Bigger then goes on to label his mother, brother, and sister blind, for not noticing the change in him. Please note that while I believe that an agent of protest needs to change, Bigger’s change is not drastic nor is it proactive. His change serves only to dehumanize him further, leading him to blame Jan for the murder, as well as rape and murder Bessie. This isn’t progression, but an exploration of his darker side. By saying that other people are blind, Bigger is projecting his view of the world onto others, making them responsible for not seeing him. Bigger has explicitly blamed the world for his situation several times, but here he is blaming the world for his actions. He even blames Mary for her own murder, stating, “Gee, what a fool she was, he thought, remembering how Mary had acted. Carrying on that way! Hell, she *made* me do it! I couldn’t help it! She should’ve known better. She should’ve left me alone, Goddammit! He did not feel sorry for Mary; she was not real to him, not a human being; he had not known her long or well enough for that” (113). He isn’t taking responsibility for his actions, in which he

blames Mary for her own death. Yet in the end, this blame placing ultimately leads to stasis in the African American community, much as Bigger is static throughout the novel. He does not realize that it is perhaps himself that needs to change if he wants things to get better.

Bigger's hypothesis that everyone else is blind is challenged by Britten, a private investigator hired by the Daltons. Up until this point of the novel, Bigger's contact with white people has been limited to the Daltons, Peggy, and Jan, and he has based his behavior on these interactions. They question him rather than accuse him. Britten is the first white person to behave like Bigger has expected, and that throws him off. "He had not thought that anyone would dare think that he, a black Negro, would be Jan's partner. Britten was his enemy. He knew that the hard light in Britten's eyes held him guilty because he was black" (162). Britten is the first "stereotypical" white man that Bigger will come across within the narrative. Bigger's first impression of Britten is that he "...had a cold, impersonal manner that told Bigger to be on his guard. In the very look of the man's eyes Bigger saw his own personality reflected in narrow, restricted terms" (154). While the Daltons questioned Bigger about Mary's disappearance, Britten suspects him, constantly drilling Bigger with questions until Bigger talks about Jan, leading Britten down another trail. Bigger seeing his own personality reflected in Britten implies that they have the same view of each other; Bigger doesn't like whites and Britten doesn't like blacks.

The major tragedy of "Flight" is the rape and murder of Bessie. The rape scene is not explicit in its content, but clear in its intent:

He had to now. Yes. Bessie. His desire was naked and hot in his hand and his fingers were touching her. Yes. Bessie. Now. He had to now. *don't Bigger don't*
 He was sorry, but he had to. He. He could not help it. Help it. Sorry. Help it.

Sorry. Help it. Sorry. Help it now. She should. Look. She should should should look. Look at how he was. He. He was. He was feeling bad about how she would feel but he could not help it now. (234)

There is a shift in the style of writing from the previous sections of the book. While the reader had always been privy to Bigger's thoughts, they were always collected and coherent. Wright's foray into Bigger's stream of consciousness provides the reader with an even more intimate knowledge of Bigger's thought process than during the scene of Mary's murder. Readers now are able to intimately connect with Bigger's thought process and from Bigger's point of view there is no sympathy for Bessie. This would suggest that at every other point of the novel when Bigger has harmed others, it is completely selfish, thoughtless, and even illogical. It is true that Bigger's actions during Mary's death are driven by fear, and that fear is justified; he is aggressive throughout that entire passage, from kissing her to smothering her with a pillow. This entire passage describes nothing but a need for the satiation of Bigger's appetite. The italicized words imply that Bessie is speaking, which is further supported when earlier in the passage Wright says, "Her voice came to him now from out of a deep, faraway silence and he paid her no heed" (233). While Mary was silenced by Bigger, which allowed him to ignore her actions, Bessie has a voice. Bessie's voice does not matter because "His desire was naked and hot in his hand and his fingers were touching her" (234). And that's what it all boils down to. Bigger finally has a taste of power and regardless of the consequences he will do what he must to sustain it. This longing for Bessie does not only come out of an overwhelming lust or feeling for her sexually but also from the need to gain control over his situation. For a short moment, Bigger had been the head puppeteer, pulling along everybody with him. But those strings have been cut, and the one lone puppet left for Bigger is Bessie. This was not an act of passion, or a mistake. It

is a rape, and one that Bigger does, not necessarily gladly, but with a tunnel-vision that will only lead to his satisfaction. He does give thought to her feelings in the line “He was feeling bad about how she would feel...” yet he continues regardless of her protests.

There is also the matter of Bessie’s murder. While Mary’s death is considered manslaughter, Bessie’s death was premeditated. Similar to the thoughts present during the rape, Bigger struggles in determining whether or not Bessie should be killed. Wright explicitly details Bigger’s motive and what eventually pushes him to kill Bessie: “No! Not this!...Then, as suddenly as the panic had come, it left. But he had to stand here until that picture came back, that motive, that driving desire to escape the law...This was the way it *had* to be” (237). The words between this section and the rape section are similar, both centered on Bigger’s need to only appease himself. Later Bigger is told by Buckley that Bessie did not die by Bigger’s hands, but froze to death in the airshaft he threw her body down. Bigger’s reaction isn’t guilt or shame, but sympathy. When the coroners show the body to Bigger, Wright says, “His eyes rested wistfully on the still oblong white draped form under the sheet on the table and he felt a deeper sympathy for Bessie than at any time when she was alive. He knew that Bessie, too, though dead, though killed by him, would resent her dead body being used in this way” (331). Bigger acknowledges his wrongs, but focuses on Bessie’s treatment by other people, believing that this is the worst state she has ever been, including after his murder-attempt of her.

For many readers of this novel, it is this act of violence that makes Bigger irredeemable as a character. In 1986 there was a film version of *Native Son* directed by Jerrold Freedman. In the original screenplay, the rape scene was included. The producers urged Freedman to cut the scene for fear that it would cause Bigger to be an unsympathetic character. He would no longer be a man who took advantage of a horrible situation, but he would be a rapist which is totally

unforgivable. The director also did not include Bigger's final conversation with Max, where Bigger stands firm behind his murderous actions because he did it for a good cause, even if he wasn't aware of what that cause was (Krasnow).

The final section of the book is "Fate," which includes Bigger facing his family, the Daltons, Jan, his defense by Max at the trial, and his goodbye. It is Bigger's actions and words right before and right after the trial that are the most interesting. After Bigger is introduced to Max, he is questioned by him. Max is trying to understand the motive behind Bigger's actions and Bigger reveals that he himself cannot explain his motives or his feelings or put them into a coherent argument. There is an interesting juxtaposition between Max's lack of understanding about Bigger, and Bigger's lack of understanding about the world. Bigger is adamant in his belief that his life will end in the electric chair, and that nothing that Max will do can change that. Bigger has yet to stop and think about his actions and the consequences, and he dislikes Max for making him do so. There is a brief glimmer of acknowledgement of his guilt when Bigger's family and friends come to visit him in his cell: "He had lived and acted on the assumption that he was alone, and now he saw that he had not been" (Wright 298). This is an amazing revelation for Bigger. Up until this point all of his actions have been self-centered. But this realization is tempered by an obstinate part of Bigger that still clings to his need for control.

Right before Bigger has this thought he viciously wishes for his family, and more specifically his mother, to leave: "She should not have come here. Her sorrow accused him. If he could only make her go home. It was precisely to keep from feeling this hate and shame and despair that he had always acted hard and tough toward them; and now he was without defense" (298). It would be wrong to dismiss Bigger's feelings toward his family at such a crucial time. He feels the need to be strong, and facing his emotions will only cause him to break down. But

he has reverted back to the thinking that has caused all of his trouble: the need for a tough and cold exterior.

There is another shift in Bigger's thinking when Mrs. Thomas flings herself at the feet of Mrs. Dalton, begging for mercy. Bigger was "paralyzed with shame" and he felt "violated" (301). It is unclear who Bigger is feeling violated by. His shame is understandable, as he watches his mother grovel at the feet of a white woman. It is this stereotypical image that Bigger has been trying to avoid his entire life, and he has brought this upon his mother. There is shame in his actions and seeing the effect of them. There is also shame in his mother's actions. A woman who, though he might have disdained her, was a solid figure in his life and he has now seen her brought low. And finally, there is shame that is more akin to embarrassment. Mrs. Thomas tries to explain her situation to Mrs. Dalton and reveals her desperate situation. She accepts their social condition, that the Daltons have the power and that she doesn't, that she will be the one to kneel and beg, and that her life will always be at the mercy of others.

Bigger feeling "violated" is another subject matter. He has spent the novel violating other people: he brutalizes Gus, stares at his sister Vera as she is undressing to make her uncomfortable, kills Mary, rapes and kills Bessie, and there are several points in the novel where he thought of killing others for his own safety. The tables have turned for Bigger in the presence of Mary and Jan, and he felt naked under their gaze. Bigger's reaction to feeling vulnerable or violated is to harden his exterior and to push against this vulnerability. If Bigger is pushing against his mother, he is feeling violated because she is revealing something so personal. But once again, this is very self-centered thinking. Bigger is no longer thinking about his family, but how his family and Mrs. Dalton are making him feel. He feels no shame for killing Mary when faced by Mrs. Dalton, and he feels no penance at hearing the suffering his family has been put

through because of him. This causes Bigger to lose what little insights he had when he was alone with his family.

This attitude continues into his talk with Max. When Max asks Bigger why he did it, Bigger replied, “Yeah; I reckon it was because I knew I oughtn’ve wanted to” (351). Bigger seems completely desolate at this part of the novel. We even go back to the same train of thought that Bigger had when he was raping Bessie “...I knew what I was doing, all right. But I couldn’t help it” (352), and “For a little while I was free. I was doing something. It was wrong, but I was feeling alright” (354). Bigger is once again granting agency to himself, but only for his own gain and his own benefit, disregarding everyone else involved. When Bigger takes action it is with a negative intent behind it. Max symbolically represents Bigger’s chance to reach across the race lines and connect with a white person because of his willingness to take on Bigger’s case; he is granting Bigger the ability to think that his crimes, though not excusable, are understandable when considering Bigger’s environment. When explaining his plan of action, Max states, “There’s an ocean of hot hate out there against you and I’m going to try to sweep some of it back. They want your life; they want revenge. They felt they had you fenced off so that you could not do what you did. Now they’re mad because deep down in them they believe that they made you do it. When people feel that way, you can’t reason with ’em” (358). An important aspect of Max is the pronoun he uses. “They” and “Them” make the white people the other, and Max aligns himself with Bigger. Max’s entire defense is based on Bigger’s living conditions and the treatment of African Americans by white America, meaning that Max has an understanding of the consequences of racism, and can see why Bigger acted so, but only in a vague, overarching sense. But Bigger does not even understand this. Bigger does not understand why he did what he did, and Max is trying to pull some reason from this conversation. There are only

two things that Bigger is sure about: 1) he hated Mary and the way she pushed past his personal boundaries and 2) he doesn't know why he killed but knew he needed to do something.

It would be different if Bigger killed with the intention of making a statement, of proving a point. If he did, then we would understand that Bigger wants to be an active participant in his life and the world around him. But he does not. Mary was a mistaken frenzy, and Bessie was out of desperation and, what Bigger thought was, necessity. There is no calculation in his actions like Buckley and Max wish there were. Bigger cannot relate to the world around him and therefore shuts down when he really can't afford to. Bigger gives an impassioned speech on how he always wanted something but was always denied it because he was black, and he was finally able to do something, unintentional as it was. Mary's murder gave him something of a purpose, convoluted though it was.

The very final meeting between Max and Bigger is perhaps the most powerful scene of the book. At this point Bigger's fate has been decided. He has nowhere left to run, and is able to say whatever he feels without any consequences. It is possibly the only time in the book where Bigger is finally able to reach out, and do so without fear. He is no longer saying that "he couldn't help it" but that "he felt he had to" (425). Though he may not know why, he felt he had to kill Mary. Bessie has always been a side note within the trial and for Max, Buckley, and the rest of society Mary's murder is the only one that matters, and Bigger will be executed for Mary's murder, not Bessie's. Bigger is finally taking responsibility for his actions by admitting that he felt the need to take some sort of action, even though Mary's death wasn't premeditated. Mary was just the final breaking point of Bigger's anger. He felt he had to push out because he was being pushed. Wright expected his readers to understand the forces that were pushing and pulling against Bigger that would inevitably lead to and explain his violent actions.

Unfortunately, Wright does not expound on this enough for the reader to truly be swayed by this argument. Bigger feels that the only way out is through the destruction of others. And this is the only world that he has known; the oppression of a race will lead only to the destruction of everyone. He now begins to understand the world that he lives in and the game he has to play, but he has realized it too late. He doesn't understand that he will have to say "yessir" and "yes'm," keep his head low and make it through life like every other African American if he wants to survive. Nonetheless, Bigger wants to live, and what Wright tries to present in the novel is that in the current conditions an African American cannot live, but only survive.

Bigger's final monologue to Max is as honest as it is terrifying. Bigger does something that is truly unique for him. For the entire novel Bigger has ignored his actions and what they meant to others, and focused on what it meant for him. He never stopped to think about what the death or rape of another could mean. He now understands that what he did was wrong, but he never truly grasps why. At the end of the novel, he justifies his actions, and now gives purpose to them:

"What I killed for must've been good!" Bigger's voice was full of frenzied anguish. 'It must have been good! When a man kills, it's for something.... I didn't know I was really alive in this world until I felt things hard enough to kill for 'em....It's the truth, Mr. Max. I can say it now, 'cause I'm going to die. I know what I'm saying real good and I know how it sounds. But I'm all right. I feel all right when I look at it that way...." (429)

As Saunders writes, "It is a powerful statement about the society in which we live that anyone would have to murder to achieve some semblance of identity" (Saunders 35). Bigger did not have an identity, and therefore a purpose, until he killed Mary. Bigger was just going to live his

life as thousands of other black men have, as part of a mass and not an individual. And while this may seem contradictory to my argument, Bigger gained individuality by killing Mary. But that is the horror of it all. A black man will only become an individual if he has committed a heinous crime, will only gain an identity if he is to be destroyed. Bigger becomes a demonic icon, rather than a beacon of warning. During this speech, Max has backed away from Bigger and is filled with “terror” from Bigger’s explanation (Wright 429). Bigger has now found pride in his actions, but he doesn’t understand the cost. Bigger has to look at the situation “that way,” meaning he has to bend and twist the situation until it is at an angle that is agreeable with him, and allows him to carry on. Once again he is reflecting on it in a way that suits him the most.

This paper isn’t arguing against the validity of Bigger’s feelings, but his actions. I am arguing that this book presents a young black man who fits all of the stereotypes that were prominent when the book was published. Not even ten years before *Native Son* was published, the Scottsboro Boys were unfairly put on trial. Despite all of the evidence against the prosecution, the boys were accused as violent, aggressive rapists of white women. Wright offers a character that neatly fits into this image, which causes difficulty in sympathizing with Bigger. As stated earlier, Wright himself expressed fears of what the reception of Bigger would be. Despite this, he felt that Bigger was a necessary character to satisfy his search for a symbol that would illustrate his intentions.

In “How Bigger Was Born,” Wright wrote that Bigger “won over all these claims; he won because I felt that I was hunting on the trail of more exciting and thrilling game” (Wright 450). The “thrilling game” was to expose to America the product of its racism, and to incite change with his novel. Wright wanted Bigger to be an agent of change, and justifies it in his essay. But Bigger’s adamant attitude towards his actions and his justifying of them pushes him

on the side of the unforgivable. If Bigger thought about the consequences of his actions and what that would mean not only for him, but for his family and his race as a whole, and accepted what he did completely and truly, he would be a more redeemable character. Why? Because he would be a character who knew that by killing Mary he would be making a social statement, though it may not be a justifiable one, because Bigger would be aware of his social environment, race relations, and would have a goal in protesting against his current conditions. As Baldwin writes, “*Native Son* finds itself at length so trapped by the American Image of Negro life and by the American necessity to find the ray of hope that it cannot pursue its own implications” (Baldwin 40). Once Mary is killed the murder becomes the focus of the novel, not Bigger’s predicament, and the protest of the novel is crushed under the weight of the sensationalized African American story. The focus is on whether Bigger is going to get away with what he did, not why he did it, or what are the social implications of his doing so. The story becomes a spectacle. Looking at Bigger’s journey throughout the novel, and Wright’s goal of writing a protest novel, white readers are left with the basic idea that “Black people will do harm to us and feel perfectly justified unless we grant true equality.” While this isn’t an incorrect message, it is negative and promotes the stereotypical idea of violent African Americans. Mary and Jan were also supporters of civil rights, however misguided their attempts were, and both of them are done serious injury by Bigger. This illustrates that despite what help African Americans can get from white supporters, the African Americans are left unsatisfied. Wright’s intention was to create a simulation of America, a microcosm of the U.S. in Chicago, rather than solidify negative African American propaganda. Bigger Thomas was not the character who could fully realize Wright’s idea of presenting the racism and its horrible effects on America because Bigger is not a character that allows for an emotional connection, and therefore he does not allow for change.

Bigger Thomas does not allow for any type of critique on the racism in America because of his lack of insight, and the fatalist tone that Wright set for the novel. In short, Bigger Thomas fails as an agent of protest, which means that *Native Son* fails as a protest novel.

CHAPTER II

The Invisible Man: The Protester

Ralph Ellison was a friend and colleague of Richard Wright. In 1952 Ellison published *Invisible Man*, which won the U.S. National Book Award for Fiction in 1953. Though *Invisible Man* never quite reached the numbers that *Native Son* did, it is considered one of America's great works of fiction, has been featured in *TIME* magazine as one of the 100 best English language novels from 1923-2005, and the Modern Library ranked it #19 of the 100 best English-language novels of the 20th century (*TIME*, Modern Library). While the novel does not state the time period in which the events take place, based on its context, one can infer that the novel takes place around the late 1920s to 1930s in the South as well as New York, though because of the setting being undated, this story's commentary on race relations and the intermingling of white men and black men transcends time. Also the audience is never told the name of the main character, not even the pseudonym he is given by the Brotherhood.

Bigger was Wright's agent of protest, and the unnamed main character in *Invisible Man* is Ellison's. There are many similarities between *Native Son* and *Invisible Man*. Both of the main characters have journeys from the South to the North, though at different times in their respective lives. They are the same age. They both become estranged from their families. They share a preoccupation with the idea of sight, though for Bigger it is other people being blind, and for the main character of *Invisible Man*, he himself is invisible, being made so by others. Despite the variations, both characters are aware of a lack of sight, though Bigger's is projected and the Invisible Man's is internalized. Bigger sees everyone else as blind, placing the blame on the other, while the Invisible Man believes he is invisible and that it is he who needs to change and

become visible. They are both searching for an identity. But what truly binds these two characters together is their situation: young black men living in a white dominated society that does not see them as equals. Because there are similarities between the two characters, a baseline is provided and will be used to judge and analyze the characters the authors use as agents of protest.

Indeed, there are many differences between the two characters. Bigger only has an eighth grade education, estranges himself from his family, and doesn't understand his own potential. He also is the principal force that leads to his own undoing. The main character in *Invisible Man* attended college for two years, becomes removed from his family through more extenuating circumstances, understands his role in society and utilizes his potential. Wright constructed his novel to illustrate how it is the environment that can shape a person, which is how Bigger was led down a violent path. While Ellison creates situations for his character which are not dissimilar from Bigger's, Ellison's main character is not doomed to fail at the onset of the novel like Bigger. Ellison disagreed with Wright's notion of presenting the horrors of African American life: "Ellison now found Wright's recognition of the 'essential bleakness of black life' a crucial difference between Wright and himself..." (Jackson 348). In 1981, Ellison wrote an introduction for his novel, giving some insight to his thought process, and his personal beliefs on the purpose of a novel. In *Invisible Man*, Ellison stated, his task was

...One of revealing the human universals hidden within the plight of one who was both black and American, and not only as a means of conveying my personal vision of possibility, but as a way of dealing with the sheer rhetorical challenge involved in communicating across our barriers of race and religion, class, color and region – barriers which consist of the many strategies of division that were

designed, and still function, to prevent what would otherwise have been a more or less natural recognition of the reality of black and white fraternity (xxii).

In many of Ellison's essays as well as interviews, he is very explicit in stating that he tried to stay away from writing a book that could firmly be put into any one camp, such as an African American protest novel. *Invisible Man* is a story about humanity as much as it is about race relations because it was Ellison's goal to reach across those many barriers of division.

Because Ellison disliked pessimism and Wright's fatalism, Ellison has more room to develop a character that has the ability to grow and adapt to his environment; his narrator has a character arc. Though he is initially ignorant and unaware, Ellison's main character soon recognizes his status and role in society, and then begins to advocate for change. Bigger is only conscious of his status in society, but never his role, and therefore is not able to participate as an agent of protest because he does not acknowledge his own ability to act. In his introduction to *Invisible Man*, written almost thirty years after the novel was published, Ellison describes the process he went through in creating his main character:

I was already having enough difficulty trying to avoid writing what might turn out to be nothing more than another novel of racial protest instead of the dramatic study in comparative humanity which I felt any worthwhile novel should be, and the voice appeared to be leading me precisely in that direction...I decided that it [the voice] would be one who had been forged in the underground of American experience and yet managed to emerge less angry than ironic (xviii).

Ellison's intent in his novel is distinctly different from Wright's. Wright wanted a novel that bankers' daughters wouldn't be able to cry over, presenting white Americans with a harsh reality, a harsh anger, which was meant to shock them into action. Wright wanted an emotional

response, a visceral one. This emotional response that Wright was seeking resulted in a novel that appealed only to the reader's pathos, a novel that caused only a reaction in people, and not action. In a way, with *Native Son* Wright inspired the readers to react to the novel as Bigger reacted to his situation.

Ellison didn't want to present anger but irony. The difference between anger and irony is that one is emotional, and the other intellectual. Wright wants people to feel and Ellison wants people to think. To encourage readers to do so, Ellison used techniques that are not dissimilar from the Brechtian style of theatre. In his essay "Alienation Effects in Chinese Acting" Brecht details how to achieve a distance between the audience and the play, excluding the emotional response and engaging the intellect. First, Brecht disregards the fourth wall. *Invisible Man* is framed by a prologue and epilogue which occur in the present; the bulk of the novel is the narrator's autobiography. The main character is framing the novel by stating it is a story that he will tell to readers, which means that he is getting rid of the literary fourth wall. Brecht writes,

The performer's self-observation, an artful and artistic act of self-alienation, stopped the spectator from losing himself in the character completely, i.e. to the point of giving up his own identity, and lent a splendid remoteness to the events. Yet the spectator's empathy was not entirely rejected. The audience identifies itself with the actor as being an observer, and accordingly develops his attitude of observing or looking on (93).

If you were to replace the words performer and actor with narrator or main character, the same technique is applied in *Invisible Man*. The entire novel is a reflection of the Invisible Man's actions, which leads to his alienation. Readers are aware of this and are

able to distance themselves from the novel, adopting the role of an observer rather than a participant.

The differences between these two novels, in my opinion, clarify what makes a successful protest novel. Emotion is a result due to something that has previously occurred. *Native Son* is a written form of outrage against cases such as the Scottsboro Boys and Jim Crow laws, but it doesn't offer anything new or productive. Wright presents his readers with a result. Ellison presents his readers with a problem: how can a young African American man find his identity in a world that sees him as part of an inferior mass? Ellison encourages his audience to think, because if one thinks about an issue, then something has to change, and change is a major theme in *Invisible Man*. Ellison isn't specific as to what exactly the change needs to be, but towards the end of the novel the main character understands that African Americans need to find a way to become visible, and by not presenting a specific solution and a very specific problem, Ellison forces his audience to think about racial injustices.

Invisible Man, though written in chapters, can be broken up into five major sections during the main character's life. For the purposes of this chapter, they shall be labeled as "Before College," "During College," "Expelled from College," "Joins the Brotherhood," and "Breaks from the Brotherhood." Each of these sections is labeled after a major event in the narrative, and each of these events demonstrates a shift in the main character's awareness of his ability find his identity. In finding his identity, the main character will then be able to create change. Ellison's character does not remain static in the sense that he does not resolutely stick to one way of dealing with or looking at current events. The Invisible Man assesses situations and then behaves accordingly. In essence, Ellison has created a fluid character, as opposed to Wright's static one. The main character is aware his social surroundings, even if he may not completely understand

them, and this enables him to be a successful agent of protest because of this adaptability. His character literally protests and this activism, adaptability, and proactive actions are more engaging than Bigger's passivity and violent reactions, and provides for a better subject to be the agent of the novel.

The novel begins with a prologue where the main character introduces himself, his current situation, and the events that led up to it, and then proceeds to spend the rest of the novel detailing these events to the readers. The readers are then introduced to the section that is labeled "Before College." The first encounter with the main character, chronologically speaking, is at a battle royal. He is thinking about the last words of his grandfather, "'Son, after I'm gone 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...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'" (16). Those last words are imprinted in the main character's memory despite his parents' desire for him to forget them. Arguably, these last words are what guide and shape the main character throughout his journey, though he doesn't necessarily know what they mean. Despite being confused, the protagonist inadvertently follows his grandfather's advice; he becomes one of the most respected young African American men, liked by "the most lily-white men of the town" (16). The narrator is just going about his life as he sees fit, not noticing that he is following in the footsteps of his grandfather; he won't acknowledge the validity of his grandfather's statement until the end of the novel. The main character is not only heeding his grandfather's last request, but he is also flourishing and paving a way for himself. Despite this success, word "traitor" is what constantly comes back to him. The main character describes a guilt he associates with the praise he is given from white people because, as his grandfather says, he is going against the "wishes of the white

folks” (17). By succeeding, by acting happy with his station in life, he is not being the stereotypical black man who should have been “sulky and mean” (17). It is because his grandfather states that he rebelled against whites by playing the happy fool that the main character feels he is doing the same. Saying yes and no, and catering to them is the only way he knows to get ahead and he sees that his actions result in favorable rewards for himself. But it is the protagonist’s excellent character, as well as his favorability, that leads him to the battle royal.

The Battle Royal is set in the ballroom of a major hotel of the town, and all of the important white men of the town have come to watch the fight. Originally the main character is in attendance in order to give the speech he had recited at his high school graduation that earned him the honor of reciting it to the guests in the ballroom. The protagonist is told that since he is present he should participate in the battle royal as well, which consists of a group of young African American men. They are then paraded around the ballroom, along with a naked white blonde, as the white men goad them into looking at her, and then reacting violently when they do. Here is the first major stumbling block in the main character’s life. To these white men, he has become a sexual curiosity in the presence of the blonde, a figure to goggle over. There has been the long standing stereotype of black men having extreme sexual prowess, falling prey to their basic instincts at the sight of a naked *white* woman; in the white men’s eyes, he becomes a rapist. The men in that ballroom subject the group of black men to this stigma, and then punish them for it by yelling, cursing, throwing, and even trying to fight them. Ellison sets up a cyclical situation that Wright did not. While Wright’s character becomes a rapist because of the deterministic theme of the novel (Bigger is a product of a negative environment), Wright does not challenge the racist notions of the “black rapist.” Ellison creates a situation in which his main character is goaded into looking upon the woman despite his hesitance, and is then punished for

it. Ellison's character falls into the black rapist stereotype because of the white men in the room, not because of his violent tendencies, which later in the novel he is proven to have.

Then the battle begins. The young men are blindfolded and told to fight to the end. By sheer determination the main character makes it to the final round against a massive youth, and afterwards the entire group is told to collect their prize, which is a pile of fool's gold set up on the rug. However, once they try to reach for the money they find that the rug has been electrified. Once again they have been made a sport of purely for the pleasure of the important white men in the room. This is the third time that these young men have been subjected to some form of abuse since they have been in the room, and each of these three times promises had been made and promises had been broken. The first was an appealing blonde whom they were harassed to look at and punished when they did. Next was the illegal battle royal where they were blindfolded and had to fight, listening to the racist jeers of the crowd. Last was the electrocuted rug which held a promise for compensation after the horrors of the night:

The rug was electrified...Then the men began to push us onto the rug...Suddenly I saw a boy lifted into the air, glistening with sweat like a circus seal, and dropped, his wet back landing flush upon the charged rug, heard him yell and saw him literally dance upon his back, his elbows beating a frenzied tattoo upon the floor, his muscles twitching like the flesh of a horse stung by many flies (27).

This repetition of deceit is crucial to the main character's development. Ellison has illustrated that every opportunity the white men have given these young black men has been tainted, and made into a sport. In short, these young men will not get anywhere as long as those influential white men are in power. Because the protagonist is still yearning to say his speech, he ignores these deceptions in hopes of doing so. But by placing obstacles between the Invisible Man and his

goal, Ellison is creating a viable character arc for his character that will support his actions throughout the book. It is also important to note that the main character, as of now, is ignoring the tortures he is being put through. By the end of the novel he is aware of all the deceit around him and chooses not to be a part of it by going underground, which illustrates Ellison's choice of having a character that develops over time.

The final piece that cements this picture is when the main character finally has the chance to do what he was invited to do in the first place, which is to recite his graduation speech. He is introduced as "the smartest boy" in his town (29). Before he even speaks there is laughter, which rises as he begins his speech. Despite being a mess of sweat and blood, the main character continues on until he is forced to repeat himself because the audience is being too loud. He originally repeats the words "social responsibility"; however, after repeating himself several times and becoming increasingly nervous, he says "social equality," which causes immediate silence in the rowdy room. Ellison does not write the speech, therefore highlighting the protagonist's mistake, nor do we know in what context "social responsibility" is used. He is then interrogated by an audience member who, after the main character assures him that it was a mistake from swallowing blood from the fight, says "'Well, you better speak more slowly so we can understand. We do mean to do right by you, but you've got to know your place at all times'" (31). The main character is not affronted, offended, or even disappointed by essentially being told that those men will not stand for the equality of races, despite all that he has done. Instead he feels fear. This is a character who understands the racial power dynamics of his society and time, and has to succumb to that despite his achievements.

Ellison offers us a character that readers empathize with because he struggles against the masses. Wright does not give us a character who evokes the same type of emotion because,

unlike Bigger, the main character understands that there is a game being played; however, he just doesn't understand the rules as of yet, and in the beginning he foolishly chooses to ignore it. He is told not only by his grandfather, but by a veteran at the Golden Day that he needs to play the game; "Come out of the fog, young man. And remember you don't have to be a complete fool in order to succeed. Play the game, but don't believe in it – that much you owe yourself... Play the game, but play it your own way – part of the time at least. Play the game, but raise the ante, my boy. Learn how it operates, learn how *you* operate" (153). The Invisible Man is given advice on how to live in a world of social inequality, but at this point in his journey, he only knows that his actions have resulted in a direct cause and effect system. The main character is rewarded for his subservience and ignorance with a leather briefcase and a full ride scholarship to college; acting the fool equals advancement. By ignoring the social injustice, the main character is rewarded for his appropriate behavior. This reward works as a preemptive move; as long as you keep the African Americans happy, they will be less likely to want things to change. And though the main character understands that change is needed, he does not think to do anything to inspire change. Ellison demonstrates that complicity and stagnation of African Americans are what leads to continuous social inequality. The main character actively and knowingly participates in this tableau. But because he is a dynamic character, Ellison has the power to use him as an agent of protest and to later put him in situations where he is forced to act.

He makes his move in the next section titled "During College." Though readers are never privy to the name of the university the main character is attending, or the name of the "Founder," it is clear that this is a very prominent and competitive black university. It is run by Dr. Bledsoe, a man of immense power and influence in both the white and black communities. At this time the main character is a junior in college with the hope of one day becoming an assistant to Bledsoe.

Bledsoe charges the main character with giving a white trustee, Mr. Norton, a tour of the campus and its surroundings in a car. During this ride Mr. Norton explains to the main character that African Americans are connected to his “destiny” and that the main character is his “fate”; “If you become a good farmer, a chef, a preacher, doctor, singer, mechanic – whatever you become, and even if you fail, you are my fate. And you must write me and tell me the outcome” (44).

Norton is not focused on the main character’s future because he sincerely wishes him well, but because whatever the main character does, will be a direct result and reflection upon himself.

Norton’s fate is tied with the main character’s fate and that of African Americans because they are an investment, an asset. Everything that the main character will become, through Norton’s perspective, is only possible because Norton made it so. In this passage the main character is being dispossessed of all of his accomplishments he has made since he has entered college, and they are bestowed upon Norton. Norton genuinely believes that he is helping out a destitute people, and that everything he does will be of a benefit to them. But at the same time, they would be nothing if not for Mr. Norton and people like him. As a benefactor, Norton believes that through his contributions, he has the right to connect another’s accomplishments to his own personal triumphs and failures. A white man is taking credit for a black man’s work he believes he is entitled to. By doing this, Ellison is illustrating abuse of power, as well as entitlement. Not only does the main character have to fight for what he wants to do in the future, but for what he has already done. He is being dispossessed of his entire history, and Ellison does this to illustrate how hard it is for African Americans to make a name for themselves in the world as it is.

Continuing on the tour, Mr. Norton requests that they stop in front of a rundown shack, an old relic from slavery that has captured his fascination. It is the home of Jim Trueblood and

his family, a sharecropper who has become a smear of shame on the black community, and a local curiosity for the white community. The main character tries to urge Mr. Norton to move onward but Norton is curious, and asks the main character about Trueblood. In an event which Trueblood calls an accident, he rapes his daughter and impregnates her. The significance of the name "Trueblood" is not a small one. By reproducing with his daughter, Trueblood will create a child with the true blood of the family. Norton is offended and fascinated at the same time, and, against the main character's attempts to dissuade him, Norton leaves the car and listens attentively to Trueblood's story of how he came to mistakenly rape his daughter in his sleep. Trueblood also depicts how he benefited from the incident despite the university and the black community trying to get rid of him:

I went to the jailhouse and give Sheriff Barbour the note and he ask me to tell him what happen, and I tole him and he called in some more men and they made me tell it again. They wanted to hear about the gal lots of times and they gimme somethin' to eat and drink and some tobacco...So finally they tell me not to worry, that they was going to send word up to the school that I was to stay right where I am...It just goes to show that no matter how biggity a nigguh gits, the white folks can always cut him down...But best of all, suh, I get more work now than I ever did have before... (53).

Ellison is fond of writing colloquially, and writes each character's diction phonetically.

Trueblood's speeches are full of misspelled words, apostrophes, and poor sentence structures.

Trueblood is the second African American voice we are introduced to besides that of the main character, and their speech patterns contrast greatly. The stark comparison between the two

distinct voices would most likely allow the reader to connect to the main character whose speech is sophisticated. Trueblood's act of incest, his Uncle Tomism, and his language, cause the reader to criticize him. There is an argument that Trueblood's current situation arose from social inequality. He is a black sharecropper in an area where a university and the white townsfolk have taken over a lot of land, so it is hard for him to come by money. As a result he is forced to share a bed with his wife in daughter in a ramshackle cabin, and is forced to huddle for warmth in the winter. But compared to the main character, Trueblood is an embarrassment, and the effect is that the reader will feel more inclined to relate to the Invisible Man.

After telling his story, Norton gives Trueblood \$100 to buy toys for his other children. The main character is witnessing something to which he cannot relate. Trueblood has done the unthinkable with his daughter, and not only has he not been punished, but the white community, including Norton have rewarded him for it. Trueblood has become a spectator, a local circus act, for the white community, though he has done nothing but disgraced the black community. The men at the jail are not sympathetic to Trueblood's explanation on how he committed the act unknowingly, but they wanted to "hear about the gal." It was a perversion that led to Trueblood's continued stay in the community. Norton's pricey gift to Trueblood is the main character's first experience in the novel where he realizes that white favoritism isn't only based on merit. It is his first glimpse into a world of what he believes to be arbitrary decisions that can alter the fate of an entire black community simply because its members are not the ones in power. Ellison heavily implies that Norton harbored an incestuous love for his daughter, though it is never explicitly stated;

She was a being more rare, more beautiful, purer, more perfect and more delicate than the wildest dream of a poet. I could never believe her to be my own flesh and

blood. Her beauty was a well-spring of purest water-of-life, and to look upon her was to drink and drink and drink again... She was a rare, a perfect creation, a work of purest art... I found it difficult to believe her my own... (42).

In memory of her, Norton began his work at the college. In essence, he built a living, human, monument for her. His love for her is further supported by his exclamation upon meeting Trueblood, ““You did and are unharmed!” (51). Norton’s desire to do as Trueblood has done is what prompts him to offer the money. While the protagonist does not see the irony between Norton and Trueblood, Ellison makes sure that the reader does. A black man’s crime has caused his community to shun him, and a white man is jealous of the crime, wishing that he could do so as well. Even though the act is base, Ellison is writing that white and black men are similar after all. But because of their race, and therefore their economic situation, Norton can create a monument for his daughter while Trueblood is ostracized by his community, and becomes a raunchy story for the white townsmen. There is an even more subtle dig at Norton because while Trueblood’s relationship with his daughter is mainly accidental, Norton’s love for his daughter is deliberate. On the moral scale, Norton is lower than Trueblood. The effect of this is to show the power of race, and how it sometime makes little difference.

This episode is the second time where black men have been made a spectacle for a white man’s pleasure, placing another obstacle in the way of the main character’s progress towards becoming an agent of protest. He has witnessed the cruelty that can come from hostile and mocking racial relationships between black and white men. By doing this, Ellison is challenging the main character. Trueblood, who is not dissimilar from certain minstrelsy tropes such as being happy-go-lucky, and dumb, is an example of black stereotype that the main character can become. Trueblood lives peacefully, is successful in his own way, and is even a “favorite” to the

white people of the town. But this Truebloodism is a stereotype that the main character will reject for fear and disdain because of its negative connotations on his race despite the favoritism and comforts that the white people of the town present him with. It is a step on his way to being an effective agent of protest, and discovering his own identity.

The next big event in the main character's time "During College" occurs at Golden Day Inn, a saloon that the main character drives Norton to after meeting with Trueblood; Norton needs a drink after all of the anxious excitement he felt after listening to Trueblood's story. A fight breaks out where Norton is injured and a veteran waxes racial philosophy to him, agitating him even further. Upon learning the events that transpired that day, Bledsoe expels the main character from the school the next day, stating that he should take a year off and go up north to earn his tuition to come back the next year. The main character tries to explain that Norton told him to stop at Trueblood's and to get him a drink, to which Bledsoe responds, "Dammit, white folks are always giving orders, it's a habit with them. Why didn't you make an excuse?...Why that Trueblood shack? My God, boy! You're black and living in the South – did you forget how to lie? (139). Bledsoe is negating everything that the main character has even been taught. The main character thought he should listen to white people; it's what got him this far. Bledsoe is introducing the main character to the rules of the racial game. Bledsoe has gained his status through manipulation and dissembling and is telling the main character that the only way for a black man to go far in life is to do the same.

Bledsoe is punishing him for dragging "the entire race into the slime" in front of a white man (141). Here is another major obstacle that Ellison presents: intraracial racism: a member of a specific racial community is prejudiced against members of that community. Bledsoe isn't trying to build up the black community but is trying to protect himself. Anything that threatens that will

be eliminated. When the main character says that he will tell people about Bledsoe unjustly expelling him, Bledsoe explains that his power comes from the whites, and that the main character will be battling a force too big for him to conquer. And to further cement the idea that Bledsoe has no qualms about expelling the main character, he states, "...I've made my place in it [the world] and I'll have every Negro in the country hanging on tree limbs by morning if it means staying where I am" (143). Ellison is demonstrating how a community cannot progress if its members do not support each other. The main character is an example of this because he goes no further in his education, and Bledsoe has no need to further help him. Bledsoe offers the main character referrals for work when he gets to New York, but all of the letters contain orders to give the main character a job but to discourage him from going back to the college, for Bledsoe will never let him return. It is Bledsoe who becomes the catalyst for the main character becoming active. Knowing that he cannot receive help from white men, nor men of his own race, he begins to rely solely on himself.

There has been scholarship on the Invisible Man's ignorance, gullibility, and tunnel-vision at this stage in his life. Valerie Smith writes, "At this point in his life, however, he is fully confident that things are what they appear and that material rewards await the virtuous" (Smith 30). I agree with Smith's assessment of the narrator, and I would go even further to say that the narrator expects white people to reward virtuous black people. Smith recounts each of the incidents where the narrator sees examples of duplicity and yet ignores the deception in favor of whatever benefits he gains from them. The battle royal, Norton, and the Brotherhood are white organizations, or in Norton's case, a white man. The narrator expects nothing from Bledsoe, one of the few black men that he can idolize. Instead he believes that he will gain rewards from Norton. Whether or not the narrator is aware of it, and judging by his very late realization that he

lives in a race defined world, the Invisible Man has created a racial hierarchy placing white men at the top and black men below. When Bledsoe gives him letters of recommendation, it is from white business men that the main character believes he will find success. This naivety is probably the biggest downfall of the narrator, but it is justifiable because of his past experiences. Bigger has obviously understood his place in the world, but he does not seek to understand why he is stuck in that social position. The Invisible Man does not seem to work in terms of race, but rather power. It's just that he does not notice the correlation between power and race, which causes him to constantly be deceived by others throughout the novel until he has a moment of realization after Clifton's death. Ultimately Ellison's goal was to create a novel bridging the gap between the races not solely by discussing race, but politics, religion, class, and other social divisions. Despite this wish of exploring universal humanity, in the text Ellison implies that if the issue of racial inequality is not discussed, and the correlation between that and other areas of life, there will never be harmony between the two races. While subtle, *Invisible Man* is still an African American protest novel, regardless of Ellison's intent.

The novel progresses on to the section entitled "Expelled from college." Previously mentioned was the deception of Dr. Bledsoe. The main character arrives in New York and immediately begins to contact the seven trustees whom Dr. Bledsoe instructed him to see. Bledsoe also has told the main character not to open the letters and read them, and the main character complies. Smith argues, "During his early days in New York City, the protagonist remains deeply convinced of the rightness of linear vision.... The patterns of his thinking display his eagerness to think ahead, his reluctance to reflect" (Smith 33). I disagree with Smith's conclusion that the narrator is reluctant to reflect. It is not so much a reluctance to reflect as it is a dismissal of the conclusion he draws after reflection. Yes, the main character is very forward

thinking. However, he is constantly reflecting back to his grandfather's words, constantly thinking of his incident with Bledsoe and Norton, and the entire novel is the Invisible Man's autobiography, a giant reflection of his life. Of course towards the beginning of the main character's journey his reflection isn't very revealing because he is reluctant to accept his conclusions, but by the end of the novel it is this constant reflection which leads him to go underground, and to decide to go above ground once more.

Each of the offices that the main character goes to rejects him by refusing to contact him, and it isn't until he goes to the office of Emerson that he uncovers the truth behind Bledsoe's letters. The son of Emerson is there, who reveals the letter. The very last line of the letter shows the ruthlessness of Bledsoe to keep the reputation of the university and, more importantly, his reputation clean of the main character's failure; "I beg of you, sir, to help him continue in the direction of that promise which, like the horizon, recedes ever brightly and distantly beyond the hopeful traveler" (191). That promise is the main character's wish to return to the school the following year. Bledsoe not only wants the main character to leave the school, but to continue to believe that he can return to it even when there is no hope for him to. Bledsoe is maliciously playing on the main character's dreams to achieve his own desires, which is to maintain his power within the school; "The white folk tell everybody what to think – except men like me. I tell *them*; that's my life, telling white folks how to think about the things I know about" (143). Bledsoe is proud of the minstrelsy show he puts on in front of the white trustees to get what he wants, because in the end he has the power. Like Trueblood, Ellison is presenting Bledsoe as another possible example that the main character can emulate. Bledsoe is a black man who believes he shouldn't bite the hand that feeds him, and a person who refuses to let his race climb the social ladder for fear of his position becoming compromised. Bledsoe has survived and

thrived, but only by leaving others behind. In a way, Bledsoe represents the American Dream. He has literally worked his way from the bottom to the top of the ladder, stepping on others as he did so, and kicking others down once he was at the top. Bledsoe is willing to help the main character so long as he remains secure in his life, and even then only to a point.

Ellison also shows a clear disdain for both Trueblood and Bledsoe, representations of African American stereotypes that he believed held back the race from moving forward as a whole. Trueblood is stuck in the past, believing that the white man is the provider and the epitome of human perfection. He is an Uncle Tom who would not mind going back to the era before Reconstruction. Bledsoe redefines the Uncle Tom trope, modernizing it as a way to gain power, believing that he is subtly directing white men to do as he wishes, and guards this power and knowledge. He is a new version of the familiar Uncle Tom, playing up his “yesses” in front of a white audience, and becoming the master in front of a black audience. Neither of these men is in a position to help his race. Once again, Ellison is providing the reader with a situation that Wright does not, an obstacle which the Invisible Man has to overcome. Wright only presents one type of male African American character, which is Bigger, an angry black man. There is the group of friends, but they are too similar to Bigger and Wright does not focus on them enough to truly extract anything from their characters. Ellison presents several types of African American characters besides the narrator, providing examples of what Ellison believes are failures in terms of the characters’ usefulness to the African American race. In a similar fashion to the Goldilocks story, the main character is trying to find a personality and position that fit him just right. These multitudes of characters, though stereotypical they may be, help the main character in his quest for agency because of his rejection of them, and need to find his own path. Author and critic William J. Shafer states, “The novel uses a cumulative plot...developing the same basic episode

over and over in an emotional crescendo: the protagonist struggles idealistically to live by the commandments of his immediate social group, then is undone by the hypocrisy built into the social structure and is plunged into despair” (117). Ellison guides his main character through variations of the same events, allowing him to build upon himself, his experience, and his knowledge each time around. Wright does not allow for this type of growth, a major flaw in his protest.

Having sympathy for the main character, Emerson offers him a job at the paint factory Liberty Whites, where their slogan is “Keep America Pure with Liberty Paints” (196). Liberty Paints boasts the ability to create the whitest paint in the country. The main character is given a black substance (called “dope”) to pour into the paint which, instead of graying the paint, is completely absorbed and the white paint remains pure. The symbolism of the paint and dope is the most significant when reading *Invisible Man* in the context of a protest novel, and looking at the main character before and after his discovery of becoming an “Invisible Man.” This symbolism will later be revisited.

The main character is then sent to the basement under the management of Lucius Brockway, the only African American in Liberty Paints with a managerial position, who is in charge of maintaining the boiler system underneath the factory. In the same fashion as Bledsoe, Brockway is condescending, rude, and completely willing to do anything to keep his position. When Brockway believes that the main character voluntarily went to a union meeting during their lunch break, Brockway physically attacks him, saying, “I’m liable to kill you. The Lord being my witness, I’LL KILL YOU!” (225). This anger filled diatribe is what finally breaks the main character; after Brockway attacks him, he fights back. In this one moment, the main character lets a piece of himself go, realizing that his future does not need to be tied to or dictated

by an older generation of black men. There is a pause in the fighting when Lucius loses his dignity when he loses his dentures, and the main character finally explains that he happened upon the meeting. Brockway explains that to join a union would be like biting “the hand of the man” who provided for them: “Here the white man done give `em jobs...He done give `em *good* jobs too, and they so ungrateful they goes and joins up with that backbiting union!” (228).

During this exchange one of the boilers is over heated, and begins to steam. Instead of doing his best to fix the situation, Brockway runs for the exit, laughing and telling the main character how to fix it. Brockway leaves the main character in a dangerous situation that he does not know how to handle. There is an explosion which knocks the main character out and puts him in critical condition. Before he loses consciousness the main character hears Brockway say, “I tole `em these here young Nineteen-Hundred boys ain’t no good for the job” (230). Brockway believes that the “new negro” doesn’t deserve the job he has, one that he has had since the beginning of the factory, especially if the new men are going to form unions. By expressing that the new boys aren’t good for the job, Brockway is not only stating that they couldn’t actually handle the labor, but they also won’t show a level of dedication that he can, because of their willingness to bite the hand that feeds them. He comfortably lives in a mix between Bledsoe and Trueblood, demanding power by truly showing subservience and ignorance. The fight between Brockway and the main character, as well as Brockway’s willingness to do anything necessary to keep his position, implies that Brockway might have deliberately let the boilers overheat and harm the main character. Brockway’s last words solidify this conclusion, because they are smug, and demeaning.

Ellison has put both Bledsoe and Brockway in the path of the main character. Bledsoe is young, has an education, and a respectable position. Brockway is older, uneducated, and works

in the basement of a factory. They are two completely different types of people who both have the ability to mislead and harm the main character. Ellison perfectly illustrates the many forms of obstacles in the way of the main character's progression. Brockway is dissimilar from Trueblood because he holds a job, does not have a licentious past, and is not a person who serves as a source of amusement for his community. Brockway is what Trueblood could have been, but from an older generation. This is important to note because having Brockway and Trueblood represent separate generations creates the motif of repetition. Truebloods and Brockways will continue to show up in every generation and it will be up to people such as the narrator to combat them.

Ellison now allows the main character to actively engage in the social issues of Harlem. He gives his first racially aware speech to a crowd of people watching the eviction of an old African American couple. Much like the main character's journey into becoming a successful agent of protest, the speech is stilted, improvised, and even contradicts itself. The main character is unaware that with his speech he has stepped into a role as an equal rights advocate; the position comes to him naturally through the witnessing of the eviction. The main character repeatedly says that blacks are a "law-abiding people" and a "slow-to-anger people" and tries to use that as a way to appeal to the crowd of people and prevent any type of violent action against the policeman organizing the eviction (275). This calm that he tries to relay to the crowd is dimmed in the face of the protagonist telling the crowd that they, he included, are ashamed. The couple who is being evicted are in their eighties, the husband eighty-seven and still a day laborer, and their possessions and their lodgings are pitiable; however, they are fighting the eviction. The main character tries to say that the eviction is not worth fighting when over eighty years of life have resulted in so little. While the main character is trying to channel the crowd's energy into an organized campaign against something bigger than the eviction, the crowd becomes even more

enraged at the physical manifestation of what the racial conditions have led them to-- arguing over junk in the street. The crowd surges against the police officer, chasing him away, and they begin to bring the furniture back into the apartment. This was not the intention of the main character, but he goes along with it, shouting, "We're dispossessed...dispossessed and we want to pray. Let's go in and pray" (281). Swept up in the energy of the people, he helps bring in chairs to start a prayer circle. When he hears that the police are coming he quickly changes his mind; "It became too much for me. The whole thing had gotten out of hand. What had I said to bring on all this?" (284). The reader witnesses the main character acting and reacting to his situation, aware of the potential power of his words. Unlike Bigger, the main character feels a responsibility for the actions of the crowd. He is aware not only of himself but also of his racial status, and this speech is his first step into actively engaging in the civil rights struggle. This speech is important because 1) he began it of his own volition, 2) he learns how delicate the mood of the crowd is and tries to react accordingly, 3) he learns of his power. These three points are what boost him into becoming an agent of protest later on in the novel, and because of his earnestness, it makes him all the more empathetic when his plans go awry.

This speech also leads him to Brother Jack, or rather Brother Jack to him. Jack is the leader of the Brotherhood, an organization dedicated to the common people. In essence, the Brotherhood believes in a scientific and intellectual method rather than one of emotions and passions. The Brotherhood wants to organize and strategically use the main character to gather people into organized groups. Jack offers the main character a stipend, a rent-free room, and the chance to make more speeches to help the common people. Eagerly the main character accepts and is given the opportunity to give another speech in front of a whole stadium of people. The main character speaks of a hidden enemy who keeps the people from banding together, playing

their fears off one another and causing chaos, while that enemy enjoys the spoils. The main character calls the crowd “uncommon people” because they are the ones who allowed themselves to be treated as such. He animated the crowd, saying probably one of the most memorable lines from the novel, “Why, they even tried to dispossess us of *our dislike of being dispossessed*” (343). At this time, the main character truly feels that he is talking to a collective of people, addressing an issue bigger than race. The crowd is pleased by his speech and he is successful, while the members of the Brotherhood, save Jack, are extremely agitated. In explanation of why the main character’s speech was wrong, a member states, “It was the antithesis of the scientific approach. Ours is a reasonable point of view. We are champions of a scientific approach to society, and such a speech as we’ve identified ourselves with tonight destroys everything that has been said before. The audience isn’t thinking, it’s yelling its head off” (350). The main character takes the disapproval at face value and believes that with the education that the Brotherhood will provide him, he will be able to access the audience with his speeches through an intellectual route.

Given our knowledge that the main character breaks with the Brotherhood, and because he mentions race, one can conclude that the Brotherhood disliked the speech not only because of its delivery, but also because the subject matter was too closely related to the racial issue. The members of the Brotherhood refer to everyone as “Brother,” and whenever the topic of race arises it is hushed because they are aiming for something higher than that. Though it is not explicitly stated in the novel, the Brotherhood is a model of the Communist Party. In terms of the main character making a speech regarding racism and the need for social equality and community, he was successful. However, that success is taken away from him because the Brotherhood steers him away from that direction, twisting him for their own purpose, just as the

main character tries to do to the audience, though he does not have such a self-serving motive. Ellison was quick to point out the faults in the Communist Party, especially when it came to the African American community. Lawrence P. Jackson explains,

Frequent conflicts arose concerning the direction and speed of the black Civil Rights Movement, leading to tensions that were not eased by the high percentage of whites in the leadership of the Harlem Communist Party during the late 1930s. The Communists undermined their public pronouncements about black self-determination by restricting the autonomy of their black leadership cadre. As a result, independent action by blacks often met with a raised eyebrow and derisive patter about overly 'individualistic' aspirations (Jackson 323).

Ellison alludes to Communism and criticized the actions of the members when dealing with social equality for African Americans. The Brotherhood was also disgruntled with the main character creating an individual image rather than being representative of the Brotherhood as an organization.

The main character receives his education and continues to make speeches in the Harlem area. Once again he does not address race, but he is conducting his gatherings in a predominantly black area. It is during the height of his success that he receives an anonymous letter: "Keep working for the people but remember that you are one of *us* and do not forget if you get too big *they* will cut you down. You are from the South and you know that this is a *white man's world*. So take a friendly advice and go easy so that you can keep on helping the colored people" (383). At the end of the novel the main character realizes that the letter was from Brother Jack based on a handwriting comparison. This discovery was made after the main character found out that the Brotherhood planned the race riot that occurred.

Because of the prologue, as well as the last words of the grandfather of the main character, the audience is aware that the main issue of the novel is racism, and that the common people who the main character refers to are mostly, if not entirely, composed of black people. But we see that in the very first speech the main character gives at the battle royal, his audience has no tolerance for the words “social equality.” When he speaks to the people at the eviction he says “law-abiding people” or “slow-to-anger people.” At his speech in the stadium they are the “uncommon common people.” It isn’t until the murder of Brother Clifton that the main character makes a direct referral to race. The main character gives his first impassioned and unscientific speech after he has joined the Brotherhood at Clifton’s funeral. It is this speech that simultaneously broadens and narrows his thinking about the actions of the Brotherhood and his relation to it. I say broadened because he expands his mind to the possibility that the Brotherhood had ceased talking in Harlem because they no longer cared about the black area; however, this event also focuses his thinking because, unlike the Brotherhood believing in something above race, the main character realizes the root of the problem could stem from race. Before his speech he contemplates why Clifton has been shot, but in the speech he says, “His name was Clifton and he was black and they shot him” (456). It is the bond between the main character and Clifton that allows him to become emotionally attached to his words again. That is not to say that he wasn’t connected to his other speeches, but those speeches were made on such broad topics where he skirted around the issue (race) and was able to approach the matter scientifically or objectively. He is not able to do so with Clifton’s speech because he witnessed Clifton’s death and saw no justifiable cause. This is what enables him to call a spade a spade. Ellison incorporates an age old argument about the superficiality of the color of our skin: “He fell in a heap like any man and his blood spilled out like any blood; *red* as any blood, wet as any

blood and reflecting the sky and the buildings and birds and trees, or your face if you'd looked into its dulling mirror – and it dried in the sun as blood dries” (456). He uses blood as a tool, and he uses it well. Clifton's blood not only symbolizes his unnecessary death, but it is a universal thing that connects all people. The main character has now gone from defending the common man to a race of people. What solidifies his place as a civil rights activist is the line “Tell them [cops] to teach them that when they call you *nigger* to make a rhyme with *trigger* it makes the gun backfire” (458). Arguably this is the catalyst that begins the main character's transformation into the Invisible Man.

Thomas Schaub writes, “Invisible Man comes to see that he lives in a world whose manners obey a collective and distorting psychology that avoids acknowledging, often willfully, what runs the social reality in which he moves” (126). Schaub purports the main character is constantly subscribing to another group and another belief system that he believed would help propel him into success. But without the acknowledgement that the same groups and systems of belief that he put his faith in are the same collective that holds him behind, he will not be able to move forward, nor will the rest of society. I believe that the power dynamics of society are so inbred in the main character that he doesn't acknowledge them because it is so obvious. From his grandfather, to Mr. Norton, to Emerson, to Brother Jack, the Invisible Man has been cautious of his behavior around white people because he understands that they have power and he doesn't. Of course, during his Brotherhood phase, the main character believes that he has had equality within the organization because of their mission statement of equality for all humanity, but soon he is disillusioned. Once the narrator strips himself of these outside forces after Clifton's funeral, and once again in the sewer as he burns his papers, the narrator can begin to find himself and his identity. It is when he chooses to remove himself from the rules of the ruling collective that he

begins to find himself, not because he doesn't acknowledge that there is a ruling collective. I believe that the Invisible Man has always known that a collective runs the society, but he did not always know that this collective did not work for the common good, whites and black included.

This speech also leads to the Brotherhood showing their true colors. While the Brotherhood and the main character have avoided the issue of race and civil rights, the main character jumps immediately upon the subject. In response to the main character's argument that the Brotherhood should get back in touch with the people, Brother Jack replies, "Today he's a busy man. First an oration over the body of Brutus, and now a lecture on the patience of the Negro people" (Ellison 465). Brother Jack in particular stayed away from race and even went so far as to kick a member out of the organization for asking the main character to sing. Before this speech Brother Jack called the people the main character was talking to "the people," but here he unconsciously admits that the main character has been talking to the black community. The conversation quickly becomes an issue of race, and because the Brotherhood refuses to acknowledge that the "Brotherhood isn't the Negro people," they will never truly get Harlem to organize. One member, Brother Tobitt, is particularly outspoken about the main character's complaints, and believes that they are unfounded; Tobitt understands the "Negro problem" because he married a "fine, intelligent Negro girl" (468). Tobitt is dispossessing the main character of his dislike of being dispossessed. Ellison is no longer hiding the issue of race or leaving it as some nameless ghost; he is addressing it directly. Jack, Tobitt, and the rest of the Brotherhood are a new kind of obstacle, though one that isn't foreign. They are reminiscent of the men from the battle royal. Both of them claim to want to uplift *all* members of the community, but only to a certain extent, and then become affronted when people are discontent with their conditions, as described in the letter the protagonist received which stated that whites

will knock him down if he aims too high. The main character faces this opposition fearfully at the battle royal, but is strong in the face of the Brotherhood. He decides to try a different approach to them, thinking he has found the key to what his grandfather told him. He will no longer just try to appease the Brotherhood, but will manipulate them for his own purposes, hoping that by complying with their wishes they will witness the destruction of their own organization. However, it is the main character who witnesses something much worse.

Harlem has disintegrated into a race riot. Triggered by the death of Clifton, the city descends into chaos led by a man who calls himself Ras the Destroyer. Previously he was called Ras the Exhorter, holding rallies about civil rights, and took on a much more aggressive and violent approach to the matter than the Brotherhood. The main character is swept away by the energy and helps set a project building on fire for the insurance money, thinking, "They've done it... They organized it and carried it through alone; the decision their own and their own action. Capable of their own action..." (548). He has gone through steps in his own thinking, reevaluating his conclusions with each of his new experiences. Ellison's character has taken several steps that Wright's never does. Between the main character's personal discoveries, as well as the several types of African American men that the main character has the possible choice to emulate, Ellison creates a world which forces the main character into horrible situations because he has the misfortune to be black, forces him to evaluate his position in his community and the world at large, and forces him underground. Each major event in the main character's life serves as a learning experience from which he will grow. Wright creates his story with major experiences that Bigger could possibly learn from, but instead of being dynamic, Bigger remains a static character, not changing or rejecting his situation. In short, Wright does not have Bigger protest against his situation; Bigger just rages. Ellison illustrates obstacles which

his main character grows from, and learns from so that he can later protest. First he believes that he needed to fight for common men, and organize their energy through his words of passion. Then he moves into organizing the common man with a scientific approach. Next comes organizing the black community with a scientific approach, and afterwards organizing the black community with a passionate approach. He finally reaches his last conclusion at this point in the novel: the black community is capable of organizing themselves.

During the commotion of the race riot the main character ends up in a sewer hole, running away from Ras' men. For light, he burns papers, like his high school diploma, from the brief case that he was carrying. For him to be able to see clearly in the dark, he must burn things that define who he was. Tony Tanner, a scholar of African American literature, believes that this act of burning the papers "represent[s] all the schemes and treacheries that his curious controllers have planned for him. He is in fact burning up his past and all the false roles it has sought to trap him in" (Tanner 88). While I agree with Tanner that the burning of the papers frees him from his previous roles, I do not believe that they represent "schemes," "treacheries," and "false roles" so much as they represent a past that has led him to see which path he needs to follow, rather than the paths that have been laid before him; he needs to pave his own path. For him to see the truth, which symbolically is also referred to as the light, he needs to let go of his past, and all of the beliefs that he once held to be important. He has to step outside his history. But this clarity comes at a cost, which is previously built identity. He realizes that he has been invisible because he has never been seen. For Bledsoe he was a disgrace to the university and needed to be forgotten. To the Brotherhood he was a tool, replaceable and disposable. He is not a human being but a second class citizen, a black man in a white man's world. He has had no power or standing; therefore he isn't seen and is invisible. This idea is further cemented when he comes

across Mr. Norton one day in the subway. Mr. Norton does not recognize the main character, despite telling him that he is his fate and his destiny. The main character is just another faceless form, yet he learns to accept that and takes power from it. He delights in siphoning off electricity into the basement that he has made into a home, which is illuminated with hundreds of light bulbs. The light bulbs in the basement are analogous to the main character's clarity in his invisibility. He now has the tools he needs to make a difference and has decided to come back to the world. His invisibility has allowed him to see how the world works, how the game is played, and what rules he will live by. The last lines of the novel are, "Being invisible and without substance, a disembodied voice, as it were, what else could I do? What else but try to tell you what was really happening when your eyes were looking through? And it is this which frightens me: Who knows but that, on the lower frequencies, I speak for you?" (Ellison 581). He is speaking for all others who are invisible but do not know it. He is able to speak, to do, on their behalf because he has had his realization. Ellison believes that "the novelist seeks to create forms in which acts, scenes and characters speak for more than their immediate selves," and not only does he present a novel that speaks for a multitude of different people, but creates a character who acts upon this belief (xx).

Bigger reached a similar conclusion; he believed that everyone else was blind. Both he and the main character knew that there was a disconnect over who is seen and who isn't. Wright chose to have Bigger use his discovery for his own gratification, while Ellison chose his character to use his discovery for the benefit of others. The main character of *Invisible Man* chose to speak for others, a trait that is necessary when he represents a type of social protest where individuals of the African American race come together as a community to achieve social justice. Ellison's main character understands the need for responsibility and self-reflection, while

Wright's main character deflects responsibility and self-reflects only as long as he is not responsible for the consequences. Gathering what we understand from both novels and analyzing how successful the main characters convey the protest, *Invisible Man* presents a main character who evokes empathy, has faced obstacles not only from the white community, but the black community and himself, learns to take responsibility for his own actions, and decides to enter the struggle. As stated at the beginning of this chapter, Ellison attempts to do something very different than Wright. Looking over the course of his career and his relationship with Wright, Ellison slowly changed his opinion on Wright's handling of the African American protest novel. Originally, Ellison was a huge fan of *Native Son*, as well as Wright's autobiography *Black Boy*. Further into his career Ellison stated, "How awful that Wright found the facile answers of Marxism before he learned to use literature as a means for discovering the forms of American Negro humanity..."(qtd. in Jackson 321). Ellison believed in creating art and that if it were to be used for a didactic or social protest, it must go beyond, and explore humanity itself.

Both Baldwin and Ellison critiqued Wright's work and use of violence in his novel. Irving Howe stated that "In response to Baldwin and Ellison, Wright would have said (I virtually quote the words he used in talking to me during the summer of 1958) that only through struggle could men with black skins, and for that matter, all the oppressed of the world, achieve their humanity" (Howe 360). Both Wright and Ellison address in their novels the issue of struggle on the pathway to equality. Wright did not illustrate struggle in his novel as Ellison did. In *Native Son*, racial inequality is assumed, and Bigger's choices are made because of racial inequality. However, this theme is not exactly explored so much as it is implied. The audience understands that Bigger will not go far in life simply because he is black, but he does not encounter a racial struggle. Bigger is thrown by Mary and Jan, but neither of them uses race as a barrier between

them, though they may not have been extremely tactful. And even if Wright did include a prominent struggle in the novel, there is no triumph. Wright does not present his case that African Americans will achieve their humanity through struggle, as Bigger is still in jail soon to be executed, and there does not seem to be any change in the world at large. On the other hand, Ellison presents many struggles and obstacles that the Invisible Man has to go through. And while by the end of the novel the main character discovers that he is invisible, he has achieved his humanity, his sense of self, and will then use that to help others, as illustrated by the line “Who knows but that, on the lower frequencies, I speak for you?” (Ellison 581). Because the main character has separated himself from the world, from the game, from the system, he is able to critique it, and the reader is able to do so as well.

When he first began to write his novel in 1981, Ellison wrote, “Among these was the question of why most protagonists of Afro-American fiction...were without intellectual depth. Too often they were figures caught up in the most intense forms of social struggle, subject to the most extreme forms of the human predicament but yet seldom able to articulate the issues which tortured them” (xix). This is a perfect description of Bigger’s situation. Throughout the entire novel, especially concentrated towards the end, Bigger struggles with communicating to others. Ellison rejects this silent anger, and goes for a calm analysis of the social life of Americans, both white and black.

CONCLUSION

As wonderful to read as these two books are, one triumphed over the other when the agency of the main character and his ability to convey the author's protest are taken into consideration. Richard Wright tried to fully immerse his readers into the world of the young black male in 1930s Chicago. He detailed the horrors of Bigger Thomas' life and actions down to the letter. Nonetheless, because of the narration and more importantly, his agent of protest, Wright failed to fully communicate his warning to white America because he wrote a protest novel in the guise of a crime drama, whose sensationalism ultimately took over. Bigger Thomas ultimately undermines the protest because he in no way, shape, or form challenges negative stereotypes of young African American men. It is understandable that Wright wanted to create the image of a male who was so influenced by his environment that he could feel nothing other than rage, hate, and exhibit violent tendencies. However, by constructing a character that shared traits with the stereotypical African American male used for racist propaganda, and by not assigning agency to this character, Wright only confirms these negative traits.

Ellison, who wanted to stray from the category of "protest novel," and disliked the idea of his novel becoming another African American book, succeeded where Wright failed. *Invisible Man* allowed even black readers to connect with the main character. Meant to inspire thought and change, Ellison takes the reader through his narrator's journey, allowing us to grow with him. By the end of the novel we feel as if it is our time to come out of hibernation.

It should be noted, however, that neither of these novels, though emblematic of African American protest literature, is completely exhaustive of the genre of the protest novel. Probably the most obvious reason for this is both Wright's and Ellison's treatment of women, and more

specifically African American women, in their novels. Though it is not discussed much in this paper, the women in *Native Son* and *Invisible Man* are devices, incomplete characters, or tools that the male characters use for their own benefit, not existing as characters in their own right. Wright and Ellison have illustrated the male African American experience, and while this is a step forward in the right direction, it is not representative of the people as a whole. Neither of the novels is a “perfect” example of an African American protest novel, which indicates that there needs to be further thoughts on how one needs to conduct a successful protest through literature.

In the end, no one can question the transformation that Richard Wright and Ralph Ellison made in African American literature. In my opinion, more than anything, the differences in their writing styles, while tackling the same racial inequality in America, proved that there were voices that needed to be heard. Both authors left a legacy that would allow other writers such as James Baldwin, Chester Himes, Toni Morrison, Alice Walker, and Octavia E. Butler to add their creations to the African American literary canon. After the Civil Rights movement, the popularity of protest literature seems to have decreased. As a 21st century reader, I would say that to find literature as powerful, as meaningful, and as connected to the history of African American culture means that I have to go back in time to authors such as Wright and Ellison.

However, in schools across the country these novels have had a shaky reception. According to the American Library Association both *Native Son* and *Invisible Man* have been challenged and banned, and from 1990-1999 were among the most frequently challenged books by authors of color (ALA). *Native Son* was challenged for being “sexually explicit, [and for its use of] offensive language, violence,” and *Invisible Man* for “profanity and images of violence and sexuality” (ALA). These books express the hardships of African Americans in a racist America, and people choose to complain about its language and sexual content. But there is a

reason why these books continue to be on high school reading lists and are considered classics by several organizations. Both *Native Son* and *Invisible Man* offer a truth about the black experience in America. Serving either as a warning, or an inspiration, they are novels that were meant to invoke change.

I don't believe that *Native Son* is a bad novel, just a weak protest novel. I was emotional, and overcome with disgust over Bigger Thomas and his actions. As much as I could see what led him to murder Mary and hide from the law, I could not forgive him for raping and killing Bessie. I could not accept him as a symbol for African Americans. Because of the fatalistic tone of *Native Son* from the beginning of the novel, a reader can infer that the ending of the novel will not be an optimistic one. The fatalism that Wright portrays in his novel suggests that there is no way to conquer racism. If there is no way to achieve racial equality, then what is the point of the protest? By the end of the novel I was left desolate, knowing that Bigger would be executed, and that his actions meant nothing, especially with the onslaught of hatred against him.

But the *Invisible Man* inspired something in me. He followed a path and had dreams that most young adults of any race would: to do well in high school, go to college, find a career, and become successful. Being derailed from that track, he made the best of his situation, and along the way discovered that he needed to create and find an identity for himself in order to be successful. *Invisible Man* made me question my own ideologies, and my own passivity. It is 2014, and in the past two years there have been major debates over what I like to call "invisible racism." With the murders of Trayvon Martin and Jordan Davis, millions of people have spoken about the racial profiling that these two young men were subjected to by their killers. I was forced to remember the epilogue of *Invisible Man* when I watched these stories play out on the

news. I recognized that there is a problem with the racial inequality that is present in America, especially when it involves African Americans, but I never believed that one voice could make a difference. However, the Invisible Man believed that it starts with one voice.

This is why I chose to begin my journey of becoming visible with this paper. I wrote this thesis because having read both books, both struck a different chord in me. I chose the topic of protest because protest is what I feel needs to happen in today's political, social, and economic climate. There are dozens of Occupy movements that address inequality in many aspects of life. Inspired by this, I thought it best to play to my strengths as a writer. My first step towards becoming visible is to understand protest literature and its effects. Reading *Native Son* was something akin to reading a suspenseful detective story; I constantly wondered if Bigger Thomas would get caught. I wasn't interested in the protest that Wright was trying to convey as much as I was interested in Bigger's future. *Invisible Man* made me pause, and think about my own personal experiences in this modern age, where racism is either seen to be a thing of the past, or subtle and covert. When racism is hidden behind racial profiling, or stop-and-frisk laws, I now question how much progress African Americans have made as a race. When I recall the shootings of Trayvon Martin or Jordan Davis in the second decade of the twenty first century, they are not so different from the Scottsboro Boys or Emmett Till. I am now forced to acknowledge my own complicity in racism in modern day America, just as the Invisible Man had to do. And it is that acknowledgement, that realization that the Invisible Man has, that makes Ellison's story succeed as a protest novel.

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