
FORUM

An Interdisciplinary Examination of U.S. Racism from *The Mismeasure of Man to Invisible Man*

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W e two authors dwell in disciplinary homes representative of the “Two Cultures” (C.P. Snow’s term for the communication gap between practitioners in the sciences vs. the humanities). Carol is an Entomology Professor who teaches an interdisciplinary course for our Honors College. Richard is an English Professor and Director of our General Education Program. Our decision to join forces in the classroom arose from Carol’s desire to utilize literary fiction as a means for students to explore the sweeping impact of science, particularly poorly conducted science, on Western society. Our purpose here is to relate our classroom activities and pedagogies aimed at bridging the “Two Cultures” gap, and our students’ responses to them.

Carol’s course examines scientific and popular assumptions, preconceptions, myths, and thinking underlying past and present diversity issues. Through readings, case studies, guided discussion, and written activities, students examine the types of errors that scientists have committed in the past and may commit today, however unwittingly. The stage is set with S.J. Gould’s *The Mismeasure of Man* (1996), which scrutinizes numerous attempts made during the 18th through 20th centuries to quantify human intellectual worth. These attempts, as Gould demonstrates through masterful, detailed data analyses, were wrongly touted as unbiased and scientifically valid and had appalling consequences, including: compulsory legalized sterilization of at least 60,000 Americans during the eugenics movement, and imprisonment and extermination of millions of Jews under the same movement in Nazi Germany; enslavement, maltreatment (sometimes fatal), and segregation/discrimination inflicted upon African Americans; and gender-based prejudices and inequities suffered by women regardless of race or ethnicity. All of these human abuses are rooted in the sciences.

Carol sought a modern literary work that would convey the devastating, far-reaching ramifications of the racially based studies discussed in Gould’s book. She

also wanted the work to be intellectually challenging and conducive to an interdisciplinary approach. With the help and encouragement of Richard, whose expertise is in 20th-century Southern U.S. literature, she chose Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man* (1952). This modern classic received the National Book Award in 1953—the first awarded to a black American author—and has been translated into at least fifteen languages (O'Meally, Introduction 4). Literary critics see it as a landmark of both African American and American literature (Lee 236), and it is frequently listed among the best 100 books of the 20th century (Kelly).

The plot of *Invisible Man* recapitulates the African American experience, from the era of Booker T. Washington to World War II, through the encounters and exploits of its archetypal protagonist-narrator. Yet the novel is capacious in scope and operates on several levels (Dickstein 129, 132-134; O'Meally, Introduction 2; Reilly, Introduction 5-6). As the eminent literary critic R.W.B. Lewis asserted, *Invisible Man* probes “our representative native theme.... For if there is an American fiction it is this” (qtd. in O'Meally, Introduction 1). The central themes of the novel, together with its allusions, symbolism, metaphors, musical motifs, and array of cultural references, provide a depth and breadth of topics and contexts seldom achieved in a single literary work.

Invisible Man draws from, employs, mimics, and sometimes mocks countless subgenres of discourse; as such, it has been deemed a “rhetorical tour-de-force” (O'Meally, Introduction 2). Allusions are made to African American literature, including works by Frederick Douglass, W.E.B. DuBois, Richard Wright, and Harlem Renaissance writers (excerpted and contextualized in Sundquist); Black American culture and folklore (Busby 84-92; Neal 93, 97, 103; O'Meally, *Craft* 78-84, 98-102; Sundquist 113-144); the writings of European masters such as Dante's *Divine Comedy*, Dostoevsky's *Notes from Underground* and *Brothers Karamazov*, Eliot's *The Waste Land*, Malraux's *Man's Fate*, Stendhal's *Red and the Black*, Joyce's *Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* (Bloom, “Two African American Masters” 89-91; Busby 65-70; 81-83; Deutsch 99-101; Morris; Savery 13; Walling 132); major works from the American canon such as Emerson's “Self-Reliance” and other essays (Hanlon); the fiction of Melville, Hemingway, and Faulkner (Busby 73-74, 79; 80-81; O'Meally 2004, 160, 164-175, 182-183); sermon oratory (O'Meally 1980, 97-98); Homer's *Odyssey* (Deutsch 97-98); and political speeches of Black leaders and revolutionaries including Booker T. Washington's “Atlanta Exposition Address” and speeches by Ras Tafari and Marcus Garvey (Sundquist 33-35, 183-184). The work of various jazz musicians such as Louis Armstrong, Bessie Smith, Jimmy Rushing is referenced frequently (O'Meally 1980, 84-87, 89), and jazz itself is central to the novel, both structurally and stylistically.

As a novel, *Invisible Man* defies easy categorization. Scholars note its picaresque elements, as episodic adventures of its roguish hero are recounted in satiric prose (Bone 26-27; Schafer). They also recognize its strong resemblance to a *Bildungsroman*, or “education novel” (Burke 66; Busby 60). The young and extraordinarily naïve “invisible man” of the title develops moral, psychological, and intellectual awareness through a series of experiences that challenge his assumptions about the world while teaching painful lessons; Twain’s *Huckleberry Finn* (the influence of which Ellison acknowledged) and Salinger’s *Catcher in the Rye* are well known examples of this genre.

Structurally, *Invisible Man* comprises twenty-five chapters flanked by a Prologue, in which the action takes place after that which occurs in the chapters; and an Epilogue, in which the protagonist/narrator reflects on the significance of his experiences. The protagonist’s physical journey parallels that of the Black American Diaspora from the postbellum South to the Northern cities, comprising a three-part literary structure: he spends his formative years through his first year of college in the South (Chapters 1-6), travels North (Chapter 7), and settles in Harlem (Chapters 8-25). Ellison described a somewhat different three-part structure for *Invisible Man*, stating that his framework paralleled the protagonist’s movement from “purpose to passion to perception” (Ellison, *Collected Essays* 218), citing the plot pattern for tragedy elucidated by the celebrated literary theorist, Kenneth Burke. Other structural divisions have been suggested for *Invisible Man*. Busby proposes a two-part structure for the novel, with the first part focused on the protagonist as individual and the second concerned with his relationship to society (62). Abbot envisions a four-part structure, based on the occurrence of a cyclical series of events symbolic of death and rebirth (39-40).

Stylistically, the novel encompasses enormous range. Ellison adopts a naturalistic style for the chapters set in the South, employing symbols and symbolism without abandoning fundamental realism; switches to an expressionistic style as the narrator apprehensively transitions from the South to the North; and employs a surrealistic style for dream-like passages and the final chapters, which relate a number of highly emotional, sensational events (Ellison, *Collected Essays* 220). Irony, incongruity, ambiguity, tragicomedy, and the enigma of contradiction pervade *Invisible Man*, enhancing the novel’s complexity. Often the narrator (and the reader) is required to see events in two or more inconsistent or even contradictory ways simultaneously (Lee 233). Ellison also delights in tropes and word play—puns, rhymes, slogans, paradoxes (O’Meally, *The Craft* 79)—and vividly brings to life the vernacular dialects of people from various social classes, backgrounds, and professions.

Several themes figure prominently in *Invisible Man*: the search for identity and self-realization (Sten), the race-related struggles of African Americans (Sundquist 40, 57, 66-67, 72), the self-transformation from ignorance to knowledge (Ellison, *Collected Essays* 220), the value inherent in one's past and cultural heritage (O'Meally, *The Craft* 90-92), and the wisdom of the African American folk experience (O'Meally, Introduction 103-104; Sundquist 120-121, 127-128). *Invisible Man* also abounds with metaphors (Horowitz 34; Reilly, Introduction 7;) and symbolism (Glücksberg; Crewdson and Thompson 269-270; O'Meally, *The Craft* 78, 80-81).

Early literary reviews of *Invisible Man* run the gamut from kudos to condemnation (Bellow, Howe, Lewis, Locke, Morris, Prescott). Butler (Introduction xxv-xxvi) and Porter (122-131) discuss the famous literary skirmish that broke out in the 1960s between Ellison and literary critic Irving Howe. Walling recounts the strong dissent of Black Arts activists—a.k.a. Black Separatists, notably LeRoi Jones (now Amiri Baraka) and Addison Gayle, Jr.—from *Invisible Man* and Ellison, whose integrationist stance and relationship with the white literary establishment they eschewed.

Invisible Man was published in 1952 at the dawn of the U.S. Civil Rights Movement, two years before the Supreme Court struck down segregation in public schools, three years before Rosa Parks refused to give up her seat to a white man on an Alabama bus. In the ensuing half-century, American cultural life has undergone radical alterations. Reflecting the changing times, *Invisible Man* and its author have been analyzed and reanalyzed, praised and criticized, spawning a panoply of scholarly articles, critiques, books, and websites. Anthologies of critical essays and analyses are numerous (Butler, Introduction; Bloom, *Ralph Ellison*; Callahan; Hersey; O'Meally, Introduction; Parr and Savery; Reilly, Introduction). Three journal issues are devoted to Ellison and his work: *Black World* Vol. 20 (1970); *Carleton Miscellany* Vol. 18 (1980), and *CLA Journal* Vol. 13 (1970). Busby provides a detailed, chapter-wise examination of the novel's structure, themes, characters, style, symbolism, and images (29-64). Moreland offers a multicultural analysis, and Butler examines Ellison's career and the ever-evolving critical assessments of *Invisible Man* (Introduction ix-xl).

Insightful interviews and reminiscences of Ellison are available (Butler, Introduction; Corry; Ellison, *Living with Music* and *Collected Essays*; Graham and Singh; Rosenblatt), as are some of Ellison's letters to his longtime friend, Albert Murray, essayist and former director of Jazz at Lincoln Center (Ellison, *Living with Music*). Also informative are Butler's chronology of Ellison's life (113-116) and two recent biographies (Jackson, Rampersad). Three websites deserve mention: Effinger's "*Invisible Man* by Ralph Ellison" features classroom strategies and assignments plus numerous musical, artistic, and historical links. Jerry Jazz Musician's "Ralph Ellison

Project” offers transcribed interviews with several Ellison scholars and musical audio clips. *Ralph Ellison: An American Journey* provides contextual information, video clips omitted from the original PBS documentary, and information for purchase of the DVD, which we use in class.

As noted earlier, jazz plays a central role in *Invisible Man*, and Ellison’s integration of musical elements is one of the novel’s most compelling aspects. Romanet traces more than fifty explicit references to music in the novel (105), whose structure is musically based (Porter 74, 77-78). In the words of Albert Murray, who has written extensively on jazz and the blues:

Invisible Man was *par excellence* the literary extension of the blues...as if Ellison had taken an everyday twelve bar blues tune (by a man from down South sitting in a manhole up North singing and signifying about how he got there) and scored it for full orchestra.... And like the blues, and echoing the irrepressibility of America itself, it ended on a note of promise, ironic and ambiguous.... (qtd. in O’Meally, *The Craft* 84)

Ellison (named for poet Ralph Waldo Emerson) studied music and played trumpet in Oklahoma City, where he grew up listening to jazz vocalist Jimmy Rushing. In 1933 Ellison entered Tuskegee Institute, where he studied with composer William Dawson before moving to New York City. There he met Richard Wright, Langston Hughes, and others associated with the Harlem Renaissance. He authored a number of essays, short stories, and reviews before he began work on *Invisible Man*.¹

When he initiated work on his novel, Ellison regarded himself first and foremost a musician (Ellison, *Collected Essays* 49). He believed that if he were to produce anything of quality as a novelist, music was the only art form that offered him “some possibility for self-definition” (Ellison, *Collected Essays* 50). He determined that he must find a way to combine the two art forms and define his own literary style. Jazz proved to be the perfect vehicle for Ellison: it inspired, informed, and shaped his literary art form.

Before a jazz musician can find his own individual voice he must possess and demonstrate a comprehensive knowledge of the past, both musically and technically (Bone 23). Moreover, because the essence of jazz is improvisation, the balance between individual vs. group performance is key. Of this relationship, Ellison declared:

true jazz is an art of individual assertion within and against the group.... [E]ach true jazz moment...springs from a contest in which each artist challenges all the rest; each solo flight, or improvisation, represents...a definition of his identity as individual, as member of the collectivity and as a link in the chain of tradition. (Ellison, *Living with Music* 36)

The challenge for Ellison was to create the literary equivalent of a transcendent jazz performance, “revealing the human universals hidden within the plight of one who was both Black and American” (Ellison, *Invisible Man*, Preface xxxii). Bone articulated Ellison’s quest in this way: “How could he interpret and extend, define and yet elaborate upon the folk culture of the American Negro and, at same time assimilate the most advanced techniques of modern literature?” (22).

A great admirer of the work of 19th-century literary masters, Ellison drew upon that canon to develop his unique literary style. Of fundamental significance in this regard was Eliot’s *The Waste Land*, of which he wrote:

its rhythms were often closer to those of jazz than were those of the Negro poets, and even though I could not understand then, its range of allusion was as mixed and as varied as that of Louis Armstrong. (Ellison, *Collected Essays* 203)

As Cooper explains, Ellison “began to see the possibility of surpassing Eliot’s use of rhythm; his style could include the varied rhythms of the spirituals, Blues, and jazz. Additionally, he could alter the tempo systematically as the narrator changed perspectives” (5). Bone finds a parallel between Ellison’s stylistic changes (i.e., from realism to expressionism to surrealism) and the musical principle of modulation (26). Porter examines Ellison’s musical background and essays, plus his comments on Armstrong and other jazz greats, as influences of *Invisible Man*.

Cooper provides detailed, analytical evidence that Ellison uses music in *Invisible Man* in three main ways:

- for *allusions*—which he uses to suggest the protagonist’s perception or lack thereof—and *characterizations* (people associated with spirituals have limited perception, and/or are insincere/manipulative; people associated with the blues gain great insight from their black heritage; and the protagonist, who eventually learns to draw upon his own rich heritage, is associated with jazz, the genre that embraces the full spectrum of black music: spirituals, blues, field cries, etc.).
- for *structure*—i.e., the novel is framed within the basic twelve-bar blues form, embroidered with “improvisations, chord progressions, and complex rhythmic patterns” such that “Ellison ultimately sings us a jazz tune” (Cooper iv).
- for *thematic reinforcement* throughout the novel—i.e., the protagonist, just as the Black jazz musician, must discard the entertainer’s mask to achieve human visibility. Bone also addresses this theme (30).

In sum, Ellison utilized his musical knowledge to develop his own individual literary style, striking a balance between his black cultural heritage and personal experiences on the one hand (in Ellison’s terms, his “individual assertion against

the group”), and the wider context of Western literature on the other (“individual assertion within the group”).

We taught our *Invisible Man* unit in 2005 and 2007. We began by assigning as reading the Preface to *Invisible Man* (Johnson vii-xii), which contextualizes the novel and provides background information on Ellison. Upon arrival in class, students viewed portions of the DVD, *Ralph Ellison: An American Journey*, featuring Ellison and experts of his work.

We devoted the next six class sessions to discussion of assigned chapter readings. For each session, students arrived with: (1) a double-entry journal (Angelo and Cross 263-266), in which they had responded to and interpreted self-selected passages from the assigned reading; and (2) a categorizing grid (Angelo and Cross 160-163), to help them track particular themes, literary techniques, characters, settings, etc. We modeled both of these homework activities in the course notes.

Students also collaborated in small groups (3-4 students each) outside of class, researching and preparing a 35-minute presentation/discussion on a topic relevant to *Invisible Man*. Choices included: the novel as a *Bildungsroman*; the array of advice given to the protagonist throughout the novel (notably by his grandfather, the veteran, Dr. Bledsoe, Mr. Emerson, Brother Jack, Ras) and his interpretation of and response to it; the novel’s use of Black American folklore and motifs; the novel’s allusions to Black American history and leaders; the contrasting critical reviews and analyses of *Invisible Man* published in the last 55 years.

For some class sessions, Richard provided brief contextual lectures with discussion. Topics included *Invisible Man* in the context of U.S. history, genres of fiction, and irony as a literary technique. Carol gave a presentation titled “Jazz Motif in *Invisible Man*” (helpful sources include Bone 23-26; Cooper; Ellison, *Living with Music*; Savery 66-74). During the presentation she played excerpts of recorded music relevant to the novel (Appendix), along with audio passages from the novel (Ellison, *Invisible Man* CD).

We also invited our colleague, a professor of jazz studies familiar with Ellison’s many essays on jazz and blues, to give an introductory lecture, during which he played a recording of Louis Armstrong’s “What Did I Do To Be So Black and Blue?” (a.k.a. “Black and Blue”). This recording figures prominently in both the Prologue and Epilogue of *Invisible Man* (Appendix). The protagonist invokes Armstrong, who established the jazz solo as a paradigm, “because he’s made poetry out of being invisible” (Ellison, *Invisible Man* 8). Armstrong soars above invisibility through improvisational riffs, just as the protagonist ultimately achieves self-realization through his own inventiveness. The song title is a pun on various themes: the blues (sadness) of the protagonist; the blues as a black musical art form, through which the

performer expresses suffering and transcends it, by “squeezing from it a near-tragic, near-comic lyricism” (Ellison, *Living with Music* 103); the black skin color of the protagonist; and the black and blue bruises that accompany bodily injury.

Upon completion of the *Invisible Man* unit in 2005 and 2007, we used an anonymous questionnaire to obtain feedback from our students. Each prompt featured a Likert scale (values from 1 = strongly disagree, to 5 = strongly agree) and free-form response space. Students responded favorably (Likert values = 4 or 5) to prompts that asked if we should retain the novel, the double-entry journal exercise, and the musical presentations on jazz by Carol and our jazz musician colleague. However, student responses to prompts regarding group work were mixed. Some generalized that group projects were simply extra work, and others expressed bluntly their dislike for group work of any sort. In 2005, few students found merit in utilizing the categorizing grid, so we omitted that exercise in 2007. When we queried whether student groups rather than the instructor should lead class discussions of chapters in the novel, responses were mixed. Some students questioned their qualifications for leading class discussions; others felt it more beneficial to hear the opinions of many, rather than a few.

The double-entry journals met favorably with students and instructors alike. An added benefit was that reticent students appeared more comfortable sharing their ideas in class, and the Carol could readily incorporate students’ journal entries into the dialogue, facilitating class discussion. In addition, Carol greatly enjoyed reading the thoughts, musings, and conjectures that students articulated in their double-entry journals. Upon reflection, response to the categorizing grid prompt might have been more favorable had each group created its own customized grid, with categories tailored to meet its needs. Also, the grids should have been distributed immediately after each group had selected its presentation topic, but before the class had begun reading the novel.

Despite many favorable responses, not all students saw Ellison’s novel as an appropriate lens through which to view the impact of racist, fatally flawed science on society. Carol found this both surprising and disheartening. Comments made on course evaluations indicated that some students prefer literary works, even a critically acclaimed magnum opus, to be consigned to English courses. These comments are representative: “Use more scientific books or books more directly related to science instead of *Invisible Man*”; “Enjoyed it, but didn’t see ‘science’”; “Although I like the novel, it almost didn’t fit in the course. But I like it so much that I think it should be kept for some breathing room for the other intense readings”; “It’s a good contrast for books we did previously, but I’m not sure it fits as well with the course topic of *science* [student’s emphasis] and society.” In anticipation of such sentiments, Carol

had taken pains at the outset of the *Invisible Man* unit to remind students of the interdisciplinary nature of the course, its objectives and learning outcomes, and the reasons she selected Ellison's novel. These pieces of information also were articulated in the course notes.

Could we have more effectively helped *all* students find value in bridging the gap between the "Two Cultures"? The disciplinary "silos" that persist on most university campuses inevitably influence student perceptions, although our Honors College strives to connect the silos by offering innovative, interdisciplinary courses. Referring to the pioneering work of Julie Thompson Klein, Haynes emphasizes that genuine interdisciplinary pedagogy fosters "a sense of self-authorship and a situated, partial, and perspectival notion of knowledge" through "active triangulation of depth, breadth, and synthesis" (Haynes xv-xvi). Perhaps Carol should have devised an activity that asked students to identify and discuss tangible impacts of science on society, with reference to both the novel's narrator and people of color in contemporary society. This approach might have enhanced critical, evaluative, and reflective thinking in our students and promoted greater synthesis. Interestingly, students did not question the relevance of our musically focused lectures/presentations. Perhaps they felt convinced that music and musical motifs were integral to *Invisible Man* and therefore critical for its comprehension.

In closing, it seems appropriate to quote Larry Neal, who so aptly stated, "Well, there is one thing that you have to admit. And that is, dealing with Ralph Ellison is no easy matter. He cannot be put into any one bag and conveniently dispensed with" (81). In our opinion, this is precisely why *Invisible Man* lends itself to a wealth of challenging and innovative interdisciplinary approaches. ✱

Notes

¹Ellison's acclaimed essays from *Shadow and Act* (1964) and *Going to the Territory* (1986), together with his working notes for *Invisible Man* and certain of his public addresses, are compiled in *Ellison* (2003). *Living with Music* (2002) is a collection of the author's jazz writings.

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Appendix

Musical selections incorporated into lecture: “Jazz Motif in *Invisible Man*”
(Downloadable via iTunes).

Song	Artist(s)	Relevance to <i>Invisible Man</i>
<i>Memphis Blues</i>	Booker T	1st published blues song; illustrates 12-bar blues form, as Albert Murray described structure of <i>Invisible Man</i>
<i>Run, N****r, Run</i>	Mose (Clear Rock) Platt	One of earliest transcribed slave songs; “running” theme pervades <i>Invisible Man</i>
<i>Black & Blue (Live 1947)</i>	Louis Armstrong & The All Stars	Serves to “bookend” <i>Invisible Man</i> ; referenced in Prologue and Epilogue
<i>Potato Head Blues</i>	Louis Armstrong	Recorded in 1927, illustrates improvisation, significance of solo performance in jazz
<i>Be Still and Know</i>	Chanticleer & Yvette Flunder	“Call-and-response” example: in Prologue, narrator “hears” preacher call, congregation responds
<i>Hi-De-Ho Miracle Man</i>	Cab Calloway and his Orchestra	Illustrates influence of “call-and-response”: early jazz music example
<i>What'd I Say (Live 1959)</i>	Ray Charles	Illustrates influence of “call-and-response”: rhythm and blues example
<i>Live a Humble</i>	Jessye Norman, The Ambrosian Singers & Willis Patterson	Favorite hymn of Dr. Bledsoe, whose humility is feigned; Chapter 4
<i>Symphony No. 9, first movement</i>	Andre Previn & Los Angeles Philharmonic	College chapel music, close of Chapter 5
<i>Swing Low, Sweet Chariot</i>	Leontyne Price	Juxtaposed with Dvorak’s “New World” Symphony, Chapter 5
<i>Pick Poor Robin Clean</i>	Erin Harpe	Song hummed by Narrator after learning content of Bledsoe’s letter; also refers to Charlie Parker; Chapter 9
<i>KoKo</i>	Charlie Parker	Illustrates be-bop style of jazz innovator Charlie Parker, Chapter 9
<i>Back Water Blues</i>	Bessie Smith	Early blues song sung by Mary Rambo, Chapter 14

Song	Artist(s)	Relevance to <i>Invisible Man</i>
<i>Go Down, Moses</i>	Paul Robeson	Drunken Brother pressures narrator to sing this spiritual, Chapter 14
<i>Many Thousand Gone</i>	Matthew Sabatella	Slave song performed at Tod Clifton's funeral, Chapter 21
<i>Old Man River</i>	Paul Robeson	Song referenced in Chapter 24, Robeson referenced in Chapters 19 and 24
<i>The Great Buddy Bilden/ Buddy Bilden's Blues</i>	Jelly Roll Morton	Line ("Open the window and let the foul air out") from song performed by Louis Armstrong; Epilogue