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ABSTRACT

The nature of black literature raises questions about a black aesthetic and the universality of black expression. Central in the writings of Richard Wright and Ralph Ellison are the black man's confusion of identity, stemming from his invisibility in a white America, and the crimes of ignorance and blindness perpetrated on him by whites and by himself. These themes find "their richest expression" in Ellison's "The Invisible Man," which makes extensive use of the symbol of blindness. (MF)

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Guide to the Black Novel

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Of all the crimes against black people in America, says James Baldwin, "Innocence constitutes the greatest crime." There is the innocence of white society; there is our own innocence as human beings and educators; and there is the black person's innocence of himself. Today is a time of radical reconstruction in this country, and, all over, teachers are trying to put an end to innocence in a world that needs a good dose of some experience.

The purpose of the following discussion is to offer, in a compressed fashion, a few suggestions to the teacher who has decided to include black literature, particularly the black novel, in his curriculum but who finds himself swimming into a torrent of recently published materials.

Questions

There are two basic groups of questions that the teacher of black literature might ask himself and discuss with his students.

1. Is there a black aesthetic? Is there a distinction between the writings of black Americans and the writings of other Americans? Does a black skin alone qualify a writer for inclusion in a black literature course? "Once a decision has been made to include black literature in the curriculum . . . should this material be incorporated into the standard courses in American literature, or should a new course be designed?" (Robert Bone, "Negro Literature in the Secondary School," April, 1969, *English Journal*, p. 510—an articulate treatment of most of these questions)

2. The black literary tradition has a revolutionary thrust. Is there a dichotomy between art and protest? Can a work be pointedly didactic and still be art? Is art "a lofty activity far removed from the fury and mire of human history" (Bone, p. 511), or are literary works political expressions, intimately bound to the communities from which they spring? We hear that "Negroes haven't given us a Shakespeare." Is Shakespeare an ideal Platonic form, and does the excellence of all other writers depend on how closely they approach Shakespeare? Or might Langston Hughes be as "good" as Shakespeare because both poets are phenomena, not forms? Do the ethnic individuality and the unique experience of the black writer disqualify his works from achieving universality? What is universality anyway, and how is it attained? If a man writes forcefully and truly about his black self, can his expression be universal?

Invisibility, Namelessness, Facelessness

In his introduction to *Black Voices*, Abraham Chapman insists upon "the individuality of each and every

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black writer . . . the varying attitudes to life within black America." Yet there is one central, pervading metaphor that unites many black novels, that of invisibility—the denial of identity, the facelessness and namelessness of the alienated black person in America. And the natural counterparts to invisibility are blindness and deafness: invisible, inaudible, nameless people are created by those who will not see or hear or touch. In his notes on his own life, Baldwin observes that "to be a Negro meant, precisely, that one was never looked at."

Richard Wright's *Native Son* (1940) abounds with images of blindness — the blindness of Bigger's family, the blindness of the whites to his humanity (Mrs. Dalton's physical blindness is symbolic), Bigger's blindness to Jan's friendship, and Bigger's blind contempt for his own people. (See pp. 49, 101-103, 128, 132, and 163 in the Perennial Classic edition.) Wright's autobiography, *Black Boy* (1945), eloquently develops the black man's confusion of identity, the numbing dehumanization of the black personality:

I was a non-man, something that vaguely felt that it was human but felt that it was not. (p. 213, Signet)

Not only had the southern whites not known me, but, more important still, as I had lived in the South I had not had the chance to learn who I was . . . Never being fully able to be myself, I had slowly learned that the South could recognize but a part of a man, could accept but a fragment of his personality, and all the rest — the best and deepest things of heart and mind were tossed away in blind ignorance and hate. (p. 284)

Indeed, the parallels between *Black Boy* and Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man* (1952) are fascinating to chart—the school experiences, the valedictory speeches, the boxing matches, the adventures in the optical and paint factories, and, most of all, the sense of black powerlessness.

The teacher can prepare students for exposure to the above themes by setting up some improvisations. For example, organize two groups, three to six students in each. Send Group Two out of the room. Then tell Group One that they will go about some sort of business — strolling, chatting, working, or another activity. Group One is to pay no real attention to the second group. Call back Group Two and instruct them to try to get the attention and recognition of Group One without ever touching Group One. What emerges may be something like this:

He turns in a rage on the men, bumping viciously into them but not jarring them the least bit. Rather it is he who recoils after each collision. He keeps growling.

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This is Eugene O'Neill's Yank, *The Hairy Ape* (Sc. V), trying to force the robots who stroll up and down Fifth Avenue to acknowledge his existence as a person. Or what emerges may be close to this:

It is difficult to let others see the full psychological meaning of caste segregation. It is as though one, looking out from a dark cave in a side of an impending mountain, sees the world passing and speaks to it . . . One talks on evenly and logically in this way but notices that the passing throng does not even turn its head, or if it does, glances curiously and walks on. It gradually penetrates the minds of the prisoners that the people passing do not hear; that some thick sheet of invisible but horribly tangible plate glass is between them and the world. They get excited; they talk louder; they gesticulate . . . They may scream and hurl themselves against the barriers, hardly realizing in their bewilderment that they are screaming in a vacuum unheard.

(W.E.B. Dubois, *Dusk of Dawn*, 1940)

From Dubois' *inaudible* black people it is a short step to the *invisible* people of Wright, Ellison, and others. The titles tell much: *Nobody Knows My Name; Another Country; The Wall Between; Black Skin, White Masks; and Invisible Man*.

Invisible Man

Let us briefly trace the themes of blindness and invisibility as they appear in their richest expression, Ralph Ellison's novel, *Invisible Man*. The narrator is a black and blues version of Dostoevsky's *Underground Man*. Indeed, like Dostoevsky's existential hero the narrator has no name: we shall call him "Invisible." In the Prologue, he ponders beneath the earth, hoping to illuminate his invisibility with the 1,369 light bulbs whose power he has furtively appropriated from the Monopolated Light and Power Co. (p. 11 in the popular Signet edition). Before the novel proper is very old, Invisible and nine other blacks are crowded into a white southern smoker and made to look at and not to look at a blonde nude belly dancer shaking herself across a stage. Then they are pushed into a ring to box each other *blindfolded* (p. 24), suggesting not only the blindness around them, but, in this mad existence, their blind contempt for each other. The boxing ritual is immediately followed by the acting out of Dubois' allegory above as Invisible delivers his naive graduation speech to the gabbling white mob (p. 32).

Invisible runs off to college — magnolias and honeysuckle, and moonlight falling on the statue of the college Founder (p. 37), a former slave who is removing (or lowering?) a veil from (or upon?) the eyes of a kneeling darkie. After the humorous chaos of the chauffeuring epi-

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sodes with Mr. Norton and Jim Trueblood, Invisible ends up at the Golden Day road house, where the veteran reiterates the theme of blindness. The vet tells the white Mr. Norton that Invisible "believes in that great false wisdom taught to slaves and pragmatists alike, that white is right . . . He'll do your bidding, and for that his blindness is his chief asset." (p. 87)

Returning from the Golden Day, Invisible enters the College Chapel and listens to the Rev. Homer A. Barbee movingly recount the trials and successes in the life of the Founder (p. 106). Then Invisible catches behind the opaque glimmer of Barbee's glasses the blinking, sightless eyes. The minister is blind.

From the Chapel to the office of Dr. Bledsoe-Booker T. Washington, the College President, who fires Invisible for having allowed Norton the opportunity to peer behind the grinning minstrel mask of the Negro. Invisible leaves his beloved seat of learning with Bledsoe's words in his brain: "You're nobody, son. You don't exist — can't you see that?" (p. 128)

Set in such a phantasmal whirl of events, the incredibility of the operation scene (p. 202) becomes credible; its surrealism becomes real. The episode is nothing less

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than an identity lobotomy. WHAT IS YOUR NAME? WHO . . . ARE . . . YOU? BOY, WHO WAS BRER RABBIT? The nightmare — electrodes, glass box, and the inert body of Invisible — weirdly recreates the identity castration of the black man by American history: "It's not so funny. It would be more scientific to try to define the case. It has been developing for three hundred years." (p. 207)

An Invisible Underground Man

The second half of the novel centers around Invisible's shifting relationships with the white, liberal Brotherhood in Harlem. Gradually he comes to see that the Brotherhood, with its Marxist rhetoric, disfigures black people as it tries to squeeze them into its mechanistic notions of history. The Brotherhood too is blind: "'But can't you see—' I said looking from face to face and seeing the blank finality in their eyes." (p. 352) But Brother Jack, the white chieftain with a glass eye, can see out of only one eye. The One-Eyed Jack thus misses the vital dimensions of the black condition.

At the end, Invisible crawls into his underground hole, and in order to light the way, he burns the papers and objects he has collected during his odyssey — the symbols of his former identities. In the Epilogue, he says that he intends to shake off his old skin, to rise again and to confront life:

And I suppose it's damn well time. Even hibernations can be overdone, come to think of it. Perhaps that's my greatest social crime, I've overstayed my hibernation, since there's a possibility that even an invisible man has a socially responsible role to play. (p. 503)

Our own decade, fast closing out, has begun to make Invisible's promise come true.

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