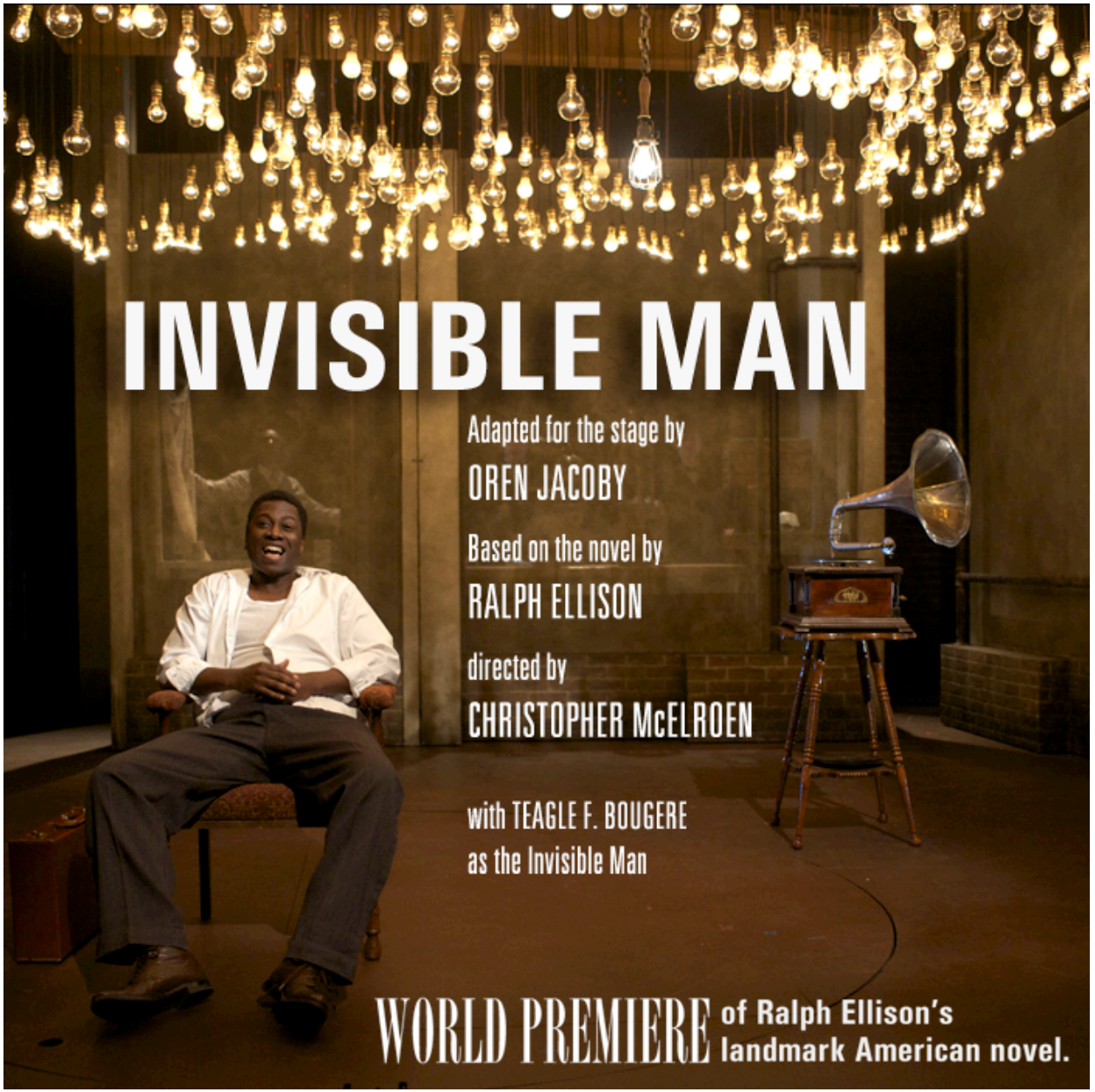
Professional Theatre at court THEATRE the University of Chicago



CHARACTERS

Invisible Man – *The unnamed narrator and protagonist of the play*
Grandfather – *The narrator's deceased grandfather, whose dying words haunt the narrator throughout the play*
Tatlock – *The narrator's final opponent in the Battle Royal*
Mr. Norton – *An elderly white benefactor of the narrator's college*
Trueblood – *A poor black sharecropper who lives with his family near the narrator's college*
Mattie Lou – *Trueblood's daughter*
Big Halley – *The owner of the Golden Day, a brothel/gambling house near the narrator's college*
Burnside – A man in the Golden Day tavern who claims to be a doctor when Mr. Norton falls sick
Emerson Jr. – *The son of the narrator's potential employer*
Miss Mary – *A woman who takes care of the narrator after he leaves the hospital*
Brother Jack – *The white leader of the Brotherhood*
Emma – *Brother Jack's mistress*
Tod Clifton – *The leader of the youth of Harlem*
Ras – *A black opponent of the Brotherhood*
Barrellhouse – *The owner of the Jolly Dollar, a bar in Harlem*
Jackson, Marshall – *Members of the Brotherhood*

STORY

Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man* follows an unnamed narrator as he recalls his decades-long struggle to find and define his place in the world.

The narrator comes from a small town in the South. A model student, he is named his high school's valedictorian and invited to present a paper he wrote on the struggles of the average black man to a group of wealthy white men. Before giving his speech, however, he is forced to participate in a fight with other young black men for the white audience's entertainment.

After enduring a series of degrading events and finally giving his speech, the narrator is offered a scholarship to an all-black college, which many readers think is modeled after Alabama's Tuskegee Institute. During his junior year at the college, the narrator takes Mr. Norton, a visiting white trustee, on a drive in the country. He accidentally drives to the house of Jim Trueblood, a black man living on the college's outskirts, who impregnated his own daughter, Mattie Lou. Trueblood, though disgraced by his fellow African-Americans, has found support in the white community despite his transgressions. After hearing Trueblood's story and giving Trueblood a $100 bill, Mr. Norton faints, then asks for some alcohol to help his condition, prompting the narrator to take him to a local bar. At the Golden Day tavern, Mr. Norton passes in and out of consciousness as a fight breaks out, but through all the chaos, the narrator manages to get the recovered Mr. Norton back to the campus by the end of the day. However, shortly thereafter, the narrator is expelled from his college due to fear that the college's funds will be jeopardized by the incident with Mr. Norton. This serves as the first epiphany among many in the narrator realizing his invisibility. At the suggestion of Dr. Bledsoe, the president of the college, the narrator decides to move to New York.

Upon arriving in New York, the narrator distributes letters of recommendation he received from his college's president, but receives no responses. Eventually, the son of the owner of one of the companies the narrator approached takes pity on him and shows him an opened copy of the letter; it reveals that the college's president merely suggested the narrator go to New York to get rid of him, and that he has not provided a letter of recommendation, but rather one instructing potential employers not to hire the narrator. On the son's suggestion, the narrator eventually gets a job in the boiler room of a paint factory in a company renowned for its white paints. After a fight with the boiler room manager that results in an injury-causing explosion, the narrator must be hospitalized.

After leaving the hospital, the narrator is overwhelmed by dizziness and faints on the street. He is taken to the residence of Mary, a kind, old-fashioned, down-to-earth woman who reminds him of his relatives in the South and friends at the college. While living with Mary, the narrator witnesses the eviction of an elderly black couple and makes an impassioned speech at the scene decrying the action; when the police arrive soon after, the narrator is forced to run to safety. He then meets a man named Brother Jack, who implores him to join a group called The Brotherhood (a group that claims to be committed to social change and betterment of the conditions in Harlem). The narrator agrees.

At first, the Brotherhood rallies go smoothly and the narrator is happy to be "making history" in his new job. Soon, however, he encounters trouble from Ras, a fanatical black nationalist who believes that the Brotherhood is controlled by whites. Ras tells this to both the narrator and to Tod Clifton, a youth leader of the Brotherhood, neither of whom seems to be swayed by his words.

The narrator continues his work in Harlem until he is called into a meeting of The Brotherhood. They believe he has become too powerful and reassign him to another part of the city to address the "woman question." After the narrator gives his first lecture on women's rights, he is approached by the wife of another member of The Brotherhood. She invites him to her apartment where she seduces him. The narrator is soon called to return to Harlem to repair its falling membership in the black community.

When he returns to Harlem, Tod Clifton has disappeared. When the narrator finds him, he realizes that Clifton has quit after becoming disillusioned with the Brotherhood. Soon after, Tod is shot by a police officer and dies. At his funeral, the narrator delivers a rousing speech, rallying

crowds to reclaim his former widespread Harlem support. He's criticized in a clandestine meeting with Brother Jack and other members for not being scientific in his arguments at the funeral; he angrily retaliates and Jack loses his temper to the extent that a glass eye flies out of its socket. The narrator realizes that the half-blind Jack has never really seen him either, and that The Brotherhood has no real interest in the black community's problems.

When the narrator returns Harlem, he decides to take his grandfather's dying advice to "overcome'em with yeses, undermine'em with grins, agree'em to death and destruction...." and "yes" the Brotherhood to death by making it look like the Harlem membership is thriving when it's actually crumbling. He seduces Sybil, the wife of another member, in an attempt to learn of the Brotherhood's new activities.

Riots break out in Harlem and the narrator gets mixed up with a gang of looters. Wandering through a ravaged Harlem, he encounters Ras, who now calls himself Ras the Destroyer. After escaping Ras's attempt to have him lynched, the narrator is attacked by a couple of white boys who trap him inside a coal-filled manhole/basement, sealing him off for the night and leaving him alone to finally confront the demons of his past.

Research Image for basement setting of *Invisible Man*

OBITUARY: RALPH ELLISON

The New York Times*, April 17, 1994. By Richard Lyons.*

Ralph Ellison, whose widely read novel *Invisible Man* was a stark account of racial alienation that foreshadowed the attention Americans eventually paid to divisions in their midst, died yesterday in his apartment on Riverside Drive. He was 80.

The cause was pancreatic cancer, said his editor, Joe Fox.

Mr. Ellison's seminal novel, *Invisible Man*, which was written over a seven-year period and published by Random House in 1952, is a chronicle of a young black man's awakening to racial discrimination and his battle against the refusal of Americans to see him apart from his ethnic background, which in turn leads to humiliation and disillusionment.

Invisible Man has been viewed as one of the most important works of fiction in the 20th century, has been read by millions, influenced dozens of younger writers and established Mr. Ellison as one of the major American writers of the 20th century.

Mr. Ellison's short stories, essays, reviews and criticisms also have been widely published over the years; one collection was printed by Random House in 1964 under the title *Shadow and Act*. The second and last collection, *Going to the Territory*, came out in 1986.

Ralph Ellison

Yet Mr. Ellison's long-awaited second novel proved to be a struggle and has yet to emerge.

Mr. Fox said yesterday that the second novel "does exist. It is very long, I don't know the name, but it is not a sequel to *Invisible Man*. The book was started in the late 1950's. The initial work on the book was destroyed in a fire in his home upstate, and that was so devastating that he did not resume work on it for several years.

"Just recently Ralph told me that I would be getting the book soon, and I know that he had been working on it every day, but that he was having trouble with what he termed 'transitions.' "

Mr. Fox said he was unsure whether the reference was to transitions in periods described in the work, or transitions between the time periods in which they were written, which have spanned 30 years.

Invisible Man was almost instantly acclaimed as the work of a major new author. It remained on the best seller lists for 16 weeks and millions of copies have been printed since its first publication. *Invisible Man* had been reprinted many times and is a standard work of American fiction in the nation's schools and colleges.

The book is the story of an unnamed, idealistic young black man growing up in a segregated community in the South, attending a Negro college and moving to New York to become involved in civil rights issues only to retreat, amid confusion and violence, into invisibility.

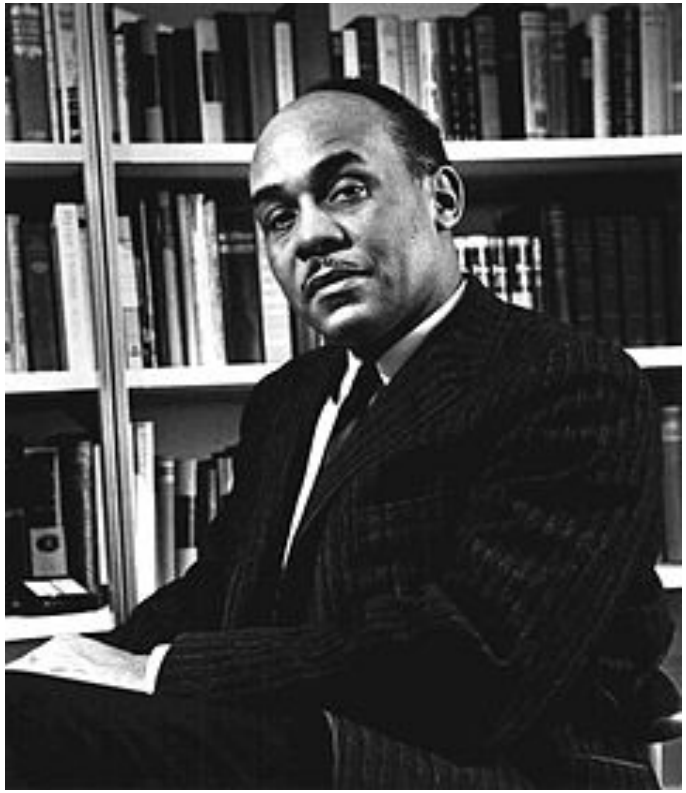
Hundreds of thousands of readers have felt themselves tingle to the flatly stated passion of the book's opening lines:

"I am an invisible man. No, I am not a spook like those who haunted Edgar Allan Poe; nor am I one of your Hollywood-movie ectoplasms. I am a man of substance, of flesh and bone, fiber and liquids -- and I might even be said to possess a mind. I am invisible, understand, simply because people refuse to see me . . ."

And 572 pages later the unnamed narrator was to evolve into the spokesman for all races when he asks in the book's last line: "Who knows but that, on the lower frequencies, I speak for you?"

The author of these now epic lines was born in Oklahoma City. His full name was Ralph Waldo Ellison, for the essayist Ralph Waldo Emerson. Mr. Ellison was the son of Lewis Ellison, a vendor of ice and coal who died accidentally when the boy was only 3 years old. He was raised by his mother, Ida, who worked as a domestic. *Invisible Man* is dedicated to her and Mr. Ellison attributed his activist streak to a mother who had recruited black votes for the Socialist Party.

Mr. Ellison began playing the trumpet at age 8, played in his high school band and knew blues singer Jimmy Rushing and trumpeter Hot Lips Page. Also drawn to writing, Mr. Ellison was to say later that his early exposure to the works of Ernest Hemingway and T.S. Eliot impressed him deeply and that he began to connect such writing with his experiences "within the Negro communities in which I grew up."



However, his environment was not segregated. Mr. Ellison was to recall years later that, in the Oklahoma City society of that time, his parents "had many white friends who came to the house when I was quite small, so that any feelings of distrust I was to develop toward whites later on were modified by those with whom I had warm relations."

He studied classical composition at Tuskegee Institute in Alabama, which he reached by riding freight trains. He stayed at Tuskegee from 1933 to 1936, before moving to New York where he worked with the Federal Writers Project.

During a stay in Harlem during his junior year in college, Mr. Ellison met the poet Langston Hughes and the novelist Richard Wright, who several years later published *Native Son*.

Mr. Wright, 6 years older than Mr. Ellison, became a friend. Mr. Wright encouraged him to persevere with writing and short stories followed, including, in 1944, "King of the Bingo Game" and "Flying Home."

During World War II, Mr. Ellison served in the Merchant Marine as a cook, and became ill from his ship's contaminated water supply. At the end of hostilities, he visited a friend in Vermont and one day typed "I am an invisible man" and the novel started. He recalled later, however, he didn't know what those words represented at the start, and had no idea what had inspired the idea.

Yet the words and the ideas were to strike a resonant chord among the public, but also among American intellectuals. Over the years such authors as Kurt Vonnegut and Joseph Heller have credited Mr. Ellison with having influenced them.

Saul Bellow hailed "what a great thing it is when a brilliant individual victory occurs, like Mr. Ellison's, proving that a truly heroic quality can exist among our contemporaries . . . (the tone) is tragicomic, poetic, the tone of the very strongest sort of creative intelligence."

Mr. Ellison was to teach creative writing at New York University, while also serving as a visiting scholar at many other institutions such as the University of Chicago, Rutgers University and Yale University.

Mr. Ellison is survived by his wife of 48 years, Fanny, and a brother, Herbert of Los Angeles.

RALPH ELLISON AND *INVISIBLE MAN*

Compiled by Production Dramaturg Jocelyn Prince

Ralph Ellison (b. March 1, 1914, d. April 16, 1994) The grandson of slaves, Ralph Ellison was born in 1914 in Oklahoma City, Oklahoma, and was raised largely in Tulsa, Oklahoma. His father was a construction worker, and his mother was a domestic servant who also volunteered for the local Socialist Party. As a young man, Ellison developed an abiding interest in jazz music; he befriended a group of musicians who played in a regional band called Walter Page's Blue Devils, many of whom later played with Count Basie's legendary big band in the late 1930s. Ellison himself studied the cornet and trumpet, and planned a career as a jazz musician. In 1933, he left Oklahoma to begin a study of music at the Tuskegee Institute in Tuskegee, Alabama. The Institute, which is now called Tuskegee University, was founded in 1881 by Booker T. Washington, one of the foremost black educators in American history, and became one of the nation's most important black colleges. It later served as the model for the black college attended by the narrator in *Invisible Man*.

Ellison left the Tuskegee Institute in 1936 and moved to New York City, where he settled in Harlem. As an employee of the Federal Writers' Project, Ellison befriended many of the most important African-American writers of the era, including Langston Hughes and Richard Wright. Ellison also befriended the eminent jazz writer and sociologist Albert Murray, with whom he carried on a lengthy and important literary correspondence, later collected in the book *Trading Twelves*. After a year editing the Negro Quarterly, Ellison left for the Merchant Marines, in which he served during World War II. After the war, Ellison won a Rosenwald Fellowship, which he used to write *Invisible Man*. The first chapter appeared in America in the 1948 volume of *Magazine of the Year*, and the novel was published in its entirety in 1952.

Employing a shifting, improvisational style directly based on Ellison's experience of jazz performance, *Invisible Man* ranges in tone from realism to extreme surrealism, from tragedy to vicious satire to near-

slapstick comedy. Rich in symbolism and metaphor, virtuosic in its use of multiple styles and tones, and steeped in the black experience in America and the human struggle for individuality, the novel spent sixteen weeks on the best-seller list and won the National Book Award in 1953. Achieving one of the most sensational debuts of any novel in American history, *Invisible Man* was hailed by writers such as Saul Bellow and critics such as Irving Howe as a landmark publication some critics claimed that it was the most important American novel to appear after World War II.

Invisible Man was heavily influenced by the work of a number of twentieth –century French writers known as the existentialists. Existentialism, whose foremost proponents included Albert Camus and Jean-Paul Sartre, explored the question of individuality and the nature of meaning in a seemingly meaningless universe. Despite- or possibly because of- the overwhelming success of *Invisible Man*, Ellison never published another novel in his lifetime. Though he published two books essays- *Shadow Act*, in the 1960s and *Going to the Territory* in the 1980s- Ellison spent his later decades laboring on a vast novel, which he never finished. Upon his death in 1994, Ellison left behind more than 2,000 pages of unedited, incomplete manuscript. In heavily abridged and edited form, this manuscript was published five years after his death under the title *Juneteenth*, to generally unfavorable reviews.

TUSKEGEE UNIVERSITY

www.tuskegee.edu/about_us/history_and_mission

Tuskegee University was founded in a one-room shanty near Butler Chapel AME Zion Church. Its first graduating class was comprised of thirty adults, and Dr. Booker T. Washington the first teacher at the school. The founding date was July 4, 1881, authorized by House Bill 165. We should give credit to George Campbell, a former slave owner, and Lewis Adams, a former slave, tinsmith and community leader, for their roles in the founding of the University. Adams had not had a day of formal education but could read and write. In addition to being a tinsmith, he was also a shoemaker and harness-maker. And he could well have been experienced in other trades. W. F. Foster was a candidate for re-election to the Alabama Senate and approached Lewis Adams about the support of African-Americans in Macon County.

What would Adams want, Foster asked, in exchange for his (Adams) securing the black vote for him (Foster)? Adams could well have asked for money, secured the support of blacks voters and life would have gone on as usual. But he didn't. Instead, Adams told Foster he wanted an educational institution - a school - for his people. Col. Foster carried out his promise and with the assistance of his colleague in the House of Representatives, Arthur L. Brooks, legislation was passed for the establishment of a "Negro Normal School in Tuskegee." A $2,000 appropriation, for teachers' salaries, was authorized by the legislation. Lewis Adams, Thomas Dryer, and M. B. Swanson formed the board of commissioners to get the school organized. George W. Campbell subsequently replaced Dryer as a commissioner. And it was Campbell, through his nephew, who sent word to Hampton Institute in Virginia looking for a teacher.

Booker T. Washington got the nod and he made the Lewis Adams dream happen. He was principal of the school from July 4, 1881, until his death in 1915. He was not 60 years old when he died. Initial space and building for the school was provided by Butler Chapel AME Zion Church not far from this present site. Not long after the founding, however, the campus was moved to "a 100 acre abandoned plantation" which became the nucleus of the present site. Tuskegee rose to national prominence under the leadership of its founder, Dr. Washington, who headed the institution from 1881 until his death at age 59 in 1915. During his tenure, institutional independence was gained in 1892, again through legislation, when Tuskegee Normal and Industrial Institute was granted authority to act independent of the state of Alabama. Dedicated in 1922, the Booker T. Washington Monument, called "Lifting the Veil," stands at the center of campus. The inscription at its base reads, "He lifted the veil of ignorance from his people and pointed the way to progress through education and industry." For Tuskegee, the process of unveiling is continuous and lifelong.

Tuskegee attained University status in 1985 and has since begun offering its first doctoral programs in integrative biosciences and materials science and engineering. The College of Business and Information Sciences was established and professionally accredited, and the College of Engineering, Architecture and Physical Sciences was expanded to include the only Aerospace Engineering department at an HBCU.

THE GREAT MIGRATION

www.wikipedia.org

The Great Migration was the movement of 2 million African Americans out of the Southern United States to the Midwest, Northeast and West from 1910 to 1930. Estimates of the number of migrants vary according to the time frame used. African Americans migrated to escape racism and seek employment opportunities in industrial cities. Some historians differentiate between the First Great Migration (1910–40), numbering about 1.6 million migrants, and the Second Great Migration, from 1940 to 1970.

In the Second Great Migration, 5 million or more people relocated, with the migrants moving to more new destinations. Many moved from Texas and Louisiana to California where there were jobs in the defense industry. From 1965–70, 14 states of the South, especially Alabama, Louisiana and Mississippi, contributed to a large net migration of blacks to the other three Census-designated regions of the United States. By the end of the Second Great Migration, African Americans had become an urbanized population. More than 80 percent lived in cities. Fifty-three percent remained in the Southern United States, while 40 percent lived in the Northeast and North Central states and seven percent in the West.

Since then, scholars have noted a reverse migration under way that gathered strength through the last 35 years of the 20th century. It has been named the New and identified in visible demographic changes since 1965. Most of the data is from 1963-2000. The data encompasses the movement of African Americans back to the South following de-industrialization in Northeastern and Midwestern cities, the growth of high-quality jobs in the South, and improving racial relations. Many people moved back because of family and kinship ties. From 1995-2000, Georgia, Texas and Maryland were the states that attracted the most black college graduates. While California was for decades a net gaining state for black migrants, in the late 1990s it lost more African Americans than it gained.

HARLEM RACE RIOTS – 1935 AND 1943

www.wikipedia.org

1935

The Harlem Riot of 1935 was Harlem's first race riot, sparked by rumors of the beating of a teenage shoplifter. Three died, hundreds were wounded, and an estimated $2 million in damages were sustained to properties throughout the district. African-American-owned homes and businesses were spared the worst of the destruction.

At 2:30pm on March 19, 1935, an employee at the Kress Five and Ten store at 256 W. 125th Street (across the street from the Apollo Theater) caught 16-year-old black Puerto Rican Lino Rivera shoplifting a 10-cent penknife. When his captor threatened to take Rivera into the store's basement and "beat the hell out of him," Rivera bit the employee's hand. The manager intervened and the police were called, but Rivera was eventually released. In the meantime, a crowd had begun to gather outside around a woman who had witnessed Rivera's apprehension and was

shouting that Rivera was being beaten. When an ambulance showed up to treat the wounds of the employee who had been bitten, it appeared to confirm the woman's story, and when the crowd took notice of a hearse parked outside of the store, the rumor began to circulate that Rivera had been beaten to death. The woman who had raised the alarm was arrested for disorderly conduct, the Kress Five and Ten store was closed early, and the crowd was dispersed.

In the early evening, groups organized by the Young Communist League and a militant African-American civil rights group called the Young Liberators mounted a demonstration outside the store that quickly drew thousands of people. Handbills were distributed: One was headlined "CHILD BRUTALLY BEATEN". Another denounced "the brutal beating of the 12 year old boy [...] for taking a piece of candy." Someone threw a rock that shattered the window of the Kress Five and Ten, at which point the destruction and looting began to spread east and west on 125th Street, targeting white-owned businesses between Fifth and Eighth Avenues. Some stores posted signs that read "COLORED STORE" or "COLORED HELP EMPLOYED HERE". In the early hours of the morning, as the rioting spread north and south, Lino Rivera was picked up from his mother's apartment and photographed with a police officer. The photographs were distributed in order to prove that Rivera had not been harmed. New York Mayor Fiorello La Guardia also had posters drawn up urging a return to peace.

By the end of the next day, the streets of Harlem were returned to order. District Attorney William C. Dodge blamed Communist incitement. Mayor LaGuardia ordered a multi-racial Mayor's Commission on Conditions in Harlem headed by African-American sociologist E. Franklin Frazier to investigate the causes of the riot. The committee issued a report, "The Negro in Harlem: A Report on Social and Economic Conditions Responsible for the Outbreak of March 19, 1935," which described the rioting as "spontaneous" with "no evidence of any program or leadership of the rioters." The report identified "injustices of discrimination in employment, the aggressions of the police, and the racial segregation" as conditions which led to the outbreak of rioting. The report congratulated the Communist organizations as deserving "more credit than any other element in Harlem for preventing a physical conflict between whites and blacks."

1943

The Harlem Riot of 1943 took place in the borough of Harlem on August 1, after an African American soldier was shot and wounded by a white New York policeman. Hundreds of businesses were destroyed and looted, six people died, and nearly 400 were injured.

On August 1, 1943, an NYPD policeman hit an African American woman who was being arrested for disturbing the peace at the Braddock Hotel in Harlem. Robert Bandy, a black soldier in the U.S. Army, tried to stop the police officer from striking the woman again. The situation rapidly escalated; the police officer drew his service revolver and shot Bandy in the shoulder. While Bandy was being brought to a nearby hospital, a crowd quickly gathered. An onlooker shouted that an African American soldier had been killed, provoking a riot.

The (mostly black) rioters destroyed property throughout Harlem. As most of the businesses in the borough were under white ownership, many shops were looted. New York Mayor Fiorello H. La Guardia ordered that a force of 6,600 city police, military police and civil patrol men enter Harlem and restore order. In addition, 8,000 State Guardsmen and 1,500 civilian volunteers were posted around the borough to contain the rioters. Order was finally restored on August 3, 1943. The mayor then had food delivered to the residents of Harlem, which helped ease tensions.

Compiled by Resident Dramaturg Jocelyn Prince

Racism as an Obstacle to Individual Identity

As the narrator of *Invisible Man* struggles to arrive at a conception of his own identity, he finds his efforts complicated by the fact that he is a black man living in a racist American society. Throughout the novel, the narrator finds himself passing through a series of communities, from the Liberty Paints plant to the Brotherhood, with each microcosm endorsing a different idea of how blacks should behave in society. As the narrator attempts to define himself through the values and expectations imposed on him, he finds that, in each case, the prescribed role limits his complexity as an individual and forces him to play an inauthentic part.

Upon arriving in New York, the narrator enters the world of the Liberty Paints plant, which achieves financial success by subverting blackness in the service of a brighter white (paint). There, the narrator finds himself involved in a process in which white depends heavily on black, both in terms of the mixing of the paint tones and in terms of the racial makeup of the workforce. Yet the factory denies this dependence in the final presentation of its product, and the narrator, as a black man, ends up stifled. Later, when the narrator joins the Brotherhood, he believes that he can fight for racial equality by working within the ideology of the organization, but he then finds that the Brotherhood seeks to use him as a token black man in its abstract project.

Ultimately, the narrator realizes that the racial prejudice of others causes them to see him only as they want to see him, and their limitations of vision in turn place limitations on his ability to act. He concludes that he is invisible, in the sense that the world is filled with blind people who cannot or will not see his real nature. Correspondingly, he remains unable to act according to his own personality and becomes literally unable to be himself. Although the narrator initially embraces his invisibility in an attempt to throw off the limiting nature of stereotype, in the end he finds this tactic too passive. He determines to emerge from his underground "hibernation," to make his own contributions to society as a complex individual. He will attempt to exert his power on the world outside of society's system of prescribed roles. By making proactive contributions to society, he will force others to acknowledge him, to acknowledge the existence of beliefs and behaviors outside of their prejudiced expectations.

The Limitations of Ideology

Over the course of *Invisible Man*, the narrator realizes that the complexity of his inner self is limited not only by people's racism, but also by their more general ideologies. He finds that the ideologies advanced by institutions prove too simplistic and one-dimensional to serve something as complex and multidimensional as human identity. The novel contains many examples of ideology, from the tame ingratiating ideology of Booker T. Washington (to which the narrator's college subscribes) to the violent separatist ideology voiced by Ras. But the text makes its point

most strongly in its discussion of the Brotherhood. Among the Brotherhood, the narrator is taught an ideology that promises to save "the people," though, in reality, it consistently limits and betrays the freedom of the individual. The novel implies that life is too rich, too various, and too unpredictable to be bound up neatly in an ideology; like jazz, of which the narrator is particularly fond (as was Ralph Ellison), life reaches the heights of its beauty during moments of improvisation and surprise.

The Danger of Fighting Stereotype with Stereotype

The narrator is not the only African-American in the book to have felt the limitations of racist stereotyping. While he tries to escape the grip of prejudice on an individual level, he encounters other blacks who attempt to prescribe a defense strategy for all African-Americans. Each presents a theory of the "right" way to be black in America and tries to outline how blacks should act in accordance with this theory. The espousers of these theories believe that anyone who acts contrary to their prescriptions effectively betrays the race. Ultimately, however, the narrator finds that such prescriptions only counter stereotype with stereotype and replace one limiting role with another.

Early in the novel, the narrator's grandfather explains his belief that in order to undermine racism, blacks should exaggerate their servility to whites. The narrator's college, in contrast, thinks that blacks can best achieve success by working industriously and adopting the manners and speech of whites. Providing a third point of view, Ras thinks that blacks should rise up and take their freedom by destroying whites. Although all of these concepts arise from within the black community, the novel implies that they ultimately prove as dangerous as the racist stereotypes held by whites. By seeking to define their identity within a race in too limited a way, blacks aim to empower themselves but ultimately undermine their goals. Instead of exploring their own identities, as the narrator struggles to do throughout the story, Ras and others consign themselves and their people to formulaic roles. These characters consider treacherous anyone who attempts to act outside the "formula of blackness." However, in seeking to restrict and choreograph the behavior of the African-American community as a whole, the actions of these characters betray, rather than liberate, their people.

ELLISON ON LITERATURE, CULTURE, AND JAZZ

"Much in negro life remains a mystery; perhaps the zoot suit conceals profound political meaning; perhaps the symmetrical frenzy of the lindy-hop conceals clues to great potential power – if only Negro leaders would solve this riddle."

-Ralph Ellison, 1943

"Without the presence of Negro American style, our [U.S.] jokes, tall tales, even our sports would be lacking in the sudden turns, shocks and swift changes of pace (all jazz-shaped) that serve to remind us that the world is ever unexplored, and that while a complete mastery of life is mere illusion, the real secret of the game is to make life swing."

-Ralph Ellison, 1970

"My basic sense of artistic form is musical… basically my instinctive approach to writing is through *sound*… what is the old phrase – 'the planned dislocation of the senses'? That *is* the condition of fiction, I think. Here is where sound becomes sight and sight becomes sound."

-Ralph Ellison, 1974

"I, Too"
Langston Hughes

I, too, sing America.

I am the darker brother.
They send me to eat in the kitchen
When company comes,
But I laugh,
And eat well,
And grow strong.

Tomorrow,
I'll be at the table
When company comes.
Nobody'll dare
Say to me,
"Eat in the kitchen,"
Then.

Besides,
They'll see how beautiful I am
And be ashamed--

I, too, am America.

"(What Did I Do to Be So) Black and Blue"
Louis Armstrong

Cold empty bed, springs hard as lead
Pains in my head, feel like old Ned
What did I do to be so black and blue?

No joys for me, no company
Even the mouse ran from my house
All my life through I've been so black and blue

I'm white inside, but that don't help my case
Cause I can't hide what is on my face
I'm so forlorn. Life's just a thorn
My heart is torn. Why was I born?
What did I do to be so black and blue?

I'm hurt inside, but that don't help my case
Cause I can't hide what is on my face
How will it end? Ain't got a friend
My only sin is in my skin
What did I do to be so black and blue?
Tell me, what did I do?
What did I do? What did I do?
What did I do? What did I do?
What did I do? What did I do?
What did I do? Tell me, what did I do to be so black and blue?
What did I do to be so black and blue?

Discussion and Follow-Up Questions

- Court Theatre's production of *Invisible Man* is a world-premiere stage adaptation. What roadblocks might the adaptor and director have encountered when trying to turn Ellison's novel into a theatrical piece? How do you think that influenced the final production?

- What is the role of treachery in *Invisible Man*? Who betrays whom? How does treachery relate to the motifs of blindness and invisibility that are prevalent in this story?

- How does the narrator's briefcase encapsulate his history? How does the briefcase relate to the narrator's position as a fugitive? What might the briefcase tell us about the narrator's identity?

- How does irony play a role in drawing attention to the difference between surface and underlying identities? What examples can you site from the play to support your views?

- Consider Ellison's quotes on page 16. What elements of the *Invisible Man* are reminiscent of jazz? Why?

- Discuss Langston Hughes's poem "I, Too" (page 17). How does it relate to *Invisible Man*, both thematically and stylistically? How do "I, Too" and Louis Armstrong's "(What Did I Do to be so) Black and Blue" relate to one another and to *Invisible Man*?