

IMPROVISATION AND SELF-EMANCIPATION IN THE NOVELS OF RALPH ELLISON

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In 1776, with the signing of the Declaration of Independence, a few thousand English Colonial men became Americans. Thomas Jefferson explained in that sacred document the ideals that would found this new nation. He discusses self-evident truths that all men are brought into this world as equal and have the unalienable right to life, liberty and happiness. Of course, some of these ideals may be considered too lofty, idealistic and unachievable. Although they had been floating around among the realms of political theorists such as John Locke, neither Thomas Jefferson nor the world had seen such a nation exist. He was taking these theories and attempting to make them a reality. The founding of this nation was and still is a political experiment.

Jefferson understood even in the great optimism of the founding that this nation lacked what it took to make the experiment successful. He knew that even in America all men were not free and were not treated equally. He wrote about King George,

He has waged cruel war against human nature itself, violating it's most sacred rights of life and liberty in the persons of a distant people who never offended him, captivating

& carrying them into slavery in another hemisphere, or to incur miserable death in their transportation thither.¹

Slavery was the great evil that seemed to doom the experiment to failure. He continues to criticize the king for then offering the slaves the freedom that he originally denied them if the slaves would serve in the king's army against the Revolution. Although Jefferson recognized the contradiction of slavery to the ideals that he declares earlier in the document, these arguments were left out of the final draft of the Declaration.

In declaring a self-evident truth, is it always necessary that the truth be completely practiced to be true? Of course, that is not necessarily so. When Jefferson declared the equality of men and liberty for all, he was providing the new nation with an aim or a target for which to strive. He knew that men were not meant to live under the rule of a tyrant king or the whip of a slave master, but the new American citizenry was not forced to immediately live accordingly. They would take baby steps toward fully enacting the principles Jefferson declared. Their first step, of course, was the Declaration of Independence and the second, the American Revolution.

After the Revolution, moving these ideals from paper to practice proved more difficult than what many Americans expected. They all agreed on the truths

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¹ Jefferson, Thomas. *Rough Draft of the Declaration of Independence.*

discussed in the document but not on how they should be enacted. The nation faced about a decade of great instability experimenting with the principles of the Declaration. There existed no manual, no step-by-step guide to building a free nation. There was not a good example from history that might give them some idea of what to do or even what not to do. In 1787, the framers of the Constitution joined together to begin to reformulate the experiment in Philadelphia. It was a long hot summer of arguing and compromising. In the end, they had created a formula that seemed to put the principles into practice as was best possible.

Alexander Hamilton, writing as the pseudonym Publius, defines the American experiment perfectly in the opening Federalist Paper, written in defense of the new Constitution that would soon take effect.

It has been frequently remarked that it seems to have been reserved to the people of this country, by their conduct and example, to decide the important question, whether societies of men are really capable or not of establishing good government from reflection and choice, or whether they are forever destined to depend for their political constitutions on accident and force.²

For Hamilton and many others, the success of the Constitution and of the nation in general proves whether men are capable of ruling themselves. Jefferson's principles, now embodied in this new Constitution, determined the fate of the world and all eyes were on America awaiting its success or failure.

Even at this pinnacle moment of restructuring the nation to what would better

enact the principles of the Declaration, the nation and the world still failed to see the enactment of the truths. One might say that with the Revolution and the years following, the new Americans took baby steps closer to freedom and equality for all, but they still failed to believe them completely and apply them to their lives. Slavery still plagued the nation during the Constitutional Convention and was the greatest threat to the success of the experiment.

The whole existence of the American slave seems contradictory even to the framers of the Constitution. In his defense of the Constitution in the Federalist 54, James Madison confirms that slaves are property, not persons. However, in the next paragraph he quotes one of the southern delegates who admits that the government in some respects viewed slaves as property and in other respects as men. For example, a slave does not labor for himself but for his master and can be bought and sold. However, in other respects, a slave is protected from the violence of other men and punishable as a man if he commits a violent act toward another man. The southern delegate confesses this major contradiction in the Constitution by saying, "The federal Constitution, therefore, decides with great propriety on the case of our slaves, when it views them in the mixed character of persons and of property. This is in fact their true character."³ The delegates were undecided on the issue of slavery, thus leaving the slave in an intermediary state between a man and a beast. This "true character," as the delegate interprets it, examines the depth of the effects of America's contradictions on the slaves themselves. Slavery is the major issue that contradicts the principles of the Declaration and leaves the American experiment incomplete. Still the experiment is not a

² Hamilton, Alexander. *Federalist No. 1*.

³ Madison, James. *Federalist No. 54*.

complete failure and the principles remain something to strive towards.

There existed at this time a significant number of Americans who tried to undermine the truths of the Declaration. They jeopardized the American experiment a few decades later in the Civil War. During the famous Gettysburg Address, Lincoln confirms the idea of Madison that the founding of this nation is an experiment when he says, "Four score and seven years ago our fathers brought forth on this continent, a new nation, conceived in Liberty, and dedicated to the proposition that all men are created equal." He begins the address by affirming the principles of the Declaration. It is apparent that Lincoln believed in the truth behind these principles even though they are not fully practiced within the Union. He continues, "Now we are engaged in a great civil war, *testing whether that nation, or any nation so conceived and so dedicated, can long endure.*"⁴ For Lincoln, the collapse of the Union meant the failure of the experiment so he continued to fight, never acknowledging the secession of the southern states.

Lincoln admits that the primary issue that threatens the Union is slavery. In the Second Inaugural Address, he states, "One eighth of the whole population were colored slaves, not distributed generally over the Union, but localized in the Southern part of it. These slaves constituted a peculiar and powerful interest. All knew that this interest was, somehow, the cause of the war."⁵ The difference between the principles supported by the American people that Lincoln discusses in the Gettysburg Address and the actions of the people and the government almost caused the nation to fall. Lincoln, in an act to save the Union, freed the slaves from their bondage, yet it would still be

years before Americans began to fully acknowledge the truth behind the principles upon which they were founded.

Throughout the Reconstruction up until the Civil Rights movement of the 1950's, blacks were free but definitely not equal. As slavery was nearing its end, many people argued for colonization, a program to send the slaves back to Africa. Although they believed that all men should be free and equal, they did not believe that the freed slaves and white America could coexist without problems. However, the most fascinating argument against the program is that the slaves did not want to leave. They, too, believed in the principles of the Declaration even though they were the ones to whom those principles had been most brutally denied. The freed slaves called this nation home even after the generations of torment that being here caused them. It has been argued that African Americans were the first true Americans and their presence here forced the nation to live by its principles or to deny the principles which, in turn, denied them for all Americans and the world.⁶

In an interview in 1976, Ralph Ellison discusses the nature of the American experiment or what he refers to as improvisation. He says, "Out of the democratic principles set down on paper in the Constitution and the Bill of Rights they were improvising themselves into a nation, scraping together a conscious culture out of the various dialects, idioms, lingos, and methodologies of America's diverse peoples and regions."⁷ All Americans came to the

⁴ Lincoln, Abraham. *Gettysburg Address*. Emphasis added.

⁵ Lincoln, Abraham. *Second Inaugural Address*.

⁶ Ellison, Ralph. "What Would America be like Without Blacks?" In Callahan, John F., ed. *Collected Essays of Ralph Ellison*. New York: The Modern Library, 2003. p. 587.

⁷ Harper, Michael S. and Stepto, Robert B. "Study and Experience: An Interview with Ralph Ellison." in Graham, Maryemma and Singh, Amritjit. *Conversations with Ralph Ellison*. Jackson, MS: University Press of Mississippi, 1995. p. 336.

United States seeking a better way of life except the African slaves. The nation became a mixing of the many different European cultures that now lived within the same thirteen colonies. Once the slaves were freed, they were forced to integrate with this European mix, yet they were distinctly un-European.⁸ Ellison argues that it was the mixing of these cultures that began to develop a truly American culture, and that is the part where the nation had to do the most improvising. They had to mix two completely different cultures both identifying themselves as Americans. Ellison continues to say, “having no past in the art of Europe, they could use its elements and their inherited sense of style to improvise forms through which they could express their own unique sense of American experience.”⁹ The form of art that best represents the American experience for Ellison is jazz, many different instrumentalists piecing together their own improvised versions of the chords to create a song. Jazz, an African-American phenomenon, is a musical representation of Jefferson, Madison, and Lincoln’s American experiment.

In the novel, *Invisible Man*, Ralph Ellison uses fiction to demonstrate how the gap between the nation’s principles and its practices affect its citizenry. He does this by presenting his reader with an anonymous young man¹⁰ from the segregated south who attempts to do everything right to make it in the white man’s world. However, every time he feels like he is doing something correctly, he ends up failing miserably and

falling deeper and deeper into disgust for the people of this nation. At the end of the novel, IM falls into a hole in the street, and there he remains. He steals electrical power, allows the notes of Louis Armstrong to reverberate within his soul, and sits alone always thinking. He questions the basic principles of the nation and the hopelessness that seems to exist. In his complacency,¹¹ he begins to tell the reader his tale of how he arrived at his current state. After the retelling of a long list of uncontrollable tragic events, he reflects again in the epilogue on the attitudes he expressed in the prologue. Throughout the novel, IM meets many different individuals from all backgrounds and races that have applied the nation’s principles in a variety of ways. These applications leave him with a deep evaluation of the gap between the nation’s principles and practices.

Ellison’s second novel, *Juneteenth*, again examines the experimental and contradictory nature evident in the nation through the story of an adopted white boy who becomes a United States Senator and his adoptive father, a black reverend. The Senator, although raised by a southern black religious community that gave him the name Bliss, was one of the most racist U.S. politicians. The novel begins with an assassination attempt of Senator Sunraider as he is making a speech and then revolves around Reverend Hickman’s visit to him while he is in the hospital. It is revealed early that one of the reasons for Bliss’ rebellion against the community that raised him is that he never knew the story of how he came to be part of the community in the first place. After a crazy woman tried to take Bliss while he

⁸ Ellison, Ralph. *The Collected Essays of Ralph Ellison*. New York: The Modern Library, 1995. p. 851.

⁹ Harper, Michael S., p. 336.

¹⁰ For the remainder of the paper, the main character will be referred to as IM based on the novel’s title. Also the first paragraph starts out, “I am an invisible man.” IM could also be the contraction for “I am,” “I’m” representing the narrators being along with his invisibility.

¹¹ IM describes himself as complacent during his hibernation. His hibernation was a failure to answer a call to action, but that the ideas that he has will not leave him in such a state. “Nor will certain ideas forget me; they keep filing away at my lethargy, my complacency.” (*Invisible Man* 579, emphasis added).

was playing a major role in a spiritual revival, he began to question the truthfulness of his past as it was presented to him by the Reverend. No one had explained his whole past to him until this moment in the hospital. The Reverend begins his explanation, “The first thing you have to understand is that this is a strange country. There’s no logic to it or to its ways. In fact, it’s been half-crazy from the beginning and it’s got so many crazy crooks and turns and blind alleys in it, that half the time a man can’t tell where he is or who he is.”¹² What does Hickman mean when he says that nation has been “half-crazy from the beginning?” He is referring to the time of the founders and then of the framers, when the country began on the very contradictory road between the suggested principles and the state of the country at the time of their suggestion. He is not suggesting that the founders were thinking illogically, but would argue that the principles are very logical. However, the illogical part of them is found in the citizenry that is trying to uphold the principles as true and then justify their actions that contradict them. Hickman continues, “To tell the truth, Bliss, he can’t tell reason from *unreason*...”¹³ The problem that results from the state of craziness that exists in the nation rests in the individual, an individual that Hickman is limiting by race. Both the white men and the black men of Hickman’s time wanted to identify themselves as Americans, but then what did that mean? It means agreeing with the nation’s founding principles, but for what end? The world still had yet to see these principles carried out, if even they could be. Men came to this land believing it to be a land of the free, but now both white and black men are left searching for that seemingly mythical nation. The consequences of

¹² Ellison, Ralph. *Juneteenth*. New York: Vintage books, 1999. p. 201.

¹³ *Juneteenth*. p. 201.

the gap between the words on paper and the actions of the nation affect this democratic nation on an individual level. Ellison’s novels are narratives about the lives of individuals, seeming to suggest that the best way to examine the effects of a democratic nation’s political theories is by examining the day-to-day lives of the individuals that make up the nation.

Ellison argued that the best way to be free was to start living as though you were free, live as though the principles of the Declaration are true even though the evidence of that truth cannot be seen anywhere.¹⁴ One reoccurring theme in his novels is how to know when to say “yes” and when to say “no.” In *Invisible Man*, the first time this occurs is when his grandfather, an ex-slave, attempted to give IM advice about how to view the world in which they live. In this speech, his grandfather advises IM 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.”¹⁵ What this could possibly mean to IM remained a mystery throughout the novel until the epilogue when he refers back to his grandfather.

First, it is necessary to examine to whom the grandfather refers when he says “em” or “them.” In this case, “them” are the white Americans that seem to be ruling the way that men view the world. In one of his essays, Ellison discusses the idea that black men had an advantage over white men because they were able to observe every move that white men make. By assuming roles as chauffeurs and butlers, they are exposed to intimate details of the white man’s life. Ellison claims that it is quite possible that black men know white men

¹⁴ Ellison, Ralph. "Working Notes" in *Juneteenth*. New York: Vintage books, 1999. p. 356.

¹⁵ Ellison, Ralph. *Invisible Man*. New York: Vintage Books, 1995. p.16.

better than white men know them-selves.¹⁶ When white men interact with other white men, they can easily put on a façade. However, when they are at home or in their car, their true character shows.

IM's grandfather suggests that his grandson should say "yes" when white men demand something of him but only to a degree. The act of saying "yes" seems to lead to the white man's destruction when IM's grandfather adds "to death" at the end of this phrase. Or it could lead to the black man's elevation. How can this be so? By saying "yes," it seems to be allowing white men to rule you. It seems to be teaching whites that black men are willing or even happy as their servants. Instead of slavery, white men could view yes-ing them as the black man's way of consenting to their subservient status. For the grandfather, this was not so. Yes-ing them was a means of survival. In a world that saw blacks as inferior, striking against it would only leave them unemployed, poor and hungry.

But what could be accomplished by yes-ing them? A "yes" demonstrates one's ability to rise above one's terrible situation. It demonstrates that black man's determination not to give up and to continue surviving. Slaves could only say "yes," but they did have a choice. They could say "yes" submissively, acknowledging the white man's power to rule them, or they could "yes" willfully, acknowledging their own humanity that cannot be rule by another. Saying "yes" is an act of one's will.¹⁷ For years, American slaves yes-ed their masters, and they survived. It is very similar to the main idea of the Atlanta Exposition Address by Booker T. Washington. Washington reminds both blacks and whites to "cast down [their] buckets where

[they] are," a phrase repeated by IM when he was a young man. Washington encouraged his audience that in the effort of progress, both races need to participate. He reminds blacks that no race can prosper until it learns that "there is as much dignity in tilling a field as in writing a poem. It is at the bottom of life [that they] must begin, and not at the top. Nor should [they] permit [their] grievances to overshadow [their] opportunities."¹⁸ Washington believed that a hard-working, honest man could not be overlooked by either race if for no other reason than he is valuable to the economic community. It is possible that this is one result of yes-ing them.

Washington implied that yes-ing them would bring about racial harmony, not necessarily equality but harmony and progress. He believed that whites could not overlook the hard work of an honest black man and will, therefore, come to the black community for high quality products and services. The problem with Washington's philosophy is that there will always be the white man who will never buy a product from a black man, even if the product is better, on account of him being black. With that hatred as the dominant philosophy of white America, it would be hard to see economic prosperity, let alone racial equality. During this time period, saying "yes" was futile because Washington's presupposition that white men cannot deny an honest man's work based on race was false. He failed to take the offensive by saying "yes" but gave the impression that blacks were content to stay in their lowly position. His "yes" lacked the powerful destructive element of IM's grandfather's.

In the opening chapter of the novel, IM is invited to speak to the prominent white men of his town. Before the speech,

¹⁶ *The Collected Essays of Ralph Ellison*. p. 384, 802-3.

¹⁷ *The Collected Essays of Ralph Ellison*. 2003. p. 751.

¹⁸ Washington, Booker T., "Atlanta Exposition Address" in Washington, Booker T., *Up from Slavery*. New York: Penguin Books, 1986. p. 220.

IM is forced into a boxing ring blind folded to fight other black boys his age as entertainment. When it finally becomes time for IM to speak, he is bloody, sweaty and thirsty. Reciting his memorized speech, he quotes Washington saying “social responsibility.” The men, amused that a black boy could pronounce three-syllable words, asked him time and time again to repeat the phrase. One of these times, he blurts out, “social equality.” The jeering hackles of the men instantly fell silent and the M.C asks IM to repeat himself. “‘You sure that about ‘equality’ was a mistake?’ ‘Oh, yes, sir,’ I said, ‘I was swallowing blood.’ ‘Well, you had better speak more slowly so we can understand. We mean to do right by you, but you’ve got to know your place at all times.’”¹⁹ The white men understood Washington’s “social responsibility” as knowing one’s place and were insulted, if not threatened, by IM’s slip of the tongue. “Social responsibility” addresses society as an entire body, but “social equality” creates individuals. Could this be the destructive element of his grandfather’s yeses that Washington’s lack? Considering that IM blurts them out suggests that the words came from somewhere deep within him, and as they were being said, they were accompanied by blood. This would not be the last time IM would swallow blood while trying to distinguish the destructive element between the words of his grandfather, those of Washington, and oddly enough his own.

The grandfather seems to be adding a destructive element to the phrase when he adds "to death." For IM's grandfather, the process of yes-ing them is a way to bring about change, not just economically but socially as well. Does he really wish to bring about the destruction of the white man? Or is he talking figuratively? It could mean tell them “yes” until they can no

longer stand to hear the word. Reply “yes” with such dignity that they cannot deny one’s humanness. Declare it in such a way that they may realize that it is not them forcing someone to do something as a slave, but a free man, a human being, giving his consent to perform an act as a means of survival. Say “yes” in a way that lets them know that one can say “no.” By yes-ing them to death, it reminds white America of the humanness of the black man, not as a race but as distinct individuals, and in doing so, they will not be able to continue in their racial thoughts and practices. By saying “yes,” it puts to death the old ways of the white man, "the old has died, and the new has come."²⁰

At the end of his life, IM's grandfather considered himself a traitor. Speaking to his son, he says, "I never told you, but our life is a war and I have been a traitor all my born days, a spy in the enemy's country ever since I give up my gun back in the Reconstruction. Live with your head in the lion's mouth."²¹ Described as a meek old man, IM did not understand how his grandfather was a traitor. In the battle of the black man, saying “yes” is taking the offensive side. Saying “no” is obviously defensive and admits that the white man was on the offensive, that he had the power over one’s will. In defying their illusioned authority, a black man will lose what power he did have. By willingly saying “yes,” one informs them that they are an individual that could say “no.” Nevertheless, where does a man stop saying “yes?” Is there a point where one cannot say “yes” any longer and should say “no?” Can you say “no” without admitting the white person’s power? Where would IM’s grandfather draw the line between saying “yes” and “no?” Obviously

¹⁹ *Invisible Man*. p.16.

²⁰ 2 Corinthians 5:17 NIV

²¹ *Invisible Man*. p.16.

one cannot consent to everything asked of him by a white man.

After reciting his speech in front of the community members, IM is awarded with a scholarship to a college for black men and with a brand new brief case. All the community leaders and his family members praised and encouraged him, everyone except for his grandfather who appeared to him in a nightmare. IM goes off to college and in his junior year has the privilege of taking one of the founders of the college, Mr. Norton, for an afternoon drive. They drive past a house of a black man, Jim Trueblood, known for impregnating his daughter and Norton insisted on talking to this man. After hearing the Trueblood's perverse story, Norton is overcome with the gruesomeness of the events, gives Trueblood one hundred dollars, and then demands that IM find him a shot of whiskey. In an anxious effort to obtain whiskey, IM arrives at the Golden Day, a bar that this particular day was full of black World War II veterans out for the afternoon from an insane asylum.

The vets' insight on the truth of their situation has driven them insane. One particular vet indirectly agrees with IM's grandfather about the nature of saying "yes" and "no." He is a former brain surgeon that offers to help Norton through his anxious state. However, the insight that he shares with Norton and IM add more stress to the afternoon. He tells Norton that in the eyes of many of his companions he has three identities, a great white father, a lyncher of souls and confusion.²² When asked to explain the statement, he says, "It is an issue which I can confront only by evading it."²³ How is it possible to address an issue only by avoiding discussing it? That is the same thing IM's grandfather means when he yeses them to death. He knows that the white men

he was serving had no control over him and somehow saying "yes" reminds him of that somehow in avoiding direct discussion of the subject, he is explaining the situation, somehow the truth is too complicated for the world to hear it. Even the vet is not ready to fully grasp the implications of his phrase. Not confronting the issue is like saying "yes," because it allows the truth to exist out there even if the world is not ready for it. He does not say that the issue will never be confronted, but that it cannot be confronted at this very moment. Confronting the issue is like taking the defensive and saying "no." It puts the truth out there, but then deprives it of any power that it might have over changing the situation. Just like a black man that would say "no," he would be stripped of any means to earn a living or to prove his humanity to the white man.

Seeing that IM does not understand what it is he is trying address without directly addressing the issue, the vet says that IM has "learned to repress not only his emotions but his humanity. He's invisible, a walking personification of the Negative... The mechanical man!"²⁴ At this point of the novel, IM has done nothing but follow the orders of the white men around him. He says "yes" but sees himself not as equal to the white man when he says "yes," but instead says "yes" as if he were inferior. He says "yes" just as the slaves said "yes." The positive emotions implanted in him by the outside world have suppressed any negative emotions he has experienced. He does not know his own feelings. The main sources of negative feelings up until this point in the novel are the words of his grandfather that constantly haunt him. Therefore, IM continually disregards these feelings for the feelings that others have told him to feel. Of course, at such a young age, IM does not understand what the vet is trying to tell him

²² *Invisible Man*. p.93.

²³ *Invisible Man*. p.93.

²⁴ *Invisible Man*. p.94.

just as he did not understand what his grandfather was trying to say. If IM says “yes” just as a slave would have, then he is not a human being but not a beast either, he is a mechanical man. He is something that takes up space but that does not contribute to the world around him. But even more so, he is like a robot that does exactly what he has been programmed to do. He does not think for himself nor question the commands that he has been given. The cause of truth that results from saying “yes” and “no” is lost when black men keep saying “yes” in a submissive way.

Back at the college, IM has to face the director of the college, Bledsoe. A fellow black man, Bledsoe worked very hard to become the president of the college. IM enters his office ashamed of what happened with Mr. Norton earlier that day. Knowing that the mishaps were not IM’s fault, Mr. Norton had already forgiven him. Bledsoe, however, affirms the vet’s conclusions about IM. He was asking IM why he took Norton to those hideous places against everything within him that told him that he should not do that. “He *ordered* you. Dammit, white folk are always giving orders, it’s a habit with them. Why didn’t you make an excuse?”²⁵ Bledsoe criticizes IM for merely accepting orders from white men. When IM told Bledsoe about the vet, Bledsoe agreed that IM believed that white was right. IM blindly says “yes” without recognizing that he is an equal human being capable of using his judgment to avoid conflict, capable of saying “no,” or of suggesting an alternative reaction.

Bledsoe would agree with the vet and IM’s grandfather that one needs to say “yes,” but unlike them, he argues that in saying “yes” one is empowered. He would argue that individual gain is more important than any type of societal change that might

amount from saying “yes.” Once empowered, an individual should fight for one person, and one person alone, the self. He set his own values by which he lives. His principle value was power, which he secretly had while he was in control of the university, secretly because the white men did not know that they were being controlled by him. He argues “Power doesn’t have to show off. Power is confident, self-assuring, self-starting and self-stopping, self-warming and self-justifying.”²⁶ Bledsoe defines power by using five words with the prefix “self.” He seems to apply it universally to mankind, but is defining it personally and in doing so is defining himself as an individual. Power is his value, and he applies it only to himself. Bledsoe is willing to destroy anyone or anything that stands in his way. He declares, “I’ll have every Negro in the country hanging on tree limbs by morning if it means staying where I am.”²⁷ There is no universal principle that is guiding him, just his own standards. He does not believe in truth and the responsibilities that accompany that truth. He would destroy the sacred principle of the nation if in doing so, he protected or increased his personal gain. Bledsoe has forgotten the problems that he faced in his boyhood and faces the future with selfish standards. He is affirming the future but only his individual future and not a better future for everyone.

After Bledsoe forces IM to leave the college and sends him to New York on the false pretext that a job would be waiting for him when he gets there, IM finds himself a job at Liberty Paints. In charge of the pressurized tanks, he got into an argument with his supervisor who felt threatened by his presence causing him to ignore the gauges on the tanks. When one of the tanks exploded, he awoke in the factory infirmary

²⁵ *Invisible Man*. p.139.

²⁶ *Invisible Man*. p. 142.

²⁷ *Invisible Man*. p. 143.

being flooded by a million questions. The primary question was “who are you?” He leaves the infirmary only to pass out on a Harlem street. There on the side of the street his own Good Samaritan, Mary Rambo, rescues him.

The act of yes-ing them to death is similar to the idea that Christians should be in the world but not of the world. That is to say, that they need to be participants in the world to the extent that they need to survive but still hold to principles very contrary to the way of the world. The truths of these principles are life changing, and when someone decides to apply them to his life, others will notice them. Christians believe that by living out these principles, they will change the world around them. Mary Rambo enacts this principle completely by opening her home to IM when he was beaten on the side of the street. She took care of him while he was recovering from his misfortune at the Liberty Paint plant and then continued to offer room and board to him, even when he did not have a job to pay rent. One particular time she encouraged him with these words, “You have to take care of yourself, son. Don’t let this Harlem git you. I’m in New York, but New York ain’t in me, understand what I mean? Don’t git corrupted.”²⁸ She had found a way to live in Harlem but not be a part of Harlem. She found a way to say “yes” to the good things of Harlem but refuse the corruption that exists there. To survive in a corrupt world, one needs to say “yes” as far as it does not conflict with the principles that one believes but cannot allow himself to become corrupted by the lies of the world.

While living with Mary, IM enters his first hibernation. At times, IM is annoyed by Mary’s optimism about the current state of the nation and how she relentlessly reminds him of his responsibility and duty to

leadership. “Mary reminded me constantly that something was expected of me, some act of leadership, some newsworthy achievement; and I was torn between resenting her for it and loving her for the nebulous hope she kept alive.”²⁹ There was so much about her that reminded him of his grandfather. He said that she was a stabilizing force like something from his past. He did not have any friends, and he thought of Mary, his sole companion, as more of a driving force than a friend.³⁰ Instead, he spent all his time reading books. Mary encourages him to put actions behind his thoughts, but that is a lesson he does not learn until the end. For IM, at this point, being in the world is being corrupted by the world. Up until this point in the novel, he believed in the American dream. He saw the United States as the land of opportunity, the land flowing with milk and honey, for those that worked hard enough. He had done everything right. He had worked hard through school and then in college. However, each person only helped him out as far as they were helping themselves, perhaps the cruelest example of this being Bledsoe. IM arrived in New York with high hopes and after loosing his job at Liberty Paints, he realizes for the first time in his young life that this country, the American dream and the sacred principles do not seem to apply to him. He chose then to stay inside and read instead of going out and facing the world. This is not the principle of yes-ing them to death, of being in the world but not of it. Instead it is the principle of avoiding that which one cannot fix. Arguably, Mary is no different because she is a home-body that never really leaves her house. She cooks, cleans and reads the paper, but is not out there performing any “newsworthy achievement.” In response, Mary is enacting the principles that she

²⁸ *Invisible Man*. p. 257.

²⁹ *Invisible Man*. p. 258.

³⁰ *Invisible Man*. p. 258.

believes in on an individual basis. She is humble and works hard, but she works hard where she is. She is not aspiring to be Booker T. Washington as IM did with his original American-dream optimism. The only blacks, or whites for that matter, in the story that have achieved that amount of greatness did so by taking advantage of individuals by seeing them merely as a part of the masses around them. If Mary is not expecting of herself some newsworthy achievement, then why did she expect it of IM? It is possible that she noticed his potential to be a great public speaker as he later went on to become. Maybe she recognized the value of all the studying he did in her house and his intellectual capabilities. However, more than likely, she was just encouraging the youth to find ways to live above their situations while living in them. IM is not the first person that Mary has cared for, so it is quite possible that she encouraged all her tenants in a similar manner.

Finally, IM gets a job as a speaker for the brotherhood and leaves Mary's house and guardianship. He experiences rapid success in his endeavors with the brotherhood. One morning when IM arrived at work, he found an anonymous note sitting on his desk warning him that if he wants to help black men, he should not go too fast because he lives in the white man's world. Thus far, his work in Harlem had successfully rallied the people together, and he was hoping to move them again soon so that their enthusiasm does not die off. At first, the note seems like prudent advice. IM had gained powerful influence in the community, the same kind of powerful influence that is possible when one says "yes" as the grandfather intended. Therefore, the advice of the letter seems accurate considering that if IM works too far ahead of himself it would be like saying "no." He will have proved himself to such a point that the

people are not ready, and he will lose all his hard work. However, the problem is that IM does not just represent his own work; he represents an organization, a movement known as the brotherhood. IM changed his identity to work for the brotherhood and studied their philosophies that teach history as a science. He had to cut any ties with his past which at that point only involved Mary. The former IM was completely consumed by the new IM that formed not an individual at all but a part of a brotherhood. That is why the warnings in the letter are not similar to the warnings of his grandfather. To his grandfather being prudent and saying "yes" defines one as an individual. It demonstrates one's own power to make decisions, but here the letter is warning IM against having his own agenda in the white man's world. The letter is reminding IM to conform to the agenda of the brotherhood. Once again IM is forced to say "yes" submissively but for the first time he does not just accept what is being demanded of him, but is angered.

Terrified by the anonymous letter, he called to Brother Tarp, who when he entered the room, IM mistook for his grandfather. Brother Tarp is an old black man who walks with a limp and lives at the Harlem base of the brotherhood. IM asked Tarp about the origins of the letter, but Tarp did not have any idea how it got into his office. Before leaving the room, Brother Tarp gave IM a mangled chain link. This chain link was the link that he broke to escape from nineteen years of imprisonment. He told IM, "...I think it's got a heap of signifying wrapped up in it and it might help you remember what we're really fighting against. I don't think of it in terms of but two words, *yes* and *no*; but it signifies a heap more..."³¹ Tarp understands yes and no clarifying what the

³¹ *Invisible Man*. p.388.

grandfather might have meant especially in regards to when it is safe to say “no.”

Tarp told IM that he was imprisoned for saying “no.” He does not give many details about the scene of the crime but just says, “I said no to a man who wanted to take something from me; that’s what is cost me for saying no.”³² The reader never learns what the crime was but just that he was protecting his own property. During his nineteen years in jail, he “kept saying no until [he] broke the chain and left.” What is the difference between Tarp saying “no” and the grandfather saying “yes?” Is it that Tarp said “no” where the grandfather said “yes?” Is it that Tarp faced a much deeper situation such as a man trying to take his freedom or the freedom of a loved one? Would the grandfather have said “no” in the same circumstance? It is possible that the world changed. Where a man used to be able to say “yes” with dignity, now must choose between saying “yes” and “no.”

As Tarp shares the story of his escape, there is a point when he has to say “yes.” He describes, “I was standing in the mud holding a long-handled shovel and I asked myself, Tarp, can you make it? And inside me I said yes; all that water and mud and rain said yes, and I took off.”³³ When Tarp says “yes” it is full of personal determination. He said “no” to the world that was treating him unjustly and said “yes” to what he knew. He knew he was a human being and therefore, that he was free. His yes was a saying of his will. He was determined to achieve freedom against all the obstacles that lay ahead of him. There is an element of courage and determination that is necessary to live out one’s principles in a world that desires to deny them.

IM suggests that slaves, or in Tarp’s case, prisoners, have an easier time under-

standing their humanity than the men of his generation. “[IM’s grandfather] never had any doubts about his humanity—that was left to his ‘free’ offspring.”³⁴ When the world around them viewed slaves as property, they easily knew that they were not. They were certain of their humanity because the world treated them like cattle. They could reason, worship and love just as a human being, not as cattle. Through their treatment, they were more certain that they were human beings and that they should be free. After the Emancipation Proclamation and Reconstruction, black men participated in a world that gave them a false sense of freedom. It was definitely an improvement from the days of slavery. Black men could work on a plantation by their own free will rather than being forced to work there. They were free to be lazy and starve to death if they so desire. The improvement is that they were free to decide. The fact that they could do everything they wanted to gain personal excellence and never receive recognition for that excellence is irrelevant. The fact that a man could honorably do everything within his power to provide for his family and still watch his children starve seemed unimportant. It smelled like freedom, for now men could decide to die slowly while fighting every step of the way or they could decide to die quickly. That is what his grandfather refers to as the good fight. They had the freedom to decide. Now the world seemed to recognize their humanity publicly and deny it in every other aspect of life.

IM spent most of his life fighting the good fight within himself. His battle, like the battle of all black men of his day, was first to recognize his own humanity and then force the world around him to see that humanity. These were the necessary conditions for him to say “yes” and “no.”

³² *Invisible Man*. p.387.

³³ *Invisible Man*. p.388.

³⁴ *Invisible Man*. p. 580.

Similar to the slaves, he always had a sense that there was more to him and to what he was doing. As a young man, he said, "Whenever things went well for me I remembered my grandfather and felt guilty and uncomfortable."³⁵ At the end of the book, he repeats a similar thought, "In order to justify *them*, I had to take myself by the throat and choke myself.... Oh, yes, it made them happy and it made me sick. So I became ill of affirmation, of saying 'yes' against the nay-saying of my stomach—not to mention my brain."³⁶ It seems as though IM did exactly what his grandfather said. He yes-ed them, yet there was no pride or dignity in his yeses. Affirming the world's absurdities only made him feel ill inside. What is the difference between the yeses of his grandfather and his own yeses? Why could his grandfather feel satisfied yes-ing them and it leave IM feeling empty?

Since his grandfather was a slave, and therefore certain of his humanity, he could say "yes" without sacrificing his dignity. IM, on the other hand, lived in a world of uncertainty, and perhaps he felt as though the more he affirmed the mistaken beliefs of others, the more uncertain the world became. Also, it is possible that since his grandfather lived in the early years of freedom, he may not have understood fully the extent of the hatred that existed among whites. He may have been so full of hope from the progress he had seen in his lifetime that he believed that centuries of hatred would melt away in a few years. However, life did not change and the hope of the freed slaves faded. Brother Tarp and IM represent the changes in the souls with each passing generation. It produced the Brother Tarps, who knew the truth and understood "yes" and "no." They could no longer just say "yes" but came to the point where they must

say "no." It produced the IMs, who once they knew the truth believed that blanket affirmation waged war with their soul. Are the yeses and no's of Brother Tarp and IM completely different from his grandfather's?

In the epilogue to the novel, IM reconsiders the statement of his grandfather and comes to a deep conclusion.

Could he have meant—hell, he *must* have meant the principle, that we are to affirm the principle on which the country was built and not the men, or at least not the men who did the violence. Did he mean say 'yes' because he knew that the principle was greater than the men, greater than the numbers and the vicious power and all the methods used to corrupt its name? Did he mean to affirm the principle, which they themselves had dreamed into being out of the chaos and darkness of the feudal past, and which they had violated and compromised to the point of absurdity even in their own corrupt minds?³⁷

IM concludes that his grandfather meant that one must affirm the principles of the Declaration of Independence. They must believe that the principles are right, even if the country under them denies them in their action. His hope is in the power of the truth of these principles. There is a power in truth that can make bad situations good. It may take years, as did the ideas of the founders. As IM said it, these ideas came from the feudal past. Once created, they took years to develop fully because the minds of men for hundreds of centuries still acted feudally and tyrannically. Frederick Douglass refers to the power of these principles in his autobiography. "The moral which I gained from

³⁵ *Invisible Man*. p.17.

³⁶ *Invisible Man*. p.573.

³⁷ *Invisible Man*. p.574.

the dialogue was the power of truth over the conscience of even a slaveholder."³⁸ The truth of these principles would live on even if violent men sought to destroy them.

During his hibernation, IM reflects upon the events of his lifetime. He examines this very question of yes and no. He tries to explain his invisibility and says that throughout his lifetime, others hated him when he told the truth and loved when he affirmed their mistaken beliefs. The few black men in the story who actually tried to explain the situation were viewed with contempt. For example, Mr. Norton and IM were completely appalled by the vet in the Golden Day. The problem with saying "yes" and "no" is that one must know the truth and in IM's absurd world, it is nearly impossible to do so. He explains, "When one is invisible he finds such problems as a good and evil, honesty and dishonesty, of such shifting shapes that he confuses one with the other, depending upon who happens to be looking through him at the time."³⁹ The way in which other people saw him decided the truth of the situation. If there is no truth, how can there be yes and no?

In *Juneteenth*, Ellison presents his reader with yet another character similar to Bledsoe that has created himself as an individual and is left incomplete. The novel opens with a speech from Senator Sunraider who would be the definition of a self-created individual. He was an adopted child raised in a black community that eventually worked his way up to be a very prominent Senator who was an enemy to the cause of the blacks. Sunraider declares,

Ours is the freedom and obligation to be ever the fearless creators of ourselves, the reconstructers of the world. We were created to be

Adamic definers, namers and shapers of yet undiscovered secrets of the universe!

Therefore let the doubters doubt, let the faint of heart turn pale. We move toward the fulfillment of our nation's demand for citizen-individualists possessing the courage to forge a multiplicity of creative selves and styles. We shall supply its need for individuals...⁴⁰

Sunraider takes Bledsoe's individualism one step further to include the quest for individualism as one of the nation's main defining ideals. In a democratic nation, the citizenry is empowered as sovereigns and given the power to say "yes" and "no." Of course, in a republic, this power is given to the people and then almost immediately taken away through representation. However, it still allows its citizenry to affirm or negate the nation's principles, thus producing individuals. The individuals must be able to recognize and affirm some principles as true and then adjust their actions accordingly. "Yes" and "no," the very words that empower individuals like Sunraider and Bledsoe, prove that their extreme individualistic philosophies are incomplete because their truths are based entirely on the individual and cannot be applied universally to mankind.

Ellison resolves this individualism that tends toward isolationism by presenting Reverend Hickman and the Christian community in *Juneteenth*. Hickman is an uneducated jazz-musician-turned-preacher after a series of unfortunate events that led to his adopting Bliss, as Sunraider was called in his boyhood. Bliss' mother accused Hickman's brother of rape to protect the man that illegitimately impreg-

³⁸ *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, An American Slave*. p. 84.

³⁹ *Invisible Man*. p.572

⁴⁰ *Juneteenth*. p.23. Also, as quoted in "Invisible Man and Juneteenth: *Ralph Ellison's Literary Pursuit of Racial Justice*." p. 100.

nated her, the price of the accusation was a brutal flogging that ended in his brother's death. Hickman was there throughout the entire process of his brother's accusation and murder. On the night of Bliss' birth, his desperate mother came to Hickman's house to have the child. Hickman, consumed by anger, hatred and revenge, began by demanding an explanation of the damnation that she had brought to his brother and him. She explained that she had lied but desperately needed help. He asked,

So now you come to me. Out of all the rest you come to me... So now here you come to me after all that to demand that I get you aid to perpetuate all that you have done without even thinking. So I'm to stand here on the spot and switch over from the animal you consider me to be to the human you've decided I could never be, so that I can be understanding and forgiving—Woman, do you think I'm Jesus Christ?⁴¹

She was demanding of him something that in his own despair he did not consider himself capable of, yet he began to act out of instinct.⁴² Considering her own shame and his bitter state, she gave him the baby to raise in the Black community. Hickman named him Bliss. With the responsibility of raising a child on his shoulders, Hickman learned how to pray. He turned to the only thing that he knew how to do to make a living, which was playing music. He played his way to the pulpit where he became known as God's trombone, a nickname that reveals a lot about his new nature. It reveals his willingness to be used by God to spread his message to others. However, in carrying

forth God's message, his life would be a beautiful tragic-sounding melody that is not prewritten, but that is created anew each time the jazz musician begins to play.

There is one man, one American, of whom all the characters, IM, his grandfather, Tarp and Hickman might agree found the balance between yes and no. In one of the most powerful scenes of the second novel, Hickman leads a group of his congregation to the Lincoln Memorial. There, the group of aged southern black Christians stands in awe of the statue of the man before them. Certainly Reverend Hickman believes that Abraham Lincoln, "one of the few that ever earned the right to be called 'father,'"⁴³ mastered what IM and his grandfather spent their days trying to figure out. One of the lay women awestruck by the statue asked Hickman, "Ain't that him, Revern'? Ain't that Father Abraham?"⁴⁴ Father Abraham most obviously refers to Lincoln as a founding father especially with the reference to George Washington that immediately follows. However, Ellison is making the Biblical reference here when talking of Father Abraham, the father of all nations. In this Biblical sense, nations can also mean groups of people or races which would include black men. How then is the Reverend referring to Lincoln as Father Abraham? Is it that just maybe, in taking the steps to free the slaves, he is taking the steps to completing the experiment started in the founding, thus affirming the hope for the whole world? Frederick Douglass argues, "[White men] are the children of Abraham Lincoln. We are at best only his step-children; children by adoption, children by forces of circumstances and necessity."⁴⁵ Answering her question, Hickman passion-

⁴¹ *Juneteenth*. p.299.

⁴² *Juneteenth*. p.299.

⁴³ *Juneteenth*. p.281.

⁴⁴ *Juneteenth*. p.281.

⁴⁵ Douglass, Frederick. "Oration in memory of Abraham Lincoln."

ately affirms through a series of yes statements Lincoln as a man and individual American. “Yes, with all I know about him and his contradictions, yes. And with all I know about men and the world, yes. And with all I know about white men and politicians of all colors and guises and intentions, yes. And with all I know about the things you had to do to be you and stay yourself – yes!”⁴⁶ Somehow in knowing when to say “yes” and “no,” Lincoln was able to be himself, especially as an American. He was able to maintain what he believed and to act upon those beliefs to the best he could given the situation. One of the most fascinating aspects of Hickman’s affirmation of Lincoln is the first phrase that acknowledges Lincoln’s contradictions. Lincoln went beyond his own personal feelings on the issue of black men and their equality to the truth of the principles of the Declaration. Once he acknowledged those truths, he had no other choice but to act accordingly. Hickman makes some strong personal conclusions about the nature of man when he first sees the statue, “man at his best, when he’s set in all the muck and confusion of life and continues to struggle for his ideals, is near sublime.”⁴⁷ A contradictory environment such as the America of Lincoln brings out the best in a person but only when he is continuing “to struggle for his ideals.” A man becomes a man when he is first forced to decide what his ideals are and then second challenged to uphold those ideals when the truth behind them seems the most ambiguous and unclear. An American man has the ideals set before him on a clear sheet of paper, so the first part is already done, but he will not be an American until he completes the second part. Hickman references George Washington saying that he did not free the slaves “though he had the

chance.”⁴⁸ In contrast, Hickman discusses “[Lincoln] is one of us, not only because he freed us to the extent that he could, but because he freed himself of that awful inherited pride they deny to us, and in doing so he became a man and he pointed the way for all of us who would be free.”⁴⁹ Douglass agrees with Hickman that Lincoln is like black men to a degree. First of all, Lincoln is a self-made man, “a man of work. A son of toil himself, he was linked in brotherly sympathy with the sons of toil in every loyal part of the Republic.”⁵⁰ Because Lincoln was a hard-working backwoodsman, he could relate to the slaves in their toil and in their desire to own their labor. Douglass also argues that Lincoln “knew the American people better than they knew themselves,”⁵¹ which is the very same argument that Ellison makes in regard to black men. Lincoln knew the people to the extent that he understood humanity and the power of the truth in the lives of men. Douglass says that Lincoln trusted himself and the people.⁵² Ellison’s argument about blacks was that blacks saw the hidden lives of whites that whites chose not to show publicly. Lincoln’s life “was a mystery to know man... The image of the man went out with his words.”⁵³ Lincoln did not have a secret life like most white men of his time. His drive was the love of truth. His words always revealed that. His life also affirmed what he said and believed. It was pride in the truths that kept most men saying one thing and doing another. They were prideful of what they had declared in the Declaration, throughout the Revolution and in the Constitution. They were proud of the “truths” they had declared. They were so

⁴⁶ *Juneteenth*. p.281.

⁴⁷ *Juneteenth*. p.280.

⁴⁸ *Juneteenth*. p. 281.

⁴⁹ *Juneteenth*. p. 280.

⁵⁰ “Oration in Memory of Abraham Lincoln.”

⁵¹ “Oration in Memory of Abraham Lincoln.”

⁵² “Oration in Memory of Abraham Lincoln.”

⁵³ “Oration in Memory of Abraham Lincoln.”

prideful that it kept them running. Hickman says “for hope or an idea to become real it has to be embodied in a man, and men change and have wills and wear masks.” Continuing, he argues that knowing the truth “will mean recognizing that they slipped up in places that they’d rather die than be caught slipping.”⁵⁴ They could never settle because of the problem of slavery and after emancipation, the problem of equality. This “inherited pride” was passed down from generation to generation. The reason that it was awful was it kept men from actually enacting the truths of the documents. It is what kept their private and public lives separate. However, that was not hidden to the blacks because of the positions they held, and it was not hidden from Lincoln. “His moral training was against his saying one thing when he meant another.”⁵⁵ He always did what he said. He was always honest which revealed his contradictions. Lincoln “freed himself” just as Ellison believes that black men need to do. He freed himself by affirming the truths and then acting them out to the extent that he could. He had two responsibilities: the first, save the Union; and the second, to free the slaves. Had he freed the slaves as soon as he arrived in office, the Union would have fallen apart, and the slaves remained in bondage under the new Confederate States. He committed himself to stopping the extension of slavery. He affirmed the principles and enacted them to the extent that he could. He said “yes” in compromises with the slave-loving south that allowed slavery to continue, but in doing so, he knew that eventually his compromising yeses would lead to the destruction of the institution of slavery. He also said “yes” to the truth and understood the destructive power of the truth in the face of contra-

dictory action. He yes-ed slavery to death and destruction.

Both of the novels sufficiently reveal the effect that the gap between principles and practices can have on individuals. The conclusion that both novels seem to arrive at is that each individual is forced to affirm or reject the principles and in doing so, they are empowered as individuals to participate in the government. They are equal in their power to decide if the principles are true or not true. However, the power that they are given in a democratic society as an individual is immediately taken away by the good of the whole. By being born into the society, they become individual sovereigns but then have to deal with the contradiction of being forced to immediately sacrifice that sovereignty. Therefore, as individuals they are forced to affirm or reject their own identity and the principles upon which the nation is founded.

Through the examination of the individual characters in Ellison’s novels, there are three types of trends that result from the empowerment of the individual. The first two are very similar yet remain at opposite ends of the spectrum. On the far left, there is the individual like Bledsoe and Sunraider. They affirm their own individuality, but then separate themselves from society and the community, rejecting anyone who helped support them on their rise to power and destroying anyone who might threaten that power. They live in a type of isolation, but one that says they are better than the other individuals because they have worked very hard to get where they are. This type of individualism is a self-righteous individualism. On the other end of the spectrum, there is another type of isolated individual, but one that is so beaten by society that he finds it hopeless and, therefore, excludes himself from it. This second type of individual is found in the characters of IM and Reverend Hickman in

⁵⁴ *Juneteenth*. p. 284.

⁵⁵ “Oration in Memory of Abraham Lincoln.”

his desperation at the end of the novel, which turns out to be the very beginning of the story. In this case, the individual is left with nothing but himself, but it is an uneasy isolation. He cannot stay in his isolated state for long. The final type of individual that Ellison suggests in his novels is the individual that is empowered by affirming the principles and exists in the society where it is. He is the one that realizes that the society is not perfect, that the principles and practices of the society do not add up, but realizes that as a member of society, he has a role to play in it. Of the characters discussed, this would be IM's grandfather, Brother Tarp, Mary and Reverend Hickman at the beginning of the novel. Obviously, for Ellison, the ideal individual falls into this middle category and even though each individual must discover this on his own, there are a few principles that force the isolated individual into back into society.

When IM freed himself by escaping society, he found that he was alone with his mind. In an individualistic society, man is forced to discover for himself who he is. In such a contradictory society that IM is living in, this task seems almost impossible. One's identity seems to be lost in the lies and manipulations of society as a whole. Hibernation seems to be the only way to discover one's identity. In his hibernation, IM finds that he cannot escape from the workings and re-workings of the mind. "In going underground, I whipped it all except the mind, the *mind*. And the mind that has conceived a plan of living must never lose sight of the chaos against which that pattern was conceived."⁵⁶ The mind is the most fundamental form of the individual and the only form that cannot be taken from a man. It is the mind that draws IM toward self-reflection. He narrates the entire novel from his hole in the ground where he is alone.

However, he is there with his mind. He has been in isolation for quite sometime now and, in the prologue, the reader experiences his first thoughts about life. IM is just sharing. His thoughts seem as unorganized and static as the society from which he is isolated. In the body of the novel, he retells his story and the encounters with other individuals in the "free society" that he lives in. He learns how to survive in the society but not how to participate in it as an individual. Finally, after retelling his events to the reader, he begins to think again, which results in his conclusions about the principles already discussed that are found in the epilogue.

Both of Ellison's novels have a very self-reflective element. The events that actually happen in the novel are not happening as the reader is reading. Instead, both novels are a retelling of past events. The reader relives the events as the changed individual tells them. The person who tells the events and the person enacting the events are two very different people. The purpose of a narration of life's experiences is so that it is useful to the individual hearer or reader. The lessons learned are more effective than preaching because they are told in a very individualistic manner. Life is a combination of experiences and reflection. Experiences, either lived vicariously through books or lived in reality, are incomplete, but it is the mind that gives them meaning. IM is not content in the cave, because even though his mind is giving meaning to his experiences, he is no longer experiencing new things. Life is meant to be lived; therefore, hibernation is incomplete. The most fundamental form of the individual for IM is his mind that does not let him exist alone, but forces him to realize he must leave his isolated individualism.

The one other time in the novel when IM is isolated from others is when he is staying at Mary's house. He does not leave

⁵⁶ *Invisible Man*. p. 580.

the house and barely leaves his room, but he just spends all his time reading. Reading helped empower him as an individual to recognize his humanity. Hickman encourages his congregation, “[God] is giving you brains and he wants you to train them lean and hard so that you can overcome all the obstacles. Educate your minds!”⁵⁷ The few slaves that could read the Declaration of Independence believed strongly in their freedom. Frederick Douglass taught himself to read during his boyhood as a slave. He found reading to be a curse more than a blessing. He writes, “the reading of these documents enabled me to utter my thoughts, and to meet the arguments brought forward to sustain slavery; but while they relieved me of one difficulty, they brought on another...The more I read, the more I was led to abhor and detest my enslavers.”⁵⁸ For Douglass, reading was both a blessing and a curse. It helped him to realize that his humanity and in doing so, caused him to despise his shackles. However, in the years after the Reconstruction, books not only had the power to reveal one’s humanity through thinking, but also gave an insight to the ways of the world that IM did not completely understand. On the bus ride to New York, IM finds himself in a conversation with Crenshaw, another vet from the Golden Day. He encourages IM to “play the game, but don’t believe in it... the game has been analyzed and put down in books. But down here they’ve forgotten to take care of the books and that’s your opportunity.”⁵⁹ Books explain the condition of man especially the black man. They break the color line so that one can examine the lives of great men and women. W.E.B. DuBois describes his moments with books as this, “I

sit with Shakespeare and he winces not. Across the color line I move arm and arm with Balzac and Dumas, where smiling men and welcoming women glide in gilded halls...I summon Aristotle and Aurelius and what soul I will, and they come all graciously with no scorn nor condescension.”⁶⁰ Books are a great equalizer of the mind. One could escape the boundaries of the world and be equal to the men and women about whom he was reading. Ellison in his own life found freedom in reading. He says, “Books which seldom, if ever, mentioned Negroes were to release me from whatever ‘segregated’ idea I might have had on my human possibilities.”⁶¹ Like the vet on the bus, Ellison says, “One reason I tell black kids to read novels is that we’ve been choked off from knowing how society operates.”⁶² He gives the same advice to children as the vet did to IM. Books, but novels especially, give insight to the ways of the world but if the society does not read them then they are losing very valuable knowledge.

At the end of the novel, IM reflects on his activities during his hibernations. He says, “Gin, jazz and dreams were not enough. Books were not enough.”⁶³ His thoughts had finally led him to the realization of his responsibility. Throughout each part of the book, he discusses a responsibility. In the opening chapter, when he quotes Washington, the social responsibility seems to be lacking for the meaning of the larger responsibility that drives IM from his hibernation. Social responsibility, as Washington meant, represented accepting one’s status and working the hardest one can in that position, be it low or high. However,

⁵⁷ *Juneteenth*. p. 129.

⁵⁸ Douglass, Frederick. *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, An American Slave*. New York: Viking Penguin, Inc, 1982. p. 84.

⁵⁹ *Invisible Man*. p. 154.

⁶⁰ DuBois, W.E.B., *Souls of Black Folk*. Chapter 6.

⁶¹ Ellison, Ralph. "The World and the Jug" in *The Collected Essays of Ralph Ellison*. p. 165.

⁶² Ellison, Ralph. "Indivisible Man" in *The Collected Essays of Ralph Ellison*. p. 385.

⁶³ *Invisible Man*. p. 580.

IM's audience that day when he accidentally replaced social responsibility for social equality was insulted because, to them, social responsibility meant that blacks would accept the fact that they are racially inferior and work hard in that low position never expecting things to change. IM defines his hibernation as "a covert preparation for a more overt action."⁶⁴ He knows that eventually he will have to leave the hole and actually *do* something. In his hibernation, IM's mind does not leave him alone, and he knows that his hibernation is a temporary period that will one day lead to action. Later he says, "Without the possibility of action, all knowledge comes to one labeled 'file and forget,' and I can neither file nor forget."⁶⁵ He has spent his time in hibernation reading and thinking, but if he cannot or does not act upon it, all his knowledge is wasted. His hibernation was necessary to compose him-self so that he can reenter society armed and ready for action. Others believe that his hibernation is irresponsible. One night IM beat a man within an inch of his life for insulting him. He says that the man did not see him there that the man was just sleepwalking and having a nightmare when an invisible man attacked him. He responds saying, "Responsibility rests upon recognition, and recognition is a form of agreement."⁶⁶ IM believes that there is a sort of social contract involved with responsibility. One is only responsible to his peers as long as they recognize him. If his peers refuse to recognize him as a member of society and a human being, then he has no responsibility. However, by the end of the prologue, IM changes his perspective on that. He says, "All dreamers and sleepwalkers must pay the price, and even the invisible victim is responsible for the fate of all. But I shirked

that responsibility."⁶⁷ IM believes that in this free democratic society, each individual has a responsibility to the fate of all. He admits that he denies that responsibility, but would also believe that the man who insulted him, the sleepwalker, shirked the responsibility also. In the epilogue, IM finally wraps his fingers around the truth of that responsibility and that is what finally forces him out of hibernation. IM is defining what he thinks his grandfather meant on his death bed and one of the questions he asks himself is this, "did he mean that we had to take responsibility for all of it, for the men as well as the principle, because we were the heirs who must use the principles because no other fitted our needs?"⁶⁸ IM believed that black men had a responsibility to the principles. He concludes, "I've overstayed my hibernation, since there's a possibility that even an invisible man has a socially responsible role to play."⁶⁹ It was the presence of the blacks in America that forced Americans not only to acknowledge the truth of their principles but also to put those principles into practice. To prevent the destruction of the principles in the hands of greedy men, his grandfather saw the need to affirm them. IM concludes, "Agree 'em to death and destruction,' grandfather had advised. Hell, weren't they their own death and their own destruction except as the principle lived in them and in us?"⁷⁰ All Americans, not just black men, need to affirm the principles that founded this nation. They need to proclaim the truths as certain as Thomas Jefferson did when he wrote them. If they continue to abuse and destroy them, it proves that men are incapable of ruling themselves. The truth and the principles are greater than the men. Americans must say "yes," as IM's grand-

⁶⁴ *Invisible Man*. p. 13.

⁶⁵ *Invisible Man*. p. 579.

⁶⁶ *Invisible Man*. p. 14.

⁶⁷ *Invisible Man*. p. 14.

⁶⁸ *Invisible Man*. p. 574.

⁶⁹ *Invisible Man*. p.581.

⁷⁰ *Invisible Man*. p.574.

father did, to all that is true with the hope that it will overcome all that is evil.

During his hibernation after the death of his brother, Hickman found the Christian virtues that his parents had instilled in him to be the most fundamental form of his individuality. In being reduced to an animal-like state where he acted from instinct, he found there within him the Cardinal virtues: faith, hope, and charity.⁷¹ Affirming the principles of a nation that would allow the great injustices that happened to Hickman and his family requires three things. First, it requires hope, which means to wish for something with expectation of its fulfillment.⁷² Hope is what it means to say “yes,” because there is an element of expectation that what you are affirming will eventually come to be. It is not just a wish, merely a human desire for different circumstances without the demand for real change. The Christian hope is an expectation of a future good and although it is difficult to attain, seemingly impossible, can be attained with God’s guidance. Faith is being sure of what we hope for and certain of what we do not see.⁷³ If hope is needed in order to affirm because it is the expectation of a future good, faith is needed to continue in that affirmation because it sustains it even if the circumstances lead one to believe otherwise. Finally, charity is putting what one believes into action. Charity reduces the gap between principles and practices. James says, “Just as the body without the spirit is dead, so faith without deeds is dead.”⁷⁴ When a person affirms something as true, it not only changes their thinking but also their actions. That is why IM could not stay in hibernation but was

driven out because once he decided what he believed, he needed to start living accordingly. However, the problem that arose for IM was that no matter how much he believed and tried to live accordingly, society would not allow him to fully live out his principles.

The problem for IM is not only recognizing his responsibility to leave his hole and reenter society, but it also has to deal a lot with the Christian notion of forgiveness. In the epilogue, IM feels that he has failed at making sense of his experiences and failed at trying to explain his thoughts about his hibernation.

I condemn and affirm, say no and yes, say yes and say no. I denounce because though implicated and partially responsible, I have been hurt to the point of abysmal pain, hurt to the point of invisibility. And I defend because in spite of all I find that I love. In order to get some of it down I *have* to love. I sell you no phony forgiveness, I’m a desperate man—but too much of your life will be lost, its meaning lost, unless you approach it as much through love as through hate. So I approach it through division.⁷⁵

The nature of a democratic society is sacrifice. When a vote is cast and won by the majority, the minority always is sacrificing their interests for those of the majority. In IM’s case, which is the case for most black men of the day, he was forced to make the sacrifice. Near the end of the novel, Brother Hambro approaches IM to discuss with him his choice to leave the Brotherhood and his final conversation with Jack, where Jack declared that discipline is sacrifice. Here IM exclaimed, “Everywhere

⁷¹ *Juneteenth*. p.299.

⁷² *The American Heritage Dictionary*, 4 ed. Hamilton Mifflin Company, 2000. as found at www.dictionary.com.

⁷³ Hebrews 11:1. NIV.

⁷⁴ James 2:26. NIV.

⁷⁵ *Invisible Man*. p. 579-80.

I've turned somebody has wanted to sacrifice me for my good—only *they* were the ones who benefited.”⁷⁶ Sacrifice in a democracy needs to be made voluntarily, and then it needs to be acknowledged and reciprocated.⁷⁷ When the minority is constantly forced to sacrifice for the sake of the majority without acknowledgment and reciprocity, then it leads to feelings of distrust and resentment, which is exactly what happened to both IM and Reverend Hickman which led to their hibernations.

Interaction between citizens is necessary for a democratic society to remain a free society instead of a majority tyranny. However, the definition of a majority tyranny is when the majority forces the minority to constantly sacrifice for the good of the majority. In the epilogue, IM concludes, “It’s ‘winner take nothing’ that is the great truth of our country or of any country. Life is to be lived, not controlled; and humanity is won by continuing to play in the face of certain defeat. Our fate is to become one, and yet many.”⁷⁸ The sacrifices that individual citizens are asked to make for the majority should not just favor the majority but also favor the minority as well. America is a nation of individuals who are forced to apply their principles to their own lives, but not so that it leads to the Bledsoes on one extreme or hibernating IMs on the other, but so that it leads to the eventual application of the principles to all citizens. America is a nation of many individuals who must work together for a common goal. Ellison argues, “The way home we seek is that condition of man’s being at home in the world, which is called love, and which we term democracy.”⁷⁹ Democracy is a society of individ-

uals who are bound together by brotherly love. Brotherly love is what makes individuals realize that all men are created equal. It is what makes one realize that he cannot demand that his brother, his equal, his fellow citizen, constantly sacrifice for one’s own good. Biblically, after killing his brother, Cain shouted to the Lord, “Am I my brother’s keeper!?”⁸⁰ Cain is his own keeper in so far as he is an individual but his brother’s keeper in so far as the two share the same world and need to co-exist in that world. One time, Ellison responded to a question that a white professor asked him with an embarrassing truth. Upon reflecting back on the situation, Ellison said, “I wanted him to understand that individuality is still operative beyond the racial structuring of American society... Friendship and shared interests make the difference.”⁸¹ In friendship, there needs to be an element of trust that develops when each one is constantly considering the interests of the other. That is how American democracy is supposed to function. The winner, the majority, should be just as concerned with the interests of the minority as their own. However, in the America of IM and Reverend Hickman, the blacks bore the burdens of the nation’s sacrifices leading to bitterness, resentment, distrust and exclusion.

Ralph Ellison admired America’s first writers such as Faulkner and Twain because they “took responsibility for the condition of democracy and, indeed, their works were imaginative projections of the conflicts within the human heart which arose when the sacred principles of the Constitution and the Bill of Rights clashed with the practical exigencies of human greed and fear, hate and love.”⁸² Since this nation’s

⁷⁶ *Invisible Man*. p. 505.

⁷⁷ Allen, Danielle. *Talking to Strangers*. Chicago, IL: The University of Chicago Press, 2004.

⁷⁸ *Invisible Man*. p. 577.

⁷⁹ Ellison, Ralph. "A Completion of Personality" in *The Collected Essays of Ralph Ellison*. p. 799.

⁸⁰ Genesis 4:9. NIV.

⁸¹ Ellison, Ralph. "Brave Words for a Startling Occasion" in *The Collected Essays of Ralph Ellison*. p. 154.

⁸² *Brave Words for a Startling Occasion*. p. 153.

founding, Americans have been forced to improvise in applying the nation's principles to the world in which they have found themselves. Ellison believed it was the responsibility of the American novelist to accurately depict the effect of the gap on individuals. Like each character in Ellison's novels, individual Americans are forced to affirm the principles of the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution. As Ellison projects, there are three types of reactions to individualism that this empowering decision in the light of the unpracticed principles: the dominating individual, the hibernating individual and the participating individual. In American democracy, individuals have to participate in the society, but how does one forgive his fellow citizens for the sacrifices demanded of him? It is found when he frees himself in his mind. Then he must accept his responsibility to his fellow citizens and the principles with the help of the cardinal virtues of faith, hope, charity and love, but the greatest of these is love. Love for one's fellow citizens is this nation's redeeming necessity to rebuild trust within the broken and divided citizenry. The answer is bliss, not the bliss of ignorance even though it results through an improvisation of an unknown future, but the bliss that accompanies the freeing of oneself from the hatred of the past. And so in a newness of mind, spirit and soul, each individual citizen must declare "yes" to the principles and emerge from his dark past to greet his brothers in love.