

Genre, Blues, and (Mis) Education in Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man*

EDUCATION DU GENRE DES BLEUS DANS L'HOMME INVISIBLE DE RALPH ELLISON

Shadi Neimneh^{1*}; Fatima Muhaidat¹; Kifah Al-Omari¹; Nazmi Al-Shalabi¹

¹ Literary and Cultural Studies, Department of English, The Hashemite University, Zarqa, Jordan.

*Corresponding author.

Received 31 January 2012; accepted 1 April 2012.

Abstract

Despite the abundance of the critical analysis Ellison's classic novel *Invisible Man* (1952) has received, critics, it seems to me, have often ignored the intersections between its genre(s) and thematic concerns. The present study is an attempt to fill this gap. In particular, I focus on the interrelationships between the novel's genre as a Bildungsroman and its critique of "Negro" education. My assumption is that the novel's genre as a novel of education gives way to a critique of "Negro" education. The life experiences and the blues that are supposed to educate the narrator according to the genre of the novel are constantly juxtaposed against the academic/professional education the narrator receives in high school and in a "Negro" segregated college. The overall achievement of Ellison is a critique of the accommodationist education of Southern blacks and their naïve faith in education as a means of achieving a better life for blacks or better race relations. If Ellison is not directly critical of "Negro" education, he is at least interrogating the efficacy of such an education. The picture of segregated "Negro" education Ellison draws is not a bright one. More positive is the representation of personal growth through internal change and black folk art, which counters the adverse forms of miseducation the novel's main character encounters.

Key words: Genre; Blues; Jazz; (Mis)Education; Ralph Ellison; *Invisible Man*; Bildungsroman; American literature; African-American literature

Résumé

Malgré l'abondance de l'analyse critique d'Ellison de son roman classique l'Homme Invisible (1952) a reçu, les critiques qui me semble souvent ignoré les intersections entre le genre (s) et les préoccupations thématiques. La présente étude est une tentative de combler cette lacune. En particulier, je me concentre sur les interrelations entre le genre du roman comme un Bildungsroman et sa critique de «nègre» de l'éducation. Mon hypothèse est que le genre du roman comme un roman de l'éducation laisse place à une critique de «nègre» de l'éducation. Les expériences de la vie et les bleus qui sont censés éduquer le narrateur en fonction du genre du roman sont constamment juxtaposées à l'enseignement scolaire / professionnelle, le narrateur reçoit à l'école secondaire et dans un «nègre» un collège distinct. La réalisation de l'ensemble Ellison est une critique de l'éducation accommodationniste des Noirs du Sud et de leur foi naïve dans l'éducation comme un moyen de parvenir à une vie meilleure pour les noirs ou les relations interraciales de meilleurs. Si Ellison n'est pas directement critique de "nègre" l'éducation, il est au moins interroger l'efficacité d'une telle éducation. L'image de la ségrégation "nègre" l'éducation Ellison tire n'est pas brillant. Plus positive est la représentation de la croissance personnelle à travers le changement interne et l'art populaire noire, qui neutralise les formes négatives de mauvaise éducation du roman rencontres personnage principal.

Mots clés: Genre; Blues, Jazz, (Mis) l'éducation; Ralph Ellison; Homme invisible; Bildungsroman; La littérature américaine; Littérature afro-américaine

Shadi Neimneh, Fatima Muhaidat, Kifah Al-Omari, Nazmi Al-Shalabi (2012). Genre, Blues, and (Mis) Education in Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man*. *Cross-Cultural Communication*, 8(2), 61-72. Available from URL: <http://www.cscanada.net/index.php/ccc/article/view/j.ccc.1923670020120802.1040>
DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.3968/j.ccc.1923670020120802.1040>

I. GENRE ISSUES AND THE EXISTENTIAL BILDUNGSROMAN

Insofar as the question of genre is concerned, *Invisible Man* can be seen as a Bildungsroman, a story of the personal growth and development of Invisible Man¹. The novel focuses on the life of IM as a young man and his experiences from adulthood through maturity. The narrator is older now as he reflects on his life story backwards. However, the novel appropriates different genres and techniques. It employs elements of the picaresque novel in the form of loose adventures the narrator encounters in his journey from the South to the North. Things happen to the narrator on the road, and sometimes in an unexpected manner. IM tries hard to secure his lodging and sustenance once he is stranded in New York in the manner of a picaresque. In the same line of thought, R. W. B. Lewis argues that the novel portrays “the adventures likely to befall a centerless individual en route through the flow and conflict of illusions toward some still undisclosed center” (Blount, 1989, p.675). In addition, elements of the psychological novel in the form of flashbacks, dreams, hallucinations, and stream of consciousness narration are also there. More importantly, the novel can be studied as an existential one, for it deals directly with questions of individual existence, identity formation, and the meaning of life for a black man confronted with racism and cultural stereotypes. In a paramount existential scene in a factory hospital, IM twice asks himself: “Who am I?” (p.240, p.242). I develop the existential relevance of the Bildungsroman later on in this section.

The novel also partakes in the Künstlerroman as an artist's novel, a sub-genre of the Bildungsroman. The Künstlerroman is a novel about an artist's growth to maturity; it often depicts the tension between a sensitive youth and the values of a worldly society. IM conforms to the Joycean prototype of the artist figure in *Portrait of the Artist As a Young Man* (1916). Like Stephen Dedalus in Joyce's novel, IM is young and ambitious. IM as a sensitive young scholar faced with a corrupt, uncaring society is in many ways an artist, a young rhetorician in particular. He aspires to be a leader and is endowed with oratory and storytelling skills. As Blount (1989) puts it, “[i]n writing down his autobiography, the invisible man is himself an artist, one who orders the events of his experience as a coherent whole, subverting his enemies through irony and parody” (p.685-6). Blount argues that IM's “newfound authority as a storyteller” frees him from “his present dilemma by reliving his past, giving it new form” (p. 686). As a modern artist, IM orders his past experiences

and attempts to impose some order on the chaos and flux of modern life in the process of storytelling.

The general effect of this mixing of genres is that of a musical medley with different sounds and voices, which justifiably makes the novel a product of a musician-turned-writer like Ellison. Ellison consciously places *Invisible Man* within a modernist tradition, and his epigraphs from Herman Melville and T.S. Eliot are the first indications of this. The novel is a rich hunting ground for literary allusions and intertexts. The novel's title is also significant. The namelessness of the narrator universalizes him and generalizes his experience. He becomes the allegorical “Everyman” in modern times. In this light, the novel is an allegory of the lives of black people under unjust socioeconomic conditions. Aside from this discussion of some genre echoes and elements, I want to particularly examine the novel as an existential and musical Bildungsroman since existential themes and jazz structures, rather than IM's college (mis)education², are often used to educate the mature IM about life.

The novel, as many critics agree, recounts a journey from “innocence to self-awareness” and allows us to see a relatively wiser man (Steele, 1976, p.159). Moreover, the young protagonist is a nameless man seeking an identity and recognition in a hostile world and constantly questioning his existence. IM arrives at the realization that he himself is the source of meaning and morality in an existential life. Instead of looking for these outwards, he learns to turn inwards to find them. IM says:

I was naïve. I was looking for myself and asking everyone except myself questions which I, and only I, could answer. It took me a long time and much painful boomeranging of my expectations to achieve a realization everyone else appears to have been born with: That I am nobody but myself. But first I had to discover that I am an invisible man! (p.15)

Trueblood similarly learns the important existential lesson conveyed by the blues that the solution is to be found in the self, not in others. IM achieves this realization as part of genre expectations in an existential Bildungsroman and in contradistinction to the education he received in his “Negro” college. At the end, and as he writes down his story, he seems to get the blues lesson; he comes to reiterate what others have been trying to tell him all the time:

I carried my sickness and though for a long time I tried to place it in the outside world, the attempt to write it down shows me that at least half of it lay within me. It came upon me slowly, like that strange disease that affects those black men whom you see turning slowly from black to albino, their pigment disappearing as under the radiation of some cruel, invisible ray. (p.575)

¹ Hereafter abbreviated as *IM*. Alternatively, the unitalicized IM refers to “the narrator.”

² I use the term “miseducation” in the way it was first used by the black educator and historian Carter Woodson (1933) in his book *The Miseducation of the Negro*. Woodson uses the term in a generalized sense to refer to the failures of “Negro” education, especially the Eurocentric education blacks receive in white-dominated institutions. In its broad sense, miseducation refers to any negative form of education one might receive, even unwittingly. In this sense, education and miseducation can be synonymous.

The prologue of the novel highlights invisibility—as an existential condition—and psychological mirroring. The novel begins with IM's assertion that he is invisible and that others, when looking at him, see his "surroundings, themselves... everything and anything except [him]" (p.3). Right from the start, IM establishes the refusal of others to see him. The novel begins this way:

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. Like the bodiless heads you see sometimes in circus sideshows, it is as though I have been surrounded by mirrors of hard, distorting glass. When they approach me they see only my surrounding, themselves, or figments of their imagination—indeed, everything and anything except me. (p.3)

IM fails to exact recognition of his existence from others. However, he is aware of his invisibility now. He says: "You ache with the need to convince yourself that you do exist in the real world, that you're a part of all the sound and anguish, and you strike out with your fists, you curse and you swear to make them recognize you. And, alas, it's seldom successful" (p.4). According to W. Hegel's *The Phenomenology of Spirit* (1807), mutual recognition and interdependence (reciprocity) are necessary for the existence of the master and the slave. The existence of each is "recognized"/realized with relation to the other. When the other is objectified/denied recognition, it becomes "invisible." Self-consciousness, which exists for itself and in itself, refuses to "see" what is merely consciousness. Hence, IM significantly says that he is invisible because people refuse to see him (p.3). The Hegelian master-slave dialectic makes risking one's life necessary for a change of power relations. In this regard, invisibility is a metaphor for IM's unwillingness to take a step towards his freedom from his "enslavers." To emerge from invisibility, IM has to make a decision first and be ready to assume responsibility for such a decision, no matter how serious the consequences are. At the end of the novel, IM acts on an existential principle he has learned and decides to emerge from his cellar to assume an authentic life.

In placing much value and meaning on what people think of him, rather than what he thinks of himself, IM is yielding to objectification; and feelings of insignificance result in symbolic "invisibility." In the absence of a struggle for recognition, granted in social life, one can become invisible or simply an object. Living alone in an underground hole means that the narrator is alienated and dehumanized. Like the existential characters of Kafka and Camus, he lives in an oppressive, indifferent society. He learns now that one defines life and gives it meaning/essence in existentialism, in first existing and then asserting one's values. Thus, the Nietzschean existential "overman" is one who creates morality and gives

meaning to experience. Besides, falling into a manhole, as befalls IM, is a clear metaphor for the existential abyss. Underground existence heightens one's awareness of bodily existence and processes. More time is also given to introspection and attempts at finding meaning in life.

Seen from an existential perspective, the sequence of the novel's events is absurd. Absurdity and meaninglessness are basic existential tenets. The events are absurd in that the narrator has no control over the unfolding story. They seem surreal sometimes as when the narrator suddenly falls into a manhole or when Ras appears on a big black horse and in Abyssinian chieftain dress; Ras carries a shield and wears a fur cap and a cape made of animal skin in the manner of a medieval knight, just as more of a man in a dream than in reality (p.556). The Harlem riot scene at the end of the book captures dream logic with laughter, sirens, gunshots, running looters, and people burning their apartment building, all making it an absurd night. The haunting presence of IM's dead grandfather, along with his eerie laughter, is also surreal. Ellison's employment of surreal or absurd elements in the plot enhances the existential import of the novel.

Frantz Fanon (1967), in *Black Skin, White Masks*, presents racism and racial stereotypes, the most obvious theme in *Invisible Man*, in existential terms. The internalization of white racism makes blackness a lived reality. Racial stereotypes fix the black man as the negation of the white man. The racialized gaze "works to define and objectify another human being not as a fellow subject worthy of equal recognition but rather as a racial other and socially subordinate object" (Anderson, 2005, p.284). Fanon contends that "[l]ayer upon layer of stereotypes linked to phenotypical and raciological assumptions rendered the Negro invisible not only to the racist other but to the self" (Anderson, 2005, p.284). Moreover, Fanon argues that white racism makes the black man don a white mask, i.e. racism directly hampers with the lived existence of a black man as blackness is something constantly felt on the face. Apparently, racial inferiority as a trope for invisibility in *IM* is rendered in existential terms. IM constantly feels that there is something lacking in his black identity, and consequently resorts to others like Mr. Norton and Emerson to experience wholeness. In the light of the existential richness of the text, *Invisible Man* is not only a Bildungsroman concerned with the education of the hero but—importantly—an existential Bildungsroman that teaches IM a lesson about his individual existence as a black man living in a harsh universe.

II. JAZZ/BLUES STRUCTURES: INVISIBLE MAN BETWEEN EXISTENTIALISM AND EDUCATION

Having looked at the existential themes and motifs of

Invisible Man, we need now to consider the existential import the blues and spirituals, as employed in the novel, have and how they serve as a more proper form of education for IM. The blues and spirituals are utilized in the text in line with the existential genre of the novel. According to existential tenets, existence precedes essence. In this light, IM's underground life forces him to redefine himself and give meaning to his life rather than wait for others to direct him. Once he is faced with his real existence in his underground cellar, he contemplates an essence for his life. He starts to believe in action and freedom. He acts on an existential blues principle and defines hibernation as "a covert preparation for a more overt action" (p.13). As Steele (1976) puts it, "[t]he blues act on the world in an existential manner by positing the inner freedom necessary for remodeling and reshaping meaning" (p.162). The blues IM listens to in his underground cellar give him some freedom of choice and compel him to search for his lost identity. In the words of Porter (2001), "[i]nvisibility, as the narrator defines it, is tied to the search for identity. Invisible Man is like a young jazzman trying to come into his own" (p.77). There is always in the blues a margin for possibility, self-control, self-discovery, and freedom of choice against sadness and circumstances. The blues for Ellison, it is noteworthy, are a means of "existential endurance as well as tragicomic wisdom" (O'Meally, 2001, p.101). This is their "pedagogical" impact on the narrator in the prologue.

The novel functions as a literary counterpart for the blues in its evocation of the harsh realities of black life. As Ellison was trained as a musician, he uses language here to a musical effect. For example, Trueblood's confession is given as a jazz solo performance (p.51-68). Brockway also tells an improvised story in the vernacular. Characters take turns in these solo performances using black idioms representative of the harsh experiences of the blacks. There are also many references to musical instruments, dances, and songs. Ellison employs a musical language, and music is always in the background. For example, drums, carols, chirping, and trombones color the narrator's description of his campus. IM, driving Mr. Norton, observes that "[w]aves of heat danced above the engine hood. The tires sang above the highway" (p.41). Ellison's other jazz techniques include improvisation and sad songs. The narrator moves from the South to the North and experiences many unexpected turns; Trueblood gives his story within IM's story as a solo to the listening narrator and trustee; and the prologue integrates Armstrong's "What did I do to be so black and blue?" at thematic and structural levels. Armstrong's song haunts the narrator. He hears not only the musical words, but also the music's underlying message of suffering. The song takes him to an underground realm and makes him contemplate the meaning of freedom, slavery, self-expression, and love. He emerges from this reverie to hear

Armstrong still asking "What did I do to be so black and blue?" IM does not fail to grasp the song's plea for action. He says: "At first I was afraid; this familiar music had demanded action, the kind of which I was incapable, and yet had I lingered there beneath the surface I might have attempted to act" (p.12). He asserts his desires and wants through the blues, for he remarks: "I'd like to hear five recordings of Louis Armstrong playing and singing 'What Did I Do to Be so Black and Blue'—all at the same time" (p.8). This music enables IM to make choices and fulfill desires. More importantly, it makes him relate to a voice. It presents his existential situation of loneliness, racism, and blackness as a lived reality and "demands" a course of action on his part. It also reminds the narrator of his Southern black roots.

The blues and spirituals sung by Peter Wheatsraw in the streets of Harlem and then an old black man during Clifton's funeral serve this same function of reminding IM about his black identity and teaching him basic principles about life. IM also identifies with Armstrong as a secret-sharer and states: "Perhaps I like Louis Armstrong because he's made poetry out of being invisible. I think it must be because he's unaware that he is invisible. And my own grasp of invisibility aids me to understand his music" (p.8). Armstrong serves to teach IM about invisibility and his "invisible poetry" can be likened to IM's invisible memoir. Armstrong stands for hope and success; he is an example of leadership and heroism to be followed by the narrator. This model of leadership contrasts with, and is far better than, that given to the narrator by an educator like Bledsoe. Ellison saw "the prototypical African-American artist and culture hero as a male jazz musician" (Anderson, 2005, p.282). Listening to music and smoking a reefer, the narrator contemplates freedom and race issues. Music gives him an aesthetic escape and a means of transcending temporal and spatial relations:

So under the spell of the reefer I discovered a new analytical way of listening to music. The unheard sounds came through, and each melodic line existed of itself, stood out clearly from all the rest, said its piece, and waited patiently for the other voices to speak. That night I found myself hearing not only in time, but in space as well. I not only entered the music but descended, like Dante, into its depths. (p.8-9)

Under the surface of the song, IM hears a wide range of sounds and voices. The descent to the depth of the music makes him hear an old woman singing a spiritual of love, hate, and murder. The woman teaches him about the love of freedom. The spiritual is painfully sad; it is "as full of Weltschmerz as flamenco" (p.9). In this descent, IM also sees a black woman standing naked before slaveowners (p.9). He sees through the blues the history of his people, their suffering, and their resilience. Jim Trueblood is a good case in point here. He is a blues singer and a storyteller. As a member of a country quartet, he used to sing to the white guests who visited the school some spirituals. IM says they were embarrassed at the

way Trueblood led the quartet and at his bad singing skills (p.47). However, Trueblood finds in singing the blues something else. He tells Norton and IM about the outcome of his incest or deal:

Finally, one night, way early in the mornin', I looks up and sees the stars and I starts singin'. I don't mean to, I don't think 'bout it, just start singin'. I don't know what it was, some kinda church song, I guess. All I know is I *ends up* singin' the blues. I sings me some blues that night ain't never been sang before, and while I'm singin' them blues I make up my mind that I ain't nobody but myself and ain't nothing' I can do but let whatever is gonna happen, happen. I made up my mind that I was goin' back home and face Kate; yeah, and face Matty Lou too. (p.66)

Trueblood tells, or sings, the story of how singing the blues sustained him and made him assume his responsibility for his family, take care of his land, and make amends for having committed incest with his daughter. As Steele (1976) succinctly puts it, "[t]he blues singer, like his religious counterpart, seeks to restore a sense of wholeness to his life and the lives of his listeners by singing of the experiences he has survived" (p.160). Steele also argues that "confession is the essential ingredient that allows for the tragic-comic interplay of the blues which makes it possible for them to function as a transcendent art form" (p.160). Trueblood and IM experience a transcendental, existential triumph over their tragic experiences. They both confess through their ceremonial storytelling, which renders them blues singers in a sense. Raymond Olderman emphasizes the instructive role of the blues and argues that IM

sings his own Blues in telling us his tale, and by singing the Blues he discovers the meaning of his own being and the nature of his reality; it is a tale that tells of the growth of perception. It is a tale which is in itself 'an assertion of the irrepressibly human over all circumstance.' (In Deitze, 1982, p.139)

Confession seems a step toward a solution. Trueblood's confession makes him able to face his family and work for their good. IM, on the other hand, confesses a story to distance himself from a traumatic past and exact a meaning from his story in the process. "By acting, through the writing of the novel and the stealing of electricity from Monopolated Power and Light, the narrator affirms his existence, whereas, earlier in the novel, the narrator performed duties that he was ordered to perform" (Brown, 1997, p.67). Steele (1976) articulates the blues structure of the novel eloquently and presents IM as the enlightened blues singer:

In the prologue, the invisible man tells us that he has seen much and that he has experienced a very fundamental realization (that he is invisible) which he will pass on to us in the course of the novel. This is the traditional stance of the blues singer. He is the central character of his own narrative, yet he stands back from it by establishing himself as the narrator and interpreter of events that have already occurred. His suffering has led him to certain insights which his narrative will lead us to as well. The narrative structure of *Invisible Man* duplicates this blues pattern precisely. (p.156-7)

According to Ellison, the jazz artist is expected to find a way "to reduce the chaos of living to form" (In Porter, 2001, p.83). IM, like Trueblood, becomes a "blues singer" who makes sense out of his confusing experiences and tries to communicate a message to the reader. In a similar fashion, Steele (1976) points out the educational impact of blues:

Like a blues singer he [IM] is going to tell the story for our benefit as well as his own. Instead of singing us a blues song he will write us a novel that will encompass the particular experiences that have caused his suffering. His underground room, like the stage for the blues singer, is the platform from which he will speak. It symbolizes the depth to which he has had to plummet in order to understand and sing about his pain. (p.156)

IM "universalizes his experience and draws us all in, like the blues singer who makes us feel his own pain" (Steele, p.159). Like the blues, the novel fulfills "its obligation to social responsibility for all who listen to its 'lower frequencies'" (Steele, p.159). The blues fulfill this social function through their effect on the audience. Music for Ellison is a way of life. It is an avenue for the unconscious. It is closely associated with "mood and memory" (*Jazz Writings*, p.13). Music also gives us "an orientation in time" (*Jazz Writings*, p.13). This is how IM and Trueblood react to and learn from the blues.

Ellison saw in the blues a philosophy of life, an ontology for coping with the human condition in its adversity or absurdity. Ellison stresses the existential meaning and social function of the blues in his essay on "Richard Wright's Blues," published in 1945. He says by way of defining the blues:

The blues is an impulse to keep the painful details and episodes of a brutal experience alive in one's aching consciousness, to finger its jagged grain, and to transcend it, not by the consolation of philosophy but by squeezing from it a near-tragic, near-comic lyricism. As a form, the blues is an autobiographical chronicle of personal catastrophe expressed lyrically. (*Jazz Writings*, p.103)

We find IM and Trueblood performing the blues principle of reliving painful experiences in the very act of narrating them and attempting to transcend them. The "attraction" of the blues, Ellison argues in the same article on Richard Wright, is that "they at once express both the agony of life and the possibility of conquering it through sheer toughness of spirit. They fall short of tragedy only in that they provide no solution, offer no scapegoat but the self" (*Jazz Writings*, p.118). Hence, it is no wonder that both Trueblood and IM come to their realizations about their existential conditions when they are alone, with one singing the blues away from his home and the other writing a book in an underground cellar. In other words, they are unconsciously indoctrinated through the blues, and they both return to themselves for solutions. Having established that the novel is a musical, existential Bildungsroman, let us examine now the ways in which the

novel conforms to its genre expectations by dealing with the education/miseducation of its protagonist.

III. INVISIBLE MAN AND (MIS)EDUCATION

As a Bildungsroman, and a Künstlerroman to some extent, *IM* is concerned with education at different levels. On one level, IM is to gain the life experience necessary for his maturity. As such, the novel celebrates the initiation rite of the passage from innocence to experience. On another level, the novel presents the problematic of "Negro" education, a necessary element in racial uplift. In a letter-turned-essay entitled "Ralph Ellison's Trueblooded Bildungsroman," Kenneth Burke (2004) discusses *Invisible Man* as a Bildungsroman in the tradition of a prototype like Goethe's *Wilhelm Meister*. Burke discusses the major pattern of a Bildungsroman of a character's "progressive education from 'apprenticeship' through 'journeymanhood' toward an ideal of 'mastery'" (p.67). Such a pattern, Burke argues, is based on IM's experiences in the South and then in the North. Burke argues that Ellison's 'apprentice' in the South was "docile and thus 'teachable'" (p.67). The education he received under Bledsoe was a "'teachable-docile' kind of education" by way of preparing young blacks for a dominant white culture (p.73). However, Ellison seems critical of this education as it is often conflated with miseducation. Therefore, Deitze (1982) is right to call the novel a "reversed Bildungsroman" as IM is subjected to bad, false education (p.168). His true education, Deitze argues, begins when he actually "un-learned what the Bledsoes, Nortons, and Jacks wanted him to learn" by shedding the false identities and notions he had acquired or imbibed (p.169). In other words, IM's education truly begins when he discovers the nature of his miseducation. The educators IM is supposed to learn from sometimes mislead and manipulate him, and thus act as miseducators. Classical arts education is rendered as miseducation while black folk culture and life experiences are offered as alternative forms of education. Discussing a thematic approach to *Invisible Man*, Rodnon rightly says that IM's disillusionment with formal education and exploitation is in itself a form of education:

Finally, the novel develops the thematic line of progressive disillusionment which is, perhaps, a form of education—or maturity. We have presented here the classic initiation into evil or, in another way, the education from innocence to awareness. Here, the betrayals by Bledsoe and, later, the Brotherhood are psychic insults to the narrator and ultimately force him to his cellar-haven to make a synthesizing review of his experiences. (p.112-3)

The white men before whom the narrator presents his graduation speech after the battle royal reward him for his humiliation with a scholarship to a Southern black college. Before IM is awarded this scholarship, he earnestly wants to deliver his commencement speech before the town's white leading men because he assumes that only these

men can judge his worth (p.25). The white men present at the smoker are educated people like "bankers, lawyers, judges, doctors, fire chiefs, teachers, merchants. Even one of the more fashionable pastors" (p.18). IM receives this scholarship from such "educated" people because of his "academic accomplishment and his accommodationist conduct as a race leader" (Leak, 2005, p.38). The M.C. says that IM "is the smartest boy we've got out there in Greenwood. I'm told that he knows more big words than a pocket-sized dictionary" (p.29). IM's educational achievement is his main asset. His education has been the justification of his whole existence. Addressing the white leaders of his town, IM makes humility the key of progress and betterment for blacks and quotes an educator like Booker T. Washington on humility, better race relations, and accommodation (p.17, 29-30). His faith in his education seems naïve and self-defeating here. He sacrifices education, and thus racial advancement, for the sake of individual empowerment and subservience to whites.

The town's leading men's bad example of reveling in sensual pleasures and apathy makes them miseducators to the narrator. They seem to push the narrator in the direction of miseducation in the form of blind obedience to authority figures and acceptance of constant humiliation. After the battle royal, the bloody IM swallows blood while delivering his speech on humility. The superintendent ironically says after the speech of IM:

'Gentlemen, you see that I did not overpraise this boy. He makes a good speech and some day he'll lead his people in the proper paths. And I don't have to tell you that that is important in these days and times. This is a good, smart boy, and so to encourage him in the right direction, in the name of the Board of Education I wish to present him a prize in the form of this . . . ' (p.32)

The narrator's high school education fails to make him adopt a critical stance in this scene. He still believes in the ideals of white civilization he learned in school. The scholarship the narrator gets is an indication that white people dominate education in terms of resources and decision making. They encourage his blind leadership because a miseducated man like him will help produce miseducated generations of blacks, who in turn, will accept the present power structures unquestioningly. Hence, IM's miseducated leadership is encouraged by the white leaders of the community as he will lead his people in the same direction of subservience through his miseducation. It is significant that the black boys fight blindfolded during the battle royal. These schoolmates are to be kept in the dark. They are to remain confused and fearful. The blindfolds go against the enlightening role of the education they received.

IM's grandfather appears as another authority figure and educator who in a dream, rather a nightmare that will haunt the narrator for years, appears to enlighten the narrator about the miseducation awaiting him. He asks

IM to read a document in his scholarship brief case which reads: "Keep This Nigger-Boy Running" (p.33). IM is now excited about his scholarship and the prospects of college education and does not fathom this dream. He will go to college and start aimlessly "running" in the wrong direction before he gets the meaning of his dream. In fact, the message he reads in the dream echoes the very message of the letters of recommendation he carries from Bledsoe: "I beg of you, sir, to help him continue in the direction of that promise which, like the horizon, recedes ever brightly and distantly beyond the hopeful traveler" (p.191). The naïve narrator at this stage cannot fathom the full meaning of such a statement. He misreads its message. The grandfather wants the narrator to think, question, and refuse subordination, to yes whites to death. However, the grandfather wants his sons to adopt the accommodationist strategy of racial docility, to lead a double life in a sense by repressing their real identities in the "war" with the white man. The dying man's advice to his son is:

'Son, after I'm gone I want you to keep up the good fight. I never told you, but our life is a war and I have been a traitor all my born days, 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. I want you to overcome 'em with yeses, undermine 'em with grins, agree 'em to death and destruction, let 'em swoller you till they vomit or bust wide open.' (p.16)

IM's strong desire to give his high school graduation speech to the white people in the smoker indicates his unquestioned belief in the American dream of success and self-fulfillment. He was taught to suppress his identity and feel shame at anything that would give a bad impression about his race in the eyes of white people. So, we find him embarrassed at Trueblood's telling of his incest story to Mr. Norton. IM was taught to believe that uneducated peasants like Trueblood disgrace the race and thwart its attempts at racial lifting (p.47). His college felt ashamed at Trueblood's "primitive spirituals" and his crude, animal voice: "We were embarrassed by the earthy harmonies they sang, but since the visitors were awed we dared not laugh at the crude, high, plaintively animal sounds Jim Trueblood made as he led the quartet" (p.47). IM was taught to be ashamed of his racial roots and heritage. It is no wonder that he later comes to the realization that this shame was bad indoctrination and feels ashamed of himself for once having been ashamed of the slavery of his grandparents (p.15).

Although a simple, uneducated farmer, Trueblood succeeds in using language to a great effect. His storytelling of his incest with his daughter and his singing of the blues are used as a means of transcendence in the face of pain and suffering, an implicit lesson for the young scholar IM. Bledsoe told his story so many times that he nearly sings it in his voice with its "deep,

incantatory quality" (p.54). The blues help him discover his identity and give him a way out of an existential situation, a redemption of the sort that IM will need when he learns to sing his story as a blues singer and fuses it with Armstrong's framing song "What Did I Do To Be So Black and Blue?" While Oedipus's incest was blinding, Trueblood's incest gives him a new realization³. His lack of education makes him "true" to his blood in a sense. There is no pretense or hypocrisy about his character, unlike those educated people like IM and Dr. Bledsoe who feel shame and self-hatred because of their racial affiliation. Trueblood, on the contrary, feels no shame in discoursing about his dream and subsequent incest. Thus, he gets rewarded by whites for expressing their unconscious/repressed desires. This act seems to encourage the blacks to stay in their place, away from civilized manners, and simultaneously thwarts the college's fake attempts at portraying a favorable black world for the white trustees.

The vet we meet early in the novel can be seen in the light of the theme of education. He was enrolled in the college the narrator attends and then went to France to study and practice. He came after World War I and was forced to give up his profession. He tells IM that if he had found someone to tell him the story he is about to tell him now, he would not have ended up in an asylum (p.91). His efforts to save the lives of people went unacknowledged, and he was outraged by inequality and oppression. He ended up in an insane asylum, apparently thrown there by the college administration. The "deranged" vet acts as a good educator and tells IM to play the white man's game but never to believe in it. The vet advises the narrator to discover the world and leave the Mr. Nortons of the world alone (p.156). What he teaches to IM on the bus in which they are both transferred from the South is reminiscent of IM's grandfather's advice and is worth quoting at length:

'All right, forget what I've said. But for God's sake, learn to look beneath the surface,' he said. 'Come out of the fog, young man. And remember you don't have to be a complete fool in order to succeed. Play the game, but don't believe in it—that much you owe yourself. Even if it lands you in a strait jacket or a padded cell. Play the game, but play it your own way—part of the time at least. Play the game, but raise the ante, my boy. Learn how it operates, learn how *you* operate—I wish I had time to tell you only a fragment. We're an ass-backward people, though. You might even beat the game. It's really a very crude affair. Really pre-Renaissance—and that game has been analyzed, put down in books. But down here they've forgotten to take care of the books and that's your opportunity. You're hidden right out in the open—that is, you would be if you only realized it. They wouldn't see you because they don't expect you to know anything, since they believe they've taken care of that...' (p.153-154; emphasis original)

The vet asks IM to be independent, that is to be his

³ On the parallels between *Invisible Man* and the Oedipus myth, see Schor (1993), pp. 53-76.

own father and to play the white man's game tactfully. He tells IM that his opportunity lies in self-education, in "books" he chooses for himself. The vet clearly makes a relationship between miseducation and invisibility and asks IM to find his own education rather than trust the "Bledsoed" theories chosen by his miseducators. The vet also earlier predicts that the narrator will be punished for repressing his emotions like a mechanical man if he fails to see the true nature of things around him. He perceptively sees the nature of IM's miseducation so far:

'You see,' he said turning to Mr. Norton, 'he has eyes and ears and a good distended African nose, but he fails to understand the simple facts of life. Understand. Understand? It's worse than that. He registers with his senses but short-circuits his brain. Nothing has meaning. He takes it in but he doesn't digest it. Already he is—well, bless my soul! Behold! A walking zombie! Already he's learned to repress not only his emotions but his humanity. He's invisible, a walking personification of the Negative, the most perfect achievement of your dreams, sir! The mechanical man!' (p.94)

The college dismisses its bright students or hinders their social success; it reduces them to criminals or maniacs, or at least encourages such impulses. It is no wonder that the "insane" veterans at the Golden Day are professional people, and former students, who received formal education like historians and physicians. The vet, a skilled, educated man, returned from France to save lives but was rejected. His professionalism/education was a source of humiliation; he was punished for his benign belief that education can effect racial uplift and acknowledge the essential humanity of blacks. The vet tells Mr. Norton:

'It is an issue which I can confront only by evading it. An utterly stupid proposition, and these hands so lovingly trained to master a scalpel yearn to caress a trigger. I returned to save life and I was refused,' he said. 'Ten men in masks drove me out from the city at midnight and beat me with whips for saving a human life. And I was forced to the utmost degradation because I possessed skilled hands and the belief that my knowledge could bring me dignity—not wealth, only dignity—and other men health!' (p.93)

The vet was seen as a threat to both whites and complicit blacks, and was punished accordingly. IM fails to understand the message behind the vet's story that professional education is not adequate, and that he should not repress his identity and emotions. He fails here as he similarly fails to understand the import of Trueblood's story that he is no one but himself and that he should accept himself for what he is. However, he will find the meaning of such stories later on as he reflects on them at the time of writing them.

Bledsoe is another important case for the pervading theme of education. He is viewed by the narrator as an educator par excellence, while in fact he is an utter miseducator. His pictures in the Negro press are captioned "EDUCATOR" and cause fear and admiration in his students (p.116). IM sees him as a leader and a father

figure:

He was a leader, a 'statesman' who carried our problems to those above us, even unto the White House; and in days past he had conducted the president himself about the campus. He was our leader and our magic, who kept the endowment high, the funds for scholarships plentiful and publicity moving through the channels of the press. He was our coal-black daddy of whom we were afraid. (p.116)

Bledsoe is the narrator's idol in the college. He came after the founder to lead this institution and is supposed to continue the Founder's message. He gets angry at the narrator for exposing an unflattering part of the black community to Mr. Norton. Bledsoe wants the narrator to lie to whites, yes them, find excuses and do anything to keep his pretense rather than take a white man to slave quarters or brothels. Angry at the narrator for taking Mr. Norton to Trueblood's log cabin and then to the Golden Day bar, Bledsoe tells him: "What kind of education are you getting around here? Who really told you to take him out there?" (p.139). He calls the narrator "nigger" and liar and a "black educated fool" (p.139, 143). Bledsoe's educational model is exposed as one based on lying and hypocrisy. He rants at IM: "Why, the dumbest black bastard in the cotton patch knows that the only way to please a white man is to tell him a lie! What kind of education are you getting around here?" (p.139). Bledsoe is an accommodationist who yeses whites and flatters them to gain influence: "I had to wait and plan and lick around . . . Yes, I had to act the nigger!" (p.143). Bledsoe felt his blackness was not a source of "pride" or "dignity." All he cares about is accessing power through contacts with whites even at the expense of his humanity (p.145). He gave up his "blood" and educational mission to be in power and successful among whites, while Trueblood, uneducated as he was, was "true" to his blood. Bledsoe dismisses the narrator from college and the narrator keeps "running", as his grandfather predicted in a dream, in New York to find a job and return to school with money for tuition. Assuming that IM's college offers him true models for behavior and redeeming education, it is a miseducator like Bledsoe who deprives the narrator from an opportunity to get a college degree, and thus implicitly undermines the chances of his race for racial uplift and independence. When IM eats yams in the streets of Harlem, he curses the bad example of Bledsoe who taught him not to be common or act like other "Negroes." Bledsoe encouraged him to suppress his identity as a black man and use hypocrisy instead.

Lucius Brockway, it can be argued, is another miseducator. IM's encounter with Brockway is important because here Ellison "heightens the power of this scene by giving Brockway, apparently an invisible man in the company's hierarchy, extraordinary power underground" (In Porter, 2001, p.78). At the paint factory Liberty Paints, IM spoils some paint and is fired by Kimbro. He goes to work in the basement of the factory for Brockway

who is responsible for the base of the paint. Brockway dislikes the narrator because he is educated and likes to give him orders. Brockway's education, instead, is long years of experience, a practical education as opposed to the "empty" theoretical education the narrator received in college at the hands of Bledsoe. Unlike IM whose theoretical miseducation left him a puppet manipulated by others in the North, Brockway learned his job "without all that education that them what's been sent down here is suppose to have. I learned it by doing it" (p.215). Brockway is essentially illiterate, and IM is surprised that "an apparently uneducated old man could gain such a responsible job" (p.211). IM's miseducation continues as he continues to run in the paint factory. He is ordered not to ask questions and yet given very little instructions. IM is told to just do what he is told and not to try to think about it (p.200).

The Brotherhood IM joins also expects him not to think, but to obey orders. The Brotherhood asks him to read its doctrines, attend meetings, and listen to speeches as part of his training, a new education in the form of brain-washing. The Brotherhood members expect him to obey orders and be disciplined. Jack tells him directly that he was not hired to think (p.469). The narrator, on the other hand, sees his role as an orator a means of educating the crowds by giving public lectures in which the ideology of the brotherhood becomes ingrained and his leadership is practiced. Mad at IM for giving Tod Clifton a public funeral, Jack tells him that the brotherhood does the thinking for its members and that he just talks rather than thinks (p.470). "Though his joining the revolutionary Brotherhood is apparently the converse of accommodation, in reality it is another form of submission, still requiring the repression of his natural instincts" (Schor, 1993, p.72). The Brotherhood members get angry at him for organizing Clifton's funeral without taking their permission first. They don't want him to think critically or make decisions for himself. Such indoctrination is a variant on the miseducation IM received in his college and continues to receive up in the North.

IM is then made the object of Western medical and psychological theories in the factory hospital. He is subjected to X-Rays and lobotomies after an explosion where he works. Physicians experiment with his body by subjecting it to the findings of Eurocentric medicine. The result is a new IM without a sense of identity. The factory hospital turns out to be another normalization institution for IM where the interplay between knowledge and power is clearly manifested. The hospital produces a docile, weak human being incapable of anger or indignation (p.237). What doctors want to effect is a new personality in line with the theories of Gestalt psychology about the mind, a new shape and form assembled from individual parts mechanically (p.236). IM here becomes a machine whose

overall structure is more important than its individual parts. Gestalt as a learning theory highlights learning needs, purposes, and remodeling rather than what students learn. More focus is given to how we learn things. So, it seems that doctors want to recreate IM and interfere with the way he perceives the world and learns things. Doctors discuss a prefrontal lobotomy through a medical machine or a knife and some even discuss castration. The narrator's identity crisis is, thus, augmented. He neither remembers his mother's name nor knows who he is. This "new man" leaves the hospital with his mind in its original tabula rasa state, as if he had learned nothing before (p.245). IM is ejected from the factory hospital as unfit for the industrial life in the North, yet prepared for a new wave of miseducation.

Institutions and organizations work with individuals to mislead IM. Mr. Norton claims to have carried the white man's burden of enlightening blacks for 40 years. Norton deceives IM as a model of wealth and greed. IM drives him around the campus hoping to get a scholarship, a tip, or a suit. Norton, instead, rewards Trueblood with a hundred-dollar bill for having committed incest. Norton is complicit with other whites in furthering the ignorance of the college community as evident in aborting attempts to make the Golden Day more respectable or to improve the slave quarters. He significantly discovers that the narrator did not read Emerson on self-reliance and individualism, for a man without independence has no need for a unique identity. The blind leaders we have like Barbee and Jack, along with the image of the founder and the veil, all suggest that these are complicit with miseducating the race. They want to blind it or keep it where it is. It is significant that the statue of the Founder in the narrator's college presents him as having his hands "outstretched in the breathtaking gesture of lifting a veil that flutters in hard, metallic folds above the face of a kneeling slave; I am standing puzzled, unable to decide whether the veil is really being lifted, or lowered more firmly in place; whether I am witnessing a revelation or a more efficient blinding" (p.36). Such an ambiguous posture indicates the Founder's potential complicity in misleading and subjecting the race and the potentially indistinct demarcations between education and miseducation. The metaphor of invisibility in the novel can thus be a metaphor for miseducation. While education enlightens and lifts the veil of ignorance and darkness, miseducation further immerses blacks in invisibility.

IM's high-school speech before the town's leading men shows that education is a means of betterment for the Southern "Negro" in segregated schools. The message is that education achieves humility, which is the essence of progress for the "Negro." On the other hand, IM's use of "social equality" draws angry responses from his audience who ask him to know his place: "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. All right, now, go on with your speech.” (p.31) Here they want him to be docile. He should know his place first so that his education does not turn him against his educators and continue then to indoctrinate his people in the same way. It is no wonder then that IM sees Bledsoe as a model and that his dream is to become a future educator following the steps of Bledsoe in the college. Education becomes a means of Foucauldian normalization in society in which people are brought to conformity with the body politic. For IM to know his place in society, he has to conform to the power structures unquestioningly. IM is continually a student of some sort. We encounter him as a newly graduated student from high school in a Southern town, then a college student in a segregated school for blacks, then a student of the illiterate Brockway in a paint factory, then a student of the factory doctors who expose him to their enlightened humanitarianism and medical technology, then a student of Brother Jack and Hambro in the Brotherhood, and finally a student reflecting on his life experiences and what he has learned from them in the prologue and epilogue sections of the novel.

After Norton sees Trueblood and takes the fainting Norton to the Golden Day, IM feels he has lost the essence of his being, his college education and campus life, and a fake sense of sheltered dignity. As he drives Norton back to college and approaches the beautiful campus, he reflects: “Here within this quiet greenness I possessed the only identity I had ever known, and I was losing it” (p.99). The education he received from Bledsoe makes him want to denounce his people and wish to flatter the white trustee:

I wanted to stop the car and talk with Mr. Norton, to beg his for pardon what he had seen; to plead and show him tears, unashamed tears like those of a child before his parent; to denounce all we'd seen and heard; to assure him that far from being like any of the people we had seen, I *hated* them, that I believed in the principles of the Founder with all my heart and soul, and that I believed in his own goodness and kindness in extending the hand of his benevolence to helping us poor, ignorant people out of the mire and darkness. (p.99; emphasis original)

His sheltered sense of identity within the campus makes him lost at the thought of leaving it. The sermon Barbee preaches in the campus chapel just before IM is expelled and in which he praises the college, its Founder, and Bledsoe makes IM's separation from the campus even more difficult (p.133). Barbee presents Bledsoe and the Founder as the pattern to be followed by IM. This is the kind of training IM receives in his college: imitation of such educators. This academic education ceases when IM is expelled from college and turns to life as a greater educator. In the words of Ruotolo (1973), “[t]he end of the protagonist's formal education signals the beginning of his inner life. Deprived of the pleasant pattern of college routine, the problem of his future ceases to be academic”

(p.85).

The black nationalist Ras the Exhorter also criticizes IM's miseducation that makes him complicit with his exploiters. Ras says: “Why *you* fight against us? You *young* fellow. You young black men with plenty education; I been hearing your rabble rousing. Why you go over to the enslaver? What kind of education is that? What kind of black mahn is that who betray his own mama?” (p.371; emphasis original). Ras is critical of IM's accommodationist miseducation and sees himself as “no black educated fool who t'inks everything between black mahn and white mahn can be settled with some blahsted lies in some bloody books written by the white mahn in the first place” (p.375-6). Young black men working for a predominantly white brotherhood are seen by a Ras as betraying their race. IM does not stop to ponder Ras's criticism of “Negro” education. Nor does he heed the importance Mary Rambo places on education. Mary can be viewed as a good educator in a sense. She always reminds IM about his responsibility to make of himself something that empowers and uplifts the race and warns him against corruption. Mary asks him about his future and he says he came to the north “wanting to be an educator” (p.254). She wants him to do something “that's credit to the race” (p.255). Mary believes in the importance of education for racial uplift and leadership. She links the education of young people with leadership: “It's you young folks what's [sic] going to make the changes,” Mary says. She also says: “Y'all's the ones. You got to lead and you got to fight and move us all on up a little higher” (p.255). Mary advises IM to take care of himself and not become corrupted in Harlem (p.255). She constantly talks to him about leadership, achievement, and responsibility.

IM meets a yam man in Harlem and feels homesick. He experiences momentary freedom from his previous education which inhibited his personality and Southern upbringing. He likes being able to eat what he likes without faking proper conduct. Hence, IM visualizes Bledsoe and sees himself insulting him as a “shameless chitterling eater!” (p.265). In this scene he visualizes, weekly newspapers refer to Bledsoe as a “Prominent Educator” who “Reverts to Field-Niggerism!” (p.265; emphasis original). IM reestablishes a relationship with his roots and tells the vendor that yams are his “birthmark.” He asserts his black identity and says “I yam what I am!” (p.266). He is somewhat aware of his prior miseducation, momentarily though, and asks: “What and how much had I lost by trying to do only what was expected of me instead of what I myself had wished to do?” (p.266). IM used to suppress his likes and dislikes as education and refinement make him have coffee, juice, and toast on the morning to heads to Emerson's office rather than the restaurant's special food of pork chops, grits, and eggs (p.178). His newfound hatred of Bledsoe stems directly from the latter's position as a failed educator and example

for the youth under his tutorship. His college training under Bledsoe is cast as empty “Bledsoing” that left him unprepared for life in New York (p.295). When IM meets Brother Jack after the speech against dispossession he gave, Jack asks him about his education and tells him he will “have to forget most of it” (p.305). The narrator studied social sciences like economics, history, literature, and sociology and these seem to be unavailing now. The fault with such disciplines is that they are shaped by a Eurocentric view of education in which black identity and achievements are eclipsed, hence their danger for IM. He has to receive a new training, for he will be given books and pamphlets to read about the brotherhood (p.305). Jack in fact gives him a new name and his training in the brotherhood is a new brainwashing. He has to read a new literature in the brotherhood and receive a new training, different yet related in a sense to “Bledsoing.” What seems to the Brotherhood like a new Booker T. Washington is in fact trying to model himself on the life of the college Founder. However, he has temporary epiphanies where he thinks of himself as nothing but himself (p.311). IM has to learn a scientific approach and undergo an intense period of study under Brother Hambro after his first overtly emotional arena speech (p.351). His new Brotherhood education under Hambro involves attending meetings, doing readings, and discussions with Hambro: “Between daily discussions with him and a rigid schedule of reading, I had been working harder than I’d ever found necessary at college” (p.357). Jack instructs him to balance theory and practice with ideology and inspiration and manipulate his audience.

It is important to note that when IM falls into a dark manhole, he starts burning the papers in his briefcase. He symbolically starts with his high school diploma. The darkness of this basement he is in is not different from this symbolic document that deceived him throughout and kept him in the dark. It was this high school diploma that gave him his scholarship in a “Negro” college. However, IM does not have a college diploma to burn. At this stage, I think IM fully realizes the emptiness of his whole quest. He left the college to work in the North, save his tuition for next year, come back to finish his degree, and become an educator like Bledsoe. He even dreamed of teaching in the same college and assisting Bledsoe, and then substituting him. He probably realized at this moment the futility of such dreams. The seeds of true education can be found in such a realization about his miseducation.

CONCLUSION

What IM needs to learn is to read through people and interpret things correctly. For example, IM fails to read the import of Trueblood’s story or that of the vet’s and how they relate to his own future. He fails to make sense of what people try to tell him in his naïve belief in what

Bledsoe and the white financiers are offering for his college. He should learn from the folk songs of his people the meaning of freedom, existential transcendence, and self-expression. The remembered blues of Trueblood, Wheatstraw, and Mary now make IM feel that he belongs to a people with a rich history of folk songs. These blues singers are supposed to remind IM of his Southern heritage and folklore. Heeding them is better than despising his people and their folk ways. Earlier, IM despised them or at least was ashamed of them when Trueblood sang spirituals before white guests on campus. Along with other life experiences of the now mature IM, the blues are a better form of education for a modern existential life.

An educator like Carter Woodson (1933) in his book *The Miseducation of the Negro* highlights the value of independent, critical thinking in the program of racial uplift. Woodson outlines the main problems of “Negro” education clearly; parallels with IM’s case become too obvious and important to be ignored. Education is discussed by Woodson as a means of social control in a power game: “If you can control a man’s thinking you do not have to worry about his action. When you determine what a man shall think you do not have to concern yourself about what he will do” (p.84). Such a man, Woodson argues, “will find his ‘proper place’ and will stay in it” (p.xiii). The “educated Negroes” are taught to respect other races and “despise the African” as inferior (p.1). In blindly imitating whites, “Negroes” lose their identities. According to Woodson, teaching people to think is “the chief purpose of education” (p.14). Not thinking for oneself results in enslavement of one’s mind, an implicit colonization. The educated Negro “cannot be a thinking man. It may be a sort of slave psychology which causes this preference for the leadership of the oppressor” (Woodson, p.55). It is no wonder, then, that a miseducated man like IM keeps running because he is controlled. IM is asked by different characters not to think, and it is his inability to develop his critical thinking skills in the course of his education that makes him continually blind. Woodson reminds us of a well-known philosophical distinction between two kinds of education one can have: “that which is given to him, and the other that which he gives himself. Of the two kinds the latter is by far the more desirable” (p.126). It seems that IM chose for himself an education that he receives from others as a young man. Now in his maturity and after more than twenty years, his disillusionment makes him choose self-education. “The traducers of the race,” Woodson argues, “are guiding these people the wrong way” (p.163). They have left a gap between themselves and the masses and exploited them. Woodson criticizes the leadership of the “racial racketeer” complicit with the oppressors “to enslave the Negroes’ minds” and who “loses his soul” in the process as he benefits from miseducating others

by having influence with the exploiters (p.116). The racketeer, Woodson says, can be “a politician, minister, teacher, director of a community center, or head of a ‘social uplift agency’” (p.116). Hence, the race, he argues, needs workers and service (p.118-119). Bledsoe is described by IM in terms fit for a Woodson’s description of racial racketeers; Bledsoe, we should remember, stands for the corrupt black leadership complicit with exploiting the race for personal gain. Bledsoe, IM says,

was the example of everything I hoped to be: Influential with wealthy men all over the country; consulted in matters concerning the race; a leader of his people; the possessor of not one, but two Cadillacs, a good salary and a soft, good-looking and creamy-complexioned wife. What was more, while black and bald and everything white folks poked fun at, he had achieved power and authority; had, while black and wrinkle-headed, made himself of more importance in the world than most Southern white men. They could laugh at him but they couldn’t ignore him . . . (p.101)

Reading *IM* against Woodson’s book on miseducation is a helpful strategy for understanding Ellison’s critique of the misguided forms of the education of blacks. In *Black Skin, White Masks*, on a chapter on “The Negro and Language,” Fanon (1967) also presents an alternative critique of colonial education—one not much different from Woodson’s critique of “Negro” education—especially with respect to Antillean “Negroes” learning French rather than Creole as a way of assimilating the colonizer’s culture, overcoming their inferiority complex, and becoming “whiter” (p.18). In the process, they lose their blackness. Language, Fanon argues, is a cultural tool: “A man who has a language consequently possesses the world expressed and implied by that language” (p.18). What is important about educating “Negroes” in Fanon’s words “is not to educate them, but to teach the Negro not to be the slave of their archetypes” (p.35). It seems that IM loses himself in his attempts at accommodation through education—i.e. in his attempts at becoming “whiter” in Fanon’s words—and becomes a neocolonial subject. In the process, he forgets his roots and feels ashamed at many aspects of black life. This is part of the inferiority complex instilled in a black man through a Eurocentric education that presents the white as the norm, the good, the beautiful, and the virtuous and degrades the black man. The college is dominated by white trustees and blacks, like Bledsoe, who benefit from the status quo. Decolonizing the mind,

hence, should be the basis for IM’s new education. In brief, Ellison uses the Bildungsroman genre of the novel against itself to offer a commentary on miseducation and possibly suggest an alternative route of growth for blacks.

REFERENCES

- Anderson, Paul Allen (2005). Ralph Ellison on Lyricism and Swing. *American Literary History*, 17(2), 280-306.
- Blount, Marcellus (1989). A Certain Eloquence: Ralph Ellison and the Afro-American Artist. *American Literary History*, 1(3), 675-688.
- Brown, Kevin (1997). *Invisible Man: An Existential Quest for Freedom*. *The Middle Atlantic Writers Association Review*, 12(2), 63-68.
- Burke, Kenneth (2004). Ralph Ellison’s Trueblooded Bildungsroman. In John F. Callahan (Ed.), *Ralph Ellison’s Invisible Man: A Casebook* (pp. 65-79). Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Dietze, Rudolf F. (1982). *Ralph Ellison: The Genesis of an Artist*. Nürnberg: Verlag Hans Carl.
- Ellison, Ralph (1995). *Invisible Man*. New York: Vintage.
- O’Meally, Robert G. (Ed.) (2001). *Living with Music: Ralph Ellison’s Jazz Writings*. New York: The Modern Library.
- Fanon, Frantz (1967). *Black Skin, White Masks* (Charles Markmann, Trans.). New York: Grove Press.
- Leak, Jeffrey B. (2005). *Racial Myths and Masculinity in African American Literature*. Knoxville: The University of Tennessee Press.
- Porter, Horace A. (2001). *Jazz Country: Ralph Ellison in America*. Iowa City: University of Iowa Press.
- Rodnon, Stewart (1971). Ralph Ellison’s *Invisible Man*: Six Tentative Approaches. In Ronald Gottesman (Comp.), *The Merrill Studies in Invisible Man* (pp. 109-120). Ohio: Charles E. Merrill Publishing Company.
- Ruotolo, Lucio P. (1973). *Six Existential Heroes: The Politics of Faith*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.
- Schor, Edith (1993). *Visible Ellison: A Study of Ralph Ellison’s Fiction*. Westport, Connecticut: Greenwood Press.
- Steele, Shelby (1976). Ralph Ellison’s Blues. *Journal of Black Studies*, 7(2), 151-168. JSTOR. Bizzell Lib., Oklahoma University. Feb. 15, 2010<<http://www.jstor.org>>.
- Woodson, Carter (1990). *The Miseducation of the Negro*. Trenton, NJ: Africa World Press. (Original Work Published 1933)