

English 11/AP English Language and Composition
Invisible Man intro

Ralph Ellison (1913-1994) is an important figure in American literature; we place him as beginning his literary career in the 1930s, a contemporary and friend of Richard Wright. Ellison is known for his novel *Invisible Man*, which won the National Book Award in 1953.

Ellison and Wright are distinct in their points of view about the role of African-American literature. While Wright wrote protest fiction—raw, straightforwardly angry work about the consequences of systemic and personal racism—Ellison wrote with more overtly artistic goals.

Ellison offered a harsh estimate of Wright's literary range: "How awful that Wright found the facile answers of Marxism before he learned to use literature as a means for discovering the forms of American Negro humanity."

Ellison's work is very much influenced by his knowledge of music. Having received free music lessons as a child and played trumpet at the Tuskegee Institute, Ellison found literary expression for his love of music in *Invisible Man* as well as in his nonfiction. Music remained a source of solace and inspiration throughout Ellison's life.

Here is Ellison's acceptance speech for the National Book Award in 1953:

If I were asked in all seriousness just what I considered to be the chief significance of *Invisible Man* as a fiction, I would reply: Its experimental attitude and its attempt to return to the mood of personal moral responsibility for democracy which typified the best of our nineteenth-century fiction.

When I examined the rather rigid concepts of reality which informed a number of the works which impressed me and to which I owed a great deal, I was forced to conclude that for me and for so many hundreds of thousands of Americans, reality was simply far more mysterious and uncertain, and at the same time more exciting, and still, despite its raw violence and capriciousness, more promising.

To see America with an awareness of its rich diversity and its almost magical fluidity and freedom I was forced to conceive of a novel unburdened by the narrow naturalism which has led after so many triumphs to the final and unrelieved despair which marks so much of our current fiction. I was to dream of a prose which was flexible, and swift as American change is swift, confronting the inequalities and brutalities of our society forthrightly, but yet thrusting forth its images of hope, human fraternity, and individual self-realization. A prose which would make use of the richness of our speech, the idiomatic expression, and the rhetorical flourishes from past periods which are still alive among us. Despite my personal failures there must be possible a fiction which, leaving sociology and case histories to the scientists, can arrive at the truth about the human condition, here and now, with all the bright magic of the fairy tale.

Underlying Ellison's work and his debate with Richard Wright is an older debate between W.E.B. DuBois and Booker T. Washington, founder of the Tuskegee Institute attended by Ellison.

In 1895, Booker T. Washington gave what later came to be known as the Atlanta Compromise speech before the Cotton States and International Exposition in Atlanta. His address was one of the most important and influential speeches in American history, guiding African-American resistance to white discrimination and establishing Washington as one of the leading black spokesmen in America. Washington's speech stressed accommodation rather than resistance to the racist order under which Southern African Americans lived.

Mr. President and gentlemen of the Board of Directors and citizens. One third of the population of the South is of the Negro race. No enterprise seeking the material, civil, or moral welfare of this section can disregard this element of our population and reach the highest success. I must convey to you, Mr. President and Directors, and Secretaries and masses of my race, when I say that in no way have the value and manhood of the American Negro been more fittingly and generously recognized, than by the managers of this magnificent exposition at every stage of its progress. It is a recognition that will do more to cement the friendship of the two races than any occurrence since the dawn of our freedom. Not only this, but the opportunities here afforded will awaken among us a new era of industrial progress.

Ignorant and inexperienced, it is not strange that in the first years of our new life we began at the top instead of the bottom, that a seat in Congress or the state legislature was more sought than real estate or industrial skill, that the political convention of some teaching had more attraction than starting a dairy farm or a stockyard.

A ship lost at sea for many days suddenly sighted a friendly vessel. From the mast of the unfortunate vessel was seen a signal: "Water, water. We die of thirst." The answer from the friendly vessel at once came back: "Cast down your bucket where you are." A second time, the signal, "Water, send us water!" went up from the distressed vessel. And was answered: "Cast down your bucket where you are." A third and fourth signal for water was answered: "Cast down your bucket where you are." The captain of the distressed vessel, at last heeding the injunction, cast down his bucket and it came up full of fresh, sparkling water from the mouth of the Amazon River.

To those of my race who depend on bettering their condition in a foreign land, or who underestimate the importance of preserving friendly relations with the southern white man who is their next door neighbor, I would say: "Cast down your bucket where you are." Cast it down, making friends in every manly way of the people of all races, by whom you are surrounded.

To those of the white race who look to the incoming of those of foreign birth and strange tongue and habits for the prosperity of the South, were I permitted, I would repeat what I have said to my own race: "Cast down your bucket where you are." Cast it down among the eight millions of Negroes whose habits you know, whose fidelity and love you have tested in days when to have proved treacherous meant the ruin of your fireside. Cast

down your bucket among these people who have without strikes and labor wars tilled your fields, cleared your forests, builded your railroads and cities, brought forth treasures from the bowels of the earth, just to make possible this magnificent representation of the progress of the South.

Later, in 1903, the African-American scholar W.E.B. DuBois rebutted Washington, calling more overtly for systemic changes to the American system and the advent of greater rights for Blacks:

Mr. Washington represents in Negro thought the old attitude of adjustment and submission; but adjustment at such a peculiar time as to make his programme unique. This is an age of unusual economic development, and Mr. Washington's programme naturally takes an economic cast, becoming a gospel of Work and Money to such an extent as apparently almost completely to overshadow the higher aims of life. Moreover, this is an age when the more advanced races are coming in closer contact with the less developed races, and the race-feeling is therefore intensified; and Mr. Washington's programme practically accepts the alleged inferiority of the Negro races. Again, in our own land, the reaction from the sentiment of war time has given impetus to race-prejudice against Negroes, and Mr. Washington withdraws many of the high demands of Negroes as men and American citizens. In other periods of intensified prejudice all the Negro's tendency to self-assertion has been called forth; at this period a policy of submission is advocated. In the history of nearly all other races and peoples the doctrine preached at such crises has been that manly self-respect is worth more than lands and houses, and that a people who voluntarily surrender such respect, or cease striving for it, are not worth civilizing.

In answer to this, it has been claimed that the Negro can survive only through submission. Mr. Washington distinctly asks that black people give up, at least for the present, three things, —

First, political power,

Second, insistence on civil rights,

Third, higher education of Negro youth,

— and concentrate all their energies on industrial education, the accumulation of wealth, and the conciliation of the South. This policy has been courageously and insistently advocated for over fifteen years, and has been triumphant for perhaps ten years. As a result of this tender of the palm-branch, what has been the return? In these years there have occurred:

1. The disfranchisement of the Negro.
2. The legal creation of a distinct status of civil inferiority for the Negro.
3. The steady withdrawal of aid from institutions for the higher training of the Negro.

These movements are not, to be sure, direct results of Mr. Washington's teachings; but his propoganda has, without a shadow of doubt, helped their speedier accomplishment. The question then comes: Is it possible, and probable, that nine millions of men can make effective progress in economic lines if they are deprived of political rights, made a servile caste, and allowed only the most meagre chance for developing their exceptional

men? If history and reason give any distinct answer to these questions, it is an emphatic No. And Mr. Washington thus faces the triple paradox of his career:

1. He is striving nobly to make Negro artisans business men and property-owners; but it is utterly impossible, under modern competitive methods, for workingmen and property-owners to defend their rights and exist without the right of suffrage .
2. He insists on thrift and self-respect, but at the same time counsels a silent submission to civic inferiority such as is bound to sap the manhood of any race in the long run.
3. He advocates common-school and industrial training, and depreciates institutions of higher learning; but neither the Negro common-schools, nor Tuskegee itself, could remain open a day were it not for teachers trained in Negro colleges, or trained by their graduates.

This triple paradox in Mr. Washington's position is the object of criticism by two classes of colored Americans. One class is spiritually descended from Toussaint the Savior, through Gabriel, Vesey, and Turner, and they represent the attitude of revolt and revenge; they hate the white South blindly and distrust the white race generally, and so far as they agree on definite action, think that the Negro's only hope lies in emigration beyond the borders of the United States. And yet, by the irony of fate, nothing has more effectually made this program seem hopeless than the recent course of the United States toward weaker and darker peoples in the West Indies, Hawaii, and the Philippines,—for where in the world may we go and be safe from lying and brute Force? The other class of Negroes who cannot agree with Mr. Washington has hitherto said little aloud. They deprecate the sight of scattered counsels, of internal disagreement; and especially they dislike making their just criticism of a useful and earnest man an excuse for a general discharge of venom from small-minded opponents. Nevertheless, the questions involved are so fundamental and serious that it is difficult to see how men like the Grimkes, Kelly Miller, J.W.E. Bowen, and other representatives of this group, can much longer be silent. Such men feel in conscience bound to ask of this nation three things.

1. The right to vote.
- 2 Civic equality.
- 3 The education of youth according to ability.

While time dictates that I stop my excerpt here, the full essay is well worth your time, as DuBois goes on to eloquently make clear the critique of Washington that is more than implied in Ellison's *Invisible Man*.

Now is the time in the handout for us to turn our attention to Louis Armstrong and his play of form and improvisation, traditional and new, and the sad, joyous, and American complexity of race and to acknowledge the role of this complexity in Ellison's philosophical ideas.

As you listen to Armstrong, consider Ellison's rejection of the notion of racial purity, for either Blacks or Whites in America. "The melting pot did indeed melt," Ellison wrote, "creating such . . . blending of identities, values and lifestyles that most American whites are culturally part Negro American without even realizing it."

Ellison's more complicated ideas have been easier to contemplate in art than to implement in politics: "The novel at its best demands a sort of complexity of vision which politics doesn't like."

With the emergence of the Black Arts movement and the rise of Black nationalism, which followed *Invisible Man*, Ellison's work endured harsh criticism from writers such as Amiri Baraka, a Black nationalist who wrote overtly political works, who felt Ellison was a skilled craftsman with backwards ideas.

The tension between peaceful desire for change and more violent approaches would continue to dominate the discourse, with a similar split between the nonviolence of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., and the more militant approach of Malcolm X, for example.

We can discuss the ways these ideas endure in our contemporary culture, with the Black Lives Matter movement and Ta-Nehisi Coates' widely praised *Between the World and Me*.

As Catholics, we are interested in racial justice; as students of literature, we are interested in art that also transcends the political to speak to the Good, the True, and the Beautiful. Let's see how Ellison's art speaks both to and beyond his historical moment as he brings together a complex vision of race and society.
