RACIAL ISSUE AND IDENTITY AS SHOWN

IN RALPH ELLISON'S INVISIBLE MAN

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Chapter One

Introductions

Like Colinger, Ralph Ellison was criticized as well as praised in the United States. Anyway, his sole novel *Invisible Man* established his status in American literature and won him numerous fame. "For all that, Ellison has written a major novel, perhaps one of the three or for most considerable American novels of the past decade!" The novel is regarded as Ellison's masterpiece that depicts the self-realization of the hero after the Second World War in the United States. Through the story of the nameless hero, the author manifested his concern about the Negro problem on the racial issue on the one hand; and his aim to study "Universal theme"--- the search for identity on the other. In classical literature man is considered to be a hero or God, but in modern literature man is regarded as an insect or a coward such as the protagonist of *Invisible Man*, an "invisible man".

Since the publication of *Invisible Man*, critics
and scholars have made a thorough study on its artistic achievement. In commenting on its theme, they emphasize that it is either a Negro Novel or a pure literary work. The viewpoints attract me a lot. After my careful study of the book, I take racial issue and identity as the novel's most remarkable features, which I'll dwell on in this thesis. An important reason, I think, is that most readers care much about its themes than its techniques. What they most wish to know or experience in the themes of the book, the outlook of the author and the emotion of the characters. Some other reasons I will explain in the first part of chapter two.

The assessment is based on Ellison's use of a Negro as the hero of the novel. Ellison depicts his hero, the invisible man, to symbolize all people in a "dehumanized" society. "Most important, perhaps, being a Negro American involves a willed affirmation of self against all out pressure." So Negro American, best represented by the Negro hero, is a metaphor for every man wrestling with the "dehumanized" pressures of the inhuman world. In the
novel, the hero searches desperately for the reality of existence in a technological society characterized by swift changes. Unlike Richard Wright, Ellison does not plan to write a mere black novel. He intends to attain "the universal" through the description of the specific man in specific circumstances. Through the description, Ellison is seeking human values bigger than the categories of race and class. When some people asked Ellison whether the search for identity was primarily an American theme or not, he replied: "It is the American theme. The nature of our society is such that we are prevented from knowing who we are." It is obvious that the search for identity is the core of the hero as well as the author. The search for identity, that is to say, the seeking of values as a human being. In a word, the seeking of human values constitutes the pyramid of the hero's identity which he exhausts all his efforts. This Ellisonian identity on the mask of the Negroes in America is truly the thematic significance of Invisible Man, thus it is further elaborating in Chapter Three.

Invisible Man has been criticized as insufficiently militant. In a sense, the criticism is true, for the novel is both subtle and complex that it lacks the immediate emotional impact of, for instance, Richard Wright's novel, Native Son. However, anyone who ignores racial issue understated by Ellison will undoubtedly make a mistake. Because Ellison held that Negro history, folklore, rituals and their experience not only set gloss on America, but also have become the very stuff of the nation's heritage. "Materially, psychologically and culturally, part of the nation's heritage is Negro American and whatever it becomes will be shaped in part by the Negro's presence." We don't
hesitate to say that without the presence of blacks, America would have been otherwise. So in *Invisible Man*, Ellison let us immerse in all the concrete materialities of Black experience: their manners, language and life styles; their happiness, horror and anger. On the other hand, as a guide of Ellison, Richard Wright who was a major figure of the Harlem Renaissance and who became the pioneering figure of "protest novel" in the '40s undoubtedly influenced Ellison. The history, the experience, the feeling, especially the misery of the black in America were naturally reflected in *Invisible Man*. The difference lied in that Ellison chose a quite different way to observe the Negro and their problem, and to study the American theme in the labyrinth of society. Thus *Invisible Man* does voice the protest of the Negroes.

"Who knows but that, on the lower frequencies, I speak for you?" (P. 56. All subsequent page references are to *Invisible Man*.) Guided by this statement of the nameless narrator as well as the author, my thesis aims at concluding that every man is the invisible man, or that loss of identity is the common fate of human being with Chapter Two at first dwells on the miserable experience of the Negro as the humble, hostile, frightened, but graceful, rebellious and hopeful in the fictional world of *Invisible Man*. Apart from this aim, this chapter shows the author's attitude toward racial problem in contrast to Wright's.

It seems necessary to make some comments on the Prologue and the Epilogue which are the unseparated part of the novel. The detailed analysis is given in Chapter Four.

Chapter Five concludes the thesis by commenting on Ellison's limitation in the novel, evaluating the merits and influence of his novel, and summing up the main points stated
in the previous Chapters. It is the author's sincere hope that this thesis would be helpful and suggestive to the readers of Ellison in enlarging their eyescope about his attitude toward racial issue and identity as shown in *Invisible Man*.
NOTES

Chapter Two
Ralph Ellison and Racial Issue

I. Racial Issue and Human Value: General Topic in World Literature

"That all men are created equal" proclaimed in Declaration of Independence about 200 years ago still resounds through the new world and Europe. However, reality is not the case indeed. Quite a few people or some nations are still under oppression and denied freedom and equity. Racial prejudice and racial discrimination have not vanished from the world today.

For nearly three centuries, Negroes in South Africa have been fighting against white domination, racial discrimination and apartheid. But they haven't gained what they should deserve to gain though their conditions have been improved. South African authorities still carry out its policy of racial discrimination and apartheid. Persecution and killing of blacks are often reported and heard.

On May 1, 1992 riots erupted in Los Angeles when a jury acquitted four police officers in the beating of black motorist Rodney King, left 54 people dead, 2333 injured and more than 15,000 arrested. "The death toll was the highest in American racial violence this century, surpassing the 13 people killed in Detroit 1967. Damage has been estimated at $350m." The incident was not accidental. It manifests that human rights violation such as racial discrimination and abuse of force by police do exist in the United States.

It is known to all that racial issue, particularly Negro problem has a long history in the U.S. Therefore, in literature it undoubtedly becomes one of the themes of
the writers' creation. As early as 1957, American women writer, Harriet Beecher Stowe published her world famous anti-slavery novel, *Uncle Tom's Cabin*. It caused great sensation immediately. Even President Lincoln praised her: "So this is the lady who made the great war." Through the depictions of the characters and their living condition, the author exposed the darkness and backwardness of America's slavery South. Being Negroes, black American writers first cared for the fate of their own nation. Since the 19th century, many Afro-American writers, from early writers such as Frederick Douglass, W.E.B. Du Bois, Paul Laurence Dunbar to the famous writers in the Harlem renaissance such as Langston Hughes, Margaret Walker and Richard Wright, concerned very much about it. In their works they depicted the sufferings of the black and exposed the white's racial discrimination and racial oppression over the black. Frederick Douglass was considered to be the greatest voice of the Blacks in the 19th century. His very important and influential book, *My Bondage and My Freedom* (1855) relates the archetypal story of Blacks escaping from their cruel and wicked white masters to emancipation. Another famous leader and writer of the black movement was William E.B. Du Bois. In his most influential book, *Souls of Black Folk: Essays and Sketches* (1903), the author portrayed the miserable life of the black in the south after the Civil War and serious racial discrimination in American society. After the First World War, great changes took place in the living condition of Afro-Americans. The migration to the north and the black National Movement improved self-respect of the Negroes in America Harlem, located in the Northeast part of New York city, was the biggest Negro residential
area at that time. Numerous distinguished artists and writers from the south and elsewhere came here. Black literature developed into an upsurge which has come to be known as the Harlem Renaissance. Gradually the Harlem writers built a counter-culture, a literature which reflected the misery, the feeling, the experience, the history of the black people. In their works, they exposed serious racial issues in America from different angles and to different extent. The most important figure in the Harlem Renaissance was Langston Hughes whose chief achievement was in poetry. His works mainly described the life of lower class people. For instance, Montage of a Dream Deferred is a book which shows a Hughes no longer able to contain his anger at the condition of the blacks.

After the Great Depression in 1930s, black writers became radical, some of whom either took part in the Communist Party or became the fellow traveller of the Party. The theme of their works turned to social criticism and social protest. Richard Wright was the most important writer at that time. His novel Uncle Tom's Children, described the miserable life of the southern blacks who were discriminated and oppressed while his masterpiece, Native Son shocked the whole American society as well as American literary circle for the novel suggested that, for the black, if nothing could help to assert their dignity and identity, then it is legitimate to resort to violence.

In the 50s and the 60s, Afro-American literature came to a new era when a number of black writers and poets such as Ralph Ellison, James Baldwin, Gwendolyn Brooks, LeRoi Jones and Malcolm X came forward. In their works,
they revealed serious social problems of the Negro's suffering. James Baldwin was probably Richard Wright's successor for he did as much as Wright (if not more) to increase the racial awareness of the black people and played an important role in black literature after Wright went to Europe. He manifested his great concern about the racial issue in his works such as Another Country, Go Tell It on the Mountain and Notes of a Native Son.

It is especially worth mentioning that Invisible Man, Ellison's single novel, has given him more and more fame and is still up-to-date though half a century has passed since its publication. Unlike Wright, Ellison deals with racial problem in a broader sense. It is not accidental that he chose a Negro as the hero of the novel. He once pointed out: "In the United States the Negro and his status have always stood for moral concern. He symbolizes among other things the human and social condition of equality. Invisible Man, especially racial issue in this novel, inevitably attracts the readers' attention both in the United States and abroad.

In American literature, two outstanding features are strikingly demonstrated: the emphasis of individual value and the quest of identity. They link with each other closely, while freedom is one of the main content of the two. It is considered to be the basis of the founding of America. Without the burden of Feudal culture, the principle of freedom has been immediately established in the field of American culture since the War of Independence in the 1770s. Then with the accumulation of material wealth, every American citizen has relatively more freedom. This phenomenon inevitably reflects in literature and becomes the concept of value American writers seek for. But in different historical period, the meaning of freedom-seeking varies, in contemporary
capitalist society, the spiritual life of people becomes more and more insignificant. With the rapid development of science and technology, man becomes the dependency of the machines, losing individuality and humanity which he held in agricultural society before. At the same time, after experiencing the two World Wars and the Great Depression in the 1930s, American has a sense of being in a precarious state. The loss of confidence in the society and traditional morality makes people feel that society becomes a factor which goes against individual. It is more and more difficult for the people to ensure their identity and humanity. So the quest for identity embodies the pursuit of individual value and that of freedom.

Identity, according to Webster's New World Dictionary, means "1. the condition or fact of being the same or exactly alike; sameness; oneness (groups united by identity of interests) 2. a) the condition or fact of being specific person or thing: individuality. b) the condition of being the same as a person or a thing described or claimed."

On the one hand, identity refers to fundamental quality of a nation, a class, a social group, a family or an individual under certain social conditions. It is the foundation of their or his principle of life and way of behavior, and also that of keeping stability psychologically. According to contemporary psychologists, once a man can maintain his identity, he has raised a foundation or a position spiritually. In fact, social environment is always not so good as might be expected. Great historical events and personal misfortune may crumble the original identity and deprive you of the foundation of your conduct; a much more powerful group or individual often overwhelm you, compelling you to give up your identity and to accept the concept they or

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he forced on you. For instance, a nation or a person is forced to admit that he is a evil doer. Under this condition, either you give up your own identity and follow others, or you maintain your identity and shoulder tremendous spiritual pressure. On the other hand, identity includes a kind of value of being what you really are. To each individual, his various innate and postnatal factors endow him with some special interest, virtue and ability. If these special qualities can be fully developed, his potential value can be turned into realities. But things are not so easy. You can not control your fate and find your own identity. So you are facing a problem which is to find who you really are. You need to understand yourself consciously and attain your potential energy. However, you may not find yourself and attain the value as a human being owing to the pressure from outside and your own faults. Thus identity is both social and individual. The most influential works concerning the theme of "self-realization" is Ellison's Invisible Man.

II. Ralph Ellison's Life and Career

One of the best Afro-American Writers, has occupied a salient place in modern American literature. He said in an interview: "If the Negro, or any other writer, is going to do what is expected of him, he is lost the battle before he takes the field." He has not done what literary and political critic suggested that he should do, but has insisted on being a writer rather than a spokesmen for a cause or representative figure. His importance to American letters is partly due to this independence, for which he is also strongly criticized. Invisible Man, the only novel he has ever written, still stands as the sole indicator of Ellison's artistic accomplishment.

Ralph Ellison was born in Oklahoma City March 1, 1914 to Lewis Alfred and Ida Millsap Ellison. His father,
a construction worker and tradesman, died when he was three. His mother had to work as a domestic and then an apartment-house custodian to support the family. In high school he played trumpet in the band; he loved jazz and started reading Hemingway and T.S. Eliot, later Stendhal. He studied music at Tuskegee Institute in Alabama from 1935. In 1936, Ralph went to New York City to study sculpture, happened to meet Langston Hughes and Richard Wright, the latter led him to read Conrad, James and Dostoevsky, encouraging him to be a writer. From then on Ellison began to publish reviews and short stories. During World War II, Ellison served with the United States Merchant Marine; after the war a Rosenwald Fellowship permitted him to work on Invisible Man, which was begun in 1944 and published seven years later. He worked on a sponsored project with Karl Shapiro which came out as The Writer’s Experience in 1964. In the same year saw the publication of Shadow and Act, a book of essays. A second novel, of which is a fragment has appeared as "And Hickman Arrives", still remains unpublished; whether it appears or not is unlikely to affect Ellison’s position. Ellison subsequently received a number of awards and lectureship, taught at the Salzburg Seminar, at Bard College, and at the University of Chicago. In 1964, he was a visiting professor of writing at Yale University and was named Albert Schweitzer Professor of the Humanities at New York University in 1970. He is a board member of P. E. N. and of the Institute of Jazz Studies. He married Fanny McConnell in 1946 and lives in New York on Riverside Drive. Ralph Ellison is very warm, humane, scholarly and eloquent.

Invisible Man, which consists of the prologue, the epilogue and the epilogue narrated the journey of a Negro. The protagonist was nameless southern Negro. He was filled with "great expectations," for, in the beginning, he was what the white masters were in the habit of calling a "good
He had cheerfully accepted all the promises of the Establishment. But unfortunately, one day he unintentionally led a visiting white trustee, Mr. Morton, to visit the incestuous share-cropper and to witness the indecent scene in Golden Day. As a result, he was expelled from the college. He then moved to the North to find a job in a paint factory and encountering a lot of setbacks. Afterwards, he was taken up by the Brotherhood, a radical organization, but he soon discovered that the Negro's cause was but a pawn being used by the Brotherhood to promote its "line". So after a furious race riot in Harlem streets, he dived down into a cellar through a manhole on his way of escape, for a period of "hibernation". Like numerous classic works in Britain and American Literature, it is a novel about "the growth of the youth". Ellison, like many writers who concerned about this theme, took great interest in the hero's attempt to seek his identity. Through the Negro's experience, the author suggested that the society was dehumanized not only for blacks but also for all people.

*Shadow and Act* (1954), a collection of critical essays, interviews, reviews and other short works, contains Ralph Ellison's real autobiography. In *Shadow and Act*, Ellison tried to interpret black experience in richly optimistic terms, to discuss black music, literature, and the visual arts in the context of tradition: black, American, Western, Eastern and Universal. One of the central themes of it may be called "Segregation of work" as revealed in "the Seer and the seen" (the first of the three sections of *Shadow and Act*).

Besides *Invisible Men* and *Shadow and Act*, Ellison published some short stories; "Afternoon" (1940), "King of the Bingo Game" (1944), "And Hickman Arrives" (1960), "It always Breaks out" (1963), "Night-talk" (1969), "Caddillac Flambe" (1973), etc, which have also aroused great interest in the reading public.

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