Shadow and Act Study Guide

Shadow and Act by Ralph Ellison

The following sections of this BookRags Literature Study Guide is offprint from Gale's For Students Series: Presenting Analysis, Context, and Criticism on Commonly Studied Works: Introduction, Author Biography, Plot Summary, Characters, Themes, Style, Historical Context, Critical Overview, Criticism and Critical Essays, Media Adaptations, Topics for Further Study, Compare & Contrast, What Do I Read Next?, For Further Study, and Sources.

(c)1998-2002; (c)2002 by Gale. Gale is an imprint of The Gale Group, Inc., a division of Thomson Learning, Inc. Gale and Design and Thomson Learning are trademarks used herein under license.

The following sections, if they exist, are offprint from Beacham's Encyclopedia of Popular Fiction: "Social Concerns", "Thematic Overview", "Techniques", "Literary Precedents", "Key Questions", "Related Titles", "Adaptations", "Related Web Sites". (c)1994-2005, by Walton Beacham.

The following sections, if they exist, are offprint from Beacham's Guide to Literature for Young Adults: "About the Author", "Overview", "Setting", "Literary Qualities", "Social Sensitivity", "Topics for Discussion", "Ideas for Reports and Papers". (c)1994-2005, by Walton Beacham.

All other sections in this Literature Study Guide are owned and copyrighted by BookRags, Inc.

Contents

Shadow and Act Study Guide....1

Contents....2

Introduction....4

Author Biography....5

Plot Summary....6

Part 1, The Seer and the Seen, Section 1....8

Part 1, The Seer and the Seen, Section 2....11

Part 1, The Seer and the Seen, Section 3....13

Part 1, The Seer and the Seen, Section 4....15

Part 1, The Seer and the Seen, Section 5....17

Part 1, The Seer and the Seen, Section 6....20

Part 1, The Seer and the Seen, Section 7....22

Part 1, The Seer and the Seen, Section 8....26

Part 1, The Seer and the Seen, Section 9....29

Part 2, Sound and the Mainstream, Section 1....31

Part 2, Sound and the Mainstream, Section 2....33

Part 2, Sound and the Mainstream, Section 3....35

Part 2, Sound and the Mainstream, Section 4....38

Part 3, The Shadow and the Act, Section 1....40

Part 3, The Shadow and the Act, Section 2....43

Part 3, The Shadow and the Act, Section 3....45

Part 3, The Shadow and the Act, Section 4....47

Characters....50

Objects/Places....54

Themes....57

Style.....61

Historical Context.....64

Critical Overview.....65

Criticism.....66

Critical Essay #1.....67

Critical Essay #2.....70

Critical Essay #3.....76

Quotes.....86

Topics for Further Study.....91

Compare and Contrast.....92

What Do I Read Next?.....93

Further Study.....94

Bibliography.....95

Copyright Information.....96

Introduction

In his introduction to *Shadow and Act* (1964), Ralph Ellison describes the essays to come as "an attempt to transform some of the themes, the problems, the enigmas, the contradictions of character and culture native to my predicament, into what Andre Malraux has described as 'conscious thought.'"

This collection consists of essays written over two decades, spanning Ellison's growth as a literary and social critic, his rise to recognition as a serious fiction writer, and his establishment as a thinker and teacher. The essays are divided thematically into three sections; as the author summarizes, they are "concerned with literature and folklore, with Negro musical expression□especially jazz and the blues□and with the complex relationship between the Negro subculture and North America as a whole."

The bulk of the collection consists of the first section, "The Seer and the Seen," in which Ellison uses interviews and essays to address his personal experience of being what he calls "Negro American," of African descent, but specifically American. He draws on classic American authors, particularly Twain, Hemingway, Faulkner, and Richard Wright, and both lauds and criticizes them in an effort to represent his experience. "Sound and the Mainstream" explores the way music is fundamental to his life and chronicles the careers and influence of several artists.

Shadow and the Act draws on different aspects of the way African American and Caucasian American culture intersect. In keeping with his lifelong commitment to representing the individual with integrity, Ellison draws on personal anecdotes as well as his sophisticated analyses of literary and musical culture in an effort to chronicle his experience of being an African American.

Author Biography

Ralph Waldo Ellison was born on March 1, 1914, in Oklahoma City, Oklahoma. His father, who died when the author was three years old, named his son for the philosopher-writer Ralph Waldo Emerson in hopes that his son would one day become a poet. In his introduction to *Shadow and Act,* Ellison characterizes his Oklahoma community as a "chaotic" mix of cultural influences, curiously free of the race stigma inherent to the South and Northeast, and the epitome of the American frontier. The jazz scene in Oklahoma City and Kansas City, in particular, had an impact on the author's view of the world; he studied music throughout his childhood, and when he finished high school, traveled to Tuskegee University in pursuit of formal training in classical music. He was a voracious reader all of his life and, while at Tuskegee, Ellison read T. S. Eliot's *The Wasteland,* which moved him greatly and directed him toward a career in writing.

In 1936, after his third year at Tuskegee, he left the South for a summer job in New York City, where he met the author Richard Wright. Newly arrived in New York himself, Wright invited Ellison to write a book review and a short story for his publication, thus initiating Ellison into the world of writing. Wright fostered Ellison's work for the next several years, during which Ellison published articles for magazines sponsored by the New York Federal Writers Project, such as *New Challenge and New Masses. Shadow and Act* contains work largely from this period and details the author's personal reckonings with race, politics, literature, and music in his American culture. In 1952, Ellison's novel *Invisible Man,* the product of seven years of work, was given the National Book Award. Somewhat autobiographical, the novel draws upon the author's experiences as a young man at a southern university, and the influence the communist party had over him as he explores his identity. The novel brought Ellison national fame, both for its artistry and its controversial content, and it continues to be taught regularly in schools today. Following the success of *Invisible Man,* Ellison began teaching at various universities nationwide although his home base, and the heart of his work, was Harlem. He died in Harlem on April 16, 1994, with his long-awaited second novel unpublished. The unfinished work was edited after his death by his literary executor and published posthumously with the title *Juneteenth*

Plot Summary

Section One: "The Seer and the Seen"

The first section of *Shadow and Act* is comprised of ten pieces mainly concerning fiction and folklore. In the interviews, "That Same Pain, That Same Pleasure" and "The Art of Fiction," as well as in the speech, "Brave Words for a Startling Occasion," Ellison discusses his influences and evolution as a writer, culminating in his novel *Invisible Man*. "Twentieth-Century Fiction and the Black Mask of Humanity" and "Beating That Boy" concern ways that modern fiction writers struggle with how to represent African Americans in fiction. Ellison discusses the ways black Americans, by definition, challenge American cultural assumptions, and the responsibility of black and white writers alike in representing them. "Hidden Name and Complex Fate" is a discussion of the power of names, and of the act of naming, which is by definition the work of the novelist. "Stephen Crane and the Mainstream of American Fiction" is Ellison's introduction to the 1960 release of *The Red Badge of Courage,* in which he lauds the author's skills, focused mainly on his use of moral imperative in his fiction. "Change the Joke and Slip the Yoke" is a response to Stanley Edgar Hyman's assertions about the function of the "darky entertainer" in American culture. In his response, Ellison outlines his thesis that the comical image of the minstrel serves to invert white America's guilt over slavery into laughter, and thus absolve the culture through identification. "Richard Wright's Blues" is Ellison's contention that the autobiographical *Black Boy* fits the definition of the blues, in the sense that the blues amount to the lyrical expression of individual pain and tragedy. "The Word and the Jug," by contrast, is a response to critic Irving Howe's assertion that Wright is a better and more culturally responsible writer than Ellison and James Baldwin. In the essay, Ellison discusses the ways that Wright's writing falls short of major modern fiction because of its adherence to ideology, and he contends that social critics fall prey to the tendency to view minorities as isolated entities, rather than as part of the larger American culture.

Section Two: "Sound and the Mainstream"

Part 2 of *Shadow and Act* is concerned with music, particularly jazz and blues, as expressions of African-American culture. "Living With Music" is Ellison's account of the music in his neighborhood and how, although it can be cause for writer's block, it is integral to his life. "The Golden Age, Time Past" is a nostalgic look at Minton's Playhouse, the site of the evolution of jazz culture in New York. In "As the Spirit Moves Mahalia," Ellison praises and chronicles the rise of Mahalia Jackson, a gospel singer who, despite her mastery of jazz and blues, maintains the church as her forum. "On Bird, Bird-Watching, and Jazz," he speculates on the way that Charlie Parker, although preoccupied with avoiding the role of performer, effectively made his entire life a performance through his infamous wild behavior. Ellison essentially eulogizes jazz guitarist Charlie Christian and blues singer Jimmy Rushing in "The Charlie Christian

Story" and "Remembering Jimmy." In "Blues People," Ellison takes writer LeRoi Jones to task for his limited vision in establishing blues in the context of American culture.

Section Three: "The Shadow and the Act"

In the final section of *Shadow and Act*, Ellison considers the way African-American culture is both integrally a part of, but deeply misunderstood by, the mainstream. "Some Questions and Some Answers" is an interview in which Ellison espouses his notion that African-American culture is an outgrowth of and a response to the larger American culture and the ways it is impossible for the two to be mutually exclusive. "The Shadow and the Act" is Ellison's response to several films that depict African Americans in new, though limited, ways. "The Way It Is" summarizes an interview with a middle-aged black woman in an effort to chronicle the effects of World War II, poverty, and discrimination on the average African American. In "Harlem Is Nowhere," the author describes the work of the Lafargue Psychiatric Clinic, a clinic that meets the needs of the chronically mentally ill in Harlem, and the ways that disenfranchisement of the African-American subculture has created conditions that foster mental illness. Finally, "An American Dilemma: A Review" is Ellison's indictment of the attempt at practicing sociology in a vacuum. Once again he contends that African-American culture cannot be understood as simply a social pathology, but as interactive with and inextricably a part of American culture as a whole.

Part 1, The Seer and the Seen, Section 1

Part 1, The Seer and the Seen, Section 1 Summary and Analysis

This book is a collection of essays and book reviews written and published by Negro novelist and critic Ralph Ellison during the middle years of the 20th Century - the Forties, Fifties and early Sixties, a time of increasing racial tensions between Negroes and whites. "Negro" was the term then in use for African-American, and is the sole term used throughout this book. Its use in this analysis is therefore reflective of this usage, and of the socio-cultural-literary context in which it was written. The essays include reviews and criticisms of a number of books, capsule biographies of well-known black performers and authors, and analysis of the origins of several key elements of Negro culture (including jazz, racism and family life). Throughout the essays, several common themes emerge, including the relationship between American society and the Negro, the relationship between art (music, literature) and life, and individualversus group identity.

The essays in this part of the book contain commentary, analysis, and reflection on the way Negroes, their culture, and their experiences are viewed and/or portrayed, by both Negro and non-Negro writers, in American literature.

"That Same Pain, That Same Pleasure: An Interview" (1961). This essay is a transcript of an interview of the author conducted by a man named Richard Stern. Stern begins the interview by asking the author to accept and not debate the premise that he (the author) has transcended "the limitations of most Negro fiction", and asks him to explain how that happened. The author explains that the main factor was being exposed at a young age to experiences outside the so-called "Negro" experience, and cites as a primary example his friendship with a young white boy, their common interest in electronics, and the boy's mother's welcoming him into their home. A footnote reveals that later in life the author was able to locate the man whom this boy had grown into, a man involved in the military as an electrical engineer. He also cites the way his mother, a part-time housekeeper, brought home books and recordings of operas discarded by her white employers, and gave them to her sons to enjoy and learn from. He also discusses the effects of his having grown up in Oklahoma, a state with no history of slavery, and of being aware of material things he didn't have but which he fully believed, and was taught, were attainable by Negroes because of his faith in education and hard work.

The author then discusses at length the reasons why his simultaneous interest in both jazz and classical music is perhaps not as incongruous as it might appear. He refers to jazz; its history and its roots speaking to him specifically of the history and culture of the Negro people, while classical music spoke to him in more general terms of the larger experience of being human. He also speaks of how, as a boy from the city, he felt like an outsider when confronted with the cultural and social experiences of Negroes who lived in an agricultural environment. Later in the interview, however, he tells of how he

came to realize that the attitudes and experiences of the rural Negroes spoke more immediately and fully to his perspective of the Negro cultural experience than the intellectual commentary of Negro politicians and academics (see "Quotes", p 11). He refers to how Americans in general and Negro Americans in particular were, and are, continuing to struggle to define their identities, as a culture, as separate cultures, and as individuals living in both (see "Quotes", p. 12). He sums up his experience by referring to his belief in, the ongoing existence of, and challenging relationship between that which is transcendent in the world and that which is limiting and destructive (see "Quotes", p.20). In conclusion, he refers to his work as a writer as his way of confronting the pain and pleasure of his people. "It is," he says, "my way of seeing that it not be in vain."

This essay introduces and defines the key themes of most of the essays contained in this book, and therefore of the book itself. Primary amongst these is an exploration of the relationship between the Negro, as both an individual and as part of a culture, and American society. It's important to note that both here and throughout the book the author takes great pains to define Negroes in America as Americans - not Negro Americans, just Americans. Herein lies a possible explanation for the essay's title, in which can be seen as a suggestion that white and Negro Americans, in many ways, experience the same pains and the same pleasures. Further in this vein, the author suggests that both communities share essentially the same values (a belief in freedom and the rights of the individual) and essentially the same cultural origins (rebellion against oppression, albeit rebellion that manifests in very different ways in the different cultures). Indeed, the author argues throughout his book that so-called Negro society is just as American as so-called white society, and in this essay, he uses examples from his life and experiences to illustrate his point. Specifically, his narrative of his childhood (his friendship with a white boy, his exposure to so-called white culture) suggests that his reactions to the various influences he encountered were no different from reactions that might be experienced by white children - he learned the value of human friendship, and he was exposed (through music) to a broader definition of being human. The only difference, the author implies, is that that what he experienced was, to all intents and purposes, forbidden because of his race. This barrier, the author suggests here and throughout the book, is simultaneously a barrier to mutual understanding and respect between the two cultures and, for Negroes, a reason for introspection and for developing unique perspectives on, and experiences within, the larger context of being American.

The second key theme of the essay introduced here is that of exploring the relationship between individual and group identity. Here again the author's references to childhood experience both introduce this theme and foreshadow its deepening development throughout the book. He suggests that his individual experience and perspective of white culture made him something of an outsider within the Negro community, while his very being, his Negro-ness, made him a total outsider within the white community. There is the sense, however, that the author believes himself to be in the process of transcending the limitations of both cultures. At the very least, he makes a plea for both sides of the race/culture war to transcend preconceptions about themselves and each other, and thereby come to both recognize and explore their common humanity - their

mutual belief in, and celebration of, the value of the individual and the individual experience. It could be argued that this is the ultimate American philosophical position - that each individual has the right to his/her own human identity. This argument is never stated outright in either this essay or in the book, but is nevertheless a psychological and sociological underpinning to the conditions both the essay and book explore.

The third principal theme of the book is introduced in the final lines of this essay. The relationship between art and life, the way the latter is used as a resource to create the former, the way the former transforms and transcends the latter, the way the latter is informed by the former - all these aspects of the art/life relationship are explored throughout the novel in terms of both literature and music. At the end of this essay, the author's comment about the transformative potential of his work foreshadows the way in which he explores how life and art transform each other in other works of literature (i.e., *Black Boy, The Red Badge of Courage*) and music (all the essays in Section 2). There is also ironic foreshadowing here, in that the reference also foreshadows the author's analysis of how art ignores or minimizes reality in the movies (*Shadow and Act*, Section 3).

Part 1, The Seer and the Seen, Section 2

Part 1, The Seer and the Seen, Section 2 Summary and Analysis

"Twentieth Century Fiction and the Black Mask of Humanity" (written 1946, published 1953). This essay begins with a preface printed at the time it was originally published, in which the author explains it was the product of a young man's writing, and that it might have more value presented as such "for it says perhaps as much about me as a member of a minority as it does about literature". The essay begins with an extensive commentary on the consistently shallow, ultimately negative, and small number of Negro characters in American fiction, citing the works of Hemingway, Faulkner, and Steinbeck as examples. He then theorizes about why the Negro in life, in all his complexity and history, is almost always portrayed in fiction as less than fully human (see "Quotes", p. 28). He then examines at detailed length the way in which three representative (and well known) American writers dealt with Negro characters.

First, the author examines the character of Jim in *Huckleberry Finn*, whom the author describes as "not simply a slave, he is a symbol of humanity, and in freeing Jim, Huck makes a bid to free himself of the conventionalized evil taken for civilization by the town". He goes on to describe Huck's actions as an act of defiance against not just the culture of the town but the culture of literature, which to this point had universally portrayed the Negro as a symbol of evil, and suggests that Huck is in fact an embodiment of an essential American dilemma (see "Quotes', p. 33). At the conclusion of the essay, in fact, the author suggests that Mark Twain, the author of *Huckleberry Finn*, knew that "humanity masked its face with blackness".

The author then turns to the writings of Ernest Hemingway, and begins with an examination of how American literature in the years following the publication of *Huckleberry Finn* rejected its humanism in favor of a shallow individualism, intellectual superficiality, and an unwillingness to probe deeply into the psychology of American culture. He then refers to the writings of Hemingway and others of his generation (referred to variously, here and elsewhere as "the lost generation" and the "hard-boiled" school of writing) as more interested in exploring their own personal myths as artists rather than the myths of a culture. He suggests that these explorations are conducted through experiments in writing technique rather than through contemplation of the larger mythic, cultural framework within which such writing takes place. In this context, he defines the reason for the portrayals of Negro characters, limited in both number and dimension, as being "an image of the unorganized, irrational forces of American life, forces through which, by projecting them in forms of images of an easily dominated minority, the white individual seeks to be at home in the vast unknown world of America. Perhaps the object of the stereotype is not so much to crush the Negro as to console the white man". Next, the author examines the work of William Faulkner, a southern writer who tended to present his Negro characters as stereotypes of either "the good

nigger" or "the bad nigger". Nevertheless, the author claims, Faulkner seemed to be exploring, in a way unique to artists born, raised, and working in southern America (the home, it must be remembered, of institutionalized slavery), the tension between such stereotypes and the deeper humanity they concealed from both the writer and the reader.

In conclusion, the author suggests that the ultimate responsibility for defining the Negro experience in America is up to Negro artists, and that ultimately, writing is a tool for exploration, definition, and change of society's ethical and moral context.

The book's three principal themes are developed again in this essay, with the primary focus being on the more negative ways in which art and life interrelate; specifically, the way in which white-written literature tends to ignore and/or dehumanize the Negro. Here the author defines a key point made again and again throughout the essays: that this literary attitude is in fact a manifestation of a societal attitude; that the Negro, in life and in literature, is a scapegoat, less a portrayal and more a projection, an outward focus of deeply buried inner blame, guilt, frustration, and/or hypocrisy. The quote at the end of the essay, in which the author refers to Mark Twain's knowledge that "America masked its face with blackness", is a summation of this thematic perspective.

Later in the book, the author explores the dilemma in which white Americans find themselves, a dilemma first outlined in this essay. This dilemma, the author suggests, arises from a general belief in America, in the values of the US Constitution, which proclaims that "all men are created equal", and a simultaneous belief, all too often acted upon in white America, that the Negro is anything but. His suggestion is that Huckleberry Finn is an embodiment of this dilemma, and that in having Huck act to preserve the dignity of the slave Jim, Twain actually makes one of the few pleas for transcendent humanism in American literature. On another level, the author's analysis of the dilemma combined with his suggestions about Twain and Huck Finn are, in fact, manifestations of the book's second key theme, the relationship between art and life. In other words, Huck Finn, an artistic (literary) creation, is an embodiment of a real-life situation.

In this section there are also references to the book's third key theme, which is exploring the relationship between individual and group identity. On the one hand, Huck Finn makes a decision based on an individual rather than a group perspective. On the other hand, so does the writer Ernest Hemingway - indeed, his entire life and stylistic approach to the work is based on and defined by his belief in the supremacy of individuality. And yet, the author suggests, Hemingway's work is also strongly affected by the broader, socio-American perspective on the Negro people ... that is, that they are less than human. In other words, this chapter presents two sides of the same coin - the strengths and dangers of the philosophy of the individual.

Part 1, The Seer and the Seen, Section 3

Part 1, The Seer and the Seen, Section 3 Summary and Analysis

"Change the Joke and Slip the Yoke" (published 1958). In a preface to this essay, the author indicates that it began as a letter to a friend and colleague, Stanley Edgar Hyman, and evolved into a debate in essay form, adding that the second part of the essay appeared in another publication in 1963. The essay itself begins with the author offering the perspective that Hyman's emphasis on folk tradition and archetype, when considering the presence of the Negro in fiction, is relevant but shallow, and therefore flawed. He (the author) refers specifically to Hyman's perception that the stereotype of the Negro (in popular culture as well as in fiction) is a manifestation of the trickster archetype, and contradicts the theory by suggesting that Hyman's definition of the archetype, in Negro terms, is in fact nothing more than a redevelopment of the stereotypical blackface music hall performer. He goes into the history and characteristics of this type of performance, suggesting that it is in fact a fear-inspired perversion, by white society, of Negro cultural characteristics (dancing, jokes, music, etc). He describes the blackface stereotype/character as a kind of catharsis for white guilt, as a means for white society to absolve itself of responsibility over how it's treated black people by in fact perpetuating the myth that the Negro is a sub-human; grotesque, laughable, but ultimately not fully human. He confronts Hyman's contention that the trickster aspects of the stereotype have their origins in African culture with several examples of how, in music hall performances and in literature alike, the stereotype is in fact a construct of white, specifically American, beliefs about the Negro which he then, in turn, describes as a manifestation of the American's beliefs about himself. The author then, and at length, discusses Hyman's critical commentary on the characters in his (the author's) novel *Invisible Man*, arguing that Hyman's argument that the characters are manifestations of the trickster archetype is limited, in the same way that American perspectives on the Negro in general are limited.

The author suggests that this blackface-manifested ambivalence of white America towards Negro America is, in fact, a projection of its own ambivalence about itself - that in projecting so much negativity onto the presence and culture of the Negro, the white American is avoiding looking at the shallowness of his own culture (see "Quotes", p. 53). The author refers to the way the original rebels who fought against the control of the British themselves donned masks in order to stage their rebellion, arguing that American culture is entirely consumed and governed by an obsession with maintaining appearance as opposed to living in connection with reality. He cites several important individuals in American history (Benjamin Franklin, Ernest Hemingway, William Faulkner, Abraham Lincoln) as examples of the way Americans in general, and white Americans in particular, create images of themselves and live according to those images, rather than examining their personal and cultural truths and living according to those truths.

In conclusion, the author suggests that while the blackface stereotype, albeit a negative one, is a part of American Negro cultural heritage in the same way as is the blues or jazz , it is the responsibility of artists in general and novelists in particular "to translate its meanings into wider, more precise vocabularies...".

The first element to consider here is the essay's title. The phrase "slipping the yoke" is never explicitly defined in the essay, but because a "yoke" is a term to describe a kind of harness worn by beasts of burden (horses, oxen), it's possible to see Ellison's use of the term as a reference to the "yoke" of submission and projected evil worn by the Negro. The title of the essay can therefore be seen as a summation of the author's argument - by altering the joke of the blackface/minstrel portrayal of Negroes, essentially by no longer holding up Negro-ness as a joke, the Negro people can therefore get out of the socio-cultural "yoke" of submission in which they find themselves.

A second important element to consider here is the reference to the trickster archetype. An archetype is a universal image, an embodiment of a pervasive human truth. A trickster, then, is an archetype of a chaotic, mischievous spirit, acting out of impulse and intense feeling, disrespectful of rules, poking fun at, and at times even breaking down, narrow perspectives. In short, the purpose of the trickster (an archetype that appears in almost every culture and mythology) is to broaden human experience and perception. In this context, therefore, it's possible to see that the author's respectful rebuttal of Hyman's argument makes sense - a blackface/minstrel performer does seem to be more of a restrictive than enlightening presence, a re-enforcer rather than destroyer of narrow perspectives.

Finally, two brief points should be mentioned. The author's point about America's obsession with image and mask rather than with substantive truth can be seen as still accurate today in relation to contemporary culture's obsession with celebrity, image, and sensationalism. Point two - the author's concluding plea for broader perspectives is a manifestation of one of the book's key themes, the way in which art can, and in his view should, be used to transform perspectives in life.

Part 1, The Seer and the Seen, Section 4

Part 1, The Seer and the Seen, Section 4 Summary and Analysis

"Stephen Crane and the Mainstream of American Fiction" (published as an introduction to *The Red Badge of Courage,* 1960*)*. The author begins this essay by commenting on Stephen Crane's background, as a child of conservative evangelical Christians born in the socio-cultural aftermath of the American Civil War (see "Quotes", p. 61). He continues with comments on Crane's visionary and technical gifts as a writer and on the way critical and popular consideration of those gifts has been colored by reaction to Crane's flamboyant life and untimely death at the age of twenty-nine. He then examines ways in which Crane might have come to a factual understanding of the Civil War experience without actually having fought in it. He suggests that Crane might have gained knowledge from his older brother who fought in the war, and also from the socio-cultural-political ramifications of the war. The author suggests, in fact, that such wars "are never really won", but continue to be fought in the political, psychological, and emotional lives of those who lived through them and in the culture born in their aftermath. In this context, the author develops the theory that *The Red Badge* is less about the incidents of the war itself than it is ultimately about the individual experience of the war; specifically, the way in which individual ways of thinking, feeling, believing and acting are challenged and changed (see "Quotes", p 71).

As the author expands his theory into examinations of Crane's other writings, he suggests that *The Red Badge* is in fact archetypal, exploring as it does (in the way of all Crane's work) the ways ideology, politics, and culture are the source of ongoing, non-military civil wars within the life of America as a whole. After offering specific examples of this perspective taken from several of Crane's stories, the author concludes by suggesting that Crane was, and continues to be, unique in the history of American literature (see "Quotes", p. 76).

The Red Badge of Courage is one of the most famous novels in American literary history, exploring from the perspective of a napve young soldier the true, harrowing, suffering-inducing nature of war. The author uses his analysis of the book and its author's approach to develop two of the primary themes of his own book, the first being the exploration of nature of the relationship between art and life, which the author suggests here can be manifested in a variety of ways. The implication is that other writers, like Crane, must look to any source they can for both information and inspiration.

The second theme of *Shadow and Act* explored here, the particular influence of American society on Negro art and culture, is dealt with more obliquely than in other essays. In his analysis of *The Red Badge*, the author is essentially commenting on the influence of American society in general, rather than on Negro society in particular. In other words, the inclusion of this essay is intended to illuminate *Shadow and Act's*

central point about American society and its limited perspective. By depicting the way that perspective is challenged by the white Crane, who offers challenge in the same way as the Negro author in the following section, the author of *Shadow and Act* holds up an example of how all authors, both white and Negro, need to write, work and create in the same inquisitive, fearless, and intuitive spirit.

Part 1, The Seer and the Seen, Section 5

Part 1, The Seer and the Seen, Section 5 Summary and Analysis

"Richard Wright's Blues" (published 1945). The essay begins with a direct statement of what, in the author's opinion, Negro writer Richard Wright is struggling to achieve in his writing in general and in his autobiography, *Black Boy* in particular (see "Quotes", p. 77). He then goes on to compare Wright's writing to that of other writers (Nehru, Joyce, Dostoyevski), and suggests that like theirs, Wright's writing and perspective on his life is colored by a unique, socio-cultural context, defined and illuminated in Wright's case by an equally unique Negro art form - the blues (see "Objects/Places - The Blues"). The author then examines in depth Wright's childhood and youth - in particular, the violence (emotional, cultural and spiritual) he experienced as a black boy growing up in the Southern United States. While doing so, he challenges critics who suggest that *Black Boy* doesn't offer enough insight into how Wright came to be the author he is by saying that their attitude is the result of the American culture's pervasive and insistent dehumanization of the Negro. He also suggests that while Wright's experiences are, in most cases, unique to him as an individual, there are still enough cultural generalities hinted at and/or explicitly defined in *Black Boy* that are "comprehensible for Americans to create the social atmosphere in which other black boys might freely bloom".

After commenting on how the purpose of art is to define life by distilling it, the author suggests that the central conflict in Wright's life and writing in general was between his drive to create a sense of individuality for himself and the presence in Negro culture of an overriding racial identity, defined by white America, which swamped such individuality. This conflict, the author suggests, began at an early stage and manifested in a tendency towards physically and emotionally violent outbursts, experiences Wright describes as symbolically reliving in his dreams, writing about them in terms the author describes as being equivalent in spiritual and psychological universality to those of characters in Greek tragedies. The author then describes the way critics, white and Negro alike (the Negro critics, the author suggests, catering to and embodying white stereotypes of Negroes), see Wright's writings about his dreams as a manifestation of his difficulty with human relationships, but argues that such comments are in fact the result of white preconceptions about Negro culture.

The author then examines those preconceptions in detail. The first is that Negroes live in a certain way in order to fulfill the larger societal belief that they are less intelligent, a situation which the author describes as an act of self-preservation in a culture, both Negro and white, that condemns individuality of any kind, including intelligence. The second preconception is that Negroes' physical and sexual expressions of energy and passion are manifestations of a more earthy humanity rather than the release of nervous energy, contained in the face of rigid societal and cultural restrictions on behavior, which is what the author suggests they in fact are.

At that point, the author returns to the essay's concern with the Negro community's pervasive condemnation of, and resistance to, individuality, describing how attempts were made (by both whites and blacks) to literally beat the spirit of independence and individuality out of Richard Wright, an experience the author suggests was common to many other black boys. He then suggests that white society is unaware of this violent aspect of Negro culture simply because it doesn't want to know - that it's afraid of being forced to recognize Negroes as human beings. He relates this idea to Wright's experience by saying that because Wright rejected both cultural and personal violence, he had to also reject the South (the community, spiritual and physical, in which he grew up) and the parts of the South that lived in him. He knew that to understand and fulfill himself, he had to transcend himself and the limited way of seeing, believing, and understanding in which he'd been raised (see "Quotes", p. 93).

In the conclusion to this essay, the author returns to the image of the blues, stating that "their attraction lies in [the way] they at once express both the agony of life and the possibility of conquering it through sheer toughness of spirit". He compares the spirit of *Black Boy* to the spirit of the blues, commenting that Wright has shown his Negro readers their own lives, and by the example of his life has also shown them that something other than "the American Negro impulse toward self-annihilation" is possible. He suggests that by presenting his life and experience as honestly as he has, Wright has confronted "the guilty conscience of America".

This essay, perhaps more than any other in the book, exemplifies several of the author's narrative tendencies. The first is an inclination towards diffuse focus, a way of wandering from incisive point to example of that point to historical background to examination of philosophical considerations back to incisive point, or perhaps the introduction of another. There is, at times, a sense of confusion, of the author trying too hard to cover too many bases. In most cases, however, everything he's saying is vital to the overall point he is attempting to make in both the essay and the book - that all the ideas and situations he's exploring are essentially interrelated, both in terms of the experience of the individual and of similar experiences lived by other individuals in other socio-cultural contexts.

To look at it another way, with its sense of focused randomness, the essay embodies a thematically relevant blend of style and substance that permeates the book. This blend, at times, has echoes of the wandering, free-associative, emotionally subjective style of jazz, a genre of music which, like the blues, has its roots in Negro culture, and is generally defined as a manifestation of simultaneously conscious and unconscious states of perception, reacting, and being. In other words, the forms of jazz, the blues, and the writing of many of the essays in this book have a degree of consciously defined structure that lends them coherence, but within that structure there is considerable freedom for impulses to be developed, to lead to other impulses, and to manifest as expressions of less structured feeling and impression. This book, to coin a phrase, is literary jazz.

Meanwhile, the book's overall thematic point about interrelations (between art and life, between Negro and white, between past and present, between music and words) also

manifests in the second of the author's tendencies, towards an intertwining of themes. In this essay, questions of the relationship between American society and the Negro, the relationship between art (in this case, literature) and life, and individual versus group identity are all explored in ways that link one to the other, and all to one particular life - that of Richard Wright. Yes, the author persuasively argues that Wright's experience is in no way the same experience of every Negro, and yes, he also argues that white American culture should in no way see it as such. There is also the sense, however, that this essay defines and develops a paradox about the relationship between the individual and the group central to the overall perspective of *Shadow and Act*. This is the idea that there is no individual experience without that of the group, there is no group experience without that of the individual, and that there is no group experience without another group by which to judge that experience. It's interesting to note, meanwhile, that very rarely in this book are the dynamics of individual-to-individual relationships explored.

There is another paradox defined and developed in this essay - the suggestion that culturally and/or individually defined experiences are, in fact, universal. This suggestion is first made in the first paragraph, where Richard Wright's experience and technique are likened to those of other, non-Negro, non-American writers. Perhaps the point could be made more accurately this way - that while the specifics of an experience might be unique, the fact of having a unique experience is not itself unique. A unique experience to a Russian is, at its core, the same as a unique experience to a Negro American as it is to a character in a Greek tragedy - the sense of discovery, of self-exploration, and of self-definition is ultimately the same.

Part 1, The Seer and the Seen, Section 6

Part 1, The Seer and the Seen, Section 6 Summary and Analysis

These two selections, written several years apart and each focused on a different piece of writing, both explore the author's perspective on ways in which fiction writing in America simultaneously explores, defines, and denies the pervasive issue of race relations.

"Beating that Boy" (published 1945). The essay opens with a definition of its title - "beating that boy" refers to the way Negroes refer to the inevitable topic of conversation when they visit white friends, the so-called "Negro problem", and uses a book called *Primer for White Folks* as an example of the way that the "problem" has become embedded in America's literature.

Primer for White Folks is described as a collection of writings, fiction and non-fiction, written by white and Negro writers alike. The author comments that while each of the pieces seems to have a new and fresh meaning because of the way it's been juxtaposed with other writings, they all share a common characteristic. They avoid, he claims, a deep examination of the issue at the heart of the "Negro problem" (a euphemism, he says, for ongoing racial tension in America). That issue, the author suggests, is the fact that America as a society, and even its writers (who are, in theory at least, responsible for examining that which society as a whole cannot and will not face), cannot and will not confront the hypocrisy at the core of its very existence (see "Quotes", p. 99). The author comments that for the most part, American literary artists are unaware that their creative powers, voice and influence are compromised by this situation, but suggests that many of the writings in *Primer for White Folks* at least contain some glimmers of hope, for both "a superior society and a more vital literature."

"Brave Words for a Startling Occasion" (speech, 1953). This speech was written for, and presented at, the occasion of the author being presented with an award for his book *Invisible Man*. The author speaks of his gratitude for receiving the award in spite of what he feels are the book's flaws and failings. He reflects upon his attempts to find a new form in which to work, discussing at length earlier forms of the American novel that he rejected because they didn't feel as though they connected fully with either the experience he was exploring or the linguistic, cultural, and emotional contexts of that experience (see "Quotes", p. 104). He refers to a figure in classical Greek mythology, the rapidly shape-shifting Proteus, when describing the challenge of grasping and defining a form of his own. He develops this idea further by suggesting that life itself, and American life in particular, is defined by similar rapid shifts in perspective, attitude, and action. He then concludes his speech with the suggestion that once novelists and artists manage to grasp a shape that both encompasses and illuminates this spirit of change, they also grasp at least the possibility that the problems of being human can be solved (see "Quotes", p. 105).

The key theme of *Shadow and Act* explored in these two pieces is the relationship between American society and the Negro - specifically, the way that relationship is explored in literature. The juxtaposition of the two pieces is interesting in itself, given that the first is a commentary by the author on the work of other writers, while the second is his commentary on his own. It may seem at first glance that there is little to connect the two pieces. Upon deeper consideration, however, it's possible to see that the author seems to believe that to date, no piece of writing, not even his own, is fully successful at exploring the core issue defined in the first piece - America's almost schizophrenic inability to cope with its own realities.

An interesting note here is that the second essay in this section contains the book's second reference to fairy tales (see "Quotes", pp. 20 and 105). The two references seem to suggest that the author believes in the power of transformation found in so many fairy tales - that the tension between the Negro and white races, based on deeply experienced socio-cultural differences, can be magically transfigured into something harmonious. In other words, there seems to be, in the author, a transcendent hope, buried through most of the book by intellectual analysis and barely restrained resentment, that the differences between the two races can actually be fitted together to create something stronger, more deeply compassionate and broader in universal perspective, than either can be on its own.

Part 1, The Seer and the Seen, Section 7

Part 1, The Seer and the Seen, Section 7 Summary and Analysis

This section begins with a preface that describes the two components of this piece as having been completed in response to a pair of articles (like the two articles in this section, published separately) by the "Northern white liberal" commentator Irving Howe.

"The World and the Jug", part 1 (published 1963). The author begins his essay with a summing up of Howe's first article, a positive commentary on the book *Native Son* by Richard Wright. Howe, according to the author, sets up Wright and his work as a hero, a true voice of the American Negro, and defines the work of other, younger writers (including the author) as lesser works. Howe, according to the author, is ultimately suggesting that because the author and other Negro writers are attempting to move beyond being *only* Negro writers, they are in fact lesser artists than Wright. Howe, the author asserts, is convinced that the only way the voice of a Negro writer can be true is if that voice is similar to Wright's - angry, rebellious, violent, and pained. The author points out that just because Wright's experience manifests in his art as anger and violence, it doesn't mean that all Negro writers define their voices and experiences in the same terms. He nevertheless defends Wright's writing as well as his own, suggesting that any artist can only write truly if writing from his own personal and cultural experience (see "Quotes", p 112). He goes on to comment on what he sees as Howe's assertions about his (the author's) identity as an individual, as a Negro, and as a writer; assertions made in comparison to the same aspects of Wright's life and art. The author suggests that before making such assertions, Howe should get to know Wright as an individual and as a life.

The latter section of this essay is concerned with what the author contends is Howe's belief that the Negro race is utterly defined by segregation - the complete separation of the Negro experience from that of the white. The first point the author makes is that in the Southern United States it's impossible for whites to do anything without having at least some awareness, sometimes positive but mostly negative, of the Negro. The author suggests that, in his words, Howe sees "segregation as an opaque steel jug with the Negroes inside waiting for some black messiah to come along and blow the cork". The author, however, goes on to say that if Negro artists like himself and the other young writers Howe derides are in a jug, their jug is transparent - they are able to see the outside world and learn from it, read and understand and explore and communicate, in ways that Wright, the author respectfully suggests, did not. He goes on to say that Wright, as admirable and necessary a spirit as he was, was also limited by his perspective in a way that he (the author) and other young Negro writers are not. He concludes by questioning whether his sense of Negro life must be condemned because it's different from Wright's and therefore from what Howe believes is the experience of every Negro.

"The World and the Jug", part 2 (published 1964). The second part of this essay begins with several comments by the author in response to comments apparently made by Howe accusing the author of "misrepresentation" and "distortion". The author, with barely restrained but evident anger, comments that Howe's placement of him within the context of Howe's and Wright's ideas of the Negro experience is an even worse form of segregation than, for example, being forced to ride in the back of a bus in the Southern United States. It is, the author claims, a segregation of ideas and words, made all the more dangerous by Howe's position of being both alienated from and inexperienced with the very people he's writing about. He hints that this attitude is part of the pervasive attitude towards the Negro in American culture, the product not so much of willful forgetfulness but discomfort with an all too present aspect of that culture that is both painful memory and current fact - fear and misunderstanding of the Negro (see "Quotes", p. 124).

The author then goes on to suggest that his initial reaction to Howe was "neither motivated by racial defensiveness nor addressed to his own racial identity", but a response by a writer whose creative context had been challenged and misunderstood by a critic with limited perception and experience. He also comments on the Negro perspective that there is a difference between white Americans and Jewish Americans (the implication is that Howe is Jewish), and at the same time a similarity between Jewish Americans and Negroes with pale enough skin to, as the author puts it, "[pass] for white". He suggests that America would benefit from such people embracing rather than concealing their cultural identity, and comments that, "the diversity of American life is often painful, frequently burdensome and always a source of conflict, but in it lies our fate and our hope." The author then questions the validity of Howe's placing him (the author) and other young Negro writers in the same experiential category as Richard Wright, telling a long story about an encounter he had as a youth with a white farmer which led him (the author) to a new understanding of how easy it is to make inappropriate snap judgments. He concludes this section with a long analysis of how Howe's emphasis on what he sees as the collective experience of being Negro has little room in it for the individual's experience, and an even longer explanation of what being Negro actually means (for the beginning of this description see "Quotes", p. 131).

The middle of the essay is defined by the author's perspective on Howe's views of him as a writer. He begins by pointing out contradictions within Howe's criticisms of him and other young writers, and also points out the limited nature of Howe's perceptions of Wright's work - i.e., the belief that because Wright experienced life in Mississippi in one way, all Negroes experienced life in Mississippi the same way. He comments on Wright's lack of awareness of the role Negro folk culture played in Wright's writing, and explains his own personal experiences (that he wasn't, in some instances, as limited by being Negro as he suggests Howe believes him and other Negroes to have been). He defends his own writing by suggesting that he wrote about the Negro experience "not because [he] was helpless before his racial condition, but because [he] *put* it there" (italics Ellison's), and concludes with the passionate statement that he would write in the same way if his people did win their full freedom as he writes in the current situation in which they don't (see "Quotes", p. 139).

The final section of the essay is taken up with the author's passionate declaration that as a writer he owes more to writers other than Richard Wright, if only because these writers (almost exclusively white) had more to teach him about being a writer than Wright. He concludes that he always has been and always will be a fighter in the Negro struggle for freedom, but in his own way and on his own terms, stating that he views Howe and his attitudes as neither dishonorable nor as enemies, but rather as a participant in an act of "antagonistic cooperation."

In some ways, it's unfortunate that these two essays are published here on their own. There is little or no opportunity to judge Howe's comments on their own merit - they must instead be judged solely from the perspective of the writer, who is essentially unhappy with what Howe apparently said and whose writing is unavoidably colored by that unhappiness. Therefore, the only possible subject of analysis here is the writing of the essays, given that a valid perspective on their content is virtually impossible.

In that context, therefore, it's clear that the author's primary focus is to explore *Shadow and Act's* primary theme, the relationship between American society and the Negro. In both essays, there is the sense that for the author, Howe's perspective is a definitive example of what concerns him most about that relationship - that American society, like Howe, bases perception and understanding upon assumption rather than reality. The author's suggestion seems to be that while Howe is basing his opinions and perspectives upon a degree of enlightenment provided by Richard Wright's book, they fall short of a fully valid experience simply because the source of that enlightenment itself falls short. It's interesting to note here that the author places the responsibility for that falling short squarely on Howe's shoulders - there is no sense of acknowledgement that Wright's own limited perspectives on the Negro experience play a role in Howe's misconceptions. In other words, who is to blame for Howe's limitations - Howe, for not digging further, or Wright, for not giving him more to dig into? The author's complaint, about Howe making negative judgments about his (the author's) experiences and those of other Negro writers because those experiences don't tally with Wright's, is a valid one. But he makes no parallel complaint that Wright's own perspective is narrow - he points out that it is, but stops short of suggesting that such narrowness in Wright can possibly be as much a flaw in his perspective as a similar narrowness in Howe's.

There is another manifestation of narrowness in this section, one displayed by the author in his admittedly ambiguous comments about Jews. His comments seem, at first glance, to be similar in limited perspective to the comments he accuses Howe of making. The question here is this - is the author a hypocrite, a limited thinker about Jews as much as he suggests Howe is about Negroes? Or is the author being ironic, satirizing Howe's comments and attitudes on his (the author's) situation by making similarly narrow, but not necessarily believed, comments about Howe's? The author gives the impression of being far too intelligent and enlightened to make such comments seriously, but the question must nevertheless be asked - is he angry enough to speak so unguardedly?

All that said, throughout both these essays the author is again making his thematic plea for the value, rights, and perspectives of the individual (as opposed to the group) to be

recognized. This is true not only of his argument that Richard Wright's writing and perspective represent only one perspective, but also of his plea for his own perspective to be recognized and valued. Here the author is quintessentially American, standing up for his own individual rights and freedoms and identity - the very principles upon which the country was founded.

Part 1, The Seer and the Seen, Section 8

Part 1, The Seer and the Seen, Section 8 Summary and Analysis

"Hidden Name and Complex Fate" (public address, 1964). The author begins his address with a brief analysis of the life and work of Ernest Hemingway, whom he credits with offering a seminal definition of the life, craft, and art of the writer. This leads him to discuss the topic of his address, the writer's experience in the United States, and to refer to his choice to deliver his speech not as a Negro writer, but simply as a writer (see "Quotes", p. 146). He refers to the necessity for artists in general, and writers in particular, to master the techniques of their art in order to make personal expression fully possible and engaging, as full a revelation of identity (as individual creator and as human being) as possible. This leads him to a contemplation of names, the power of names, and how "being the gift of others, [they] must be made our own". He refers to how the names of Negroes were, in general, bestowed generations ago by the owners of their enslaved ancestors, and how in some cases Negroes reject both those names and their historical, social connotations, while other Negroes work to transcend those connotations and give their names, and therefore their lives, new and personally relevant meanings. He then turns to consideration of his own name, Ralph Waldo Ellison, which he says is tied up ironically with his own experience as a writer (the point must be made here that the author's first two names are those of the famous poet Ralph Waldo Emerson, and that the author's last name bears a strong resemblance to the poet's).

The author describes the various stages of confusion and denial he went through with regard to his name. The confusion arose in regard to his wondering why his father gave him the name he did, and why teachers and adults regarded him and his name with a certain degree of amusement. Denial arose when, as a teenager, the author realized who Ralph Waldo Emerson was and attempted to distance himself from the poet and his work as much as possible. He compares the mystery and hope associated with the name and his having been given it with the mystery and hope associated with the precious photographic lens he found as a young boy. He played with it, enjoyed the ways it made the world look different, protected it from other boys who wanted it, determined to create a camera to go with it - and then lost interest in it, putting it away with other soon-to-be dusty keepsakes. He then discusses at length how it was difficult in the Oklahoma of the time to develop a discipline and perspective as an artist, but how easy it eventually became (once the Negro library was established) to read and develop perspectives that way. He adds that as he matured he experienced a unique combination of literary and lived experience, of learning through reading and studying books and learning through experiencing the life of the Negro communities in which he lived. He speaks of a particularly transformative moment that occurred while he was reading *The Waste Land* (T.S. Eliot) and found similarities in the rhythm and style of the book to the rhythm and style of Negro culture. He describes his move to New York in

search of work and his enriching encounters with both whites and blacks, including Richard Wright, who taught him and mentored him. This leads him to a contemplation of technique, how ways in which words and structures both enhanced and defined his studies, and depictions, of values both individual and American (see "Quotes", p. 164).

The author reminds his audience that he didn't completely discard his "troublesome middle name", but only suppressed it, adding that it sometimes serves as a reminder of his obligation to both the letter and spirit of the poetic life of Ralph Waldo Emerson. He then concludes by quoting another great American writer, Henry James, who suggested (the author says) that "being an American is an arduous task, and for most of us, I suspect, the difficulty begins with the name".

The author's focus on names in this section can be seen as a manifestation of one of his, and the book's key themes, that being an examination of the nature of individual identity. What is a name, after all, but a shorthand definition of identity? The problem comes, as the author himself suggests, when the name itself carries with it a definition of identity that seems at variance with the individual's experience of himself. This idea is explored most overtly in the author's detailed recounting of his relationship with his own name, but can be extended by inference into his experience of being Negro and/or being American - both names, both shorthand descriptions of a certain experience and/or belief system. All these names, the author suggests in this essay, are in fact incomplete expressions of identity - the tip of the iceberg of being, to coin a phrase. There is, the author suggests here and throughout the essay, so much more to an individual than what he is called or how he is seen. He also seems to be saying that the job of anyone with a name - an individual name (Ralph Waldo Ellison), a cultural name (Negro) or socio-political name (American) - is to transcend the "mereness" and limitations of that name, living instead from a fullness of unlimited humanity.

The camera lens referred to by the author in this section is one of the book's few symbols. On the one hand, because it's juxtaposed with the image of "name", the lens seems to represent and/or embody the idea of "precious possession", in the same way the name does. The fact that the lens is the focus of a kind of obsession but is then put away represents the way that names generally in this essay (Ralph Waldo Ellison, Negro, American) themselves become the focus of obsessive contemplation, are left alone for a while, but then re-emerge as the subject of a different kind of contemplation. The lens re-appears here as a focus of contemplation of the past, as does the author's name. At the same time, throughout the book the names "Negro" and "American" emerge, disappear, and re-emerge as the objects of different kinds of contemplation, particularly on the subjects of individuality and/or societal experience/perspective. Another symbolic value of the lens is that it represents, literally, a different way of seeing. Life viewed through a glass lens such as the camera lens makes objects look different, in the same way as life viewed through the lens of being Ralph Waldo Ellison, and/or Negro, and/or American, makes even the same object (or idea or experience) look different.

Ralph Waldo Emerson was an American writer and lecturer in the late 1800s. Aside from his literary efforts, he was known as a vocal supporter of the abolition of slavery, a

position that made him unpopular in many communities in the Southern US. It's never explicitly stated in *Shadow and Act*, but it's possible to infer that Ellison was given Emerson's first two names in recognition of his literary accomplishments and of his position on slavery. The name seems, on some level, to be somewhat prophetic. Ralph Waldo Ellison, in his own way, is as anti-slavery as Ralph Waldo Emerson ... a different kind of slavery, perhaps, in that Ellison is a crusader against cultural and literary slavery while Emerson opposed literal, working, picking cotton, and being beaten slavery. Their principles, however, are essentially the same - the Negro people have the right to be recognized as full members of both the human race and the community of Americans.

Part 1, The Seer and the Seen, Section 9

Part 1, The Seer and the Seen, Section 9 Summary and Analysis

"The Art of Fiction: An Interview" (published 1955). The focus of this interview is on the author's novel *Invisible Man*. Before specific discussions of the novel begin, the interview references important elements in the author's life, previously referred to in other essays - for example, the seminal importance of both Ernest Hemingway (in terms of style and attack) and T.S Eliot's *The Waste Land* (for use of language, rhythm, and inspiration) in the author's work. When the question is raised of whether it's possible for the so-called "Negro writer" to be truly objective, the author responds by suggesting that for Negro writers who tend (he says) to be writing for a white audience, the writing is often a plea to be considered as humanity. He proposes that an alternative, and more universal, perspective would be to focus on specific forms and/or manifestations of humanity, and let universality be experienced through that. He further proposes that the key to finding that universal perspective is to study folklore, and from that study glean the universal truths of not only a particular group (such as the Negro) but general truths about humanity gleaned from those particular truths (see "Quotes", p. 171). When asked to provide particular examples of the way folklore manifests in *Invisible Man*, the author goes into detailed explanations of several examples - in particular, the way the hero moves from the South (imprisonment, darkness) to the North (freedom, light) in the way heroes of many Negro folk tales do. He suggests that even white readers can understand both the meaning and the implications of the incidents in his book, and says that, "the understanding of art depends finally upon one's willingness to extend one's humanity and one's knowledge of human life".

The interview then examines the author's reaction to critics (some he learns from, some he rejects) and the creative process of *Invisible Man*. At one point, the interviewers ask whether the search for identity is a common theme in American literature; the author suggests that it is the single American theme, at the core of all great literature. Then follows detailed discussion of how certain aspects of the novel were created and shaped, and of whether certain characters were based on real people, with the author here suggesting that in his work, as with that of all artists, there are certain foundations in reality blended with certain choices made for effect. The author concludes by reiterating his point about how the quest for identity is at the core of most American literature, and suggests that white America's relationship with Negro America is at the core of that quest for identity. In that sense, he says, both his novel in particular and the American novel in general contribute to the shape of the culture in which it was written and in which it is read.

Again in this essay the author makes his plea for being recognized as an American writer, not a Negro writer, and again the plea can be seen as a tying together of the book's three key themes - the relationship between American society and the Negro, the

relationship between art and life, and the relationship between individual and group identity. Consciously or not, the author portrays himself here and throughout the book as an embodiment of all these experiences - American, Negro, artist, human being, individual, and member of a group. He and his work, he suggests here and throughout this first section, are manifestations of all these experiences and designations. The overall implication is that in this situation, he is like anyone who experiences himself in just one of these categories; in fact and familiarity, he is a member of many more than just one. The problem in America, he suggests, is that its citizens only see themselves as one, not another and not more.

Meanwhile, the detailed examination of the role of folklore in literature and society can be seen as another manifestation of the fairy tale image repeated earlier in the book (see "Quotes, pp. 20 and 105") in that both fairy- and folk-tales are essentially archetypal narrations of universal human experiences. The author himself makes the point in this essay, suggesting that at their core, Negro folk stories are essentially the same stories as fairy tales or other forms of American folklore; ultimately, they're all quests for individual identity and/or freedom. It's interesting to consider this point in relation to the author's concerns about white interpretations of Negro culture such as those in the commentaries of Irving Howe (see "The World and the Jug", Section 1, Part 7). In making his comments about the universal nature of folklore, the author is essentially saying to Howe and other white critics, "Look at my stories and my experiences not solely as experiences unique to me, but as specific manifestations of universal truths". In other words, here again is he both individual and member of a group - a man living his unique life, and a human being living a human life with the same human concerns as any other.

BOOKRAGS

Part 2, Sound and the Mainstream, Section 1

Part 2, Sound and the Mainstream, Section 1 Summary and Analysis

The essays in this part of the book contain commentary, analysis, reflection, and criticism relating to various types of music as manifestations and/or expressions of Negro culture and experience.

"Living with Music" (published 1955). The author describes, in extensive and evocative detail, the equal parts musical and noisy environment in which he once struggled to write. There was a loud record player next door, a courtyard on the other side of a short wall which was a gathering place for street singers and philosophers, a drunk constantly shouting from the roof, and a singer in the apartment upstairs who, as the author describes, vocalized all day, every day, in all weathers and in all moods. He describes himself as being in something of a dilemma - on the one hand recognizing the necessity for an artist, any artist, to have discipline in order to develop his craft, but on the other hand, the singer was making it impossible for him to work. His consideration of the dedication exhibited by the singer upstairs leads him to contemplate his own attempts to perfect a musical craft - in his case, the playing of the trumpet in emulation of jazz greats like Louis Armstrong. He describes how he often drove those around him to distraction with his playing, but how his efforts were, more often than not, met with tolerance from those who recognized that even the greats had to both study and practice (see "Quotes", p. 189) and that one day he might be as famous as, say, Duke Ellington. He then tells how, after having given up music (in favor of writing, a choice he describes in other writings in this book), he realized from listening to the singer that he loved music deeply, and as a result began to invest time, money, and energy in creating his own sound system.

The author describes how, in the same way as he experimented with radios when he was a child (see "Section 1, Part 1), he experimented endlessly, with varying degrees of success, with various electronic components, and eventually created a powerful sound system. He then describes how he got into volume duels with the singer upstairs, through which the two artists eventually came to an accommodation of each other's need - the author's for relative quiet, the singer's for additional musical insight (which she received, the author deduces as the result of her improved singing, from the records he played on his sound system). In conclusion, he describes the way in which his experience with the singer upstairs, who specialized in classic repertoire, taught him that there's not that much difference between forms of music (see "Quotes", p. 197) - that music, no matter what its form, is a universal expression of humanity.

This essay is defined by three central metaphors. The first relates to one of the book's key themes, the ongoing tension between individual and group expression - in this case,

the tension between the noise made by the group/musicians/citizens of the neighborhood and the need of the individual (i.e., the author) for an environment in which to express himself. This situation can also be seen as a metaphor for his overall experience as a writer - an individual and experiential voice struggling to make itself heard over the din of preconception and prejudice. This struggle towards creation, of both a work of art and an individual identity, is the source of the second key metaphor in this essay, with the author's struggle to create the perfect sound system serving as a representation of his struggle to create again a work of art and an individual identity. The successful construction of the sound system combines with the fact that both the author and the singer upstairs experience growth as the result of its existence to suggest that both creative struggles are worthwhile and will eventually result in something new and true. The third metaphor in this essay emerges in the reference to the author and the singer upstairs having learned from each other. This coming together after struggle is a metaphor for the socio-cultural coming together of Negro and white American the author seems so intent upon fostering. The so-called "volume duels" between the author and the singer upstairs are a metaphor for ongoing racial conflict, while their eventual coming to terms with each other can be seen as representing white and Negro, individual and group, also coming to terms.

Part 2, Sound and the Mainstream, Section 2

Part 2, Sound and the Mainstream, Section 2 Summary and Analysis

"The Golden Age, Time Past" (published 1959). This essay, among the most poetically written of all the essays in *Shadow and Act*, evokes the experience of being at, and in the case of the jazzmen who played there, creating music at Minton's Playhouse in New York. The author describes Minton's as a home for musicians from all over America who came to New York to develop themselves and their careers, commenting that the influence of Minton's and the artists who played there has been mostly forgotten, but that the legacy of the music invented there lives on. He lists several important musicians who played there, defined themselves and their music there, and defined jazz culture there - Dizzy Gillespie, Charlie Parker, Thelonius Monk, Fats Waller, Benny Goodman, Count Basie, Lena Horne. He also describes the nature of the music these and other artists made, the musical voice of fragmented, jarred-together cultures (see "Quotes", p. 203).

The author describes how the lives of several musicians who played at Minton's were tragically short, how the music developed there (jazz) is recognized as uniquely American the world over, and how Minton's became a place of pilgrimage for jazz fans in the same way as the Louvre in Paris did for art lovers. He also describes the history of openness, freedom, experimentation, and competition that made Minton's both possible and necessary, and comments on the education in both music and life received by young musicians who played there (see "Quotes", p. 208). He contends that Minton's allowed no racial discrimination - white artists could triumph, and self-destruct as easily and as freely as Negro artists - but adds that one of the reasons the club's level of success shrank over the years was that white artists were taking credit for the sound, the music, and the style formulated there. He speculates on the possibility that this is the reason why young Negro artists were justifiably proud of what they've accomplished and simultaneously wary, to the point of cool defensiveness, of returning to the old ways of open-ness and musical freedom. In conclusion, he sums up the experience at Minton's, even after it was handed over to a new owner, as "a continuing symposium of jazz", a blending of the new and the old, the young and the experienced ... the actual and the possible.

There are three important aspects to this essay. The first is its evocation of a historical and musical landmark, the way in which time, attitude and spirit are all portrayed with a skilful blend of hard-nosed realism, poetic lyricism, and wisdom-fueled perspective. The essay gives the impression that Minton's was not just a place, it was a manifestation of life - of the spirits of independence, creativity, and the determination to not only survive, but to thrive. The second important aspect is the way in which it develops the book's

three principal themes. In its analysis of the development of jazz and the attitudes that made it possible, the essay sketches in, with few but very telling details, first of all the relationship between American society and the Negro (with the spirit of Minton's manifesting as a Negro act of defiant creativity and self-expression). It also sketches in the relationship between art and life (with the art created at Minton's being portrayed as a way in which musicians and audiences alike could experience and/or release otherwise life-restrained emotions). Finally, it explores an artistic/musical dimension to the sometimes antagonistic relationship between the individual and the group.

The third, and perhaps most important, aspect of this essay is the way that aspects of its narrative can be seen as metaphors for the author's experiences in both life and art. In the same way as young jazz artists developed a new kind of musical language as a means of expressing individual manifestations of their group identity, the author (as he himself describes throughout *Shadow and Act*) struggled to develop a new kind of literary language to express the same kind of individual manifestation of a group experience. In the same way as young musicians apprenticed with and eventually moved beyond the influences of older, more experienced artists, the author apprenticed with Richard Wright and moved beyond his influence - to paraphrase his own words, he found himself, was reborn, and found his soul (see "Quotes", p. 208-209). Finally, in the essay's concluding words, there seems to be an expression of the author's perspective on himself and on his work. He gives the impression throughout the book that his writing is a "continuing symposium" on self-definition, on living life as an American and on challenging others, Negro and white alike, to accept and/or interpret him and his work as such.

Part 2, Sound and the Mainstream, Section 3

Part 2, Sound and the Mainstream, Section 3 Summary and Analysis

This section contains four relatively brief essays, each examining the artistry, career, and context of a Negro musician/entertainer.

"As the Spirit Moves Mahalia" (published 1958). This essay is written in praise of the renowned Negro singer Mahalia Jackson, and as an analysis of her work. Following a brief introduction, in which the author celebrates the transcendent, humanist power of certain female singers (see "Quotes", p. 214), the author briefly sums up Jackson's life (following the traditional folk-tale path of Negroes moving from the South to the North). He then delves deeply into an analysis of her technique, which he describes as unique to Negro singers in that she, and they, draw upon a wide variety of sounds and inspirations to create their music (see "Quotes", p. 216). He comments on how her music also has many elements of jazz and the blues, but because of her deep religious convictions, which lead her to maintain that the worlds of jazz and blues are "temptation to be resisted", she restricts her performances to spiritual works, becoming a leading proponent of a genre described as "gospel". He describes a particular failed attempt at integrating Jackson's style with jazz, and then comments that her gift is best experienced in churches, where her music opens the way for both preacher and congregation to be moved by the so-called "spirit". He concludes by suggesting that no matter what form her music either takes or adapts, the movement of that "spirit" is at the core of everything she sings.

"On Bird, Bird Watching, and Jazz" (published 1962). This essay examines the life, career, and music of jazz saxophonist Charlie Parker, known as "Bird". The author comments that there is no clear, definitive explanation of how Parker got the nickname, but then discusses, in almost fanciful terms, how a search through ornithology reference books led him to the belief that of all the birds, Parker was most like a mockingbird (see "Quotes", p.224). He goes on to comment that a key aspect of both Parker's artistry and personality (he was selfish, manipulative, and drug-addicted) was his determination to avoid having to camouflage his talent and skill in the guise of the minstrel (see The Seer and the Seen, "Change the Joke and Slip the Yoke" for an analysis of this style of performance). He describes how Parker's increasingly desperate and chaotic attempts to escape that aspect of himself combined with the essential contradictions in his character to create a life and career undermined by loneliness and increasing impulses towards self-destruction, which the author contends are the emotional underpinnings of his music and style. The author concludes his essay by suggesting that in fact the bird that shares more characteristics with Parker than any other is the robin; specifically, the robin described in the lyrics of a Negro funeral song. The robin here is a beautiful,

popular bird picked clean by those who resented him (in Parker's case, musicians who came after him and emulated him, as well as the public who simultaneously adored and consumed him).

"The Charlie Christian Story" (published 1958). This essay is a review of a recording by jazz guitarist Charlie Christian (whom the author knew in Oklahoma), and uses the story of Christian's life as a template for a contemplation of the history and nature of jazz. The author describes how, in the world of jazz, many great innovators and musicians were known only locally, how many had their innovations quickly absorbed into, and made popular by, the work of other musicians, and how many died young. He cites Christian's life and work as a typical example of this pattern. He goes on to use an examination of Christian's childhood (trained in music theory and educated in other forms of music as well as jazz) to rebut the theory that jazz musicians had no training, had no experience of other forms of music, and played the way they did as a rejection of other music. He then suggests that many musicians, like Christian, struggled to find a balance between interest in/awareness of more formalized forms of music, and the freewheeling style and emotions associated with jazz, citing a duality in Negro culture as a source of difficult in finding that balance (see "Quotes", p. 238). He adds, however, that for Christian and many jazz artists, the influence of individual, idiosyncratic performers was more important than any formal training. He concludes the essay/review by suggesting that through Christian's talent, art and work, the guitar found its place and its voice in the world and style of jazz.

"Remembering Jimmy" (published 1958). This essay is a commentary on the life and art of Jimmy Rushing, a blues/big band vocalist popular in Oklahoma City while the author was growing up. The author suggests that Rushing's performances embodied and evoked a dichotomy unique to Negro culture - awareness of racial suffering combined with desperate hope and faith in better things. The author describes in nostalgic detail the circumstances in which he heard Rushing sing, and how Rushing, because he was raised in the emerging Negro middle class, transformed the rawness of the Negro experience and language into something more sophisticated. The author suggests that this approach is, in fact, the essence of the blues - masking deep, torturous pain beneath the ambiguous mask of lyrics (see "Quotes", p. 246). The author concludes by suggesting that the blues, which he calls the "most vital popular art form" in America, and the moods and experiences they explore, are a key component of America understanding who and what and where it is.

These essays explore commonalities in the life experiences and work of four artists that, in some ways, appear to be very different. While Mahalia, Bird, Christian, and Jimmy are portrayed as having different perspectives on music, different life experiences, and different talents, the author suggests that they all did essentially the same thing. They transformed both their general experiences of being Negro and their individual experiences of both suffering and joy into artistic expressions of universal truth. They each, the author suggests, forged a bond between art and life, forged a similar bond between the individual and the universal, and had the talent to communicate their experiences of those bonds to audiences that may not have understood intellectually what they were experiencing but could feel it in their non-verbal, perhaps even non-

musical souls. Mahalia's faith and joy, Bird's chaotic spirit, Christian's spirit of freedom, Jimmy's transcendent suffering and simultaneous hope - all are experiences that every human being has experienced at one time or another in his or her own way. By including in his book such detailed, often reverent, and always insightful analysis of the transcendent artistry of these individuals, the author is suggesting that each individual, in his or her own unique, perhaps small way, has the capacity to transform and communicate and transcend in the same way.

In making these points, the author again entwines his main themes. The relationship between art and life in the work of these artists is unmistakable. The manifestations of the relationship between American society and the Negro in the stories of these artists are perhaps less obvious, but can be inferred from the sub-textual sense that the artistic expressions of these four artists resulted in no small part from their reactions to the oppressions and narrowness of American Culture. Meanwhile, the book's thematic focus on individual and group identity manifests here in the portrayals of all these artists as determined to live, create and explore on their own terms.

Part 2, Sound and the Mainstream, Section 4

Part 2, Sound and the Mainstream, Section 4 Summary and Analysis

"Blues People" (published 1964). This essay is a review of the book *Blues People* by LeRoi Jones, a book described by the author, quoting from other reviews, as one of the few books by a Negro to consider the subject of the blues. The author comments favorably on Jones' attempt to examine the blues in its sociological and anthropological contexts, but suggests that Jones has paid too little attention to that aspect of the blues which is a poetic, emotional expression of Negro experience and Negro life. After commenting that Jones is perhaps following the general pattern of American sociological studies -ignoring history and the process by which the culture came to be what it is - he goes on to suggest that Jones is mistaken when he divides Negro Americans into two broad camps. These camps, the author suggests, are, in Jones' mind; the middle class Negroes corrupted by white culture who prefer "classic" blues (such as that performed in urban clubs), and the "black, uncorrupted, country Negroes" who prefer the so-called "country blues" (less refined or polished than the "classic" blues). The author goes on to suggest that variations on perspective within the Negro community are much more complex and varied than Jones maintains, and that Jones misunderstands slavery in similar, limited terms (see "Quotes", p.255). The author suggests that there is in fact no difference between different kinds of blues, adding that at the core of all Negro cultural experience is the experience of slavery (see "Quotes", p. 256) - an experience simultaneously universal and infinitely varied. "As such," the author writes, "[the blues] are one of the techniques through which Negroes have survived and kept their courage during that long people when many whites assumed, as some still assume, they were afraid". The author concludes his review by suggesting that simply being a Negro isn't enough to examine and understand the blues - thorough, exceptional criticism and intelligence are also necessary.

This essay contains one of the clearest examples of one of the author's consistent means and points of criticism - of literature, of culture, and of society. Over and over throughout the book, he maintains that those who examine and/or write and/or think about Negro culture don't do enough - don't examine enough, consider enough, think deeply or critically enough, or have a broad enough perspective. It's important to note that he makes this point of both Negro and white writers. LeRoi Jones comes in for this criticism, Irving Howe comes in for it in "The World and the Jug" - even Richard Wright, whom Ellison considered a mentor of sorts and whose book *Black Boy* is something of a seminal examination of the so-called Negro experience, is portrayed as being worthy but limited. The question raised by this criticism is this - can there ever be enough examination and/or consideration to get a full picture? It would seem that in Ellison's mind there cannot; while in terms of whether it's possible for society and or culture as a

whole, the book takes no position. This, in fact, may be part of the author's point in presenting the book - that there is no way the Negro problem and/or experience can be solved with a single, unified solution because there is no single, unifying experience. There is in this idea a sense of hopelessness, but it's important to note that Ellison is not writing from a place of despair. He is, however overwhelmed by the broad range of Negro experience and perspective, hopeful that one day that perspective will be freed from the spiritual blinders of cultural slavery and one will be able to see and live broadly, fully, and freely. These ideas, that there is no single Negro experience and no single solution to the Negro problem, are developed further in the following essay.

Part 3, The Shadow and the Act, Section 1

Part 3, The Shadow and the Act, Section 1 Summary and Analysis

The essays in this part of the book focus on other socio-cultural manifestations and/or explorations of the so-called "Negro experience".

"Some Questions and Some Answers" (published 1958). This essay takes the form of, as the title suggests, questions and answers - the questioner, however, is never named. The first questions relate to the nature of Negro culture, which the author claims doesn't in fact exist. There is, he suggests, no one Negro culture in the same way as there is no one definition of Negro, since those generally believed to fit into that category don't originate from any one background. The author says that in terms of the American Negro, their so-called "culture" is deeply and inextricably influenced by that which defines America. He concludes the answer to this question by suggesting that the only thing binding Negroes of African origin (many American Negroes but also Negroes around the world) is a resentment of what happened to them as the result of colonization by Europeans.

The author responds to a question about the effect of the industrial revolution on the Negro people by suggesting that Negroes (who provided, he says, the manual labor upon which the beginnings of the industrial revolution were founded) both affected and were profoundly affected by the industrial revolution. He continues by suggesting that the effect of industry on people in general and not just on Negroes is a manifestation of the intent with which industry is undertaken - exploitation of humanity, or benefit to humanity. "There is," he says, "a threat when industrialism is linked to a political doctrine which has as its goal the subjugation of the world".

Discussion then turns to the use of language - specifically, the way some Negro poets from Africa find they can't express their intent through African language. After reminding the questioner that there is, in fact, no one African language, the author suggests that this particular phenomenon is in fact a manifestation of a global, cross-cultural phenomenon of writers in non-English speaking cultures writing in the language (English), which makes them able to communicate with the widest possible audience. Similar questions about Negro sculpture and Negro music are met with similar answers, with the author suggesting that Negro artists working in those media are being affected by the culture in which they work in the same way as they are affecting the culture, with a resulting (and potentially dangerous) dilution of original inspiration. He suggests, however, that such dilution can't ultimately damage the source of that inspiration, that the culture and its truths remain - the only thing that's altered, he says, is the way those truths manifest.

A question about the author's views on the way in which American Negroes seem determined to adopt "white" values leads the author to comment that ultimately, American Negroes are just that - American, and that Negro values are unavoidably American values. He goes on to say that because of Negro determination to change the way that American Negroes relate to, and *are* related to by other Americans, American values are therefore in a profound process of change. "As Americans," he says, "we have accepted this conscious and ceaseless struggle as a condition of our freedom, and we are aware that each of our victories increases the area of freedom for all Americans, regardless of color". He concludes by expressing two hopes - that as a result of the American Negro's struggle for inclusion and equality, similar racially motivated "savageries" all over the world will come to an end, and that this end will come when someone, someday, asks the correct questions and provides the correct answers - especially, he says, "those of us who would be free."

Aside from this essay containing yet another reiteration of the author's point that Negro Americans are simply Americans, and that the experience of Negro Americans is in fact the American experience, there are two key points to note about this particular essay. The first is that without saying so in so many words, the essay seems to be suggesting that Negro culture is challenged, defined and shaped by external rather than internal forces ... by reaction rather than action. The attitudes of European colonists, the actions of those in the forefront of the industrial revolution, the mass market of the English speaking world, white Americans - all are portrayed in this essay as being the forces which shape and make demands of both Negroes and their characteristic, distinctive culture. The image that comes to mind is that of the chameleon, a reptile with the capacity to change its pigmentation to blend into its background - to camouflage itself. The point is not made to suggest that Negroes are changing their *actual* pigmentation, but their *socio-cultural* pigmentation, the way in which they relate and/or connect to the world in order to fit into, and perhaps even thrive within, the background by which they find themselves, their lives, and their experiences defined. The author's point here seems to be that in spite of the constantly shifting and evolving demands of these various backgrounds, the essence of the Negro remains the same - in the same way as the chameleon is still the chameleon, the Negro is still the Negro. It's interesting to note, however, that in this context the author maintains that the Negro American is American first and Negro second, because the Negro values are American values. Several questions then become seemingly unavoidable - is there truly such a thing as a Negro? Is pigmentation enough to define identity? Did Negro culture come into existence, and does it continue to exist primarily in response to outside forces?

The second main point raised by this essay appears in the reference in its final line to the question of freedom. While it's clear that the author is suggesting that Negroes should offer the questions and answers he deems necessary and important, there is the possibility that he is also referring to non-Negroes. Throughout the book he has suggested that Americans in general, and non-Negro Americans in particular, are held psychologically and culturally captive by their perceptions, by their willful ignorance of history, and by a degree of blindness to reality. In this context, it's possible to see the essay's final comment about freedom offering hope to non-Negro Americans as well. If they are released from their various psychological prisons by the right questions and the

right answers, America can truly be what its Constitution and its culture claim it is ... the land of the free, where all men are created equal.

Part 3, The Shadow and the Act, Section 2

Part 3, The Shadow and the Act, Section 2 Summary and Analysis

"The Shadow and the Act" (published 1949). This essay uses analysis of four Hollywood films, each with race relations as their narrative focus, as the basis for a discussion of the way film echoes the general, and ongoing, racial tension in America. It begins with a detailed plot summary of the filmic adaptation of William Faulkner's novel *Intruder in the Dust*, the story of a young racist white boy coming to respect the older black man who saves his life. The author clearly views the film as a "remarkable" step forward, and uses it as the touchstone for comparison with several other films. The first of these is *The Birth of a Nation*, a silent film directed by one of the greatest and most innovative film directors of all time, D. W. Griffith. The author speaks of the violent racism in the film, its portrayal of Negroes in stereotypical roles, and of its apparent glorifying of the Ku Klux Klan (a violently racist organization dedicated to white racial purity and control). He also refers to the way the film proved, as the result of its commercial success, that the perpetuation of the idea of Negro as sub-human was both financially and dramatically profitable, citing it as a key example in the way the medium of film affected the Negro experience in America (see "Quotes", p. 276).

The author then contrasts the negative impact of *The Birth of a Nation* with the seemingly positive impact of four other films, including *Intruder in the Dust*. Before getting into the specifics of each film, however, he reminds the reader that, "to direct an attack upon Hollywood would indeed be to confuse portrayal with action, image with reality. In the beginning," he says, "was not the shadow, but the act, and the province of Hollywood is not action, but illusion". In other words, the author is suggesting that negative images of Negroes in film were in fact a reflection of the generalized American need to view Negroes as less than human, rather than viewing them from a perspective in any way realistic. He goes on to name the films he's examining, offers specific examples of how each film, while purporting to positively explore aspects of being Negro, are in fact perpetuations of Negro stereotypes, and suggests that they're not about Negroes at all, but about white conceptions about Negroes. He then says that in spite of their flaws, the films are worth seeing because of the way in which they connect emotionally with those watching them ... that is, the whites watching them. White audiences, he says, will sigh with relief and relative contentment. There is, he suggests, great relief to be experienced by seeing such stories played out, a release of collective guilt. Black audiences, he says, will simply laugh; nowhere in any of these films, with the possible exception of *Intruder in the Dust*, to the Negro characters behave like real Negroes.

The author concludes with the suggestion that ultimately, all these movies have a positive value - that they have the potential to trigger, in both white and Negro audiences, encounters with the individual and group conscience. It's only through such encounters, the author says, can the individual become aware of his own personal truth.

The thematic premise of this particular essay - that Hollywood presents dramatizations of popular ideas about reality as opposed to realistic explorations of reality itself - is, ultimately, the thematic premise of the entire book. This is why the book is given the title of the essay, *Shadow and Act*. Like the essay, the book suggests that views of Negro Americans held by white Americans, and perhaps even by some Negro Americans, are illusions, ideas, beliefs, and values based on what people know or think or want as opposed to the way things truly are - in short, that everyone is human, caught up in the human race. It might not be going too far, in fact, to suggest that the author's ultimate point is that the entire so-called "Negro Problem", while having a very real effect on those who encounter it, is itself an illusion - that the "problem" would vanish if white and Negro Americans looked at each other with openness, respect, and integrity.

Part 3, The Shadow and the Act, Section 3

Part 3, The Shadow and the Act, Section 3 Summary and Analysis

The two entries in this section chronicle life in Harlem, a borough in New York with a primarily Negro population.

"The Way it Is" (published 1942). This essay, written in a form similar to a short story, narrates a journey the author makes to visit a Mrs. Jackson to hear how she's surviving the war (the story, it seems, was written in the early stages of World War II). After making small talk about her children, and after satisfying herself that the author isn't a government representative, she speaks at length of the hardships suffered by her, by other Negroes living in Harlem, and by Negroes in general. She speaks of how her son is bullied and beaten by the white soldiers with whom he's training, and of how her daughter can't get a job without experience and can't get experience because she's Negro. She speaks at anguished length of how her nephew was forced into the merchant marine rather than having his skills at invention and machine work utilized in either business or the war effort, and how his ship was sunk shortly after he joined up. In the midst of her conversation, the author refers to a small collection of plants blooming on a windowsill, and then returns his attention to Mrs. Jackson as she speaks of her anguished concern for her other children. She speaks of her worry about how they're going to survive the winter with little food and little heat, how other Negroes in Harlem are in similar situations, and how it's not fair that all the Negroes in America are forced to live in similar situations when they're just as eager to fight and win the war as white people. She quotes an old Negro song in which the lyrics refer poetically to the impossibility of transcending the difficulties of life in Harlem, and says, "that's the way it is." The author then describes how he leaves Mrs. Jackson's apartment, says her description of life in Harlem is indeed "the way it is". He writes passionately about both the need for and the justice of finding ways to treat Negroes living in Harlem and everywhere else in America with greater equality and respect ... since, as Mrs. Jackson says, their feelings about America and the war are just as strong as those of the whites. He concludes with a call for concrete action, saying that that's the only thing that will be effective, and that that's "the way it is".

"Harlem is Nowhere" (unpublished - written 1948). This essay begins with a reference to the Lafargue Psychiatric Clinic, a basement operation in Harlem founded by a white doctor, Frederick Wertham, offering low cost, often free, psychiatric care to anyone, Negro or white, who comes in. After a brief introduction of the clinic's function (see "Quotes", p. 295), the author goes into a detailed exploration of the reasons such a clinic is necessary. His particular focus is the contradictions between Negro past, American present, and human future many (most?) of the Negro citizens of Harlem face

- between the slave traditions, Christian belief systems, family values, and social limitations of the past, the slavery-free, tradition-blinded, opportunity-seizing, frustration-riddled present, and a future which seems full of both blind hope and blinding hopelessness. He examines the way both American and Negro culture have changed so drastically in such a short a period of time - the eighty or so years since the Civil War, the thirty or so years since the Industrial Revolution, and the twenty or so years since World War I. He describes how, when greeted in Harlem, many people use the slang/casual expression "Man I'm nowhere" to symbolize the overall state of Negro culture, referring to Harlem as an embodiment of nowhere - Harlem is, in the author's imagery, an embodiment of a lost, frustrated, confused, aimless state of being. He defines the Lafargue Clinic (staffed by both Negroes and whites) in two terms. The first is as a source of help and assistance for those lost in that world. The second is as an example of the way Negro and white can work together, heal together, and just live together in an effort to make Harlem - and by extension, America- and by further extension, life in general to be better, healthier, and easier, a place "to re-forge the will to endure in a hostile world."

There are two key points to consider about these two essays. The first is the powerful, detailed way in which the writer evokes the experience of living in Harlem. The life of Mrs. Jackson and the lives of those aided by the Lafargue Clinic come across as simultaneously individualized and universal - there is the very clear sense that Mrs. Jackson's story is not unique, and neither is the desperate need for help experienced by everyone who lives within Harlem's boundaries. The essays in fact suggest that theirs is the torturous, neglected existence of Negroes everywhere, manifestations of oppression and hopelessness that seem, on the surface, to have little or no possibility of easing. But therein lies the importance of the second key point about these essays - that in both, there are manifestations of the hope for the future that continually appears throughout the novel. In the story of Mrs. Jackson that hope is expressed in the apparently deliberate reference made by the author to the flowers and plants on Mrs. Jackson's dining room table. Plants, especially thriving ones like Mrs. Jackson's (the author takes great pains to point this out) are an embodiment of life - in their greenness, in their awareness of the sun (always a symbol of life, hope, and the future), and in their blossoming. The placement of the flowers in the middle of Mrs. Jackson's sad stories is a powerful and vivid evocation of possibility, even when there seems to be no possibility left.

The Lafargue Clinic is likewise a manifestation and symbol of that same hope, albeit a more overtly defined and portrayed one. Hope is in the actions of the people who started and who run the clinic, who go there for care, perhaps even in the building itself. In the same way as Mrs. Jackson's plants, the clinic and the hope it inspires grew from a seed - the belief in the doctor who founded it that healing and health are universal rights. Harlem may be a nowhere, but in the Lafargue Clinic and in Mrs. Jackson's living room, there is hope for a somewhere - a place where each and every human being can live, belong, and achieve if not blooming, at least the hope that blooming is possible.

Part 3, The Shadow and the Act, Section 4

Part 3, The Shadow and the Act, Section 4 Summary and Analysis

"An American Dilemma" (unpublished - written 1944). This essay is a response to the book *An American Dilemma*, written by Gunnar Myrdal, a European social scientist brought into America by the Carnegie Foundation (dedicated to exploration and development of American arts and social sciences). The purpose of his visit was to study Negro and white relationships and history and, in the words of the foundation, to write a book with "the purpose of ... contribu[ting] to the general advancement and diffusion of knowledge and understanding".

The author opens his essay with a statement of ambivalence, both praising the book highly and revealing significant doubts about its theories and conclusions. In explaining the reasons for this position, he reveals his belief that on one level Myrdal has it right, particularly in his suggestion that the existence of the so-called "Negro Problem" is in no small part the result of white culture and attitudes. He goes on to suggest, however, that the ultimate solution to "the Negro Problem" lies in the will of the Negro people to define themselves as a people and as individuals within Negro and American society alike. The author then takes an extended, critical look at previous studies of "the Negro Problem", most of which he portrays as negative and shallow. He analyzes the influence that Marxism/Socialism played in increasing both awareness of "the Negro Problem" and determination to do something about it, but suggests that for all its leftwing ideology, Marxism/Socialism was itself too colored by so many years of misconceptions that ultimately its perspectives were flawed and its efforts fruitless. This, in turn, brings the author's attention back to Myrdal's studies and conclusions, and he writes admiringly of the way Myrdal navigates the emotionally over-charged, politically tricky, socially volatile subject of "the Negro Problem". However, the author suggests that Myrdal, for all his careful walking of the North/South, white/Negro, liberal/conservative tightrope, still avoids one central fact. This fact, the author suggests, is there is a class struggle in America that embodies the essential contradiction between the theory of the so-called "American Dream" and the reality of American capitalism. He further suggests that the tension between the two is at the heart of both "the Negro Problem" and the difficulties of not just being a Negro American, but of being an American in general.

The author concludes his study of Myrdal's book with an examination of his (Myrdal's) theory that the American Negro has become who and what he is solely in reaction to whites. "Are American Negroes," the author asks, "simply the creation of white men, or have they at least helped to create themselves out of what they found around them?" The author suggests that while Myrdal's point is valid to a considerable degree, there is also a great deal that's innate (non-reactive) in Negro culture, that what's innate also

has great value, and that those aspects of Negro culture can't and won't be discarded. He also suggests that Negroes and whites must work together, study the situation together, and come to solutions together in order to "create a more human American". Finally, he suggests that the publication of the book is a cue for liberal intellectuals from both races "to get busy to see that *An American Dilemma* does not become an instrument of an American tragedy".

There are several interesting points to consider in relation to this essay. The first relates to the fact that a non-American undertook both the book and analysis being discussed. This fact carries with it at least some implication that it's more possible for a non-American to have a greater degree of objectivity on the question of race and/or Negro white relations. To what extent this implication is representative of reality is open to debate, but it's interesting to note that this point is not in fact explicitly discussed in the essay. The author does comment on how the sense of "alienation and embarrassment" a Negro American might feel at being reminded that, "it is necessary in our democracy for a European scientist to affirm the Negro American's humanity." He makes no comment, however, on how a white American might react, or on the theoretical value of the outsider's perspective. Meanwhile, the particular value of this outsider's perspective is the second point to consider about this essay. Once again, as is the case throughout the book, the subject of the author's analysis falls short of the author's standards. Myrdal, like just about every author discussed in the book (the exception is Stephen Crane, in relation to his novel *The Red Badge of Courage*), is taken to task for not having a broad enough perspective or considered the individualities of the situation thoroughly enough. Ellison, in effect, does all this for him - which raises the potentially troubling question of whether Ellison considers himself in the same light. Does he, one wonders, do enough? think enough? Dig deeply enough?

The third consideration-worthy point about this essay is that it delves into the previously discussed question of reactivity; specifically, the way Negro culture seems, in many cases, to be defined by, and/or created in response to outside influence. The author makes the firm, almost defiantly phrased suggestion that there is indeed an innate Negro experience, but interestingly offers no definition of what that is - at least, not in this essay. He does say at one point that much of so-called "Negro culture" exists in rejection of white culture and/or attitudes, but rejection is still very much a form of reaction. A positive action taken in response to a negative action is still a response, not a spontaneous or independent impulse. It could be argued that so-called "Negro" forms of expression, particularly musical forms like jazz, the blues, and gospel, are to some degree manifestations of Negro experience; and indeed, the author makes that point in several essays in other parts of the book. But while making those points, he also suggests that all those forms of music take the form they do as a rejection of more traditional forms (jazz), a transfiguration of pain imposed, at least in part, by outside sources (the blues), or as a particularly Negro expression of Christian faith (gospel). It seems clear that these forms exist at least in part as a Negro response to some form of non-Negro influence. Therefore, the questions remain, even at the end of the exhaustive, passionate, and deeply personal exploration of being Negro both defined and analyzed by this book. What in fact *is* a Negro? Is pigmentation enough of a

definition? Is Ralph Waldo Ellison, like Ralph Waldo Emerson, right in saying there is, essentially, no meaningful difference?

Characters

Louis Armstrong

Although no essay in *Shadow and Act* focuses on Louis Armstrong (1900-1971) alone, Ellison makes reference to him many times throughout the collection, both as a blues master and as a distinctive type of musical performer. In several instances, but most explicitly in "On Bird, Bird-Watching, and Jazz," Ellison makes the point that although Armstrong's theatrical, joking, and self-deprecating style is clown-like, it is "basically a make-believe role of clown." Although other jazzmen, such as Charlie Parker and Miles Davis, sought to disassociate themselves with the role of such performance in the name of respecting their racial identity, Ellison asserts that Armstrong's strength of lyric and trumpet redeem his performance and make him "an outstanding creative musician."

Bird

See Charlie Parker

Charlie Christian

In "The Charlie Christian Story," Ellison calls his friend Christian "probably the greatest of jazz guitarists." Originally from Ellison's native Oklahoma City, he led a "spectacular career" with the Benny Goodman Sextet and shares with Ellison his training in classical music as a child in the school band. Ellison goes so far as to charge Christian with giving the guitar its jazz voice, and, in so doing, changing the face of the art forever.

Samuel Clemens

See Mark Twain

Stephen Crane

In "Stephen Crane and the Mainstream of American Fiction," Ellison offers his introduction to the 1960 publication of *The Red Badge of Courage* The novel is an acknowledged classic, and Ellison hails Crane as the youngest of the nineteenth-century "masters of fiction." The youngest of fourteen children and the son of a Methodist minister, Crane (1871-1900) diverged from his family's religious fundamentalism by immersing himself in all things worldly. Although he was infamous for his adventures and exploits, his writing is sensitive to the individual's process of self -definition in society.

Ralph Waldo Emerson

Ralph Waldo Emerson (1803-1882) was the esteemed abolitionist author, speaker, and poet, after whom Ralph Ellison was named.

William Faulkner

In "Brave Words for a Startling Occasion," Ellison states that as a young writer, he "felt that except for the work of William Faulkner something vital had gone out of American prose after Mark Twain." Ellison names Faulkner (1897-1962) as another "literary ancestor." In "Twentieth-Century Fiction and the Black Mask of Humanity," he takes Faulkner to task for relying too heavily on stereotype in creating black characters for symbolic use, but he suggests "we must turn to him for continuity of moral purpose which made for the greatest of our classics." Later in the collection, he reviews the film version of Faulkner's *Intruder in the Dust* and deems it revolutionary in that "the role of Negroes in American life has been given what, for the movies, is a startling new definition."

Ernest Hemingway

Ernest Hemingway (1899-1961) is another acclaimed twentieth-century writer whom Ellison claims as a "literary ancestor." Although in one of his earlier pieces in "Twentieth-Century Fiction and the Black Mask of Humanity," Ellison charges Hemingway with abandoning moral ideals in fiction in favor of technique, he still considers him a greater artist than his mentor, Richard Wright. He states in "The World and the Jug" that Hemingway is more important to him than Wright because his writing

. . . was imbued with a spirit beyond the tragic with which I could feel at home, for it was very close to the feeling of the blues, which are, perhaps, as close as Americans can come to expressing the feeling of tragedy.

Irving Howe

Irving Howe is a Jewish-American author of an essay entitled "Black Boys and Native Sons" for the magazine *New Leader*. "The World and the Jug" entails Ellison's two responses to Howe's assertion that because of his ideological commitment, Richard Wright is a superior artist to Ellison and James Baldwin.

Stanley Edgar Hyman

Stanley Edgar Hyman is a friend of Ellison's and, in his words, "an old intellectual sparring partner." In "Change the Joke and Slip the Yoke," Ellison responds to a lecture Hyman prepared for a series at Brandeis University concerning the African-American

relationship to folk tradition. Generally, Ellison contends that Hyman oversimplifies the American tradition, particularly when it comes to the practice of blackface, or the "darky" entertainer.

Mahalia Jackson

Mahalia Jackson (1911-1972) was a singer from New Orleans whose performance Ellison reviews in "When the Spirit Moves Mahalia." Ellison asserts that Jackson synthesizes the best of classic jazz and blues artists such as Bessie Smith, but in the venue in which she was raised, the church. According to Ellison, she merges technique and influence so effectively that he considers her "not primarily a concert singer but a high priestess in the religious ceremony of her church."

Charlie Parker

Charlie Parker (1920-1955) is a famous jazz saxophonist and the subject of "On Bird, Bird-Watching, and Jazz." In the essay, Ellison reviews a book on Parker that chronicles the artist's life and exploits. Ellison speculates on the origin of the artist's nickname, Bird, and how it might relate to his famously erratic, often aberrant behavior, and the function of identity in the public eye. He asserts that Parker resisted the role of entertainer, in contrast to artists such as Louis Armstrong, but ironically eliminated his private life by leading such an infamous public one.

Jimmy Rushing

Jimmy Rushing (1901-1972, though some biography sources list 1903 as a birthdate) is an Oklahoma blues singer whom Ellison eulogizes in "Remembering Jimmy." He is remembered for his clear, bell-like voice that he paired with dance, and a lyricism that Ellison identifies as "of the Southwest; a romanticism native to the frontier."

Mark Twain

Mark Twain is the pen name of Samuel Clemens (1835-1910), the celebrated American author of *Tom Sawyer* and *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn,*. The latter, the story of a southern boy on the run with an escaped slave, is considered his masterpiece. Ellison considers Twain his foremost "literary ancestor," a writer whose work captures the colloquial language and climate of frontier America, while holding to a moral ideal of democracy. In "Twentieth-Century Fiction and the Black Mask of Humanity," he applauds Twain's willingness to represent the black character Jim as a whole, .awed human being rather than an idealized version of a man, and throughout the collection cites him as the father of twentieth-century American fiction.

Richard Wright

Richard Wright (1908-1960) is the African- American author of several controversial, groundbreaking works, namely his memoir *Black Boy* and the novel *Native Son*. Wright is recognized as Ellison's mentor, but their relationship was a charged one. On one hand, Ellison lauds Wright's work as an exemplary representation of keeping the blues tradition alive by detailing the pain in one's life. In "Richard Wright's Blues," he also praises Wright's work as an effective means of confronting white America with the brutal reality of the African-American experience. However, later, Ellison asserts several times in *Shadow and Act* that Wright sacrifices good writing in the interest of ideology.

Ralph Ellison

Ralph's Mother

Ernest Hemingway, T.S. Eliot

Mark Twain, William Faulkner

Stephen Crane

Richard Wright

The Singer Upstairs

Mahalia Jackson, Charlie Parker, Charlie Christian, Jimmy Rushing

Mrs. Jackson

Dr. Frederick Wertham

Objects/Places

America

America in *Shadow and Act* is portrayed as a concept as much as it is a physical, geo-political reality; that concept being defined by certain, oft-quoted (here and elsewhere) aspects of its founding documents, its Constitution and Bill of Rights. The theory developed in both these documents is that America is to be a land in which "all men are created equal". The intention is that all men have the right to "life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness" with "justice for all". *Shadow and Act's* overall premise is founded on a contrary concept - that several segments of the population, and in the focus of the book, the Negro population in particular, are treated and/or viewed with narrow, restrictive, unequal perspective. It's the tension between the concept and the reality that, in the author's mind, define the core of the conflict between Negro and non-Negro in America.

The Southern United States

The Southern States (Alabama, Louisiana, Georgia, Kentucky, etc) were (and sometimes still are) known as the Confederate States, the states in which slavery was institutionalized and widely practiced, and the states in which racial tensions between Negro and white are arguably the most visible and the most acute.

Oklahoma

Oklahoma is a mid-western state, just north of Texas. As the author points out in *That Same Pain, That Same Pleasure* (Section 1, Part 1), Oklahoma did not have a history of slavery - which means that Negro families living there experienced a degree or two of freedom from racial tension. He suggests that it was still there, but there were more opportunities for non-whites to transcend the situation of Negroes in the southern states, or in the ghettoes of larger northern cities (New York, Chicago, etc).

Blackface

Blackface is a term originally used to describe the makeup worn by white performers when impersonating Negroes in minstrel shows, vaudeville-like performances in which so-called Negro forms of entertainment like tap dancing, folk songs, and spirituals, were emulated to the point of satire. The makeup involved the white performer wearing dark brown makeup, exaggerated makeup around the lips, and white gloves. Eventually, the term came to be a derogatory term for all such forms of entertainment, carrying with it the connotation that such entertainments were racist in content and intent.

The Red Badge of Courage, Black Boy, Primer for White Folks, Blues People, An American Dilemma

These five books are the books reviewed by Ralph Ellison in his essays. The first and last were written by white writers, the middle three by Negroes.

The Blues

This is a term used to describe a form of music unique to the Negro experience but which has become an essential element in mainstream musical culture. A form of instrumental and/or vocal performance, it developed out of "an impulse to keep the painful details of a brutal experience alive in one's aching consciousness ... and to transcend it, not by the consolation of philosophy but by squeezing from it a near-tragic, near-comic lyricism". In other words, it is a musicalization of pain (see "Quotes", p. 246).

The Transparent Jug

A central metaphor developed in *The World and the Jug* (Section 1 Part 7), in which Negro culture is portrayed as functioning within an opaque, jug-like container. Ellison develops this metaphor to suggest that Negro culture may in fact function within certain limits, but maintains that the so-called "jug" is transparent - that is, Negroes can see beyond the confines of their experience and come to an awareness and understanding of that which is outside it. This idea manifests in various forms throughout the book.

The Camera Lens

This object appears in *That Same Pain, That Same Pleasure* (Section 1 Part 1), as a metaphoric representation of the way in which the young Ralph Ellison was allowed to have a perspective on the world different from that which his race ostensibly limited him to. Its symbolic value, as a means of increasing perspective and awareness, is similar to that of the transparent jug.

The Sound System

This object appears in *Living with Music* (Part 2, Section 1) as a symbol of the way the author, and perhaps all artists referred to in the book, construct art out of the various components of life.

Minton's Playhouse (Section 2, Part 2)

The history of this club, and its importance to Negro culture in general and jazz culture in particular, is detailed in *The Golden Age ...* (Section 2 Part 2 - see "quotes", p. 202).

Harlem

This famous, or infamous, ghetto is a borough in New York City that over the years has become home to large concentrations of Negroes and other non-white Americans who have found themselves living in what has, at times, been perceived as a symbol of racially defined misery.

The Lafargue Psychiatric Clinic

The story and importance of this clinic, where Harlem's poor (white and non-white alike) can receive psychiatric treatment is explored and analyzed in depth in *Harlem is Nowhere* (Section 3, Part 4).

Themes

Frontier

In his introduction to *Shadow and Act*, Ellison asserts that as a Negro American born in Oklahoma in post-Civil War America, he is a "frontiersman." By Ellison's definition, the American frontier is the territory of the individual, the realm in which, like Twain's Huckleberry Finn, he is allowed to seek out his destiny, make rash, "quixotic gestures" and approach the world as full of possibility, unhampered by categorical limitations such as race. Ellison attributes this self-image to his childhood in a community rich in diverse cultural influences in a state unburdened by pre-Civil War affiliations of North or South. Throughout *Shadow and Act*, Ellison uses the image of the frontier as synonymous with or tied to ideas of invention, action, newness, cultural development, and the American ideal of democracy. At several points, for example, he identifies the frontier with passion for the outdoors as depicted in Hemingway's work. At other points, he identifies the frontier with the world of Huckleberry Finn and his quality of self-invention and adventure. In other contexts, he asserts that jazz is a form of the frontier, in the sense that it is an expression and outgrowth of African-American culture, an ever changing response of the individual to environment, especially in the arena of the jam session, an act of challenge and self-invention. As he explains in the closing of "The Art of Fiction: An Interview," Ellison's understanding of the act of self-representation through writing is an act of shaping culture as he represents his own corner of it. In his words, "The American novel is in this sense a conquest of the frontier; as it describes our experience, it creates it."

Identity

Ellison makes the point that the task of his fiction is to discover exactly who he is, how he defines himself, taking into consideration the filter of American society and his own experience as integrally a part of it. The essays in *Shadow and Act* embody the author's efforts to confront and clarify these issues for himself, and in this capacity, they are preoccupied with the issue of identity on many levels. Throughout his career, Ellison has been criticized for what some take to be his lack of militancy, and for his relationship to the classics of American and European literature, many of which are written by white people. In response, the author has always contended that he is an individual in relationship to his environment, and that his work is committed to resisting stereotype, both black and white. The first section of the collection, "The Seer and the Seen," is particularly devoted to Ellison's ideas about identity as he examines different ways African Americans are perceived by the mainstream. In some of the essays, he discusses the ways that mainstream American society projects a distorted image of African Americans, while in others, such as his portraits of jazz artists, he fleshes out musicians who have previously been viewed as caricatures through their celebrity. While in "Twentieth Century Fiction and the Black Mask of Humanity" he indicts white authors, such as Faulkner, for presenting only limited African-American characters in

their fiction, in "The World and the Jug" he takes Wright to task for creating similarly simple characters out of ideological drive. Ellison plays upon the themes of masking, naming, and role-play; he examines the ways in which Americans keep themselves and others bound by such devices but also suggests the endless possibility implicit there. As he asserts in "The Art of Fiction: An Interview," the search for identity is "the American theme."

Music

Since Ellison was trained as a composer and raised in a community focused on musical expression, music is central to his identity and his writing. In "Richard Wright's Blues," for example, he defines blues as a means of holding and examining the details of one's pain, and as an expression of African-American life, a means of confronting the mainstream with that pain. He characterizes Wright's memoir *Black Boy* as just such a blues expression.Similarly, elsewhere, such as in "The Golden Age, Time Past," he examines the way jazz expression is an assertion of self, in the sense that it is a relatively new outgrowth of other musical traditions, and, as such, fundamentally American. Several of his essays commemorate the lives of musicians; in "As the Spirit Moves Mahalia," for example, he examines the way gospel and blues intersect in one artist's form, while in his review of a biography of Charlie Parker, he fleshes out the American popular image of the musician. In other essays, such as "The Sound and the Mainstream," Ellison's language mirrors the flow of the music he describes; in its own form and in relation to the art of writing, he sees music as critical to the act of African-American expression.

Black and White

As a person of mixed ancestry, black and white, Ellison considers himself a personification of the blend of influences that make up America. His work by definition is about challenging the mythical associations of the polarities of black and white, light and darkness, that are projected upon African Americans in particular. In "Twentieth-Century Fiction and the Black Mask of Humanity," Ellison asserts that historically "the Negro and the color black were associated with evil and ugliness." In several places in *Shadow and Act* he discusses ways in which blackness serves as a metaphor for the buried psychology of all things dark; he asserts that white Americans attribute to African Americans qualities they wish to be disassociated from, such as anger, passion, and sexuality. He examines the ways American culture expresses these stereotypes through literature and film, and how, in his own fiction, he challenges such imagery through depicting a whole, self-contradictory individual. In his commitment to representing himself as a mix of the chaotic influences found in American culture, Ellison draws upon the most obvious metaphors of color to resist simplistic categorization.

The Relationship between American Society and the Negro

This is the book's central theme, the focus (albeit to greater or lesser degrees) of every piece of writing in the book. There are two key aspects to this theme, both reiterated by the author with considerable frequency. The first is that a so-called Negro American is, first and foremost, an American - born into, raised under, believing in, and striving towards the same values of freedom and justice as white Americans. The difference between the ways the two races struggle to live those values is the second key aspect to the theme. Throughout the book, the author implies (and sometimes states outright) that America as a whole is victimized by institutional hypocrisy. The so-called American values are preached everywhere, aspired to everywhere, given lip service to everywhere - but reality, he suggests, is not lived according to those values. In other words, America as a whole does not practice what it preaches. Negroes, the author contends, are the more obvious victims of this hypocrisy, but his writing occasionally offers hints that he believes whites also suffer from its effects. If, he seems to be saying, all of American society truly lived according to these values, there would be peace, understanding, and socio-political-cultural harmony.

The Relationship between Art (Music, Literature) and Life

Throughout the book, whether examining literature or music, the author develops the theme that art and life are inextricably linked - that true art cannot exist without having been distilled from life, and that life cannot be fully, or even partially understood, without the guidance and/or inspiration of art. There are several key quotes to this effect throughout the book, the most important of which can be found in "Quotes - p. 105, and/or p. 114. Specific examples of the way this relationship works are also found throughout the book. In terms of music, the author describes in detail the ways in which so-called Negro forms of music (jazz, the blues) are a direct result of deeply felt emotional responses to uniquely Negro experiences. In terms of literature, the author pays particular attention in several of his reviews/essays to the ways in which Negro writers have taken the raw material of their tragic, painful, individual lives and transformed it into works of art that have enabled them to offer broader perspectives on their culture to Negro and non-Negro alike. They also have enabled the individual writer to come to a better and deeper understanding himself. This, perhaps, is the ultimate implication of the author's exploration of this theme - that art, because it is both created and ultimately perceived by individuals, is a powerful tool in bringing an individual to an understanding of himself, his society, the way self and society inter-relate, and of possibilities for improving that relationship.

Individual vs. Group Identity

This theme is developed throughout the book as a kind of sub-theme of the other two. In other words, as the author explores the relationships between American society and the Negro and between art and life, he suggests that these relationships are in no small part a manifestation of an individual's struggle for an autonomous identity within a group. In this, he is at his most American. A non-explicit tenet of the American belief system is that the value of the individual, his goals, potential, and success, is paramount and ultimately transcendent of any other. The American paradox, however, is that the society as a whole, the author suggests, has a profound, self-preservational stake in defining individuals (particularly Negro Americans) as members of a group. If, he says, individuals are seen as individuals, then perceptions and treatment of both individuals and the group might have to improve. God forbid! In other words, if a stereotype is proved wrong by the actions of the individuals, thinking and perception and relationship all become more challenging. It's important to note, however, that the author states in no uncertain terms that the value of individual contribution and identity is such that these challenges must be made. He cites the work of several individual artists as examples of how such challenges are both presented and met, indicating in his analysis of their life and work that society is ultimately enriched by the presence and influence of independent, individually minded thinkers and creators. See "Quotes - p 189" and "Quotes - p. 216" for specific examples of the author's attitudes towards the relationship between the individual and the group.

Style

Point of View

Many of the pieces that appear in *Shadow and Act* are drawn from progressive, left-leaning publications such as *New Challenge*, associated with the labor/communist parties. Some others are interviews and articles for literary magazines or publications with an educated, cultured bent. Hence, many of the pieces come from a first or third person, didactic point of view. They are straightforward and literal in tone, assuming an informed, educated audience. They also assume interest in and familiarity with the basics of civil rights issues, popular music, literature, and culture. Ellison makes the point that although his novel *Invisible Man* won the National Book Award, most African Americans (at the time of the interview) don't know who he is. This point indicates that although he is African American himself, his ongoing dialogue about the status of race relations in the United States is not necessarily a part of the popular black subculture or the mainstream.

Allusion

One of Ellison's techniques for locating race issues in American culture is by alluding to the work of other writers. In some essays, in particular "Twentieth- Century Fiction and the Black Mask of Humanity," he criticizes Twain, Hemingway, and Faulkner for portraying African Americans as only partial characters, not even human. At other points, generally later in his career, he embraces aspects of these authors' works, and in fact, in "The World and the Jug" claims them as his "literary ancestors," writers to whose level he aspires. Ellison demonstrates similar ambivalence about the work of his contemporary,Richard Wright. While in "Richard Wright's Blues" he lauds Wright's work as effective confrontation of white America with the brutal conditions for African Americans, in other pieces, he faults Wright for sacrificing quality writing in favor of ideology. These allusions serve as evidence of Ellison's cultural assertions, a springboard for his ideas, and a measure for his own writing.

Perspective

The author's perspective is clearly and vividly defined on every page, in every paragraph, in every sentence of the book. He is a broadly educated, astute, observant, passionate Negro man, a writer and musician dedicated to expanding the way Negroes, as a group and as individuals, are perceived both by Negroes and whites in America. In this context, there are two important things to note. The first is the use of the term "Negro", the term then in use for African-American (indeed, the term, "African American" had yet to be coined). As previously discussed, the use of "Negro" in this analysis is reflective of its use in the book, and of the socio-cultural-literary context in which it was written.

This point relates to the second important point about perspective in this book. For the most part, the writing here was done before the advent of the American Civil Rights movement - in particular, before the rise to prominence of the Rev. Martin Luther King Jr. It might not be going too far to say that from a historical perspective, Ralph Ellison was in the intellectual vanguard of the Movement, less of a populist than King, but no less important a figure in raising Negro and white consciousness. It's also interesting to note that Ellison's perspective is somewhat different from that of King's. While King's goal was essentially to empower the Negro people, to inspire them to courage and faith and action, Ellison's perspective was that of enlightening *both* the Negro and white peoples, offering encouragement to look not so much at race as at America - its realities, its hypocrisies, and its ideals. His expertise is that of someone who has not only lived the experience of which he's writing about, but of someone who has thought about it a great deal and not just from a personal perspective - from a societal perspective as well. He seems to be first and foremost an American - a stance of self-identification that he urges all who read his book, Negroes and non-Negroes alike, to adopt as their own.

Tone

The tone of this book is an interesting, almost paradoxical blend of the subjective and the objective. Because the author has an obviously powerful intellect, and because he seems to be striving to be perceived as presenting fact and not just opinion, there are points at which he comes across as quite objective. That said, however, there are times when the obvious emotional context associated with what he's writing about (essentially the oppression and repression of Negroes in America) seeps through, and the tone becomes more subjective. This is particularly true of "The World and the Jug" (Part 1 Section 7), in which a seething anger against both the society in which he lives and works and the writings of the critic whom he's debating seems to be barely restrained beneath a veneer of academic politeness.

By the same token, there are also points at which other feelings (passion, affection, joy) are evoked with less restraint. At several points in Section 2, for example, in which he examines musical issues and artists, his writing becomes evocative almost to the point of poeticism; his joy and pride and sense of celebration in what "his people" have both survived and created being quite evident. In short, in spite of the writing in the book giving the first impression of having a more austere, academic focus, it is ultimately an entirely subjective piece of work - and really, it can't help but be exactly that. The essays in *Shadow and Act* are ultimately entirely based on the opinions and experiences of one man, and a man who has come to the flowering of his creative intelligence within a profoundly oppressive environment. Of course, he's emotional, and writes emotionally. What's interesting, however, is that there is just enough objectivity about the book that the emotion is tempered. Feeling is backed up by reason, reason is backed up by feeling, and it's an undeniably affecting and powerful combination.

Structure

The book is divided into three sections. The first, and longest, examines several aspects of literature - of the way literature in general is created, of the way Negroes in American literature have been portrayed, and of the way literature is ultimately a manifestation of the larger culture in which it's created. All this is done in terms both general and specific, in relation to both individual artists and the group experience within which they live and create. This double barreled perspective, on the individual creation of art and societal impact on that creation, carries through into the novel's section (and much shorter) section, focusing on music - historically oriented examinations of different forms of music, biographical studies and commentary, etc. There is the sense that this section is defined much more by personality rather than by product. The third section is perhaps the least unified of the three, in that the essays therein each focus on a different topic, albeit sustaining an overall focus on the question of the relationships between Negro and American culture.

The book's structure is perhaps an illumination of the author's perspective on his cultural/artistic experience. There is the sense that in the author's mind, literary explorations of "the Negro Experience" have a degree of intellectualized depth, and that musical explorations of that experience have a deeper, less refined, rawer degree of depth, but nothing provides or illuminates the true depth of experience more than the actual living of that experience. To extend the metaphor - writing is of the air, music is of the earth, and the Negro experience is of the soul. If this is in fact a manifestation of the author's intent, whether sub-conscious or conscious, it's of considerable worth to the reader in that it leads him/her, consciously or subconsciously, into the depths of the experience with which the author is concerned.

Historical Context

Ellison's life and the two decades during which *Shadow and Act* was written span a pivotal period in United States history, one full of change and activity. Born only half a century after the end of the Civil War, Ellison's world was still resonating with the effects of the conflict. In the South, Jim Crow laws were in full effect, enforcing strict segregation between blacks and whites. Abolition of slavery crippled the South economically, and rampant poverty was the result. A rise in northern industry after the turn of the century followed and, consequently, so did a migration of southern blacks to northern urban centers.

The outcome of such a migration was manifold. On one hand, the 1920s marked a period of artistic experimentation during which African-American culture came into vogue. This national temperament, combined with a trend toward altruism and philanthropy on the part of many wealthy, white northerners, resulted in what is known as the Harlem Renaissance, a period during which African-American art and literature flourished. On the other hand, the movement disrupted family traditions from the South and set many African Americans adrift without family support, and the flood of labor to the North resulted in eventual unemployment and poverty. Two major events eventually helped to improve civil rights for African Americans: the Great Depression, which began with the stock market crash of 1929 and continued throughout the 1930s,bringing poverty to whites and blacks alike; and World War II, which began in 1939 and ended in 1945. During the 1930s, Franklin D. Roosevelt's administration created federally funded job programs like the Works Progress Administration (WPA), and made jobs within these programs available to blacks. In 1937, after strenuous work on the part of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), Hugo Black became the first African-American appointee to the United States Supreme Court. World War II marked an increased call to desegregate the armed forces, an act that was finalized in 1948 by Harry Truman.

The culmination of events known as the civil rights movement, or black freedom movement, began in 1954 with the outcome of the United States *Supreme Court case, Brown v. the Board of Education*, which declared the racial segregation of education unconstitutional. The year 1955 saw the bus boycott in Montgomery, Alabama, take place; this event eventually resulted in the desegregation of buses in 1956. In 1957, the Reverend Martin Luther King, Jr. was elected president of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference, a group committed to the non-violent direct action and boycotts that characterized the late 1950s and early 1960s. August 1963 marked the March on Washington, at which Dr. King delivered his "I Have A Dream" speech. The march was partially responsible for a new civil rights law proposed by President John F. Kennedy, which was later pushed through after Kennedy's assassination by his successor, President Lyndon B. Johnson. The Civil Rights Act of 1964 prohibited all forms of racial discrimination.

Critical Overview

Shadow and Act was published in 1964, in the wake of the civil rights movement and at the time of the rise of the black power movement. Released only a year after the historic March on Washington, it was met by critics with developed opinions about social reform. Both friends and foes anticipated Ellison's new work because of the response to his novel, *Invisible Man*.

In "Portrait of a Man on His Own," a 1964 *New York Times review*, George P. Elliot writes that *Shadow and Act* "says more about being an American Negro, and says it better, than any other book I know of." He asserts that the last section is "less distinguished" than the first section, "The Seer and the Seen." He goes on to say, however, that it is when Ellison "addresses his attention to his particular experience that what the writer says is of the greatest importance." He continues, saying that the essays "build upon a wisdom□not an intellectual apprehension, but a profound, because experienced, knowledge□of political power and the importance of ideas in shaping society and individuals."

Elliot's enthusiasm, however, does not reflect the whole reception to *Shadow and Act*. In *Improvising America: Ralph Ellison and the Paradox of Form*, C. W. E. Bigsby writes that:

Those who, in the 1960s and 1970s, proposed their own prescription for cultural and political responsibility . . . found his determined pluralism unacceptable. For although he undeniably concentrated on the black experience in America, he tended to see this experience in relation to the problem of identity, the anxieties associated with the struggle for cultural autonomy, and the need to define the contours of experience.

This idea is echoed in Brent Staples's 1996 review in which he reports, "Black radicals scorned [Ellison] as a white folks' nigger."

The mixed response to *Shadow and Act* is in keeping with response to Ellison's entire body of work. John Wright summarizes this in "Slipping the Yoke," an essay in *Speaking for You: The Vision of Ralph Ellison*, when he writes:

Ralph Ellison's fiction, essays, interviews, and speeches have been characteristically canny and complex. And both white and black readers of *Invisible Man* and *Shadow and Act* have routinely, even ritually, approached the politics, the art, and the 'racial' values these books codify in terms narrower than those Ellison himself proposes. In consequence, the body of 'conscious thought' he has erected since the 1930s has been left in shadow, artificially isolated from its intellectual roots in Afro-American tradition, and almost invariably denied a critical context as pluralistic in its techniques and cultural references as Ellison's extraordinary eclecticism demands.

Criticism

- Critical Essay #1
- Critical Essay #2
- Critical Essay #3

Critical Essay #1

Lynch is a teacher and freelance writer in northern New Mexico. In the following essay, she explores themes of self-invention and identity found in Ellison's essays.Lynch is a teacher and freelance writer in northern New Mexico. In the following essay, she explores themes of self-invention and identity found in Ellison's essays.

In his introduction to *Shadow and Act*, Ellison makes the point that writing is "the agency of my efforts to answer the question: Who am I, what am I, how did I come to be?" When deciding upon a career, he describes wondering "what was the most desirable agency for defining myself." He goes on to describe the essays in the collection as "witness of that which I have known and that which I have tried and am still trying to confront." Ellison is preoccupied with identityAmerican identity, in particular. As he indicates in the introduction, his essays are "concerned with the nature of the culture and society out of which American fiction is fabricated."

Fabrication is key to Ellison's understanding of American identity and, it follows, American music and fiction; Americans spring from a cultural tradition obsessed with manifest destiny, frontier traditions, and self-invention. Ellison asserts that the real America is constantly unfolding, and as such, the American cultural identity is a thing yet unfinished, always in the process of being invented. Controversy has surrounded Ellison's work because of his consistent defiance of stereotype and categorization, especially concerning race. As an ethnic blend of black, white, and Native American, he is by definition a mix, and as such inherently American. Bearing this in mind, he asserts that African Americans epitomize the tradition of self-invention, particularly with regard to musical expression. Sprung from the "chaos" of the community in which he was raised, his work reflects his preoccupation with American identity as an act of self-invention.

Ellison contextualizes his essays in his introduction by discussing his childhood and the origins of his writing impulse. He calls his childhood home of Oklahoma City a

. . . chaotic community, still characterized by frontier attitudes . . . that mixture which often affords the minds of the young who grow up in the far provinces such wide and unstructured latitude, and which encourages the individual's imagination . . . to range widely and, sometimes, even to soar.

Imagination is key to his self-concept; it affords him the freedom to see his world as one of endless possibility, in which he determines his form. The "chaos of Oklahoma" gives rise to Ellison's self-concept as a Renaissance Man, a master of many art forms. This chaos, he goes on to describe in "That Same Pleasure, That Same Pain", takes the shape of multiple cultural influences, from the classical music of the school band, to southwestern jazz, to European folk dance.

Culturally everything was mixed, you see, and beyond all question of conscious choices there was a level where you were claimed by emotion and movement and moods which

you couldn't often put into words. Often we wanted to share both:the classics and jazz, the Charleston and the Irish reel, spirituals and the blues, the sacred and the profane.

The result is Ellison's sense of endless possibility for his own identity; he reports, "we fabricated our own heroes and ideals catch-as-catch can, and with an outrageous and irreverent sense of freedom."

That freedom is often expressed in jazz and blues terms throughout the text, but especially in the section entitled "Sound and the Mainstream." In "Remembering Jimmy," Ellison states that in his youth, "Jazz and the public jazz dance was a third institution in our lives, and a vital one." He discusses ways that music was critical to his upbringing and sense of self; Ellison himself trained as a composer before he chose a career in writing. By definition, jazz is an outgrowth of other forms of music, including classical music and spirituals, and as such serves as an example of the way African-American culture draws on a blend of influences to create new artistic expressions. As Ellison puts it in "The Charlie Christian Story," "jazz finds its very life in an endless improvisation upon traditional materials." Jazz also serves as a means of self-invention or defining identity for the individual musician. In the same essay, he asserts that "true jazz is an art of individual assertion within and against the group." In "The Golden Age, Time Past," he explains that the jazzman must first learn the fundamentals of his art, and "he must then 'find himself,' must be reborn, must find, as it were, his soul. . . . He must achieve, in short, his self-determined identity."

Although Ellison makes mention of his college ambition to become a composer, his ultimate means of expressing his identity is as a novelist. The influences he cites in the collection range from the black militant to the traditional in the literary canon and transcend easy categorization. Richard Wright is a stated influence for Ellison, both as a mentor and through offering Ellison opportunities to write for *New Masses*, his first attempt. Wright is known for his absolutist depiction of Bigger Thomas in *Native Son*, a novel aimed at shocking whites into acknowledging the disparity between white and black qualities of life. In "Richard Wright's Blues," Ellison lauds Wright's work as eloquent literary manifestation of the blues "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." Yet, in "The World and the Jug," Ellison asserts that:

Wright as a writer was less interesting than the enigma he personified . . . he could be so wonderful an example of human possibility but could not for ideological reasons depict a Negro as intelligent, as creative or as dedicated as himself.

Ellison's willingness to express his ambivalence about Wright reflects his resistance to categorization. His simultaneous applause and rejection of a renowned African-American author serves as an assertion of self that is contradictory and complicated.Indeed, he acknowledges in "That Same, Pain, That Same Pleasure," it is Wright who instructs Ellison to read the classics, including Conrad, Joyce, and Dostoyevsky, for stylistic instruction.

In "The World and the Jug," Ellison explains that, concerning influence and inspiration, Wright is his "relative" and other writers such as T. S. Eliot, Malreaux, Hemingway, and Faulkner are literary "ancestors." His citation of various authors from diverse traditions and nations reflects Ellison's awareness that, as an American writer, he is a blend of cultural influences, and the blend is a matter of choice and intention. Because they are twentieth century American novelists, Twain and Hemingway are the most discussed "ancestors" in the text, and both are responsible for what is considered invention in their prose styles. Hemingway is the inventor of his precedent-setting style of short, lean, minimalist sentences, which objectively describe such topics as adventure and war. His prose and thematic material are responsible for the author's public persona as a sportsman and adventurer; in effect, he invents himself, at least in the public eye, by depicting his particular, masculine view of the world. Interestingly, Ellison is as ambivalent about Hemingway as he is about Wright. Although in "The World and the Jug" he offers a lyrical explanation for the ways Hemingway inspires him and "was in so many ways the father-as-artist of so many of us who came to writing during the thirties," he is just as willing to indict Hemingway in "Twentieth-Century Fiction and the Black Mask of Humanity" for his lack of moral responsibility in his fiction.

Twain, on the other hand, in the same essay, is noted for his introduction of the use of colloquial language and for his revolutionary depiction of an African-American character who is a whole, rounded person. His depiction of Jim in Huckleberry Finn is the first American fictional presentation of a black character who is, in Jim's case, at times kind, intelligent, and logical, and at other times, superstitious and foolish. Twain's protagonist, *Huckleberry Finn*, is an act of invention, too, in that he virtually invents himself by running away and choosing people other than his father to influence or parent him. Twain, like Hemingway, fits Ellison's understanding of the frontier writer both in the content of the work and in the fact that their inventiveness suggests the endless possibility of their art. Thus, they embody Ellison's assertion in "The Art of Fiction: An Interview" that "the American novel is . . . a conquest of the frontier; as it describes our experience, it creates it."

Whether concerning literature or music, Ellison is explicit throughout *Shadow and Act* about his concern with the construction of American identity through art. He addresses the theme personally by explaining his origins and influences, but the phenomenon of his self-invention is also apparent from the evolution of his work from his earliest pieces in the collection to his latest. This is best evidenced by the preface to "Twentieth-Century Fiction and the Black Mask of Humanity," which was written in 1946. He writes, "I've left in much of the bias and short-sightedness, for it says perhaps as much about me as a member of a minority as it does about literature." In presenting his earlier, less sophisticated work alongside his recent writings throughout the text, Ellison offers a view of his progression as a writer and as an African American in all his complexity. His stated intention in writing is to learn who he is, since, as he asserts in "The Art of Fiction: An Interview," "the search for identity . . . is *the* American theme.'

Source:Jennifer Lynch, Critical Essay on *Shadow and Act*, in *Nonfiction Classics for Students*, The Gale Group, 2002.

Critical Essay #2

In the following essay excerpt, Busby focuses on the themes of autobiography and "the fullness and value of African American culture" in Shadow and Act.

When Ellison decided to collect his essays, interviews, and speeches written from 1942 to 1964, he turned to one of his favorite ancestors for the title, *Shadow and Act*. T. S. Eliot's "The Hollow Men," perhaps because of the emphasis on a complex dialectical process, provides the allusion:

Between the idea
And the reality
Between the motion
And the act
Falls the Shadow

Ellison's title suggests several meanings. In the introduction Ellison refers to the title and emphasizes the significance of a writer's need to understand both his own personal past and history when he says that the "act of writing requires a constant plunging back into the shadow of the past where time hovers ghostlike." Writing as act requires a constant interaction with the shadow of the past. A second meaning is suggested by the 1949 essay "Shadow and Act," included in the collection, in which Ellison examines three recent films about African Americans, one based on Faulkner's *Intruder in the Dust*. The film, Ellison suggests, is a shadow of the novel, and films in general involve flickering shadowlike images on a two-dimensional plane.

Shadow and Act contains an introduction and three major divisions: "The Seer and the Seen"□interviews, speeches, and essays on literature; "Sound and the Mainstream"□essays about music and musicians; and "Shadow and Act"□"occasional pieces" concerned "with the complex relationship between the Negro American subculture and North American culture as a whole." Through all three parts Ellison emphasizes the importance of his personal experiences, particularly his Oklahoma past, much quoted in earlier chapters. In fact, some early reviewers labeled the work as autobiography. Both George P. Elliot in the *New York Times Book Review* (25 October 1964) and *R. W. B. Lewis* in the *New York Review of Books* (28 January 1965) called *Shadow and Act* Ellison's "real autobiography."

In the introduction Ellison stresses what Reilly calls his "fictional" generalized autobiography with its "broad frontiersman scheme." There Ellison describes himself and his friends as "frontiersmen" in a territory that emphasized freedom and possibility, explains how they adopted their Renaissance man ideal, points to the significance of southwestern jazz, and, most important, establishes himself as an initiate who ultimately embraced the significant discipline of writing only after undergoing a variety of experiences. "One might say," Ellison writes, "that with these thin essays for wings I was launched full flight into the dark." And as he searched for his craft, he drew from his frontier experience, especially the emphasis on the possibilities of amalgamation, for

BOOKRAGS

"part of our boyish activity expressed a yearning to make any□and everything of quality *Negro American*; to appropriate it, possess it, recreate it in our own group and individual images."

Related to Ellison's emphasis on autobiography is a second important theme: the fullness and value of African American culture. Ellison scorns "the notion currently projected by certain specialists in the 'Negro Problem,' which characterizes the Negro American as self-hating and defensive." Like the narrator in *Invisible Man* who learns to reject others' definitions of reality, Ellison learned to repudiate limited definitions of African American life: "I learned that nothing could go unchallenged; especially that feverish industry dedicated to telling Negroes who and what they are, and which can usually be counted upon to deprive both humanity and culture of their complexity."

The issues reappear in the first major section, "The Seer and the Seen," concerned primarily with literature. The section contains interviews with Richard G. Stern titled "That Same Pain, That Same Pleasure" originally published in *December* magazine in 1961, and with Alfred Chester and Vilma Howard titled "The Art of Fiction" published in the *Paris Review* in 1955. In the Stern interview Ellison points to many of the same autobiographical details as he does in the introduction: the importance of the frontier past, the power of the imagination, cultural mixture, ("I learned very early that in the realm of the imagination all people and their ambitions and interests could meet"), and the value of African American culture, the "Negro environment which I found warm and meaningful." In the Paris Review interview, Ellison talks specifically about the background, style, structure, and imagery of *Invisible Man*.

The first section also includes two speeches, "Brave Words for a Startling Occasion," Ellison's acceptance speech for the National Book Award in 1953, and "Hidden Name and Complex Fate: A Writer's Experience in the United States," an address to the Library of Congress on 6 January 1964 sponsored by the Gertrude Clarke Whittall Foundation. In his acceptance speech, Ellison stressed the relationship between *Invisible Man* and nineteenth century American fiction,explained his stylistic purpose, and defined democratic principles: "The way home we seek is that condition of man's being in the world, which is called love, and which we term democracy."The speech at the Library of Congress was explicitly autobiographical, as the title indicates, as Ellison reflected upon having been named for Ralph Waldo Emerson and having become a writer. He amused about the questions of identity that one's name suggests, recalled the humor that revolved around his name, and remembered the powerful literary and oral influences that permeated his boyhood before comparing the best nineteenth-century fiction and its direct confrontation with democratic themes to twentieth-century fiction of understatement.

Ellison includes in section 1 three literary essays written prior to the publication of *Invisible Man*. "Beating that Boy," whose title refers to belabored discussions of "the Negro problem," is a 1945 review of Bucklin Moon's *Primer for White Folks*. "Twentieth Century Fiction and the Black Mask of Humanity" (1946) demonstrates Ellison's concerns about the American literary tradition while he worked on *Invisible Man*, especially his thesis that twentieth-century American novelists had turned away from the

social and moral function of literature central to nineteenth-century American writers. "Richard Wright's Blues," a review of Wright's *Black Boy* for the *Antioch Review* in 1945, is important because it demonstrates the complexity of Ellison's relationship with Wright. Written before the split with Wright, Ellison found the blues in Wright's autobiography and praised his relative for breaking from the restrictions of both southern society and the cultural possessiveness of black southern culture.

Two essays in the first section are intellectual bouts with white critics. "Change the Joke and Slip the Yoke," published in *Partisan Review* in 1958, is a response to a Stanley Edgar Hyman lecture at Brandeis University. Hyman had identified the trickster and the darky entertainer as folk figures important to African American writers. Ellison disagrees with Hyman, saying that the trickster is a much more universal archetype, and the "'darky' entertainer," Ellison concludes, appealed not to black Americans but to whites for whom blackness had become a metaphor for "the white American's fascination with the symbolism of whiteness and blackness." Ellison points out that the mask of the "'darky' entertainer" was not limited to black folklore, for the American experience was begun in the masquerade as Indians at the Boston Tea Party. In response to Hyman's comments about the narrator's grandfather in *Invisible Man* as the "smartman-playing-dumb," Ellison notes that the grandfather's ambiguity rather than his mask indicates his importance.

The second and better-known skirmish was with Irving Howe. "The World and the Jug" combines two separate articles written for Myron Kolatch of the *New Leader*, who asked for Ellison's response to Howe's "Black Boys and Native Sons," published in the August 1963 issue of *Dissent*, in which Howe compared Ellison to Wright and Baldwin and found both younger writers lacking. Ellison's second essay responds to Howe's comments about the first piece and therefore takes on an angrier, more combative tone than many of Ellison's other pieces. Ironically Howe had initially charged Ellison with insufficient anger and called for more protest about racism in his work.

Ellison's argument revolves around the distinction between art and propaganda. Protest writing, Ellison asserts, weakens artistic merit if a writer emphasizes protest rather than craft. Judgments about writing should be based on merit, not on whether it includes "racial suffering, social injustice or ideologies of whatever mammy-made variety." But Ellison contends his novel contains protest: "My goal was not to escape, or hold back, but to work through; to transcend, as the blues transcend the painful conditions with which they deal. The protest is there, not because I was helpless before my racial condition, but because I *put* it there."

The second important part of the argument concerns Ellison's belief in the value of African American experience. Social critics such as Howe, Ellison asserts, refuse to see African Americans as full human beings; rather "when he looks at a Negro he sees not a human being but an abstract embodiment of living hell." This limited view ignores the value of African American culture: "To deny in the interest of revolutionary posture that such possibilities of human richness exist for others, even in Mississippi, is not only to deny us our humanity but to betray the critic's commitment to social reality." Consequently, given his attitude about the merit of African American culture, Ellison

believes that the most valuable literature that grows from this experience is celebratory: "I believe that true novels, even when most pessimistic and bitter, arise out of an impulse to celebrate human life and therefore are ritualistic and ceremonial at their core. Thus they would preserve as they destroy, affirm as they reject."

Ellison also stresses the importance of African American culture in part 2, "Sound and the Mainstream," with essays about music over such topics as Minton's Playhouse, Mahalia Jackson, Jimmy Rushing, Charlie Bird, Charlie Christian, and LeRoi Jones's book on the blues, *Blues People*. Throughout these essays, Ellison points to the central importance of jazz and the blues on his own work as he highlights music as one of the richest contributions of African American culture to the American amalgamation.

In "Living with Music," for example, he recalls how as a boy he learned about artistic discipline from early Oklahoma jazzmen. From them he came to understand the dynamics of the dialectic between tradition and the individual talent: "I had learned too that the end of all this discipline and technical mastery was the desire to express an affirmative way of life through its musical tradition and that this tradition insisted that each artist achieve his creativity within its frame. He must learn the best of the past, and add to it his personal vision." Similarly Ellison found an interplay between freedom and restriction in Jimmy Rushing's singing. Rushing, like Ellison, was a product of the southwestern frontier, and Ellison believes that Rushing's geographical background was the basis for his individual talent. Ellison's comments on Rushing may just as easily be applied to Ellison himself: "For one of the significant aspects of his art is the imposition of a romantic lyricism upon the blues tradition . . .; a lyricism which is not of the Deep South, but of the Southwest: a romanticism native to the frontier, imposed upon the violent rawness of a part of the nation which only thirteen years before Rushing's birth was still Indian territory. Thus there is an optimism in it which echoes the spirit of those Negroes who, like Rushing's father, had come to Oklahoma in search of a more human way of life." Rushing therefore communicated the blues as "an art of ambivalence" for they "constantly remind us of our limitations while encouraging us to see how far we can actually go."

Besides dramatizing constant tension between freedom and restriction, jazz presents rituals of initiation and rebirth. In his remembrance of Minton's, "The Golden Age, Time Past," Ellison notes that jam sessions there, like the ones he viewed growing up, demonstrated "apprenticeship, ordeals, initiation ceremonies, . . . rebirth." He continues, "For after the jazzman has learned the fundamentals of jazz . . ., he must then 'find himself,' must be reborn, must find, as it were, his soul." Charlie Parker became just such an example of transformation. His nickname, the "Bird," indicated metamorphosis: "Nicknames are indicative of a change from a given to an achieved identity, whether by rise or fall, and they tell us something of the nicknamed individual's interaction with his fellows." As he remade himself and adopted a mask, Parker moved over the line into chaos and became "a sacrificial figure whose struggles against personal chaos, on stage and off, served as entertainment for a ravenous, sensation-starved, culturally disoriented public." The comments about Parker provide insight into Ellison's conceptions of two of his characters, Rinehart and Senator Sunraider/Bliss, figures who tempt chaos as they don masks.

Another leitmotif in this section, important to Ellison's Hickman stories, is the value of history. In his review of LeRoi Jones's *Blues People*, in which he criticizes Jones for reducing blues to ideology, Ellison strikes out against the American tendency to ignore the past: "Perhaps more than any other people, Americans have been locked in a deadly struggle with time, with history. We've fled the past and trained ourselves to suppress, if not forget, troublesome details of the national memory, and a great part of our optimism, like our progress, has been bought at the cost of ignoring the processes through which we've arrived at any given moment in our national existence."

Ellison's title, of course, also points to the importance of history, and the third section is also titled "Shadow and Act." Something of a grab bag, this section includes a 1958 interview with *Preuves*, the title review of films about African Americans, a Hemingway-influenced piece on a Harlem family during World War II, a description of the Lafargue Psychiatric Clinic written in 1948 but unpublished, and an unpublished 1944 review of Gunnar Myrdal's *An American Dilemma*. As a group, these pieces continue some of the earlier themes, but they are less autobiographical than most of the other selections in *Shadow and Act*.

"The Way It Is," the only early *New Masses* article that Ellison decided to include, demonstrates, as the title indicates, Hemingway's influence and Marxist issues as Ellison describes one Harlem family's response to racial injustice and patriotic demands during World War II. "Harlem Is Nowhere" defines the alienation and discontinuity that Harlem residents, dislocated from cultural roots, felt in the 1940s and serves as an important statement of the concerns from which *Invisible Man* developed. Finally, in his review of Myrdal's book, Ellison again stresses the value of African American life by sharply criticizing the European sociologist for accepting the flawed conclusion that African Americans are the product of social pathology rather than a culture of "great value, of richness."

When *Shadow and Act* appeared in 1964, American racial disharmony was high. Riots in Watts, Detroit, Newark, and other American cities loomed on the horizon. Incendiary comments by Malcolm X, LeRoi Jones, and James Baldwin made many white Americans uncomfortable. So it is not surprising that many reviewers found comfort in Ellison's measured prose. For example, the reviewer for *Choice* (March 1965) called it an" antidote to the more hysterical proclamations coming from the pens of James Baldwin and LeRoi Jones." Ellison was often called "sane" by reviewers, mostly white. In fact, few African American reviewers or journals discussed *Shadow and Act*.

In his review, R. W. B. Lewis, focusing on autobiographical elements, identified Ellison's purpose as a definition of identity: "Inquiring into his experience, his literary and musical education, Ellison has come up with a number of clues to the fantastic fate of trying to be at the same time a writer, a Negro, an American, and a human being." Stanley Edgar Hyman, in a review for the *New Leader* (26 October 1964), emphasized Ellison's concern with values: "In his insight into the complexity of American experience, Ralph Ellison is the profoundest cultural critic that we have, and his hard doctrine of freedom, responsibility, and fraternity is a wisdom rare in our time." Robert Penn Warren, reviewing for *Commentary* (May 1965), found Ellison's concentration on unity from

diversity the most important *element of Shadow and Act:"The basic unity of human experience*that is what Ellison asserts; and he sets the richness of his own experience and that of many Negroes he has known, and his own early capacity to absorb the general values of Western culture, over against what Wright called 'the essential bleakness of black life in America. '"

In *Shadow and Act* Ellison draws from his vivid and specific memory to recreate a rich and vibrant culture to juxtapose with the dismal one too often attributed to African American life. Instead Ellison offers "the glorious days of Oklahoma jazz dances, the jam sessions at Halley Richardson's place on Deep Second, . . . the days when watermelon men with voices like mellow bugles shouted their wares in time with the rhythm of their horses' hoofs." The figure of the young Ralph Ellison coming out of Oklahoma territory and becoming a famous author is, as Reilly notes, a "fiction," a shaping of experience by art, and it is an American story most powerful. His second collection of essays, published 22 years later, offers a new extension of the old persona.

Source: Mark Busby, "The Mellow Bugler: Ellison's Non-fiction," in *Ralph Ellison*, edited by Warren French, Twayne, 1991, pp. 126-33.

Critical Essay #3

In the following essay, O'Meally examines Ellison's intentions in Shadow and Act, citing Ellison's "single-minded intention to define Afro-American life."

The initial appeal of *Shadow and Act* seemed to be that here, at last, the "invisible man" would emerge from underground; that here, as one reviewer proclaimed, was Ralph Ellison's "real autobiography.' It is true that *Shadow and Act* has autobiographical overtones. Two pieces, the Introduction and "Hidden Name and Complex Fate," are explicitly autobiographical in design. And in the book's reviews and interviews the author draws extensively upon his own experience. Furthermore, by including essays (none retouched) written over a span of twenty-two years, Ellison reveals certain aspects of his development from the twenty -eight year-old, Marxist-oriented WPA worker of "The Way It Is" (1942) to the seasoned writer of 1964:now he was "not primarily concerned with injustice, but with art."

In his Introduction Ellison offers a sort of apologia, explaining that the essays "represent, in all their modesty, some of the necessary effort which a writer of my background must make in order to possess the meaning of his experience." When the first of the essays appeared, he regarded himself "in my most secret heart at least□a musician," not a writer. "With these thin essays for wings," he notes, "I was launched full flight into the dark." Looking at the publication date printed at he end of each text, we may trace the growth of a young intellectual's consciousness. Thus "their basic significance, whatever their value as information or speculation, is autobiographical." Nonetheless, the book has thematic unities that are even more compelling. A good deal of the cumulative power of Shadow and Act derives from its basic contrast of black American life as seen through the lenses of politics, sociology, and popular culture with black American life as observed and lived by one sensitive, questioning black man.

Shadow and Act, a compilation, has enduring validity as a unified work of art because of its author's single-minded intention to define Afro- American life. Sometimes Ellison gently punctures, sometimes wields an ax, against inadequate definitions of black experience. In place of what he detects as false prophesies, usually uttered by social scientists, Ellison chooses as broad a frame of reference as possible to interpret black experience in richly optimistic terms. "Who wills to be a Negro?" he asks, rhetorically. "*I* do!"

In a number of essays Ellison points out that all too often the white critic treats black art as if it had appeared miraculously, without tradition, as if the black artist just grew like Topsy. To correct for this kind of condescension, Ellison is very careful in his criticism to discuss black music, literature, and the visual arts in the context of tradition: black, American, Western, Eastern, universal. Ellison's warnings notwithstanding, *Shadow and Act* is a singular achievement. It is not possible to point out another work that deals as fully with Afro-American and American literature and music and politics; and that is varied enough to include tightly drawn literary essays and a formal address alongside

breezy interviews and autobiographical reflections. That it all comes together as a well-unified whole is a tribute to its author's power as editor/philosopher/artist.

This is not to suggest that *Shadow and Act* is without precursors. With its emphasis on ritual and folk forms in art, it recalls the writings of Kenneth Burke, André Malraux, and Stanley Edgar Hyman. The political persuasion, which Arthur P. Davis terms "integrationist," as well as the rhetoric remind us of Ellison's support for the freedom movement. As a study of Americana from the expansive perspective of a writer, *Shadow and Act* falls within the tradition of Henry James's *The American Scene* (1907). James Baldwin's *Notes of a Native Son* (1955), which includes book and movie reviews and political commentary as well as documents for an autobiography, provides another context for *Shadow and Act*.

Ellison's book of essays has also inspired others, including Imamu Amiri Baraka's *Home* (1966). Although the perspectives of Ellison and Baraka, who in *Home* professes his strident black nationalism, clash dramatically, their books are very similar in form. Both consist of essays on Afro-American art and politics; both have autobiographical underpinnings. Then too, in that he painstakingly stresses the particular contributions of blacks to American society, Ellison is in his way undoubtedly a black cultural nationalist.

The central theme of "The Seer and the Seen" (the first of the three sections of *Shadow and Act*) is "segregation of the word." White Americans, says Ellison, because of their "Manichean fascination with the symbolism of blackness and whiteness," tend to see the world in black (bad) and white (good). When whites contemplate a "profoundly personal problem involving guilt," the conjured images and characters appear, as it were, darkly. Thus:

It is practically impossible for the white American to think of sex, of economics, his children or womenfolk, or of sweeping sociopolitical changes, without summoning into consciousness fear-flecked images of black men. Indeed, it seems that the Negro has become identified with those unpleasant aspects of conscience and consciousness which it is part of the American's character to avoid. Thus when the literary artist attempts to tap the charged springs issuing from his inner world, up float his misshapen and bloated images of the Negro, like the fetid bodies of the drowned, and he turns away, discarding an ambiguous substance which the artists of other cultures would confront boldly and humanize into the stuff of a tragic art.

According to Ellison, certain nineteenth-century writers, notably Herman Melville, Mark Twain, and Stephen Crane, produced classic American fiction because they were able eloquently to confront the "blackness of darkness" on the guiltshadowed edges of their minds. For them, the black man, even when portrayed in the garb of minstrelsy, represented America's moral concern and quest for freedom. Much of the vitality of *Moby Dick, Huckleberry Finn*, and Crane's short stories derives from the blackness of these works. When other writers left out black characters (or reduced them to the dimensions of badmen, angels, and clowns), these writers presented black characters whose humanity was great and whose principles provided the fiction with a moral context. When other writers ignored or excused Americans' "blackest" political and

moral transgressions, these writers faced them directly. "Mark Twain knew that in his America humanity masked its face with blackness."

Ellison writes that, with the Hayes-Tilden Compromise, this moral concern slipped underground. Blacks disappeared almost completely from American fiction; and with them the "deep-probing doubt and a sense of evil" that had immortalized certain nineteenth-century writers. Muckrakers, proletarian writers, and "lost generation" writers raised some doubt about morality. "But it is a shallow doubt, which seldom turns inward upon the writer's own values; almost always it focuses outward, upon some scapegoat with which he is seldom able to identify himself . . . This particular naturalism explored everything except the nature of man.

" Even Hemingway's stories, which the young Ellison loved for their descriptions of nature and human emotions, and which he once imitated for their technical excellence, also failed to explore deeply the nature of man. Hemingway authored "the trend toward technique for the sake of technique and production for the sake of the market to the neglect of the human need out of which [these techniques] spring." The understated, hard-boiled novel, "with its dedication to physical violence, social cynicism and understatement," performs on the social level "a function similar to that of the stereotype: it conditions the reader to accept the less worthy values of society, and it serves to absolve our sins of social irresponsibility."

Ellison goes on to consider William Faulkner and Richard Wright, who present a variety of black characters in their fiction. Both recall nineteenthcentury writers in their outward and unrelenting concern with America's moral climate. Faulkner's characters, like Mark Twain's, have stereotypical outlines, but Faulkner is willing to "start with the stereotype, accept it as true, and then seek out the human truth which it hides." Wright's characters also verge on the stereotypic: often they are either the usual "bad niggers" of white folklore or the evil, broken blacks of what one critic has called "lthlore" of social-science fiction. Nonetheless, Wright pulls from underground the black character and, with him, the disturbing moral questions that cluster around the black as "seen" by whites. Armed, says Ellison, with the insights of Freud and Marx, Wright sought "to discover and depict the meaning of Negro experience; and to reveal to both Negroes and whites those problems of a psychological and emotional nature which arise between them when they strive for mutual understanding."

Aside from his comments on Wright, Ellison says very little in *Shadow and Act* about Afro-American writing per se. As a boy he was introduced to New Negro poets, and their works inspired pride and excitement over the glamor of Harlem. "And it was good to know that there were Negro writers." But after reading T. S. Eliot, black poetry faded in Ellison's eyes: "The Waste Land" gripped his mind. "Somehow its rhythms were often closer to those of jazz than were those of the Negro poets, and even though I could not understand them, its range of allusion was as mixed and varied as Louis Armstrong." Ellison says that white writers like Eliot, and later Malraux, Dostoevsky, and others, helped to free him from segregation of the mind. Black writers' portraits of blacks were often unsatisfactory, but certain white writers, dealing "darkly" with the complex human condition, led Ellison to realize some of the possibilities for black characters he would

create. The Invisible Man, of course, is as much Candide and Stephen Daedalus as he is Richard (of *Black Boy*) or Big Boy (of Sterling Brown's poem, "The Odyssey of Big Boy").

In *Shadow and Act* Ellison spars openly with two literary historians, Irving Howe and Stanley Edgar Hyman. Both *"The World and the Jug"* and *"Change the Joke and Slip the Yoke"* began as informal, if heated, rebuttals to articles on *Invisible Man. "The World and the Jug"* germinated through a telephone conversation with Myron Kolatch of the *New Leader; "Change the Joke and Slip the Yoke"* through a letter to Hyman. Irritated by the condescending reductionism he felt to be implicit in their approaches, Ellison took aim with both barrels. In fact, in his attempts to correct what he saw as these critics' distortions of the Afro-American image, he scatters the form and substance of certain of their literary theories, twisting them, sometimes unfairly, to serve his own purposes.

In "The World and the Jug" Ellison takes issue with Howe's essay "Black Boys and Native Sons," which deals what it means to be a black American writer. Ellison objects to the notion that, while Richard Wright kept the faith by maintaining his militant stance, Ellison and Baldwin became overrefined, "literary to a fault." Making Howe a strawman, Ellison labels this critic a sociology oriented writer who values ideology over art and who is blind to works that are not explicitly political. Howe is also stung for his statement that Wright's release of anger allowed Baldwin and Ellison to express their own anger. "What does Howe know of my acquaintance with violence," writes Ellison, "or the shape of my courage or the intensity of my anger? I suggest that my credentials are at least as valid as Wright's . . . and it is possible that I have lived through and committed even more violence than he." Furthermore, Wright, though a hero and friend, was not as great a literary influence as were Malraux and Hemingway. To say that blacks are influenced only by other blacks assumes that blacks live in a "colored-only" jug with a tight cork. We must remember, however, that the jug is not opaque, but transparent: blacks influence and are influenced by whites and others outside the jug.

Too often, Ellison warns, a writer like Howe, who believes that good art must be overtly *engagé,* shrinks the image of the black man he is purporting to defend. "One unfamiliar with what Howe stands for would get the impression that when he looks at a Negro he sees not a human being but an abstract embodiment of living hell." Thus the raging Bigger Thomas is preferred to the bemused Invisible Man. Overlooked here is the belief that blacks are unquestionably human and that.

Their resistance to provocation, their coolness under pressure, their sense of timing and their tenacious hold on the ideal of their ultimate freedom are indispensable values in the struggle, and are at least as characteristic of American Negroes as the hatred, fear and vindictiveness which Wright chose to emphasize.

Ellison states succinctly where he differs with Wright (and Howe) regarding the purpose of art:

Wright believed in the much abused notion that novels are "weapons"□the counterpart of the dreary notion, common among most minority groups, that novels are instruments

of good social relations. But I believe that true novels, even when most pessimistic and bitter, arise out of an impulse to celebrate human life and therefore are ritualistic and ceremonial at their core. Thus they would preserve as they destroy, affirm as they reject.

Ellison says that just as he, and most blacks, have disciplined themselves to live sanely in a hostile America, his novel is a product not of political struggle alone but of disciplined literary struggle. The writer's job is not to deny but to transmute the loadstone of anger and injustice into art.

With its comment on folklore and art, Stanley Edgar Hyman's chapter on *Invisible Man*, published in *The Promised End*, could be seen as derivative of Ellison's own critical work. Yet Ellison takes sharp issue with Hyman in *"Change the Joke."* In a typical preface he puts his essay in context, explaining that it originated as a letter to "an old friend and intellectual sparring partner." Their two articles, he adds, "are apt to yield their maximum return when read together." Despite this gentle beginning, Ellison is quick to point out that Hyman's conception of how literature draws on folk sources is so much at variance from his own that he "must disagree with him all along the way."

Ellison finds fault with the "racially pure" aspects of Hyman's discussion. Hyman identifies the "darky entertainer" as a figure from black American folklore and as one related to the "archetypal trickster figure, originating from Africa." This minstrel man, a professional entertainer who plays dumb, metamorphoses in Afro-American literature into such characters as the wiley grandfather of *Invisible Man*. This argument offends Ellison by veering toward the claim that black Americans possess idiosyncratic forms directly traceable to an African homeland.

Ellison responds that the black American writer draws on literature of any and all kinds to create character and circumstance. If he uses folklore, it is not because of his ethnic heritage but because he is a student of *Ulysses* and "The Waste Land" where folk and myth sources provide structure and resonance. The black writer should not be backed into a corner where the oddments and exotica of folklore are said to preside over the true source of good writing, which is *good writing.*

Ellison adds that when black writers do tap folk sources, they do not use the "darky" figures of minstrelsy. Such characters are by no means black folk types but white ones, born of the white American's need to exorcise the true black man and to drape in black certain troubling behavioral patterns and attitudes. When these entertainers show up in American literature they are repulsive to Afro-Americans. Furthermore, masking and "playing dumb" are American games, not just black ones. Black characters in novels by American blacks are, Ellison says, as homegrown as their authors. Trace them to Africa, and the critic takes a political position not a literary one.

This hyperbolic statement seems to contradict Ellison's belief that folklore provides a secure base for great literature. But, troubled by the "segregated" idea that black writers strictly depend on black sources, and angered by even the dimmest suggestion that as a black writer he himself performed the obscene function of a blackface minstrel man, Ellison threw Hyman a hyperbole. Afro-American folklore provides riches, Ellison says,

"but for the novelist, of any cultural or racial identity, his form is his greatest freedom and his insights are where he finds them."

So where does the writer find true portraits of Afro-Americans? In black folklore, yes. In churches, barbershops, workgangs, and playgrounds where the lore abounds. But that kind of study can never replace the needed study of images and modes of characterization in literature. And this does appear in the works of Toni Morrison, Ernest J. Gaines, Ishmael Reed, Al Young, Alice Walker, and James A. McPherson□all of whom also use folklore in their fiction□whose characters spring from the Bible, James Fenimore Cooper, Jonathan Swift, Henry James, Zora Neale Hurston, from Ralph Ellison.

When jazz saxophonist Marion Brown taught at the University of Massachusetts, he required his students to read the second section of *Shadow and Act*, "Sound and the Mainstream." There, he said, you get an idea of the milieu in which the black musician operates. There, too, are several portraits of Afro-Americans at their eloquent best: as musicians, as artists.

"Blues People," a review of Imamu Amiri Baraka's study of black music, is the theoretical cornerstone of *Shadow and Act's* middle section. Baraka, another strawman, is said to strain for militancy and to falsify the meaning of the blues and the background of the bluesman. Afro-Americans of any kind are likely to produce genuine art, notes Ellison, not just dark-skinned, country, lower-class, or militant blacks. Furthermore, Afro-American music may not correctly be considered in isolation from mainstream American music. "The most authoritative rendering of America in music is that of American Negroes." One of Ellison's major points here is that black American musicians, throughout their history in the New World, have functioned not as politicians but as artists, leaders of transcending ritual. "Any effective study of the blues would treat them first as poetry and ritual." To white society, Bessie Smith may have been purely an entertainer, a "blues queen"; but "within the tighter Negro community where the blues were part of a total way of life, and a major expression of an attitude toward life, she was a priestess, a celebrant who affirmed the values of the group and man's ability to deal with chaos." The same is true of other black musicians too, as Ellison carries out the theme in his portraits of Mahalia Jackson, Charlie Parker, Charlie Christian, and Jimmy Rushing.

The piece on Mahalia Jackson, "As the Spirit Moves Mahalia," contains a fine thumbnail sketch of the renowned gospel singer, whose ebullience brought her international fame. Also, though untrained in a formal sense, she is portrayed as a highly conscious artist who extended the gospel form. Disciplined by her experiences in a black southern rural and then black northern urban setting, she was influenced not only by blues and jazz, but by the European classics, flamenco, and certain Eastern forms.

Ellison gives an excellent discussion of black sacred music as the music of ritual. He advises those who would truly understand this singer to hear her in the Afro-American church, where she reigns as "a high priestess in the religious ceremony."

It is in the setting of the church that the full timbre of her sincerity sounds most distinctly . . . Here it could be seen that the true function of her singing is not simply to entertain, but to prepare the congregation for the minister's message, to make it receptive to the spirit and, with effects of voice and rhythm, to evoke a shared community of experience.

The recordings are wonderful, but only in church may she sing truly" until the Lord comes." Only in the music's ritual context may the full mystery and meaning of her songs be comprehended.

"Remembering Jimmy" is Ellison's eloquent appreciation of Jimmy Rushing who, like Mahalia Jackson, is portrayed as the leader of a ritual, in this case a secular one: the public dance. The combination of blues, dancers, musicians, and singers "formed the vital whole of jazz as an institutional form, and even today neither part is quite complete without the rest." Rushing's blues and ballads must be experienced in ritual context. So, too, his music is a product of the black neighborhood, his voice seeming to echo something wondrous about the east side of Oklahoma City where he like Ellison got his start. And Rushing's music has political, social, and national implications, reminding Americans of "rockbottom reality" along with "our sense of the possibility of rising about it." Herein lies the force of the blues, "our most vital popular art form," and the universal appeal of an artist/interpreter, Rushing.

Ellison's tribute to another childhood acquaintance in "The Charlie Christian Story" focuses on the jazz musician in American society. In a country where high art is viewed as entertainment, and where the complexities of history are reduced to the clichés of legend, the meanings of jazz are dimly understood. Charlie Christian was exposed to many kinds of music as he grew up. Oklahoma City was a bustling, energetic blues and jazz center where Second Street was comparable to Kansas City's famous Twelfth. Moreover, at school, on the radio, at the movies, and, in Christian's case, at home, classical music as well as popular and folk songs were heard. Many jazz performers, including Christian before he reached New York City, remain local heroes inside the narrow radius of their traveling circuit. But the tradition from which their art springs is a rich and diverse one, tapping blues and classics, folk and high art.

As with Rushing and Jackson, Christian and other jazz artists can be most fully understood in the context of ritual. For jazzmen the public dance is a vital institution. But the "academy"—the principal ritual and testing ground—is the jam session. Here the artists exchange ideas (which then, imitated, drift into the vocabulary of mainstream jazz, leaving their creators anonymous); they also participate in a rite wherein the musician's identity is discovered and asserted. In Ellison's words, "Each true jazz moment . . . springs from a contest in which each artist challenges all the rest; each solo flight, or improvisation, represents (like the successive canvases of a painter) a definition of his identity: as individual, as member of the collectivity and as a link in the chain of tradition." For Ellison, black musicians are tough, astute artists and ritual leaders who teach, purge, destroy, mourn, initiate, delight—and, above all, celebrate.

And black music that is unconnected to these life-sustaining rituals—the church, the dance, the jam session—is liable to be sterile. Such seems the case even with the eloquent saxophone virtuoso, Charlie "Bird" Parker, portrayed in "On Bird, Bird-Watching, and Jazz" as an artist without roots. Though Parker studied and jammed with Kansas City musicians, he (and a generation of imitators) threw off the mask of the dance-hall entertainer only, Ellison says, to become a "white hero" and, ironically, "entertainment for a ravenous, sensation-starved, culturally disoriented public," mostly white. To Ellison, Parker's music reflected the triumph of technique over real feeling (as expressed in sacred and secular ritual) and, finally, adolescent impotence. Of Parker's style, Ellison writes: "For all its velocity, brilliance and imagination there is in it a great deal of loneliness, self-deprecation and self-pity. With this there is a quality which seems to issue from its vibratoless tone: a sound of amateurish ineffectuality, as though he could never quite make it." "Bird lives," in Ellison's view, because he transforms postwar discord and yearning into "a haunting art." Ellison, who obviously is deaf to virtually all jazz beyond Basie and Ellington, says that if Bird could be said to reign as a ritual leader, his was a cult of sad-eyed, self-destructive whites, trying desperately, decadently, to be "hip."

The third and final "movement" of *Shadow and Act*, the one that gives the book its title, is its least focused section. This "eldest" division (containing essays dated 1942, 1944, 1948, 1949, and 1958) comprises two topical essays, a piece on black Hollywood images, a book review, and a selfinterview on politics, race, and culture. This mixed section is not, however, a mere grab bag stuffed with old essays unfitted to the rest of the book. Dealing primarily with culture and politics—rather than literature and music—it provides the reader a background against which to evaluate Ellison's discussions of specific art forms and artists.

Also, the essays in this final section are the book's most radical in analysis. In "The Way It Is," published in *New Masses* (1942) Ellison coolly defines the misery and near despair of Harlemites on the home front of the world war fought by a Jim Crow army. In "Harlem Is Nowhere" (unpublished, 1948) he discusses the wretched conditions in Harlem and their effects on the minds of desperate "folk" residents. And in "An American Dilemma: A Review" (unpublished, 1944) he delineates the invidious relation of "philanthropic" big business, social science, and black politics. Here we seem to be in the presence of a Young Turk who hurls elaborate curses from the sidelines of American culture. That two of these essays were not previously published (because of their radical bent?) suggests that Ellison may have yet more gems filed away.

As in the first two thirds of *Shadow and Act*, in this section Ellison deals with the image and role of the Afro-American in the United States. Here again he observes that in terms of culture Afro-Americans are more American than purely African. What binds people of African ancestry throughout the world is "not culture . . . but an identity of passions." "We share a hatred for the alienation forced upon us by Europeans during the process of colonialization and empire are bound by our common suffering more than by our pigmentation." Thus blacks around the world share what one anthropologist has termed a common "culture of oppression" rather than language and other cultural forms and rites. Now we meet Ellison at his stubborn and limiting worse, blindly ignoring the

multiplicity of cultural forms shared by peoples of African descent. According to the Ellison of "Some Questions and Some Ancestors," all that blacks in America have in common with blacks in Ghana or South Africa is white oppression.

This is not to say that Afro-Americans do not constitute a distinctive group; nor, as Ellison makes clear elsewhere, does it mean that Afro-Americans are defined simply by their relation to white Americans. In an often-quoted passage from his review of Gunnar Myrdal's *An American Dilemma*, Ellison bristles:

Can a people (its faith in an idealized American Creed not withstanding) live and develop for over three hundred years simply by reacting? Are American Negroes simply the creation of white men, or have they at least helped to create themselves out of whatthey found around them? Men have made a way of life in caves and upon cliffs, why cannot Negroes have made a way of life upon the horns of the white man's dilemma?

In fact, black Americans *have,* made a way of life which they do not wish to sacrifice entirely, even in their drive for full freedom in America. Ellison accuses Myrdal of presuming that blacks do not participate in "white" culture because they are kept away from it. Ellison offers an important corrective here:

It does not occur to Myrdal that many of the Negro cultural manifestations which he considers merely reflective might also embody a rejection of what he considers "higher values." There is a dualism at work here. It is only partially true that Negroes turn away from white patterns because they are refused participation. There is nothing like distance to create objectivity, and exclusion gives rise to counter values. Men, as Dostoevsky observed, cannot live in revolt.

Men tend to prefer the styles and values of their particular cultural group. Sounding somewhat more like Imamu Amiri Baraka than the moderate integrationist, Ellison comments on the effect of integration on black culture:

I see a period when Negroes are going to be wandering around because, you see, we have had this thing thrown at us for so long that we haven't had a chance to discover what in our own background is really worth preserving. For the first time we are given a choice, we are making a choice . . . Most Negroes could not be nourished by the life white Southerners live. It is too hag-ridden, it is too obsessed, it is too concerned with attitudes which could change everything that Negroes have been conditioned to expect from life.

Shadow and Act presents explicit and compelling definitions of Afro-American life. The most comprehensive of these appears in "The World and the Jug" (which I talked about earlier in terms of its literary argument):

It is not skin color which makes a Negro American but cultural heritage as shaped by the American experience, the social and political predicament; a sharing of that "concord of sensibilities" which the group expresses through historical circumstance . . . Being a Negro American has to do with the memory of slavery and the hope of

emancipation and the betrayal by allies and the revenge and contempt inflicted by our former masters after the Reconstruction, and the myths, both Northern and Southern, which are propagated in justification of that betrayal . . . It has to do with a special perspective on the national ideals and the national conduct, and with a tragicomic attitude toward the universe. It has to do with special emotions evoked by the details of cities and countrysides, with forms of labor and with forms of pleasure; with sex and with love, with food and with drink, with machines and with animals; with climates and with dwellings, with places of worship and places of entertainment; with garments and dreams and idioms of speech; with manners and customs, with religion and art, with life styles and hoping, and with that special sense of predicament and fate which gives direction and resonance to the Freedom Movement.

Ellison closes this lyrical definition with: "Most important, perhaps, being a Negro American involves a *willed* affirmation of self against all outside pressure□an identification with the group as extended through the individual self which rejects all possibilities of escape that do not involve a basic resuscitation of original American ideals of social and political justice."

As seen by Ellison, the Afro-American's life has been torturous and tragic, but it has also been heroic and rich in form and spirit. Sociologists and sociological critics, indeed critics of all kinds, and writers, black and white, have failed for the most part to focus on black American men and women of flesh and blood. A few writers have seen through the greasepaint stereotypes. In *Shadow and Act* Ellison recommends that those who would truly "know the Negro" study certain nineteenth- and twentieth century writers (including the Russians) and to learn about black folklore. Moreover, in this abstracted autobiography Ellison surveys his own experience and recommends that blacks be seen (and, especially, that they see themselves) as a group with a special perspective, with beautiful and useful cultural forms, and with a flaming desire for freedom.

Source: Robert G. O'Meally, "Shadow Actor: Ellison's Aesthetics," in *The Craft of Ralph Ellison*, Harvard University Press, 1980, pp. 160-72.

Quotes

"Culturally everything was mixed, you see, and beyond all question of conscious choices there was a level where you were claimed by emotion and movement and moods which you couldn't put into words." "That Same Pain, That Same Pleasure: An Interview." p. 11

"I learned very early that in the realm of the imagination all people and their ambitions and interests could meet." "That Same Pain, That Same Pleasure: An Interview." p. 12

"...I think that the mixture of the marvelous and the terrible is a basic condition of human life and that the persistence of human ideals represents the marvelous pulling itself up out of the chaos of the universe. In the fairy tale, beauty must be awakened by the beast, the beastly man can only regain his humanity through love." "That Same Pain, That Same Pleasure: An Interview." p. 20

"Color prejudice springs not from the stereotype alone, but from an internal psychological state; not from misinformation alone, but from an inner need to believe ... the Negro stereotype ... is also a key figure in a magic rite by which the white American seeks to resolve the dilemma between ... his acceptance of the sacred democratic belief that all men are created equal and his treatment of every tenth man as though he were not." "Twentieth Century Fiction and the Black Mask of Humanity" p. 28

"Huck's relationship to Jim ... is that of a humanist; in his relation to the community he is an individualist. He embodies the two major conflicting drives operating in nineteenth century America." "Twentieth Century Fiction and the Black Mask of Humanity", p. 33

"... out of the counterfeiting of the black American's identity there arises a profound doubt in the white man's mind as to the authenticity of his own image of himself ... the declaration of an American identity meant the assumption of a mask ... it gave Americans an ironic awareness of the joke that always lies between appearance and reality ..." "Change the Joke and Slip the Yoke", p. 53

"Surely if fundamentalist Christianity could get so authoritatively into national politics ... so ambiguously into our system of education ... into our style of crime ... and so powerfully into jazz - it is about time we recognized its deeper relationship to the art of our twentieth century literature. And not simply as subject matter, but as a major source of its technique, its form, and its rhetoric." "Stephen Crane and American Fiction, pp. 61-62

"...as with most of Crane's fiction, the point at issue is the cost of moral perception, of achieving an informed sense of life, in a universe which is essentially hostile to man and which skill and courage and loyalty are virtues which help in the struggle but by no means exempt us from the necessary plunge..." "Stephen Crane and the Mainstream of American Fiction", p. 71

"...no artist of Crane's caliber looked so steadily at the wholeness of American life and discovered such far-reaching symbolic equivalents for its unceasing state of civil war." "Stephen Crane and the Mainstream of American Fiction", p. 76

"As a writer, Richard Wright has outlined for himself a dual role: to discover and depict the meaning of Negro experience; and to reveal to both Negroes and whites those problems of a psychological and emotional nature which arise between them when they strive for mutual understanding." "Richard Wright's Blues", p. 77

"Wright knows perfectly well that Negro life is a by-product of Western civilization, and that in it, if only one possesses the humanity and humility to see, are to be discovered all those impulses, tendencies, life and cultural forms to be found elsewhere in Western society." "Richard Wright's Blues", p. 93

"...since 1876 the race issue has been like a stave driven into the American system of values, a stave so deeply imbedded in the American ethos as to render America a nation of ethical schizophrenics. Believing truly in democracy on one side of their minds, they act on the other in violation of its most sacred principles; holding that all men are created equal, they treat thirteen million Americans as though they were not." "Beating that Boy", p. 99

"To attempt to express that American experience which has carried one back and forth and up and down the land and across, and across again the great river, from freight train to Pullman car, from contact with slavery to contact with a world of advanced scholarship, art and science, is simply to burst such neatly understated forms of the novel asunder." "Brave Words for a Startling Occasion", p. 104

"...despite my personal failures, there must be possible a fiction which, leaving sociology to the scientists, can arrive at the truth about the human condition, here and now, with all the bright magic of a fairy tale." "Brave Words for a Startling Occasion", p. 105

"For even as his life toughens the Negro, even as it brutalizes him, sensitizes him, dulls him, goads him to anger, moves him to irony, sometimes fracturing and sometimes affirming his hopes; even as it shapes his attitudes toward family, sex, love, religion; even as it modulates his humor, tempers his joy - it *conditions* him to deal with his life and with himself. Because it is *his* life and no mere abstraction in someone's head ... he is a product of the interaction between his racial predicament, his individual will, and the broader American cultural freedom in which he finds his ambiguous experience." "The World and the Jug", part 1, p. 112

"...I believe that true novels, even when most pessimistic and bitter, arise out of an impulse to celebrate human life and therefore are ritualistic and ceremonial at their core. Thus they would preserve as they destroy, affirm as they reject." "The World and the Jug", part 1, p. 114

"One of the most insidious crimes occurring in this democracy is that of designating another, politically weaker, less socially acceptable, people as the receptacle for one's own self-disgust, for one's own infantile rebellions, for one's own fears of, and retreats

from, reality. It is the crime of reducing the humanity of others to ... a banal game which involves no apparent risk to ourselves." "The World and the Jug", part 2, p. 124

"It is not skin color which makes a Negro American but cultural heritage as shaped by the American experience, the social and political predicament ... being a Negro American has to do with the memory of slavery and the hope of emancipation and the betrayal by allies and the revenge and contempt inflicted by our former masters ..." "The World and the Jug", part 2, p. 131

"[the Negro writer] must suffer alone even as he shares the suffering of his group, and he must write alone and pit his talents against the standards set by the best practitioners of his craft, both past and present ... for the writer's real way of sharing the experience of his group is to convert its mutual suffering into lasting value." "The World and the Jug, part 2, p. 139

"...we select neither our parents, our race, nor our nation; these occur to us out of the love, the hate, the circumstances, the fate, of others. But we *do* become writers out of an act of will, out of an act of choice; a dim, confused and oft-times regrettable choice, perhaps, but choice nonetheless." "Hidden Name and Complex Fate, p. 146

"...the American novel had long concerned itself with the puzzle of the one-and-the-many; the mystery of how each of us, despite his origin in diverse regions, with our diverse racial, cultural, religious backgrounds, speaking his own diverse idiom of the American in his own accent, is, nevertheless, American. And with this concern with the implicit pluralism of the country ... there goes a concern with gauging the health of the American promise, with depicting the extent to which it was being ... made manifest in our daily conduct." "Hidden Name and Complex Fate", p. 165

"...folklore ... offers the first drawings of any group's character. It preserves mainly those situations which have repeated themselves again and again in the history of any given group. It describes ... those boundaries of feeling, thought and action which that particular group has found to be the limitation of the human condition. It projects this wisdom in symbols which express the group's will to survive; it embodies those values by which the group lives and dies." "The Art of Fiction: An Interview" p. 171

"... each artist ... must learn the best of the past, and add to it his personal vision." "Living with Music", p. 189

"One learns by moving from the familiar to the unfamiliar, and while it might sound incongruous at first, the step from the spirituality of the spirituals to that of ... Beethoven or Bach is not as vast as it seems. Nor is the romanticism of a Brahms or Chopin completely unrelated to that of Louis Armstrong." "Living with Music", p. 197

"Usually music gives resonance to memory ... but not the music then in the making here. It was itself a texture of fragments, repetitive, nervous, not fully formed; its melodic lines underground, secret and taunting; its riffs jeering ...its timbres flat or shrill ... its rhythms were out of stride and seemingly arbitrary, its drummers frozen-faced introverts dedicated to chaos. And in it the steady flow of memory, desire and defined experience

summed up by the traditional jazz beat and blues mood seems swept like a great river from its old, deep bed." "The Golden Age, Time Past", p. 202

"Here it is more meaningful to speak, not of courses of study, of grades and degrees, but of apprenticeship, ordeals, initiation ceremonies, of rebirth. For after the jazzman has learned the fundamentals of his instrument and the traditional techniques of jazz ... he must then 'find himself', must be reborn, must find, as it were, his soul." "The Golden Age, Time Past", pp. 208-209

"...if the idea of aristocracy is more than mere class conceit, then these surely are our natural queens. For they enchant the eye as they caress the ear, and in their presence we sense the full, moony glory of womanhood in all its mystery - maid, matron, and matriarch." "As the Spirit Moves Mahalia", p. 214

"It is an art which depends upon the employment of the full expressive resources of the human voice - from the rough growls employed by blues singers, the intermediate sounds, half-cry, half-recitative, which are common to Eastern music; the shouts and hollers of American Negro folk cries; the rough-edged tones and broad vibratos, the high, shrill and grating tones which rasp one's ears like the agonized flourishes of flamenco, to the gut tones, which remind us of where the jazz trombone found its human notes ... it calls upon the most lyrical, floating tones of which the voice is capable..." "As the Spirit Moves Mahalia", p. 216

"...on summer nights in the South, when the moon hangs low, the mockingbirds sing as though determined to heat every drop of romance in the sleeping adolescent's heart to fever pitch. Their song thrills and swings the entire moon-struck night to arouse one's sense of the mystery, the promise and the frustration of being human, alive and hot in the blood." "On Bird, Bird-Watching, and Jazz", p. 224

"...jazz was regarded by most of the respectable Negroes of the town as a backward, low-class form of expression, and there was a marked difference between those who accepted and lived close to their folk experience and those whose status strivings led them to reject and deny it." "The Charlie Christian Story", p. 238

"The blues is an art of ambiguity, an assertion of the irrepressibly human over all circumstance whether created by others or by one's own human failings. They are the only consistent art in the United States which constantly remind us of our limitations while encouraging us to see how far we can actually go." "Remembering Jimmy", p. 246

"...from the days of their introduction into the colonies, Negroes have taken, with the ruthlessness of those without articulate investments in cultural styles, whatever they could of European music, making of it that which would, when blended with the cultural tendencies inherited from Africa, express their own sense of life - while rejecting the rest." "Blues People", p. 255

"This [is] the heritage of a people who for hundreds of years could not celebrate birth or dignify death and whose need to live despite the dehumanizing pressures of slavery

developed an endless capacity for laughing at their painful experiences." "Blues People", p. 256

"If film became the main manipulator of the American dream, for Negroes that dream contained a strong dose of that stuff that nightmares are made of." "The Shadow and the Act", p. 276

"...each patient, whether black or white, is approached dynamically as a being possessing a cultural and biological past who seeks to make his way toward the future in a world wherein each discovery about himself must be made in the here and now at the expense of hope, pain and fear - a being who in responding to the complex forces of America has become confused." "Harlem is Nowhere", p. 295

Topics for Further Study

Research and read some of the work of Richard Wright. In what ways did Wright and Ellison differ in style and philosophy?

Investigate the ideology of the black power movement In what ways might Ellison's politics be scrutinized by organizations affiliated with this movement?

Consider Ellison's assertions about the ways jazz and blues are musical expressions of African- American culture. In what ways do more recent forms of music, such as rap and hip hop, express the African-American culture of today?a work by Twain or Faulkner that features an African-American character. Is the life of this character realistically portrayed?

Choose a work by Twain or Faulkner that features an African-American character. Is the life of this character realistically portrayed?

Compare and Contrast

1939: With the onset of World War II, African Americans call for the desegregation of the U.S. military. While blacks are allowed to serve, they are only allowed to serve in non-combat and support roles. Some gains are made during the war; for example, although it is very controversial, black pilots train at Tuskegee University to fight in the conflict.

Today: The U.S. military has been entirely desegregated since 1948.

1949: Films such as *Intruder in the Dust and Home of the Brave* depict African Americans in supporting roles and as caricatures.

Today: African Americans, such as Denzel Washington, star in mainstream box office hits and deliver Academy Award-winning performances.

1950s: In the historic *Brown v. Board of Education* case, the Supreme Court rules that racial segregation in education is unconstitutional. Opposition to the ruling is huge, and organizations such as the White Citizens Council effectively keep schools segregated.

Today: All schools in the United States are desegregated and reflect the racial makeup of their communities. Poorer areas with a higher percentage of minorities, however, tend to have overcrowded schools with poorer quality education.

1950s: A fourteen-year-old boy is murdered in Mississippi for allegedly flirting with a white woman.

Today: Although such hate crimes are far more rare, they still occur. For example, in 1998, James Byrd Jr., an African-American man from Texas, is dragged to his death behind a truck driven by three white men

What Do I Read Next?

The Collected Essays of Ralph Ellison (1995) brings together many of the essays that appear in *Shadow and Act* and *Going to the Territory* with previously unpublished essays and interviews.

Invisible Man (1953) is Ellison's National Book Award-winning novel about a young African-American man's search for identity through his encounters with both southern and northern culture.

In *The Omni-Americans:* Some Alternatives to the Folklore of *White Supremacy* (1970), Albert Murray dispels racist mythology with alternative African-American folklore.

Uncle Tom's Children is Richard Wright's 1938 collection of stories depicting the struggles of African Americans before the civil rights movement.

Further Study

Bloom, Harold, *Ralph Ellison,* Modern Critical Views series, Chelsea House Publishers, 1986.

Bloom's text is a collection of critical essays on Ellison's fiction and non-fiction.

Butler, Robert J., *The Critical Response to Ralph Ellison,* Greenwood Press, 2000.

This work is a collection of critical essays on Ellison's work that were published since the release of his posthumously published work.

Nadel, Alan, Invisible Criticism: Ralph Ellison and the American Canon, University of Iowa Press, 1988.

Nadel offers a collection of essays addressing Ellison's ambivalent relationship to other prominent American authors, including Mark Twain, Ernest Hemingway,and William Faulkner.

Woodward, C. Vann, *The Strange Career of Jim Crow,* Oxford University Press, 1966.

Woodward's book is the definitive work detailing the relationship between the civil rights movement and the decades of segregation that preceded it. Provides detailed literary and historical background on the most commonly.

Bibliography

Bigsby, C. W. E., "Improvising America: Ralph Ellison and the Paradox of Form," in *Speaking for You: The Vision of Ralph Ellison,* edited by Kimberly W. Benston, Howard University Press, 1987, p. 137.

Elliot, George P., "Portrait of a Man on His Own," in *New York Times Book Review, October 25, 1964.*

Staples, Brent, "Indivisible Man," in New York Times Book Review, May 12, 1996.

Wright, John, "Slipping the Yoke," in *Speaking for You: The Vision of Ralph Ellison,* edited by Kimberly W. Benston, Howard University Press, 1987, p. 65.

Copyright Information

This Premium Study Guide is an offprint from *Nonfiction Classics for Students*.

Project Editor
David Galens

Editorial
Sara Constantakis, Elizabeth A. Cranston, Kristen A. Dorsch, Anne Marie Hacht, Madeline S. Harris, Arlene Johnson, Michelle Kazensky, Ira Mark Milne, Polly Rapp, Pam Revitzer, Mary Ruby, Kathy Sauer, Jennifer Smith, Daniel Toronto, Carol Ullmann

Research
Michelle Campbell, Nicodemus Ford, Sarah Genik, Tamara C. Nott, Tracie Richardson

Data Capture
Beverly Jendrowski

Permissions
Mary Ann Bahr, Margaret Chamberlain, Kim Davis, Debra Freitas, Lori Hines, Jackie Jones, Jacqueline Key, Shalice Shah-Caldwell

Imaging and Multimedia
Randy Bassett, Dean Dauphinais, Robert Duncan, Leitha Etheridge-Sims, Mary Grimes, Lezlie Light, Jeffrey Matlock, Dan Newell, Dave Oblender, Christine O'Bryan, Kelly A. Quin, Luke Rademacher, Robyn V. Young

Product Design
Michelle DiMercurio, Pamela A. E. Galbreath, Michael Logusz

Manufacturing
Stacy Melson

©1997-2002; ©2002 by Gale. Gale is an imprint of The Gale Group, Inc., a division of Thomson Learning, Inc.

Gale and Design® and Thomson Learning™ are trademarks used herein under license.

For more information, contact
The Gale Group, Inc
27500 Drake Rd.
Farmington Hills, MI 48334-3535
Or you can visit our Internet site at
http://www.gale.com

ALL RIGHTS RESERVED.
No part of this work covered by the copyright hereon may be reproduced or used in any

form or by any means—graphic, electronic, or mechanical, including photocopying, recording, taping, Web distribution or information storage retrieval systems—without the written permission of the publisher.

For permission to use material from this product, submit your request via Web at http://www.gale-edit.com/permissions, or you may download our Permissions Request form and submit your request by fax or mail to:

Permissions Department
The Gale Group, Inc
27500 Drake Rd.
Farmington Hills, MI 48331-3535

Permissions Hotline:
248-699-8006 or 800-877-4253, ext. 8006
Fax: 248-699-8074 or 800-762-4058

Since this page cannot legibly accommodate all copyright notices, the acknowledgments constitute an extension of the copyright notice.

While every effort has been made to secure permission to reprint material and to ensure the reliability of the information presented in this publication, The Gale Group, Inc. does not guarantee the accuracy of the data contained herein. The Gale Group, Inc. accepts no payment for listing; and inclusion in the publication of any organization, agency, institution, publication, service, or individual does not imply endorsement of the editors or publisher. Errors brought to the attention of the publisher and verified to the satisfaction of the publisher will be corrected in future editions.

The following sections, if they exist, are offprint from Beacham's Encyclopedia of Popular Fiction: "Social Concerns", "Thematic Overview", "Techniques", "Literary Precedents", "Key Questions", "Related Titles", "Adaptations", "Related Web Sites". © 1994-2005, by Walton Beacham.

The following sections, if they exist, are offprint from Beacham's Guide to Literature for Young Adults: "About the Author", "Overview", "Setting", "Literary Qualities", "Social Sensitivity", "Topics for Discussion", "Ideas for Reports and Papers". © 1994-2005, by Walton Beacham.

Introduction

Purpose of the Book

The purpose of Nonfiction Classics for Students (NCfS) is to provide readers with a guide to understanding, enjoying, and studying novels by giving them easy access to information about the work. Part of Gale's□For Students□ Literature line, NCfS is specifically designed to meet the curricular needs of high school and undergraduate college students and their teachers, as well as the interests of general readers and researchers considering specific novels. While each volume contains entries on

�classic� novels frequently studied in classrooms, there are also entries containing hard-to-find information on contemporary novels, including works by multicultural, international, and women novelists.

The information covered in each entry includes an introduction to the novel and the novel's author; a plot summary, to help readers unravel and understand the events in a novel; descriptions of important characters, including explanation of a given character's role in the novel as well as discussion about that character's relationship to other characters in the novel; analysis of important themes in the novel; and an explanation of important literary techniques and movements as they are demonstrated in the novel.

In addition to this material, which helps the readers analyze the novel itself, students are also provided with important information on the literary and historical background informing each work. This includes a historical context essay, a box comparing the time or place the novel was written to modern Western culture, a critical overview essay, and excerpts from critical essays on the novel. A unique feature of NCfS is a specially commissioned critical essay on each novel, targeted toward the student reader.

To further aid the student in studying and enjoying each novel, information on media adaptations is provided, as well as reading suggestions for works of fiction and nonfiction on similar themes and topics. Classroom aids include ideas for research papers and lists of critical sources that provide additional material on the novel.

Selection Criteria

The titles for each volume of NCfS were selected by surveying numerous sources on teaching literature and analyzing course curricula for various school districts. Some of the sources surveyed included: literature anthologies; Reading Lists for College-Bound Students: The Books Most Recommended by America's Top Colleges; textbooks on teaching the novel; a College Board survey of novels commonly studied in high schools; a National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE) survey of novels commonly studied in high schools; the NCTE's Teaching Literature in High School: The Novel;and the Young Adult Library Services Association (YALSA) list of best books for young adults of the past twenty-five years. Input was also solicited from our advisory board, as well as educators from various areas. From these discussions, it was determined that each volume should have a mix of �classic� novels (those works commonly taught in literature classes) and contemporary novels for which information is often hard to find. Because of the interest in expanding the canon of literature, an emphasis was also placed on including works by international, multicultural, and women authors. Our advisory board members�educational professionals� helped pare down the list for each volume. If a work was not selected for the present volume, it was often noted as a possibility for a future volume. As always, the editor welcomes suggestions for titles to be included in future volumes.

How Each Entry Is Organized

Each entry, or chapter, in NCfS focuses on one novel. Each entry heading lists the full name of the novel, the author's name, and the date of the novel's publication. The following elements are contained in each entry:

- Introduction: a brief overview of the novel which provides information about its first appearance, its literary standing, any controversies surrounding the work, and major conflicts or themes within the work.
- Author Biography: this section includes basic facts about the author's life, and focuses on events and times in the author's life that inspired the novel in question.
- Plot Summary: a factual description of the major events in the novel. Lengthy summaries are broken down with subheads.
- Characters: an alphabetical listing of major characters in the novel. Each character name is followed by a brief to an extensive description of the character's role in the novel, as well as discussion of the character's actions, relationships, and possible motivation. Characters are listed alphabetically by last name. If a character is unnamed□for instance, the narrator in Invisible Man-the character is listed as □The Narrator□ and alphabetized as □Narrator.□ If a character's first name is the only one given, the name will appear alphabetically by that name. □ Variant names are also included for each character. Thus, the full name □Jean Louise Finch□ would head the listing for the narrator of To Kill a Mockingbird, but listed in a separate cross-reference would be the nickname □Scout Finch.□
- Themes: a thorough overview of how the major topics, themes, and issues are addressed within the novel. Each theme discussed appears in a separate subhead, and is easily accessed through the boldface entries in the Subject/Theme Index.
- Style: this section addresses important style elements of the novel, such as setting, point of view, and narration; important literary devices used, such as imagery, foreshadowing, symbolism; and, if applicable, genres to which the work might have belonged, such as Gothicism or Romanticism. Literary terms are explained within the entry, but can also be found in the Glossary.
- Historical Context: This section outlines the social, political, and cultural climate in which the author lived and the novel was created. This section may include descriptions of related historical events, pertinent aspects of daily life in the culture, and the artistic and literary sensibilities of the time in which the work was written. If the novel is a historical work, information regarding the time in which the novel is set is also included. Each section is broken down with helpful subheads.
- Critical Overview: this section provides background on the critical reputation of the novel, including bannings or any other public controversies surrounding the work. For older works, this section includes a history of how the novel was first received and how perceptions of it may have changed over the years; for more recent novels, direct quotes from early reviews may also be included.
- Criticism: an essay commissioned by NCfS which specifically deals with the novel and is written specifically for the student audience, as well as excerpts from previously published criticism on the work (if available).

- Sources: an alphabetical list of critical material quoted in the entry, with full bibliographical information.
- Further Reading: an alphabetical list of other critical sources which may prove useful for the student. Includes full bibliographical information and a brief annotation.

In addition, each entry contains the following highlighted sections, set apart from the main text as sidebars:

- Media Adaptations: a list of important film and television adaptations of the novel, including source information. The list also includes stage adaptations, audio recordings, musical adaptations, etc.
- Topics for Further Study: a list of potential study questions or research topics dealing with the novel. This section includes questions related to other disciplines the student may be studying, such as American history, world history, science, math, government, business, geography, economics, psychology, etc.
- Compare and Contrast Box: an □at-a-glance□ comparison of the cultural and historical differences between the author's time and culture and late twentieth century/early twenty-first century Western culture. This box includes pertinent parallels between the major scientific, political, and cultural movements of the time or place the novel was written, the time or place the novel was set (if a historical work), and modern Western culture. Works written after 1990 may not have this box.
- What Do I Read Next?: a list of works that might complement the featured novel or serve as a contrast to it. This includes works by the same author and others, works of fiction and nonfiction, and works from various genres, cultures, and eras.

Other Features

NCfS includes □The Informed Dialogue: Interacting with Literature,□ a foreword by Anne Devereaux Jordan, Senior Editor for Teaching and Learning Literature (TALL), and a founder of the Children's Literature Association. This essay provides an enlightening look at how readers interact with literature and how Nonfiction Classics for Students can help teachers show students how to enrich their own reading experiences.

A Cumulative Author/Title Index lists the authors and titles covered in each volume of the NCfS series.

A Cumulative Nationality/Ethnicity Index breaks down the authors and titles covered in each volume of the NCfS series by nationality and ethnicity.

A Subject/Theme Index, specific to each volume, provides easy reference for users who may be studying a particular subject or theme rather than a single work. Significant subjects from events to broad themes are included, and the entries pointing to the specific theme discussions in each entry are indicated in boldface.

Each entry has several illustrations, including photos of the author, stills from film adaptations (if available), maps, and/or photos of key historical events.

Citing Nonfiction Classics for Students

When writing papers, students who quote directly from any volume of Nonfiction Classics for Students may use the following general forms. These examples are based on MLA style; teachers may request that students adhere to a different style, so the following examples may be adapted as needed. When citing text from NCfS that is not attributed to a particular author (i.e., the Themes, Style, Historical Context sections, etc.), the following format should be used in the bibliography section:

□Night.□ Nonfiction Classics for Students. Ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski. Vol. 4. Detroit: Gale, 1998. 234-35.

When quoting the specially commissioned essay from NCfS (usually the first piece under the □Criticism□ subhead), the following format should be used:

Miller, Tyrus. Critical Essay on □Winesburg, Ohio.□ Nonfiction Classics for Students. Ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski. Vol. 4. Detroit: Gale, 1998. 335-39.

When quoting a journal or newspaper essay that is reprinted in a volume of NCfS, the following form may be used:

Malak, Amin. □Margaret Atwood's □The Handmaid's Tale and the Dystopian Tradition,□ Canadian Literature No. 112 (Spring, 1987), 9-16; excerpted and reprinted in Nonfiction Classics for Students, Vol. 4, ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski (Detroit: Gale, 1998), pp. 133-36.

When quoting material reprinted from a book that appears in a volume of NCfS, the following form may be used:

Adams, Timothy Dow. □Richard Wright: □Wearing the Mask,□ in Telling Lies in Modern American Autobiography (University of North Carolina Press, 1990), 69-83; excerpted and reprinted in Novels for Students, Vol. 1, ed. Diane Telgen (Detroit: Gale, 1997), pp. 59-61.

We Welcome Your Suggestions

The editor of Nonfiction Classics for Students welcomes your comments and ideas. Readers who wish to suggest novels to appear in future volumes, or who have other suggestions, are cordially invited to contact the editor. You may contact the editor via email at: ForStudentsEditors@gale.com. Or write to the editor at:

Editor, Nonfiction Classics for Students
Gale Group
27500 Drake Road
Farmington Hills, MI 48331-3535