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# The Color of Invisibility

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The Color of Invisibility

A Thesis

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in partial fulfillment of the  
requirements for the degree of

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in  
English  
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by

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## Abstract

This thesis is an analysis of Ralph Ellison's use of color terminology in his novel, *Invisible Man*. By taking an in depth look at the circumstances in which Ellison uses specific color terms, the reader can ascertain the author's thoughts on various historical events, as well as the differences between characters in the novel such as Ras, Dr. Bledsoe, and Rinehart.

Keywords: Ralph Ellison; Invisible Man; Color; Bledsoe; Battle Royale

## INTRODUCTION

Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man* is one of the great novels of the twentieth century. It is a novel that not only explores racial color as black versus white, but also as to who is "black enough." Ellison's portrayal of racial tension is gritty, brutal, and even in its most hyperbolic, all too realistic. At its core, it is a book about blindness, invisibility, and the constructs of race. As Joseph Millichap notes in his article, "Fiction, Photography, and the Cultural Construction of Racial Identity in Ralph Ellison's 'Invisible Man,'" Ellison was well aware that the white populace defined blackness and so, "the individual African American must define his own identity within this black/white continuum in visual as well as verbal terms" (139). Therefore, it comes as no surprise that a lot of scholarship has focused on Ellison's representation of this color dynamic in *Invisible Man*.

However, where as many critics have written about the perception and operation of race in the novel, it is rare that anyone discusses the author's use color outside of racial constructs which I saw as a huge blind spot in the scholarship of this important novel. Rather than use a panoply of color-descriptive terms, the narrator often employs only a few of the most basic terms such as blue, green, white, red, and so on. During my initial reading of the book, I noticed these words arising again and again. Ralph Ellison was a hugely intelligent man with a fascination of the arts, so why would he limit himself to such narrow descriptors?

The answer came in the form of the fallen Brother Clifton as he sells the sambo dolls on a street corner. The protagonist notices that the dolls are animated with a tiny black thread, which he describes as invisible in his first observation of the figure. So, I began to wonder whether the sambo doll stands for a myriad of characters and situations throughout the novel, each animated through the manipulation of a particular colored thread. If so, what do those colors say about the

situation in the novel, how the characters behave, and can it be useful in the larger understanding of the novel itself? Through an intense close reading of the novel with particular attention on when and how various color terms appear in the novel, as well as researching the common critical analysis of characters and scenes, I discovered that Ellison's use of color informs the structure of the text and provide the key to how to read a number of characters in the text. Threads of color weave throughout the text, pulling characters and exposing their motivations in some instances, and revealing who they truly are in others. Through this analysis, I assert that critical questions about characters like Dr. Bledsoe, Ras the Destroyer, and the enigmatic Rinehart can be answered in a much more satisfying way. Additionally, Ellison's personal beliefs are ascertained through the colors he uses in describing certain historical events like the Harlem riots or the Housing Act of 1949 in New York.

To properly assert my thesis, it is important to dissect the use of a number of colors throughout the novel and how they operate in the text. Only through such analysis can we take a look at more complex scenes like the Battle Royale or the Harlem Riots and discover the deeper meaning Ellison has placed in the text, guiding the reader through his use of color specific terms. This will not be a comprehensive list of every use of a color in the text, nor every scene in the text. Instead, I have chosen specific examples that prove the use of color and illustrate the importance of such an analysis in the critical scholarship of Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man*.

## **COLOR ANALYSIS**

In the following section, I will be explicating how Ellison uses color terms in very specific and distinct ways. Each time they are mentioned, the author is informing the reader of a particular struggle -- emotional, psychological, or sociological -- within the events of the scene, the thread that is being pulled to manipulate the marionette, if you will. By taking an in-depth

look at individual examples of color and exploring the meaning of them, deeper meanings can be found in the way others have read commonly referenced scenes in *Invisible Man*. Additionally, the analysis of color can inform how to read certain characters, even when they have little background given to the reader in the text.

### *Red*

Red is, perhaps, the most used color term outside of black or white. As such, it is a good place to begin the analysis of how color operates throughout the novel and how it informs the reader how to read the text. Whether the color is found on the dress of a seducer, the face of Norton as Trueblood describes his incestuous affair with his young daughter, or the in the tears running down Ras the Exhorter's face as he rallies his followers, red is always found in conjunction with uncontrollable base passion such as lust or rage, or in several instances, both at the same time.

The conflict with Ras the Exhorter in chapter 17 offers the most profound use of the color red as a signifier of base emotion. While arranging a protest action with Brother Clifton's youth brigade in service of the Brotherhood's cause, the assembled group encounters Ras. Where the Brotherhood focuses on racial equality through grass roots action and philosophical exchange, Ras is militantly anti-white and desires the African American race to violently rise up and assume its place in the world. As such, Ras views the Brotherhood and all its members as racial traitors, only serving the cause of everything he stands against.

Red is almost overbearing in the scene, from the mention of two red neon signs in the area, faces dominated by a red glow, and most profoundly, red tears running down Ras' face, showing both violent and emotional passions colliding. After a violent battle and a long discussion about the relationship between black and white men, Ras is left in the street, tears of

frustration, betrayal, and anger on his face glowing red from the neon sign above him. Thus, by understanding red as the color of deep, driving emotion, the red tears on Ras' face take on greater meaning as a badge of his overwhelming passion for his people and his political views. He is not dominated by his mind or a philosophy. Instead, he is ruled by his passionate hatred and motivates his followers through emotion, rather than reason.

In another scene littered with mentions of red, the unnamed woman who seduces the narrator in chapter 19 wears both a red dress and a red robe. Initially, her actions in conjunction with the usage of the color imagery suggest that lust will be primary base emotion. However, when she calls the protagonist "primitive" and tells him he has "tom-toms beating in your voice" (413), the protagonist is outraged due to her obvious reference to his race and the stereotypical way she sees him. The scene culminates in her bedroom where her "red robe swept aside like a veil" and the protagonist sees "only her mysteriously smiling eyes above the rich red robe" (416). He tries to leave "torn between anger and fierce excitement," (416) but instead, succumbs to her advances. This creates one of the more fascinating analyses of the color red in the text. His base rage is surging beneath the surface making red one of the only colors he can see in the scene. Her lust for him is obvious and literally drapes her form throughout the chapter. However, he lusts for her as well, culminating in the protagonist saying, "the conflict between the ideological and the biological...had become too subtly confused" (416). Ideologically, he should succumb to his rage and storm out after being commodified by her as an object of primitive lust. However, his lust is equally undeniable, leaving not a choice of a better or worse option in the form of another color, but rather, to which red should he succumb? In either case, he is moved like a puppet as the red thread is pulled throughout the scene.



While trying to motivate the mourners at Brother Clifton's funeral, the narrator refers to the red of Clifton's blood, hoping to elicit an emotional response from the crowd. Each occurrence of red demarcates a moment of extreme passion within the scene. This is an interesting divergence from the earlier speech of the narrator. In that speech, he is shown using his intelligence and rhetorical skill to leverage his power. However, this speech is dominated by his uncontrollable rage at the unjust murder of his former colleague by an overeager police officer. Therefore, if we are observing the color scheme in the novel, we cannot help but draw connections to Ras and his rhetoric as the narrator stokes the emotion of the gathered mourners.

As he prepares to speak, unsure of what to say, the narrator references the image of a "red-cheeked boy thrill at Clifton's falling to the earth" (454). Therefore, the reader should not be shocked when the intelligent discourse that the narrator is so adept at is replaced by his shouting in rage to the crowd about Clifton's death. Several times throughout the eulogy, the text repeats that the protagonist is not merely speaking as he recites his memories and thoughts about Clifton, but instead, shouts his eulogy interspersed with rhetorical questions about the injustice of the murder. When he finishes, and the mourners begin to depart, the protagonist notes the dazzling reds of "cheap sport shirts and summer dresses" (460). This is of particular interest as it shows the operation of Ellison's use of color in stark relief. In the opening of the scene, the only base passion at the funeral belongs to the Invisible Man as he imagines the child with red cheeks. However, after he has concluded, the red has moved into the crowd. The speech has, therefore, awoken the rage of the assembled masses and begins to motivate them. This rage will, of course, culminate in the Harlem Riots that dominate the end of the novel, suggesting that Ellison believes the rioters were motivated not by higher thought or emotion but controlled by the base passion that consumes them and leads to mass destruction.

## *Blue*

It is important to note that in the explication of the color blue, I have ignored any mention of blues music. Though there is a correlation, I am focused on physical color present in the novel. Additionally, any colloquial mention of depression as “feeling blue” or similar mention will not be covered. This is strictly an analysis of the actual color as used in the text.

Blue appears frequently throughout the text in conjunction with people of varying character from the seemingly noble figure of Dr. Bledsoe in the beginning of the novel, to a woman wrapped in a blue sweater as she is evicted from her home. As such, it can appear difficult to find some unifying force between the mentions of the color in the text. However, Ellison uses the color blue to guide the reader in the confrontation between Dr. Bledsoe and the Invisible Man as he is expelled from the college.

When the protagonist first sees Bledsoe, “he was wiping his neck with a blue-bordered handkerchief” (137). Wearing a blue serge suit, Bledsoe spends the better part of ten pages explaining how the world works in his experience to the protagonist. After a catastrophic tour of the campus that the protagonist gives to a major benefactor to the school, the Invisible Man is expecting to be expelled, or worse, by Bledsoe. Therefore, it is tempting to associate blue with the common colloquial definition of depression or possibly even as fear, as Bledsoe seems to hold the protagonist’s life in his hands.

However, if we look at what Bledsoe has to say, we quickly realize that blue is the color of power in the book. Bledsoe explains to the protagonist how his power operates. He gains much of his power from the white establishment that supports the school. However, he exerts his will over the benefactors by showing them only the right things, bowing to them in the right

moments, and building a network of associations that he knows exactly how to control. As such, he can rule the institution of the school as he sees fit, essentially the unquestioned ruler. He explicitly tells the Invisible Man that he will do anything and everything to hold on to his power. In other words, if Bledsoe were a marionette, it is the blue strings of power that make him dance.

Additionally, in this scene, he holds all the power between the two characters. To the Invisible Man, the school is everything. He lives and breathes for the college and all his future hopes and dreams hinge on it. After the disaster of showing Norton around, his life hangs in the balance, all in Bledsoe's hands. Bledsoe's monologuing proves that he lives for these moments of utilizing his power, relishing his position over the protagonist before he finally cuts the Invisible Man loose of the institution.

The analysis of Bledsoe and his relation to the color blue leads to an interesting explanation of why analyzing Ellison's use of color is so important to a larger understanding of the text. Many critics such as James Seaton assert that the people the Invisible Man encounters over the course of the novel are possibilities of lives that he can live. Thus, many people have discussed Dr. Bledsoe in conjunction with the character of Ras the Exhorter, suggesting that they are the same option in the end - two sides of the same coin, if you will. Seaton, when discussing Bledsoe's fanatical devotion to power, suggests that "[h]is motto might be the slogan now often associated with Malcolm X and emblazoned on tee shirts: 'by any means necessary'" (*Affirming* 27) and that he wants to fight white supremacy in his own subtle ways. Of Ras, Seaton says, "Ras the Exhorter, like Dr. Bledsoe, rejects white supremacy but, unlike Bledsoe, does so openly" (*Affirming* 28), drawing a direct connection to the two characters. Seaton believes they are so similar that he even asks, "How do we know Ras isn't as cynical as Bledsoe?" (28).

Though he asks it rhetorically, through the analysis of Ellison's colors, we can give an answer to Seaton and all the others who see the characters of Bledsoe and Ras. Bledsoe is dominated by the color blue. He is motivated by, and thinks only of, power and how he can attain more of it. Bledsoe even says he would "have every Negro in the country hanging on tree limbs" (Ellison 142) in his quest to gain and maintain power. Ras, on the other hand, is dominated by the color red. He is in a position of power, but his goal isn't the power. He is driven by his rage against racial injustice and his desire for violent revolt. Bledsoe wants the power, Ras wants revolt. The answer to Seaton's question, then, is that Ras isn't as cynical as Bledsoe because we can literally see what is motivating him throughout the book.

So, what to make of the crazy man that the protagonist encounters when he arrives in New York carting around discarded blueprints? The word blue appears several times in this scene, and if blue is indicative of the use of power, then who is the one wielding it in this scene? Surely not the protagonist, as he appears almost helpless at this moment. Equally, it would be difficult to suggest that the Peter Wheatstraw, the man with the cart, has any power, as he seems to be yet another of the dispossessed masses. Frankly, this particular image caused the most trepidation to my analysis of the novel. It became my Gordian Knot, my "blue whale" (with apologies to Melville).

My savior was Myka Tucker Abramson and her article, "Blueprints: *Invisible Man* and the Housing Act of 1949." Though it does not discuss the operation of the color blue, Abramson's article is an excellently researched analysis of how *Invisible Man* communicated Ellison's feelings on what the housing act was doing to the African American community of the time. She notes that "The Housing Act of 1949 was the centerpiece of postwar urban redevelopment policies that aimed to modernize and rebuild cities suffering from the problem of

urban blight,” going on to explain that “Race was central to this project” (Abramson 10). Thus, the Housing Act operated as a form of racial discrimination, developing nicer houses for white neighborhoods and evicting African Americans from their homes, particularly in Harlem.

So, when Peter Wheatstraw arrives with “rolls of blue paper stacked in the cart” (175), the mention of the color is meant to make the reader see what strings are being pulled, even by a seemingly minor figure. It is not that Wheatstraw has an unseen power, but rather, that the blueprints themselves are a leveraging of power. The reason there are so many blueprints laying around for him to pick up is because people are redesigning “everything. Cities, towns, country clubs. Some just buildings and houses” (175) in response to the Housing Act of 1949. The plans themselves are the result of power being leveraged over the African American community of New York, as they are literally being designed out of the city. Though a seemingly minor moment in the novel, by taking the color analysis and pairing it with a historical perspective, much can be gathered about Ellison’s beliefs.

Several other mentions of the color add context to a variety of scenes throughout the book. For instance, after the narrator fights with Mr. Brockway in the boiler room of the paint factory, he notes that Brockway’s toothless gums are blue. This is shortly before the boiler explodes, nearly killing the narrator while Brockway makes his escape. Brockway’s power manifests as the master of the boilers, since they explode after Brockway’s attention is diverted by the fight. Additionally, in chapter 16 when the narrator is to give his first speech as a member of the Brotherhood, he is dressed in a blue suit. Moreover, the narrator moves into “a bright blue light” (338) as he enters the arena. Often throughout the novel, the narrator’s speaking abilities have been lauded as one of his greatest gifts. In the speech in the arena, he is able to use his power to its greatest expression in order to inspire and motivate the assembled masses. The

narrator is the only one in this scene who is described with the color blue, despite a group of police who are described as wearing blue suits with blue pistols earlier in chapter 13, as they evict the elderly couple. Therefore, it is the narrator, not the police, who wields power in the arena.

### *Green*

Green is one of the most fascinating colors throughout the novel. While typically associated with life and renewal in many novels, it is used in a much darker way in Ellison's application. Green is found in conjunction with the perceived promise, and ultimate failure, of salvation in *Invisible Man*. Each time green appears, it is at a point where the narrator feels like he may have found a possible path to life, only to have it snatched away from him by a fatal flaw in the path itself. Green is not Eden, then, but the mirage of Eden as the narrator observes it, a path to a paradise that is discovered to be an illusion as you approach it.

It should come as no surprise that the narrator's description of campus literally drips with green. In a mock-ode, the narrator says, "Oh, long green stretch of campus," (36) as he recalls his early days at college. As with most young people, college possessed for the narrator a particular promise for the future. This promise of paradise through education is only compounded when his race is taken into account, as many African Americans believed that education was the primary hope for individuals and the race as a whole. At points, the narrator even suggests that he might like to stay at the college, becoming a teacher or administrator at some point, making the college not only the start of paradise to him, but the entirety of his personal paradise.

Of course, this is all ripped away from him when he is expelled by Dr. Bledsoe. However, it is important to note in the analysis of the color that the protagonist's expulsion is not

what ruins the campus, but rather the narrator's realization of how the college operates. When Bledsoe talks to the narrator, he lets the Invisible Man see how the school actually works.

Bledsoe is not a man with a noble goal; he is simply a powermonger and a bully. The donors are not really invested in the students; they are just performing a charitable act. While Ellison does not condemn education, he surely suggests that the southern college that the narrator goes to is not a path to salvation.

A similar image is repeated after the narrator goes to New York in search of employment. Bledsoe, in a seeming act of charity, gives the Invisible Man several letters of reference to help him on his way. After handing out all but one, and hearing nothing in weeks, the narrator is in deep despair. Finally, he goes to hand his last letter to a man named Emerson and waits in the lobby in a green silk chair. The narrator feels particularly optimistic as he observes the luxurious rooms, especially when he is summoned into Emerson's office. However, it is here that it is revealed that the letters from Bledsoe were not recommendations, rather a warning to the employer not to hire the narrator under any circumstances. While smaller in scale, the use of green in this scene shows yet another promise and evaporation of paradise.

These patterns repeat in other scenes throughout the book, from the narrator's green locker at Liberty Paint before the job literally blows up in his face, to the green glasses of the Rinehart costume before he discovers what Rinehart really is. Like the other colors, observing them and their placement show the threads that move characters throughout the book. Interestingly, green is most often found in relation to the narrator, where other colors can be found in conjunction with many other characters. Therefore, such an analysis of the color green undercuts any possibility that the novel can be a bildungsroman, as one of the primary characteristics of the genre is the protagonist finding some piece of redemption or paradise at the

end, no matter how small. The fact that green is always used as a false promise of Eden for the narrator suggests that Ellison did not create the text as a bildungsroman.

### *Gold*

Gold operates in a similar way to green in the text, but in a distinctly different way. As with green, gold is a false promise of something better, a way to progress in the world.

However, where green is used in moments where the protagonist believes he has found a path to paradise, gold is the false promise of someone else offering a path. Therefore, where green is a mistaken hope of paradise from the protagonist, gold is a lie offered as hope.

Once again, Bledsoe enters the analysis of colors in the novel. After being expelled, Dr. Bledsoe gives the protagonist a stack of what he believes are referral letters to help him gain employment in New York. Bledsoe, clad in a white suit, is noted to have a gold chain accenting his outfit. Bledsoe offers the letters to the protagonist as an offer of hope and a life outside of the campus. However, the glinting gold chain against the white suit indicates that the letters are a false promise of salvation, which the protagonist will only discover when it is too late.

The color gold repeats in the protagonist's quest for employment as he passes out the letters from Bledsoe. The first man who meets with the protagonist to receive one of the letters has an office filled with books with "gold and leather binding" (166). He does not offer the protagonist a job, but he does offer much false hope that he will keep the protagonist in mind. While the protagonist leaves contented and hopeful, the color gold indicates to the reader immediately that there is no true promise to be found in the office.

Similarly, when the protagonist gives his last letter to a man named Emerson the color gold arises once again. Emerson summons the protagonist into his office, where he sees that Emerson's shirt cuffs are gold. In a double act of revealing the false promise of gold, Emerson



reveals what Bledsoe's letters say, and offers a job to the invisible man at Liberty Paint. Here, the protagonist finally discovers that the letters he has been handing to potential employers tell them not to hire him under any circumstances, confirming the false promise of gold from Bledsoe's chain. While Emerson does offer a job to the protagonist, it too is a false hope, as Liberty Paint makes the protagonist nothing more than a manual laborer; which is a job he is ill suited to.

Similar examples are scattered throughout the text. Ellison's use of gold is the epitome of the old saying, "all that glitters is not gold." In each case, someone offers a promise of salvation to the protagonist, only to have it turn into nothing but foolish hope, fool's gold if you will, in the end. Each appearance of gold illustrates the dire hope of the protagonist, and the false nature of the one offering him assistance.

### *Gray*

On the opposite side of the emotional spectrum from red, blue, or green, Ellison uses the color gray to denote lifelessness or emptiness, those things devoid of any passion, power, or hope. It is important to distinguish the concept lifelessness from death in regard to Ellison's use of gray. The color does not portend a death, or even apply specifically to death. Rather, he often uses it to note something drained of life, passion, drive, or motivation. For example, the campus which is so often described in shades of green, is dominated in grey color imagery as the protagonist leaves. While the campus is not lifeless, per se, it is completely empty and hopeless for him as he exits the gate for the last time.

Brother Clifton's coffin is an interesting example of the use of gray in the novel. Clifton, a paragon of activity and passion throughout the book is interred in a gray coffin following his murder. In the end, Clifton has no affiliation with the brotherhood he fought so hard for and

reduced to selling Sambo dolls in the street, his gray coffin exemplifies the nothingness and pointlessness of his death. While the narrator uses the occasion to motivate the crowd, Clifton is nothing but a prop, lacking any color or anything he can donate to the cause. The color he had added in previous chapters has vanished, leaving behind nothing but gray, much in the same way that the pictures of Lincoln and Douglass in the narrator's office are grey and lifeless. The remembrance of such men can be used to inspire and motivate people, but the men themselves have nothing left to offer. They are no longer men, but lifeless objects, props that the brotherhood uses as they so wish.

Most of the narrator's observations of the city are also dominated by the color gray. In chapter 8, when he first arrives in the city, much of it is described as gray or hazy. Similarly, in chapters 13 and 14 he notes that the buildings and the streets of Harlem are gray, specifically noting "soot tinged snow" and "gray smoke" as he leaves Mary's home. The way the author paints the city suggests that Ellison sees it as an entity that holds no love, passion, or any other emotion. It simply exists as a sort of emptiness that its inhabitants fill with colors. Thus, while many authors depict New York in various forms of personification, suggesting that it has a life of its own, Ellison paints the city in lifeless gray. Therefore, Harlem does not have a heart of its own, as many of the Harlem Renaissance would suggest, but instead, the people are what create a life in the lifeless façade of the buildings and streets that make up the geographical location.

### *Black*

In the explication of black, I will be avoiding any mention of the color in a racial context. Instead, this is a look at physical items throughout the novel that are mentioned as black, how they appear, and what they imply about the scenes in which they appear. Therefore, when I suggest that Ellison is using black to suggest a sort of emptiness or lack of identity, I do not

mean that I believe Ellison is portraying the African American race as such. Rather, I mean that the threads that motivate people in various scenes that are colored black show how feelings of hollowness are motivating people or represented within a certain context.

While many of the other colors in the book have very solid emotions or motivations they are tied to, the color black is a more nuanced analysis. It is not emotion, like red, or lack of emotion, like gray. Instead, it denotes a lack of identity, a hollow or blank space where identity should be found but isn't. Additionally, the color black isn't representative of someone covering their identity in the form of a disguise or craft. It represents a void in where something should be.

As the inspiration of much of the color analysis in the novel came from the scene featuring Brother Clifton manipulating the Sambo doll, it seems like a logical place to begin. The narrator was enraged when he saw Clifton, fallen from the heights of the Brotherhood, hawking the dolls on the corner. He begins to attack Clifton and smash the display, until the police arrive leading to Clifton's murder. It is only later, when the narrator is recounting the events and how Clifton made it look so lifelike that he takes a closer look at one of the Sambo dolls he had accidentally kept. "I saw a fine black thread and pulled it from the frilled paper. There was a loop tied in the end. I slipped it over my finger and stood stretching it taut. And this time it danced. Clifton had been making it dance all the time and the black thread had been invisible" (446).

Though this seems like a simple scene at the outset, like so much of the novel, it is far more complex. First of all, the doll of black tissue paper, the Sambo doll, stands for a great many things. Dozens of scholars have discussed this symbol in a myriad of different ways. However, once again, using the analysis of the color at play adds an extra dimension of meaning

to the events. After all, the narrator must have encountered dozens of such Sambo sellers on the streets of New York. Thus, I have a hard time believing that it is merely the image of his friend selling them that is so important. Instead of being the narrator feeling betrayed by Clifton selling the dolls, I assert that the black Sambo doll showed the loss of identity that Clifton experienced after the Brotherhood abandoned him to the protagonist. As Clifton had been his mentor and savior in several instances in the novel, he reacted to the horror of a man that he idolized losing any sense of who he was, his identity having been taken by the Brotherhood.

Additionally, if Clifton lost his identity so easily, simply by the Brotherhood expelling him, what sort of identity did Clifton truly have? As so many have suggested, the protagonist realized that Clifton and the Sambo doll were the same, controlled by invisible threads as puppets. However, where most suggest that the protagonist's anger comes from the feeling of being used as Clifton was used by the Brotherhood, I suggest that it goes deeper than that. Clifton was, in many ways, a man that the narrator wanted to become. However, the realization that he had no identity, symbolized by the color black in the scene and repeated in the discovery of the black thread, is what truly crushed the narrator. The protagonist was enraged at the loss of yet another figure, who at the end of the day, was just controlled by another colored thread, having no core meaning or purpose of his own.

This use of the color black as emptiness or lack of identity in relation to Clifton arises during his funeral. The leaflets that the Brotherhood distributes denouncing the police commissioner had a black border, black banners fly at his wake, and "there were black-bordered signs that read: BROTHER TOD CLIFTON/OUR HOPE SHOT DOWN" (450). While this imagery would be common in a funerary scene, Ellison does not use color-related words lightly in this text. The protagonist's eulogy goes to great lengths to explain who Clifton was, but in

terms that make him anyone's son, brother, or uncle in the audience. He doesn't truly eulogize Clifton, because Clifton had no true identity. Instead, he eulogizes all such people who have died at the hands of an unjust system. There are no details of his life or passions. The overwhelming imagery of the color black illustrates that while there was a person called Tod Clifton, he was empty inside.

Police officers are often described as wearing black in scenes where their identity is in question. For example, the officer that shot Clifton was wearing a black shirt. His only identity is "police officer," with no personal identity or even enough to get a description of him in the wake of the shooting. Similarly, the police officers scrambling through the Harlem Riots are "almost invisible in black shirts" as they "thrust flaming pistols before them" (535). Thus, particularly in instances of violence, the police are not motivated by red passion or blue power; they are simply empty, being pulled with their black strings and made to dance because of their role as the police.

One of the most fascinating uses of black is in relation to the founding of the college in the beginning of the text. As the narrator surveys pictures of the founding of the college, he notes the pictures are full of people "dressed in black, dusty clothing, people who seemed almost without individuality, a black mob that seemed to be waiting, looking with blank faces" (39). Here, Ellison seems to be guiding the reader in explicit terms as to how to read the color black in the ensuing text. The initial people who helped build and establish the college have no names or identities. They are just images.

The same can be said for the founder of the college. While he is often referred to with almost religious reverence, we never discover anything about who he really was. Reverend Barbee, who is also dressed in black in his appearance, gives a stirring mythologized account

about the physical and philosophical founding of the college by the noble Founder. However, Barbee never really tells us much about the man himself. In fact, Barbee repeats the word black ad nauseum throughout his recollection of the Founder's death, from the "black-draped coffin lying in state" to the "Black, black, black!" sorrow of the people, and into the "cold black clay" (131) that his coffin rests in at the end. In the end, the Founder has no identity remaining, any more than the nameless people in the photographs that line the halls of the college.

In each mention of the color black in *Invisible Man*, there is a loss of identity intimately tied with it. Even the thread with which Clifton makes the Sambo doll dance is described as an invisible until under closer inspection, the narrator sees that it is a "fine black thread" (446). The hollow lack of a true identity is thus used to leverage people in the scenes. The empty identity of the founder allows Dr. Bledsoe and Rev. Barbee to control the crowd as they want, leveraging, not the actual person, but rather the empty shell where a person should be.

### *White*

Similar to the analysis of black, I will be avoiding any racial mention of the term. Thus, any mention of a character's skin tone will be ignored in this analysis. Instead, I will focus on the actual usage of the color as a descriptive term of physical objects in the novel. White is used in a similar way to black, but with an important distinction. In both cases, the color is used to note a lack of core identity. However, where black indicates a space where a core identity should be, but is found absent, white is used to completely cover an identity. The identity is still present; it is simply buried beneath the blanket of whiteness.

It is well known that Ellison was a great fan of Herman Melville and, in particular, *Moby Dick*. In the novel, Ishmael spends quite a bit of time philosophizing about the color white, noting its suggestion of purity in the Western world, but coming to symbolize ugliness by the

end of the text. As Sarah Thwaites notes in her analysis of Ishmael, “The diversity of possible interpretations for the colour white leaves the reader caught between skepticism and agnosticism as Ishmael’s narrative refuses to commit to any single meaning that whiteness implies” (126). However, Ellison seems to be trying to overcome Ishmael’s ambiguity in *Invisible Man* in his presentation of the color white and offer a more solid interpretation for the reader.

While there are references to the color white earlier in the novel, Liberty Paint offers the reader the most accessible route to understanding Ellison’s use of the color white. Throughout chapter 10, Liberty Paint is said to be proudest of its Optic White paint. Mr. Brockway notes that the paint is so good, “you can paint a chunka coal and you’d have to crack it open with a sledge hammer to prove it wasn’t white clear through” (217). The paint, therefore, erases the identity of what lies beneath, a lump of coal. It is not that the coal no longer exists, as the color black would indicate. Instead, the coal is still there; one would simply need a sledgehammer to break through all the whiteness covering it and discover what is inside.

Shortly before Brockway’s pronouncement of the wonder of Optic White paint, the narrator wonders whether this is the same paint used on campus. He notes that due to the regular painting of the buildings on campus, they stand in stark contrast to the weathered houses surrounding the campus. The houses belong to the sort of black people that the narrator did not want to be associated with, namely the poor and uneducated. Thus, the painting of the buildings serves to erase the connection between the campus and black society as a whole.

These two musings about the use of the Optic White paint suggest that Ellison uses the color white as a sign of erasing identity within the text. The college seeks to erase part of its identity by separating itself from the surrounding community. The coal loses its identity by being painted Optic White. In both instances, the white color erases, but does not destroy, part

of the identity of the item in question. The college does not bulldoze the buildings, nor does the paint destroy the piece of coal; it simply buries the identity of each beneath the Optic White paint.

Perhaps the most intriguing element of the Liberty Paints scene is the fact that the paint the protagonist was mixing was headed to paint a national monument. Many critics have approached the analysis of the scene through a racial critical lens, debating and assessing the meaning of the paint and the assertion of “White is Right” (140). While this is certainly a valid exploration of the themes in the novel, using the color analysis, I believe that critics have overlooked one of the primary themes in the scene. If the paint is headed to a national monument, then the Optic White paint will be used to erase or cover the central identity of whatever monument it is destined for. As Ellison never mentions which national monument, it is fair to assume that he is speaking about national monuments and national identity in general. Therefore, Ellison is suggesting that while there is a central American identity, it has been covered time and time again in Optic White paint, to the level that one would “need a sledgehammer” to crack it open and discover what is truly inside. It is a literal “whitewashing” of the American identity to make it look shiny, new, and pure, like the houses that surround the protagonist’s college campus, with no actual analysis of what is inside.

The hospitalization of the narrator in chapter 11 then builds upon the theme of whiteness covering a core identity. The chapter is dominated by the color white, opening with the dazed narrator sitting in a cold, white chair. The uniforms on the nurses and doctors are all described as white as he goes through his examinations and medical procedures, a symbol for the various identities hidden behind medical uniforms. While he is strapped to the machine, the narrator notes that the ceiling is white, and when they begin the electroshock, the narrator loses all “sense



of proportion” and wonders where he ends and “the crystal and white world begin” (238). At the end of the procedure, the narrator cannot even remember his or his mother’s names, covering, perhaps even burying, his identity beneath the “crystal and white world.” The chapter which is so dominated by the color white serves essentially to erase his identity entirely, even the basic element of his name and his familial bonds.

## **SCENE ANALYSIS**

### *Battle Royale*

There is no doubt that the Battle Royale scene that occupies the first chapter of the book is one of the most discussed elements of *Invisible Man*. Published at one time as a stand-alone piece and subsequently anthologized numerous times, the shocking display always entralls and horrifies the reader. The Battle Royale is arguably the most important scene in the novel. Dozens of scholars have analyzed it through a myriad of critical lenses and come to various conclusions as to what the main operation of this chapter is in relation to Ellison’s beliefs and the text as a whole. While I do not disregard such analyses, by taking a look at the color dynamics in play, the reader gains a glimpse into the deeper meaning of various elements at play in the scene.

In Timothy Parrish’s article discussing the relationship between Ellison’s politics and those of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., he suggests that the Battle Royale scene is meant to establish “the ritual of identity creation (and suppression) that is enacted in virtually every encounter between blacks and whites in American history” (“Invisible Man” 182). Certainly, there is a validity to this argument. However, Parrish, like many other critics, simply leaves the analysis there, with no deeper look into the operation of various systems and workings of oppression in the scene. By looking at the threads of color Ellison weaves throughout the scene,

a much more well-defined and profound analysis of the operation and Ellison's condemnation of such systems arises.

As there are a number of colors and systems at play in this scene, I will be analyzing them in chronological order as they come in the text, showing how Ellison allows the color imagery to paint the scenes with additional complexity than how they appear at first glance. The initial blast of color comes from a young white woman placed in the center of the ring in which the African American graduates are meant to fight one another. Her eyes are described as "hollow and smeared a cool blue" (19) and her lips are red. In these mentions of color, it could be read that the woman's base sexuality (red) has a power (blue) over the gathered men. However, when she begins to dance sensuously to arouse the men, the narrator notes that he is reminded of a bird calling from the "angry surface of some gray and threatening sea" (Ellison 19). Therefore, the girl is associated with lifelessness (gray), merely a prop using her sensuality (red) to pull on the young African American students as a show of the gathered white men's power (blue). Rather than becoming an instigator, she is merely a lifeless object that those with power can use, little different than the African American students themselves.

This analysis is similar to common critical analysis which discusses the fear of black men in relation to white women. One of the most common fears expressed by those in favor of racial segregation was that black men would rape white women. So, the gathered white men are using the white girl to stir up the African American boys into the sexual fervor that they expect, exemplified by the embarrassed young man "wearing dark red fighting trunks much too small to conceal the erection which projected from him" (20). However, by taking into account the color schemes, Ellison is suggesting that the white woman is oppressed in this scene as well, drawing a connection between black men and white women. She has no power of her own, other than

possibly her sexuality, which has been used as a prop by the white men as she dances lifelessly around the floor. As such, we see a much clearer idea of Ellison's views, that those in power (white men) oppress everyone in different ways that end in the same lifeless, helpless place.

Before the battle begins in earnest, the contestants are "blindfolded with broad bands of white cloth" (21). This is an extremely interesting use of the color white, as the blindfold not only erases the identity of the individual, but that erasing of identity also blinds the individual to the identity of anyone else in the ring. Therefore, besides the obvious reference to blindness in this instance, Ellison is suggesting that erasing one's identity also blinds others to each other's identities. Such an idea could then be applied to Dr. Bledsoe, who gladly took a sort of white blindfold in order to run the college, blinding him to the plight of the African Americans around him, letting him swing wildly simply to maintain his power and position.

In the end, the battle boils down to two contenders, the narrator and Tatlock, "the biggest of the gang" (24). As they square up, the narrator notes "the howling red faces crouching tense beneath a cloud of blue-gray smoke" (Ellison 25). Clearly, Ellison is showing the reader the motivating threads of the observers in this scene, their lust for violence (red) permeated with a sense of their own power over the two (blue), and yet, lifeless (gray) to the narrator who can still barely comprehend why the two men are in such a position. When Tatlock dispatches the narrator at the end of the battle, he notes that "the room went red as I fell" and he ends up staring at a "dark red spot of my own blood...soaking into the soiled gray world of the canvas" (Ellison 25-26). This moment can easily be seen as the rage of Tatlock dispatching the narrator, while his own passion, in the form of his red blood, drains from him only to be absorbed by lifelessness, as represented by the gray canvas.

The next element of the Battle Royale is a mad dash for money on the floor. A group of attendants, their identities hidden beneath white jackets, wheel the ring out of the room and set up a large blue rug, covering it in gold coins and paper money. When the narrator lunges for one of the coins, he discovers that “The rug was electrified” (27). However, the narrator pushes through and manages to get a few of the coins. One young African American boy is thrown onto the rug, only to be electrified until “his face was gray” (27). Throughout the scene, the boys attack one another for the scraps of money that the assembled white men have scattered on the floor.

Critics such as Danielle Allen have suggested that this scene is a criticism of capitalism and noted that the frenzy for the coins is yet another initiation rite into American democracy (“Tragi-Comedy” 40). While I can certainly see if not a Marxist reading, certainly an anti-capitalist reading, of the scene, I again assert that Ellison is using the colors to create a more nuanced argument of what is really going on. The white men running the battle set a blue rug down and fill it with what seems to be bits of money. Thus, they use their power to not only assert the borders of capitalist enterprise for the African Americans but give them false hope that there is actually money and prosperity within those bounds. As discussed earlier, gold is always a false hope in the text, and it is no different in the Battle Royale, where the narrator discovers that “the gold pieces I had scrambled for were brass pocket tokens advertising a certain make of automobile” (Ellison 32). Using the color analysis, I would suggest that Ellison is not directly condemning capitalism but condemning how the system actually operated in his analysis, where white men maintain their power by forcing African Americans to fight over pocket change and promises on a border designed to keep their own power.

## *Harlem Riot*

As the Harlem Riot is based on an amalgam of actual historical riots in Harlem, many critics have dissected the scene through historical, racial, and sociological lenses. While these are all valid in their own individual ways, it is important to note that Ellison is fictionalizing the events and thus is interpreting them through his own perspective. Therefore, when Nicole Waligoria-Davis suggests that the riot scene is Ellison's "exacting critique of intracolonialism; a critique that is humanist in its advocacy of human rights and in its sustained belief in individual autonomy" ("Riotous Discontent" 388), she certainly creates a compelling argument. After all, many moments in the riot scene are examples of staunch individualism fighting against the injustices of society thrust upon Harlem and its residents. However, it is only through the use of color analysis that we are able to take a closer look at how Ellison views the riot as a whole, and on a person-by-person basis.

One of the primary color images that echo throughout the chapter is blue. However, the color is almost never suggested in conjunction with an individual, or even a group of people. Instead, flashes of the riot itself are described as "like a blue dream" (536) or as seen through "the blue curtain that screened the street" (537). As the color is not linked to an individual, I assert that the riot itself is the powerful force in the chapter. The actions of individuals are motivated in other ways, as we will see later on. However, the actual riot itself is a tangible expression of power that shades much of what the narrator sees as he makes his way through the chaos. As a result, I suggest that Ellison is not suggesting that the riot is an expression of rage from the community, but rather, a flexing of its power, albeit in destructive ways in the end.

The police in the chapter are always described in relation to the color black, or much more commonly, the color white. The mention of the color black at the beginning of the chapter

is one of the most fascinating. The narrator says, “behind me, two policemen, almost invisible in black shirts, thrust flaming pistols before them” (535). This is a particularly interesting appearance as we have seen police in relation to blue, an expression of their power, in previous scenes. However, in this chapter, the riot itself holds the power of the scene. So, Ellison seems to be asking, if a police officer is powerless, what is he? The answer, plainly, is nothing, a lack of identity illustrated by the color black.

Throughout the rest of the chapter, police are often referred to in reference to their white helmets, even just being called “white helmets” in various sections of the chapter. For example, in one section the protagonist notes, “Some of the white helmets, racing for the doorways, turned to fire” (552). One of the reasons for the use of such imagery is obvious from even a cursory search on Google. The photographs that covered the front page of various newspapers often featured police in the riot gear of their day, complete with a gleaming white steel helmet. Therefore, anyone recalling the events would have such an image seared into their minds.

However, as I have noted, Ellison does not use color terminology lightly in this novel. The repetition of the color white in reference to the police in riot gear is meaningful. As with other mentions of white, the helmets erase the identity of those wearing them. When the officers took their helmets off, they could be individuals again, but while they wore them, they were the nameless force of police trying to impose some sort of power. They were no longer people, in Ellison’s estimation, but when they put on the helmets became the helmet itself, rather than an individual.

While the color analysis of the scene indicates that Ellison believed the riot was about power not passion, the interspersed red throughout the riot shows he acknowledges the base emotions that carried some people into acts of desperation and violence. The most obvious

example is the crowd that gathers to set an apartment building on fire in response to unfair treatment at the hands of the building's owner. Despite a woman pleading with the head of the mob that she will be giving birth soon and will have no place to take her child if the building burns down, they decide to do it anyway. The base emotion has overwhelmed the mob to the point where they carry buckets of kerosene into their own apartments, dousing them, and laughing while it burns. The protagonist's friend, Scofield, "stood there silhouetted against the red flare, looking into the flames, shouting. 'Goddam you rotten sonsabitches. You didn't think I'd do it but there it is. You wouldn't fix it up. Now see how you like it.'" (548). Ellison does not defend such actions taken in the riot. He sees them as destructive and contrary to all reason. However, he also shows Scofield as somewhat sympathetic, showing that he is not himself, but instead controlled by a red thread of passion that has driven him to this illogical place.

It is also interesting to note here that the colors that dominate the riot are red, white, and blue. Returning to Nicole Waligoria-Davis' article "Riotous Discontent," her analysis focuses on whether African Americans can be patriotic in the view of Ellison, drawing from many other critics who ask the same question. Her answer, as drafted from sexual politics, WWII, and domestic sentimentality, suggests that Ellison did not believe so. However, using the color analysis, I suggest that Ellison absolutely does believe in African-American patriotism. He believes that the flag and the riot are representative of the same elements, the interplay of passion, power, and identity. While the protagonist disappears into "the black waters of the sewers" (566-7), thus having no identity at the end, that doesn't mean that opting out is the correct solution. It means that Americans, black and white must face the elements of the system, represented in both the riot and expressed through the colors of the American flag.

### *Trueblood Encounter*

Dominating chapter two, Trueblood's tale is not nearly as discussed as it deserves to be. In some ways, this omission is understandable. After all, it is a story of poverty and incest in a chapter where the protagonist is even more of a passive figure than he usually is. The interaction is almost exclusively between Norton, a white benefactor to the college, and the uneducated Trueblood, who is living in what was once slave cabins. Many who discuss the section talk about the transactional nature of the encounter, as Norton gives Trueblood one hundred dollars at the conclusion of his tale, or the elements of minstrelsy in the scene. Others discuss the host of socioeconomic factors in play in the interaction. However, I think that the color analysis of this scene in particular offers insight into the depth of Ellison's narrative skill and social commentary.

Shortly after the protagonist explains the rumors of incest to Norton, we receive our first look at Trueblood in "new blue overalls" fanning himself with a "blue bandanna handkerchief" (50). Though it would seem that Trueblood would have the least power of the three men gathered, Ellison is telling us through the use of blue that he holds the authority in this particular exchange. This correlates to an argument that Houston A. Baker makes in his article "To Move Without Moving," suggesting that Trueblood is a "dual manifestation as trickster and merchant" (829). Therefore, his story gives him power, as it becomes a commodity to be consumed by white people who would have ordinarily passed him by.

However, the assertion that Trueblood is a trickster figure also presents problems as to whether he is a reliable narrator or not. Rumors had been spreading that he was the one who impregnated his own daughter, but that does not mean it is the truth. Baker suggests that "the content and mode of narration the sharecropper chooses reflect his knowledge of what a white



audience expects of the Afro-American” (831) and therefore, is simply crafting a story that Norton will be more likely to believe, even though it is not the truth. While I do not believe that Trueblood is so sophisticated in my own reading of him, the fact that “Flies and fine white gnats swarmed about his wound” (54) is an indicator from the author that Trueblood is obscuring his identity in some way. As the obscuring white is shown not as a solid figure, but rather as tiny white dots, I assert that Ellison is telling the reader that much of Trueblood’s story is true, but there are tiny alterations to cover up the true actions or identity of Trueblood in the tale.

Leading into the dream which results in the sexual contact with his daughter, Trueblood describes another dream he had that same night about a watermelon saying it “was on top of all the striped green ones like it’s waitin’ just for you, so you see how red and ripe and juicy it is and all the shiny black seeds it’s got and all” (56). This imagery is the primary reason that I assert that Trueblood is obscuring the real truth of the night with his daughter. Using the color explication, the watermelon becomes the ultimate forbidden fruit for Trueblood, with a green skin promising paradise, red luscious lustful flesh, and just a touch of black to remove the identity that he is her father. Therefore, as the reader we can see what Norton cannot. All along, Trueblood had been lusting after his own daughter. His trickster narrative is not merely what a white person would expect, as Baker suggests, though Trueblood certainly leverages such elements in his telling. Instead, it is a way to cover his heinous actions beneath a fog of dreams.

The dream that Trueblood describes to Norton in which he discovers he is having intercourse with his own daughter is laden with the color white. Trueblood notes a “big white bedroom,” where “everything in the room was white,” and a lady on a bed “got on a nightgown of soft white silky stuff” (57). While presented as some sort of elegant dream to Norton, I believe that Ellison is telling the reader not to believe a word of this section. The repetition of

white indicates a covering of a person's identity, and therefore, the covering of what actually happened between Trueblood and his daughter. While he cannot remove the evidence of his actions, he can cover it in a coat of "Optic White" and make it less offensive to the observer, as the college does to the slave cabins around campus.

### *Posing as Rinehart*

Rinehart is easily one of the most discussed figures in *Invisible Man*, which is fascinating as we never actually encounter the man himself. Instead, everything we learn about Rinehart comes from the protagonist posing as Rinehart to escape the wrath of Ras. While the narrator discovers much about Rinehart through the people he encounters who know Rinehart, the color symbolism laden in the scene informs the reader in a much more profound way, indicating not just what Rinehart means to the community, but what Rinehart means to the protagonist as well.

Initially, the protagonist is not trying to masquerade as anyone. Instead, he slips on a pair of glasses made "of a green glass so dark that it appeared black" (482). Upon first mention, it is tempting to believe that the green promise of paradise indicated by the glasses is merely the escape of the protagonist from Ras and the riot. However, Ellison's use of the color black in the same moment suggests a total separation from identity, not just a covering, as white might, but a removal of identity while wearing the glasses. As such, Ellison indicates to the reader from the first moment that the glasses are far more significant than a mere disguise, though there has been no mention of Rinehart yet.

As the protagonist travels around the chaos of the riot, he mentions repeatedly that everything is tinted in green. As Ellison has shown the reader time and time again at this point, green is only the promise of paradise in the narrator's perception, never the realization of it. Therefore, while Rinehartism seems like an ideal option for the protagonist, especially since his

disillusionment with the Brotherhood, the reader should be instantly on alert for what is wrong with this paradise. However, as much as green is a warning to the reader, it is also a profound indicator of what the protagonist is feeling. Beneath the green lenses, he can travel anywhere, even to observe Ras' speech without the fear of harm. Additionally, everyone he encounters treats him with respect and dignity, something the protagonist has never experienced before. This experience would certainly feel like some sort of Eden for the narrator after all he has gone through.

The final element of the Rinehart costume is, perhaps, the most telling. After encountering a woman who mistakes the protagonist for Rinehart the pimp, he realizes that he needs a hat to complete his look. Entering a hat shop, he picks out the hat with the widest brim that he could find. It is not until almost ten pages later that we discover the color of the hat, when the protagonist asks of himself, "If dark glasses and a white hat could blot out my identity so quickly, who actually was who?" (493). Again, Ellison uses the color white to cover and obscure the identity of an individual. It is not that the protagonist looks like Rinehart, but rather that with the white hat, Rinehart can be anything to anyone, be it a number runner, pimp, or as we see at the end of the scene, a pastor of a church. The analysis of the colors in play then becomes one of the most important elements in play. Ellison is not simply suggesting that men like Rinehart exist and critiquing their operation in society, but rather that with little more than the promise of paradise and a little something to erase one's identity, anyone can be Rinehart.

The first mention of a color other than green or white in the Rinehart scene comes when the protagonist steps into a bar and sees a Brotherhood member he knows, Brother Maceo. In order to test his costume, the protagonist approaches Maceo and begins a conversation with him, to see if Maceo can see through the disguise. As the protagonist pushes Maceo, gently mocking

him, Maceo looks into “the low blue rotisserie flames” (487) that the chickens are roasting over. Though the protagonist is still unaware of who Rinehart is, the indicator of the blue flames shows that there is a power to the man he is portraying, or more specifically in the costume itself. There is a way that he can speak to Maceo while wearing the green glasses and white hat that he couldn’t have as a Brotherhood member. Once again, by analyzing the use of color in this scene, we can see that the interaction transcends the surface tension of Brother Maceo’s dislike of Rinehart. Instead, it is a layered interplay of power dynamics as a result of the protagonist’s masquerade.

After exploring for a while, it is revealed to the protagonist that among the myriad of less than reputable careers Rinehart is involved with, he is also the pastor of his own church. Not only that, but the people of the congregation know nothing of Rinehart’s other lives and therefore believe that he is a holy, noble, and inspirational man of god. It is at this point that there are no longer any mentions of green in the scene, though the protagonist is still wearing the glasses. Thus, the lack of color is equally indicative of the mindset of the protagonist as the overwhelming mention of it earlier in the scene. He had no problem with the less than reputable actions of Rinehart as he meandered through the streets. In fact, he enjoyed them to the point that he thought Rinehartism would be a path to his own personal paradise. However, from the moment he steps into the church, all that goes away, and the green promise of joy disappears from Rinehartism forever for the protagonist.

The colors present in the church tell the reader much about how Rinehart operates as a pastor. A man in a red robe stands “resting against an enormous Bible” (497), embodying the religious fervor that the figure of Rev. Rinehart can inspire. The white and gold pulpit allows Rinehart to erase his worldly identity as a pimp, gambler, and number-runner to become an

upstanding man of God, while the gold indicates to the informed reader that he is only offering false promise of redemption or paradise. Above the pulpit, inscribed in gold are the words, “LET THERE BE LIGHT” (498). Again, using the knowledge of color in the novel, the reader can see the implied irony of this, as not only is gold a false promise of truth, which is surely what Rinehart offers, but also that he would never want light to shine on him and the deeds he performs outside of the church’s walls. As Daniel Weber notes, “Rinehart is the infinitely adaptable organism, who has no sense of race or history, and for whom only the present circumstance has reality” (168). Through Ellison’s use of color in this scene, we are not only able to interpret the adaptability of Rinehart, but the narrator’s perception of Rinehart’s form of life, offering a promise of paradise through the green glasses, but ending in disillusionment, not only for him, but for all of Rinehart’s devoted parish with false promises inscribed in gold covering the walls.

The protagonist never meets Rinehart, but he discovers much about him while masquerading to escape Ras’ men. Rinehart is many different things to many different people. However, the colors that dominate the scene inform the narrator what Rinehart truly is as much as the encounters with other people. Daniel Nykos’ article on the nature of Rinehart suggests that the nebulous identity of Rinehart makes him an equal choice for how the protagonist should live as Bledsoe or Ras. He states that “It is vital that the narrator never meets the actual Rinehart” (3) suggesting that Rinehart then can never be defined. However, through the protagonist’s embodiment of Rinehart and the colors of Rinehart’s existence and the encounters with people who meet Rinehart, I would argue that the reader discovers exactly who Rinehart is and how he operates. Equivalently, through the color analysis, we know exactly what motivates Bledsoe and Ras, making them a distinct choice of whether to follow power or passion.

Therefore, what appears at first glance as vague differences between various characters are rendered in bright technicolor for the reader to evaluate and make an informed conclusion about.

## CONCLUSION

The specific use of color terminology by Ellison allows the reader another lens with which to approach this immensely complicated text. However, more functionally, it allows the reader and the critic to answer some of the questions that their own work has led them to. For example, in James Seaton's article, "Affirming the Principle," he analyzes the use of patriotism and social construction within *Invisible Man*. In comparing Bledsoe and Ras, Seaton asks, "How do we know Ras isn't as cynical as Bledsoe?" (28). His suggestion is that while Bledsoe is willing to sacrifice African Americans to keep his position of authority, Ras is focused on giving all he can to African Americans. However, this does not mean he is not cynical enough to compromise some of his morals in order to pursue his end goal of elevating his race. The answer comes in the use of color for each character. The color blue is synonymous with Bledsoe, indicating his obsession with power. Ras, on the other hand, is consumed by red indicating a base of emotion which takes the form of moral outrage. Thus, Ras will not compromise as Bledsoe would, answering Seaton's query.

Threads of color weave through the text as though it were a loom creating a tapestry. By paying attention to them, the reader can draw connections to various people and events throughout the book adding depth to the crafting of each scene and the narrative as a whole. Characters, places, and moments are connected through these fine threads of color, though they may be separated by both time and distance in the novel itself. Additionally, the analysis of color leads to the discovery of the author's own thoughts on various cultural and historical moments. Additionally, the analysis of color in the novel opens up an entirely new lens through

which we can read the text, characters, scenes, and even Ellison's beliefs as expressed through fiction.

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