<u>Discuss the relationship between the individual and the mass in Ralph's Ellison's *Invisible Man*</u>

In *Invisible Man,* Ellison presents the argument that the position of the black individual within the mass of white American culture is one of social and racial invisibility. By communicating to readers through an obscure and nameless narrator, Ellison presents an existential enquiry into identity and the African American experience during the McCarthy era. Questioning the sacrifice of the individual for the mass in communist rhetoric through his presentation of the Brotherhood, Ellison more broadly critiques the hypocrisy of white liberal American values and patriotic mass production. Race relations are therefore revealed to be entangled in the wider instability of the Cold War international system. As the narrator struggles to forge an individual identity in the suffocating collectives of both the Brotherhood and the black community of Harlem, he remains alienated; simultaneously occupying the status of an isolated individual and existing as part of the autonomous mass.

Ellison chronicles the struggles of black characters as they negotiate the dynamic relationship between the individual and the white mass of American society. The reorganisation of the traditional 'narrative of ascent' (Stepto 1979, 166) which has roots in slavery is representative of the limited social possibilities afforded to black individuals by the impenetrable mass that is white power structures. Indeed, while the novel is spatially organised around the narrators movement from the North to the South, mirroring the Great Migration, the overall structure of the novel is cyclical and bookended by the narrators retreat underground- he appears to have made little real progress. Other characters make similar attempts to elevate their status as a black individual. While Bledsoe attempts to infiltrate the white mass: 'I'll have every Negro in the country hanging on tree limbs by morning if it means staying where I am'[1] (p.140), Ras the Destroyer believes that the only way to achieve freedom is to destroy the white enemy: 'Ras, he be here black and fighting for the liberty of the black people'(p.362) This dissonance however undermines the idea of a collective mass black community. Overall, the relationship between the individual and the white mass is defined by dominance and control as illustrated by the reoccurring symbols of the coin bank and sambo doll. Nevertheless, this dynamic undergoes a significant transformation in the

[1] All quotations from *Invisible Man* in this essay are taken from "Invisible Man" (London: Penguin Books, 2001)

Epilogue in what some scholars have called a strangely universalist recaptualisation of racism (Kaiser 1970; Schaub 1991). Here, the narrator interprets his invisibility as a metaphor for the wider human condition: ‘that goes for societies as well as individuals’ (p.560). In this way, Ellison overturns the prominent theme of the invisible individual, instead interpreting the individual as part of the alienated mass that is humanity.

At the centre of the novel is the narrator’s struggle to forge an individual identity, negotiating between his place in the white mass of 1950s American society and within the collective black community. This management of conflicting political realities represents a need for validation of the subjective self and, as the narrator states, ‘a proper reflection of my importance’ (p.158). Indeed, this inward search for identity dominated post-war art forms and manifested in the emergence of Abstract Expressionism (Paul 2004). The novel therefore perhaps represents a canvas through which the artist, Ellison, adopts elements of this movement to explore the freedom of the individual. Harper reconfigures Saussure's conception of the linguistic sign in his interpretation of the novel, arguing that the status of the African American with respect to the white mass is that of a ‘signifier’ whose ‘destiny is always to affirm white identity at the expense of their own’ (Harper 1989, 684). This is evident when Mr Norton, the college benefactor, looks at the narrator’s face and recognises in it his own ‘fate’ (p.39). Here, black identity and ‘fate’ does not stand for itself but serves to frame the white identity. Interpreting the rest of the novel through the lens of Harper’s criticism, the protagonist’s immersion into the black community of Harlem once he reaches the industrial North is perhaps an attempt to be free of the white influence and forge an authentic selfhood. However, this represents further problems for self-definition; his existence in this community means that he becomes part of the black indistinguishable mass. It is evident that the narrator himself internalises this idea. Remembering a picture of students at his old college, he recalls ‘a black mob’ ‘almost without individual identity’ (p.39). Moreover, while the maternal figure of Mary identifies in terms of the collective, ‘you got to fight and move us all on up a little higher’ (p.245), the narrator resents this collectivisation:

> There are things about people like Mary that I dislike. For one thing, they seldom know where their personalities end and yours begins; they usually think in terms of 'we' while I have always tended to think in terms of 'me' (p.305)

The narrator is therefore unable to reconcile his individualism with a mass, collective identity, perhaps confined to his predetermined role as a signifier (Ibid.). In this way, *Invisible Man* is situated within the literary modernist movement which presents 'man as a solitary being, incapable of meaningful human relationships' with the result that 'man's subjectivity itself is impoverished' (Lukács 1963, 24). Indeed, in failing to negotiate his relationships with both the white and black masses, the narrator experiences psychic tension and a crisis of identity: 'if only all the contradictory voices shouting inside my head would calm down and sing a song in unison' (p.253). To evade this dilemma, the narrator sets himself apart from the black community, 'I felt superior to them' (p.17), becoming a 'race leader' (p.304) in the Brotherhood. While the narrator uses the collective 'we' when addressing his 'black brothers': 'we're a law-abiding people' (p.265), this pluralisation is less an acceptance of a collective identity than it is an assertion of his superiority over the grassroots. Indeed, while the crowds that listen to his speeches have their identities obliterated: 'I could no longer see the audience, the bowl of human faces' (p.327), they help the narrator become '*more human'* (p.333), the mass creating a mirror from which he can form his own identity. This tension between competing identities is only resolved in the Epilogue which, fulfilling the generic conventions of a Bildungsroman, serves to reveal the narrator's psychological growth: 'I must shake off the dead skin and come up for breath' (p.560). The incomplete self is thus finally transformed into a coherent subject.

Through the careful construction of his characters, Ellison presents ways in which the black individual can negotiate their relationship with the mass: through pretence and masking, infiltration, or revolution. While masks have a long tradition within African culture, in the context of contemporary race relations, masking presents an opportunity to become someone else and transcend the status of an oppressed individual. By adopting the identity of Reinhart, a surreal figure who seems to occupy multiple identities, the narrator's own identity becomes fluid as he is able to avoid Ras by blending into the mass of the black community of Harlem, shifting like a chameleon. Ellison notes the freedom that masking affords: 'masking is a play upon possibility . . . and the motives behind the mask are as numerous as the ambiguities the mask conceals' (Wilner 1970, 243). However, the distinction between the mask and internal identity becomes increasingly blurred. Mistaken for Reinhart, the narrator is almost knifed by Brother Maceo. The narrator is therefore unable to blend into the mass as by occupying the identity of the elusive Reinhart, he is simultaneously invisible and hyper-visible on the streets of Harlem. As Olderman argues 'behind Rinehart's many masks, behind the invisible man, there is no identity' (Olderman 1996, 155). 'Reinhartism' (p.486) therefore represents an illusionary promise of freedom as his multiplicity lacks coherence. The narrator thus trades his own incoherent identity for the mask of another, contradictorily lacking a subjective self while remaining apart from the black mass of Harlem.

Ellison presents another option afforded to the alienated black individual: infiltration of the white mass. This is most obviously represented by the grandfather's riddle whose words so permeate the novel that, as Marcus Klein has suggested, 'the riddle defines every gambit the narrator makes' (Klein 1964, 113). However, it simultaneously becomes both an aphorism and curse on the protagonist. The riddle is built on the military metaphor that 'our life is a war' (p.16), perhaps an expression of the 1950s Civil War centennial moment as an examination into the progress that has been made in American race relations. The second part of the riddle seems to advocate for a strategy of sedition by 'liv[ing] with your head in the lion's mouth' (p.16), arguing that by exaggerating their servility to the white mass, African Americans can achieve success. The riddle is therefore a parody; while the grandfather believes that he is behaving like a 'spy' (p.16), reflective of the pervasive Cold War culture of espionage and counter-intelligence, this is less a life of duplicity than it is a life of submission. However, Dr Bledsoe embraces this strategy, adopting the manner and speeches of white benefactors to maintain his own status and power. Bledsoe's confession that he would 'have every Negro in the country hanging on tree limbs by morning if it means staying where I am' (p.140) thus demonstrates that 'yessing' (p.495) represents a betrayal of the black community by prioritising individual success over wider societal progress for the mass.

The riddle takes many forms as the novel continues, haunting the narrator. In a strikingly Machiavellian passage, a veteran tells the narrator to 'Play the game, but don't believe in it… Play the game, but play it your own way' (p.149). In the wider context of the novel, this 'game' therefore represents mass white Anglo-American culture. While the narrator tries to forget his grandfather's words, he subconsciously becomes an infiltrator himself, 'considered an example of desirable conduct' (p.16) by the white elites and later, consciously when he decides to destroy the Brotherhood from within. However, it is revealed that infiltration is a step away from subjugation as the narrator becomes little more than the coin bank which, 'if a coin is placed in the hand and a lever pressed upon the back, will raise its arm and flip the coin into the grinning mouth' (p.307). The narrator is programmed and disciplined by the

Brotherhood until his individual identity is stripped away, infiltrating the autonomous mass while contradictorily rejecting a collective identity.

The narrator's employment at the Liberty Paint plant is demonstrative of the exploitation of the black individual to uphold mass industrial structures, constituting a kind of neo-slavery. Winther argues that the factory is strongly associated with national emblems and therefore 'becomes representative of American industry at large' (Winther 1983, 117). Indeed, as he approaches the factory, the narrator first notices the American flags which are 'fluttering in the breeze' (p.189) and the trademark of a 'screaming eagle' (p.190), reminding him of 'some vast patriotic ceremony' (p.189). The narrators job at the factory is to make 'Optic White' (p.194), 'the purest white that can be found' (p.195). This colour is achieved by adding 'glistening black drops' (p.193) to the mix which soon disappear into the white abyss of the paint. Optic White can be considered a microcosm for the white mass that is American society. Indeed, the ironically named Liberty Paint Plant achieves financial success by subverting blackness in the pursuit of a brighter white, essentially covering black identity with white culture. At the height of post-war American consumerism, industrialists perpetuated the narrative that 'this mass consumption driven economy held out the promise of political as well as economic democracy' (Cohen 2004, 236), leading to a more equitable, egalitarian society. However, in Ellison's depiction of the paint plant in which employees must unionise to 'improve the condition of the workers' (p.214), this rings hollow. While the carefully measured drops of black are essential to the Optic White mixture, they become invisible, reflective of the black individual labourers which are central to the success of mass American industry but are nonetheless hidden. The author is thus alluding to the vicious circle in which African Americans uphold the economic system which contributes to their own social and political oppression. While both Liberty Paints and America as a whole represent themselves as protectors of liberty, racial politics are deeply imbedded. The company slogan 'If it's Optic White, it's the right white' is thus both phonetically and symbolically linked to the expression 'If you're white, you're right' (p.210).

The rationalised mode of production of 1950s industrial capitalism itself represents a crisis of individual identity, reducing labourers to an autonomous mass (Weber 1958). Indeed, the agency of labourers at the Liberty Paint Plant is sacrificed in the name of mass production, upholding the foundation of patriotic American consumerism: 'more, newer, better' (Cohen 2004, 237). Reduced to a mere cog in the machine that is the paint plant, the black labourer is alienated from their work and any agency they had has been transferred onto the product itself, evoking Marx's concept of commodity fetishism in which products take on a power of their own as an expression of social relations (Marx 1972, 133-5). As Mr Emerson, an industrial heir, tells the narrator, nobody 'has any identity anymore anyway' (p.181). By exposing exploitative capitalist structures, Ellison anticipates Crenshaw's concept of intersectionality, demonstrating how the suffocating webs of capitalism and racism intersect to restrict black agency (Crenshaw 1989). It can be argued then that the explosion in the basement is a warning against the black individuals passive acceptance of white capitalist power structures which will only destroy their identity as the narrator is propelled into 'a wet blast of black emptiness that was somehow a bath of whiteness' (p.222).

The ideological dynamic between the individual and the mass in the novel is most starkly represented by the Brotherhood and its Marxist-Leninist machinations. Culminating in their betrayal of the protagonist and the wider black community of Harlem, the Brotherhood demonstrates the limitations of an ideology which although promises integration and community, prioritises the mass over the individual. When he is first recruited by the Brotherhood, the narrator embraces the opportunity as a chance to represent the black community and shed his own cloak of invisibility: 'I was dominated by the all-embracing idea of the Brotherhood. The organisation had given the world a new shape' (p.368). The narrator's immersion into the mass of the Brotherhood represents an attempt to become part of something beyond himself, trading isolated individualism for the collective. However, his affiliation with the Brotherhood destroys his relationship with the community of Harlem: 'what community?... he got the white fever and left' (p.409). The narrator is ultimately marginalised too by the Brotherhood as Brother Jack is threatened by his preoccupation with 'personal responsibility' (p.449) and action over dry ideology. The brotherhood demands 'sacrifice' (p.487) of the individual for the mass but in the process, betrays the freedom of the individual. At the climax of the novel, the narrator realises that despite leaving the brotherhood collective, he remains part of the autonomous mass: 'I was one with the mass, moving down the littered street over the puddles of oil and milk, my personality blasted' (p.550).

By presenting the individual as a mere tool for the mass of the Brotherhood then, Ellison reveals the wider inability for abstract ideologies to address the real plight of African Americans during the 1950s. Instead, Ellison presents liberal democratic humanism as a viable alternative as this more effectively reconciles individualism with a mass identity. The allegory is far from discreet; Brother Jack's red hair and glass eye reflect the metaphorical blindness of the Communist Party to the political situation of the black American: 'why do you fellows always talk in terms of race?' (p.282). It can be argued that this is part of Ellison's wider critique of the apparent contradiction between America's projected self-image as a free liberal democracy and the persistence of Jim Crow Laws. In McCarthy era America, neither the state or the Communist Party are willing to effectively address race relations, leaving the black individual both alienated and 'invisible' (p.3).

Some scholars have argued that this damning portrayal of the Brotherhood as sectarian and ideological stems from Ellison's own experiences with the American Communist Party (CPUSA) and therefore reflects his own bitterness and disillusionment. Staples argues that the novel is semi-autobiographical: 'It told a story of a young Black man whose experiences… mirror Ellison's own' (Staples 2007). Indeed, Ellison is able to weave his own feelings and experiences into a fictional tale of an 'invisible man' (p.3), including his apparent anti-Communism. There is some evidence that Ellison himself defected from the CPUSA for revisionism. In a private letter written in 1945, Ellison's anger towards party leaders is palpable: 'If they want to play ball with the bourgeoise they needn't think they can get away with it' (Polsgrove and LaCroix 2003, 66-9). Perhaps then the Brotherhood can be regarded as a satirical portrait of the CPUSA. However, any anti-Communist reading of the novel must consider the wider socio-political climate of post-war America which was dominated by a rampant public fear of dissent known as the 'Red Scare'. Foley argues that the novel is therefore permeated by this climate of McCarthyism, rather than being representative of any genuine disillusionment of Ellison's. This perhaps undermines the validity of Ellison's portrayal of the left and represents an 'ideological distortion of a real history' (Foley 1997, 535). However, Foley's criticism inadvertently demonstrates that at its core, *Invisible Man* is a product of its Cold War context. Ellison's often contradictory representation of the relationship between the individual and the mass can therefore be considered a microcosm of 1950s anti-Communist paranoia and fears of soviet infiltration, revealing the wider connection between race relations and the instability of the Cold War.

In summary, the relationship between the individual and the mass in *Invisible Man* exists on multiple levels. Ellison presents the concept of the mass in different ways throughout the novel, concurrently represented by the collective identity of the Brotherhood, the black community of Harlem and more widely the mass white power structures which uphold industrial capitalism. The narrator is both invisible, able to blend in and infiltrate these masses following his grandfather's Machiavellian advice, and hyper-visible, alienated and unable to forge an individual identity. Rendered an ineffectual leader within the black community due to his affiliation with the Brotherhood, the narrator is also unable to find validation of his identity in white power structures. Ellison appears to be arguing that individualism is incompatible with communist collectivisation and more broadly, that the individual black subject is ultimately a subjective self who must forge a coherent identity outside of the realms of white power and the black community.

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