

Not Just a Novel of Epic Proportions:
Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man* as Modern American Epic

by

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A Dissertation submitted to the Faculty of the Graduate School,
Marquette University, in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the
Degree of Doctor of Philosophy

Milwaukee, Wisconsin

May, 2008
Marquette University

UMI Number: 3306506

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ABSTRACT

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This study discusses how Ralph Ellison offers a modern reinterpretation of the epic genre with his novel *Invisible Man*. Whereas, according to epic scholars such as Thomas E. Greene and others, epic has almost always been defined via form (verse), Ellison allows us to redefine it via purpose (national narrative). I contend that Ellison's novel should be seen not simply as a race novel but also, more broadly, as offering a modern American epic that builds upon classical forms. Ellison adds to the classical form of epic primarily by employing the conventions of the hero and the heroic journey. But, this re-envisioning of epic conventions does not lead to simple mimicry. Rather, we can see that Ellison builds upon how others have modified the epic over history, and challenges these modifications by bringing the epic into America during the twentieth century. Additionally, he challenges classical epic conventions through three other moves: first, he adds an explicitly psychological dimension to the hero's journey; second, he writes about a racialized hero; and, third, he composes in a nontraditional form for epic, prose.

Ellison reinterprets the epic most pointedly by focusing on a hero who is neither great nor particularly heroic and who is on the margins of the larger society. But, the hero fulfills a heroic journey through the development of self, instigated by the disparity between how he sees himself and how others see him. This study explains his journey by 1) tracing the representational qualities of the hero; 2) analyzing the hero's journey toward identity, which is his central quest; 3) detailing how this journey is interrupted but also compelled by the masculine world; and, finally 4) detailing how multiple white female characters stand as the largest obstacles against which the hero must work. These women challenge the narrator the most since the relationships between the hero and these women are predicated upon extreme stereotypes of race and gender. Because of this journey, by the novel's end, we are left with a fully-formed epic hero, who might not look anything like classical models, but who has succeeded in offering an alternate, yet worthy, narrative of an American experience.

Preface

So my task was one of revealing the human universals hidden within the plight of one who was both black and American, and not only as a means of conveying my personal vision of possibility, but as a way of dealing with the sheer rhetorical challenge involved in communicating across our barriers of race and religion, class, color and region—barriers which consist of the many strategies of division that were designed, and still function, to prevent what would otherwise have been a more or less natural recognition of the reality of black and white fraternity.

--Ellison, Introduction to 1980 edition of *Invisible Man*, p. xxiii.

I began my graduate career thinking I would devote my scholarship to what I had deemed to be “classic” American texts, which I defined through age: works of the Colonial and American Renaissance periods caught my attention because I thought they offered a clear, and obviously agreed upon and respected, definition of both American and literature. Crèvecoeur, Hawthorne, Poe and Emerson—these men knew the American mind (with all of its macabre and egotistical trappings) and could project it clearly through their writing.

While in my second year of the Master’s program, I looked ahead to a possible thesis topic and read Edgar Allan Poe’s novel *The Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym of Nantucket* on the suggestion of a professor who knew of my interest in “classic” American writers and my secondary interest (which to me seemed more like a hobby than a scholarly lens) of representations of race. The novel left me wondering why the only character to survive the horrible shipwreck which concludes the novel is Dirk Peters, a racially mixed character of white, black, and Native American blood. The only other characters on board the small boat with Peters, but who do not survive, are Pym, a purely white character, and Nunu, a purely black character. Their deaths are caused by a mysterious white fog which rolls over the boat, leaving Dirk alive. The metaphor of the white fog

could not be lost on the deft reader. Was Poe trying to claim something about the longevity of the human species based on race? Would interracial mixing be the antidote to mortality? And, was mortality brought about by white forces?

I wanted to know more about how race, either metaphorically (as in the case of the white fog) or literally (as in Dirk's ancestry), played out in American fiction. I branched out to other works in which I saw race functioning as a theme, rather than a corollary of author or setting: *Moby Dick*, *The Interesting Narrative of the Life of Olaudah Equiano, or Gustavus Vassa, the African. Written by Himself*, and *Leaves of Grass*. I first read *Invisible Man* on the suggestion of a colleague in the graduate program at Salisbury University. She thought it would help me to contextualize my interest in representations of racialized characters within modern works. I approached the novel cautiously, sure it would do little to further my argument. After all, I wanted to look at classic American texts—I had not yet come to realize the wealth of texts written *after* the American Renaissance and how important some of them would be in helping me understand why I was interested in race as a literary trope.

The novel spoke to me in a way I wasn't prepared for. Naively, I approached it, as does most superficial criticism, by placing it within the confines of "race novel." This label is very much confining, especially for a work by Ellison, who found it impossible to divorce race from nationality. As he says in the introduction to the 1980 edition of the novel, he tried to tell the story of someone who was both black *and* American. To label this novel a race novel denies the larger purpose of the work. This is not to say that race novels are

without a grand purpose, very much to the contrary; race novels—here I'm thinking about *Native Son* in particular—have advanced cultural awareness of racism and the all-too-contradictory experiences with democracy felt between black and white Americans. One cannot help but feel outraged at the disparity of realities when reading such a work.

Only a few chapters into my first read-through and I was absolutely hooked. I fawned over this book, recommending it to anyone, who were like me or not, or who wanted “something good to read.” I shoved it into the hands of family members and friends, but was disappointed by the lack of enthusiasm. Typical responses went something like this: “I can't get into it—it's too long;” “What is he talking about?” or, “Why doesn't he have a name?” Those readers who *did* make it through the entire novel came away feeling unfulfilled since the novel seems to be working toward an explicit resolution of the narrator's mistreatment, which to many readers, can only be demonstrated through a “happy ending.” They wanted him to come out of the novel triumphant, having looked in the face of the chaos around him and escaped unharmed, to have reached his goal of becoming an influential race leader. My question is, “But, doesn't he do this?”

There was something about the novel, though, that readers did connect with, although not nearly as strongly as I did—the character of the narrator. Even those readers who only read one or two chapters definitely came away with concern or a sense of sympathy for him. Whether this concern stems from his naïve tone in the first chapter, or in the somewhat cryptic voice of the narrator who introduces the recitation in the Prologue, the character of the narrator made

an impression on them. He certainly did on me. He sounded authentic, real, in both racial terms and in terms of literary realism. I felt that I was hearing the voice of someone who had actually been put through the metaphoric ringer of being black and male in Post-World War I America rather than the voice of a stereotype or rendering of such an experience.

Other characters in the novel also spoke to me in deep ways. Mary, Emma and Sybil were especially interesting to me since by this point in my graduate career I had encountered feminist criticism and was somewhat taken in by its central focus on the (sometimes simultaneous) representation and objectification of women. For my first formal discussion of the novel, I chose to interrogate *Invisible Man* by writing about the invisible women held within its pages. It was the narrator's eerie last lines of the Epilogue that got me:

Being invisible and without substance, a disembodied voice, as it were, what else could I do? What else but try to tell you what was really happening when your eyes were looking through? And it is this which frightens me: Who knows but, that, on the lower frequencies, I speak for you? (581)

It got me because the narrator, after having gone through so much despair and having arrived at the fundamental realization that he is invisible, is scared that I might be invisible too. This introduces a pivotal concept in American (possibly all of human) culture—who is seen by others? How are they seen? Who is unseen? Ellison's narrator hints that we are all unseen, that none of us has a truly subjective self and even the objective one we show to others is not recognized.

This implies a lack of caring between humans and calls into question the very nature of not only constructions of self, but also constructions of relationships.

Ellison's novel owes much to previous writers who paved the way for his novel by introducing discrepancies of realities based on racial difference. Certainly, this is a foundation for his work, which follows the young black narrator from his naïve southern persona to his more mature northern one. The narrator matures not only in age and physicality but also in his psychology; whereas he once felt that he would achieve his dreams through hard work and strict adherence to social codes, by the novel's end he realizes how none of this matters, that how one is seen by others is not under one's control.

The novel advances the progression and reputation of the American novel by linking a racial experience to a larger national experience, drawing on classical texts, such as epic, and on national narratives. The American novel progresses even further from its British roots and the reputation for inherently American works grows. What we see when we look closely at *Invisible Man* is Ellison's pulling through the threads of heroism of Homer, individualism and imagination found in Charles Brockden Brown, the scope and struggle of humanity of Herman Melville, the democratic vista and barbaric yawp of Walt Whitman; these threads then get combined with those of African American narrative and experience to create a work that is uniquely American and that transcends each of the separate threads to create a new more unified narrative of American experience.

The organizing principle that directed Ellison's composition of the novel—to reveal the human universals—stands as its greatest lesson and speaks to

the usefulness of such a work to our modern society. I feel that we are in desperate need of a national narrative that binds us together rather than elucidates our (cultural, racial, regional, gendered, political, etc.) differences. Although admittedly lacking a “happy ending” this novel more than any other is able to draw these disparate people together by way of a shared experience of subjectivity and invisibility.

I hope this is what I can convey to future readers of Ellison’s masterpiece, whether I encounter them within my family or community or within my classroom. Yes, it’s long and, yes, it doesn’t fulfill our need for a happy ending, but it is our story as much as it is the protagonist’s. Once we embrace the story, we can begin to work to change it. Ellison’s purpose, as I interpret it, is not to have his novel end with its last page, but to challenge us to revise the national narrative that negates our personhoods and subjecthoods. His novel challenges us to work toward developing a national narrative that sees each of us as we truly are, not as others want to or do not want to see us. Thus, the narrator’s fear is that, indeed, we are all invisible; his secondary fear is that we do not realize this invisibility, just as his naïve, younger self didn’t realize it.

Acknowledgements

The frustrated actress in me thinks my acknowledgement page is the most exciting aspect to my project—it's the Humanities version of a Golden Globe acceptance speech. But, the humble scholar in me knows it is the hardest—since no aspect of my project, from its tiniest seeds to its present fruition, would have been possible without so many people.

First and foremost, I have to thank the brilliant Ralph Waldo Ellison for writing such an amazing and poignant novel. Lauren Silverman, my colleague at Salisbury, thank you for recommending I read it. Dr. Jack Wenke at Salisbury, thank you for supporting my first somewhat naïve and clumsy attempts at making sense of the novel.

My committee members, Dr. Heather Hathaway, Dr. Krista Ratcliffe, and Dr. MC Bodden, have made this dissertation possible through their unending support, even when it looked as though I'd never finish. Thanks to Dr. Hathaway, especially, for allowing me the freedom to see the novel through new eyes and for re-directing me when my vision became blurred. Dr. B, thank you for talking me down off the ledge multiple times. Dr. Ratcliffe, thank you for your recommendations concerning the interplay between race and gender. Your feedback has challenged me to become a better scholar.

My friends and colleagues in the English department at Marquette can not go without being recognized since they often got the brunt of my stumbling through the novel. To my fellow ASF-ers, thank you for letting me pop in for a word or two. Colleen Willenbring, Rebecca Parker Fedewa, and Jake Stratman—I owe much of the completion of this dissertation to you three. You were always there to help me out of a compositional hole or philosophical quandary, or, more often, a full-blown meltdown-freakout.

And, finally, to my amazingly patient family, who has supported me through this process. Pete, you are wonderful and I could not have finished this project without your support. That you read the novel just so I'd have someone to talk to about it was very touching to me. And to my mom: when I would call in a panic, thinking I couldn't do it, you'd always tell me those magic words: "It'll come. Look how far you've already gotten." Well, mom, it finally came. Thanks for not letting me give up.

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Introduction: Moving Toward the American Epic

I. Joining the Conversation

How do we make sense of the epic genre? Is there an American epic, and if so, what does it look like? The primary purpose of this dissertation is to answer these questions and to argue how Ralph Ellison's novel *Invisible Man* falls within the genre of the epic, even though conventional ways of making sense of the genre do not allow for the inclusion of the novel form or of an unnamed, ordinary protagonist. The reason for doing so is to show how Ellison's novel can be discussed in terms other than "race novel" or African American novel, not because these labels are incorrect or unworthy, but because to place such labels onto the work does little to expose Ellison's purpose behind writing the novel or to illuminate Ellison's classical antecedents. His purposes go beyond reiteration of a racialized experience, to include national implications. He was not only writing the story of a black man in 1940s America, he was also writing an alternate national narrative, an alternate way of making sense of a national identity. He chose the form of the epic as a means to tell this alternate story because of his training and interest in classical modes of storytelling; myth and epic form the bases of this training and interest. At the time he wrote *Invisible Man*, he had read and fully engaged with Lord Raglan's *The Hero*. Before writing, he had been exposed to many classical and European writers including Homer, Aristotle, T.S. Eliot, and James Joyce.¹ Ellison merges myth and epic to

¹ See Lloyd Brown's review in *Masses and Mainstream* from June of 1952. One of Butler's criticisms of Ellison is that he is too Eurocentric in his reading and scholarship.

create a new form through which to tell the American story, takes Walt Whitman's purpose in writing *Song of Myself* further discuss Whitman's purpose, and in doing so challenges both common conceptions of the epic genre and arguments that see works like *Moby Dick* as the American epic.

My other purposes will come to the fore throughout this discussion, which are predicated upon the primary purpose. These include revising the roles of women in epics and de-vilifying white women in race novels. Women have overwhelmingly served as stock characters in classical epics, taking on the roles of dutiful wife and helpful assistant. Ellison complicates such roles by showing the absurdity of such strict characterizations. White women have been vilified in many of the race novels that preceded Ellison's work; they have been characterized as partners in black male subjugation. Ellison challenges this notion of white womanhood by interweaving the experiences of white women and black men, showing them both to be victims of the dominant culture, namely white males.

The discussions found within this dissertation rely heavily on the work of previous critics of epic as well as on the debates concerning the development of epic and novel. Most noteworthy are the writings of Mikhail Bakhtin, Georg Lukacs, and Benedict Anderson since they helped me toward a definition of epic. First and foremost, the epic must be the story of a nation rather than the story of one man or hero. The reason for this is that as a national narrative, the purpose behind the epic is to serve as a story of origin of sorts for that nation. Since America is a heterogeneous, multi-vocal nation, its epic must also be

heterogeneous and multi-vocal. Second, the epic story then must focus on the experiences of the nation rather than on one member of that community. Not only is the narrator's story being told, but as he meets other characters their stories are also being told. Finally, because of the diversity of the nation, the hero's story and the stories of secondary characters are not meant to be just theirs alone, but can be seen as representational in that they transcend demographic boundaries. For the purposes of this discussion, "representational" refers to the symbolic connections between the hero (narrator) and other characters within the novel. For example, the hero's feeling of invisibility can be symbolic of a similar feeling felt by secondary characters, who may or may not be demographically similar to the hero.

Bakhtin and Lukacs were especially helpful in building a case for why a novel can be (should be?) considered to be an epic, regardless of its form of prose rather than verse. Specifically, Bakhtin's attention to the dialogic conventions of the novel lead me to understand that the form of the novel allows for a greater chance for the work to be epic since a multitude of voices is better able to tell the story of a nation than one lone voice is. Lukacs' focus on the relationship between conventions of epic and novel helped me to construct arguments concerning Ellison's formal heritage, found in the epic; this allowed me to see that the trajectory between epic and novel was not so strained. As Lukacs tells us, "the really great novels have a tendency to overlap into the epic" (qtd. in McWilliams 5).

Overall, though, Anderson's work *Imagined Communities*, was the most helpful since it innovatively correlates the origins of the novel with the origins of modern nationalism, which I understand to be the most pointed reasoning for why the epic can no longer be a poem (McKeon 359). As previously alluded to, nationalism is a large component in my ruminations on epic. Obviously, the multi-vocal form of the novel allows for a greater sense of community since various, here-to-fore marginalized voices are finally being heard. Thus, the epic must be seen through the form of novel in contemporary American society since only the novel form allows for such moves toward an inclusive (however imagined by the author) community of which the disparate components of the nation can be a part.

Greater attention, however, needs to be given to the trajectory of the theories of epic in order to show how my discussion moves conceptions of epic further, so far that the genre can include *Invisible Man*. This introduction will focus on the evolution of the epic and theories of epic to show how epic has been a topic of debate among scholars; second, it will discuss which conventions of epic remain after Ellison revises the genre; third, it will discuss which conventions, although remaining in Ellison's novel, are not included in the larger dissertation and why; and, finally, it will outline the dissertation's chapters.

II. Theories of Epic

Theories of epic tend to fall into two categories: classical, or formal, and (r)evolutionary.² Classical theories uphold strict definitions of the genre, like that posed by Thomas Greene in “The Norms of Epic:” the epic is a long poem that focuses on a human hero who is named and has supernatural or god-like qualities, and who is important to the nation. Secondary qualities include expansiveness of time and setting; a story which revolves around a “cosmic power struggle;” and an obstacle that the hero must overcome in order to return to his home victorious. These theorists can also be termed “formal” since their definitions of epic rely heavily on the assumed form of the genre. (R)evolutionary theories are more flexible, understanding that the epic, like many literary genres, is constantly evolving. A far greater number of theorists fall into the classical category than the (r)evolutionary category. This suggests the power that the epic has as a genre. Theorists of classical epics do not want to release their holds on epic and allow it to be fluid, because of the importance the epic genre has had in the makings or interpretations of nationhood. The epic is still seen as a tale of origin for a nation; once a community has united under one nation, that nation must devise a tale of origin that discusses the nation’s greatness. Thus, the super-human qualities of the epic hero are meant to reinforce the power of the nation. His strength and quickness in battle mimics the nation’s own identity as powerful. It is my contention that those theorists in the classical category do not want to let go of

² These categories are of my own design. The dual use of revolutionary and evolutionary is meant to suggest the extent to which revisions of conceptions of epic are revolutionary in that they fly in the face of conventional concepts of epic; the word is also meant to nod toward the implications of the epic in terms of concepts of nationhood. Evolutionary refers to the evolution of the genre I identify as leading to Ellison’s novel *Invisible Man*.

these conventions because doing so would suggest a disconnect between epic and nation building.

Besides Thomas Greene, other theorists who fall within the classical category include Kate Milner Rabb, Adeline Johns-Putra, Patrick D. Murphy and J.B. Hainsworth. These theorists' conceptions of epic can be plotted along a continuum of form; each is concerned with formal aspects of the genre, passed down via classical examples of the epic.

Kate Milner Rabb, positing a definition of epic nearly 60 years before Greene, looks to the *Iliad*, the *Odyssey*, the *Kalevala*, *Beowulf*, the *Nibelungen Lied*, and the *Song of Roland* as exempla of the epic form. Her definition does not differentiate between traditional (what she calls primitive) and literary (or, modern) epics. Instead, she argues that both contain "uniform metre, simplicity of construction, concentration of action into a short time, and the use of episode and dialogue" (4).

Adeline Johns-Putra echoes Greene and Rabb. In *History of the Epic*, she discusses the qualities that set epic apart from tragedy, an argument originally put forth by Aristotle: "[Tragedy] should relate a single action, not all the actions of a single person...Epic, due to its length, must embellish this action through the use of episodes" (37). Thus, the attention of the epic is on the panorama of action, on the broad scope of the work, and on the importance of particular moments of action used to elaborate upon the scope. Johns-Putra's conception of epic, like that of Rabb and Greene, is focused on the formal qualities of the genre.

Even when theorists are not discussing the epic genre specifically, assumptions concerning the qualities of epic come to the fore. Patrick D. Murphy's article, "The Verse Novel: A Modern American Poetic Genre," assumes a classical and formal definition of epic while musing on Eliot's *The Waste Land*. Although not explicitly an article meant to discuss epic conventions, Murphy makes use of assumptions concerning epic while arguing why Eliot's long poem *could not* be an epic. This is a prime example of definition by inversion and meaningful to this discussion because it shows the great extent to which definitions of epic have become common and taken for granted. For Murphy, *The Waste Land* can not be considered an epic, or a comedy or tragedy for that matter, because its "polyphony prevents any single language or dialect from asserting itself as authoritative and thereby prevents any clear cut resolution enabling the poem to be defined as...epic" (62). Clearly, Murphy is working from a preset definition of epic, one that dictates that the form cannot be polyphonic.

For J.B. Hainsworth, who notes no less than five types of epic, the epic can be defined as the product of the collision between primitive narratives of myths and folktales and the form of heroic poetry. Thus, the epic has to do with both the story being told and the manner in which that story is brought to the page. Hainsworth, like many theorists concerning epic, defines epic solely as a poetic venture, which seems to place the energy of the epic form squarely on how the language being used to narrate the hero's story is represented rather than on the story itself. Plot, then, takes a backseat to form.

As we can see, much of the writing concerning epic tends to locate epic as a classical genre, discussing epic conventions via historical repetitions of formal conventions. (R)evolutionary theorists of epic tend to be a bit looser in their concepts of epic, arguing that the form can and does change; therefore, the definition of epic is not found in the rigors of form, but rather in the purpose behind the genre. Such theorists include Lascelles Abercrombie, Theodore L. Steinberg, Frederick T. Griffiths and Stanley J. Rabinowitz, and Nathan Glazer.

Lascelles Abercrombie straddles the divide between classical and (r)evolutionary theorists of epic in that his concepts of epic balance form and the relationship between the epic and its audience. This is a position that edges us closer to ideas concerning purpose since discussions of purpose take into account the rhetorical relationship between the word and the reader/listener. Although he does define epic via style or form, a position in desperate need of revision, he hits upon the danger in defining literary genres too strictly: "At bottom, it is what we feel, not what we think, that makes us put certain poems together and apart from others; and feelings cannot be defined, only related. If we define a poem, we say what we think about it; and that may not sufficiently imply the essential thing the poem does for us" (50). In placing the reader in engagement with the work, he illuminates an often forgotten central facet to the epic. As an oral form of narrative, there was an inherent relationship between the speaker of the poem and the listener of the poem. Although the listener has been replaced by the reader, the relationship between reader and word remains.

Theodore L. Steinberg, building upon the nuanced definition of epic offered by Abercrombie, sees the epic as a constant state of flux or evolution. Writing in *Twentieth-Century Epic Novels*, Steinberg wants to add modern or contemporary conventions to the definition of epic: “The epic is a narrative that focuses simultaneously on the lives of its characters and on a pivotal moment in the history of a community” (29). That Steinberg argues for the possibility of epic novels is especially noteworthy, since epic has almost always been defined via the poetic form. With theorists like Steinberg, the argument for prose and novel epics comes to the fore and challenges the antiquated notion that the epic must be written solely in verse. But, the most important detail to Steinberg’s theory of the epic is that he has moved away from seeing the epic as the story of a solitary hero to seeing the possibility for multiple heroes or important characters. Additionally important is that the narrative concerns not only these heroes but the larger community. With Steinberg, we are beginning to see inklings of the epic taking on greater political importance.

The politicization of the epic narrative is seen in the revisions of epic that occur alongside national developments and changes. It seems that with every new twist in a culture’s history, as Griffiths and Rabinowitz point to, there is greater need for a new epic, a new national story.³ This is precisely the case made by Nathan Glazer in “American Epic: Then and Now.” Glazer sees two American epics: the first, dominant until the 1930s, concerns the myth of freedom and vastness; the second, concerns racial and ethnic diversity. This second phase of

³ I am writing under the premise that the epic, whatever form it takes, is at heart a national story. Thus, the epic hero is representative of the nation and his deeds hold importance to that nation.

epic “celebrates quite different voyages: the middle passage, the Trail of Tears, the immigrant ship, the underground railway, the tenement trail from slum to suburb...[it] is the epic of the Native Americans, the Africans, the ‘new immigrants’ from southern and eastern Europe, the new new [sic] immigrants of the last three decades, cast generally as the victims of the protagonists of the first epic” (8). What remains epic-like for Glazer is the narrative’s concern with journey or the voyage. There is something about the voyage, especially one that challenges the protagonist and which may or may not have national implications that warrants the label “epic.”

A second implication comes to light through the title of a publication on Russian epics by Frederick T. Griffiths and Stanely J. Rabinowitz: *Novel Epics*. Primarily, the book has to do with Russian epics which take the novel form. An important second reading of the title suggests to what extent the epic is constantly in a state of flux as the term “novel” also denotes newness. Thus, a novel epic may not only be an epic in novel form, but a new way of writing the epic as well.

III. Ellison’s Epic Conventions

Because my discussion of Ellison’s novel as epic is predicated on the connection between epic and nationhood, or national identity, the conventions that Ellison employs, however in revised form, also concern questions of national identity. These have to do most explicitly with the hero and the hero’s journey. Since I argue that the hero is representative of the larger nation, his experience is the focus of my discussion. His story and journey represent those of his fellow

Americans, both black and white, male and female. Thus, the conventions of epic that remain in Ellison's work include the hero, the heroic journey, the heroic quest (as part of the journey) and obstacles found in the hero's journey.

The hero, in Ellison's work, is an especially problematic issue since his hero reads more like an anti-hero than an epic hero. For one, he is not of great import to the nation; he is neither named nor does the hope of his nation fall on his shoulders—at least not explicitly. Because the characterization of Ellison's narrator is so unlike that of classical epic heroes, it is difficult to make the connection, to see how Ellison draws upon such classic examples as Aeneas or Odysseus. Although, upon first glance, the narrator may not seem important because of his lack of strength, wealth and reputation, he is of great importance to the nation because his story will become the national story. His lack of name, although troubling in light of the great weight placed on names in classical epics, can also be seen as epic in that, because the story is a national narrative, the narrator stands for all Americans; he is an everyman figure rather than a specifically named citizen. Without a name, his lineage cannot be traced; therefore, his history and experiences become those of all Americans.

His heroic journey is less difficult to parse, especially if we realize that the hero journeys from the southern region of America to the northern—specifically Harlem, New York. Whereas classical epic examples span continents and time, Ellison's spans specific regions of the nation and various cultures found within those regions. Ellison complicates the epic journey most extremely through his inclusion of a psychological component. Secondary evidence of Ellison's scope

is in his hero's removal into his psyche. The psychological setting of the novel takes the place of the international one seen in classical examples.

As part of his journey, the hero also journeys toward something. For Ellison's hero, the something is identity. Since he remains nameless throughout the novel, a large part of his journey is meeting other people who try to impose identities upon him. These identities contend with, and do not often agree with, the identity the hero has for himself.

These run-ins with others form the base of the majority of obstacles the hero faces, and as such are quite literal—these people stand in the way of the hero's successful attainment of identity. For example, one of the most explicit literal obstacles is the hero's constant wrestling with the taboo of white womanhood. His desire to not be associated with white women, for fear of the possible punishments, hinders his ability to develop as a fully-formed hero. Other obstacles are metaphoric, as in his association of (white) masculinity and power. Because he assumes white men to be in control of the entire cultural system in America, he can not see white men as struggling with similar issues of invisibility as him.

To return to the first convention, that of hero, the journey, the quest toward identity, and the obstacles that stand in the way of this quest, all point to the narrator being a hero. Because of these three supplementary components, the narrator is able to fill the heroic role. He overcomes the obstacles to attain a sense of identity; through his journey north and inside of himself, he comes to the greatest sense of heroism found within the novel: the journey leads him to the

realization that invisibility is an experience shared by all Americans, not a punishment levied on African Americans by white society.

III. Undiscussed Epic Conventions

In addition to the hero, the heroic journey, the quest, and the obstacles, Ellison includes a multitude of other epic conventions. These include the use of verse, the supernatural, and the epic battle. These were not included in my discussion because I felt they were superficial and used by Ellison in a mostly straight-forward way. He did not play with them as much as he did the ones I listed above.

First, the use of verse comes out via the narrator's connection to his culture, and usually occurs in flashback or in his remembrance of a dream. Thus, it makes up secondary moments in the novel, not primary ones. Since the bulk of the novel is written in prose, I chose to focus on Ellison's use of prose as a challenge to the epic form. However, although I did not choose to look at Ellison's use of verse, an argument levied in Leon Forrest's "Luminosity from the Lower Frequencies" needs to be brought into this section. Whereas I see the use of verse to be quite superficial, Forrest sees it as Ellison's way of linking the narrator with a heritage and a culture. Second, he locates the narrator's recitations of blues and jazz as evidence of Ellison's didacticism; he wants the reader to realize that only through improvisation can the narrator be successful. Although a wonderful discussion of the verse form, Forrest's discussion, and those like it, did