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THE GRANDFATHER'S RIDDLE IN RALPH ELLISON'S

INVISIBLE MAN

JOSEPH F. TRIMMER

At the center of Ralph Ellison's Invisible Man is a riddle that is both a delightfully ambiguous joke, and a cruel and cryptic curse. The narrator begins his story by telling us about his grandfather who, on his deathbed, calling the family into his room to utter the following mystifying advice:

"Son, after I'm gone I want you to keep up the good fight. I never told you, but our life is a war and I have been a traitor all my born days, a spy in the enemy's country ever since I give up my gun back in the Reconstruction. Live with your head in the lion's mouth. I want you to overcome 'em with yeses, undermine 'em with grins, agree 'em to death and destruction, let 'em swoller you till they vomit or bust wide open." 1

The narrator and the rest of the children are rushed from the room and warned emphatically to forget what the old man has said. But the narrator admits that the incident has had a tremendous effect upon him, and he continues to puzzle over the meaning of the grandfather's words. In fact, those words so permeate the fabric of the novel, as Marcus Klein has suggested, the riddle defines every gambit the narrator makes.2 Most critics have commented on the importance of this riddle, but interestingly enough no one has made a systematic analysis of the series of solutions the narrator offers to the riddle in the Epilogue. 3 After a discussion of the language of the riddle and the way the riddle functions in the narrative, I will demonstrate how an understanding of these solutions provides an important key to the novel. The answer to the Sphinx's riddle was man and, like Oedipus, the narrator must struggle toward insight and knowledge until he begins to solve the riddle of his own humanity.

Though we discover later that the meaning of the riddle is much deeper than we first imagined, an initial reading of it produces some interesting ambiguities. Actually the riddle breaks into two parts. The first part is dominated by military metaphors and is built on the revelation that "our life is a war." The grandfather asserts that by conforming to the expectations of the enemy, he has betrayed his own people and their cause. The grandfather would seem to be saying that any new strategy must be responsible to the people: individual victory purchased at the price of group defeat is an act of perfidy. But the character of that new strategy is difficult to discern. At the end of the first section of the riddle the grandfather suggests that he was wrong to give up his gun in the Reconstruction. But when, in the second part of the riddle, the grandfather offers his solution, he suggests a strategy that seems more like sedition than open conflict. Living with one's head in the lion's mouth counsels constant confrontation with the enemy, but the method of that confrontation seems to indicate the actions of a spy: the enemy is to be overcome, undermined, and destroyed with "yea-saying," not guns. This duplicity will produce a kind of ingestion that will result in either expulsion or internal explosion.

The difficulty with this advice, as Jonathan Baumbach suggests, is that it is a parody of itself. 4 The grandfather has lived a life of conciliation that he terms treacherous, and yet he counsels what appears to be the same strategy as a way of avoiding treason. The narrator admits that "whenever things went well for me I remembered my grandfather and felt guilty and uncomfortable. And to make it worse, everyone loved me for it" (p. 14).

At the beginning of the novel the narrator chooses to overlook the ambiguities in the riddle; he interprets the riddle quite literally as counseling meekness and humility. Hoping to emulate Booker T. Washington, the narrator argues in his high school oration that "humility was the secret, indeed, the very essence of progress" (p. 14). The narrator does not really believe in this doctrine—"how could I, remembering my grandfather?—I only believed that it worked" (p. 14). But his belief in the ultimate utility of humility is so strong that he participates in the Battle Royal, drops his guard when he suspects that he is supposed to lose, and then, swallowing blood between sentences, yeses the White community some more in his speech. When this capitulation produces an apparent victory, a scholarship, the narrator feels "safe from my grandfather, whose deathbed curse usually spoiled my triumphs" (p. 26).

Here again is confusion and ambiguity. The narrator has followed the strategy advised in the riddle, and it has worked; yet the narrator interprets his actions as a victory over his grandfather, and suggests that the riddle has suddenly become a curse. In the dream sequence that follows, the grandfather introduces another difficulty when he refuses to laugh at the clowns. The clown figure is inevitably linked with the riddle throughout the novel because the strategy of yea-saying requires a mask.
But as we witness the appearance of mechanical men, dolls, puppets, and grinning statues, on the one hand, and the more stylized masks worn by men like Bledsoe and Rinehart, on the other, we realize, with Eleanor R. Wilner, that there is a difference between a fool and a clown. As Ellison has said, "masking is a play upon possibility . . . and the motives behind the mask are as numerous as the ambiguities the mask conceals." Unfortunately the narrator has fallen into the trap of believing in the mask: he sees neither the ambiguities nor the possibilities of the mask. The dream ends with the grandfather laughing at the fraudulent results produced by the narrator's actions; the narrator has played the clown but he is only a fool.

The results of this first experiment with yea-saying establish the pattern for the whole novel. As Baumbach points out, every time the narrator tries yessing them, "it is he, not 'em, who is victimized." Thus the narrator feels guilty for following his grandfather's advice but feels compelled to continue acting out the role designed for him in the hope of some ultimate victory: he remains confused, however, because his actions never produce that victory and because in his failure he detects the possibility of his own treachery; and above all he is tormented by his ignorance and the suspicion that his grandfather is laughing at his folly.

To add to the confusion the narrator continually confronts characters who seem to be following his grandfather's advice but who are personally repellant to him. Trueblood and Bledsoe are such characters. Each man is able to gain favors from the white community by confirming a racial stereotype: Trueblood enacts the role of black man as sexual beast, while Bledsoe plays the role of the obsequious "good nigger." The narrator is humiliated by Trueblood's willingness to cater to the sexual fantasies of white people, and he is shocked by the depth of Bledsoe's Machiavellian guile. Clearly neither character can be seen as fulfilling the spirit of the grandfather's advice because in the battle for human dignity each man's "yes" has meant the denial of humanity: Trueblood seems to exchange his dignity for a few groceries and a hundred dollar bill, while Bledsoe's quest for power means that "I'll have every Negro in the country hanging on tree limbs by morning if it means staying where I am'" (p. 110).

Yet each character is more of a riddle than it would first appear. Trueblood is not immune to the moral implications of his sin: he did not commit the sin for white approval. And, like the Ancient Mariner, he repeats the story of his perfidy as a kind of penitence. In fact, Raymond M. Olderman has successfully demonstrated that Trueblood's story is a microcosm of the novel, and, as such, foreshadows the conclusions of the novel:

Trueblood has looked upon what the world calls chaos, and in singing the Blues, he has intuitively recognized the ambivalences and contradictions in both himself and in his reality. . . . He has accepted both the nature of his own identity, his humanity, and the strongly similar nature of his reality, and has decided to have the courage to accept his responsibility, face it and continue to act, and it turns out pretty well for him. Of course, it is Trueblood's willful economic exploitation of his own sin that strikes the narrator as a betrayal of humanity. It is not so much the sin that repels as the candid assertions that in exchange for a story about his sin " . . . the white folks treat me fine'" (p. 52).

In similar fashion Bledsoe exhibits some positive qualities which, if properly used, would be extremely beneficial to the narrator. He tells the narrator that "power doesn't have to show off. Power is confident, self-assuring, self-starting and self-stopping, self-warming and self-justifying'" (pp. 109-10). But while Bledsoe seems to be counseling the inner assurance that comes with self-knowledge as the necessary prelude to self-power, he also suggests that the narrator " . . . let the white folk worry about pride and dignity—you learn where you are and get yourself power, influence, contacts with powerful and influential people.—then stay in the dark and use it!" (p. 111). These latter comments suggest why Bledsoe's advice does not square with the grandfather's. Bledsoe knows where he is, but he does not know who he is. He has accepted the mask of nonidentity and gains personal power as he enforces the nonidentity of his people: he does not worry about human dignity. As Ellen Horowitz has pointed out, Bledsoe "will say yes and aid white men in subjugating his people. The hero's grandfather, however, made no claim to rule." 10

The grandfather's strategy is further delineated when the narrator encounters the veteran. As his name suggests, the veteran has been through the racial war, but he has neither Trueblood's materialistic gain nor Bledsoe's power to show for his troubles. Like the grandfather, he is a weak and powerless man who, in spite of his wisdom, is victimized by the forces of power. But he tells the narrator to " . . . look beneath the surface . . . Play the game, but don't believe in it . . . Play the game but play it your own way . . . Learn how it operates, learn how you operate . . . " (p. 118).

The difference between Bledsoe and the veteran is obvious: Bledsoe sees the game as an already defined reality and he is simply interested in being an operator; the veteran sees the obvious realism in such a strategy, but he adds the ingredient of self-knowledge — "learn how you operate." The narrator must stop "asking everyone except myself questions which I, and only I, could answer" (p. 10). He must begin with himself: "Be your own father, young man" (p. 120). Rather than accept a stereotype of self, as Bledsoe and Trueblood have done, the narrator must create his own definition, and he must do it without the Mr. Nortons of the world. Once he does he will learn that " . . . the world is possibility if only you'll discover it" (p. 120).

Clearly there is irony in this assertion of possibility by a man who is being sent to Washington for a disease for which there is "'no cure.' " What kind of possibility is he talking about? What is the value of
self-definition and self-affirmation if they are powerless to prevent further victimization? Even the veteran admits that much of the narrator’s freedom ‘will have to be symbolic’” (p. 117). The answers to these questions “lie beneath the surface,” but for the moment the narrator is interested in the surface only. Rather than inspect the riddle of his own identity, he expects that his migration North will produce results if he is careful to be on time, smell good, and agree with whatever white men say.

Thus the narrator’s journey prepares us for another set of characters whose actions comment on the grandfather’s riddle. The first of these is Lucius Brockway who, as Richard Kostelanetz has suggested, “survives in the industrial system by embracing the existing authority and by having indispensable talents.”11 Brockway, like Bledsoe, has earned his position of power by “telling white folks how to think about the things I know about” (p. 128). It was Brockway who coined the slogan “‘If It’s Optic White, It’s the Right White’” (p. 165). Brockway’s yea-saying produces the destruction of Liberty Paints. In a sense, he has demonstrated the validity of the grandfather’s advice. He has allowed the factory to swallow him whole and it has busted wide open; and his activities in the cellar serve as a foreshadowing of the narrator’s own retreat into a hole at the conclusion of the novel. His ironic laughter in the midst of the explosion recalls the grandfather’s laughter. But the narrator gains nothing from his example. Brockway’s yea-saying has produced an explosion, but it has produced no meaningful victory for himself or his people.

Juxtaposed with Brockway is Brother Tarp, whose life has been characterized not by yea-saying but by his decision to say no. His decision cost him nineteen years on the chain gang and a bad leg. Tarp passes his leg chain on to the narrator because “... it’s got a heap of signifying wrapped up in it and it might help you remember what we’re really fighting against. I don’t think of it in terms of but two words, yes and no, but it signifies a heap more...” (p. 293). However, at this point in the narrative, both yes and no seem to add up to victimization: Brockway’s yes has meant destruction, not triumph, and Tarp’s no has meant brutalization, not nobility.

In expectation of a more meaningful and politically viable existence, the narrator joins the Brotherhood. But it soon becomes obvious that the change in allegiance produces no real change. He joins the Brotherhood, in part, to help the Mary Rambo of the world, but his first act as a member of the Brotherhood is to move out of Mary’s house, indeed out of Harlem. The narrator is like the grinning Negro 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. 242). He is tutored, reprogrammed, and disciplined until he learns to mouth the correct ideology. It is Tod Clifton, of course, who finally reveals to the narrator the absurdity of yessing the Brotherhood. The Sambo dolls he hawks signify that the ultimate effect of working for the Brotherhood is to be a puppet. Like the veteran, Tod pays for his ability to see beneath the surface. The decision to choose some other form of self-definition means having to plunge outside history, and with that plunge comes self-annihilation.

The death of Tod Clifton and the fiasco that results from his funeral make the narrator decide to be something other than a black puppet. For the first time he seizes upon his grandfather’s words as a weapon: ... I was ready to test his advice. ... I’d yes them till they puked and rolled in it. All they wanted from me was one belch of affirmation and I’d bellow it out loud. ... That was all anyone wanted of us, that we should be heard. ... only in one big optimistic chorus of yassuh, yassuh, yassuh! ... I’d become a supersensitive confirmer of their misconceptions. ... (P. 384)

Unfortunately, the narrator’s “yassuh,” like Brockway’s, produces an explosion. At first the narrator is pleased by the actions of his people in the Harlem riot, but this exhaltation is followed by hopelessness as he realizes they were not acting but reacting to the manipulations of the Brotherhood: “It was not suicide, but murder... And I had helped, had been a tool. ... By pretending to agree I had agreed, had made myself responsible for... all the others whom now the night was making ripe for death” (pp. 417-18). Like Bledsoe, the narrator has become merely an agent of subjugation and destruction.

Before the narrator decides to take his plunge outside history, he considers the symbolic significance of another pair of characters. Like Tarp and Brockway, Ras and Rinehart represent the positions of no and yes. Or, as William J. Schafer has suggested, “Ras offers the assurance of one undivided black identity and Rinehart the assurance of many shifting amoral identities—the faces of stability and flux.”12 The narrator’s dilemma is to discern the consequences of choosing one of these opposing strategies.

Ras, as Tod Clifton asserts, is “strong on the inside” because there is an appealing nobility in his categorical distrust of the white man. Yessing the white man produces, at best, a society of “good slaves.” Unfortunately, Ras’s no, like Tarp’s, produces no meaningful results. He is driven from Exhorter to Destroyer, but he destroys Harlem, not the white enemy. In the moment of his most dramatic visibility, the riot, he is revealed as a silly clown on a horse that “shot up the street leaping like Heigho, the goddam Silver” (p. 426). Ras is simply another victim of white exploitation.

The example of Rinehart is more of a riddle. As Ellison has said, “Rinehart’s role in the formal structure of the narrative is to suggest to the hero a mode of escape from Ras, and a means of applying, in yet another form, his grandfather’s cryptic advice” (S&A, p. 71). Indeed, William Goede has argued that Rinehart is “the ultimate incarnation of the grandfather’s political theory.”13 But this assertion is not so simple as it would appear. As the narrator learns by “looking through a glass darkly,” Rinehart possesses multiple identities because he yesses everybody’s misconceptions of him. In this way, Rinehart demonstrates the doctrine
of possibility enunciated by the veteran. There is ambiguity in this possibility, however, because Rinehart is Ellison’s “name for the personification of chaos” (S&A, p. 181). Rinehartism cannot be the final solution to the riddle because, as the narrator discovers, adopting Rinehart’s methodology leads to the destruction of Harlem and the betrayal of his people. And there are even deeper implications in the example of Rinehart. As Olderman points out, “behind Rinehart’s many masks, behind the invisible man, there is no identity.”14 Or as Earl H. Rovit has suggested, Rinehartism is the “wholesale exploitation of and surrender to chaos.”15 Comments like these suggest the accuracy of the narrator’s assertion that Rinehartism is finally not a positive energy but “‘cynicism’” (p. 381).

It would seem that none of the characters the narrator has encountered provides him with a satisfactory solution to his grandfather’s riddle. In the Epilogue the narrator begins to sort out all this conflicting evidence. At first he considers the possibility that perhaps “my grandfather had been wrong . . . or else things had changed too much since his day” (p. 426). He complains that “. . . in order to justify them, I had to take myself by the throat . . . I became ill of affirmation, of saying ‘yes’ against the nay-saying of my stomach—not to mention my brain” (pp. 432-33). But in his hibernation “. . . my mind revolved again and again back to my grandfather . . . Perhaps he hid his meaning deeper than I thought . . .” (p. 433).

The narrator then lists three possible interpretations of the riddle. Each interpretation is posed as a question, but the question is not answered; each question probes deeper beneath the surface to explore the nuances and subtleties latent in the riddle; but each new question does not cancel the validity of the question that precedes it. The result is therefore cumulative, and we suspect that the grandfather would say yes to all three possibilities.

The narrator first considers the possibility that the grandfather must have meant “that we were to affirm the principle on which the country was built and not the men . . . who did the violence . . . Did he mean to affirm the principle, which they themselves had dreamed into being out of the chaos and darkness of the feudal past, and which they had violated and compromised . . . even in their own corrupt minds?” (p. 433). This principle is clearly the American ideal of democracy, and Ellison admits that “for better or worse, whatever there is of value in Negro life is an American heritage and as such it must be preserved” (S&A, p. 40). In fact, “being a Negro American involves a willed . . . affirmation of self as against all outside pressures—an identification with the group as extended through the individual self which rejects all possibilities of escape that do not involve a basic re-suscitation of the original American ideals of social and political justice” (S&A, p. 137).

But the second possibility suggests the need to affirm the reality as well as the ideal. The narrator theorizes that the grandfather meant “‘that we had to take responsibility for all of it . . . because we, with the given circumstances of our origin, could only thus find transcendence’” (p. 433). The implication here is that the hope of realizing the American ideal lies with the black man precisely because he has been victimized. Because he has suffered and transcended that suffering, he has become a more human and humane American: “. . . we were older than they, in the sense of what it took to live in the world with others and . . . they had exhausted in us, some—not much, but some—of the human greed and smallness, yes, and the fear and superstition that had kept them running” (pp. 433-34). Such comments parallel Ellison’s assertion that as painful and as brutal as the reality of the black man’s experience can be, it is valuable because “it conditions him to deal with his life and with himself. Because it is his life and no mere abstraction in someone’s head. He must live it and try consciously to grasp its complexity until he can change it” (S&A, p. 120).

The third possibility is “‘that we should affirm the principle because we . . . were linked to all the others in the . . . world’” (p. 434). Here the narrator seems to be saying that affirmation accomplishes more than vindication or transcendence for the black man. The yes is finally a universal affirmation of humanity, and it is only the affirmation of that principle that will protect the human race from the Jacks and Nortons who dehumanize people into the tools of history making. The narrator goes on to say that if the Jacks and Nortons deny the principle in others, they destroy their own humanity. Likewise, if the black man fails to affirm the principle in others (including the Jacks and the Nortons) he is destroying himself. The narrator asks, “Weren’t we part of them as well as apart from them and subject to die when they died?” (p. 434).

With this last question the narrator ends his speculation on the grandfather’s riddle by saying that he cannot figure it out. But clearly he has solved at least part of the riddle. If the answer to the Sphinx’s riddle was man, and if, as Ellison has claimed, the grandfather’s riddle “represents the ambiguity of the past,” then it is entirely appropriate that the narrator outline the complex heritage which he must affirm if he is to understand his manhood (S&A, p. 70). His first solution deals with the importance of the American ideal for the black man, the second with the importance of the black experience, and the third with the importance of the life principle itself. By saying yes to these three heritages, by accepting the agony of his life as black American man, the narrator may begin the process of “‘creating the uncretated features of his face’” (p. 268).

It could be argued that these three interlocking solutions do not really solve the riddle; or to put the matter differently, the narrator seems to be solving a new riddle in a new language. The riddle is no longer seen in its original context; the context has changed from military to metaphysical, from political to philosophical, from economic to existential. But then this change is appropriate to what the narrator has learned about the meaning of experience. He does not want
“the freedom of a Rinehart or the power of a Jack, nor simply the freedom not to run” (p. 434). What he is after in solving his grandfather’s riddle is knowledge. Like his grandfather, the veteran, and Tod, the narrator has exchanged power for wisdom. In the process the narrator changes, as Ellison has pointed out, from a “would-be politician and rabble-rouser and orator to . . . a writer.” 16 The narrator has discovered that military-political-economic blueprints do not produce meaningful victories for the individual or his people. This discovery probably explains why Ellison says that the narrator “actually writes his grandfather’s memoirs.” 17 As the narrator concludes this history of his puzzlement, he realizes that those who insist on the value of blueprints are “all up there somewhere, making a mess of the world” (p. 431). His decision to try to solve the metaphysical-philosophical-existential riddle of his “hidden name and complex fate” does not mean that he has become an “irresponsible bastard.” As Ellison has said, the novel is a “memoir of a man who has gone through experience and now comes back and brings his message to the world. It’s a social act; it’s not resignation from society but an attempt to be useful.” 18 The narrator’s message is that meaningful victory comes not from social blueprints but from “making ourselves individuals. The conscience of a race is the gift of its individuals who see, evaluate, record . . . We create the race by creating ourselves . . .” 19 (p. 268).

From this perspective, one could argue that the solution to the novel’s riddle is the novel. It is a document that records and evaluates a man’s struggle to create himself. The narrator has lived with his head in the lion’s mouth and he has explored his own heart of darkness. As a result he has discovered that the solution to the riddle of self-creation begins with the affirmation of self and the complex heritage of that self, the heritage of being a black American man. Ellison has argued that “true novels, even when most pessimistic and bitter, arise out of an impulse to celebrate human life” (S&A, p. 121). The narrator’s memoir, while often pessimistic and bitter, is nevertheless finally a celebration. It celebrates, it affirms, it says yes, to the tragicomic wisdom that results from discovering what it means to be black, American, and human.

NOTES


3 Nick Aaron Ford, in a short note entitled “The Ambivalence of Ralph Ellison,” *Black World*, 20, No. 2 (1970), 5-9, lists the three solutions in the Epilogue. Ford’s main purpose is to demonstrate that the challenge of reading Ellison is caused by his ambivalence. The solutions are offered as one of several examples of that ambivalence.

4 “Nightmare of a Native Son: Ralph Ellison’s *Invisible Man*,” *Critique*, 6, No. 1 (1963), 49.


8 “Nightmare of a Native Son,” p. 49.


14 “Ralph Ellison’s Blues,” p. 155.


17 Ibid.

18 Ibid.

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