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Stereotypes and Social Types in Ellison’s
*Invisible Man*

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The literature of the first three decades of the twentieth century records directly and indirectly the rise of national society and the destruction of the local society. The very fact that so many of the most able writers of the so-called “lost generation” were ex-patriots could . . . be taken, not unfairly, as a direct product of the fact that while local forms of American community were being destroyed, the national community was too underdeveloped to re-incorporate the pieces. The artists were like refugees from destroyed communities.¹

A TWENTIETH-CENTURY American Negro who wanted to write a great American novel had to move into a role not readily available. And if he also wished to register a major social protest, his task was to convert tough stereotypes into new social types. These achievements are the index of Ralph Ellison’s triumph in *Invisible Man*, published in 1952.²

Race stereotypes, according to Weinberg’s *Social Problems in Our Time*, exhibit various characteristics. They exaggerate negative features of the minority group and use deprecatory nicknames for it. They ignore individual differences among minority group members, and if minority individuals have “majority group virtues,” these are somehow still interpreted as vices.

Minority group members’ disvalued traits are declared to be biologically determined and immutable. Majority group members’ faults which are supposed to typify members of minority groups

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¹ Revision of a paper read in the Race and Ethnic Groups section of the meeting of the Midwest Sociological Society, April, 1964.


will be overlooked or reinterpreted. Relatively tolerant members of the majority group, while giving little credence to exaggerated racial stereotypes, are still often prejudiced. Although race stereotypes will shift subtly and defensively as intergroup relations vary, stereotypes themselves are slow-changing and persistent. Kurt W. Back has shown how our students of race relations themselves have been rather accommodating to a long-segregated status quo.³

Orrin E. Klapp in *Heroes, Villains and Fools* puts stereotypes on a continuum with *social types*. The latter are collective representations which result from the impact of colorful personalities as well as imputation and abstraction by popular audiences. The three important kinds of social types, of course, are heroes, villains, and fools.⁴

Klapp doubts whether modern society could function without these social types, which he distinguishes from stereotypes. In general, he believes that social types are used with reasonable accuracy in contemporary social life. If the meaning of *stereotype* were extended to include accurate and revealing judgments arrived at by the use of popular concepts, Klapp would not object to its being synonymous with *social types*.⁵ Since this is not true, however, he defines *social types* as symbols which help us achieve insight into relationships in a social system. Stereotypes, on the other hand, keep people apart by depicting outgroup members inaccurately.⁶

What are the functions of social types which (Klapp claims) have a high degree of consensus, are more informal than roles, and are discoverable by studying popular language? Klapp outlines their functions as role discrimination, the defining and institutionalization of roles in complex and changing societies, professionalization, helping individuals to have useful self-images, exerting pressure and control through status modification and refinement, and reaching consensus in interpersonal relations and in society as a whole.⁷

Surprisingly, however, Klapp feels that our current hero types are not serving these functions adequately. Thus he expresses regret

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at the deterioration of the hero, the corruption of the hero, and the mocking of the hero.⁸ The nation's hero, villain, and fool types are no longer very distinguishable from each other because of the prevalence of determinism and democracy. Instead, we have such figures as the Good Joe, the Smart Operator, and the Playboy.⁹ Such blurred heroes lack the stature and clarity which they would need if they were to serve society as tragic protagonists.¹⁰

Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man* is both a social protest novel and a complex work of modern art. And since it has been a popular paper-backed reprint its relationship to racial stereotypes and social types merits investigation. While acknowledging the verisimilitude of many of our white-Negro stereotypes, regardless of causes or ideals, the novel is neither conservative apology nor crusading pamphlet.

In order to find white-Negro stereotypes we need not examine F.B.I. files on the Citizens' Councils, the Black Muslims, or psychiatric protocols. As a presumably liberal member of the majority group, John Fisher discussed our "Negro problem" recently in the Editor's Easy Chair column of *Harper's* magazine. Asserting that the N.A.A.C.P., the Urban League, and C.O.R.E. are too set in their ways as protest groups, Fisher claimed that American Negroes need a new kind of leadership and a fresh approach to our race problem. What American Negroes need, Fisher argued, is a "First Class Citizens' Council," to work for "full-scale participation, on easy and equal terms, in the ordinary operations of American society."¹¹

"Easier said than done," one might reply, recalling S. K. Weinberg's judgment that our Negroes' sufferings and deprivations of the last three hundred years have been incalculable. Even today we are faced with a stupendous task as we attempt to equalize job opportunities, improve Negroes' political participation, open up the housing market, and desegregate schools. Discrimination has been costing the country more in untapped earning power and services than the traffic should bear.¹²

And Fisher overlooked one source of leadership and action in his

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editorial. The source is art as exemplified by comedian Dick Gregory, actor Sidney Poitier, singer Marion Anderson, and writers like James Baldwin and Ralph Ellison, whose *Invisible Man* received the National Book Award in 1953. Desirable social change may well come about as much through instruments of empathy and the communication of feeling as through town planning, legislation, and community education projects. Everett C. Hughes has paid his respects in the *American Sociological Review* to James Baldwin and Alan Paton for their imaginative treatment of race relations.\(^{13}\)

Obviously these modes of action need not preclude or interfere with one another. A rich chapter is yet to be written, for example, on the role of the mass media in the civil rights revolution.\(^{14}\) Meanwhile, the examination of stereotypes can be helpful. Much can be learned by studying the Uncle Tom image as it helped organize sentiments involved in the Civil War and gradually changed into today's term of opprobrium for conservative Negroes.\(^{15}\)

Today, in Editor Fisher's view, the legal and political battles against racial discrimination are almost won. First class citizens' councils should be formed to end *de facto* discrimination by upgrading the civic and personal behavior of Negroes. To show the need for improving our Negroes Fisher describes the stereotyped fears that many white people have as the basis of their prejudice against Negroes.

Fisher says that numerous well-informed whites are worried about urban Negroes' high crime rates and resurgent "Black Nationalism," about the "deterioration of neighborhoods," when large numbers of Negroes move in; about the civic apathy of Negroes, e.g., lackadaisical voting behavior; and about the moral responsibility of Negro spouses and parents. For good measure, Fisher adds the "frustration reactions" of drunkenness, dope addiction, crimes of violence and gambling.\(^{16}\) He asks whether these fears which our white people have are rational or unreasonable prejudices. Are they groundless stereotypes or sensible generalizations?


\(^{14}\) See Norris Vitcheck, as told to Alfred Balk, "Confessions of a Block-Buster," *Saturday Evening Post*, July 14–21, 1962, p. 15.

\(^{15}\) For a discussion of the Uncle Tom and his white counterpart, the Segregationist, see Daniel C. Thompson's chapter, "Patterns of Race Relations Leadership," in *The Negro Leadership Class* (New York, 1963), p. 58.

Ralph Ellison takes up these questions in *Invisible Man*, though his style is not objective nor his method the analytic approach of sociologists of race relations. As a novelist he does not prescribe a specific for progress like Fisher’s first class citizens’ councils. He does use the first person singular of a twentieth-century Huck Finn moving *toward civilization*, from a small Southern town to a northern metropolis. Nowhere in his ultimately comic epic does Ellison evade or try to deny the stereotypes that Fisher spells out. Instead he takes artistic advantage of his peculiar opportunities as an American Negro. No doubt it is this traditional paradox that he invokes when he has his nameless hero claim to be in the Franklin and Edison tinkering tradition.¹⁷

Like heroes of those other twentieth-century liberals with provincial backgrounds, Camus and Tennessee Williams, Ellison’s hero “makes music with the bad air in the hole he has been forced to live in.” This trope celebrates the trumpeting of Louis Armstrong, protests against segregation, and states *Invisible Man’s* main “positive accent,” or countertheme. The theme is the adventure of self-discovery of a modern minority American which ends with a commitment “to the individual’s ability to rise out of the mass and achieve the possibility implicit in American society.”¹⁸ It is evoked by the emergence of a new, amorphous social type.

Instead of rejecting or suppressing “the violence of his days,” as the young 1940 Negro hero puts it, Ellison takes such material as given. In other words, he wrestles with stereotypes and social problems, converting them into symbols of the human condition.

If stereotyped thinking itself is a social problem as contemporary critics of school texts are suggesting and *Invisible Man* is a kind of counterstatement to the stereotypes of racial bigotry, the novel helps its readers understand some of the factors involved in ethnic group conflict. We see how irony can undermine inept social thinking and refresh the language of contemporary human relations.

The title of Ellison’s *Invisible Man* is meant both literally and symbolically, like Hawthorne’s *Scarlet Letter*. As the symbol is exploited it becomes more literal and actual. Minority group members tend to be invisible to the majority. Regardless of their numbers or

¹⁷ Ellison, op. cit., p. 11.
supposed inherited abilities they appear only when permitted. The majority group not only defines accomplishment but it controls opportunity. If majority group members fail to oppose this situation they will not perceive minority members accurately. Minority groups will also have peculiar views of the majority. John Griffin’s *Black Like Me* is a terrifying example of what happens to the human nature of people thus shut away from each other.\(^{19}\) Our whole society is revealed as a stereotype.

Kardiner and Ovesy in *The Mark of Oppression* restate the problem of our Negroes’ adaptation as a struggle against both discrimination and a negative self-reference in their social orientation. The self-esteem of Negroes suffers because too often they get a negative picture of themselves from the way other people behave toward them. Projective and compensatory reactions to this image are likely to be self-hatred, apathy, hedonism, living for the moment, and criminality.\(^ {20}\)

On Fisher’s bill of particulars there is also the charge that there is too much crime and violence among our increasingly Northern and urban colored people. This move to the city is the main plot line of *Invisible Man*, as the anonymous hero moves through life in these United States. Beginning in a small town in the South, he spends two years at a small Jim Crow college, works briefly in a factory, and assumes the role of a Communist agitator in Harlem. He becomes increasingly disillusioned with this career opportunity, and when it almost causes his death in a Harlem riot without advancing integration, he finally rejects it as another Jim Crow swindle.\(^ {21}\)

In violence *Invisible Man* is as rich as a Mike Hammer yarn, though its psychoanalytic percipience about such problems as controlling aggression under conditions of constant frustration recalls John Dollard’s *Caste and Class in a Southern Town*.\(^ {22}\) Nevertheless, it avoids the clinical approach and does not use Freudian terminology. And without recourse to polemic or the language of collective behavior the book has the historical and sociological effect


\(^{22}\) John Dollard, *Caste and Class in a Southern Town* (Garden City, N.Y., 1957)
of an N.A.A.C.P. publication. The mob scene at the end, in fact, is based on the Harlem race riot of the summer of 1943, though Ellison uses it as a revelatory climax.23

Continually frustrated in childhood, Kardiner and Ovesy assert, our lower class Negroes develop personalities “devoid of confidence in human relations” and “an eternal vigilance and distrust of others” as a defense maneuver.24 This reaction is a part of the “disturbances in family life of the Negro” in their psychodynamic inventory.

As if to illustrate this trait Ellison’s hero is an extremely mobile and unattached young man. He has no really intimate associations except for a brief interlude with Mary, a motherly Harlem acquaintance who shelters him when he leaves the hospital after an injury in a paint factory explosion. At the end of the book, too, our hero is alone, telling his story in a hideout under the sidewalks of New York. A striking and tragic aspect of the novel is the complete lack of romantic love. The hero’s father does not figure in the action, and dreams of his old slave grandfather have more effect on him. At one point he is urged by a shell-shocked Negro M.D. on a bus to “be your own father.” 25

Connoting yet surmounting the theme of stereotyped careerism and personal isolation, Louis Armstrong serves as a vital symbol of Ellison’s protagonist.26 His main vocation is that of an orator, and the only real job he holds is that of platform speaker and agitator, though he must also often play the prize fighter. A displaced Depression intellectual, he has no family business to enter, nor is he called to preach in a church.27 If such a man lost faith in the individual, what could he believe in?

The violent events in Invisible Man are many. Portrayed are our hero’s mugging and almost knifing a clumsy white pedestrian, his forced participation in a battle royal in a boxing ring in a Southern small town smoker, a riot in a brothel, being called nigger during his expulsion from a segregated college by its venal Negro president,
a fight with an old Uncle Tom machine tender in a New York paint factory, having to undergo shock treatment in a hospital, a street demonstration against the eviction of an old Harlem couple on a Depression winter day, a street fight between young Harlem Communists and Black Nationalists, the shooting of a young Negro street vendor by a policeman, the acrimonious expulsion of the hero from a Harlem cell of the Communist party, his hurling a spear at a mounted Black Nationalist leader during a race riot, and his final nightmare of being lynched by his powerful opponents: New England philanthropists, Uncle Toms, ordinary Southern bigots, Communists, and Black Nationalists. (In his dream they all merge into a threatening robot-man).

This bare sketch of the action of Invisible Man omits the development from the early battles, which are small and segregated, to the concluding riot which is interracial and involves all Harlem. In the early eviction demonstration the hero and the crowd insist on returning the old couple to their tenement. But in the climactic riot, recklessly engineered by the Communists for the sake of revolutionary disorder, he joins a group which urges people to leave their wretched tenement houses and burns them down.

These instances exhibit the dramatic richness of Invisible Man and on the level of social description, expose the complexities and conflicts that our country's race relations involve. Moreover, if this sounds outrageous, the potential purgative value of having this sort of social material uncovered is probably great. As Rose said in his section of a recent social problems text, "it is now known that minority members do not like being discriminated against and 'hate back.'"

Meanwhile the pace of social change, the pangs and possibilities of social mobility, and the problem of human reality, not to mention many of Fisher's stereotypes, are embodied in a variety of mistakes as to the hero's identity in the Rinehart sequence of the novel. To escape from an ugly Black Nationalist mob the hero puts on dark glasses and a Panama hat. In rapid succession he is then mistaken for a gambler, a hoodlum, an adulterer, and a fundamentalist minister, as he walks through the streets of Harlem.29

29 Ellison, Invisible Man, p. 430.
Besides political and economic stereotypes and the rugged realities they reflect, Ellison probes more “social” (or “biological”) stereotypes. If, by his literary frankness and concreteness, he illuminates the dark corners of the job market and politics, does he do anything in the area of sexual interaction?

Rose, following Myrdal, points out that the caste system is based on the systematic separation of the races, segregation or “Jim Crow.” It provides, first of all, that Negro men and white women should never have sex relations. Any such relations between white men and Negro women are illicit, with any children resulting classified as Negro. An elaborate “etiquette of race relations” should be followed, and Negroes (except for agriculture, sports, entertainment, and professions with segregated clienteles) should not have the same occupations as white people.30

Ellison has no more genteel reservations about sex than he has toward crime, violence, tenement living or revolutionary politics. He opens *Invisible Man* with a vision of his slave grandmother confessing that she loved her master, who gave her several sons. She also asserts that she loved freedom better, but she had no clear conception of freedom.31

At the smoker in the small Southern hotel the hero and his Negro classmates have to join the town gentry and ogle a naked white blonde dancer with an American flag tattooed around her navel.32 Then he must listen, horrified, to an old Negro sharecropper, Jim Trueblood, confessing how he committed incest with his daughter Mattie Lou one cold night.33 When he is being initiated into the Communist Party in a Manhattan penthouse he must dance with his attractive, sophisticated hostess, Emma. Apparently forgetting our hero’s presence Emma remarks to her fellow workers, “Don’t you think he should be a little blacker?”34 Emma is white.

In the ironic Sybil scene, planning revenge on the Communists, the protagonist is in bed with a drunken white woman he had met as an Uptown speaker on the Woman question. She insists on being seduced in such a stereotyped fashion that, though he plays the gentleman, he quickly loses interest in her.35

By thus cataloging and exposing stereotyped taboos Ellison per-

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30 Rose, *op. cit.*, p. 357.
forms the functions of sociologist and social therapist. He shows how we need authentic social types to replace warped stereotypes if interpersonal relations are to acquire meaning and reality in America.

Almost Joycean in its historical stylistic allusiveness, the novel is also quite modern in that it confronts the problem of individual identity as seen by an American existentialist. This problem transcends racial, sectional, and national boundaries. Literary criticism must also transcend boundaries. In his essay, "Society, Morality and the Novel," Ellison points out that discrimination has been as crippling for our literary criticism as it has in our political and social life. 

The question remains whether Invisible Man with its compelling and complex overtones presents the reader with stereotypes, social types, or both. That is, in Klapp's terms, whether the protagonist is a believable human representation which enables us to live effectively in society, or whether he is a distortion which will intensify segregation and suspicion. If Ellison succeeds in leaving such questions with the reader his novel has scored as polemic, I believe.

Our identification with the protagonist grows as he goes through progressive stages of disillusionment—first in his home town, then at the Jim Crow college, and finally in the Communist cell in Harlem. He becomes increasingly disengaged and free-floating, a kind of literary Louis Armstrong or "pure orator." Although our hero is out of a job, unattached and hiding under the sidewalks at the end of the book, the reader's attachment to him is intense. He has acquired reality; in Klapp's terms, he has become a social type. Is he hero, villain, or fool? If hero, is he only a Good Joe, a Smart Operator, or a Playboy? As developed by Ellison, the protagonist starts as a villainous conservative and he becomes a liberal hero through playing the revolutionary fool. Beginning by trying to play popular hero roles, he is reshaped by the norms of segregation. In the prophetic eyes of the shell-shocked Negro M.D., he is a mere mechanical man, blindly and cruelly actuated by unjust power, the power of a whole discriminatory society.

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36 I have discussed this in an unpublished study, "Our Own Underground Man: Ellison's American Existentialism."
38 See Klapp, op. cit., pp. 55, 71.
39 Ellison, Invisible Man, p. 86.
Types in Ellison’s Invisible Man

From accumulating disillusionment with half-truths and complete reversals, however, a sense of the complexity and the possibilities of reality dawns on the hero in the midst of the great Harlem riot of 1943.\(^{40}\) He realizes that *freedom is the recognition of possibility as well as necessity.*

By accepting his absurd American identity, which somehow is both public and private, both competitive and social, he no longer has to be a blindly driven careerist, and he no longer is completely invisible.\(^{41}\) He can begin seeing himself in mirrors. At peace with himself as the narrative leaves off he hides under a New York sidewalk garnering his strength for whatever adventures the future may hold.\(^{42}\)

Orrin Klapp is distressed in *Heroes, Villains and Fools* by what he finds is the decline and mockery of heroism in modern life, though he admits that this can have compensatory and critical functions. His general conclusion is that the American character has deteriorated and people have become alienated from positive values.\(^{43}\) He regrets our lack of value-consensus and the disappearance of villains and tragic heroes, even from our better literature. Klapp hopes that popular hero types like the “Smoothie” can be reformed. How does *Invisible Man* relate to these concerns?

Like Klapp’s book, *Invisible Man* is valuable as social analysis. Where Klapp is interested in interpreting our society broadly in terms of the morality of social types, or a morality involved in the construction of such types, Ellison is ultimately more concerned with the impact of social change on concrete and complex individual personalities.\(^{44}\) Where Klapp seeks general evaluations of our society, Ellison wants to heal the split in our national character caused by the invisibility of a large segment of our people. Negro Americans have not been seeing themselves reflected in our newspaper and television ads, in the books children must read in school, in the


\(^{41}\) Ellison, *Invisible Man*, pp. 403, 431, 483, 484. Cf. Klapp, *op. cit.*, p. 174, where he regretfully observes that the decline in the belief in free will and responsibility has robbed would-be tragic heroes of the chance to take credit for their actions.


\(^{43}\) Klapp, *op. cit.*, pp. 142 ff.

\(^{44}\) Ellison, “Society, Morality and the Novel,” in Hicks, *op. cit.*
profligate visual arts. Perhaps it is this practical orientation and the fact that, in recent years and weeks, great changes have been taking place in race relations that makes Ellison’s novel, for all its artistic concern with ugliness and horror, a more encouraging as well as a more therapeutic and hilarious work.45

45 See Joseph Kimes, “Changing Social Roles in the New South,” in Earl Raab, ed., American Race Relations Today (New York, 1962), pp. 62, 63: “Many circumstances point to the emergence of the ‘mass’ type of individual in the ‘new South.’ In this connection, regional change has crucial consequences. First, the individual ... urban or rural, is increasingly subjected to the national ... process of mass communication. He tends ... to live the traditional Southern way of life in the mass American manner. Second, the individual ... becomes ... isolated from the stable, inclusive primary groups of the old and disappearing sectional South. He emerges as a discrete, independent, rationalistic and self-directed creature. And third, the new regional individual is beginning to participate directly in the emerging mass patterns of social action.”

Cf. Time, January 3, 1964, p. 26: “The most striking aspect of the revolt ... is the change in ... Negroes themselves. The Invisible Man has now become ... visible—in bars, restaurants, boards of education, city commissions, civic committees, theaters and mixed social activities ... [and] in jobs. Says Mississippi’s N.A.A.C.P. President, Aaron Henry, ‘There has been a re-evaluation of our slave philosophy that permitted us to be satisfied with the leftovers at the back door rather than demand a full serving at the family dinner table.’” Even with the Selma to Montgomery march and the Voting Rights Act of 1965 accomplished, the apparent state of justice in Mississippi and Alabama suggests that the process is not yet complete.