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Carolyn A. Naylor

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Cross-Gender Significance of the Journey Motif in Selected Afro-American Fiction

by CAROLYN A. NAYLOR

SUSANNE HOWE suggests in *Wilhelm Meister and His English Kinsmen*, her book-length study of the apprenticeship novel, that “. . . no one can learn much of anything at home. Going somewhere is the thing.”¹ This idea prompted consideration of the frequency with which the journey motif appears in literature. Further exploration of the motif as it undergirds the theme of apprenticeship was prompted by feminist critic, Ellen Morgan, who suggests that the *bildungsroman* or apprenticeship novel is becoming “the most salient form for literature influenced by neo-feminism.”² Morgan believes that the theme of apprenticeship treated by women writers emerges as significantly different from the same theme treated by men. She acknowledges that the *bildungsroman* is traditionally a vehicle for male expression and though there have been female novels of apprenticeship in the past, the apprenticeship has been for marriage and for motherhood.³

According to Morgan, the specific turn that the *bildungsroman* takes when treated by women reflects that fact that: “power, beauty, fame are not the wellsprings or housing of dignity and worth, that the dignity and value of a person are to be found in the degree of inner growth achieved, in compassion, in the affirmation and acting out of humanistic values over and against the specifics of one’s condition.”⁴ In perusing the four texts (Zora Neale Hurston’s *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, Toni Morrison’s *Song of Solomon*, Richard Wright’s “The Man Who Lived Underground,” and Ralph Ellison’s *Invisible Man*) it becomes evident that there is a deeply spiritual, “holistic” element which characterizes the journey of the women, but not that of the men. This element suggests that “affirmation and acting out of humanistic values” is characteristic of the female vision in the *bildungsroman*. The key to the difference appears to be not only the struggle to know a female self, but also to know, internally and externally, a male self.

1. Susanne Howe, *Wilhelm Meister and His English Kinsmen* (New York: Columbia Univ. Press, 1930), p. 1. The journey motif is grounded in literary history of the picaresque tradition, which informed the initial thinking for this study.

2. Ellen Morgan, “Humanbecoming: Form and Focus in the Neo-Feminist Novel,” in *Images of Women in Fiction: Feminist Perspectives*, ed. Susan Koppelman Cornillon (Bowling Green, Ohio: Bowling Green Univ. Popular Press, 1972), p. 185.

3. Morgan, p. 184.

4. Morgan, p. 186.

One, therefore, must consider the issue of androgyny. In Janie, Hurston seems to deal unconsciously with the idea. Toni Morrison's development of Pilate seems a much more conscious, though unstated, inclusion of the androgynous principle. In Fred Daniels and in the *Invisible Man*, there is an absence of the "affirmation and acting out of humanistic values" and there is an absence of the female principle as a balancing, harmonizing entity. The idea of androgyny used in this paper is meant primarily to suggest one means of explaining the unity evident in the female psyche; it is meant to suggest inclusiveness where male and female retain their innate identities, but where each can accept the characteristics of one in the other, and where each can accept the influence of one on the other.

At this point, one must distinguish between the words "female/femininity" and "male/masculinity." "Female" and "male" are innate, essential characteristics of the two sexes. "Femininity" and "masculinity" define those superficial characteristics that mask the points of merger between the two sexes. For example, docility, passivity, and frivolity are considered "feminine." Strength, bravery, and seriousness are defined as "masculine."

Thus, the foundation for this paper is based on the idea of the journey motif as it undergirds the theme of the *bildungsroman* as a vehicle for self-exploration, and of androgyny as it symbolizes the healing, affirming, and humanizing of self and of others. The choice of authors is based on the fact that Hurston, Morrison, Wright, and Ellison rank with the best of 20th-century Afro-American and American writers. They each develop the journey motif, which is common in Afro-American literature, with new insight.

The significance of the journey motif is established at the very beginning of Zora Neale Hurston's novel, *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, as she prepares the reader for Janie's return to a hostile community after a long and (by community standards) questionable absence. The equation of "ships at a distance" with unrealized human wishes and dreams that are eventually "mocked to death by time" subtly establishes the psychological distance between Janie, who left to pursue her dream, and the jealous townspeople, who lacked the courage to do the same. Janie returns after several years and using flashbacks tells her story to her best friend, Phoeby.⁵

Janie's story begins with her highly developed sense of the natural and physical world around her. Hers is an innate understanding of the female receptivity implicit in unfolding spring blossoms and the mystery of emerging spring causes her to pause in her chores and to daydream: "She saw a dust-bearing bee sink into the sanctum of a bloom; the thou-

5. Zora Neale Hurston, *Their Eyes Were Watching God* (Greenwich, Conn.: Fawcett, 1965), p. 5. All further references to this work appear in the text.

sand sister-calyxes arch to meet the love embrace and the ecstatic shiver of the tree from root to tiniest branch creaming in every blossom and frothing with delight. So this was a marriage! She had been summoned to behold a revelation" (p. 13). Janie's consciousness is heightened as a result of this "revelation" and answers to the What? How? Why? of the world around her begin to emerge. But she has no answer to the specific question concerning her own relationship to the whole until through "pollinated air she saw a glorious being coming up the road" (p. 14). This "glorious" being is a local ne'er-do-well, whom Janie, caught in the throes of spring fever, allows to kiss her.

Janie's grandmother, detecting danger in the girl's awakening, promptly arranges a "proper" marriage to Logan Killicks, an older, propertied man. Janie struggles to actualize the revelation she has experienced under the pear tree, but Killicks' narrow, utilitarian view of women and of marriage soon go against her natural instinct. She cannot resonate with Logan because he offers her only material goods, and her journey begins in earnest when she leaves him for Jody Sparks.

Janie's decision to go with Sparks is based on her feeling that "he spoke for far horizon . . . for change and chance" (p. 28). In other words, he "spoke" for personal growth beyond that which she could realize in her relationship with Killicks. Janie, in pursuit of her vision, marries Jody. There is no further mention of Killicks, not even mention of a "legitimate" divorce, and the temptation is to see this omission as a flaw in the novel. More to the point is the possibility that this "flaw" places Janie outside the norm of institutional and societal judgment and is a foreshadowing of her eventual realization of total personal freedom.

Jody Sparks, however, considers his woman/wife as property. She is part of the goods amassed as testament to his masculine ability and her relationship with him is no better than the one she had with Logan. Though Janie remains in the marriage with Sparks, the years

. . . took all the fight out of [her] face. For a while she thought it was gone from her soul. No matter what Jody did, she said nothing. She learned how to talk some and leave some. She was a rut in the road. Plenty of life beneath the surface but it was kept beaten down by the wheels. Sometimes she stuck [sic] out into the future, imagining her life different from what it was. But mostly she lived between her head and her heels, with her emotional disturbances like shade patterns in the woods—come and gone with the sun. She got nothing from Jody except what money could buy, and she was giving away what she didn't value.⁶

6. Hurston, p. 66. This quotation verifies my opinion that *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, though not in the neo-feminist tradition because it was published in 1937, qualifies as a novel written in the "lyric" mode. See Joanna Russ, "What Can A Heroine Do? or Why Women Can't Write," in *Images of Women in Fiction: Feminist Perspectives* (Bowling Green, Ohio: Bowling Green Univ. Press, 1972), p. 12. Russ describes "lyric" as "the organization of discrete elements (images, events, scenes, passages, words . . .) around an unspoken thematic or emotional center" (emphasis is Russ's). Hurston attempts throughout the novel to locate this emotional or invisible center in Janie. It is interesting that Janie's inability to articulate the feelings at her own emotional center drives her first to silence, then to a split sense of self. See also Tillie Olsen's essay, "Silences: When Writers Don't Write," in *Images*.

The image of the road appears at a crucial point in the description and, like the ship mentioned earlier, repeats the journey motif. Janie is a "rut in the road," but she is not without life which is symbolically "beneath the surface." Janie is caught in a period of stasis, and becomes conscious of a split in herself. In becoming "two" people—the shadow of herself tending the terminally-ill Jody and her real self, still in resonance with nature—she unknowingly preserves herself in order to continue her journey after Jody's death. Her "true," female self is not overwhelmed by Jody's hard, oppressive, masculine acquisitiveness.

The female self which Janie claimed under her grandmother's pear tree finds a male counterpart in Tea Cake, a man twelve years her junior, who comes into her life after Jody's death. Janie is stereotypically viewed by the townspeople as the older rich widow, when, in fact, she is free of age and material classification in her own mind. Tea Cake's arrival provides the opportunity for the third and last stage in Janie's journey to self-realization. Disregarding the gossip and the dire predictions, she leaves with Tea Cake and, in so doing, liberates herself to claim true love and to pursue her vision. She leaves behind her "respectability" and she leaves behind her security, which is Jody's legacy. In exchange, she embraces the uncertain life of the road, for she and Tea Cake become migrant workers. Janie has finally found a "bee for her blossom."

Janie insists on realizing her vision of a harmonious, balanced, compatible relationship with a man. Such a relationship calls for her to value her own worth and that of others. Janie requires a similar consciousness in her man. Neither Logan nor Jody is capable of this consciousness. Thus, it is not enough for her to have had from Logan the "onliest organ" among the Black folks in town; nor is it enough to have been established by Jody as the "bell cow" (the highest woman in the community's social hierarchy). Janie resists giving up her sense of worth to fit a stereotyped view of women as mindless beings easily pacified by "things" and by social status.

Unlike her first two relationships, Janie's marriage to Tea Cake becomes an uncertain but dynamic entity, for he allows her to realize her vision. However, tragedy strikes and Tea Cake, bitten by a rabid dog while saving Janie from drowning in a flood, grows increasingly insane. As he deteriorates, it becomes clear that she must kill him or he will kill her. The irony of his death at her hands elevates the story above the level of mere romance, and allows the reader to experience the culmination of Janie's initial insight about relationships in the natural world and the place of human relationships in this world. The final image of Tea Cake "with the sun for a shawl" (p. 159) is the mature Janie's understanding that she and Tea Cake were indeed matched, an interpretation which suggests that Hurston probably had in mind the mythological idea of the sun as male and the earth as female.

It is significant that Hurston does not have Janie explore personal validation outside of marriage, though it seems to be understood that the "completed" Janie will not remarry after Tea Cake's death. Janie's need for the balance suggested by marriage is based on her innate understanding of the male/female pole, of its reflection in the natural world and of its potential to foster compatibility in the social world.

Janie's journey is a circle. After Tea Cake's death, she returns home. She is clad in a workshirt and muddy overalls, metaphors for her involvement in the harsh, often destructive man's world. She has not been objectified on a pedestal, but has worked hand-to-hand with Tea Cake earning a living. She has learned to use a gun and, mastering it, in self-preservation has used it to kill the person she most values. Her beautiful hair, which had been the subject of so much strife between Jody and her, swings carelessly behind her, a metaphor for her unbroken womanly spirit. She has known freedom of a kind not available to those who are reluctant to test social norms and her journey into personhood is completed because she has sought and successfully internalized an understanding of female and male as part of the same continuum.

The impetus for Pilate's journey grows directly from the racial confrontation involving theft of land from her father, by white people, and from a subsequent confrontation with her brother involving money.⁷ Pilate begins her wanderings at this point, but is forced to continue them for many years because she discovers that she is "different." She has been born without a navel and as she grows older and is exposed to people, especially men, she comes to understand just how different she is:

They [men] froze at the sight of that belly that looked like a back; became limp even, or cold, if she happened to undress completely and walked straight toward them, showing them, deliberately, a stomach as blind as knee. . . .

It isolated her. Already without family, she was further isolated from her people, for . . . every other resource was denied her: partnership in marriage, confessional friendship, and communal religion. Men frowned, women whispered and shoved their children behind them. (p. 149)

Her journey becomes a means of protecting herself from derision and from ostracism and, as she moves around, she attempts to comprehend the abstract world and, like Janie, her relationship to it:

Although she was hampered by huge ignorances, but not in any way unintelligent, when she realized what her situation in the world was and would probably always be she threw away every assumption she had learned and began at zero. First off, she cut her hair. . . . Then she tackled the problem of trying to decide how she wanted to live and what was valuable to her. When am I happy and when am I sad and what is the difference? What do I need to know to stay alive? What is true in the world? (p. 149)

7. Toni Morrison, *Song of Solomon* (New York: Signet, New American Library, 1978), pp. 166-173. All further references to this work appear in the text.

She relinquished the idea of ever again having a relationship with a man comparable to that she had with her young, innocent first lover and the father of her daughter, Reba; she now begins to manifest those androgynous features that distinguish her throughout the story. When Pilate crops her hair, she embraces the first of many external characteristics that reflect what she already considers to be her basic difference. Nothing about Pilate's physical appearance measures up to the norm by which women are judged. Unlike the earrings worn by most women, Pilate's one earring is utilitarian, as well as ornamental. It is like a covenantal ark, for it contains in it a slip of paper bearing her name, a biblical man's name. Nevertheless, Pilate is deeply, essentially female (as is Janie), but she is not bound by the stereotypical definition of "feminine."

Pilate's journey covers over 20 years, coming to an end only when Reba has a child. She and Reba had been happy in their nomadic life, but the birth of Reba's daughter, Hagar, demands stability and "Pilate decided to find her brother, if he was still alive, for the child, Hagar, needed family, people, a life very different from what she and Reba could offer . . ." (p. 151). Pilate finds her brother, Macon; he is a cruel, materialistic, unforgiving man and the breach between them which occurred after the murder of their father is never healed, but Pilate forces him to reckon with her.

Pilate is a spiritualist, a mid-wife/healer, and she becomes a surrogate mother/nurturer to Milkman, her brother's son. But Pilate is also a bootlegger, for having been *forced* to be an outcast, she *decides* to be an outlaw. The female avocation reveals Pilate's complexity; the male vocation reveals her independence. Milkman, in spite of his father's warning to avoid Pilate because she is "queer" and outside the law, sets out to find her: "They [Milkman and his friend Guitar] found her sitting wide-legged in a long-sleeved, long-skirted black dress. Her hair was wrapped in black too, and from a distance, all they could really see beneath her face was the bright orange she was peeling. She was all angles . . . knees mostly, and elbows. One foot pointed east and one pointed west" (p. 36).

The relationship between Milkman and Pilate is one of constant flux, but her concern for him is the means by which he is finally humanized and redeemed. Milkman's humanity has been seriously stunted by his father's brutality and by his own mother's ineffectuality. His relationships with women are hardly ideal. He sees his sisters as extensions of his mother and has largely used them to further his own domestic comfort—beyond that, he ignores them. His relationship with Hagar, Pilate's granddaughter, is destructive to both of them. Recognition of Hagar's lack of identity underscores the same lack of identity in himself and they threaten to destroy one another.

Pilate, for all her wisdom, is not perfect. One of the most disturbing

notes in the story is her lack of perception concerning Hagar. Pilate loves her granddaughter deeply, but is unable to do for her what she does for Milkman. Though Pilate is, as mentioned above, deeply female, she has no concern for the feminine. Having discarded feminine things as useless at the beginning of her journey, they cease to exist for her. Hagar's tragedy is that these things *do* exist for her; they finally become her only reality and she is destroyed as a result.

As surrogate mother, Pilate rescues Milkman from a life as his father's pawn, and as a womanizer, and from the life of violence Guitar comes to represent. The story Pilate shares of her early life opens up possibilities for Milkman that he had never considered. It is at this point in the story that Milkman undertakes his own journey, which strengthens the psychological and spiritual bond that has been established between Pilate and him. Milkman's journey covers a shorter period, but it is as essential as Pilate's.

Though Milkman's journey is initially undertaken for monetary gain, he soon understands the quality of his personal, family, and racial history. Pilate's actual and symbolic vision of freedom, presented in the metaphor of flight which permeates the book, is the means by which Milkman is ultimately freed from family and personal limitations. Pilate teaches him to see, to feel; she frees him to fly. As Milkman journeys into knowledge, he, too, must relinquish the symbols valued by society as indicators of self-worth such as his fine watch, expensive shoes, tailored clothes. Finally, in spite of sexual and age differences, Pilate and Milkman become one, representing opposite ends of the same continuum, for her journey and his journey become spiritually synonymous.

Though Milkman is hunted by Guitar, once his best friend, he risks his life to share his discoveries about the family history with Pilate. As they stand together on a precipice in Virginia sharing a brief moment of triumph, Pilate is shot by Guitar. With Milkman's help, she has completed her journey. Pilate, the one person in the story who has loved to the extent of her human capacity, says, "I wish I'd a knowed more people. I would of loved 'em all. If I'd a knowed more, I would a loved more" (p. 340). And Milkman's journey into personhood culminates in his understanding of Pilate's worth. "There must be another one like you," he whispered to her. "There's got to be at least one more woman like you" (p. 340).

Pilate's journey ends with her need to incorporate more people into her vision of love. Hers has been an odd, offbeat life with many failures. Yet Pilate's failures are countered by her triumphant command of her own life with its female/male balance and her rejection of societal definition. Symbolically, Milkman occupies the same position in her life that Tea Cake occupies in Janie's. Though Pilate and Milkman are blood relations, they have connected spiritually and both have been freed by Pilate's vision. Again, it seems that the androgynous ideal is

realized in a woman and that the value of her journey is finalized in her ability to embrace and include the young male.

In exploring the journey motif across gender lines, it becomes apparent that a different consciousness is operative in the fiction written by men. As with the women, the journey is often involuntary since the protagonist is forced by circumstances to move, but an organic relationship between person and unfolding events never develops. Thus, the characters move from experience to experience, but never internalize them in a coherent way. They remain at bay in a social/political world which regards them as expendable.

Fred Daniels, the protagonist in Richard Wright's story, "The Man Who Lived Underground," begins his journey into the underworld after the police have beat a confession out of him. His is an adversary relationship with the political, social, and economic forces which dominate the upperworld. Fred's journey is into hell as he slips through a manhole into a rain-swollen sewer. One senses immediately that he has slipped into a trap because the forces below ground are as virulent as those above for he is literally and symbolically in the world of the dead:

He went forward for about a quarter of an hour, wading aimlessly. . . . Then he stopped, his eyes fixed and intent. . . . A strangely familiar image attracted and repelled him. Lit by the yellow stems from another manhole cover was a tiny nude body of a baby snagged by debris and half-submerged in water. Thinking that the baby was alive, he moved impulsively to save it, but his roused feelings told him that it was dead, cold, nothing, the same nothingness he had felt while watching the men and women singing in the church. Water blossomed about the tiny legs, the tiny arms, the tiny head, and rushed onward. The eyes were closed, as though in sleep; the fists were clenched, as though in protest; and the mouth gaped black in a soundless cry.⁸

The extent of Fred's problem is revealed in the fact that the dead baby and the living church people symbolized "nothingness" to him.

He is beneath the "real" world; a movie house, a mortuary, a furnace room are bridges between this world and the underworld. But since he is unable to assimilate their meanings in relation to himself, they become way stations on his journey and symbols of his estrangement. As he travels, he attempts to "humanize" the world he encounters, but the degree to which he is already depersonalized is revealed by the items he initially steals: a radio, typewriter, tool chest, a meat cleaver. He later robs the safe in a jewelry store, taking money, diamonds, gold watches, rings.

As is the case with Janie and Pilate, Fred must question and then decide his relationship to the world at large. He stands in a room that opens off from the main sewer, listening to the church members singing a hymn, "Glad, glad, glad, oh, so glad / I got Jesus in my soul" (p. 142). The hymn links him to the essence of the Afro-American religious

8. Richard Wright, "The Man Who Lived Underground," in *Black Voices*, ed. Abraham Chapman (New York: New American Library, 1968), p. 119. All further references to this work appear in the text.

experience, but it does not offer him solace or spiritual continuity. Instead, he experiences a deep sense of guilt:

He was now in possession of the feeling that had gripped him when he had first come into the underground. It came to him in a series of questions: Why was this sense of guilt so seemingly innate, so easy to come by, to think, to feel, so verily physical? It seemed that when one felt this guilt one was retracing in one's feelings a faint pattern designed long before; it seemed that one was always trying to remember a gigantic shock that had left a haunting impression upon one's body which one could not forget or shake off, but which had been forgotten by the conscious mind, creating in one's life a state of eternal anxiety. (p. 143)

His questions raised the issue of personal and cosmic guilt; the "state of eternal anxiety" reveals his deep-rooted alienation from himself and from the world.

The guilt he feels is the key to the difference between his journey and the journeys of Janie and Pilate. Fred has fled underground to escape police brutality, but he is not a criminal; he is not guilty. To the degree that he has internalized unearned guilt, he reveals an intrinsic lack of self-knowledge and ambivalence about his self-worth. Thus, a split in his consciousness becomes evident.⁹ There is a significant difference between the split Fred experiences and that Janie experiences. It is obvious that Janie does not internalize Jody's assessment of her. In her split she never loses touch with her whole self; rather, the physical part of her goes through the motions of survival, while the other, spiritual self enters a holding pattern. Likewise, Pilate exhibits the same ability to "go through the motions" while saving her "essential" self. As Fred's journey progresses, however, he legitimizes the policemen's assessment of him; he becomes a thief and, symbolically, a murderer, for the night watchman at the jewelry store is accused of robbing the safe and commits suicide in desperation. Fred watches and does nothing.

In a brilliantly conceived ending, Wright continues to develop the theme of the alienated self. Fred regresses from a split in which his two adult selves are in conflict over the issues of guilt and anxiety to a state where he is first an animal and then a child. In the animal state, fear dominates him and the split occurs between his mind and his body. He feels as if he has lost control:

. . . fear claimed him completely; yet it was not a fear of the police or of people, but a cold dread at the thought of the actions he knew he would perform if he went into that cruel sunshine. His mind said no; his body said yes; and his mind could not understand his feelings. A low whine broke from him and he was in the act of uncoiling. . . . Like a frantic cat clutching a rag, he clung to the steel prongs and heaved his shoulder against the cover and pushed it off halfway. (p. 147)

9. W. E. B. DuBois in his classic study, *The Souls of Black Folk* (New York: Fawcett, 1961), pp. 16-17, discusses the phenomenon of "double-consciousness" in the American Negro. It is my opinion that this "double" or split consciousness is a psychological "given" and surfaces in myriad guises in different characters in Afro-American fiction.

Once more in the upperworld, it is clear that Fred needs to test his reality against the reality of the world. He has stolen the goods most symbolic of wealth and power in white society and has stolen for the sheer excitement of doing so. Therefore, flaunting wealth and power are not important to him. He knows he has transcended the mores of the marketplace in not stealing for personal gain, but, unlike Janie and Pilate, he is unable to internalize the significance of this personal revelation about himself. He, therefore, seeks the policemen who beat him to share with them his new-found knowledge. His regression to a child-like state is tragically revealed:

"I was down in the basement," he began in a childlike tone as though repeating a lesson learned by heart; "and I went into a movie. . . ." His voice failed. He was getting ahead of his story. First, he ought to tell them about the singing in the church, but what words could he use? He looked at them appealingly. "I went into a shop and took a sackful of money and diamonds and watches and rings . . . I didn't steal 'em; I'll give 'em all back. I just took 'em to play with. . . ." (p. 153)

The policemen kill Fred Daniels as he attempts to lead them to his underground room. His journey ends on a bleak and tragic note as he sinks beneath the water of the sewer.

The difference between the journey undertaken by the men and that undertaken by the women is immediately discernible in the hard, brutal masculine world of overt confrontation with white power. Richard Wright's primary focus is on the need of the Black man to establish and maintain his identity and his autonomy in a world whose only purpose seems to be to kill him. Thus, Fred Daniels' world is one totally devoid of the female presence, except in a casual reference to his wife and in the powerful dream sequence when he, temporarily assuming the Christ-like ability to walk on water, attempts to rescue a drowning woman. Wright has revealed a world where the opportunity to grow into a better self is thwarted by relentless forces which insist on their own destructive reality. Fred is faced with constant, universal erosion of his manhood. There is no female presence to provide the balance against which he could measure and restore his potential for humanity. He is not afforded a moment of respite to internalize his experiences and to heal himself.

In the fiction by women, the brutal world is definitely present, but as a backdrop against which the action unfolds. The force of this world is not denied; it has an impact on the female just as it does on the male. The central issue for both is identity. The women must deal with the realization that cosmetic goods, domestic and social status cannot define them; Fred must deal with the fact that power and dominance cannot define him. He never fully learns this.

It must be noted that violence is as dominant in the landscape of *Song of Solomon* as it is in "The Man Who Lived Underground." One example appears in the careful delineation of the masculine world of power and violence in the portrait of Guitar and the vigilante group, the Seven

Days. But, as mentioned earlier, Pilate's humanizing influence on Milkman steers him away from the group and brings them both to transcendence.

On one level, Ralph Ellison's novel, *Invisible Man*, seems not as grim as "The Man Who Lived Underground." Yet the nameless protagonist of this story also undertakes a journey that leads him through a violent, aggressive upperworld to a depersonalized, barren underworld. His journey is a longer, more experiential one and the realization of self-knowledge is the crucial issue for him, too.

The Invisible Man's journey commences when he is expelled by the president from a southern Black college. He goes to New York City with a briefcase filled with what he believes to be letters of recommendation, for the president has led him to believe that his is a temporary suspension. The letters actually warn the white, corporate heads, who are friends of the school, not to hire him. There emerges at this point a major gap between what the Invisible Man knows about himself and what the reader knows about him. This ironic gap never closes because the momentum of the story depends on the reader remaining at least one step ahead of the character, who is buffeted at every turn, but never learns to piece the components of past experience together for future use. His innocence/ignorance blind him to the devious reality of the world, yet he attempts to survive in a political world where the ability to "read" the past is a minimum requirement.

In the most telling and significant stage of his journey to the underworld, the Invisible Man passes through an area of the city presided over by Rinehart, who never appears in the story, but is a powerful, chameleon-like presence. Rinehart's actual invisibility prefigures the Invisible Man's symbolic invisibility. Rinehart is a pimp, a numbers runner, a con man, a preacher. The Invisible Man, in donning dark glasses and a dapper white hat, is constantly mistaken for him. The Invisible Man has a brief moment of concern and questions the relationship between appearance and identity: "It was as though by dressing and walking in a certain way I had enlisted in a fraternity in which I was recognized at a glance—not by features, but by clothes, by uniform, by gait. But this gave rise to another uncertainty. I was not a zoot-suiter, but a kind of politician. Or was I?"¹⁰ The protagonist is nowhere near consideration of the intrinsic questions regarding identity because he has maintained throughout the story a sense of himself as an American. He says at one point, "We are all Americans, all of us, whether black or white . . . Americans" (p. 415). He believes that in time the American system will become enlightened enough to include him, but he has not learned his history. There is irony in his tentative identification of him-

10. Ralph Ellison, *Invisible Man* (New York: New American Library, 1952), p. 419. All further references to this work appear in the text.

self as a politician, perhaps the most questionable of all identities. Next, he fails to understand that the zoot-suiters' clothing is a political statement and that the zoot-suiters are potentially more qualified to make political statements than he. Lastly, he fails to see that, in the eyes of the system, he *and* the zoot-suiters are all outsiders.

From the beginning of the story to the end, the Invisible Man stands outside of his personal and racial history as an Afro-American man. Though the evidence gathers from the very beginning to suggest that his personal and racial history is the only valid history he can claim, he persists in his dream of inclusion. In reality he is split from his corporal self, his historical self, and his communal self. He denies his body in accepting invisibility. He denies his history in assuming that the American Dream includes him. He denies his communal self when, in disguise, he visits his familiar hangouts in Harlem only to find out that he is no longer known.

To accept invisibility as a self statement is comparable to Fred Daniels validating a negative statement about himself by becoming a thief. The Invisible Man's journey brings him to the underground where he lives, doubting his own substance, accepting society's assessment of himself:

I am an invisible man. . . . I am invisible, understand, simply because people refuse to see me. . . .

I am not complaining, nor am I protesting either. It is sometimes advantageous to be unseen, although it is most often rather wearing on the nerves. Then, too, you're constantly being bumped against by those of poor vision. Or again, you often doubt if you really exist. . . . It's when you feel like this that, out of resentment, you begin to bump people back. . . . You ache with the need to convince yourself that you do exist in the real world, that you're a part of all the sound and anguish, and you strike out with your fists, you curse and you swear to make them recognize you. And, alas, it's seldom successful. (pp. 7-8)

The Invisible Man does not understand that existence in the "real world" begins with an attempt to establish a sense of self. He does not know that to react to someone else's reaction to him is to constantly diminish one's self and one's control.

Having first accepted his invisibility and gone underground, the protagonist *then* attempts to assess and claim responsibility for his life. But, in so doing, he accepts pathology or sickness as his reality:

I'm not blaming anyone for this state of affairs, mind you; nor merely crying *mea culpa*. The fact is that you carry part of your sickness within you, at least I do as an invisible man. I carried my sickness and though for a long time I tried to place it in the outside world, the attempt to write it down shows me that at least half of it lay within me. . . . You go along for years knowing something is wrong, then suddenly you discover that you're transparent as air. At first you tell yourself that it's all a dirty joke, or that it's due to the "political situation." But deep down you come to suspect that you've yourself to blame. . . . (pp. 497-498)

Unlike Fred Daniels, the underground offers the Invisible Man a period of relief during which he can think about his situation. He is not

annihilated, yet as he struggles in isolation, the absence of others to support him is glaringly evident. Like Fred Daniels, this character must deal with his total lack of power in a world where his worth as a man—ultimately as an American—is predicated on power that he will never have.

The journey of the women, Janie and Pilate, forces them to relinquish the false self implicit in the definition of femininity. In so doing, they both become strong, determined females, capable of honoring the male principle within themselves and in the men with whom they interact. They experience the destructiveness of the world, but do not succumb to it for they are lovers of self, of men, of inner harmony.

The impulse for the journey of Fred Daniels and the Invisible Man derives specifically from the oppression of the political system with which they are overtly in conflict. They react to it, pitting their relative power against its absolute invincibility. Power and invincibility are two characteristics of masculinity and the two men never come to an understanding of the way in which they are robbed of their humanity by accepting these characteristics as the norm for self-definition.

The women begin by questioning who they are and where they fit in a hostile landscape. They, too, must deal with systematic oppression, but they are more keenly aware of the need for self-knowledge in the face of depersonalization and inhumanity. One senses that there is a separation in journey consciousness from gender to gender, for the female and male writers treat the same motif powerfully, but in significantly different ways. Perhaps the last image of Janie, recollecting the memory of Tea Cake, best captures the sense of harmony that the women come to know at the end of their journeys: "Here was peace. She pulled in her horizon like a great fish-net. Pulled it from around the waist of the world and draped it over her shoulder. So much of life in its meshes! She called in her soul to come and see" (p. 159).

University of Santa Clara
California