UNIVERZITA KARLOVA V PRAZE – FILOZOFICKÁ FAKULTA

ÚSTAV ANGLOFONNÍCH LITERATUR A KULTUR

The Concept of Self-Definition: Emersonian Principles in Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man* and Richard Wright's *Native Son*

Pojem sebedefinování: emersonovské principy v *Neviditelném* Ralpha Ellisona a *Synovi černého lidu* Richarda Wrighta

DIPLOMOVÁ PRÁCE

Vedoucí diplomové práce (supervisor):
Prof. David L. Robbins

Zpracovala (author):
Alžběta Piňosová
Studijní obor (subjects):
Anglistika a amerikanistika - švédština

Praha, May 2011

Prohlašuji, že jsem tuto diplomovou práci vypracovala samostatně, že jsem řádně citovala všechny použité prameny a literaturu a že práce nebyla využita v rámci jiného vysokoškolského studia či k získání jiného nebo stejného titulu.

I declare that the following MA thesis is my own work for which I used only the sources and literature mentioned, and that this thesis has not been used in the course of other university studies or in order to acquire the same or another type of diploma.

V Praze dne .....

Prague, date .....

Acknowledgements

I would like to express my gratitude to my supervisor, Prof. David L. Robbins, for inspiring me throughout my studies at the Department of Anglophone Literatures and Cultures, for helping me reach an understanding of the works of Ralph Waldo Emerson, and for his invaluable advice and insightful suggestions throughout my work on this thesis.

ABSTRACT

The works of the nineteenth-century American thinker Ralph Waldo Emerson continue to be inspiring particularly due to their empowering effect on the individual. It is especially Emerson's concepts of the sovereignty of the individual, the importance of self-definition, the view of life as a transitory flow, and the relationship between freedom and fate which can be practically and usefully applied in the life of an individual. It is possible, then, to understand and evaluate Emerson's works through the practical effects of his concepts, in other words through the prism of pragmatism. Emerson's empowering philosophy can be of use especially to disempowered groups such as African Americans. The Emersonian themes which are to be found in the works of various African-American non-fiction writers such as W.E.B. Du Bois, James Baldwin, Martin Luther King Jr. and Cornel West testify to the relevance of Emerson for this minority group. In Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man* and Richard Wright's *Native Son*, two African-American novels, Emersonian principles are shown to be of utmost importance for the positive development of the protagonists.

ABSTRAKT

Ralph Waldo Emerson, významný americký myslitel devatenáctého století, nepřestává svým dílem inspirovat, zejména díky tomu, že své myšlenky zaměřuje na jedince s účelem dodat mu vnitřní sílu. Především jeho pojetí svrchovanosti jedince, důležitosti sebe-definice a jeho pohled na vztah mezi svobodnou vůlí a osudem a na život jako neustávající proud mohou být v životě jedince prakticky a užitečně aplikovány. Emersonovo dílo je tedy možno chápat a hodnotit na základě praktické účinnosti jeho myšlenek, jinými slovy prismatem pragmatismu. Emersonova filozofie posiluje jedince; je tedy obzvláště relevantní pro znevýhodněné menšiny, například Afroameričany. Emersonovské principy se proto objevují v dílech rozličných afroamerických spisovatelů nebeletristické literatury, jako jsou W.E.B. Du Bois, James Baldwin, Martin Luther King Jr. a Cornel West. V afroamerických románech *Neviditelný* Ralpha Ellisona a *Syn černého lidu* Richarda Wrighta jsou tyto principy pro pozitivní vývoj hrdinů mimořádně důležité.

CONTENTS

1. INTRODUCTION

The points of departure of this thesis are what I consider to be the central elements of the writings of Ralph Waldo Emerson, the most influential nineteenth century American thinker, writer, and lecturer. These key concepts include the fundamental worth and power of each individual; the right and the necessity of every human being to define his own life and identity, and thus defy imposed and limiting structures; and the fluid quality of existence resulting in constant metamorphosis. In his writings, Emerson celebrates the individual as a highly imaginative and active agent who, guided by the inner voice which only he himself can hear, will perform an original function in the world which no other individual can carry out. This confirms the individual's invaluable worth. I consider these central features of Emerson's thought to be extremely empowering; not only does Emerson strongly reject any form of subordination of some individuals to others as he encourages one to follow his own path, but his outlook on life as a constantly moving flow offers ceaseless hope for the future.

The stress on the above-mentioned elements of Emerson's lifelong work connects my view of this thinker most closely with the critical strand which considers him to be "the father of American pragmatism"[1]. Considering pragmatism's preoccupation with practical consequences and usefulness[2], viewing Emerson from the pragmatic angle necessarily instigates a discussion of how his concepts can be practically and usefully applied in everyday life. That Emerson's writings can be read as inspiration for a healthy conduct of life is not only suggested by the content, but also by the style of his works; the abundant examples from everyday life with which Emerson's essays and lectures are interspersed provide a meaningful connection between his ideas and their practical relevance. Emerson's

---

[1] Richard Poirier, *The Renewal of Literature: Emersonian Reflections* (New York: Random House, 1987) 17.
[2] For an explication of the basic concepts of pragmatism see William James's "Lecture II: What Pragmatism Means" in *Pragmatis*m (William James, *Pragmatism*, 10 Jan. 2011 <http://www.gutenberg.org/cache/epub/5116/pg5116.html>.).

belief that self-definition is not only the right of every individual, but also a necessity, is relevant especially for disempowered groups whose voice in their own affairs has been systematically disregarded or suppressed. Disempowered minorities are frequently subjected to definitions which are imposed by the dominant group. Due to the negative charge of such definitions, they often prove to be harmful for the minority, especially when they become internalized, leading to a negative self-perception. What is more, such definitions form a vicious circle, of which it is extremely difficult to break out, because they are often intentionally devised to hold a disempowered group in place. The case of African Americans is a typical example: by deeming this group incapable of self-government, the dominant white population had used this definition as an argument for the continued enslavement and disenfranchisement of the African-American population. Emerson's constant urging of the individual to make use of the right to self-definition and his view that all human beings have unique worth has led me to believe that the conduct of life which he promotes in his works can be, and has been, used as a strategy by disempowered groups in their attempt to break out of their subordinate position.

What this thesis therefore proposes is that the central concepts of the writings of Emerson can be, and have been, read and utilized as a useful strategy for the empowerment of disempowered groups. This thesis will focus on one of the largest minority groups in the United States, the African Americans, as a specific example with which to demonstrate this argument. A possible objection to this proposal may be that of Emerson's race, class and gender. I am aware of the objections which some literary historians and critics make when connections are made between representatives of the dominant culture (that is, white middle-class males) and the cultures of minorities. John Carlos Rowe, for example, praises the "rejection of [the] literary and cultural cannons" of Emersonianism by "Women's

Studies and Afro-American Studies programs […] that reconstructed their own traditions"[3]. At the same time, however, I cannot but make that connection when I study the works of various African-American leaders and writers and see the similarity between their arguments and the arguments which Emerson had made. As support for my argument, then, I shall make a brief analysis of some of the works written by African-American non-fiction writers to point out wherein this affinity lies. I have chosen to focus on the works of W.E.B. Du Bois, James Baldwin, Martin Luther King, Jr., and Cornel West to demonstrate that Emersonian elements can be discerned in the works of African-American writers throughout a wide time period. As a further justification of the connection I make between African-American writers and Emerson, a member of the dominant culture, let me quote the words of Ralph Ellison on literary influences:

> while one can do nothing about choosing one's relatives, one can, as artist, choose one's 'ancestors.' Wright was, in this sense, a 'relative'; Hemingway an 'ancestor.' Langston Hughes, whose work I knew in grade school and whom I knew before I knew Wright, was a 'relative'; Eliot, whom I was to meet only many years later, and Malraux and Dostoievsky and Faulkner, were 'ancestors' – if you please or don't please![4]

So much about Euro-American influences on African-American writers.

Finally, the relevance of Emerson's thought as an empowering strategy for African Americans will be illustrated in the discussion of two African-American novels, Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man* and Richard Wright's *Native Son*. The sharply contrasting outlooks on the purpose and form of African-American literature as well as on African-American life which these two writers hold have led to a highly-charged critical battle, involving James Baldwin's attack on Wright in "Everybody's Protest Novel", Irving Howe's counterattack "Black Boys and Native Sons", which at the same time expressed a highly negative opinion of *Invisible Man*, and Ellison's retaliation in "The World and the Jug". The differing

---

[3] John Carlos Rowe, *At Emerson's Tomb: The Politics of Classic American Literature* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1997) 5.
[4] Ralph Ellison, "The World and the Jug", *Shadow and Act* (New York: Random House, 1964) 140.

opinions of Ellison and Wright on these issues are reflected in the overall stance which the novels take towards life in general. While Emersonian principles are more immediately evident in Ellison's novel, Wright's concern with them is somewhat more difficult to discern. Through my analysis of these two novels, however, I hope to show that Emersonian principles are significant in both of these literary works and that they are especially relevant for the development of the lives of the protagonists.

2. THE EMPOWERING EFFECT OF RALPH WALDO EMERSON

2.1 Emersonian Criticism

The interpretation and criticism of the writings of Ralph Waldo Emerson has throughout its existence undergone significant transformation regarding the matter of interest on which various critics have focused. As Blankenship observes, "Emerson in the hands of his critics reminds one of the descriptions of the elephant by the seven blind men of Hindustan. Each critic seizes upon a striking passage […] and concludes that […] it must be the gist of Emersonianism"[1]. Once viewed by some of his contemporaries as a "dangerous radical"[2], Emerson has later become known as "the founding father of nearly everything we think of as American in the modern world"[3]. A Transcendentalist, a Jeffersonian, a shallow optimist, a modernist, a pragmatist, and an existentialist are only some of the appellations which critics have used to describe Emerson.[4] Not only has the criticism of Emerson changed over time, but his own ideas underwent a transformation as well, although critics do not fully agree with each other on this point. While some make a clear distinction between Emerson's earlier optimistic period as opposed to his later skepticism, others, such as Richard Poirier, believe that skepticism "was always implicit in his vision of life"[5]. A change in Emerson's thinking which has nonetheless been demonstrated by the publication of *Emerson's Antislavery Writings* is the transformation of the position he took regarding the question of slavery: according to Gougeon, "There can be little doubt that […] Emerson made the transition from philosophical antislavery to active

---

[1] Russell Blankenship, *American Literature as an Expression of the National Mind* (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 1931) 290-291.
[2] Perry Miller, "From Edwards to Emerson", *Interpretations of American Literature*, eds. Charles Feidelson, Jr. and Paul Brodtkorb, Jr. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1960) 114.
[3] Denis Donoghue, *Reading America: Essays on American Literature* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1987) 37.
[4] A detailed overview of the development of Emersonian criticism can be found in *Eight American Authors,* (James Woodress, ed., *Eight American Authors* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1972)), while a briefer summary is given in Stephen E. Whicher's preface to *Emerson: A Collection of Critical Essays* (Milton R. Konvitz and Stephen E. Whicher, eds., *Emerson: A Collection of Critical Essays* (Englewood Cliffs: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1962)).
[5] Richard Poirier, *The Renewal of Literature: Emersonian Reflections* (New York: Random House, 1987) 33.

abolitionism"[6]. Emerson's active participation in the anti-slavery movement is an important link between his empowering effect on individuals in general and his special relevance for disempowered groups, African Americans in particular. However, since the aim of this chapter is to illuminate how the central concepts of Emerson's writings can be read as an empowering strategy for individuals in general, the special relevance for African Americans will be discussed in the following chapter.

2.2 The Individual

The stress on the individual with the emphasis on his autonomy, worth, and active/ creative agency is so prevalent in Emerson's works that I am led to believe that this is what needs to be considered as the central theme of his thought. All of Emerson's other key themes revolve around the individual. Emerson incessantly urges the individual to be original and thus to confirm his uniqueness and worth, since each individual can contribute to society in a special way which no other individual can emulate. The tendency to follow the lead of others is strongly rejected, since this hinders individual creativity and originality. The individual, according to Emerson, should trust in himself and "take counsel of his own bosom"[7], because nobody else can tell him with more accuracy who he is or what he should do. The inclination to trust oneself can be termed self-reliance, which is arguably Emerson's best-known concept; this term, however, needs to be examined in greater detail due to its frequent misinterpretation.

It is important to stress that Emerson's concept of self-reliance is not what it has often been understood as, namely, aggressive individualism devoid of any respect for others. This understanding has come to prevail due to the popularization of the essay "Self-Reliance", which, when read as a representative sample of Emerson's thought, gives the

---

[6] Len Gougeon, "Historical Background", *Emerson's Antislavery Writings*, Len Gougeon and Joel Myerson, eds. (New Heaven and London: Yale University Press, 1995) xxx.
[7] Ralph Waldo Emerson, "Heroism", *Essays and Poems*, (London: Everyman, 2001) 128.

reader a picture which is very far removed from what Emerson's lifelong work actually promotes. The essay "Self-Reliance" explores some of Emerson's most characteristic themes such as the uniqueness of each individual, nonconformity, or power, yet because its tone is so reminiscent of aggressive individualism, it gives a somewhat distorted picture of Emerson's thought. These themes should therefore be examined and evaluated in relation to the whole of Emerson's corpus. The force of this essay can partly be attributed to its style, with the frequently repeated direct address of the reader, which conveys the impression of special importance as well as of command. This is, however, quite atypical for Emerson, whose purpose it had always been "to liberate the mind from dominant traditions and schools"[8] rather than to present a set of dogmatic principles which should be followed.

The importance of the ability of individuals to rely on their own faculties instead of trusting somebody else has a central place in many of Emerson's other works, but never again with the same aggressive tone as in "Self-Reliance". Through the examination of other works it becomes clear that Emerson does not urge individuals to chase ruthlessly and selfishly after their personal interests while disregarding the rights of others; he urges them instead mutually to respect one another. The need to respect the liberties of others is best expressed in "Lecture on Slavery" where Emerson claims that "the largest liberty of each [must be] compatible with the liberty of all"[9]. Emerson strongly rejects any attempts to limit an individual by ascribing him a role or defining him in any way other than the individual himself has done. Telling others who they are or what they are to do is, according to Emerson, aggressive imposition: "whenever I find my dominion over myself not sufficient for me, and undertake the direction of [my neighbor] also, I overstep the truth […]. This undertaking for another, is the blunder which stands in colossal ugliness in the governments

---

[8] Milton R. Konvitz, "Introduction", *Emerson: A Collection of Critical Essays*, eds. Milton R. Konvitz and Stephen E. Whicher (Englewood Cliffs: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1962) 11.
[9] Ralph Waldo Emerson, "Lecture on Slavery", *Emerson's Antislavery Writings*, eds. Len Gougeon and Joel Myerson (New Heaven and London: Yale University Press, 1995) 99.

of the world"[10]. Emerson goes on to show how an attempt to control others becomes more difficult to avoid by the victim as the number of imposers increases: "when a quarter of the human race assume to tell me what I must do, I may be too much disturbed by the circumstances to see so clearly the absurdity of their command"[11]. When warning against those "who think they know what is your duty better than you know it"[12], Emerson is at the same time implicitly urging his readers not to become the imposers themselves but instead to allow each individual to practice his liberty of self-definition and self-determination.

The reason why Emerson is so confident in urging each individual to be self-reliant is due to his transcendental beliefs in the unity of all things and in the universal "spirit [which is] our unseen pilot"[13]. Emerson believes that for each man a special function is designed which only he and nobody else can carry out (hence the unique worth of every individual), and it is by listening to the inner voice that one is able to discern what one's unique vocation is: "There is guidance for each of us, and by lowly listening we shall hear the right word"[14]. The belief that each individual should look for guidance within himself is therefore a key theme which can be perceived in all of Emerson's writings.

Although in most of his works Emerson celebrates self-reliance as a redeeming principle, it is evident that he is aware of the ambivalence of the concept. While in essays such as "Self-Reliance" it is presented as highly positive because it allows the individual to break free of limiting impositions and to achieve empowering autonomy and originality, in later essays such as "Fate" Emerson makes it evident that this concept can acquire rather negative and almost existential qualities. Emerson's image of drowning men where "'twas little they could do for one another; 'twas much if they could keep afloat alone"[15] shows that

---

[10] Ralph Waldo Emerson, "Politics", *Essays and Poems* (London: Everyman, 2001) 283.
[11] Emerson, "Politics" 283.
[12] Ralph Waldo Emerson, "Self-Reliance", *Essays and Poems*, (London: Everyman, 2001) 27.
[13] Ralph Waldo Emerson, "The Method of Nature", *Ralph Waldo Emerson: Essays and Lectures* (New York: The Library of America, 1983) 124.
[14] Ralph Waldo Emerson, "Spiritual Laws", *Essays and Poems* (London: Everyman, 2001) 69.
[15] Ralph Waldo Emerson, "Fate", 15 Feb. 2011 <http://www.rwe.org/works/Conduct_1_Fate.htm>.

having to rely on oneself with no possibility of being offered a guiding hand from anybody else can be perceived as rather sinister. Emerson shows that while the concept of self-reliance positively empowers the individual by allowing him to feel that he is in control of his own life and thus has a sense of responsibility and purpose, it can also lead to the negative sense of isolation and abandonment should an individual fall prey to the belief that he is unable to discern the inner guiding voice and thus cannot know how to lead his life.

It further needs to be pointed out that for all his celebration of the individual with his capacity for the empowering self-reliance, Emerson does not shun society as such. A distinction has to be made between what Emerson identifies as the mob or "the multitude [with] no habit of self-reliance or original action"[16] which distracts the individual from hearing the inner voice, and society, which for Emerson entails fruitful cooperation between individuals who have already reached the stage of being self-reliant. Only strong individuals who have achieved control over themselves can form a well-functioning society: "He only who is able to stand alone, is qualified for society"[17]. It is therefore in the interest of society to let each man define himself and determine his own role. Hence Emerson's dislike of organized social reform; in his view, it is up to each individual to reform himself which will cumulatively result in the reform of the whole society.

With his emphasis on guidance from within, Emerson further views leadership as predominantly negative. To lead is for Emerson the equivalent of to impose. Individuals should therefore not look to others for guidance ("the guide is a tyrant"[18]), but instead for provocation. As Emerson contends, "it is not instruction, but provocation, that I can receive from another soul"[19]. Since literary works can be considered as a form of guidance,

---

[16] Ralph Waldo Emerson, "Power", 14 Feb. 2011 <http://www.rwe.org/works/Conduct_2_Power.htm>.
[17] Ralph Waldo Emerson, "The Fugitive Slave Law", *Emerson's Antislavery Writings*, eds. Len Gougeon and Joel Myerson (New Heaven and London: Yale University Press, 1995) 83.
[18] Ralph Waldo Emerson, "The American Scholar", *Ralph Waldo Emerson: Essays and Lectures* (New York: The Library of America, 1983) 57.
[19] Ralph Waldo Emerson, "Divinity School Address", *Ralph Waldo Emerson: Essays and Lectures* (New York: The Library of America, 1983) 79.

Emerson asks of his audience not to accept indiscriminately the views of famous authors and suggests in "The American Scholar" that books "are for nothing but to inspire"[20]. Emerson's own lifelong work successfully fulfils this requirement; unlike traditional philosophers, Emerson does not present any strict dogma to be followed, but rather, as Cornel West points out, "[t]he primary aim of Emerson's life and discourse is to provoke"[21]. In this respect his method is similar to that of the Danish thinker Kierkegaard whose aim it was to provoke his audience into finding the answers for themselves.

2.3 The Limiting Effect of Systems

Some critics have pointed out that Emerson's work lacks the systematic structure which is generally common for traditional philosophers. George Santayana for example claims that Emerson "never attempted to give articulation to his philosophy"[22]. The lack of a systematic structure need not, however, be considered as a fault on Emerson's part; it can, on the other hand, be seen as consistent with his belief that any system is a limitation which restricts the individual's freedom and flight. Since the purpose of a system is organization, any unit within a system is assigned its place with not much freedom of movement. This is precisely what Emerson strives to avoid. By refusing to constrict his thought to a system, he leaves open the possibilities lying outside the circumference which any system would necessarily form. Among such limiting systems Emerson counts all institutions; for this reason his stance towards them is quite skeptical.

Because language is also a system, Emerson perceives it as a limiting factor which needs to be subverted. Richard Poirier points out Emerson's preoccupation with language and shows how he attempts to escape its limiting effect through troping: "The turning or

---

[20] Emerson, "The American Scholar" 57.
[21] Cornel West, *The American Evasion of Philosophy: A Genealogy of Pragmatism* (Wisconsin: The University of Wisconsin Press, 1989) 25.
[22] George Santayana, "Emerson", *Emerson: A Collection of Critical Essays*, eds. Milton R. Konvitz and Stephen E. Whicher (Englewood Cliffs: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1962) 31.

troping of words is […] an act of power over meaning"[23]. Having power over language is extremely important for the individual, because out of the system of language constricting definitions can be constructed. These definitions can then be used to assign an individual a rigid place and thus have an imprisoning effect. Furthermore, a negative definition which is internalized can cause an individual to view himself in a negative light, which influences his general wellbeing. As the *Handbook of Cross-Cultural Psychology* states, "[t]he development of [...] identity is mainly threatened by the internalization of the deprecating and stereotyped image projected by society", which can then lead to "self-effacing behavior, or submission"[24]. As the most potent way to counter the power of imposed definitions, Emerson proposes self-definition, on which he places the utmost stress throughout his writings. Similarly, the authors of the *Handbook* recommend as the best strategy "to accept or even increase the value of one's differences" and "to dismiss the image of [oneself] projected by [...] society"[25]. It is therefore important that the individual is the one who manipulates language instead of language manipulating the individual. Emerson further promotes re-definition which allows for the continuous expansion of horizons as described in the essay "Circles"; the individual is encouraged in his "continual effort to raise himself above himself"[26].

2.4 Transition

Another key element which recurs throughout Emerson's writings and which significantly contributes to the empowering effect of his thought is transition. Life is a

---

[23] Poirier 17.
[24] C. Camilleri and H. Malewska-Peyre, "Socialization and Identity Strategies", *Handbook of Cross-Cultural Psychology, Volume 2: Basic Processes and Human Development*, eds. John W. Berry et al. (Needham Heights: Allyn & Bacon, 1997) 61, 31 Jan. 2011
< http://books.google.com/books?id=tLvAmyvsU8UC&pg=PA59&dq=negative+self-perception&hl=cs&ei=d_xGTY2mLIes8APp8emuCQ&sa=X&oi=book_result&ct=result&resnum=10&ved=0CFIQ6AEwCQ#v=onepage&q=valorization&f=false> .
[25] C. Camilleri and H. Malewska-Peyre 62 .
[26] Ralph Waldo Emerson, "Circles", *Essays and Poems* (London: Everyman, 2001) 149.

never-ending process, a continuous flow in which an individual should actively and creatively participate. The concept of transition is most clearly depicted in the essay "Circles": "The life of a man is a self-evolving circle, which, from a ring imperceptibly small, rushes on all sides outwards to new and larger circles, and that without end"[27]. In this quote Emerson expresses multiple themes at once; not only does he address the flux of life, but he also portrays with great eloquence the dynamic and vast potential of man, celebrating his capacity to transcend horizons. Emerson depicts the vital need of transition through the image of the body: "health of body consists in circulation, and sanity of mind in variety or facility of association. We need change of objects. Dedication to one thought is quickly odious"[28]. At the same time, however, he is aware of the tendency of individuals to resist change and cling to the past in their fear of the unknown. He therefore warns that "[g]ladly we would anchor, but the anchorage is quicksand"[29]. For this reason Emerson frequently reiterates the idea that the past should be left behind and, instead of freezing at one point, one should rather move on with the flow.

The reason why transition is so vital is because it offers hope: "People wish to be settled: only as far as they are unsettled is there any hope for them"[30]. The notion of the transitional quality of life gives individuals hope in the possibility of improvement. Without the view of life as a flowing and changing entity, individuals would be doomed to accept their position and would feel no incentive actively to partake in the process of development. Emerson, however, urges individuals to play the role of active agents who can make a difference through their endeavor. Just as with self-reliance, the acceptance of transition is necessary, but it is also ambiguous; on the one hand it offers hope, on the other hand it can cause the negative feelings of uncertainty, anxiety, and even fear.

---

[27] Emerson "Circles" 147.
[28] Ralph Waldo Emerson "Experience", *Essays and Poems* (London: Everyman, 2001) 207.
[29] Emerson "Experience" 207.
[30] Emerson, "Circles" 155.

2.5 Power

Ultimately, all of the recurring themes discussed above lead to the most important theme of all; that of power. Trust in oneself, the rejection and subversion of confining systems, and the notion of life as a flow with its inherent demand for action and originality, all contribute to the positive sense of an individual's worth, self-control and active influence on his life. The central concepts of Emerson's thought are actually prerequisites which the individual needs to fulfill in order to achieve the most power. What is important to stress is that Emerson does not mean power over others – that is something which he strongly rejects. Instead, he valorizes only power over oneself. Emerson's ultimate goal therefore is, to use Konvitz's words, to help "each man to discover and disencumber his own powers"[31]. It is for their empowering effect that Emerson's writings continue to be inspiring.

Notwithstanding the optimistic and laudatory stance which Emerson assumes in most of his works regarding the limitless power of the individual ("Nothing is impossible to the man who can will"[32]), he does acknowledge the existence of a force which has a limiting effect on this power: "Whatever limits us, we call Fate"[33]. According to Emerson, "[a] man's power is hooped in by a necessity, which, by many experiments, he touches on every side, until he learns its arc"[34]. It is important for the individual to find out where this arc lies, because this will give him a sense of what he is capable of within the given limits. By exploring the boundaries, an individual will get an understanding of where he stands and of what he can become.

Emerson's reluctance to accept fate is reflected in his way of dealing with this issue. To resolve the problem of the limiting effect of fate, Emerson claims that "a part of Fate is

---

[31] Konvitz, "Introduction" 11.
[32] Ralph Waldo Emerson, "Considerations by the Way", 20 Sept. 2010 <http://www.rwe.org/complete-works/vi---conduct-of-life/vii-considerations-by-the-way>.
[33] Emerson, "Fate".
[34] Emerson, "Fate".

the freedom of man"[35]. This appears to be a contradiction, and although Emerson does his best, it is evident that he never quite manages to reconcile these two forces. The conflict between freedom and fate always remains discernible, and to what extent exactly one is free to counter fate remains somewhat vague. What Emerson suggests is that "it is wholesome to man to look not at Fate, but the other way: the practical view is the other"[36]. By advising the individual to look at his possibilities in a positive way and make the best of them instead of brooding on what he cannot do, Emerson offers a psychologically wholesome strategy with which to deal with limiting factors in one's life. The same advice is reiterated in "Considerations by the Way": "power dwells with cheerfulness; hope puts us in a working mood, whilst despair is no muse, and untunes the active powers"[37]. Emerson thus stresses the fact that the way in which an individual perceives things can make a significant difference. Because of his advice as to how an individual should best conduct his life in order to feel empowered, it seems quite justified to consider Emerson in connection with the field of psychology.[38] His relevance for the disempowered group of African Americans which will be discussed presently is thus largely connected with countering the effects of psychological enslavement.

---

[35] Emerson, "Fate".
[36] Emerson, "Fate".
[37] Emerson, "Considerations by the Way".
[38] The link between Emerson and the development of American psychology is traced in Carl N. Edwards, *Responsibilities and Dispensations: Behavior, Science, & American Justice* (Dover: Four Oaks Press, 2001), 1 Feb. 2011 <http://books.google.cz/books?id=moDrQY4tM-kC&printsec=frontcover&dq=responsibilities+and+dispensations&hl=cs&ei=K-pHTbayKIyVswa40s30Ag&sa=X&oi=book_result&ct=result&resnum=1&ved=0CCkQ6AEwAA#v=onepage&q&f=false>.

3. THE RELEVANCE OF EMERSONIAN PRINCIPLES FOR AFRICAN AMERICANS

Having discussed Emerson's most important and empowering themes, I shall proceed to show how these themes can be constructively employed in the case of African Americans. This chapter will give a brief overview of the historical development of the social position of this minority in America; it will trace the development, purpose and effect of the negative definitions and images of this group which were devised by the white majority; and finally it will show how a number of African-American non-fiction writers and leaders employ Emersonian principles as they offer a solution to the African-American problem of continuing inequality.

3.1 The Development of the Position of African Americans in American Society

One of the founding documents of the United States of America, the Declaration of Independence from 1776, "hold[s] these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable rights, that among these are life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness"[1]. Historically, however, there were certain minority groups within the nation which were evidently excluded from these privileges. African Americans were the most clearly (in)visible of these groups. Not only was this group denied liberty, equality, and the pursuit of happiness; it was also denied basic human status. The appalling treatment of African Americans by the white majority was a direct contradiction to the American ideals of liberty. Therefore, in order to justify the denial of the basic rights to this group, racism, or the belief in the hereditary superiority of one race as opposed to the inferiority of other races, was made use of. Its conclusion was

[1] Thomas Jefferson, "The Declaration of Independence", *The Norton Anthology of American Literature, Volume 1*, ed. Nina Baym (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1998) 715.

that African Americans were subhuman, and thus not eligible to what was considered to be the basic principles of American democracy.

A number of historians have suggested that the development of racism in America did not directly correspond with the development of the institution of slavery. According to Anthony B. Mitchell, "the enslavement of Africans evolved out of the widely practiced indentured servitude system that covered immigrants from England"[2]; the working conditions of the first slaves in the southern states were at first not much different from that of European immigrants. This is confirmed by Edmund S. Morgan who suggests that "the daily life of a slave differed from that of a servant less drastically than at first sight it appears to have"[3]. It was only later, Mitchell continues, that "differences in the terms of servitude of Africans developed, noticeably around the issues of race, color, and culture"[4].

Once the slavery system developed into the form of a violent, racialized, legal institution, it was sustained in this form until its abolition with the help of the racist beliefs which were held in stronger or milder forms by practically all white inhabitants of the American South. While many northern states, where the African-American population was significantly smaller and the economy was not based on slavery, abolished this institution during the first half if the 19th century, the South with its plantation economy continued to rely largely on slave labor up to the Civil War. By the time Emerson published his first significant work, *Nature*, in 1836, northern abolitionists had already started their radical campaign for a change in the position of African-American slaves. The contradiction between the ideals of American society and the inhuman treatment of the slaves was too evident to be ignored; but it was only in 1865 that chattel slavery was abolished in all of the

---

[2] Anthony B. Mitchell, "Self-emancipation and Slavery: An Examination of the African American's Quest for Literacy and Freedom", *Journal of Pan African Studies*, July 2008, 7 Feb. 2011 <http://findarticles.com/p/articles/mi_7075/is_5_2/ai_n31505801/?tag=content;col1>.
[3] Edmund S. Morgan, *American Slavery, American Freedom: The Ordeal of Colonial Virginia* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2003) 319.
[4] Mitchell.

states and territories by the passage of the Thirnteenth Amendment to the American Constitution.

The brief period of hope for the newly freed African Americans during the Reconstruction era of 1865-1877 was, however, followed by the repressive Jim Crow regime in the South which showed that the improvement of the social position of African Americans was to be a long time coming. African Americans were no longer treated as chattel after 1865 and were granted citizenship rights together with the right to vote (which for the moment applied to men only) following the passage of the Fourteenth and the Fifteenth Amendments in 1868 and 1870, respectively. Their position was, however, far from equal with the white population of the United States. The degree of violence directed against African Americans can be discerned from the increase in the number of lynchings of black men during the Jim Crow period. Because African Americans were no longer considered property, the damage done to their bodies did not need to be repaid to the owner. For this reason, and because such damage was not punished under a racist judicial system in which African Americans could find no remedy, they became more liable to lethal violence inflicted by racist whites.

As a result of the Great Migration at the end of the 19th century and the beginning of the 20th century, the population of African Americans in northern cities significantly increased. This led to African Americans' coming to be seen as dangerous economic competition by many northern whites. Racial tension in the North therefore increased and gave rise to a number of race riots and race-based restrictions on black immigrants. The rapid growth of black ghettoes was just one manifestation of emerging northern racial discrimination against African Americans.

Although legally African Americans had achieved an equal standing with their white compatriots, in many cases theory continues to differ from practice even at the beginning of the new millennium. Many African Americans today continue to feel that they are

discriminated against on racial grounds. Although the race problem has not yet been adequately solved, the improvement over the last half a century has been great indeed; that an African American has become the president of the United States of America is a telling indicator of how significant the change for the better has been.

3.2 White Perception of African Americans: Beliefs, Ideals and Stereotypes

The African-American experience had for a long time been shaped not by African Americans themselves, but by the racist white population of America. African Americans were assigned a place and status in American society which they had not chosen themselves but which they were forced to accept. Turning the arrivals from Africa into a subordinate underclass and purposely perpetuating their subservient position required certain techniques of subjugation. Besides laws legalizing slavery and violent physical methods which were employed to convert "men into monkeys"[5], various psychological techniques were also devised and practiced by whites. For the purpose of this thesis it is the psychological enslavement which is most relevant and will therefore be examined in closer detail.

The aim of enslaving African Americans psychologically was to achieve a mentality with which slaves were more likely to accept their subhuman position. One way of attaining this was to create and spread negative images of African Americans and place them in contrast to the radically different white ideal. The expected effect of this was double. Firstly, most whites realized that the treatment of slaves went against the American ideal of freedom and equality of all men. The enslavement of African Americans therefore needed to be justified in the eyes of the white population. This could be done by deeming African Americans inferior to the extent that they were not considered human, but subhuman. The racist images that accompanied the African-American experience had therefore not

[5] Emerson, "The Fugitive Slave Law", *Emerson's Antislavery Writings*, eds. Len Gougeon and Joel Myerson (New Heaven and London: Yale University Press, 1995) 79.

appeared randomly, but had been deliberately designed by elements of the white population with a specific purpose in mind. They soon took root in the white mind and were transmitted from generation to generation. By many, they came to be accepted as true, and their validity was not tested or even questioned. Secondly, African Americans were supposed to internalize this negative image and perceive themselves in the same negative terms in which they were perceived by their surroundings; that is, as inferior, helpless and worthless. If African Americans accepted these characteristics as an unquestionable fact, they would more readily put up with their seemingly inescapable and unchangeable predicament. The internalization of white ideals would additionally lead them to the belief in the alleged superiority of the white race, as well as to the acceptance of the subordinate position which they were assigned.

The opinion that people of African descent are inferior to the white race was accepted as an unquestionable fact by most Americans of European origin; as Forrest G. Wood claims, "in the middle of the nineteenth century the majority of white Americans believed that they were far superior to the nonwhite people of the world"[6]. This widely-spread belief was justified by two authoritative sources: the Bible and science. The Bible was used to sanctify the inferiority of African Americans on the basis of their alleged relation to the cursed son of Noah, Ham. The servitude of this group was therefore understood to be God's punishment, which should by no means be contested. Science stressed heredity, deeming African Americans to be "naturally inferior"[7]. The institution of slavery was presented as having a civilizing effect on the slaves, and was therefore considered to be beneficial for them. Both of these arguments were used as a delusive justification for the perpetuation of the servitude of African Americans.

---

[6] Forrest G. Wood, *Black Scare: The Racist Response to Emancipation and Reconstruction* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1970) 2, 6 Feb. 2011 <http://books.google.com/books?id=4FXXV9H0Y-oC&printsec=frontcover&dq=intitle:the+intitle:black+intitle:scare&hl=cs&ei=9VdQTej8JITf4gaFzMW3CQ&sa=X&oi=book_result&ct=result&resnum=1&ved=0CCgQ6AEwAA#v=onepage&q&f=false>.

[7] Wood 7.

One way of shaping the slaves' beliefs about their own inferiority was the use of demeaning appellations when a slave was addressed. As Norrece T. Jones points out, "Each time an adult black male or female was addressed as 'boy', 'girl', or, just plain 'nigger', these nameless others were not only debased symbolically, but dehumanized"[8]. These appellations enhanced the belief that African Americans were incapable of looking after themselves and were fully dependent on their masters. Furthermore, slaves generally had their African names taken from them and were renamed by their owners. The act of renaming was symbolic of the slaves' loss of identity as well as of their loss of possession of their own selves. The master's name, which most slaves received, was a sign of the relationship between the master and slave as owner and property. The poet Phillis Wheatley can serve as an example: she was "purchased by a wealthy tailor, John Wheatley, for his wife, […] and named for the vessel that carried her to [the American] shores"[9].

A number of stereotypical images of African Americans developed, among which were those of "Uncle Tom", "Mammy", "Sambo", and "the Coon". The stereotype of Uncle Tom was based on the character in Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, published in 1852. It portrayed the desexed African-American man's unconditional loyalty to the master. The Mammy can be seen as Uncle Tom's female counterpart: "happily obedient to her master and mistress […], her hair hidden beneath a bandana, her ample weight, dark skin and coarse manners, the Mammy was stripped of sexual allure"[10]. The Sambo can be described as "a simple, docile, laughing black man: […] His life was one of child-like contentment"[11]. The purpose of these three images was to perpetuate the myth that life on the plantation was a happy one and that slaves not only accepted their current situation, but

---

[8] Norrece T. Jones, Jr., "In Search of Freedom: Slave Life and Culture in the Antebellum South", *Essays on African-American History, Culture and Society*, eds. William R. Scott and William G. Shade (Washington: Bureau of Educational and Cultural Affairs, 2005) 80.
[9] Nina Baym, ed. *The Norton Anthology of American Literature, Volume 1* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1998) 824.
[10] Marlon Riggs, *Ethnic Notions*, 6 Feb. 2011 <http://newsreel.org/transcripts/ethnicno.htm>.
[11] Riggs.

were content with it and did not wish for any change. The Coon was a portrayal of the free northern African American. What was important about this figure was his "ludicrous failure to adapt to freedom"[12]. This image strengthened the idea that without the guidance of the master, African Americans are incapable of leading a free existence.

At the same time another image emerged: that of the African American as a violent brute. The Haitian Revolution showed that a black rebellion was a real possibility. A number of less extensive slave rebellions also took place on the soil of the United States, the most significant of which was the Nat Turner rebellion in 1831. Besides being a reaction to the possibility of a slave rebellion, the image of the black brute was, however, also purposely exploited and used to raise fear and race hatred among members of the white population. It supported the belief that African Americans needed to be controlled; otherwise they would express their animalistic passions by violent acts against whites and especially against the white female. The stereotype of the alleged brutality of African Americans was frequently used in the Postbellum Era as a justification of the violence directed against this group by whites. The argument of African-American brutality was commonly reverted to and is discussed in *The Black Image in the White Mind*: the retaliation against African Americans "was more than justified by the increasing 'horror and brutality' of the crimes allegedly committed by blacks"[13]. As with the contradictory stereotypes of docile and happy slaves, this image was likewise used to justify the inhumane treatment of African Americans.

The image of the African-American man misusing the white woman brought out especially tellingly the stark contrast between the white ideal as opposed to the alleged black deficiency and inferiority. The typical representation was that of the African-American man as "very black, hideous, and evil, a veritable brute, and the white woman was

---

[12] Riggs.
[13] George M. Fredrickson, *The Black Image in the White Mind: The Debate on Afro-American Character and Destiny, 1817 – 1914* (Hanover: Wesleyan University Press, 1987) 273.

angelic, young, beautiful, and innocent"[14]. A comparison was made on the moral as well as on the aesthetic level. While white women were "held up as paragons of morality to be protected at all costs"[15], African Americans were considered to be immoral and promiscuous. The alleged immorality of the African-American male was transferred by association to the African-American female. As Angela Davis points out in her discussion of this stereotype, "the mythical rapist implies the mythical whore"[16]. The Euro-American beauty ideal had such a strong influence on the aesthetic perception of African Americans that it has led to the development of a skin tone hierarchy. This hierarchy is not only applied by some racist whites, but is shown to be internalized and recognized by African Americans (and other non-white groups) themselves. According to Shankar Vedantam, however, this issue is not much talked about:

> Racial minorities who are alert to white-black or white-brown issues often remain silent about a colorism that asks "how black" or "how brown" someone is within their own communities. […] Americans may like to believe that we are now color-blind […]. It remains a worthy aspiration.[17]

The practical consequences of this hierarchy remain; dark-skinned African Americans are disadvantaged in comparison to light-skinned ones even at the beginning of the 21st century.

3.3 Emerson's Stance Towards the Question of Slavery and Race

Because the purpose of this thesis is to show how the teachings of Ralph Waldo Emerson can be usefully applied by African Americans, a few words need to be said about Emerson's stance towards this minority group. The question of slavery was the most pressing question in American politics and society for most of Emerson's active life. For

---

[14] Wood 65.
[15] Jones, Jr. 81.
[16] Angela Davis, *Women, Race & Class* (London: The Women's Press Limited, 1982) 191.
[17] Shankar Vedantam, "Shades of Prejudice", The New York Times, 18 Jan 2010, 2 May 2011 <http://www.nytimes.com/2010/01/19/opinion/19vedantam.html>.

this reason, it was inevitable that Emerson, as a famous orator, should be asked to speak on this subject. His initial reaction to this request was rather reluctant. Gougeon explains this reluctance as being caused by Emerson's belief that reform must come from the individual, not from laws and restrictions[18]. Following his first anti-slavery lectures, Emerson was accused of being "rather cool and philosophical"[19]. He was also somewhat undecided as to the equality of African Americans; as Gougeon shows, by 1838 Emerson "had not resolved for himself the question of racial inferiority"[20]. Although Gougeon dates the disappearance of Emerson's "lingering doubts about the equality of blacks"[21] to the year 1844, the fact that Emerson continued to believe that there is "weakness […] in the black race"[22], a belief he expressed in a speech delivered as late as 1854, seems rather to support Cornel West's claim that Emerson was "a racist"[23] throughout his life. Emerson's racism, however, must be considered in relation to the general racist sentiments of the era. Although Emerson continued to believe in inherent differences between the races, he did become an active supporter of the ending of slavery and his speeches which call for the improvement of the situation of African Americans definitely place him among the progressives of his time. Although Emerson's racist tendencies may be considered as a reason for dismissing the view that his philosophy can be useful to African Americans, I do not believe this dismissal to be justified; the key principles of Emerson's thought do not become any the less useable. That many African Americans found it useful to revert to Emersonian concepts in their attempt to improve their position will be shown in the following sub-chapter.

---

[18] Len Gougeon, "Historical Background", *Emerson's Antislavery Writings*, Len Gougeon and Joel Myerson, eds. (New Heaven and London: Yale University Press, 1995) xi.
[19] Gougeon xvii.
[20] Gougeon xix.
[21] Gougeon xxviii.
[22] Ralph Waldo Emerson, "The Fugitive Slave Law" 80.
[23] Cornel West, *The American Evasion of Philosophy: A Genealogy of Pragmatism* (Wisconsin: The University of Wisconsin Press, 1989) 28.

3.4 The Emersonian Solution

The position of African Americans in American society could be understood as a direct reversal of the central principles advocated by Ralph Waldo Emerson. African Americans were caught in a rigid system, defined by others, disempowered and with seemingly no possibility of change. It is therefore not surprising that in their fight for the improvement of the African-American condition and in order to reach the ultimate goal of equality, many African-American writers and leaders have offered solutions to the problem which are highly reminiscent of Emerson's central ideas. The purpose of this subchapter is to point out and discuss such similarities. It is not economic, but psychological obstructions which have frequently been identified as the gravest obstacle to be overcome in order for this minority to attain a status of equality. This is pointed out by Martin Luther King, Jr.: "personal degradation as an inferior human being was even more keenly felt than material privation"[24]. For this reason, I believe that it is quite pertinent to employ the ideas of a thinker whose aim it was to help "each man to discover and disencumber his own powers"[25]. The following account will show how the central concepts of Emerson's writings could be practically and usefully employed as an empowering strategy by African Americans.

Throughout his existence on the American continent, the African American was surrounded by the image of his own deficiency. This image was so prevalent that it was practically impossible for the members of this oppressed minority to create a positive self-image. As Vetta L. Sanders Thompson and Maysa Akbar point out, for slaves "self-labeling was hardly an option and acceptance of derogatory terminology was almost a certainty"[26].

---

[24] Martin Luther King, Jr., *Where Do We Go From Here: Chaos or Community?* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1968) 87.
[25] Milton R. Konvitz, "Introduction", *Emerson: A Collection of Critical Essays*, eds. Milton R. Konvitz and Stephen E. Whicher (Englewood Cliffs: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1962) 11.
[26] Vetta L. Sanders Thompson and Maysa Akbar, "The Understanding of Race and the Construction of African American Identity", *The Western Journal of Black Studies*, Summer 2003, 8 Feb. 2011 <http://findarticles.com/p/articles/mi_go2877/is_2_27/ai_n29060126/>.

As already shown, however, the abolition of slavery did not put a stop to the use and creation of such demeaning definitions. African Americans continued to be denied the right to define themselves, and the labeling by the white majority persisted. This proved to have a harmful effect on the improvement of the African-American situation; a status of equality can hardly be achieved while one believes oneself to be inferior.

The negative effect of internalizing degrading definitions of oneself has been warned against by many African-American writers. One such leader and writer who showed the importance of discarding white definitions as a way to improvement was W.E.B. Du Bois. In his successful non-fictional work from 1903, *The Souls of Black Folk*, the predicament of African Americans is portrayed through the symbol of the veil. In the life of those who live "within the Veil"[27], the effect of this symbolic object is multiple. Firstly, it bars African Americans from the white world or, more importantly, from the world of opportunity. In this sense, the veil can be compared to a prison wall. Secondly, it has the effect of veiling the sight; those within the veil are incapable of discerning their own selves clearly. Instead, the African American is dependent on "looking at [him]self through the eyes of others"[28]. This brings us to the crucial problem: the vision of himself which the African American is forced to accept is that of the racist society; it is a vision which convinces him of his worthlessness and powerlessness. This conviction further leads to the lack of any higher aspirations, because all attempts to develop are seemingly futile; the veil is "so thick, that [African Americans] shall not even think of breaking through"[29]. As Du Bois writes, it was only as the African American "began to have a dim feeling that, to attain his place in the world, he must be himself, and not another"[30], that there was any hope of breaking out of

[27] W.E.B. Du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folk*, 11 Feb. 2011 <http://www.gutenberg.org/files/408/408-h/408-h.htm>.
[28] Du Bois.
[29] Du Bois.
[30] Du Bois.

the prison of the veil. Du Bois advocates looking inside oneself for an authentic vision of who one truly is, a strategy which Emerson promotes throughout his writings.

Similarly, the issue of imposed roles and stereotypes, and especially the negative effect of their internalization, is explored by James Baldwin in his essays collected in *Nobody Knows My Name* (1961) and *The Fire Next Time* (1963). In the latter work, Baldwin identifies as the gravest problem the fact that African Americans continue to be denied the right to self-definition and, what is worse, that some internalize the definitions that are imposed on them. Baldwin states that his grandfather "was defeated […] because, at the bottom of his heart, he really believed what white people said about him", adding that "[y]ou can only be destroyed by believing that you really are what the white world calls a *nigger*"[31]. Baldwin's wording is significant: the word "only" plays a crucial role; it suggests that when the African American rejects white definitions, he is invincible. This quote further makes evident the fact that the word "nigger" is a white invention which has nothing to do with reality. It is simply a label devised to degrade the African American, yet, as shown by the example of Baldwin's grandfather, it is a label which, when internalized, has devastating consequences.

The use of degrading labels for African Americans brings us to another theme of Emerson's: the limiting effect of the system of language and the necessity of breaking out of its constricting web. Emerson shows how powerful words can be when he claims that "this insulting appellation, 'O, the Niggers!'"[32] was used in a similar way as the Bible and science to justify slavery. Demeaning terminology for African Americans was, however, not only employed by white Americans, but it was also frequently used by members of the minority themselves. As Mitchell points out, the adoption of the negative terminology when referring

---

[31] James Baldwin, *The Fire Next Time, James Baldwin: Collected Essays* (New York: The Library of America, 1998) 291.
[32] Ralph Waldo Emerson, "Anniversary of West Indian Emancipation", *Emerson's Antislavery Writings*, Len Gougeon and Joel Myerson, eds. (New Heaven and London: Yale University Press, 1995) 36.

to oneself was not uncommon among former slaves and it had negative psycho-social effects. Among some African Americans, the trend to refer to oneself using racist terminology has persisted until today.[33]

The negative effect of language is not consigned to demeaning definitions, but, as Martin Luther King Jr. points out, pervades the whole language system: "[e]ven semantics have conspired to make that which is black seem ugly and degrading"[34]. His study of the words "white" and "black" in a thesaurus resulted in the discovery that all of the synonyms for "white" have positive connotations while half of the synonyms for "black" have negative connotations. This finding has led him to conclude that language works to "perpetuate [the African American's] sense of inferiority"[35]. Such findings show that Emerson's belief in the limiting effect of language is justified. The subversion of the language system which enforces racist white ideology is therefore an important step towards the psychological freedom of African Americans.

Another concept which is central to Emerson's thought and is also highly relevant for African Americans is the concept of transition. The position of this group was considered to be unchangeable; as Baldwin remarks, "the black man has functioned in the white man's world as a fixed star, as an immovable pillar"[36]. Baldwin further points out that "[t]he limits of [African-American] ambition were […] expected to be set forever"[37]. As shown above in the discussion of the stereotypical images of African Americans, racist whites did their best to perpetuate the old system of white domination and to stop any changes from taking place. In order to advance and improve the position of African Americans, however, the old order needs to be discarded and transition is necessary. It is therefore important to believe in the possibility of transition; without this belief, hope for

[33] Mitchell.
[34] King, Jr. 41.
[35] King, Jr. 41.
[36] Baldwin 294.
[37] Baldwin 293.

improvement would be impossible, and the effort to bring any change about might well be lacking.

The Emersonian spirit of Du Bois, Baldwin, and King is evident in their view of the concept of power. All three agree with Emerson on the point that each individual has power and genius which should be acted upon and celebrated. Only through the use of this power can anything be achieved. It is King who explains that the concept of power has often been misunderstood and that "[t]here is nothing essentially wrong with power"[38]. As in Emerson's writings, King emphasizes that power over others must be condemned and instead "creative and positive power"[39] should be embraced.

Du Bois puts forth a similar view and likewise highlights the necessity of embracing one's powers. As Cornel West claims, Du Bois's vision is that "creative powers reside among the wretched of the earth even in their subjugation"[40]. In his first essay of *The Souls of Black Folk*, Du Bois writes that the African American should "use his best powers and his latent genius. These powers of body and mind have in the past been strangely wasted, dispersed, or forgotten"[41]. The obstacle that has to be overcome is the fact that this power is being denied by the white majority: "the other world […] does not know and does not want to know our power"[42]. The African American must therefore reject the racist belief in his insufficiency and powerlessness and recognize the existence of the "revelation of his power"[43] within himself. Similarly, Baldwin celebrates the power of human possibility when he expresses the view that "there is really no limit to where you can go"[44]. Notwithstanding the attempts to confine African Americans to a limited role, Baldwin himself exemplifies that the situation of African Americans is not hopeless as long as they

[38] King, Jr. 37.
[39] King, Jr. 37.
[40] West 148.
[41] Du Bois.
[42] Du Bois.
[43] Du Bois.
[44] Baldwin 293.

refuse to give up their aspirations: "I really *believed* I could do anything a white boy could do, and had every intention of proving it"[45].

As shown above, Du Bois, Baldwin, and King all celebrate and call for African-American creative power and potential. This, however, leads to an important question: to what extent is the African American truly able to use his powers, if we consider the immense obstacles that are put in his way? It is precisely the problem that Emerson was forced to deal with in his writings: what exactly is the relationship between fate and freedom in the life of an individual? To what extent is one determined by circumstances, and to what extent is one able to transcend and counter these limitations through the power of will and personal endeavor? As shown in the second chapter, Emerson's answer to this question is somewhat ambivalent and not quite satisfactory. In the case of disempowered groups such as African Americans, the question of determinism versus free will seems to be all the more pressing. African Americans had for a long time found themselves in a position where the white majority attempted to convince them that their subordinate place was given and unchangeable. To accept this view and believe in circumstance implies that to strive for higher goals than those set by the racist society is pointless, because the limitations cannot be overcome however hard one tries. It is therefore evident that the tendency towards one or the other of the poles, fatality or freedom, has important practical effects on one's life. It would seem that in order to advance, the most logical step for African Americans to take would be to abandon any belief in determinism. It is, however, also somewhat questionable whether the belief in limitless freedom is advisable, and whether it is not more useful to take an ambivalent stance towards this dichotomy.

The reason why it is not advisable to nullify either circumstance or freedom is explained by Cornel West in *Race Matters*. On the one hand, West rejects the idea that "all

[45] Baldwin 302.

is a matter of personal will"[46]; if this belief is embraced, all the responsibility for their failure can be blamed on African Americans, and programs to help improve their position must logically be considered superfluous. This belief is obviously false, as the discrimination against African Americans in everyday life and their resultant unequal opportunities cannot be denied. On the other hand, West likewise rejects the belief in unchangeable circumstance; such a belief would defeat all effort to attempt to improve the situation on the part of African Americans. His solution is therefore the following: "It is imperative to steer a course between the Scylla of environmental determinism and the Charybdis of a blaming-the-victim perspective"[47]. It is not practical to revert to either extreme. Even in this case, therefore, Emerson's conclusion applies: the existence of limiting circumstance cannot be denied, but it is more practical and empowering for African Americans not to brood too much on it and rather open their eyes to the possibilities before them.

[46] Cornel West, *Race Matters* (New York: Vintage Books, 1994) 22.
[47] West, *Race Matters* 85.

4. EMERSONIAN PRINCIPLES IN RALPH ELLISON'S *INVISIBLE MAN*

Ralph Ellison's novel *Invisible Man*, published in its entirety in 1952, portrays an African-American young man in his struggle to free himself of the limiting definitions imposed on him by American society. The protagonist undergoes a series of disillusioning experiences which convince him that it is necessary to oppose and discard the stereotypical images and roles which he is expected to fulfill. The transition from a youth who accepts the place which is assigned to him to an autonomous individual is a painful one. By the end of his journey, however, the protagonist has realized the importance of what can be referred to as the novel's credo: "I am nobody but myself"[1]. This is precisely what Ralph Waldo Emerson considers to be of utmost importance: the necessity of an individual to seek guidance within himself. Interestingly, Ellison himself does not support the view that there is a connection between his novel and Emerson's works. Furthermore, the references to Emerson in the text are intended to be ironic. As Earl H. Rovit points out, "Emerson's work is given short shrift as rhetorical nonsense in *Invisible Man* and his name is bestowed upon a character whose minor function in the novel is to be a self-righteous hypocrite"[2]. On a deeper level, however, Rovit identifies an affinity between Ellison and Emerson: "in their respective searches for identity, in their mutual concern with defining the possibilities and limitations which give form and shape to that which is human, [they] draw close together"[3]. While Rovit's discussion of Emersonian principles in *Invisible Man* is rather brief, the aim of this chapter is to trace this relationship in detail and to show how the protagonist adopts an essentially Emersonian perspective on life which helps him to overcome the naïve and self-negating conduct of his youth.

---

[1] Ralph Ellison, *Invisible Man* (New York: Vintage Books, 1995) 15.
[2] Earl H. Rovit, "Ralph Ellison and the American Comic Tradition", *Ralph Ellison: A Collection of Critical Essays*, ed. John Hersey (Englewood Cliffs: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1974) 155.
[3] Rovit 156.

4.1 Expectations, Role Models and "White Is Right"

The protagonist of *Invisible Man* is shown to be an ambitious youth with great hopes for the future, aspiring to become the spokesman of his people in the grain of the African-American leader Booker T. Washington. In order to fulfill his dream, he diligently follows the path which has been laid out before him. The problem with this conduct is that it is not he himself who determines this path. As the author of the novel says in an interview, "[t]he major flaw in the hero's character is his unquestioning willingness to do what is required of him by others as a way to success […]. He goes where he is told to go; he does what he is told to do"[4]. The path has been laid out for him by the white establishment with the following purpose in mind: to keep the protagonist within the limits of the prevailing social order in which African Americans are designated the place of second-class citizens. The protagonist is expected to and, what is worse, attempts to fulfill a role which is highly self-negating and which is designed to undermine any effort to improve the position of African Americans in American society. The mature narrator accurately summarizes his own behavior in the following words: "I had kept unswervingly to the path placed before me, had tried to be exactly what I was expected to be, had done exactly what I was expected to do"[5]. At the beginning of the novel, the protagonist thus negates the vital Emersonian principle of self-reliance, which is essentially equivalent to the negation of his own self. This tendency, as we shall see, is precisely what he later attempts to free himself of, realizing that it is only once he begins to trust his own experience and judgment that he can truly be free.

In the first chapters of the novel the young protagonist is shown to have internalized the power structure promoted and perpetuated by the white "big shots"[6], obediently fulfilling the stereotypical idea of how an African American is expected to behave in the US

---

[4] George Plimpton, ed., *Writers at Work: The Paris Review Interviews, Second Series* (New York: The Viking Press, 1969) 329.
[5] Ellison 146.
[6] Ellison 17.

South. When the protagonist looks for recognition, it is to these influential white men that he turns: "I felt that only these men could judge truly my ability"[7]. It is, however, not in the interest of these men to grant the young African American his full abilities and possibilities, since they are well aware that this would necessarily endanger their own power. The encouragement they give the youth is limited to certain kinds of behavior which, ironically, they had themselves defined as desirable. The protagonist's behavior is thus very carefully monitored and contained. As soon as he oversteps the limits, he is promptly returned to his place. An example of this is the speech after the battle royal where the words "social equality" accidentally slip from his mouth. His audience is quick to perceive the slip of the tongue as a threat, the protagonist is made to correct himself and is returned to his assigned position: "you've got to know your place at all times"[8]. That this place is subordinate need not be stated explicitly in the novel, just as it is clear that its key characteristics are humbleness, servility, and gratefulness.

It is no coincidence that the protagonist's role model during his youth is Booker T. Washington; by many this leader was considered to be an accommodationist and his strategy was therefore seen as close to harmful to African Americans. As Floyd R. Horowitz asserts, Washington's tradition amounts to the "intellectualized acceptance of white authority"[9]. It is precisely for this reason that the protagonist is encouraged by the white men to follow in the steps of this leader; perceiving the protagonist's intelligence and high aspirations, it is more convenient to have him admire and follow the accommodationist Washington than to let him ponder on the possibility of a more radical solution.

---

[7] Ellison 25.
[8] Ellison 31.
[9] Floyd R. Horowitz, "Ralph Ellison's Modern Version of Brer Bear and Brer Rabbit in *Invisible Man*", *Twentieth Century Interpretations of Invisible Man*, ed. John M. Reilly (Englewood Cliffs: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1970) 32.

For his exemplary behavior during his youth the protagonist receives a reward in the form of a scholarship to a college for Negroes "to encourage him in the right direction"[10]. However, the scholarship ironically strengthens the white hold on the protagonist. The college is funded by white trustees who make sure that the students are indoctrinated with such "virtues" as to prevent them from questioning the existing order. This reward thus functions to further reinforce the prevailing power structure. The narrator recalls how the trustees

> described to us the limitations of our lives and the vast boldness of our aspirations, the staggering folly of our impatience to rise even higher […]. This was our world, they said as they described it to us, this our horizon and its earth, […] and they themselves our thunder and lightning; and this we must accept and love and accept even if we did not love.[11]

This quote provides a clear description of the power dynamics in the protagonist's world. It is the trustees who define the limits of the students' lives, while the students are passive recipients and accept what is presented to them as perhaps not the most desirable, but certainly as a more or less unchangeable state. The reference to thunder and lightning also makes it evident that the trustees fashion themselves in the role of gods who have unlimited power over the fate of the students. The protagonist accepts the place designed for him, internalizing the belief that the white trustees truly are his gods.

It is the supposedly mad vet doctor at the Golden Day who points out that the protagonist considers Mr. Norton, one of the trustees, to be "a God, a force", as well as the fact that the protagonist "believes in that great false wisdom […] that white is right"[12]. The vet thus names the crux of the problem: the protagonist does not form his own independent view of the world or of himself, but instead accepts an image fed to him by others. What the protagonist needs to realize is that this image is distorted and the picture it provides does not

[10] Ellison 32.
[11] Ellison 112.
[12] Ellison 95.

correspond with reality. In the protagonist's world there is, as Philippe Whyte points out, a profound "gap between what one is and what people see one to be"[13]. The vet is one of the few characters who give the protagonist truly wise advice. It is therefore highly probable that he is kept away from society by being confined in a mental asylum not because he is mad, but rather because he has more sense than is convenient. During his second meeting with the protagonist, the vet's words sound much like Emerson's advice: "I'm nobody's father except my own. […] Be your own father, young man. And remember, the world is possibility if only you'll discover it"[14]. At this point of the novel, it is yet to take some time before the protagonist learns to appreciate this wisdom. Towards the end of the novel, however, he comes to realize that "freedom was not only the recognition of necessity, it was the recognition of possibility"[15].

The apparently contradictory concepts of necessity and possibility are brought together in a similar way as in Emerson's essay "Fate", where Emerson claims that a "man's power is hooped in by a necessity, which, by many experiments, he touches on every side, until he learns its arc"[16]. Through such experimenting one is to find the different possibilities available. Emerson recognizes that possibilities are not infinite, yet necessity allows for a sufficient and satisfactory number of them. What Emerson suggests is also acknowledged by the protagonist of *Invisible Man*: there are limits to each man's powers, yet within these one can and must move freely. It is futile to attempt to break through the limiting arc of necessity and for this reason it is important to know where exactly this arc lies. It is, however, likewise foolish to ignore the possibilities which the arc of necessity allows for. As Emerson says, "a part of Fate is the freedom of man"; it is not only man's right, but it is also his duty to explore and make use of his possibilities.

---

[13] Philippe Whyte, "*Invisible Man* as a Trickster Tale", *Delta*, No. 18, 1984, 66.
[14] Ellison 156.
[15] Ellison 499.
[16] Emerson, . "Fate" 15 Feb. 2011 <http://www.rwe.org/works/Conduct_1_Fate.htm>.

4.2 Invisibility and Blindness

As the title of the novel suggests, invisibility is an important and a frequently recurring motif in this literary work. It is intimately connected with the protagonist's quest to discover and affirm his self. In the very first sentence of the novel, the already mature narrator relates to the reader the crucial fact which he has discovered about his existence: that he is invisible. He goes on to explain that this is the case "because people refuse to see"[17] him. In other words, people turn a blind eye to his true identity. The motif of invisibility is thus closely connected with the motif of blindness. The two are often so intimately intertwined that it is best to interpret them as two sides of the same coin. As we read further into the novel, it becomes evident that the recurring motifs of invisibility and blindness cut in more than one way. Not only is the protagonist invisible to other characters; for a long time he is also invisible to himself. Instead of seeing his authentic self, he sees the image which others have created. More often than not it is a stereotypical image which negates the protagonist's individuality. The protagonist is shown to be in the undesirable position of "looking at [him]self through the eyes of others"[18], a position described by Du Bois and identified as detrimental to the improvement of the African-American situation. Furthermore, other characters are also invisible to the protagonist. The fact that he is blind to the true identity of the trustees and sees gods in their stead is a case in point.

The motif of blindness reappears during the battle royal in the first chapter when the boys are blindfolded and forced to strike out blindly at one another to entertain the influential white men of the town. The narrator describes the effect of being blindfolded in the following words: "Blindfolded, I could no longer control my motions. I had no dignity."[19] While the blindfolded boys do not see what they are doing, it is the white

---

[17] Ellison 3.
[18] W.E.B. Du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folk*, 11 Feb. 2011 <http://www.gutenberg.org/files/408/408-h/408-h.htm>.
[19] Ellison 22.

onlookers who shout directions at them. The battle royal can thus be seen as a ritual where the boys' self-confidence and dignity is trampled upon while the power of the white audience is strengthened. Ellison himself describes this scene as "a ritual in preservation of caste lines"[20]. During the battle, however, the protagonist's blindfold comes loose, allowing him to see at least partially. As soon as his "eye partly opened there was not so much terror"[21] and the protagonist achieves an obvious advantage over the other boys. This scene represents the theme of the novel in miniature; the protagonist's blindness is shown to be a great hindrance because it places him in the power of other characters, while the opening of his eyes liberates him and allows him to see the world for himself and create his own independent picture of it. This further enables him to act according to his own decisions instead of having to rely on the directions of others.

The motif of blindness recurs during the protagonist's studies at the college for Negroes. A dominant and symbolic feature of the college premises is the statue of "the college Founder […], his hands outstretched in the breathtaking gesture of lifting a veil [from] the face of a kneeling slave". The allusion to Du Bois's symbol of the veil is clear. What never struck the protagonist during his youth strikes the mature narrator as he recollects the scene; he "is unable to decide whether the veil is really being lifted, or lowered more firmly in place"[22]. This realization is just one of the many examples of the profound changes which take place in the protagonist's vision and which allow him to see reality in its greater complexity. It is the case of revelation which Emerson describes in "Illusions": "From day to day, the capital facts of human life are hidden from our eyes. Suddenly the mist rolls up, and reveals them, and we think how much good time is gone, that might have been saved, had any hint of these things been shown"[23]. As the mist begins

---

[20] Plimpton 326.
[21] Ellison 23.
[22] Ellison 36.
[23] Ralph Waldo Emerson, "Illusions", *Ralph Waldo Emerson: Essays and Lectures* (New York: The Library of America, 1983) 1121.

to rise and the protagonist's vision becomes clearer, he likewise realizes how much had been lost in the meantime: "What and how much had I lost by trying to do only what was expected of me instead of what I myself had wished to do? What a waste, what a senseless waste!"[24] Although the protagonist is yet to experience a number of disillusionments, this conscious recognition brings him a step closer towards the clear sense of self which he achieves by the end of the novel.

The statue at the college has a further function. The possibility of the Founder keeping the slave in darkness underscores the fact that the role of the college, as Robert A. Bones claims, "is not to educate but to indoctrinate with a myth"[25]. It is the myth of supposed progress as a reward for patience and humbleness which Reverend Barbee advocates in his speech. The fact that Barbee is blind, however, symbolically shows the model of patience and humbleness to be flawed. Once the Reverend delivers his speech, he stumbles; his path is one on which African Americans are not given the opportunity to walk with dignity. Barbee is evidently advocating the same strategy as was put forth by Booker T. Washington, the protagonist's role model. Although the protagonist is startled by the revelation of Barbee's blindness, he does not understand its symbolic meaning.

Instead of taking this incident as a warning and turning away from the path of humbleness and patience, the protagonist models his next significant speech in the eviction scene once again on the accommodationist leader. He builds the speech around the "accepted lie"[26], as Barbara Christian calls it, that African Americans are "a law-abiding people and a slow-to-anger people"[27]. While Christian claims that the protagonist delivers this lie intentionally "in order to provoke and arouse the crowd to action"[28], the scene rather suggests that the speech is intended without any irony. While the crowd is ready to rush at

---

[24] Ellison 266.
[25] Robert A. Bone, *The Negro Novel in America* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1958) 205.
[26] Barbara Christian, "Ralph Ellison: A Critical Study", *Black Expression: Essays by and about Black Americans in the Creative Arts*, ed. Addison Gayle, Jr. (New York: Weybright and Talley, Inc., 1970) 361.
[27] Ellison 275.
[28] Christian 361.

the white men who are carrying the eviction out, the protagonist is evidently attempting to hold it back. In this scene it is not the "hero [who] destroys the false myth that Negroes can and will suffer anything"[29] as Christian claims; it is rather the crowd that is determined to do this. The protagonist is, once again, delivering "the shock-absorbing phrases that [he] had learned all [his] life"[30]. His fall as the crowd finally rushes forward, not heeding his speech, could be interpreted as a parallel to Barbee's stumble, revealing the ineffectiveness of the strategy the protagonist is putting forward. Interestingly, it is during his very next speech, his first speech for the Brotherhood, when the protagonist identifies the blindness of African-Americans as one of the gravest problems: "They think we're blind – *un*-commonly blind. And I don't wonder. Think about it, they've dispossessed us each of one eye from the day we're born. So now we can only see in straight white lines."[31] At this point the protagonist is not yet aware of the ironic and highly symbolic fact that the white brother Jack, one of the head members of the Brotherhood, is missing one eye.

Brother Jack's glass eye symbolizes the fact that he does not see the protagonist as he really is, but in a manner highly distorted to suit Jack's own purposes. Brother Jack, as we shall see, is one of the characters who deny the protagonist the right to express his individuality. Instead, Jack attempts to define the protagonist's identity himself and is intent upon subduing him to the Brotherhood's decidedly anti-Emersonian philosophy of self-denial and self-sacrifice.

4.3 African-American Stereotypes in *Invisible Man*

Addison Gayle rightly refers to Ellison's novel as "a journey through American stereotypes and images"[32]. During the course of the novel, the protagonist is subjected to a

---

[29] Christian 361.
[30] Ellison 275.
[31] Ellison 343.
[32] Addison Gayle, Jr., *The Way of the New World: The Black Novel in America* (New York: Anchor Press, 1976) 255.

wide range of African-American stereotypes which delay his progress towards the discovery and the free expression of his true identity. However, the protagonist's attitude to these stereotypes undergoes a significant change. While the beginning of the novel finds him accepting these images and mistaking them for who he really is, he soon comes to the realization that he must not rely on anyone else's image of himself.

One of the stereotypes which the protagonist encounters and at first attempts to fulfill is that of the servile African American. The clearest sign of his acceptance of this role is his admiration of Booker T. Washington and the leader's accommodationist tradition. This stereotype is also underscored in a number of other ways. It is dramatized in the scene where the protagonist drives Mr. Norton, one of the white trustees of the college, around the premises; his position of a chauffeur for the white man clearly strengthens the social hierarchy. While it may be argued that in this case the student merely carries out a task at the request of Dr. Bledsoe, the director of the college, there are other instances when the protagonist actively envisions himself in a servile position. On his way to New York, the protagonist imagines how he will behave when he meets his future employers:

> When I met the big men to whom my letters were addressed I would put on my best manner. I would speak softly, in my most polished tones, smile agreeably and be most polite; and I would remember that if he […] should begin a topic of conversation […] which I found unfamiliar, I would smile and agree.[33]

There is an instance in the novel when the protagonist is explicitly referred to as an "Uncle Tom"[34], the prototype of the servile African American. The protagonist is identified as such by Ras, a character who represents the ideology of the Pan-African movement popularized by Marcus Garvey especially during the 1920s. Despite the obvious limitations of the ideology which Ras represents, some of the ideas which he imparts to the protagonist during their violent meeting in Harlem are worth considering for their highly self-

[33] Ellison 157.
[34] Ellison 369.

affirmative stance. Ras is certainly not one who suffers from lack of self-esteem or who would let others define and limit his life. This is evident from the following words: "Don't deny you'self! […] Recognize you'self inside […]! A mahn knows he's a mahn when he got not'ing, when he's naked – nobody have to tell him that!"[35] While the protagonist unquestioningly lets himself be named by others, such is not the case with Ras. The protagonist's question as to where Ras got his name is answered in the following words: "He gave it to himself. […] *Ras* is a title of respect in the East"[36]. Ras is beyond the stage of masking his true beliefs and is making use of the right to self-definition and free expression. Thus he is quite justified in calling the protagonist an Uncle Tom.

The mask of servility was often adopted by African Americans as a useful survival strategy during the slavery era. As Norrece T. Jones claims, "[p]erhaps [no stratagem] was more effective than the broad mask of servility that [black elders] coached all to wear in order to disguise their quest for freedom"[37]. This advice is also expressed by the protagonist's slaveborn grandfather as he lies on his deathbed: "overcome 'em with yeses, undermine 'em with grins, agree 'em to death and destruction"[38]. The grandfather's words haunt the protagonist throughout the novel and he even attempts to make use of this strategy. However, in the last chapter he concludes that his "grandfather had been wrong about yessing them to death and destruction"[39] and that "[by] pretending to agree [he] had indeed agreed"[40].

The character who exemplifies this strategy especially well in the novel is the director of the college, Dr. Bledsoe. The narrator humorously recalls how Dr. Bledsoe "managed to make himself look humble. Somehow, his trousers inevitably bagged at the

---

[35] Ellison 373.
[36] Ellison 376.
[37] Norrece T. Jones, Jr., "In Search of Freedom: Slave Life and Culture in the Antebellum South", *Essays on African-American History, Culture and Society*, eds. William R. Scott and William G. Shade (Washington: Bureau of Educational and Cultural Affairs, 2005) 88.
[38] Ellison 16.
[39] Ellison 564.
[40] Ellison 553.

knees and the coat slouched in the shoulders"[41]. The protagonist realizes that the apparent humbleness of Dr. Bledsoe is just a mask only when he is about to be expelled from the college. The revelation of Dr. Bledsoe's trickery is a shock for him; the protagonist has not yet learned to "[p]lay the game, but [not] believe in it"[42]; instead, he believes the servility of African Americans to be genuine and he unquestioningly accepts this role.

The development of the protagonist's behavior can be divided into three stages, where each stage seems to be a logical development of the previous one while it at the same time moves closer to the ideal of self-affirmation. The first stage of this development is outright self-negation where the protagonist accepts the role which has been designed for him. This is the stage in which the protagonist finds himself before he leaves the South. The yessing strategy of the grandfather as well as the mask of servility which Bledsoe uses so effectively seems to be the next logical step. Unlike the protagonist who is genuinely servile at the beginning of the novel, these two characters are conscious of the game-like quality of their strategy and they realize that they are not expressing their genuine selves. In order to fully realize one's self, however, this stage is also to be overcome; the ideal is the free and open expression of one's self without the need of concealment.

In the evaluation of his grandfather's strategy towards the end of the novel, the protagonist rightly points out that "things had changed too much since [grandfather's] day"[43]. While the strategy may have been useful for the grandfather in his time, society has undergone changes since then which allow the protagonist to move beyond yessing and to freely express himself. The three stages of self-perception described above could therefore not only be viewed in terms of individual development, but also in relation to historical time where the stage which prevails at any particular time depends on historical and social conditions. This historical perspective, however, seems to be limited only to the last two

[41] Ellison 114.
[42] Ellison 153.
[43] Ellison 564.

stages; it is difficult to find a time in African-American history when the first stage of self-negation prevailed.

The change which takes place in the protagonist's perception of the stereotypes and roles imposed on him, allowing him to move from the self-negating stage to the stage of self-affirmation, correlates with his moving from the South to New York. In the South, racial roles are strictly defined and more difficult to transcend; the only ones who openly turn them upside down are the vets at the Golden Day who are deemed crazy. It is in New York where the black and white roles which the protagonist has learned to accept as natural begin to crumble. The protagonist's bewilderment at his physical closeness to a white female in the subway as well as his "shock of seeing a black policeman directing traffic – and there were white drivers in the traffic who obeyed his signals as though it was the most natural thing in the world"[44] testifies to how deeply imbedded the racial roles are in his mind. Although the city is far from free of racial stereotypes as will be shown later on, it does open up new and unexpected avenues for the protagonist and it is here where he first begins to assert himself by consciously opposing the stereotypes in terms of which many other characters perceive him. Some rare moments of the last stage of self-affirmation take place relatively early on in the novel; the protagonist's words "I am what I am" and the pun on this, "I yam what I am"[45] in the yam scene are clear examples. The fact that what follows is the eviction scene where the protagonist once again reverts to Washington's accommodationist tactics shows that his development towards the final stage takes place rather slowly, with frequent regression to the earlier stages.

Another stereotype which the protagonist encounters is that of the African American as an entertainer. The battle royal where the boys are brought out on the stage to entertain the white men can be seen as the first occurrence of this stereotype. More frequently,

[44] Ellison 159.
[45] Ellison 266.

however, this stereotype is linked with the alleged musicality and the sensuous exoticism of African Americans; what they are expected to perform are songs and dance, often of a genre labeled as "primitive". The protagonist is viewed through the prism of this stereotype in the factory hospital scene. As he is forced to undergo shock therapy, the doctors claim: "Look, he's dancing […]. They really do have rhythm, don't they?"[46] The doctors laugh at the protagonist's grotesque movements, viewing him, in Ellin Horowitz's words, "as a ludicrous dancing minstrel darky, the harmless silly fellow the white world would like to believe in"[47]. Besides exemplifying the stereotype, this scene also shows a change in how the protagonist perceives such images. While in the battle royal he acts according to expectations and fulfills the stereotype, the anger which he feels when he hears what the doctors say about him is evidence of the fact that he is no longer prepared to accept unquestioningly such stereotypical images. Although in the hospital he finds himself in a situation which renders him powerless, his anger is a positive indicator of the fact that he has begun to question and to reject the stereotypes which are constantly being forced onto him.

The stereotype of the singing and dancing entertainer recurs during the protagonist's engagement with the Brotherhood. At the first Brotherhood party one of the members asks: "How about a spiritual, Brother? Or one of those real good ole Negro work songs?"[48] The protagonist's reaction is hysterical laughter; he has realized that such stereotypes are not to be taken seriously. Several chapters later, a woman reacts to the protagonist's speech in the following way: "It's so powerful, so – so primitive! […] Yes, primitive; no one has told you, Brother, that at times you have tom-toms beating in your voice?"[49]

---

[46] Ellison 237.
[47] Ellin Horowitz, "The Rebirth of the Artist", *Twentieth Century Interpretations of Invisible Man*, ed. John M. Reilly (Englewood Cliffs: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1970) 83.
[48] Ellison 312.
[49] Ellison 413.

The third stereotype with which other characters associate the protagonist is that of the violent brute. Ellison gives a rather humorous portrayal of this stereotype in chapter twenty-four where the white character Sybil attempts to stage her fantasies about the sexual prowess and the violence of African-American men. As she asks the protagonist to rape her, he realizes that her deluded beliefs are the results of the stereotypes which prevail in society: "why be surprised, when that's what they hear all their lives"[50]. Sybil is thus another one of those characters who do not see the protagonist's true self, but instead see their own image of him which is far removed from reality.

While the protagonist considers Sybil to be more of a victim of such illusions herself and is therefore not offended by her proposal, on a number of occasions he is shown to react in anger to such negating and dehumanizing impositions. An example of this is his first Brotherhood party where Emma, one of the Brotherhood members, expresses the opinion that the protagonist "should be a little blacker"[51] to better suit the Brotherhood's purposes. The protagonist's angry reaction shows that he is no longer prepared to put up with being constantly defined and shaped according to the selfish views of others: "So she doesn't think I'm black enough. What does she want, a black-face comedian? […] Maybe she wants to see me sweat coal, tar, ink, shoe polish, graphite. What am I, a man or a natural resource?"[52] This reaction shows the protagonist's revolt against repeatedly being treated as "a stereotype, an object, an instrument but never as an American or a man"[53]. In the scene with Sybil, however, he decides to pretend to act the role which she bestows upon him. While Thomas A. Vogler claims that "in the very moment of seeing Sybil's fantasy of the Black rapist he is himself attempting to live one"[54], the scene seems somewhat more

---

[50] Ellison 520.
[51] Ellison 303.
[52] Ellison 303.
[53] Simone Vauthier, "Not Quite on the Beat: An Academic Interpretation of the Narrative Stances in Ralph Ellison's Invisible Man", *Delta*, No. 18, 1984, 76.
[54] Thomas A. Vogler, "*Invisible Man*: Somebody's Protest Novel", *Ralph Ellison: A Collection of Critical Essays*, ed. John Hersey (Englewood Cliffs: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1974) 142.

complex. On the one hand, it can be compared to the grandfather's yessing strategy, about which the protagonist concludes that "[b]y pretending to agree [the protagonist] *had* indeed agreed"[55]. On the other hand, in this scene the protagonist realizes straight away that "[s]uch games were for Rinehart, not me"[56]. Whether the protagonist "agrees" with the role Sybil gives him seems much more dubious than whether he "agrees" with the Brotherhood. In the Brotherhood he considers this strategy to be useful, not realizing that he is the one who is being fooled, while it is he who fools Sybil into believing that he had raped her. What is clear is that the protagonist does not genuinely attempt to act out the role as he did during his days in the South, yet his efforts to openly refute it are quite meek. He feels sorry for the deluded Sybil and his trying to please her by pretending to act the role she gives him is a mild form of self-denial, yet it is difficult to interpret it as the protagonist's outright agreement with it.

4.4 Emersonian and Anti-Emersonian Characters in *Invisible Man*

The aim of this subchapter is to analyze the characters of *Invisible Man* in light of Emerson's philosophy. Based on their behavior and world view, the characters in the novel can be divided into Emersonian and anti-Emersonian. However, because the discussion of some of the characters was used to elucidate the topics of the previous sections, this subchapter will focus only on the characters not yet dealt with. Those characters already discussed will be treated only briefly.

Throughout the novel the majority of the characters with whom the protagonist interacts impose their own image on him and attempt to control him in some way. Such characters can be considered as essentially anti-Emersonian since they negate Emerson's master belief in the right and the need of every individual to define himself and his own life.

---

[55] Ellison 553.
[56] Ellison 523.

The white men at the battle royal, the white trustees of the college, Reverend Barbee who propagates the doctrine of self-denial and the manipulative Dr. Bledsoe are examples of the southern characters who fall into this category.

Contrary to what could be expected of the more liberal North, the protagonist's change of milieu does not bring any tangible decrease in the number of anti-Emersonian characters. The character Emerson, the secretary of one of the protagonist's potential employers, appears to have good intentions with the protagonist which he proves by revealing Dr. Bledsoe's treachery. In this way, he helps to open the eyes of the protagonist. Even he, however, has his own preconceived view of the protagonist which is based on a stereotypical image. During the job interview, Emerson touches upon the stereotype of the physical prowess of African Americans: "Were you an athlete? […] You have the build […]. You'd probably make an excellent runner, a sprinter"[57]. Furthermore, Emerson's belief that he "know[s] many things about [the protagonist] – not [him] personally, but fellows like [him]"[58] is a clear example of the kind of arrogance with which many characters claim that they know so much about the protagonist that they can advise him about his life. Emerson may have good intentions, but by "trying to advise [the protagonist] what is best for [him]"[59] he is negating the Emersonian belief that each man knows best how to conduct his own life. At this point the protagonist resists Emerson, only to affirm the influence of Dr. Bledsoe on his actions: "But *I* know what is best for me […]. Or at least Dr. Bledsoe does"[60]. The protagonist remains under the self-negating influence of Dr. Bledsoe, believing that it is from him he can learn the direction he is to take, not yet realizing the extent of Dr. Bledsoe's manipulations.

---

[57] Ellison 182-183.
[58] Ellison 187.
[59] Ellison 189.
[60] Ellison 189.

The protagonist, following the episode in which the treacherous attempt of Dr. Bledsoe to "keep him running"[61] is revealed, begins to assert his own will to a much greater extent. The fact that he continues to fall in the traps that are set for him is of lesser importance than the fact that he consciously thinks about his situation and does his best to be in control of it. By the end of chapter nine, which contains the Emerson episode, the protagonist has arranged a job at Liberty Paints, rightly satisfied that "[t]his time *I* had made the move"[62]. Independent action is key to the protagonist's development towards the Emersonian ideal.

The environment as well as the characters at Liberty Paints are also decidedly anti-Emersonian. The slogan of the company, "If It's Optic White, It's the Right White", reminds the protagonist of a rhyme which expresses the race relations of the time: "If you're white, you're right"[63]. The protagonist is told by his boss Kimbro to "just do what you're told and don't try to think about it"[64]. By now the protagonist has, however, become very sensitive to all attempts to negate him, and he reacts in a similar way as he does later on in the novel to the already mentioned Emma: "So I wasn't supposed to think! To hell with him"[65]. The protagonist is further denied the right to make his own decision by the union members he meets at the plant: "They had made their decision without giving me a chance to speak for myself"[66].

A character whose anti-Emersonian stance is not so obvious is Mary Rambo, at whose place the protagonist finds his refuge once he is released from the factory hospital. Unlike the other anti-Emersonian characters whom Ellison ridicules through the use of a good deal of irony, Mary is portrayed in a predominantly positive light. However, the protagonist realizes that even her attitude towards him is limiting. Just like the majority of

---

[61] Ellison 194.
[62] Ellison 195.
[63] Ellison 218.
[64] Ellison 200.
[65] Ellison 200.
[66] Ellison 223.

the other characters which the protagonist interacts with, Mary also has certain expectations of him that he resents: "Mary reminded me constantly that something was expected of me, some act of leadership, some newsworthy achievement"[67]. As the protagonist decides that it is time to move on, he reflects on what it is that he dislikes about her:

> there are many things about people like Mary that I dislike. For one thing, they seldom know where their personalities end and yours begins; they usually think in terms of "we" while I have always tended to think in terms of "me" – and that has caused some friction, even with my own family[68].

The protagonist prefers a more individualistic attitude which would allow him to rely on himself without having to conform to the expectations of the group. It is quite ironic that his next step is his membership in the Brotherhood, Ellison's satirical treatment of the Communist Party, which attempts to suppress the individuality of the members in order to advance the goals of the organization.

It is in the Brotherhood where the protagonist's conflict with other characters over his right to express himself and to act according to his own beliefs reaches its peak. An early sign of the Brotherhood's suppression of the individual is the new name which the protagonist receives from Brother Jack. By choosing a name for the protagonist, the Brotherhood in effect usurps the right to define him and assign him a place within the organization. At this point it is pertinent to mention the implications of the protagonist's namelessness. Not once during the novel is the protagonist's name mentioned. This is not only the case with the name he is assigned by the Brotherhood; the reader never finds out what the protagonist's real name is either. Philippe Whyte contends that the narrator "tells the story as an Everyman representing the predicament of all human beings, a person who cannot have an individualizing name because he was somehow 'a part of all of them'"[69]. According to Whyte, then, a name has an individualizing effect and the narrator is not given

[67] Ellison 258.
[68] Ellison 316.
[69] Whyte 65.

a name because he represents the general rather than the individual. A name could, however, also be seen in different terms: as a label with an unnecessarily limiting and categorizing effect. Hortense Spillers points out that a name "could confine"[70] the protagonist. By the time the protagonist writes the novel, he has been labeled and defined so many times that it is not surprising that he prefers to give himself the freedom to stay unnamed and undefined and thus to leave more possibilities open for himself. By refusing to give himself a name, the protagonist becomes an exemplar of the Emersonian self, which, in Richard Poirier's words, "tries to elude definition"[71]. As Poirier further claims, "[t]he 'self' on which Emerson chooses to rely exists only in transitions"[72]. The reason why the self needs to undergo constant transformation and redefinition is because it is "in the moment of transition from a past to a new state"[73] where the most power resides.

At first the protagonist hopes that within the framework of the Brotherhood he will be given some space within which to move freely, but he soon finds out that this is not to be the case. As the protagonist claims, "[t]he organization had given [him] a vital role"[74]. In his belief that the Brotherhood is "the one organization in the whole country in which [he] could reach the very top"[75], the protagonist again accepts the role which he is given. It is only later that he realizes that the Brotherhood is intent upon denying its members their individuality. While at the beginning of the novel this did not seem to be too much of a problem for the protagonist, he has now reached a stage where he would like to express his individuality and openly resents the attempts to deny him the opportunity to do so. In the Brotherhood, however, "[i]ndividuals don't count for much; it's what the group wants, what the group does. Everyone here submerges his personal ambitions for the common

---

[70] Hortense J. Spillers, "Ellison's "Usable Past": Toward a Theory of Myth", *Black, White, and in Color: Essays on American Literature and Culture* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2003) 78.
[71] Richard Poirier, *The Renewal of Literature: Emersonian Reflections* (New York: Random House, 1987) 87.
[72] Poirier 176.
[73] Ralph Waldo Emerson, "Self-Reliance", *Essays and Poems*, (London: Everyman, 2001) 35-36.
[74] Ellison 382.
[75] Ellison 380.

achievement"[76]. The protagonist is chastised for acting on his "personal responsibility"[77] and is accused of being a "petty individualist"[78]. To this he replies with a tone of irony that he "had forgotten [his] place"[79], alluding to the first chapter of the novel where he is likewise reminded of his place as soon as there is the smallest sign of him overstepping the line. A parallel can also be seen between Brother Jack's and Dr. Bledsoe's strategy. Just as it is Dr. Bledsoe's strategy to "take these white folks where we want them to go, we show them what we want them to see"[80], so does brother Jack advise the protagonist to "[s]ay what the people want to hear, but say it in such a way that they'll do what we wish"[81]. Both characters are shown to be manipulators, the antithesis of the Emersonian belief that each man must determine his own path without the interference of others.

The number of characters who can be considered Emersonian is noticeably smaller. The most obvious one is the already discussed mad vet doctor. Another character who can be counted among this group is Ras with his philosophy of personal pride and the belief in oneself. In a certain way Trueblood, the incestuous sharecropper with his Emersonian conclusion that "I ain't nobody but myself"[82] and with his acceptance of who he is, could be considered as one of this group. Finally, a character who embodies the Emersonian trait of flux and possibility is Rinehart whom the protagonist meets towards the end of the novel.

Rinehart is a highly protean character whose identity undergoes constant transformation. He is in a state of perpetual flux which opens up a world of a seemingly countless number of possibilities. Since it is precisely in this state of transition where Emerson sees the most potential for empowerment, it seems that Rinehart is a true representative of Emersonianism. The protagonist realizes the advantages of Rinehart's

---

[76] Ellison 397.
[77] Ellison 463.
[78] Ellison 401.
[79] Ellison 470.
[80] Ellison 102.
[81] Ellison 359.
[82] Ellison 66.

strategy: "His world was possibility and he knew it. He was years ahead of me and I was a fool. […] The world in which we lived was without boundaries"[83]. The protagonist, however, also realizes that Rinehart's way of life is not for him; once he tries this strategy out, he finds out that living as someone he is not does not feel right for him. Because Rinehart's frequency of metamorphosis seems to be somewhat extreme, the following question arises: is he simply putting on various masks and being a confidence man or does this character show that it is possible to be more things at once? While the protagonist has a chance to speak to his grandfather as well as to Dr. Bledsoe personally and thus finds out that they are simply putting on a mask, with Rinehart the answer is not clear. To answer this question, one would have to find out from Rinehart himself, since, as Emerson claims, it is only the individual himself who can define his own identity. It is not possible to determine whether Rinehart is a confidence man or not, because his feelings about his identity are never revealed.

4.5 The Emersonian Element of Jazz

Some critics have pointed out the importance of music styles of African-American origin in *Invisible Man*. For the purpose of this thesis, the frequent allusion to jazz is of special interest. According to Robert Bone, for example, "[j]azz forms have […] influenced what might be called the composition of the novel"[84]. The purpose of this subchapter is to show in what ways this music style reflects certain Emersonian features. The analysis of Emersonian features in jazz will further illuminate how this music style contributes to the overall Emersonian tone of the novel.

[83] Ellison 498.
[84] Bone 200.

According to Jack McCray, "[i]mprovisation is the most important singular feature of jazz"[85]. In other words, within the framework of a particular jazz piece, the jazz musician is free to explore the possibilities open to him through improvisation. The musician's freedom is not absolute because the overall structure of the piece poses certain limitations, but the room for possibilities is large enough to allow for relatively free self-expression. Jazz music thus exemplifies Emerson's notion of the arc within which one freely moves as depicted in the essay "Fate".

Furthermore, jazz music can be likened to Emerson's notion of an ideal society. When playing in a group, a jazz musician is not forced to conform, but is instead allowed to express his individuality. Therefore, from Emerson's perspective, a jazz group seems to embody the kind of society which should be striven for. This is a society where members are able to stand alone and retain their individuality even as they become part of the group. When playing a solo, the jazz musician is, for a moment, actually leading the rest of the group. While leadership is generally condemned by Emerson who believes that each individual should be a leader to himself, the deference which the group pays to the soloist is only temporary and the submission which it implies therefore cannot be viewed as negative. The members have to realize that the soloist's individuality positively contributes to the group. The Emersonian notion of society consisting of strong individuals is also expressed by one of the protagonist's former teachers. According to this character,

> "[o]ur task is that of 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 and then to our great astonishment we will have created something far more important: We will have created a culture."[86]

---

[85] Jack McCray, *Charleston Jazz* (Charleston: Arcadia Publishing, 2007) 12, 4 April 2011<http://books.google.com/books?id=5hsWQcCvUTkC&pg=PA11&dq=%22what+is+jazz%22&hl=cs&ei=ghaaTc-WL8TXsgac-ZTACA&sa=X&oi=book_result&ct=result&resnum=1&ved=0CDEQ6AEwAA#v=onepage&q=%22what%20is%20jazz%22&f=false> .

[86] Ellison 354.

By encouraging the members' individuality, a jazz group can be seen as a model of the ideal democracy in miniature.

The last feature of jazz which can be seen as Emersonian is its fluid form. Due to the importance of the improvisational aspect, a jazz piece can be performed in very different ways according to the current inner state of the jazz musician. While one may argue that this is the case with any performance, in jazz music this tendency is especially strong. Because of this feature, jazz music can be said to be in constant transition, lacking a finished form. The inconclusiveness of the ending of the novel as well as the fact that the protagonist is likewise perpetually on the move is an expression of the jazz-like composition of the novel.

4.6 The Emersonian Conclusion

Critical opinion is divided as to the level of success or failure of the novel's ending. Some critics believe the ending to be optimistic and therefore successful, supporting this belief by the fact that the protagonist has managed to break out of the definitions which had limited him in the past and that he is now able to trust himself in questions that have immediate relation to his own existence. Such is for example John M. Reilly's view: "[t]he unnamed narrator, now free of the definitions others imposed upon him, is about to become engaged in the world on his own terms, with his own viewpoint"[87]. William J. Schafer's interpretation of the novel's ending is somewhat more ambiguous; he claims that "there is a clear feeling of the possibility of salvation at the end of the novel[, but t]he problem is shoved rudely into the reader's hands"[88]. Other critics, however, claim that the ending of the novel is an outright failure. This opinion is exemplified by Ellin Horowitz who claims that "the epilogue […] is certainly the least effective piece of writing in the novel. We feel that

---

[87] John M. Reilly, "Introduction", *Twentieth Century Interpretations of Invisible Man*, ed. John M. Reilly (Englewood Cliffs: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1970) 7.
[88] William J. Shafer, "Irony From the Underground – Satiric Elements in Invisible Man", *Twentieth Century Interpretations of Invisible Man*, ed. John M. Reilly (Englewood Cliffs: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1970) 47.

the author searches for something positive but seems undercut by doubt"[89]. In this subchapter I shall explain why I consider the ending of the novel to be successful and in what ways it can be considered Emersonian.

What makes the ending of the novel successful in my opinion is the great development for the better which the protagonist has undergone. By the development for the better I mean his change from the naïve position of fulfilling the expectations of others without even realizing that such expectations are questionable to a stage in which he has not only rejected the definitions imposed on him, but where he consciously reflects on his own existential position. The protagonist has reached the Emersonian conclusion that "[n]o sane man at last distrusts himself"[90]. That he does not give himself a clear definition is proof of the fact that he strives to keep as many possibilities open as he can without imposing unnecessary limits on himself. Furthermore, the complexity of the perception of life which the protagonist has reached is another reason to consider the ending of the novel a success. Whether he comes to any tangible conclusions during his reflexive hibernation in his hole or not is a somewhat different matter which does not, in my opinion, determine the success or failure of the ending. Any kind of a definite conclusion about his existence seems to be too much to expect of the protagonist if we remember that even Emerson, a thinker who spent most of his life pondering upon the question of human existence, was often torn between conflicting concepts which he never quite managed to reconcile. Doubt seems to be an integral part of the human condition and any definite conclusion would necessarily be a reduction of the highly complex and often contradictory state of being. While Ihab Hassan simply states that "the very ending of the novel is inconclusive"[91] without expressing any value judgment about this, Ellin Horowitz considers the fact that "almost all of the writing

---

[89] Ellin Horowitz, "The Rebirth of the Artist", *Twentieth Century Interpretations of Invisible Man*, ed. John M. Reilly (Englewood Cliffs: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1970) 87.
[90] Ralph Waldo Emerson, "Considerations By the Way", 20 Sept. 2010 <http://www.rwe.org/complete-works/vi---conduct-of-life/vii-considerations-by-the-way>.
[91] Ihab Hassan, *Radical Innocence: Studies in the Contemporary American Novel* (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1971) 175.

in the epilogue is qualified or framed as questions"[92] as a negative feature. I believe, however, that it can be seen more as a positive sign of the protagonist's awareness of the complexity of existence and of the need to consider, weigh and reject some of the possibilities which are open.

The protagonist needs to perform one symbolic act before he is able to reach the reflexive stage of the prologue. This act is the discarding of his prize suitcase which he received as a reward for his effort at his high-school after the Battle Royal. As he receives this prize, the protagonist is told by the white men to "[k]eep developing as you are and some day it will be filled with important papers that will help shape the destiny of your people"[93]. The development as well as the destiny of African Americans which the white men have in mind is towards the acceptance of the role which they themselves assign them. The scholarship to the college for Negroes which is in the suitcase is supposed to keep the protagonist on the path of accommodation. The protagonist's nightmare about the content of the suitcase foreshadows that the role of this suitcase is to "Keep This Nigger-Boy Running"[94]. Through the course of the novel the protagonist fills the suitcase with papers and objects which symbolize his delusions and his tendency to conform to the roles assigned him by others. By the end of the novel, the suitcase contains the protagonist's high-school diploma; the deceitful letters from Dr. Bledsoe to the protagonist's employers with the purpose to keep the protagonist in his illusions; an exemplar of the Sambo dolls which Clifton, a member of the Brotherhood, reverted to selling once he found out that the Brotherhood had used its African-American members for its own purposes; the protagonist's Brotherhood name, as well as an anonymous letter of warning written by the same hand. The suitcase also contains a slave chain link and the remains of a coin bank with

[92] Horowitz 87-88.
[93] Ellison 32.
[94] Ellison 33.

the form of "a very black, red-lipped and wide-mouthed Negro"[95]. As the protagonist finds himself underground in the last chapter of the novel, he is forced to burn the contents of his suitcase "to light [his] way out"[96]. By burning the symbols of his submission, the protagonist is not only lighting his way out of physical darkness, but also from his mental darkness. The light created by these burning objects helps him see how things really are. Although the protagonist has made some progress in breaking out of his illusions throughout the novel, his vision reaches the most clearness in the hole. This paradox is humorously underpinned by his "battle with Monopolated Light & Power"[97] where he has 1,369 lights illuminating his current home.

In this hole the protagonist devotes his time to contemplating about his existence as well as to artistic creation. The result of this pastime is the novel recounting his development, as well as a clearer sense of himself and his position. Contemplation brings the protagonist to a number of highly Emersonian conclusions. Firstly, he concludes that his "world has become one of infinite possibilities. What a phrase – still, it's a good phrase and a good view of life, and a man shouldn't accept any other"[98]. The protagonist thus reaches the view supported by Emerson in his essay "Fate": "it is wholesome to man to look not at Fate, but the other way: the practical view is the other"[99]. Interestingly, the protagonist counterbalances this optimism by the pessimistic view that "[n]one of us seems to know who he is or where he's going"[100]. Again, he is expressing an important feature which is to be found in Emerson's works: the conflict between a highly optimistic and a despairingly pessimistic view of life. The same kind of pessimism as is expressed by the protagonist in this quote can be found in Emerson's "Illusions": "We cannot even see what or where our

---

[95] Ellison 319.
[96] Ellison 567.
[97] Ellison 7.
[98] Ellison 576.
[99] Ralph Waldo Emerson, "Fate", 15 Feb. 2011 <http://www.rwe.org/works/Conduct_1_Fate.htm>.
[100] Ellison 577.

stars of destiny are"[101]. As with all of Emerson's concepts, however, nothing is either purely positive or purely negative; there are always two sides of a coin. Quoting Oliver Cromwell, Emerson points out that a "man […] never rises so high as when he knows not whither he is going"[102]. Another Emersonian conclusion which the protagonist reaches is that "the assumption that the world was solid"[103] is false, confirming Emerson's notion of life as perpetual flux. The fluid notion of life is important; without it, one would not have faith in the possibility of change for the better. Since, as Robert Bone says, it is "[t]he bursting forth of Negro personality from the fixed boundaries of southern life [which is] Ellison's essential theme"[104], the empowering belief in the possibility of change is vital. The inconclusiveness of the novel as well as the abundance of questions in the Epilogue underpins the view of life as a never-ending flow. By the end of the novel the protagonist finds himself at a new beginning. He has become a true Emersonian and with this newly acquired world view, he is ready to plunge into the world once again.

---

[101] Ralph Waldo Emerson, "Illusions", *Ralph Waldo Emerson: Essays and Lectures* (New York: The Library of America, 1983) 1121.
[102] Ralph Waldo Emerson, "Circles", *Essays and Poems* (London: Everyman, 2001) 156.
[103] Ellison 576.
[104] Robert Bone, "Ralph Ellison and the Uses of Imagination", *Modern Black Novelists: A Collection of Critical Essays*, ed. M.G. Cooke (Englewood Cliffs: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1971) 52.

5. EMERSONIAN PRINCIPLES IN RICHARD WRIGHT'S *NATIVE SON*

At first glance, Richard Wright's violent novel *Native Son* from 1940 does not seem to have much in common with Ralph Waldo Emerson's philosophy. However, a deeper analysis of this literary work reveals that a number of issues which Wright raises closely resemble some of the central concepts discussed in Emerson's works. This novel portrays an African-American young man's struggle for recognition and for the realization of his individuality through autonomous action. Whether the main character, Bigger Thomas, is successful in achieving this or not has been the topic of many a critical debate. What has not been discussed, however, are the Emersonian concerns of this theme. The aim of this chapter is therefore to show in what ways some of the concerns of Wright's novel can be seen as Emersonian. Despite the great difference in tone, many issues which appear in *Invisible Man* can also be found in *Native Son*. Ellison's novel will therefore be used as a point of comparison where appropriate.

5.1 Stereotypes in *Native Son*

Just as *Invisible Man* has been referred to as "a journey through American stereotypes and images"[1], a similar statement can be made about *Native Son.* A characteristic aspect of the relationships between characters in *Native Son* is that many of them view each other in terms of stereotypes. In Wright's novel, as in the first section of *Invisible Man* before the protagonist reassesses his attitude, stereotyping is a two-way process. Not only do white characters see Bigger as a stereotype, but the protagonist views white characters in a similarly distorted fashion. This distortion significantly influences the development of the plot. Like the protagonist of *Invisible Man* in his immature stage, Bigger, furthermore, views himself through the eyes of other characters, taking on the role

[1] Addison Gayle, Jr., *The Way of the New World: The Black Novel in America* (New York: Anchor Press, 1976) 255.

which he believes he is expected to fulfill. The major difference in the development of the two novels lies in the fact that while the protagonist of *Invisible Man* eventually breaks free of the roles, Bigger falls into the trap of believing that the role forced on him is his authentic self. It is the anti-Emersonian acceptance of the definition which others impose on the protagonist which is ultimately his major flaw (just as was the case with the protagonist of *Invisible Man*). The fact that this flaw is never overcome eventually leads to the protagonist's end.

What greatly contributes to the major conflict in the novel is Bigger's distorted perception of the members of the white race. Bigger does not view white characters as individuals, but rather as some kind of a threatening natural force. Keneth Kinnamon rightly claims that Bigger "cannot respond to individual whites as separate persons, but only as abstract embodiments of white power"[2]. In Bigger's eyes, the white race assumes mythic dimensions. Bigger's perception of Mr. Dalton, his employer, as "a god"[3] is reminiscent of the way in which the protagonist of *Invisible Man* views the white trustees of the college. As Joseph Bodziock points out, "Bigger does not reject the mythology of the white world; rather, he consumes it"[4]. Having limited personal experience in this matter, his understanding of the white race is based on stories and images which he hears and sees. According to Ross Pudaloff, Bigger's view of whites is significantly influenced by images spread by the media: "Bigger knows only the self and the world mass culture presents to him"[5]. It is on the basis of this preconceived and distorted image that Bigger acts. The negative consequences of viewing white characters in this way will be discussed in greater

---

[2] Keneth Kinnamon, *The Emergence of Richard Wright: A Study in Literature and Society* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1973)131.
[3] Richard Wright, *Native Son* (New York: Harper Perennial Modern Classics, 2005) 174.
[4] Joseph Bodziock, "Afro-American Gothic", *Richard Wright: Myths and Realities*, ed. C. James Trorman (New York: Garland Publishing, Inc., 1988) 33.
[5] Ross Pudaloff, "Celebrity as Identity: Native Son and Mass Culture", *Richard Wright: Critical Perspectives Past and Present*, eds. Henry Louis Gates, Jr., K. A. Appiah (New York: Amistad Press, Inc., 1993) 156.

depth in the subchapter devoted to the murder of Mary Dalton; for the moment, suffice it to say that this distorted image plays a vital role in the crime for which Bigger is tried.

As the protagonist enters what he perceives to be threatening white territory on his way to the Dalton house, he not only has a preconceived image of the family itself, but also of their expectations concerning his own behavior. What is more, he finds himself acting according to these supposed expectations. Believing that this is the way the Daltons expect him to behave, he fulfills the stereotypical image of the docile African American. During his first encounter with the Daltons, Bigger is shown to be greatly concerned about fulfilling what he believes are the expectations of his future employers: "Would they expect him to come in the front way or the back? [...] Timidly, he lifted the latch on the gate and walked to the steps. [...] He pushed [the doorbell] and was startled to hear a soft gong sound within. Maybe he had pushed it too hard?"[6]. Throughout the first interview with Mr. Dalton, Bigger constantly monitors his own behavior to make sure that it is consistent with his stereotypical image of a black employee, thus denying his true self. "With cap in hand and shoulders sloped"[7], Bigger's behavior closely resembles that of Dr. Bledsoe in *Invisible Man*. There is one significant difference, however. While Dr. Bledsoe acts the role of an Uncle Tom with a specific purpose in mind, Bigger is angry at himself for behaving this way, yet is shown to be unable to act otherwise: "He hated himself at that moment. Why was he acting and feeling this way?"[8]. In the Dalton household, then, Bigger enacts the stereotype, which in turn encourages the Daltons to view him as "timid and frightened"[9].

Bigger's mask of "a black timid Negro boy"[10] becomes a purposeful tool only after the murder of Mary Dalton. It is only then that Bigger "hide[s] behind the stereotypical

[6] Wright 44.
[7] Wright 45.
[8] Wright 47.
[9] Wright 325.
[10] Wright 107.

image of the dumb, submissive Negro"[11], realizing the benefits of "act[ing] like other people thought you ought to act, yet do[ing] what you wanted"[12]. According to the narrator of the novel, however, the protagonist "had been doing just that in a loud and rough manner all his life"[13]. The problem with this statement is that it denies the fact that throughout a significant part of the novel, Bigger's acting in a submissive way does not actually allow him to do what he wants, to which his anger at acting that way testifies. It is therefore pertinent to say a few words about the narrator of *Native Son*, because it is here where it becomes evident for the first time that the interpretation of the protagonist's behavior and feelings which the narrator gives is somewhat distorting.

The protagonist of *Native Son*, contrary to that of *Invisible Man*, is not particularly verbal or reflexive. In order to portray his inner life, methods other than his own words are therefore needed. For this purpose Wright has employed two strategies: direct dramatization through Bigger's actions and a third person narrator who at first sight appears to represent Bigger's consciousness. However, while Joyce Anne Joyce believes that "the narrator [is] identified with Bigger's consciousness"[14], the opposite actually seems to be true. The narrator frequently provides interpretations of Bigger's inner life, yet it is difficult not to sense a certain tension created by these interpretations. It is therefore Laura Tanner's opinion which better expresses the narrative situation in the novel: there "exists a discrepancy between the Bigger that we know through action and speech and the Bigger that the narrator creates before our eyes"[15]. In order to understand the protagonist's motives and feelings, the reader should not rely on the narrator's interpretation, but should rather form

---

[11] Robert Butler, "Wright's *Native Son* and Two Novels by Zola: A Comparative Study", *The Critical Response to Richard Wright*, ed. Robert J. Butler (Westport: Greenwood Press, 1995) 52.
[12] Wright 113.
[13] Wright 113.
[14] Joyce Anne Joyce, "The Figurative Web of Native Son", *Richard Wright: Critical Perspectives Past and Present*, eds. Henry Louis Gates, Jr., K. A. Appiah (New York: Amistad, 1993) 171.
[15] Laura Tanner, "Uncovering the Magical Disguise of Language: The Narrative Presence in Richard Wright's Native Son", *Richard Wright: Critical Perspectives Past and Present*, eds. Henry Louis Gates, Jr., K. A. Appiah (New York: Amistad, 1993) 137.

his own interpretation based on Bigger's words and actions. This contradiction points to a deeper philosophical conflict present in the novel to which I shall return later.

The white characters of the novel likewise view the black race in terms of stereotypes. One of the scenes which most clearly reveals the subtle issue of stereotyping is the scene where Bigger drives around with Jan and Mary. On the one hand, Jan and Mary seem to show concern for African Americans and are interested in taking part in the improvement of their situation. They reject social norms which deem African Americans subordinate and cast them in the role of servants, which they demonstrate by such symbolic action as shaking Bigger's hand and asking him to address them by their first name. At the same time, Mary's naive comments accompanied by her dreamy look[16] show that she evidently harbors a romanticized notion of the race problem tinged with a sense of exoticism. It becomes clear that not even she is free of viewing African Americans in terms of stereotypes when she subjects Bigger to the stereotypical image of the singing African-American entertainer, asking him to perform a song, a scene not unlike that in Ellison's *Invisible Man*.

The fact that stereotyping in *Native Son* is a two-way process becomes particularly clear in this scene. Bigger's tendency to view himself and others in terms of stereotypes has a significant influence on his perception and understanding of his encounter with Jan and Mary. Firstly, Bigger is not prepared to open his mind to any forms of behavior other than those based on the stereotypical view of African Americans as subordinate. Instead of using the opportunity which the liberal Jan and Mary offer, he refuses to step out of the limiting social norms. Furthermore, his view of the white race as an undifferentiated mass prevents him from constructively using the opportunity of being acquainted with whites who show willingness to help people in his position. Despite the fact that Bigger has a "feeling of freedom" as Mary talks to him, he is unable to overcome "the hard fact that she was white

[16] Wright 76.

and rich, a part of the world of people who told him what he could and could not do"[17]. At this point, Bigger is no longer reliant on the stories he hears about members of the white race, but has his own experience to rely on. That he chooses to deny his own experience and continues to lump all whites together is unfortunate, for it prevents him from discerning individuals who could be of practical use to him should he decide to strive for the improvement of his situation. Wright makes it clear that it is not possible to blame the misunderstanding solely on Jan and Mary; Bigger also significantly contributes to it through his refusal to give up his stereotypical view of whites and of his own relation to them.

It is possible to apply two of Emerson's key concepts to the development of *Native Son* at this stage: the concept of self-reliance and the concept of transition. Both of these concepts would be of practical use to the protagonist. Reliance on his own personal experience with members of the white race would allow Bigger to replace his black and white picture with a more complex one. This would in turn open his eyes to the fact that since not all whites are intent upon keeping African Americans in their place, the situation is not completely hopeless and an attempt to do something to improve the matter is not utterly futile. Bigger's possibilities would expand simply through his belief in possibility. The fact that this belief would have a positive effect on Bigger's life shows the usefulness of evaluating ideas according to the pragmatic criteria of "practical consequences" and "practical difference"[18]. The second Emersonian notion which could also have a positive effect on Bigger's life, that of transition, is paradoxically understood by the protagonist as a threat, although it has the potential of being highly empowering. Bigger is loath to leave the current order behind by abandoning the old social norms. He is unwilling to step into the unknown, although it is precisely this old order which has a limiting effect on his life. Since this order does not offer anything positive to Bigger, it is only stepping into the unknown

---

[17] Wright 65.
[18] William James, "Lecture II: What Pragmatism Means" , *Pragmatism*, 1 May 2011 <http://www.gutenberg.org/cache/epub/5116/pg5116.html>.

that offers him hope for the future. By staying within the limits of the current order, Bigger thus bars his own way to betterment.

The last and the most important of the African-American stereotypes which Wright explores in his novel is the stereotype of the black brute. This becomes yet another stereotype which the protagonist unwittingly enacts and it is around this stereotype that the plot of *Native Son* revolves. Once Bigger is identified as the murderer of Mary Dalton, the timid boy suddenly becomes a black beast in the eyes of the enraged white mob. In the novel it is the media that take on the role of reinforcing this image. What may come as a surprise to the contemporary reader is that the articles published by the fictive media which refer to Bigger as "an ape" and "a jungle beast"[19] are no more exaggerated than the articles published in 1938 on the real case of Robert Nixon.[20]

The stereotypes associated with the protagonist are enhanced by the way in which he is addressed. The name Bigger strikingly resembles the pejorative term for an African American; as Russell Carl Brignano points out, "Bigger, then, is the 'nigger'"[21]. A comparison between *Native Son* and *Invisible Man* shows that the use of names is employed in both novels to underscore the line of development of the protagonists. The name of the protagonist in *Invisible Man* is never disclosed, suggesting that his identity is perpetually developing and can therefore not be pinned down to anything final (which would also be inherently limiting). The lack of name thus leaves space for possibility. The name of Wright's protagonist, on the other hand, prefigures the fact that Bigger will never be able to break out of the negative definitions which are impressed upon him and which he fatally accepts. The definiteness of his name helps to highlight the fact that Bigger is drawn to fate rather than to possibility. The stereotype of timid subservience in *Native Son* is underscored

---

[19] Wright 279.
[20] Kinnamon 122.
[21] Russell Carl Brignano, *Richard Wright: An Introduction to the Man and His Works* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1970) 33.

by the frequency with which Bigger is referred to as a "boy". This address is often used by the officials that handle Bigger and there is no doubt that it is meant to serve as a method of intimidation. The word "son" in the name of the novel itself can be understood as enforcing the idea of the protagonist's powerlessness. It can also be seen as symbolic of the fact that Bigger never outgrows the stereotypes forced on him. He is the product, or the child, as it were, of the culture which shapes him, while he himself plays a rather passive role in this process, accepting the images which come his way. Furthermore, the word "son" evokes a sense of dependence and limitation. In Bigger's case, this may allude to the limitations imposed on him by the white race. In contrast to this, Ellison uses the word "man" in the title of his work to show that the protagonist matures by the end of the novel and is able to steer the direction of his own life himself, refuting the limitations which the racist system has attempted to impose on him and gaining instead a sense of autonomy and independence.

5.2 The Murder of Mary Dalton: Act of Creation or Fulfillment of Stereotype?

The key event of the plot of *Native Son* is the murder of Mary Dalton. However, critical opinion has been divided as to the meaning and implications of the murder. Some critics believe that the murder is Bigger's first autonomous act and that it has an enlivening and a humanizing effect on him. According to Joyce Anne Joyce, "Mary's death is Bigger's source of life"[22], which is an opinion seconded by Dan McCall, who claims that "in the act of killing, [Bigger] had begun to *be*"[23]. To name just a few more critics from this camp, Michael G. Cooke believes that for Bigger the murder "entails the beginning of his active humanity"[24], which is an opinion shared by Addison Gayle, who asserts that "[t]he murder of Mary Dalton is [...] the catalyst that propels Bigger upon the search for manhood"[25]. On

---

[22] Joyce 186.
[23] Dan McCall, *The Example of Richard Wright* (New York: Hartcourt Brace Jovanovich, Inc., 1969) 64.
[24] Michael G. Cooke, *Afro-American Literature in the Twentieth Century: The Achievement of Intimacy* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1984) 89.
[25] Gayle 204.

the other side of the critical debate stand those critics who believe that by murdering Mary Dalton, Bigger has enacted the stereotype of the black brute. Such is the opinion of Kathleen Gallagher: Bigger "is being manipulated by [a] stereotype which he has chosen to assume, that of the 'bad nigger'"[26]. Likewise, Keneth Kinnamon claims that "Bigger's sense of freedom after Mary's death is delusive"[27], which is also the opinion of C.W.E. Bigsby: "The freedom which [Bigger] believes himself to have created is highly limited and self-defeating"[28]. In this sub-chapter I shall provide further arguments for the side of the latter group of critics, and I shall show how, by accepting the stereotypical image of the black brute, Bigger bars his own way to freedom and hastens the approach of his death, the ultimate negation of the empowering flux of life. By having his protagonist accept the stereotype which inescapably leads to his death, a death designed for the African American by the racist society, Wright implicitly points out the utmost importance of self-definition as the cornerstone of a fulfilling life.

To evaluate the implications of the murder, it is important to understand for what reason it is committed. The murder is not planned, but happens by accident. It is caused by Bigger's fear of being found in Mary's room, or, more precisely, by the fear of how his being in Mary's room would be interpreted. As Barbara Johnson points out, Bigger murders "because he thinks that the only possible interpretation of his presence in [Mary's] room is 'rape' "[29]. Once again, then, Bigger is shown to look at himself through the eyes of others. Because his own image of others is distorted, however, so is his belief as to how he would be viewed by them and how his actions would be interpreted. Although the defense of the

---

[26] Kathleen Gallagher, "Bigger's Great Leap to the Figurative", *Richard Wright's Native Son*, ed. Harold Bloom (New York: Bloom's Literary Criticism, 2009) 9, 24 Apr 2011 <http://books.google.com/books?id=m7vUgQc_TpkC&printsec=frontcover&dq=Richard+Wright's+Native+Son&hl=cs&ei=qjm1TeHtFNHzsgbKptngDA&sa=X&oi=book_result&ct=result&resnum=2&ved=0CC8Q6AEwAQ#v=onepage&q&f=false>.

[27] Kinnamon 141.

[28] C. W. E. Bigsby, *The Second Black Renaissance: Essays in Black Literature* (Westport: Greenwood Press, 1980) 67.

[29] Barbara Johnson, "The Re(a)d and the Black", *Richard Wright: Critical Perspectives Past and Present*, eds. Henry Louis Gates, Jr., K. A. Appiah (New York: Amistad Press, Inc., 1993) 152.

Jewish lawyer Max at the end of the novel contains a lot of questionable statements, there is one thing he mentions that makes sense: had Bigger not been trapped in the delusive web of stereotypes, he "would have gone to Mr. or Mrs. Dalton and told them that their daughter was drunk. And the thing would have been over. There would have been no murder"[30]. During the scene of the murder, however, Bigger does not think in rational terms, which he himself confirms in his interview with Max: "Mr. Max, so help me God, I couldn't do nothing when I turned around and saw that woman [Mrs. Dalton] coming to that bed. Honest to God, I didn't know what I was doing"[31]. When we acknowledge that Bigger murders Mary because he is paralyzed with fear, it becomes difficult to agree with the interpretation of the murder as an act that "made him free [and] gave him the possibility of choice"[32] as Max as well as some critics assert.

In assessing the murder scene, it is also important to note that Bigger does actually feel attracted to Mary. His explanation of this attraction in his talk with Max towards the end of the novel further highlights the negative effect of accepting stereotypes. According to Bigger, he "was feeling that way and maybe the reason was because they say it"[33]. The protagonist is thus shown to have internalized the stereotypical assumption which is later expressed in one of the newspaper articles published about his case; "that white women have an unusual fascination for Negro men"[34]. Another dangerous and self-defeating assumption which Bigger internalizes is the fact that being black is a crime: "Had he not taken fully upon himself the crime of being black?"[35] Bigger unquestioningly accepts the connection between blackness and criminality, which has the effect of a self-fulfilling prophesy, and it thus significantly contributes to his fate. What James Baldwin writes about his grandfather in *The Fire Next Time* is also true for Bigger: "he was defeated [because he]

[30] Wright 395.
[31] Wright 352.
[32] Wright 396.
[33] Wright 351.
[34] Wright 366.
[35] Wright 296.

believed what white people said about him"[36]. The fate of the protagonist thus exemplifies the importance of one of Emerson's key notions: the importance of the concept of self-definition and the necessity of rejecting limiting definitions imposed by others. That the murder is described as "an anchor weighing [Bigger] safely in time"[37] can be seen as an ironic reversal of Emerson's belief that "only as far as [we] are unsettled is there any hope"[38]; the protagonist's "anchor" which he believes leads to safety actually leads to his death.

After the murder, it again becomes necessary to distinguish carefully between the voice of the narrator and Bigger's own thoughts. From the murder scene to the end of the novel, the narrator promotes the interpretation of the murder as an act which contributes to Bigger's freedom and to his sense of autonomy. However, it is only "[i]f we accept the narrator as Bigger's spokesperson [that] we come to see Mary's murder as an assault against an enslaving system of value rather than a fearful reflex response"[39]. Since we have established in the previous sub-chapter that the narrator cannot be identified with Bigger's consciousness and that he distorts the narrative, we likewise have to reject the narrator's interpretation of the empowering effect of the murder. As Tanner points out, the murder has no tangible effect on Bigger's position[40]; while the narrator as well as a number of critics claim that the protagonist is made free by the murder, we find Bigger standing in the kitchen of the Dalton house "wondering if he ought to eat, but afraid to do so"[41].

A number of critics have argued that the murder is an act through which Bigger gains recognition in the eyes of the white inhabitants which they have up till then denied him. Such is the opinion of Robert Bone: "Bigger murders in order to become real, to make

---

[36] James Baldwin, *The Fire Next Time*, *James Baldwin: Collected Essays* (New York: The Library of America, 1998) 291.
[37] Wright 105.
[38] Ralph Waldo Emerson, "Circles", *Essays and Poems* (London: Everyman, 2001) 155.
[39] Tanner 133.
[40] Tanner 140.
[41] Wright 186.

the white world acknowledge his existence"[42]. That the white world acknowledges Bigger's importance is questionable, however. Through the murder of a white woman, Bigger does become important in the eyes of the white population, yet not as an individual, but rather as a type, or, to be more precise, as a stereotype. In the media, Bigger is immediately associated with the stereotype of the black brute; the public is quick to label and classify him as such and his action is interpreted on the basis of this label. The scene where Bigger is asked to sign the confession by Buckley, the State's Attorney, further exemplifies the fact that nobody is really interested in Bigger as an individual. Once he has Bigger's signature, Buckley utters the following words: "Just a scared colored boy from Mississippi"[43]. Not surprisingly, this makes Bigger feel "that they had forgotten him already"[44], which in effect they had. Bigger is not important as an individual, but is seen as "the Negro symbol, as Baldwin phrases it, in 'that fantasy Americans hold in their minds when they speak of the Negro'"[45]. Besides having the effect of dismissing Bigger as utterly unimportant as an individual, Buckley's utterance is also worth analyzing in respect to the stereotype of Bigger as a beast. Buckley's words can paradoxically be seen as having a potentially humanizing effect; by referring to Bigger as "a scared colored boy", Buckley shows that he actually sees through the stereotype of the beast. This does not, however, lead to any sympathy from Buckley's side. Although he is well aware of the fact that Bigger is no beast as the media and the public claim, the State's Attorney continues to act as if he did not realize this, choosing to ignore Bigger's humanity. Despite the murder, then, Bigger never becomes important to anyone as an individual. The only characters who seem to show genuine interest in him are Jan and Max, yet it is too late for them to do anything which would be of any help.

---

[42] Robert Bone, *Richard Wright* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1969) 21.
[43] Wright 310.
[44] Wright 310.
[45] Brignano 33.

The contradictory interpretations of the murder testify to a striking conflict within the novel. On the one hand, it is evident that the murder of Mary Dalton is the result of the protagonist's internalization of a stereotype which has a highly negative effect on his life, since it gives the white racist population a sound pretext for pronouncing the death penalty upon the criminal. On the other hand, however, the narrator of the novel is determined to impress upon the reader the false opinion that through the murder, the protagonist has achieved freedom and recognition. While the conflict in the part of the novel after the murder is evident, a conflict can also be observed in the first part of the novel, to which critics have not paid as much attention. In both cases the conflict seems to be the result of the author's inability to decide on the leading philosophical line of the novel; there is evident strife between the inevitability of fate/determinism and the possibilities provided for by free will. It is here where Emerson's thought is of particular relevance. Since the understanding of this conflict significantly influences the understanding of the novel as a whole, the problem of determinism versus free will or, to use Emerson's terminology, the problem of fate versus freedom, deserves a separate subchapter.

5.3 The Emersonian Dilemma: Possibility vs. Limitation

One of the dominant characteristics of the protagonist of Wright's novel is his negative view of life. The sullen attitude of Bigger is in stark contrast to the protagonist of *Invisible Man*, who has a hopeful view of the future and exerts great effort to make something of himself. Bigger, on the other hand, has no hopes for the future, believing his life to be limited to such an extent that any striving for betterment seems to him to be futile. Bigger is often shown to be brooding on the limitations: "Goddammit! […] They don't let us do *nothing*"[46]. At the same time, however, there is no sign of his having actively

[46] Wright 19.

attempted to change the situation. Bigger's complaint that "[n]othing ever happens"[47] is a good example of his passive attitude; instead of thinking of the ways in which he can actively participate in shaping his life, Bigger passively sits and waits for something to happen. Bigger's fatalistic attitude is best portrayed close to the end of the novel when his lawyer Max asks him: "Did you ever hope for anything, Bigger?" The protagonist's answer shows that he puts all the blame on circumstances and does not consider himself to be at all responsible for the situation: "What for? I couldn't get it. I'm black"[48].

The limitations imposed on African Americans in Bigger's time cannot be denied. At the same time, however, one can legitimately ask to what extent Ralph Waldo Emerson's words that "it is wholesome to man to look not at Fate, but the other way"[49] would be of practical use in Bigger's case. Could the attitude which Emerson proposes have a positive effect on the development of Bigger's life? To answer this question, it may be useful to compare the life of this fictive character with the life of the author of the novel. Richard Wright's own experience shows that to adopt the Emersonian attitude bears its fruit. Wright grew up in Mississippi where opportunities for African Americans were strictly limited. Despite these unfavorable circumstances, however, Wright refused to give up his aspirations to become a writer and did all he could to fulfill this dream. Wright's own attitude and development thus gives the lie to the philosophy of determinism. At the same time, however, he promotes this philosophy in the novel, where it is most explicitly expressed through the deterministic way in which Max interprets Bigger's case in the last book which carries the telling title "Fate". The contradiction between Wright's personal experience and the ideology which he puts forth in the novel is pointed out by Ralph Ellison, who considers Wright to be "so wonderful an example of human possibility" but adds that Wright "could

---

[47] Wright 20.
[48] Wright 354.
[49] Ralph Waldo Emerson, "Fate", 15 Feb. 2011 <http://www.rwe.org/works/Conduct_1_Fate.htm>.

not for ideological reasons depict a Negro as intelligent, as creative or as dedicated as himself"[50].

What purpose did Wright pursue when he created Bigger Thomas? According to his own explanation in "How Bigger Was Born", he wanted to show the "horror of Negro life in the United States"[51]. For this reason he created a character who is supposedly determined by the circumstances designed for him by the dominant white society. Wright was well aware of the objections which some African Americans would make to a protagonist who would mar the reputation of the race, but was determined not to paint a more pleasing portrait. The question is to what extent Wright believed, given his own personal experience, that Bigger's situation was as hopeless as the character himself professes. As Arnold Rampersad points out, apart from naturalism with its deterministic view of life, another prominent tradition in the novel is that of existentialism, which "emphasizes the power of the will in creating identity. […] Wright took upon himself the daunting task of reconciling sometimes conflicting elements of these intellectual traditions"[52]. Although Wright intended to emphasize determinism in the life of African Americans, and thus wanted to point out what devastating effect racist restrictions had on them, the fact that he does not wholly agree with the deterministic view of life is evident from various features in the novel which I shall discuss presently. What Wright makes clear is that the American society of his time was racist; that Bigger had no choice but to accept the racist stereotypes and act them out is, however, not clear at all. The novel actually seems to imply that Bigger's end is not simply the result of the racist society, but to a large extent of his acceptance of racist stereotypes; he is "destroyed by believing the [he is] what the white world calls a *nigger*"[53].

---

[50] Ralph Ellison, "The World and the Jug", *Shadow and Act* (New York: Random House, 1964) 120.
[51] Richard Wright, "How Bigger Was Born", *Native Son* (New York: Harper Perennial Modern Classics, 2005) 461.
[52] Arnold Rampersad, "Introduction", *Native son* (New York: Harper Perennial Modern Classics, 2005) ix-xxii.
[53] Baldwin, 291.

What further illustrates the fact that although the dominating philosophy of the novel is determinism, the power of the will is not wholly rejected, is the tension which can be discerned in the first part of the novel. That Bigger could have been better off had he tried, is implied by his mother when she tells her son that "[s]ome of these days you going to wish you had made something out of yourself"[54]. Bigger's mother evidently believes that a more active attitude would be of practical use. A more persistent aspect which contributes to the tension is the highly negative description of the protagonist's characteristics. As Rampersad claims, "it is hard to think of a central character in all of literature who is less likable than Bigger Thomas"[55]. The fact that Wright portrays a character with whom it is virtually impossible to sympathize strongly inclines the reader to question Bigger's attitude. Under these circumstances, one can reasonably hypothesize that by making his readers disapprove of the protagonist, Wright wanted them to understand that Bigger's deterministic attitude to life and his acceptance of stereotypes significantly contributed to his problems.

Throughout the novel, then, it is possible to discern Wright's unwillingness to reject completely the power of free will, although this is often only implicitly expressed. Wright seems to be wrestling with the same problem which Emerson was forced to address: the relationship between circumstance and freedom in the life of man. However, while Emerson tends to stress the importance of freedom and acknowledges the existence of limitations with great reluctance, Wright takes the opposite stand, underpinning the importance of limitations and expressing his belief in freedom between the lines. As Edward Margolies points out, this "contradiction is never resolved [...]. For the plot, the structure, even the portrayal of Bigger himself are often at odds with Wright's official determinism"[56]. The inability to resolve this issue and the tension that results are therefore prominent features common to Wright's *Native Son* and Emerson's work.

---

[54] Wright 9.
[55] Rampersad xix.
[56] Edward Margolies, *The Art of Richard Wright* (London: Feffer & Simons, Inc., 1969) 107.

6. CONCLUSION

The original purpose of this thesis was to study the principles of Ralph Waldo Emerson's thought, especially that of self-definition, in two African-American novels, Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man* and Richard Wright's *Native Son*. As work on this thesis proceeded, it became evident that this study has another dimension, and the following question formed: to what extent can the key concepts of Emerson's works be used as an empowering strategy by disempowered groups, by African Americans in particular? This question became the leading element of my thesis.

Since Emerson's work concerns itself with a broad variety of themes which include concepts such as nature, the over-soul, history, self-reliance, and the dichotomy of fate and freedom, it was, first and foremost, absolutely necessary to narrow these concepts down to those which most directly contribute to the empowerment of the individual. Among the most relevant concepts I included Emerson's belief in the sovereignty of the individual together with the related concept of self-definition; the rejection of systems, which are inherently limiting as they confine their components, whether it be things or people, to a given place; transition, which gives the individual hope for the future by allowing him to develop; and Emerson's understanding of the relationship between freedom and fate. I have further shown how the understanding of these concepts has a practical effect on the life of an individual; it is, therefore, the pragmatic aspect of Emerson's thought on which I have focused. While all of these concepts help to increase the power of the individual, there is a negative side to them as well. It is, however, up to the individual as to what extent he takes this side into account.

Having established the concepts with which I was to work in my thesis, I went on to give a brief overview of the history of African Americans and the relationship of this minority group to the Emersonian concepts. It is evident that African Americans were forced to live in direct conflict with the Emersonian principle of the sovereignty of the

individual, which led to the outright negation of their individuality. It was imperative that the stereotypes which were created by the dominant culture be rejected, because they were designed to keep African Americans in their place. Furthermore, a positive self-definition had to be created. What Emerson suggests as a way to empowerment is to be found in the works of a number of African-American non-fiction writers. I have shown that Emersonian principles are to be found in the works of W.E.B. Du Bois, James Baldwin, Martin Luther King, Jr., and Cornel West. While the first three never explicitly state their proximity to Emerson and may not themselves have been aware of it, the most contemporary of the above-named, Cornel West, points out the link between Emerson's pragmatism and Du Bois in *The American Evasion of Philosophy*.

What has just been mentioned above constituted preliminary background to what was originally to be the most important part of my thesis: the literary analysis of the Emersonian principles in the two works of African-American fiction, Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man* and Richard Wright's *Native Son*. I have included a brief historical and a social overview as well as the works of African-American non-fiction writers not only to show the relevance of Emersonian principles for African Americans in real life, but also in order to justify the connection I have made between Emerson and the two African-American novels. In the last few decades, it has become common for minority literatures to establish their own literary traditions and, in the effort to reach the utmost independence, some critical voices have condemned any attempts to find connections between minority literatures and the dominant literature. For this reason I felt that a broader historical and social context was necessary.

The analysis of Emersonian principles in *Invisible Man* has shown that the protagonist proceeds from a stage where he blindly accepts the definitions which are imposed on him to a stage where he realizes that those definitions need to be discarded. He eventually goes so far in discarding them that he refuses to give a name to himself and thus

to limit himself by yet another definition. In this way, he moves from an anti-Emersonian stance to life to true Emersonianism. He has, furthermore, become very reflexive, understanding the importance of finding his own path. It is not only the behavior of the protagonist and a number of other characters in the novel which can be understood as Emersonian, however; the structure of the novel can likewise be seen as such. The ending of the novel is actually a new beginning, full of possibilities and questions, showing that it is in transition where the most power is to be found.

In Wright's *Native Son*, the protagonist never actually reaches an Emersonian stance towards life. For this reason, the Emersonian principles in this novel are less obvious. Nevertheless, the problem of definitions and stereotypes, which play such a vital role in *Native Son*, emphasizes the importance of the Emersonian concept of self-definition. It can be said that the events in the novel are a direct result of the protagonist's internalization of racist stereotypes; had he not internalized them, life would have turned out somewhat differently for him. Furthermore, there is a tension throughout the novel which points to the fact that Wright had to wrestle with the same problem as Emerson did: the problem of the relationship between fate and freedom. To what extent an individual believes that he is free or determined has practical effects on his life. For this reason, Emerson suggests that it is useful to believe in freedom, but at the same time to realize that an individual is not completely limitless. Through his own life, Wright himself exemplifies the view that to believe in freedom no matter how hopeless the situation seems is more practical than to believe in determinism. Throughout the novel, then, there are subtle hints suggesting that Bigger is not actually as determined as he believes, and that it is to a great extent his perception of the situation as given and unchangeable which leads to his end.

In my thesis, then, I have shown the empowering effect of Emersonian principles not only on individuals from the dominant culture, but also, and perhaps especially, on disempowered minorities. I have pointed out the relevance of Emerson's philosophy not

only from a literary point of view, in *Invisible Man* and *Native Son*, but also through analysis of the historical and social development of African Americans and of a number of additional African-American non-fiction works. Through these examinations, I have, I believe, demonstrated the practical relevance of a number of Emersonian concepts for the real life of minority groups such as African Americans.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Baldwin, James. "Everybody's Protest Novel". *Notes of a Native Son*, *James Baldwin: Collected Essays*. New York: The Library of America, 1998. 11-18.

Baym, Nina, ed. *The Norton Anthology of American Literature, Volume 1*. New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1998.

Bigsby, C. W. E. *The Second Black Renaissance: Essays in Black Literature*. Westport: Greenwood Press, 1980.

Blankenship, Russell. *American Literature as an Expression of the National Mind*. New York: Henry Holt and Company, 1931.

Bodziock, Joseph. "Afro-American Gothic". *Richard Wright: Myths and Realities*. Ed. C. James Trorman. New York: Garland Publishing, Inc., 1988. 27-42.

Bone, Robert A. *The Negro Novel in America.* New Haven: Yale University Press, 1958.

---. "Ralph Ellison and the Uses of Imagination". *Modern Black Novelists: A Collection of Critical Essays*. Ed. M.G. Cooke. Englewood Cliffs: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1971. 45-63.

---. *Richard Wright*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1969.

Brignano, Russell Carl. *Richard Wright: An Introduction to the Man and His Works*. Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1970.

Butler, Robert. "Wright's *Native Son* and Two Novels by Zola: A Comparative Study". *The Critical Response to Richard Wright*. Ed. Robert J. Butler. Westport: Greenwood Press, 1995. 51-59.

Camilleri C. and Malewska-Peyre H. "Socialization and Identity Strategies". *Handbook of Cross-Cultural Psychology, Volume 2: Basic Processes and Human Development*. Eds. John W. Berry et al. Needham Heights: Allyn & Bacon, 1997. 31 Jan. 2011 <http://books.google.com/books?id=tLvAmyvsU8UC&pg=PA59&dq=negative+selfperception&hl=cs&ei=d_xGTY2mLIes8APp8emuCQ&sa=X&oi=book_result&ct=result&resnum=10&ved=0CFIQ6AEwCQ#v=onepage&q=valorization&f=false> .

Christian, Barbara. "Ralph Ellison: A Critical Study". *Black Expression: Essays by and about Black Americans in the Creative Arts*. Ed. Addison Gayle, Jr. New York: Weybright and Talley, Inc., 1970. 353-365.

Cooke, Michael G. *Afro-American Literature in the Twentieth Century: The Achievement of Intimacy*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1984.

Davis, Angela. *Women, Race & Class*. London: The Women's Press Limited, 1982.

Donoghue, Denis. *Reading America: Essays on American Literature*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1987.

Du Bois, W. E. B. *The Souls of Black Folk*. 11 Feb. 2011 <http://www.gutenberg.org/files/408/408-h/408-h.htm>.

Edwards, Carl N. *Responsibilities and Dispensations: Behavior, Science, & American Justice*. Dover: Four Oaks Press, 2001. 1 Feb. 2011 <http://books.google.cz/books?id=moDrQY4tM-kC&printsec=frontcover&dq=responsibilities+and+dispensations&hl=cs&ei=K-pHTbayKIyVswa40s30Ag&sa=X&oi=book_result&ct=result&resnum=1&ved=0CCkQ6AEwAA#v=onepage&q&f=false>.

Ellison, Ralph. *Invisible Man*. New York: Vintage Books, 1995.

---. "The World and the Jug". *Shadow and Act*. New York: Random House, 1964. 107-143.

Emerson, Ralph Waldo. "Anniversary of West Indian Emancipation". *Emerson's Antislavery Writings*. Eds. Len Gougeon and Joel Myerson. New Heaven and London: Yale University Press, 1995. 35-38.

---. "Circles". *Essays and Poems*. London: Everyman, 2001. 146-156.

---. "Considerations by the Way". 20 Sept. 2010 <http://www.rwe.org/complete-works/vi---conduct-of-life/vii-considerations-by-the-way>.

---. "Divinity School Address". *Ralph Waldo Emerson: Essays and Lectures*. New York: The Library of America, 1983. 75-92.

---. "Experience". *Essays and Poems*. London: Everyman, 2001. 202-222.

---. "Fate". 15 Feb. 2011 <http://www.rwe.org/works/Conduct_1_Fate.htm>.

---. "Heroism". *Essays and Poems*. London: Everyman, 2001. 119-129.

---. "Illusions". *Ralph Waldo Emerson: Essays and Lectures*. New York: The Library of America, 1983. 1115-1124.

---. "Lecture on Slavery". *Emerson's Antislavery Writings*. Eds. Len Gougeon and Joel Myerson. New Heaven and London: Yale University Press, 1995. 91-106.

---. "Politics". *Essays and Poems*. London: Everyman, 2001. 275-286.

---. "Power". 14 Feb. 2011 <http://www.rwe.org/works/Conduct_2_Power.htm>.

---. "Self-Reliance". *Essays and Poems*,. London: Everyman, 2001. 23-46.

---. "Spiritual Laws". *Essays and Poems*. London: Everyman, 2001. 65-82.

---. "The American Scholar". *Ralph Waldo Emerson: Essays and Lectures*. New York: The Library of America, 1983. 51-71.

---. "The Fugitive Slave Law". *Emerson's Antislavery Writings*. Eds. Len Gougeon and

Joel Myerson. New Heaven and London: Yale University Press, 1995. 73-89.

---. "The Method of Nature". *Ralph Waldo Emerson: Essays and Lectures*. New York: The Library of America, 1983. 113-132.

Fredrickson, George M. *The Black Image in the White Mind: The Debate on Afro-American Character and Destiny, 1817 – 1914*. Hanover: Wesleyan University Press, 1987.

Gallagher, Kathleen. "Bigger's Great Leap to the Figurative", *Richard Wright's Native Son*. Ed. Harold Bloom. New York: Bloom's Literary Criticism, 2009. 24 Apr 2011 <http://books.google.com/books?id=m7vUgQc_TpkC&printsec=frontcover&dq=Richard+Wright's+Native+Son&hl=cs&ei=qjm1TeHtFNHzsgbKptngDA&sa=X&oi=book_result&ct=result&resnum=2&ved=0CC8Q6AEwAQ#v=onepage&q&f=false>.

Gayle, Addison, Jr. *The Way of the New World: The Black Novel in America*. New York: Anchor Press, 1976.

Gougeon, Len. "Historical Background". *Emerson's Antislavery Writings*. Eds. Len Gougeon and Joel Myerson. New Heaven and London: Yale University Press, 1995. xi-lvi.

Hassan, Ihab. *Radical Innocence: Studies in the Contemporary American Novel*. New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1971.

Horowitz, Ellin. "The Rebirth of the Artist". *Twentieth Century Interpretations of Invisible Man*. Ed. John M. Reilly. Englewood Cliffs: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1970.

Horowitz, Floyd R. "Ralph Ellison's Modern Version of Brer Bear and Brer Rabbit in *Invisible Man*". *Twentieth Century Interpretations of Invisible Man*. Ed. John M. Reilly Englewood Cliffs: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1970. 32-38.

Howe, Irving. "Black Boys and Native Sons". *Decline of the New*. New York: Hartcourt, Brace & World, Inc., 1970. 167-189.

Baldwin, James. *The Fire Next Time*. *James Baldwin: Collected Essays*. New York: The Library of America, 1998. 291-347.

James, William. *Pragmatism*. 10 Jan 2011 <http://www.gutenberg.org/cache/epub/5116/pg5116.html>.

Jefferson, Thomas. "The Declaration of Independence". *The Norton Anthology of American Literature, Volume 1*. Ed. Nina Baym. New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1998. 714-719.

Johnson, Barbara. "The Re(a)d and the Black". *Richard Wright: Critical Perspectives Past and Present*. Eds. Henry Louis Gates, Jr., K. A. Appiah. New York: Amistad Press, Inc., 1993. 149-155.

Jones, Norrece T., Jr. "In Search of Freedom: Slave Life and Culture in the Antebellum

South". *Essays on African-American History, Culture and Society*. Eds. William R. Scott and William G. Shade.Washington: Bureau of Educational and Cultural Affairs, 2005. 78-91.

Joyce, Joyce Anne. "The Figurative Web of Native Son". *Richard Wright: Critical Perspectives Past and Present*. Eds. Henry Louis Gates, Jr., K. A. Appiah. New York: Amistad, 1993. 171-187.

King, Martin Luther, Jr. *Where Do We Go From Here: Chaos or Community?* Boston: Beacon Press, 1968.

Kinnamon, Keneth. *The Emergence of Richard Wright: A Study in Literature and Society.* Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1973.

Konvitz, Milton R. "Introduction". *Emerson: A Collection of Critical Essays*. Eds. Milton R. Konvitz and Stephen E. Whicher. Englewood Cliffs: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1962. 1-11.

Konvitz, Milton R. and Whicher, Stephen E., eds. *Emerson: A Collection of Critical Essays*. Englewood Cliffs: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1962.

Margolies, Edward. *The Art of Richard Wright*. London: Feffer & Simons, Inc., 1969.

McCall, Dan. *The Example of Richard Wright*. New York: Hartcourt Brace Jovanovich, Inc., 1969.

McCray, Jack. *Charleston Jazz*. Charleston: Arcadia Publishing, 2007. 4 April 2011 <http://books.google.com/books?id=5hsWQcCvUTkC&pg=PA11&dq=%22what+is+jazz%22&hl=cs&ei=ghaaTc-WL8TXsgac-ZTACA&sa=X&oi=book_result&ct=result&resnum=1&ved=0CDEQ6AEwAA#v=onepage&q=%22what%20is%20jazz%22&f=false> .

Miller, Perry. "From Edwards to Emerson". *Interpretations of American Literature*. Eds. Charles Feidelson, Jr. and Paul Brodtkorb, Jr.. New York: Oxford University Press, 1960. 114-136.

Mitchell, Anthony B. "Self-emancipation and Slavery: An Examination of the African American's Quest for Literacy and Freedom". *Journal of Pan African Studies*. July 2008. 7 Feb. 2011 <http://findarticles.com/p/articles/mi_7075/is_5_2/ai_n31505801/?tag=content;col1>.

Morgan, Edmund S. *American Slavery, American Freedom: The Ordeal of Colonial Virginia*. New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2003.

Plimpton, George, ed. *Writers at Work: The Paris Review Interviews, Second Series*. New York: The Viking Press, 1969.

Poirier, Richard. *The Renewal of Literature: Emersonian Reflections*. New York: Random

House, 1987.

Pudaloff, Ross. “Celebrity as Identity: Native Son and Mass Culture”. *Richard Wright: Critical Perspectives Past and Present*. Eds. Henry Louis Gates, Jr., K. A. Appiah. New York: Amistad Press, Inc., 1993. 156-170.

Rampersad, Arnold. “Introduction”. *Native son*. New York: Harper Perennial Modern Classics, 2005. ix-xxii.

Reilly, John M. “Introduction”. *Twentieth Century Interpretations of Invisible Man*. Ed. John M. Reilly. Englewood Cliffs: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1970. 2-9.

Riggs, Marlon. *Ethnic Notions*. 6 Feb. 2011 <http://newsreel.org/transcripts/ethnicno.htm>.

Rovit, Earl H. “Ralph Ellison and the American Comic Tradition”. *Ralph Ellison: A Collection of Critical Essays*. Ed. John Hersey. Englewood Cliffs: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1974. 151-159.

Rowe, John Carlos. *At Emerson’s Tomb: The Politics of Classic American Literature*. New York: Columbia University Press, 1997.

Sanders Thompson, Vetta L. and Akbar, Maysa. “The Understanding of Race and the Construction of African American Identity”. *The Western Journal of Black Studies*. Summer 2003. 8 Feb. 2011 <http://findarticles.com/p/articles/mi_go2877/is_2_27/ai_n29060126/>.

Santayana, George. “Emerson”. *Emerson: A Collection of Critical Essays*. Eds. Milton R. Konvitz and Stephen E. Whicher. Englewood Cliffs: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1962. 31-38.

Shafer, William J. “Irony From the Underground – Satiric Elements in Invisible Man”. *Twentieth Century Interpretations of Invisible Man*. Ed. John M. Reilly. Englewood Cliffs: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1970. 39-47.

Spillers, Hortense J. “Ellison’s “Usable Past”: Toward a Theory of Myth”. *Black, White, and in Color: Essays on American Literature and Culture*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2003. 65-80.

Tanner, Laura. “Uncovering the Magical Disguise of Language: The Narrative Presence in Richard Wright’s Native Son”. *Richard Wright: Critical Perspectives Past and Present*. Eds. Henry Louis Gates, Jr., K. A. Appiah. New York: Amistad, 1993. 132-148.

Vauthier, Simone. “Not Quite on the Beat: An Academic Interpretation of the Narrative Stances in Ralph Ellison’s Invisible Man”. *Delta*. No. 18. 1984. 69-88.

Vedantam, Shankar. “Shades of Prejudice”. The New York Times. 18 Jan 2010. 2 May 2011 <http://www.nytimes.com/2010/01/19/opinion/19vedantam.html>.

Vogler, Thomas A. “*Invisible Man*: Somebody’s Protest Novel”, *Ralph Ellison: A*

Collection of Critical Essays. Ed. John Herse. Englewood Cliffs: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1974. 127-150.

West, Cornel. *Race Matters*. New York: Vintage Books, 1994.

---. *The American Evasion of Philosophy: A Genealogy of Pragmatism*. Wisconsin: The University of Wisconsin Press, 1989.

Whyte, Philippe. "*Invisible Man* as a Trickster Tale". *Delta*. No. 18. 1984. 47-67.

Wood, Forrest G. *Black Scare: The Racist Response to Emancipation and Reconstruction*. Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1970. 6 Feb. 2011 <http://books.google.com/books?id=4FXXV9H0Y-oC&printsec=frontcover&dq=intitle:the+intitle:black+intitle:scare&hl=cs&ei=9VdQTej8JITf4gaFzMW3CQ&sa=X&oi=book_result&ct=result&resnum=1&ved=0CCgQ6AEwAA#v=onepage&q&f=false>.

Woodress, James, ed. *Eight American Authors*. New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1972.

Wright, Richard. "How Bigger Was Born". *Native Son*. New York: Harper Perennial Modern Classics, 2005. 431-462.

---. *Native Son.* New York: Harper Perennial Modern Classics, 2005.