Alienated, Anxious, American:  
The Crisis of Coming of Age in Ralph Ellison’s *Invisible Man* and the Late Harlem Bildungsroman 

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Themes of fear and loathing are often associated with the narrative trajectory of the twentieth century American Bildungsroman. In the traditional European prototype, coming-of-age is charted through the representation of ordeals and life lessons which the young protagonist or Bildungsheld must overcome in order to achieve their harmonious course of maturation. The American model forgoes this necessity of harmony. Ralph Ellison’s *Invisible Man* (1952) is one such coming-of-age narrative, following the pedagogical and experiential education of an African American adolescent in the 1920s and 30s. By innovating upon several of the traditional Bildungsroman subgenres: the Künstlerroman (development of the artist novel), and Erziehungsroman (novel of pedagogical education), Ellison subverts the inefficiencies of representing race in American literature and culture that had come before him. At the same time, the author illuminates the hypocrisies of racial and ideological identity politics in a post-Abolition American society. Through close textual analysis, this paper will assess the extent to which the Bildungsroman genre facilitates Ellison’s didactic intention to represent an African American subject who is at once a complex individual, an allegorical universal figure, and most significantly to the text’s themes, an authentic representation of what it means to be an American.

Ralph Ellison’s coming-of-age novel, *Invisible Man*, demonstrates a strong continuation of the tradition that situates the African American roman-à-clef as Bildungsroman. The Bildungsroman is a European tradition of realism, the bourgeois coming-of-age novel that originated with Johann Wolfgang von Goethe’s *Wilhelm Meister’s Apprenticeship* (1795). Originally a symbolic and individualistic genre, the Bildungsroman depicts the harmonious entrance of a young man into adult society through the workforce and then matrimony, thereby finding his true identity and purpose in the world; the genre has now become what Franco Moretti describes as an increasing ‘approximation’. The African American coming-of-age memoir tradition also originated in the nineteenth century, with texts such as Frederick Douglass’ *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, An American Slave* (1845) bringing awareness to the pro-Abolition movement. This second genre found second bloom in New York City during the Harlem Renaissance in the early twentieth century, where Ellison himself came of age.

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Invisible Man functions more specifically within two of the originating Bildungsroman subgenres: the Erziehungsroman, translating to ‘the novel of education’, and the Künstlerroman, or the development of the artist novel. The ‘education’ inferred by the first subgenre designates a plot which heavily circumferences the pedagogical learning of an individual within schools and universities, and even their entry into the workforce. These formal lessons and rites of passage are often juxtaposed against the Bildungsheld, or the protagonist, and his social education. The latter subgenre attests to the author’s conscious Joycean influence, an affiliation with modernist narratives of young and ambitious male scholars faced with the realisation of a ‘corrupt, uncaring society’, such as Stephen Dedalus of Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man (1916).

This paper will discuss the particular difficulties of self-expression and self-identification in a context that, as Ellison’s friend and mentor Richard Wright describes, has set ‘Negro life as a by-product of Western civilisation’. These anxieties are often expressed and represented in the novel through shocking mechanisms, such as the stark juxtaposition of romantic (traditionally Bildungsroman) narration against ultraviolent, hypersexualised episodes filled with ebonic vernacular and high symbolism. Ellison and the first person narrator display the same ethical confliction in regard to their ‘social responsibilities’ as young African American artists coming of age in twentieth century American urbanity. Their society is one that tells them they must play certain racial stereotypes, advocating oppressive white capitalist ideology, violent black nationalism, or radical leftism. This paper will assess the extent to which the Bildungsroman, as a genre, facilitates Ellison’s didactic intention to represent an African American subject who is at once a complex individual, an allegorical universal figure, and most significantly to the text’s themes, an authentic representation of what it means to be an American.

Invisible Man is a narrative written in first person fictional memoir form, following the recollections of an unnamed African American youth living in a state of hibernation beneath Harlem, New York City, during the 1930s. The linear temporality of the traditional Bildungsroman form is subverted by Ellison’s reflexive use of direct, first person narration in the present and past tense, featuring an ironic use of the in media res technique with flashbacks. It is indeed ironic because traditionally, in media res suggests a narrative that begins in action; this novel, however, opens with a protagonist who has retreated into hibernated inaction. It is a narratological technique which enables ‘elements of the psychological novel’ to further the progression of characterisation. These elements include flashbacks, dream sequences, hallucinations, and streams of consciousness, and are unorthodox in terms of the traditional Bildungsroman’s affiliation with chronological realism. This demonstrates one structural way in which Invisible Man is very much a novel about corroding traditional practices on every given level, finding new creative outlets through the subversion of norms.

5 Neimneh, ‘Genre, Blues, and (Mis)Education’, p. 62.
The narrative begins with a brief ten-page prologue narrated in the present tense, in which the protagonist describes his current position as being in retreat from society, and living underground:

My hole is warm and full of light. Yes, full of light. I doubt if there is a brighter spot in all New York than this hole of mine, and I do not exclude Broadway, Or the Empire State Building on a photographer's dream night. But that is taking advantage of you. Those two spots are among the darkest of our whole civilization – pardon me, our whole culture (an important distinction, I've heard) – which might sound like a hoax, or a contradiction, but that (by contradiction, I mean) is how the world moves: Not like an arrow, but a boomerang. (Beware of those who speak of the spiral of history; they are preparing a boomerang. Keep a steel helmet handy.)

He has buried himself in an enclave beneath the city – at once metaphorically but also literally outside the structures of culture and history – in order to escape a society that has alienated and ultimately excluded him. Anonymous and isolated, he has undertaken the measured task of writing his own narrative outside of the corruptive forces of the world above ground. He leeches thousands of bulbs of electricity from a company called ‘Monopolated Light & Power’. The company name is highly symbolic: light, as an allusion to skin tone, and the double entendre of the word ‘power’, meaning both electricity and authority. The suggestion is that Invisible Man has broken away from the order of the white American hegemonic institution that holds a monopoly over the city’s modern technologies and resources. His act of personal defiance is not just about flouting the hegemonic authority of white, male society; rather, it may be read as a personal revolt against competitive capitalist practices that assign arbitrary value to commodities, monopolising resources that the modern individual needs to survive.

Invisible Man’s apparent stasis, unemployment, and rejection of popular culture and capitalist practices immediately present him as an antithetical Bildungsheld. In the traditional Bildungsroman, the protagonist’s goal is to find a meaningful position within the production of capitalism through bourgeois employment, and adherence to the social institutions of marriage and the nuclear family. Invisible Man’s task is a tactical retreat: ‘[I]t is incorrect to assume that, because I’m invisible and live in a hole, I am dead’, he assures the reader. ‘I am neither dead nor in a state of suspended animation. Call me Jack-the-Bear, for I am in a state of hibernation’. Invisible Man’s immediate subversion of bourgeois realism, which at one stage defined the Bildungsroman genre, is reinforced by the non-conventional narration of this episode. There is heavy use of monologue, which semi-formally addresses some third party, juxtaposed against streams of a more fluid first person stream of consciousness.

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6 Ellison, Invisible Man, p. 3.
7 Ellison, Invisible Man, p. 6.
8 Ellison, Invisible Man, p. 3.
From the prologue onwards, the past tense of narrative is recounted chronologically in a cyclical structure that ultimately adjoins to the present position of the narrator underground. Thereafter, the novel follows Invisible Man’s early years and pedagogical education in the South; and in the much larger section of the novel, his Northern experiences in the creolised urban centre of Harlem. The novel threads nine significant chains of life events; the varying lengths of these episodic segments are loosely structured upon the picaresque form popularised in early American Bildungsroman literature by Mark Twain.

The narrator opens his ‘memoir’ in Chapter One by outlining his largely uneventful childhood in the South during the 1920s and early 30s. He flatly recounts his graduation from a separatist school, from which he emerges as an exceptionally talented young orator and scholar with a bright future as a leader of his people. He is on the precipice of adulthood, but his only contact with the world of adult realities is in the death of his grandfather. The tension between Invisible Man and his assigned destiny becomes clear to the reader at this point, during which the narrator overhears the old ex-slave’s last confession to his son:

I never told you, but our life is a war and I have been a traitor all my born days, a spy in the enemy’s country ever since I give up my gun back in the Reconstruction. Live with your head in the lion’s mouth. I want you to overcome ‘em with yeses, undermine ‘em with grins, agree ‘em to death and destruction.9

Invisible Man believes that his grandfather has ‘gone out of his mind’,10 but the words are the cause of ‘much anxiety’ for the narrator for years to come. His lesson is acute: he fears that a day might come when he will be forced into a position where his ‘traitorous’ actions will bring the disapproval of the white men he believes control his destiny. For the first time, he sees himself as an alienated outsider.

His first test against his grandfather’s ‘curse’, as he believes it to be, occurs with an event of public humiliation and disillusionment. Invisible Man is invited to present his valedictorian speech to a group of wealthy white patrons at a Southern gentlemen’s club. When he arrives, however, he is forced to participate in a blindfolded ‘battle royal’ against a group of men he believes to be his ‘peers’: adolescent African American males. The irony of the situation is, he finds no commonality with these youths, only bitter rivalry.

The hypocrisy of the Southern socio-economy is figuratively actualised in the poignant symbolism of the young black adolescents, who are induced to beat each other to bloody pulps for the amusement of rich white patrons, with the promise of coins as reward (which, they later discover, are counterfeit). Like many members of the Jazz Age intelligentsia before him, Ellison is interested in satirising the cultural apologue of an American ‘aristocracy’ built on slavery in a pure, high capitalist society where there has never been a decline of the ruling class. The mere prospect of wealth enflames a capitalist instinct in the young men, and they are invited to perceive each other as rivals, not equals who could work together for the greater

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cause. It is the first violent instance in which Invisible Man bears witness to the anarchy that has turned children of the same racial background against each other in a post-slavery world.

The protagonist’s language depicts this past self as a bewildered ingénue figure, hitherto oblivious to the control that the white proprietors of American ‘old money’ have over the destinies of young African Americans:

Everyone fought hysterically. It was complete anarchy. Everybody fought everybody else. No group fought together for long. Two, three, four, fought one, then turned to fight each other, were themselves attacked.11

They all begin to ‘fight automatically’.12 At this point in the narrative, Ellison employs performatively robotic, short, rhythmic sentences filled with monosyllables and disyllables, such as, ‘A glove smacked against my head’, or ‘Blows pounded me from all sides as I struck out as best I could’.13 Every sensation is meticulously described. As the protagonist and his competitors are blindfolded, the lack of visibility (it is a physical and metaphysical blindness), emerges as a recurring trope.

The boys are taken one by one out of the ring until just Invisible Man and a much larger boy are left, and their blindfolds are removed. The other boys had known that the last two in the ring would flight, and use the protagonist’s naiveté as a measure of self-preservation. Invisible Man begs his larger opponent to ‘fake like I knocked you out, you can have the prize’, in a desperate attempt for survival.14 His competitor, however, is only interested in his own self-preservation, and has the upperhand in their fight:

‘I’ll break your behind,’ he whispered hoarsely.
‘For them?’
‘For me, sonofabitch!’15

Ellison’s style evokes both poetic and cinematic imagery: it is a synthesis of the auditory registers and visual lenses of language. As Invisible Man is reeled by the bigger boy in their anarchic duel, he spins about from the blows ‘as a joggled camera sweeps in a reeling scene’.16 Pleading for mercy, Invisible Man bribes his rival with the pledge of ‘five dollars more’, to which the opponent responds, ‘Go to hell!’17 He hears the white men waging monetary bets against him, and ponders, ‘Would not this go against my speech, and was not this a moment for humility, for nonresistance?’18

The events that follow concretise Ellison’s synecdoche of the blood money:

12 Ellison, Invisible Man, p. 19.
13 Ellison, Invisible Man, p. 18.
14 Ellison, Invisible Man, p. 20.
15 Ellison, Invisible Man, p. 20.
16 Ellison, Invisible Man, p. 20.
17 Ellison, Invisible Man, p. 20.
18 Ellison, Invisible Man, p. 21.
I saw the rug covered with coins of all dimensions and a few crumpled bills. But what excited me, scattered here and there, were the gold pieces.¹⁹

Invisible Man and his opponent are told by the master of ceremonies to ‘come on up here boys and get your money’,²⁰ but are met with the audience’s laughter. The mere appearance of money incites a visceral effect in the young protagonist. The glittering configuration of money excites him; he is entranced not only by the gilded prospect of symbolic wealth, but the shining beauty of the coins themselves. One spectator remarks, ‘These niggers look like they’re about to pray!’,²¹ as they kneel before the ‘good hard American cash’²² in anticipation. There is a link in this imagery between religion, capitalism, and the subordination of ethnic identity: the young African American men have been returned to a state of blind slavery, this time, to the American dollar and the culture of consumption, an economy that is governed by rich, white American males like the patrons of the club.

Unfortunately, the ‘good hard American cash’ is another empty promise, a false advertisement of happiness; the money they scramble over is literally made up of false tokens. The blissful possession of gold comes at the price of violently clambering over an electrified rug, a ruse set up by the establishment for the amusement of its patrons. The boys are pushed into an electric ring of pain and confusion, for what turns out to be an even crueller joke than they realise. The narrator discovers that ‘the gold pieces I had scrambled for were brass pocket tokens advertising a certain make of automobile’.²³ Again, they are quite literally bested by the mechanisms of consumption, this time representing the deceptively persuasive ideologies and misleading practices of capitalist advertising.

Immediately after the battle is finished, Invisible Man is invited to give his oration, which he had presented earlier that week as a valedictory speech to his graduating class. The master of ceremonies announces that Invisible Man is ‘the smartest boy we’ve got out there in Greenwood. I’m told he knows more big words than a pocket-sized dictionary’.²⁴ However, he is reminded that he is not an equal and must ‘know [his] place at all times’ in white society, as is demonstrated when he tries to use his speech to speak of ‘social equality’.²⁵ His timid proposition is hotly rebuffed by the ‘hostile phrases’ and outspoken displeasure of the white patrons.²⁶ With his acquiescence to the demands of the audience, Invisible Man is left in a liminal position; not belonging to black society, and remaining subordinate to white. The theatricality of the staged events of this chapter illuminates wider metaphorical commentary on the spectacle of white American capitalism and its power structures. The shocking escalation of events in the second half of this second section are not

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enough to embitter or utterly disillusion the protagonist, leaving his character trope as the ingénue intact and quotidian to the disposition of the traditional Bildungsheld.

Invisible Man does not acknowledge that he is the only young man to go home with some sort of financial reward that night, which in this case, is in the form of a scholarship to the segregated ‘state college for Negroes’.27 There, he is to be educated in the lessons of a white hegemonic history of literature and culture; he will be taught to appropriately lead his people by ‘social responsibility’ and not ‘social equality’,28 as he is reminded by a moustached man in the front row. Despite the pain and humiliation that they endure, the other boys leave empty handed. The farce of the spectacle is darkly complimented by the symbolism of Invisible Man being rewarded with a calf-skin satchel, a biblical metaphor of sacrifice. Invisible Man can be read metonymically, therefore, as a young animal sacrificed to the bloody greed of hegemonic capitalism. This positioning, and his acceptance of the calf-skin satchel (as a symbol of unnecessary expenditure, or, according to Georges Bataille, a ‘luxuries’) creates a tension for Invisible Man and the reader. Bataille conceptualises human activity as not entirely reducible to processes of production and conservation, instead dividing consumption into productive (conservational) and unproductive (luxury) expenditures.29 The latter, Bataille proposes (in a framework called The Principle of Loss), demonstrates the arbitrary rationality of expenditure masquerading as cultural necessitation through four taxonomies of common experience: jewels, cults and sacrifices, games and competition, and art.

The scholarship papers inside the calf satchel form a fierce, early symbol of capitalist objectification in the narrative. It comes at a point in which Invisible Man is not yet mature or educated enough to form a personal resistance against a society which will use and ultimately discard him like any other commodity under the false guise of generosity and reward. The battle royale episode therefore functions as a dystopic formulation of the traditional Bildungsroman rites of passage, where according to Barbara Foley, ‘naïve protagonists, usually young, encounter various trials that enable them to test their mettle. They undergo apprenticeships in the lessons of life and emerge older and wiser’.30 Invisible Man is literally ‘set apart’ from his peers by his above average intelligence. He is ‘at once ordinary and extraordinary’, as Foley suggests the Bildungsheld traditionally must be.31 For the traditional Bildungsheld, this is a trait that enables the protagonist to better understand their true self and their position in society. Invisible Man’s enlightenment and acumen prove only to further threaten his own sense of identity.

The voice of the narrator in the following section retains the passive tone of the last; his thoughts still those of the uncorrupted innocent figure. It is a sharp contrast to the nonlinear, chaotic, and bitter inflections of the present tense narrator. This third section follows a short series of events leading to the protagonist’s untimely expulsion from college three years later, and speaks to the episodic

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28 Ellison, Invisible Man, p. 25.
31 Foley, Radical Representations, p. 321.
picaresque structure of the novel. Like the counterfeit coins, the beauty of the college is a false advertisement; the college’s surreal serenity is ultimately disrupted by two hypersexualised and ultraviolent misadventures.

Ellison ironically engages with the Erziehungsroman tradition that romanticises buildings themselves as centres of wisdom and learning, without acknowledging the life skills that he acquires during his matriculation. The hypocritical bureaucracies of a Booker T. Washington Southern education system are ironically set against the vividly romantic, pastoral descriptions of a ‘beautiful college’, with buildings that are ‘old and covered with vines’ and gracefully winding roads, ‘lined with hedges and wild roses that dazzled the eyes in the summer sun’. The effect of the juxtaposition between the beauty of the school and the hypocrisy of its system is a resounding critique of the ‘accommodationist education’. As Shadi Neimneh has argued, Ellison is critical of young African American’s ‘naïve faith in education as a means of achieving a better life for blacks or better race relations’.

If there are tribulations that the traditional Eurocentric Bildungsheld must overcome in order to form their true nature in the prototypical Bildungsroman, overcoming his naivety in a post-Abolition world filled with residual racism on both sides of the white-black divide is the equivalent for Ellison’s Invisible Man, at least at this point in the narrative.

Invisible Man’s ‘authentic’ life lessons at college occur when he is commissioned to chauffeur a white founding father, Mr Norton, on a revisitation tour of the campus. Mr Norton boasts that he is sympathetic to the racial heritage of his young companion, and is an avid supporter of ‘Negro education’, so long as it occurs separate to their white counterparts. In an interesting point of meta-irony, Norton lectures Invisible Man about the lessons in self-reliance taught by Ralph Waldo Emerson – the irony being that the author himself, Ralph Waldo Ellison, was named in honour of this particular intellectualist.

‘You’ve studied Emerson, haven’t you?’
‘Emerson, sir?’
‘Ralph Waldo Emerson’.
I was embarrassed because I hadn’t.

Ellison is playfully, reflexively testing the limits of the roman-a-cléf, determining where the anxieties of the fictional Bildungsheld meet with the formational experiences of the author himself. Invisible Man’s shame at his display of ignorance in front of a white figure of authority is conflated with his sense of condescending paternalism in their conversation; particularly as Norton makes well known his belief that they are of two separate ‘peoples’ with a common destiny, a destiny that has been designed by the sympathy of white men such as himself. The dynamics of this pedagogical paternalism are made clear where the founding father is referred to by a distinguishing title: ‘Mr’ or ‘Sir’. Norton tells Invisible Man that their destinies are somehow bound, and that whatever he might become, ‘a good farmer, a chef, a

32 Ellison, Invisible Man, p. 27.
33 Neimneh, ‘Genre, Blues and (Mis)Education’, p. 61.
34 Ellison, Invisible Man, p. 32.
preacher, doctor, singer, mechanic — whatever you become, and even if you fail, you are my fate’.35

On this occasion, Norton represents a guiding, masculine figure attempting to mould the destiny of the young protagonist, so that the Goethean Bildungsheld might follow in the traditional Bildungsroman form. Yet only moments later, the role of the guiding figure is ironically reversed, as the pair happen upon a log cabin, the house of an African American sharecropper called Jim Trueblood. Trueblood is a man who has ‘brought disgrace upon the black community’,36 despite possessing above average talent for singing what the school officials call ‘their primitive spirituals’.37 At this point in the segment, the narratorial harmony typical of the realist Bildungsroman becomes increasingly dislocated, with an increasing use of heavy dialogue followed by pages of longwinded, monologic address given by Trueblood, and faithfully recounted in his ebonic vernacular. Over twelve pages, Trueblood gives a disturbing, detailed confession of how he, as if in some inescapably predetermined trance, came to accidentally rape his own daughter in his sleep whilst his wife, Kate, slept in the bed right next to them.38 He relates to Norton how his wife then attempted to murder him with an axe, grossly disfiguring his face when it is discovered that he has impregnated his own daughter. The narrator seems disgraced by the unpolished, uneducated black vernacular, filled as it is with incorrect grammar, jargon, and mispronunciation. Yet, Invisible Man is ‘torn between humiliation and fascination’39 in witnessing Trueblood offending Norton’s ‘sensibilities’40 by relaying this grotesque account of events. His humiliation stems from the feeling that this narrative ‘reduces’ the ‘black voice’ in the eyes of the white authority figure, and yet, what he doesn’t realise is that the authority Norton holds over himself, is not held over Trueblood. The humiliation Invisible Man feels at the vulgarity of Trueblood’s crimes comes despite a deep ‘fascination’ for the melodic passion of Trueblood’s speech, which he finds narratologically mesmerising:

‘I was frozen to where I was like a young’un what done struck his lip to a pump handle in the wintertime. I was just like a jaybird that the yellow jackets done stung ‘til he’s paralyzed – but still alive in his eyes and he’s watchin’ ‘em sting his body to death’.41

The most overwhelming revelation that Invisible Man gleams from Trueblood is the reaction of the African American staff ‘up at the school’: they enact the ‘social responsibility’ that Invisible Man spoke of in his speech to the Southern patrons after the Battle Royale. Trueblood is bewildered how:

The nigguhs up at the school come down to chase me off and that made me mad. I went to see the white folks then and they gave me

35 Ellison, *Invisible Man*, p. 34.
help. That’s what I don’t understand. I done the worse thing a man could ever do in his family and instead of chasin’ me out of the country, they gimme more help than they ever give any other colored man, no matter how good a nigguh he was. Except that my wife an’ daughter won’t speak to me, I’m better off than I ever been before. And even if Kate won’t speak to me she took the new clothes I brought her from up in town and now she’s getting’ some eyeglasses made what she been needin’ for so long. But what I don’t understand is how I done the worse thing a man can do in his own family and ‘stead of thing gittin’ bad, they got better. The nigguhs up at the school don’t like me, but the white folks treat me fine.\footnote{Ellison, \textit{Invisible Man}, p. 52.}

Trueblood’s first name, Jim, is an allusion to the slave character ‘Nigger Jim’ in Twain’s \textit{The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn} (1885). His speech, however, reflects that of a more complicated, multi-dimensional character. Trueblood embodies the racial stereotype that Ellison rejected, and the stereotypes which he believed were ‘holding back’ great African American figures in American literature, such as the criminal sexual predator, on the one hand, or the well-meaning but bumbling simpleton on the other. Valeria Smith argues that Ellison ‘jeopardised his credibility with more ideological writers and scholars’ by consciously citing his primary influences for the novel alongside the tradition of ‘American literary craftsmen and moral writers’, including Twain, Faulkner, Hemingway, and T. S. Eliot. His critics determined that he was denying his ‘intellectual links with and debt to earlier black writers’.\footnote{V. Smith, ‘The Meaning of Narration in \textit{Invisible Man}’, in R.G. O’Meally (ed.), \textit{New Essays on Invisible Man}, Cambridge University Press, 1988, p. 26.} The character of Trueblood demonstrates otherwise. As a revision of Twain’s sympathetic but two-dimensional characterisation, Jim Trueblood demonstrates a formidable attempt to rectify the injustice of an American literary history that had only ever reinforced a lack of complexity in its ethnic literary characters.

Jim Trueblood is a pluralism of identities: he is a family man, who cares deeply about his kin and provides for them; he is a victim of black prejudice, and white prejudice; he is a talented singer and a successful farmer; but he is also the perpetrator of incest and rape. By his speech, he proves that he is also a story-teller, and an anti-conventional \textit{Künstler}. His complexity as a character is only acknowledged by the white community after he commits a crime; upon which time he is turned into some sort of indigenous mythological beast, whose obedience and solitude must be paid off. As the recipient of welfare culture, his fellow African Americans despise him, for his crimes reinforce the negative stereotypes that present the African American as an amoralistic animal rather than a complex human being capable of multiple identities. They despise him all the more because he is financially rewarded for playing to the culture’s negative racial stereotypes. Invisible Man is embittered as Norton, also the father of a young girl, takes out a ‘red Moroccan-leather wallet’ — another symbol linking luxury with African sacrifice — and hands the ‘no-good bastard’ one hundred dollars to buy his many children some toys.\footnote{Ellison, \textit{Invisible Man}, p. 53.} The
singing of ‘London Bridge is Falling Down’ by these children, and the juxtaposition of Norton’s response to this playing, seems to symbolically insist that this home is at a point of great disaster for civilisation.\(^{45}\)

Invisible Man drives a visibly shaken Norton to a tavern to settle his nerves with whisky, where a second chaotic event ensues. They arrive at the Golden Day at the same time that a throng of African American army veterans arrive. They are patients at a nearby asylum, and are still ‘a little shell shocked’ from their exploits in the First World War.\(^{46}\) The narration shifts again, this time overwhelmed by polyphonic fragments — a cacophony, even — of demented wartime conversations, the voices of ex-soldiers who permanently relive the battlefield. The men are confused by Norton’s presence, and, in a state of inebriation, descend into a chaotic brawl. Norton faints, and is carried upstairs by Invisible Man and an ex-physician to be out of harm’s way. The ex-physician, a former student of the college, tends to Norton whilst Invisible Man oversees, warning the founding father not to go back downstairs:

> The clocks are all set back and the forces of destruction are rampant down below. They might suddenly realize that you are what you are, and then your life wouldn’t be worth a piece of bankrupt stock. You would be canceled, perforated, voided, become the recognized magnet attracting loose screws. Then what would you do? Such men are beyond money, and with Supercargo [the patients’ overseer] down, out like a felled ox, they know nothing of value. To some, you are the great white father, to others the lyncher of souls, but for all, you are confusion come even into the Golden Day.\(^{47}\)

The effects of war have created a hive of chaos within this tavern, as an intensified microcosm of the post-trauma of violent conflict: where race, class, profession, and age no longer follow the invisible binds of social order they do in the outside world beyond the Golden Day. Language and identity are broken down, and this is represented in the confusion that the patients have, mistaking Norton for decorated wartime General John J. Pershing, and at another point, for former president, Thomas Jefferson. In theme and the unapologetic characterisation, the Golden Day episode is an homage to the writing of one of Ellison’s lifelong literary idols, Ernest Hemingway.\(^{48}\)

These two misadventures beyond the slave quarters act to invert the role of the traditional Bildungsroman: it is Invisible Man who inadvertently assumes the role of the guiding figure, educating Mr Norton about the harsh realities of African American life. When the narrator returns with the founding father to the college, the African American principal, Dr. Bledsloe, reprimands him, impressing upon the young man the need to avoid the ‘white man’ as he has done, and to practise self-reliance.\(^{49}\) He is expelled shortly thereafter.

\(^{46}\) Ellison, *Invisible Man*, p. 56.  
Invisible Man arrives in Harlem, carrying seven letters of recommendation from the founding fathers and friends of the school, which might help him obtain work. At this point in the narrative, the Erziehungsroman tradition ends, and in the urban centre, the more relevant Entwicklungsroman subgenre comes into play. A form of the Bildungsroman which translates to the novel of growth or development, an Entwicklungsroman text places less emphasis on self-cultivation than the Erziehungsroman. This growth suggests a coming to awareness of one’s identity through experience; this path typically ends in harmonious self-cultivation which is favourable ‘für das Ganze’ or ‘for the whole’, in the words of Wilhelm Dilthey, who first conceptualised the term Bildungsroman.\footnote{F. Moretti, \textit{The Way of the World: The Bildungsroman in European Culture}, 2nd ed., trans. A. Sbragia, London, Verso, 2000, p. 18.}

According to Moretti, the classical Bildungsroman must synthesise these two subgenres in order to balance the two imperative forces of bourgeois maturation in modernity: scholarship and experience.\footnote{Moretti, \textit{The Way of the World}, pp. 16-17.} The semantics of the Entwicklungsroman implies, but does not necessarily necessitate, a harmonious, finite endpoint to the protagonist’s growth. This ambiguity is capitalised upon in many twentieth century American novels — particularly in the proletarian Bildungsroman, such as Wright’s \textit{Native Son} — often aborting or limitlessly deferring a dénouement of harmonious Bildung, with a tragic end for the protagonist.\footnote{A. Douglas, \textit{Terrible Honesty: Mongrel Manhattan in the 1920s}, Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1995, p. 16.} This is relevant to the narrative trajectory of \textit{Invisible Man}, as the protagonist leaves the bourgeois college and enters the fierce proletariat of Harlem.

\textit{Invisible Man}’s migration follows the common the Entwicklungsroman trope of the young ingénue escaping a dull, agrarian life by venturing to the wizening streets of the grand metropolises, where they are bound to find disillusionment. The first two decades of the twentieth century was an age of Great Migration, when an estimated six million African Americans escaped the lingering tyrannies of the South in search of work in the North. In the two decades prior to 1930, the population of New York doubled in size, attracting artistes and intellectuals of all races and classes from all over America and Europe.\footnote{Ellison, \textit{Invisible Man}, p. 165.} These two factors facilitated the creative movement of African Americans known as the Harlem Renaissance.

\textit{Invisible Man}’s first New York experiences are not those of the artist escaping the boredom of his hometown – he fails to seize the metropolitan ‘spirit’. Overwhelmed by the city, \textit{Invisible Man} attempts to enter the workforce in Harlem, not desperate for a meaningful career – as the traditional Bildungsheld should be – just any kind of work that will earn him enough to live off. It is soon apparent, however, that his seven letters of recommendation from Dr Bledsloe actually portray him as a dishonourable character. He eventually finds work in a paint factory called ‘Liberty Paints’, which prides itself on producing a particular shade of colour called ‘Optic White’, used on several significant national monuments, into which they disperse several drops of black paint.\footnote{Lucas E. Morel calls this chiaroscurist technique ‘chiaroscuro’.}
metaphor Ellison’s ‘test of the American melting pot’, raising an awareness of what the author designed as the ‘inclusion and not assimilation of the black man’.

After an explosion at the factory, the concept of Invisible Man’s awareness is complicated as the narrator wakes in a factory hospital mute, and with temporary amnesia. In his vulnerable state, he is cruelly experimented upon by several perverse physicians; he is hooked up to a machine that, the doctors laughingly suggest, ‘will produce the results of a prefrontal lobotomy without the negative effects of the knife’. They believe, as he is an unidentified African American male, he must be a criminal whose personality they can remould through the wonder of medical science.

The existential dilemmas of the typical coming-of-age genre are playfully literalised as the doctors eventually try to identify their patient. They hold up cards asking questions such as, ‘WHAT IS YOUR NAME?’,'WHO… ARE… YOU?', and ‘WHO WAS BUCKEYE THE RABBIT?’ in reference to a popular children’s song. Invisible Man is left alone on his hospital bed, trapped in a daze and, ‘fretting over [his] identity’. He suspects that he ‘was really playing a game with myself and that they were taking part. A kind of combat’. In a biblical allusion to the Book of Judges, Invisible Man compares himself to Samson, the betrayed and blinded Israelite with superhuman strength, who murders thousands of Philistines for their part in his imprisonment and degradation, killing himself in the same act of terrorism.

I had no desire to destroy myself even if it destroyed the machine; I wanted freedom, not destruction. It was exhausting, for no matter what the scheme I conceived, there was one constant flaw – myself. There was no getting around it. I could not more escape than I could think of my identity. Perhaps, I thought, the two things are involved with each other. When I discover who I am, I’ll be free.

The ‘machine’ in this instance is both literal and metaphorical; it could easily be read as referring to the mechanisms of bigotry. His short term quest for identity is fruitless because he has not yet reached his defining moment as an individual. The use of imagery turns this life event into an allegorical sideshow in terms of narrative progression. A nurse announces that he is a ‘new man’; the doctor who discharges him tells him ‘I have [your name] here’, but never divulges it to the narrator. He returns to the outside world no closer to understanding who he is or what his role or identity may be, only that he may not return to the industrial workforce due to health limitations. Before leaving the hospital, the ‘doctor’ is revealed to be a factory official who is determined to renege Invisible Man’s compensation rights as an injured worker: ‘But, after all, any new occupation has its hazards. They are part of growing up, of becoming adjusted, as it were. One takes a chance and while some are

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56 Ellison, Invisible Man, pp. 182-183.
57 Ellison, Invisible Man, p. 184.
58 Ellison, Invisible Man, p. 185.
59 Ellison, Invisible Man, p. 186.
prepared, others are not.” 60 The doctor’s dismissive speech reminds Invisible Man of Mr. Norton and Dr Bledsloe, who were also quick to relieve themselves of any social responsibility toward him. By physically disabling the protagonist, the author complicates the Bildungsroman theme of relating the protagonist’s entrance into the production side of capitalism; Invisible Man is rendered disabled by virtue of a damaged reputation and sense of self-ability.

He fortuitously meets the leader of the left-wing Brotherhood, Brother Jack, who is deeply impressed by the young man’s talent as an orator, and convinces Invisible Man to join the Brotherhood as a public spokesman for Harlem. The ideological function that The Brotherhood performs in the novel is one of the most well-discussed historical formalist elements of the narrative. This is particularly so given Ellison’s own early radical years (where he was involved in leftist journalism and activism alongside Richard Wright and Langston Hughes). 61 At The Brotherhood, Invisible Man meets the charismatic African American youth leader, Brother Tod Clifton, with whom he forms a deep bond, not unlike the bond between Hughes and Ellison himself, which enabled his entrance into the leftist artistic community of New York. 62

As they patrol the streets one day, they are both accosted by the formidable Black Nationalist leader of Harlem, Ras the Exhorter, who is violently against miscegenation, and believes that black Americans should violently rise against white Americans. Invisible Man had first seen Ras only days earlier, where he was described as a ‘short squat man’ of West Indian accent shaking his fist and crying out from a ladder over a crowd of coloured men, his step decorated with small American flags. 63 The Exhorter’s passionate oration holds a puzzlingly powerful effect over the narrator, as does the ‘obvious anger of the crowd’, 64 who are dazzled and persuaded by his passionate speech. It is a striking image of power and persuasion that stays with Invisible Man long after the sighting, until he is reintroduced to Invisible Man again by the warnings of Brothers Tod Clifton and Jack of the socialist Brotherhood.

Ras the Exhorter — or Exorter or Destroyer, as the narrator tells us he will become known — is the leader of a group who are the ideological rivals of the Brotherhood, with similar interests but opposite methodologies. If Brother Jack is the sweet-tongued politican, then Ellison surely establishes Ras as his rival allegorical figure: a violent and vengeful Samsonite archetype, the sort of figure Invisible Man feared he would become. Ras’ comparative blindness is not a literal affliction, but he is certainly blinded by his own breed of racial prejudice and ambitions of widespread ethnic cleansing, not unlike the biblical figure himself. Ras and his followers are violently opposed to miscegenation or creolisation, believing that the camaraderie between ‘blacks and whites’ embodied by communism is more detrimental to the black movement than anything else.

The irony of the racial rivalry in the battle royale is reignited by another moment of violence: Clifton and the narrator find themselves in the midst of a street-

60 Ellison, Invisible Man, p. 188.
62 Foley, Wrestling with the Left, p. 28.
63 Ellison, Invisible Man, p. 122.
64 Ellison, Invisible Man, p. 122.
fight against Ras’s gang. Rather than killing Clifton at the opportune moment, Ras holds the young man down and lectures him:

You my brother, mahn. Brothers are the same color; how the hell you call these white men brother? Shit, mahn. That’s shit! Brothers the same color. We sons of Mama Africa, you done forgot? You black, BLACK! You – Godahm, mahn.\(^{65}\)

Ras beseeches Clifton to join his fold as a leader, believing him to be a leader of Africa, who has been misappropriated in the white man’s world; he ignores Invisible Man, believing him to be ‘tainted’ by his Anglo-oriented education. Ras rants of hierarchical levels of education: that he is considered ‘crazy’ because he ‘speak bahd English? Hell, it ain’t my mama tongue, mahn, I’m African!’\(^{66}\) He speaks of the hatred for ‘the black mahn’, held particularly by the ‘high-class white man’ and demands of Clifton, in a page long string of one-sided dialogue,

When the black mahn going to tire of this childish perfidity? He got you so you don’t trust your black intelligence? You young, you don’t play you-self cheap, mahn. Don’t deny you’self! It took a billion gallons of black blood to make you. Recognise you’self inside and you wan the kings among men! A mahn knows he’s a mahn when he got not’ing, when he’s naked – nobody have to tell him that. You six foot tall, mahn. You young and intelligent You black and beautiful – don’t let em tell you different!\(^{67}\)

Like he was entranced by Trueblood’s speech, the narrator is again ‘caught in the crude, insane eloquence of his plea’. Ras is the antithetical guidance figure of Clifton’s Bildungsroman (and Invisible Man’s alter ego), who tries to educate or bring about realisation in the young ‘king’ or aristocratic African figure, Clifton.

The final sections of the book follow the power dynamics between the Brotherhood and Ras’ followers. Invisible Man is demoted by the Brotherhood, and is forced to leave his post in Harlem; but when he returns, he finds that Clifton has disappeared, and that many of the African American members of the group have left due to the Brotherhood’s betrayal of their interests. When Invisible Man finds Clifton, he finds a changed man. His comrade is accosted by members of the police for selling ‘Sambo’ dolls (racially derogative slave icons) without a permit —a betrayal of all that either wing of the protest movement (the Communists and black nationalists) stood for. Invisible Man watches helplessly as Clifton is shot dead by the police in front of a large crowd. At the scene, he is compelled to draw on his talent as an orator, staging an impassioned public eulogy for the gathered crowd; by doing so, he frames Clifton as a hero, rather than a criminal.

Invisible Man is reprimanded by Jack and the Brothers for hosting a funeral without orders. Jack’s cold reaction leaves Invisible Man completely disillusioned by the guidance figure he thought he could trust. The narrator accuses Jack of not

understanding the sacrifice Clifton made. In a moment of symbolic revelation, the leader responds by removing a glass eye from his eye socket. Through the entwining of literal and metaphorical blindness, Brother Jack’s false eye represents the communists’ inability, as a whole, to see a plurality of interests. This sense of disillusionment is an exaggerated refraction of the disillusionment Ellison, Wright and their African American counterparts felt as they left the American communist party — later summarised by Wright in a 1965 interview:

“They fostered the myth that communism was twentieth-century Americanism, but to be a twentieth-century American meant, in their thinking, that you had to be more Russian than American and less Negro than either. That’s how they lost the Negroes. The communists recognized no plurality of interests and were really responding to the necessities of Soviet foreign policy, and when the war came, Negroes got caught and were made expedient in the shifting of policy”.

After leaving the communist party, Ellison retroactively referred to himself as an ‘outsider’ of the Left. This is how the narrator describes himself as he walks away from Brother Jack and his glass eye. Invisible Man desires to take action against the Brotherhood, but his plans are cut short when, again, he encounters Ras, who is also livid that Invisible Man has chosen not to capitalise on the community’s fear and loathing of white authority after Clifton’s death. Ras has transformed into the nightmarish figure of an African warlord:

A new Ras of a haughty, vulgar dignity, dressed in the costume of an Abyssian chieftain; a fur cap upon his head, his arm bearing a shield, a cape made of the skin of some wild animal around his shoulders. A figure more out of a dream than out of Harlem, than out of even this Harlem night, yet real, alive, alarming.

By transforming into an allegorical image, Ras provokes a metaphoric call to arms. He does not respond to Clifton’s death with debate or theatrics, like Brother Jack, but instead with threats of violence. At the novel’s climax, the suburb succumbs to full-scale race riots, impelled by Ras. Invisible Man becomes caught up in the violence, and sets fire to a tenement, where he is accosted by Ras, now dressed in the traditional African attire of a chieftain. Ras demands that the rioters lynch Invisible Man, so as to send a message to all ‘race traitors’, a purposefully ironic punishment for ‘betraying’ his own race. In this moment of chaos and life-threatening danger, the Bildung of Invisible is reified, and he discovers the truth about his own identity:

I looked at Ras on his horse and at their handful of guns and recognized the absurdity of the whole night and of the simple yet confoundingly complex arrangement of hope and desire, fear and

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68 Quoted in: Foley, Wrestling with the Left, p. 3.
69 Foley, Wrestling with the Left, p. 3.
70 Ellison, Invisible Man, p. 420.
hate, that had brought me here still running, and knowing now who I was and where I was and knowing too that I had no longer to run for or from the Jack and the Emersons and the Bledsloes and Nortons, but only from their confusion, impatience, and refusal to recognize the beautiful absurdity of their American identity and mine.71

Unlike Clifton, who dies as an ideological prop in the crossfire of other people’s violent quests for identity, Invisible Man chooses to run from the violence. He knows that his death will ‘not bring [him] to visibility’, that he is better off to live as an autonomous individual, to ‘live out one’s own absurdity than to die for that of others, whether for Ras’s or Jack’s’.72

As he tries to flee the scene, two white policemen, believing him to be an instigator of the violent riot, pursue him. In his attempt at escape, Invisible Man falls into an uncovered manhole. By covering over the opening, and its damp, inescapable darkness, the policemen allow the narrative to complete its full cycle as a ‘boomerang’73 of history, returning to the present tense, where Invisible Man informs the reader he has remained since. This final section outlines what Invisible Man has learnt from his life experience, effectively fulfilling, in a unique way, the formal mechanisms of the Bildungsroman genre. His lesson is that he must remain true to the complexity of his self, and not betray his own desire to fulfill social roles and responsibilities. The novel ends with a prologue, in which the narrator stands poised, ready to emerge from his cave of hibernation.

Close analysis of Invisible Man demonstrates that whilst Ellison is engaging in tropes, mechanisms, and themes associated with the traditional Bildungsroman, he does not hold fast to the generic constraints of the Goethean Bildungsroman prototype of representing the bourgeois education of a young man. However, it must be emphasised that this narrative is not an anti-Bildungsroman like the protest Bildungsroman of Wright or his successor James Baldwin, an essential distinction to make. We might think of the protagonist’s extrusion from society as a metaphor for the position the novel holds in the American Bildungsroman: as belonging to the genre, but consciously digressing from the generic to form its own unique appropriation of what it means to come of age for one man. This novel belongs to a very specific moment in time, yet it is deliberately universal; it is an allegorical address, yet it is also an autofictive individual narrative/history. It is a novel that applies the Bildungsroman’s generic variations in order to engage with deeper ideological functions: to subvert the fear and loathing associated with American identity, and to promote the plurality of its literature and culture.

71 Ellison, Invisible Man, p. 422.
72 Ellison, Invisible Man, p. 422.
73 Ellison, Invisible Man, p. 5.