Invisible Man

INTRODUCTION

BRIEF BIOGRAPHY OF RALPH ELLISON

Ralph Ellison's father was a small business owner who died when Ellison was three. Ellison was raised by his mother in Oklahoma City. As a young man, Ellison was fascinated by jazz, and soon learned to play the trumpet. Ellison attended the Tuskegee Institute for college, originally intending to become a composer. Seeking money to pay his tuition, Ellison traveled to New York, where he met and befriended other artists and writers. In New York, Ellison began to write and publish articles and reviews, becoming involved with both the Federal Writer's Project during the Great Depression as well as the Communist Party. During World War II, Ellison served in the Merchant Marine. After the war, Ellison began work on *Invisible Man*, ultimately finishing the novel in 1952. The novel became an instant classic, catapulting Ellison to national and international fame. Afterward, Ellison lectured both in Europe and at several major American universities. He continued work on his unfinished second novel until the time of his death in 1994.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Invisible Man was written shortly after America's triumph in World War II. While the postwar period is traditionally considered a boom time in American history, many men were disillusioned by the experience of the war, something reflected by the novel's veteran mental patients. Furthermore, the late 1940s and early 1950s were also a time of immense discrimination against blacks, especially in the Deep South. Segregation was in full effect in many parts of America when *Invisible Man* was published, and many of its scenes were considered shocking at the time.

RELATED LITERARY WORKS

The work of T.S. Eliot, particularly "The Waste Land," was a major influence on the novel's style. Ellison gravitated toward Eliot's elaborate, allusion-dense language, and Ellison alludes to Eliot's "Four Quartets" multiple times in the novel. Ellison was also influenced by the pioneering work of the African-American writer Richard Wright, the author of *Black Boy* and *Native Son*. Though *Invisible Man* does not match Wright's work in terms of style, both men shared a concern for portraying a realistic black consciousness. In addition, Wright and Ellison were both deeply involved in Communist politics in the 1930s and 40s, a fact that resurfaces in *Invisible Man* in the form of the Brotherhood.

KEY FACTS

- **Full Title:** *Invisible Man*
- **When Written:** Begun in 1945, finished in 1952.
- **Where Written:** Several locations on the East Coast, including Vermont and New York City
- **When Published:** 1952
- **Literary Period:** Modernism, postwar American fiction
- **Genre:** Modernist novel
- **Setting:** First, an unnamed black university in the south. Later, New York City, especially the area of Harlem.
- **Climax:** The massive race riot that nearly destroys Harlem.
- **Antagonist:** Dr. Bledsoe, Brother Jack, Ras the Exhorter
- **Point of View:** First person

EXTRA CREDIT

Radio Days: Ellison was known to be a tinker, capable of repairing both automobiles and electronic devices. He had a particular passion for high quality audio equipment, and found a hobby in building and customizing stereo systems.

Tough Act to Follow: Ellison found it difficult to replicate the success of *Invisible Man*, which immediately was considered a classic. He spent the rest of his life trying to write his second novel. Two different versions of Ellison's incomplete manuscript have been published since his death, *Juneteenth* (1999) and *Three Days Before the Shooting* (2010)

PLOT SUMMARY

An unnamed narrator speaks, telling his reader that he is an "invisible man." The narrator explains that he is invisible simply because others refuse to see him. He goes on to say that he lives underground, siphoning electricity away from Monopolated Light & Power Company by lining his apartment with light bulbs. The narrator listens to jazz, and recounts a vision he had while he listened to Louis Armstrong, traveling back into the history of slavery.

The narrator flashes back to his own youth, remembering his naïveté. The narrator is a talented young man, and is invited to give his high school graduation speech in front of a group of prominent white local leaders. At the meeting, the narrator is asked to join a humiliating boxing match, a battle royal, with some other black students. Next, the boys are forced to grab for their payment on an electrified carpet. Afterward, the narrator gives his speech while swallowing blood. The local leaders reward the narrator with a **brief case** and a scholarship

to the state's black college.

Later, the narrator is a student at the unnamed black college. The narrator has been given the honor of chauffeuring for one of the school's trustees, a northern white man named Mr. Norton. While driving, the narrator takes Mr. Norton into an unfamiliar area near the campus. Mr. Norton demands that the narrator stop the car, and Mr. Norton gets out to talk to a local sharecropper named Jim Trueblood. Trueblood has brought disgrace upon himself by impregnating his daughter, and he recounts the incident to Mr. Norton in a long, dreamlike story. Mr. Norton is both horrified and titillated, and tells the narrator that he needs a "stimulant" to recover himself. The narrator, worried that Mr. Norton will fall ill, takes him to the Golden Day, a black bar and whorehouse. When they arrive, the Golden Day is occupied by a group of mental patients. The narrator tries to carry out a drink but is eventually forced to bring Mr. Norton into the bar, where pandemonium breaks loose. The narrator meets a patient who is an ex-doctor. The ex-doctor helps Mr. Norton recover from his fainting spell, but insults Mr. Norton with his boldness.

Shaken, Mr. Norton returns to campus and speaks with Dr. Bledsoe, the president of the black college. Dr. Bledsoe is furious with the narrator. In chapel, the narrator listens to a sermon preached by the Reverend Barbee, who praises the Founder of the black college. The speech makes the narrator feel even guiltier for his mistake. Afterward, Dr. Bledsoe reprimands the narrator, deciding to exile him to New York City. In New York, the narrator will work through the summer to earn his next year's tuition. Dr. Bledsoe tells the narrator that he will prepare him letters of recommendation. The narrator leaves for New York the next day.

On the bus to New York, the narrator runs into the ex-doctor again, who gives the narrator some life advice that the narrator does not understand. The narrator arrives in New York, excited to live in Harlem's black community. However, his job hunt proves unsuccessful, as Dr. Bledsoe's letters do little good. Eventually, the narrator meets young Emerson, the son of the Mr. Emerson to which he supposed to be introduced. Young Emerson lets the narrator read Dr. Bledsoe's letter, which he discovers were not meant to help him at all, but instead to give him a sense of false hope. The narrator leaves dejected, but young Emerson tells him of a potential job at the factory of Liberty Paints.

The narrator reports to Liberty Paints and is given a job assisting Lucius Brockway, an old black man who controls the factory's boiler room and basement. Lucius is suspicious of his protégé, and when the narrator accidentally stumbles into a union meeting, Brockway believes that he is collaborating with the union and attacks him. The narrator bests the old Brockway in a fight, but Brockway gets the last laugh by causing an explosion in the basement, severely wounding the narrator. The narrator is taken to the factory's hospital, where he is strapped into a glass and metal box. The factor's doctors treat the narrator with severe electric shocks, and the narrator soon forgets his own name. The narrator's sense of identity is only rekindled through his anger at the doctors' racist behavior. Without explanation, the narrator is discharged from the hospital and fired from his job at the factory.

When the narrator returns to Harlem, he nearly collapses from weakness. A kind woman named Mary Rambo takes the narrator in, and soon the narrator begins renting a room in her house. The narrator begins practicing his speechmaking abilities. One day, the narrator stumbles across an elderly black couple that is being evicted from their apartment. The narrator uses his rhetorical skill to rouse the crowd watching the dispossession and causes a public disturbance. A man named Brother Jack follows the narrator after he escapes from the police. Brother Jack tells the narrator that he wishes to offer him a job making speeches for his organization, the Brotherhood. The narrator is initially skeptical and turns him down, but later accepts the offer.

The narrator is taken to the Brotherhood's headquarters, where he is given a new name and is told that he must move away from Mary. The narrator agrees to the conditions. Soon after, the narrator gives a rousing speech to a crowded arena. He is embraced as a hero, although some of the Brotherhood leaders disagree with the speech. The narrator is sent to a man named Brother Hambro to be "indoctrinated" into the theory of the Brotherhood. Four months later, the narrator meets Brother Jack, who tells the narrator he will be appointed chief spokesperson of the Brotherhood's Harlem District.

In Harlem, the narrator is tasked with increasing support for the Brotherhood. He meets Tod Clifton, an intelligent and skillful member of the Brotherhood. Clifton and the narrator soon find themselves fighting against Ras the Exhorter, a black nationalist who believes that blacks should not cooperate with whites. The narrator soon starts to become famous as a speaker. However, complications set in. The narrator receives an anonymous note telling him that he is rising too quickly. Even worse, another Brotherhood member named Wrestrum accuses the narrator of using the Brotherhood for his own personal gain. The Brotherhood's committee suspends the narrator until the charges are cleared, and reassigns him to lecture downtown on the "Woman Question." Downtown, the narrator meets a woman who convinces him to come back to her apartment. They sleep together, and the narrator becomes afraid that the tryst will be discovered.

The narrator is summoned to an emergency meeting, in which the committee informs him that Tod Clifton has gone missing. The narrator is reassigned to Harlem. When he returns, he discovers that things have changed, and that the Brotherhood has lost much of its previous popularity. The narrator soon after discovers Clifton on the street, selling **Sambo dolls**. Before the narrator can understand Clifton's betrayal, Clifton is shot dead

by a police officer for resisting arrest. Unable to get in touch with the party leaders, the narrator organizes a public funeral for Clifton. The funeral is a success, and the people of Harlem are energized by the narrator's speech. However, the narrator is called again to face the party committee, where he is chastised for not following their orders. The narrator confronts Brother Jack, whose glass eye pops out of its socket.

Leaving the committee, the narrator is nearly beat up by Ras the Exhorter's men. Sensing his new unpopularity in Harlem, the narrator buys a pair of **dark-lensed glasses**. As soon as he puts on the glasses, several people mistake the narrator for a man named Rinehart, who is apparently a gambler, pimp, and preacher. The narrator goes to see Brother Hambro for an explanation of the Brotherhood's dictates. Hambro tells the narrator that Harlem must be "sacrificed" for the best interests of the entire Brotherhood, an answer the narrator finds deeply unsatisfying.

The narrator, disillusioned by Hambro's words, remembers his grandfather's advice to undermine white power through cooperation. The narrator plans to sabotage the Brotherhood by telling the committee whatever it wants to hear, regardless of the reality. He also plans to infiltrate the party's hierarchy by sleeping with the wife of a high-ranking member of the Brotherhood. The narrator meets Sybil, a woman who fits the bill, at a Brotherhood party. However, Sybil knows nothing, preferring to use the narrator to play out her fantasy of being raped by a black man. While Sybil is in his apartment, the narrator gets a call that a riot is going on in Harlem.

The narrator rushes uptown to find that Harlem is in chaos. The narrator falls in with a group of looters. The looters soon escalate their violence, burning down their own tenement building to protest the poor living conditions. The narrator runs into Ras the Exhorter again, now dressed as an Abyssinian chieftain. Ras sends his men to try to hang the narrator. The narrator barely escapes from Ras' men, only to meet three white men who ask him what he has in his briefcase. When the narrator turns to run, he falls into a manhole. The white men seal the narrator underground, where the narrator is forced to burn his past possessions to see in the dark.

The narrator returns to the present, remarking that he has remained underground since that time. The narrator reflects on history and the words of his grandfather, and says that his mind won't let him rest. Last, the narrator says that he feels ready to end his hibernation and emerge above ground.

CHARACTERS

MAJOR CHARACTERS

The Narrator – The entire story of *Invisible Man* is told through the eyes of the narrator, who is by far the novel's most central character, despite the fact that his name is never revealed. The narrator begins and ends the novel as a type of disembodied voice, "invisible" to all those who are unable to see him for what he is, a thinking individual instead of merely a black complexion. The narrator is portrayed as a forceful speaker, and the narrator's private meditations are amply expressed throughout the novel as well. The arc of the novel follows the narrator's lost illusions, beginning as an ambitious and hopeful young man from the South and ending as a disillusioned rebel, hiding underground from his white, and even black, oppressors. Throughout the novel, the narrator deeply wishes to believe in a cause, hoping that his belief will help him understand his identity. Ultimately, he discovers that causes like Dr. Bledsoe's college or the Brotherhood are false narratives, and that he has to discover for himself what to think about himself.

Dr. Bledsoe – Dr. Bledsoe is the president of the all-black college that the narrator attends in his youth. The narrator is extremely impressed with Dr. Bledsoe for reaching the top of the black community, and Bledsoe is known far and wide as a statesman and educator. Outwardly subservient to whites, Bledsoe prides himself on being the black man who can tell white men what to think. Ultimately, Bledsoe is more concerned with holding onto his small enclave of power than anything else.

Mr. Norton – Mr. Norton is a white trustee of the college from Boston. Norton believes that though his donations he understands the black community, but in reality he is clueless, a fact that is exposed by his experience with Trueblood and at the Golden Day. He is obsessed with his "destiny," believing that he is responsible for the fate of young black men like the narrator. Mr. Norton also has a strange obsession with his daughter, a facet of his personality that is revealed when listens to Trueblood's story with a little too much excitement.

Brother Jack – Brother Jack is an experienced politician and the leader of the Brotherhood. When the narrator first meets Brother Jack he is cool and collected, able to marshal reams of history and theory with ease. However, it quickly becomes apparent that Brother Jack is more interested in his own power than in any scientific theory of history. Brother Jack uses the Brotherhood's theory to justify his own commands, and ultimately admits to the narrator that he intends to tell the people what to think. His single eye becomes a metaphor for his partial blindness.

Ras the Exhorter – Ras the Exhorter is a West Indian man whose background is never explained. A black nationalist, Ras believes that the black race should band together to form their own nation, separate from the interests of other races. He opposes cooperation between whites and blacks on principle, and opposes the Brotherhood due to its multiracial membership. As the novel progresses, Ras' exhortations rise in pitch and intensity, and Ras eventually declares himself "Ras the Destroyer" by the time of the Harlem riots, donning African gear and jousting the police force.

Tod Clifton – Tod Clifton is a dedicated member of the Brotherhood chapter of Harlem and the leader of the chapter's youth division. Early on, Clifton is the Brotherhood's most tireless defender against the repeated attacks of Ras the Exhorter. However, when the Brotherhood's policies shift, Clifton grows disillusioned and drops out of the Brotherhood. The narrator discovers him later selling **Sambo dolls** on the street, a cynical mocking of the Brotherhood's high ideals.

Rinehart – When the narrator puts on dark-lensed glasses, he immediately is mistaken for a man named Rinehart. Not so much a character as an idea, Rinehart represents the fluidity, hopefulness, and charlatanism of the black community. Rinehart is a gambler, a numbers man, a pimp, and a preacher, and shifts between all of his roles with ease. Rinehart is a reminder of the open possibilities outside strictly prescribed visions of the world.

Mary Rambo – Mary is a motherly figure for the narrator, a caring woman who provides food and shelter in the narrator's time of need. The narrator feels indebted to Mary, despite finding her bothersome from time to time. Mary also has high ideals, telling the narrator that whatever he does, he should be a "credit to the race."

MINOR CHARACTERS

Jim Trueblood – A black sharecropper. Formerly a well-liked singer and storyteller in the college community, Trueblood is ostracized when he impregnates his own daughter. However, white men are fascinated by Trueblood's story, and after his foul deed he receives more assistance than ever before.

Reverend Barbee – A black preacher from Chicago, Barbee gives a rousing sermon about the Founder, describing the early years of the black college. After the speech, the narrator realizes that Barbee is blind.

Sybil – The wife of a high-ranking brotherhood member, the narrator seduces Sybil to learn about the organization's secrets. Ignorant of any important information, Sybil is more interested in playing out a rape fantasy with the narrator.

Young Emerson – Young Emerson attempts to help the narrator, exposing Dr. Bledsoe's harmful letters of introduction. Influenced by his analysis, young Emerson asks the narrator if two strangers can ever really speak honestly with one another.

Lucius Brockway – An old foreman at Liberty Paints. Brockway is not an engineer, but is the only person who knows the secrets of how Liberty Paints are manufactured. He is gladly subservient to his white boss.

The Ex-doctor – A patient at the mental hospital near the college, the ex-doctor was once a successful brain surgeon in France. However, he became convinced that his work could not bring him dignity in a racist society.

The Founder – The fictionalized founder of the unnamed black college, the Founder is similar to but different from the real-life Booker T. Washington.

Brother Hambro – The Brotherhood's chief theorist, Brother Hambro tutors the narrator during his "indoctrination."

The Hostess – An unnamed woman who seduces the narrator after one of his lectures on the "Woman Question."

Brother Wrestrum – An insecure but zealous member of the Brotherhood, Wrestrum accuses the narrator of using the Brotherhood for his own self-interest.

The Narrator's Grandfather – On his deathbed, the narrator's grandfather tells his family that he is a spy and traitor, and that they should try "yessing" white men as a form of resistance.

Brother Tobitt – A Brotherhood member and crony of Brother Jack. Brother Tobitt is proud of his marriage to his black wife.

Mr. Kimbro – The narrator's first boss at Liberty paint.

Emma – A woman member of the Brotherhood, later identified as Brother Jack's mistress.

Kate – Jim Trueblood's wife.

Matty Lou – Jim Trueblood's daughter, impregnated by Trueblood.

Big Halley – The bartender at the Golden Day

Supercargo – The attendant for the mental patients at the Golden Day.

Brother and Sister Provo – An elderly couple who are dispossessed of their Harlem home.

THEMES

In LitCharts literature guides, each theme gets its own color-coded icon. These icons make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. If you don't have a color printer, you can still use the icons to track themes in black and white.

RACE AND RACISM

In *Invisible Man*, race is a constant subject of inquiry. As a young black man in the middle of 20th century America, the narrator most often confronts the idea of race through experiencing the racism of others – from the degradation he experiences in the battle royal to his realization of his token role in the Brotherhood. However, the novel also explores the question of whether race might be an authentic marker of individual identity, outside the context of racism and other narratives imposed by others. The narrator quickly realizes that his blackness is highly significant, but cannot easily decipher what it should mean to him.

At the novel's beginning, a younger narrator's take on race is relatively simple. In his graduation speech, he is happy to repeat

Booker T. Washington's words, explaining that blacks should cheerfully cooperate with the whites that are in power. As the narrator travels through the world of the novel, he meets an array of characters shaped by the complex history of race, and his views grow more complex. The most important of these figures are black, though also included are overtly or unintentionally racist whites, like the pompous Mr. Norton. Characters like Dr. Bledsoe and Lucius Brockway are characters that control their small domains within the white system but are either cynical or unaware of their compromised positions.

Many of the experiences of the novel revolve around the narrator's acceptance of one notion of race, only to discover that there exceptions and difficulties in the ideas he encounters. For example, Ras the Exhorter offers the inflammatory message of rejecting whites wholesale. This has a seductive appeal for the narrator, despite being irrational and dangerous. Near the novel's end, the narrator attempts to enact his grandfather's strategy of "yessing them to death," but his plan backfires during his fling with Sybil, the wife of a powerful Brotherhood member.

Ellison offers no solution to the complicated legacies of race. Although the narrator withdraws into his hole at the novel's end, he still boldly states, "I couldn't be still even in hibernation. Because, damn it, there's the *mind*...It wouldn't let me rest." Ellison hints that the only way to find an authentic relationship with race is to puzzle it out for oneself, and only an active, individual mind can locate his own relationship with history.

IDENTITY AND INVISIBILITY

Invisible Man is the story of a young man searching for his identity, unsure about where to turn to define himself. As the narrator states at the novel's beginning, "All my life I had been looking for something, and everywhere I turned somebody tried to tell me what it was." It is undoubtedly clear that the narrator's blackness comprises a large part of his identity, although this isn't something he has necessarily chosen. For others in the novel, it is simply convenient to define the narrator through his blackness.

Ellison's narrator explains that the outcome of this is a phenomenon he calls "invisibility"—the idea that he is simply "not seen" by his oppressors. Ellison implies that if racists *really* saw their victims, they would not act the way they do. The narrator recognizes his invisibility slowly—in moments like the hospital machine, when he realizes he is being asked to respond to the question of who he is in terms of his blackness. Ultimately, the narrator is forced to retreat to his hole, siphoning off the light from the white-owned power company, itself a symbol of an underground resistance that may go unacknowledged for a long time.

However, invisibility doesn't come from racism alone. Just as poisonous for the narrator are other generalized ways of thinking about identity—ideas that envision him as a cog in a machine instead of a unique individual. This is true for the narrator both at the unnamed black university and at Liberty Paints. However, it is the Brotherhood, a thinly veiled take on the Communist Party, that proves to be most disillusioning for the narrator. The Brotherhood provides a systematic way of thinking about the world that claims to be the solution to racism and inequality.

When the narrator first meets Brother Jack, Jack says, "You mustn't waste your emotions on individuals, they don't count." At first, the narrator embraces this ideology of the Brotherhood and structures his identity around it. However, he comes to discover that the Brotherhood is perfectly willing to sacrifice him for its own potentially flawed ends. Thus the novel can be read not only as a story about a black man's struggle against racism, but a black man's struggle to grow up and learn to be himself, against the backdrop of intense social pressures, racism among others.

POWER AND SELF-INTEREST

Throughout the novel, the narrator encounters powerful institutions and individuals, all of which are bent on maintaining influence over events. At the novel's beginning the narrator is exposed to the white power elite of his town, who act one way in the public eye but have no shame about their racist and sexist actions within a private club. The very moment they sense a threat from the narrator (when he mentions the word "equality"), they prepare to destroy him. These men arm themselves with the story that they are upstanding businessmen and community leaders, but this narrative is in contradiction with their naked desire to maintain power.

The Brotherhood is one of the best examples of another group that uses a powerful narrative that seems to perfectly explain the world. By suggesting that all events are part of a science of history that can be perfectly understood, they seek to impose their subjective vision on others who buy into their philosophy. However, this ideology is flawed: although the Brotherhood is originally interested in combating oppression, it is clear that characters like Brother Jack come to relish their power above any other altruistic motive.

The black community is no freer from the self-interested drive to consolidate and maintain power at all costs – only they are limited by white oppression. Dr. Bledsoe is an example of a figure the narrator looks up to, only to find out that he is more interested in holding onto the enclave of power he has carved out than in the ideals of humility and cooperation he espouses in public. Later, the figure of Rinehart comes to represent a similar impulse within the black community: a cynical attempt to profit in the short term by exploiting the ignorance of others.

He is a pimp, gambler, racketeer, lover and preacher all in one, but only because he can rely on the weakness and desperation of other members of the black community. At the novel's end, the narrator remarks, "I've never been more loved or appreciated than when…I've tried to give my friends the incorrect, absurd answers they wished to hear." By retreating into the underground, the narrator hopes to distance himself these stories that destroy individual integrity while shoring up power structures.

DREAMS AND THE UNCONSCIOUS

Dreams and other unconscious influences play an important role in *Invisible Man*. Much of the novel depicts a society that is hostile to individual expressions that resist preconceived notions of how people should speak or act. Sometimes, however, repressed feelings come through, and some of the novel's most powerful moments are expressed in dream sequences that weave together the complicated strains of race, history, and memory. In the Prologue, the narrator has a dreamlike vision of listening to Louis Armstrong, an episode that takes him down progressive levels into the history of slavery. The narrator attempts to convey the generations, pains, struggles, and actions that led to Louis Armstrong to sing the way that he does. A dream can do more than most exposition to unlock emotions or connections that society doesn't want to see.

The narrator's dream of his grandfather's last words is one of the novel's most consistent reference points. This underscores the idea that his grandfather's words are themselves like a dream –enigmatic, suspended in a complex fabric of ideas and associations the narrator cannot completely unravel. Similarly, Jim Trueblood's dream is another complex narrative that illustrated the tangled race relationships, suggesting that images and emotions persist long after any intellectual attempt to change situations, a fact that stuns the ignorant Mr. Norton when he hears Trueblood's story.

Many of the novel's scenes are described in a dreamlike, almost improvisatory fashion that seems to fade in and out of realistic description. For instance, the "battle royal" at the beginning of the book is more like a nightmare or extended dream sequence than a realistic description of an event that might have occurred in the time period of the novel. These unreal "real" scenes give Ellison room to expose the hidden emotional aspects of a situation that a "normal" depiction of society would hide.

AMBITION AND DISILLUSIONMENT

Invisible Man can in many ways be thought of as a coming of age novel, in which an ambitious young man attempts to rise up through a broken system that ultimately rejects him. The novel is structured into a series of hopes and dashed expectations, beginning with the promise of the unnamed university, where the narrator assumes he will model himself after the Founder. Later, in the working world and in the world of the Brotherhood, the narrator similarly invests hope in the goodwill of others, only to find his expectations and ambitious thwarted.

His experience mirrors the whole generation of young black individuals who expected that they could rise up in an increasingly equal society. The ex-doctor from the mental hospital is a reflection of these dashed ambitions. After receiving recognition in France, the ex-doctor learns that he will never be truly respected due to his race. Denied his dignity, the surgeon gives up hope of recognition and ultimately ends up as another nameless member of the asylum. His advice for the narrator is to "Play the game, but don't believe in it."

In the Brotherhood, the narrator finally feels as though he is beginning to achieve recognition. However, he quickly begins to discover that the actions of the Brotherhood are designed to keep him in place. Ultimately, the Brotherhood's betrayal culminates in the race riot at the end of the novel. The narrator realizes that he has been kept out of affairs in order to help incite the riot without his interference. The narrator's retreat into the hole represents the final stage of the narrator's disillusionment, though on an ambiguous note.

Completely dissatisfied with all existing institutions and accepted ways of behaving in the world, the narrator says he is in "hibernation," waiting for the time to come when he can begin to achieve his aims. By secluding himself in his hole, the narrator precludes himself from either ambition or disappointment. However, the narrator acknowledges that this is only a temporary state, one that allows him to narrate his story from a distance, but that he will soon emerge from his hiding.

SYMBOLS

Symbols appear in **teal text** throughout the Summary and Analysis sections of this LitChart.

THE BRIEF CASE

The narrator's brief case is his literal "baggage." Presented in the first chapter after making his graduation speech, the brief case travels with the narrator throughout the novel, accumulating the signs of the narrator's past. The brief case becomes a sign of the changeability of the narrator's identity: he, like the brief case, is simply a vessel for the events have come to occupy his body and mind. At the novel's end, the narrator is forced to burn most of the brief case's contents in order create a light to see by. This act is a recognition that the past must be reckoned with in order to move forward into the future.

THE COIN BANK

The coin bank represents an exaggerated black figure that is excited to eat the coins that a white man gives him. The coin bank first appears in Mary Rambo's house, and the narrator is offended by the bank's stereotypical and stupid image. However, the bank truly becomes symbolic after the narrator smashes it. Try as he might to get rid of the fragments, the narrator cannot dump the bank, and it stays with him until the novel's end. The coin bank represents the difficulty of abandoning the legacies of past stereotypes, and that all men carry the burden of history with them as they move forward.

THE SAMBO DOLL

When Tod Clifton abandons the Brotherhood, the narrator rediscovers him selling racist Sambo dolls. The dolls' writhing is a grotesque play on the stereotype of African sensuality, and the dolls represent the servility of black entertainers for white masters. However, the fact that Clifton, the former protector of the Brotherhood's ideals, sells the dolls complicates the symbol, making their meaning ambiguous. In addition, Clifton controls the dolls with an invisible string, indicating that he may have more power than meets the eye. The dolls seem to be a rebuke to the good intentions of the Brotherhood, reminding the narrator that there are many things that exist outside the Brotherhood's tightly controlled view of the world.

THE DARK-LENSED GLASSES

When the narrator puts on the dark-lensed glasses, the citizens of Harlem immediately begin to mistake him for a man named Rinehart. The glasses are a sign of the unexpected fluidity of identity. For instance, after a few moments of wearing the glasses, the narrator finds himself acting differently, beginning the play the role of the man for whom he has been mistaken. The narrator finds it easier than he expected to inhabit a new role, a sign of the many unexplored possibilities that belong to every person. However, the glasses have their limits, as the narrator finds them crushed later during the Harlem riot.

QUOTES

Note: all page numbers for the quotes below refer to the Vintage edition of *Invisible Man* published in 1995.

Prologue Quotes

I am an invisible man…I am a man of substance, of flesh and bone, fiber and liquids—and I might even be said to possess a mind. I am invisible, understand, simply because people refuse to see me.

Related Characters: The Narrator (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 3

Explanation and Analysis

The narrator introduces the central concept of the novel from the very first sentence, describing himself as an "invisible man" who––despite having a body and taking up physical space––is not perceived by others because they "refuse to see" him. Immediately, this evokes the idea that because the narrator is African American, he is not recognized or acknowledged as a person in the same way that a white person would be. The narrator highlights the strange logic of this fact by pointing to the aspects of himself that are the same as any human: "flesh and bone, fiber and liquids." These basic facts constitute the human body prior to any racial differentiation, and thus indicate that the forces that render the narrator "invisible" are arbitrary and artificial.

The narrator's statement "I might even be said to possess a mind" may allude to the fact that a major feature of racism is the idea that black people are less intelligent than white people, or that racism encourages white people not to recognize black people's internal lives and consciousnesses (minds). Indeed, it is chiefly in this way that the narrator is invisible; while other characters can perceive his bodily presence when they encounter him, they do not acknowledge the existence of his mind. In the context of the novel, this is ironic, because the entire narrative is set within and narrated from the narrator's consciousness. Unlike the characters in the novel, the reader truly "sees" the narrator, an impression confirmed by the direct, almost confessional address of the first sentence: "I am an invisible man."

Without light I am not only invisible, but formless as well; and to be unaware of one's form is to live a death. I myself, after existing some twenty years, did not become alive until I discovered my invisibility.

Related Characters: The Narrator (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 7

Explanation and Analysis

The narrator has explained that the "hole" where he lives is "full of light," because he manages to use energy from Monopolated Light and Power without paying the company for it. He says that this is important because without light he becomes "formless," a state of existence that is like being dead; he then confesses that he only became alive once he "discovered" his invisibility. At first glance, this passage seems to contain two paradoxical ideas: firstly, that the narrator needs light because being formless and invisible is a kind of death, and secondly, that he was not alive until he realized he was invisible.

On closer inspection, however, it is possible to see that these concepts are not in fact contradictory. In the first sentence, the narrator is referring to the concept of being invisible to *himself*, and argues that if he does not have a sense of who he is, then he might as well be dead. In the second half of the passage, his focus is on his invisibility to *others*, and points out that before he acknowledged this was true he was not really alive. This passage therefore confirms the importance of self-possession and self-awareness.

It also highlights the necessity of not living in ignorance of the true nature of reality. Before becoming aware of his "invisibility," the narrator struggled in vain for recognition and justice. However, once he understands the way that racism renders him invisible, he is able to achieve a greater level of autonomy.

Chapter 1 Quotes

❝ All my life I had been looking for something, and everywhere I turned someone tried to tell me what it was. I accepted their answers too, though they were often in contradiction and even self-contradictory. I was naïve. I was looking for myself and asking everyone except myself questions which, and only I, could answer.

Related Characters: The Narrator (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 15

Explanation and Analysis

The narrator begins the first chapter of the novel by confessing that all his life he has been "looking for something," and that he spent a great deal of time listening to the views of other people in trying to figure out what it was. Eventually, however, he came to realize that only he himself would be able to decide. This passage foreshadows the journey the narrator embarks upon over the course of the novel. Indeed, much of the conflict in the narrative originates in the many contradictory views of the world the narrator encounters, and his uncertainty about which path to follow.

Particularly at the beginning of the novel, the narrator places very little faith in himself, preferring to blindly trust the authority of figures such as the Founder, Mr. Norton, and Dr. Bledsoe. However, after various crises he is forced to reckon with the extent to which these figures act out of ignorance or self-interest, and comes to see his trust in them as naïve. Indeed, the narrator comes to realize that his central problem––the thing he was looking for––is his lost sense of identity, and that those he formerly looked up to in fact contributed to his lack of stable identity in the first place. The sentence "I was looking for myself" confirms how this quest for identity is related to theme of being an "invisible" man.

❝ 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…Live with your head in the lion's mouth. I want you to overcome 'em with yeses, undermine 'em with grins, agree 'em to death and destruction, let 'em swoller you till they vomit or bust wide open.

Related Characters: The Narrator's Grandfather (speaker), The Narrator

Related Themes:

Page Number: 16

Explanation and Analysis

The narrator has admitted that he once felt ashamed of the fact that he was the descendant of slaves, and then came to be embarrassed of that very shame. He recalls the dying words of his grandfather, who he describes as an "odd old guy" who "caused the trouble." On his deathbed, the narrator's grandfather announced that "our life is a war" and that he considered himself a traitor and a spy; he advised the narrator's father to "overcome 'em with yeses... agree 'em to death and destruction." The narrator goes on to explain that this advice was highly unexpected, as his

grandfather––a former slave whom the narrator describes as quiet and meek––never seemed interested in disrupting the status quo.

Although his parents urge him to forget his grandfather's dying words, the narrator is profoundly shaken by them, and identifies this moment as the catalyst for the later events in the novel. Indeed, a major motif in the novel is the tension between appearing to resist racist power structures, and actually doing so. Characters such as the narrator's grandfather and the ex-doctor at first seem passive and compliant; however, they are then revealed to be "troublemakers" by rebelling from within the system, and encouraging others to do the same. Meanwhile, characters like Dr. Bledsoe and Brother Jack present themselves as fighting against subordination, when in fact they are motivated by self-interest.

Chapter 2 Quotes

I am standing puzzled, unable to decide whether the veil is really being lifted, or lowered more fimly in place; whether I am witnessing a revelation or a more efficient blinding.

Related Characters: The Narrator (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 36

Explanation and Analysis

The narrator has described the college he attended, an institution for black students opened by an unnamed individual described only in reverent terms as "the Founder." The narrator details the idyllic scene of the campus, including a bronze statue depicting the Founder lifting a veil from the face of a kneeling slave. As he recounts the image of the statue, he admits it is not clear to him whether the Founder is actually lifting the veil or lowering it "more firmly in place." This ambiguity is significant, as it represents the narrator's conflicted feelings not only about the college itself, but also the broader evolution of his views on racial uplift, power, and social change.

At the novel's outset, the narrator is an obedient and enthusiastic student, who earnestly believes in the authority of figures such as the Founder, the college president Dr. Bledsoe, and the white college trustee Mr. Norton. He has faith that working hard at the college will secure him a prosperous future, and dreams of one day holding a high-powered academic position like Dr. Bledsoe.

However, the events of the novel lead the narrator to question the ideology of the college and the figures who run it. He notices that Dr. Bledsoe and Mr. Norton are primarily motivated by self-interest, not a true desire to change the social status and conditions of black people. He thus comes to see the college as an institution that secures the power of a few individuals over the oppressed majority of African Americans.

I didn't understand in those pre-invisible days that their hate, and mine too, was charged with fear. How all of us at the college hated the black-belt people, the "peasants," during those days! We were trying to lift them up and they, like Trueblood, did everything it seemed to pull us down.

Related Characters: The Narrator (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 47

Explanation and Analysis

The narrator has been tasked with chauffeuring Mr. Norton, a wealthy white trustee of the college, and per Mr. Norton's request has driven them to a nearby area where the poorest members of the local black population live in shacks. The narrator refers to these people as "the black-belt people, the 'peasants,'" and recounts that everyone at the college––including himself––hated, feared, and resented them for supposedly thwarting their efforts to uplift the race. Once again, the narrator divides his understanding of the world into before and after his realization that he was invisible, and characterizes his "pre-invisible days" as being characterized by naive faith in the transformative power of the college and fearful misunderstanding of poor black people.

Indeed, this passage shows the complex and contradictory nature of the narrator's feelings toward the impoverished "black-belt people." He claims that he hated and feared them, while at the same time embodying a patronizing, paternalistic attitude by saying "We were trying to lift them up." This highlights the incoherent nature of the college's relationship to poorer black people, a relationship that directly echoes Mr. Norton's attitude toward the college. As this chapter shows, Mr. Norton is both fascinated and repelled by black people. Although his support of the college is supposedly motivated by altruism, his conversation with the narrator reveals the extent to which he is actually acting out of self-interest, as he believes that his own fate is directly implicated in the fate of black people.

Chapter 3 Quotes

❝ Already he's learned to repress not only his emotions but his humanity. He's invisible, a walking personification of the Negative, the most perfect achievement of your dreams, sir! The mechanical man!

Related Characters: The Ex-doctor (speaker), The Narrator

Related Themes:

Page Number: 94

Explanation and Analysis

The narrator has taken Mr. Norton into the Golden Day, a local black bar in which a group of "shell-shocked" WWII veterans are drinking. Mr. Norton passes out, and one of the veterans, an ex-doctor, helps the narrator to revive him. Once Mr. Norton regains consciousness, the ex-doctor speaks to him with a frankness that alarms the narrator; in this passage, the ex-doctor responds to the narrator's distress by commenting on the narrator's repressed, submissive character. By telling Mr. Norton that the narrator is a "perfect achievement of your dreams," the ex-doctor highlights a new interpretation of Mr. Norton's real motivation for investing in the college—he implies that Mr. Norton's "dream" is in fact to have greater control over black people. This contrasts with the narrator's understanding of Mr. Norton at the time, though over the course of the novel the narrator comes to agree with the ex-doctor's perspective.

This is also the first instance when a character other than the narrator uses the term "invisible." The ex-doctor clearly views the narrator's invisibility as a symptom of his "mechanical" obedience to Mr. Norton, implying that the narrator's submission to white authority has robbed him of autonomy and humanity. The narrator's use of the word "invisible" is subtly different; while rooted in the same concept that black people are "invisible" because white people refuse to recognize their agency, the narrator believes that this is an inherent condition of being black in a racist society, and not the result of mechanically acquiescing to the will of white people.

Chapter 6 Quotes

❝ The white folk tell everybody what to think—except men like me. I tell *them*; that's my life, telling white folk how to think about the things I know about.

Related Characters: Dr. Bledsoe (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 143

Explanation and Analysis

Dr. Bledsoe has scolded the narrator for taking Mr. Norton to the poor black neighborhood and to the Golden Day. When the narrator protests that he was just obeying Mr. Norton's wishes, Dr. Bledsoe exclaims that every black person should know that the only way to please white people is to lie. He goes on to rant about his own power, claiming that white people "tell everybody what to think" except men like himself, who tell white people how to think. This passage radically alters the narrator's understanding of Dr. Bledsoe. Unlike the narrator himself, who willingly obeys white people such as Mr. Norton, Dr. Bledsoe collaborates with white people in a strategic way, making it seem as though he is submitting to them when in fact he retains control by lying to them and manipulating them into thinking how he wants them to.

Or at least, this is what Dr. Bledsoe claims. While it is certainly true that Dr. Bledsoe has been able to secure a degree of power for himself, over the course of the novel the narrator comes to view Dr. Bledsoe's claims about the extent of his influence over white people as somewhat delusional. Despite his statement about telling white people what to think, in reality Dr. Bledsoe must behave in an outwardly subservient way to white people in order to retain his position as president of the college, and thus remains "invisible" in the same way as the narrator and other black characters.

Chapter 10 Quotes

❝ If It's Optic White, It's the Right White

Related Characters: Lucius Brockway (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 217

Explanation and Analysis

The narrator has taken a job in the factory of Liberty Paints, a company with the patriotic marketing slogan "Keep America Pure." The narrator's boss, an older black man named Lucius Brockway, boasts that he helped the owner of Liberty Paints devise the slogan for the white paint: "If It's the Optic White, It's the Right White." This passage reveals the extent to which white supremacy inflects all aspects of

American society. Even something as seemingly neutral as paint is implicated in a belief system that equates whiteness with purity, correctness, and moral goodness. It also highlights the deep and pervasive fear of black people "contaminating" white society through integration. The fact that Brockway is proud of having invented the slogan suggests he has internalized these racist ideas, and that in his blackness he too is "invisible."

Chapter 11 Quotes

❝ A tremor shook me; it was as though he had suddenly given a name to, had organized the vagueness that drifted through my head, and I was overcome with swift shame. I realized that I no longer knew my own name. I shut my eyes and shook my head with sorrow.

Related Characters: The Narrator (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 239

Explanation and Analysis

The narrator has awoken in a hospital after having been tricked into causing an explosion at the factory by Brockway. His experience of the hospital is muted and surreal, and he has described the white doctors making racist comments and suggesting strange and cruel ways of treating him. One of the doctors asks the narrator what his name is, and at this moment the narrator is overcome by a mental and physical "tremor" that quickly transforms into shame as he realizes he does not remember his name. This passage highlights the way in which racism causes the doctors to treat the narrator in a degrading way, using electroshock therapy when it was totally unnecessary.

The fact that the treatment has caused the narrator to forget his name is significant. During slavery, Africans transported to the US were not allowed to keep their names, but were given Western, Christian first names and were forced to use their master's surname. The legacy of this practice is an important part of African American history; without their names, slaves were not able to define their own identity or preserve their own lineage, leaving their descendants unable to trace their ancestry to the particular regions and tribes of Africa where their ancestors originated. It was also a way of denying slaves the right to retain individual identity, thereby violating one of the most fundamental aspects of their humanity. The fact that the narrator has forgotten his name because of the cruel mistreatment of white oppressors shows that this American "tradition" is far from dead.

Chapter 12 Quotes

❝ One moment I believed, I was dedicated, willing to lie on the blazing coals, do anything to attain a position on the campus—then snap! It was done with, finished, through. Now there was only the problem of forgetting it.

Related Characters: The Narrator (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 259

Explanation and Analysis

The narrator has settled at Mary Rambo's house, which allows him the security of stable accommodation; at the same time, he feels lost and purposeless, because without a job or promise of return to the college it is no longer clear why he is in New York. In this passage the narrator reflects on the psychological impact of coming to terms with the fact that he will not return to the college. He is able to acknowledge that he will never go back; at the same time, his entire life had previously been oriented around securing a position on campus, and thus "forgetting" the college will not be easy.

This passage highlights the extent to which the narrator's fate is beyond his control. Despite the zeal of his ambitions, there is literally nothing he can do about the fact that he will never be able to realize his dream of working at the college. At the same time, his words suggest that there is a kind of freedom to be found in letting go of his former dreams. He admits that he would have lain "on the blazing coals" in order to fulfill his goal, a phrase that emphasizes the extent to which his ambitions required total self-sacrifice and surrendering of agency (not to mention significant hardship and pain). By letting go of his desire to work at the college, he is able to reclaim autonomy and freedom in a similar way to the moment when he realizes he is "invisible."

Chapter 14 Quotes

❝ I was puzzled. Just what did she mean? Was it that she understood that we resented having others think that we were all entertainers and natural singers? But now after the mutual laughter something disturbed me: Shouldn't there be some way for us to be asked to sing? Shouldn't the short man have the right to make a mistake without his motives being considered consciously or unconsciously malicious? After all, *he* was singing, or trying to.

Related Characters: The Narrator (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 314

Explanation and Analysis

Having accompanied Brother Jack to a gathering at a luxurious, elegant home, the narrator has been inducted into the Brotherhood and given a new identity and place to live. A short, drunken man at the gathering has insistently requested that the narrator sing, which has embarrassed the other attendees, including a woman who apologizes profusely to the narrator. Although the narrator has dispelled the embarrassment with laughter, he is left disturbed by the woman's apology, as it seems to indicate a profound block in the possibility of black people and white people communicating with one another.

The narrator's work with the Brotherhood introduces a new type of white person into the narrative. The white members of the Brotherhood seem genuinely distressed by racism, and claim to want to end racial discrimination. The narrator is astonished by the seemingly open and respectful way they treat him, but at this moment he perceives a troubling dimension to their deference. He admits that the woman is right to assume that black people resent being stereotyped as "natural entertainers," but nonetheless thinks there should be a way for the man to ask him to sing, considering the man himself was singing. In spite of––or perhaps even due to––their concerns about racism, the members of the Brotherhood are not able to communicate with the narrator as a person, instead assuming they know what he thinks without him telling them. Despite their apparent good intentions, the narrator thus remains "invisible" to them.

Chapter 16 Quotes

❝ This was a new phase, I realized, a new beginning, and I would have to take that part of myself that looked on with remote eyes and keep it always at the distance of the campus, the hospital machine, the battle royal—all now far behind. Perhaps the part of me that observed listlessly but saw all, missing nothing, was still…the dissenting voice, my grandfather part; the cynical disbelieving part—the traitor self that always threatened internal discord.

Related Characters: The Narrator (speaker), The Narrator's Grandfather

Related Themes:

Page Number: 335

Explanation and Analysis

Brother Jack has taken the narrator to a boxing arena in Harlem where he is to give a speech. The narrator waits nervously, reflecting on the role he is expected to perform as part of the Brotherhood and uneasily admitting that, although he is largely willing to trust the Brotherhood, "the traitor self" inside him threatens to ruin this new beginning. Note that the narrator describes this side of himself as inherently oppositional rather than opposed to any particular ideology or group. Indeed, this "dissenting voice" is a threat first and foremost to the narrator's own peace of mind.

It would be wrong, however, to characterize this aspect of the narrator's personality as needlessly cynical. Over and over again, the narrator encounters individuals and groups of people who demand his obedience––from the white boys at the "battle royal" to Dr. Bledsoe to Lucius Brockway to the Brotherhood. Each has a different motivation for wanting the narrator to submit to them, and some seem genuinely invested in his wellbeing. However, in every case, surrendering his autonomy eventually leads the narrator to a bad situation; thus, although the narrator resents the "dissenting voice" for causing "internal discord," he is ultimately right to trust it. Over the course of the novel it becomes clear that it is this dissenting voice that allows the narrator to retain a sense of his own identity and humanity.

Chapter 17 Quotes

❝ And it went so fast and smoothly that it seemed not to happen to me but to someone who actually bore my new name. I almost laughed into the phone when I heard the director of Men's House address me with profound respect. My new name was getting around. It's very strange, I thought, but things are so unreal for them normally that they believe that to call a thing by name is to make it so. And yet I am what they think I am.

Related Characters: The Narrator (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 379

Explanation and Analysis

Despite a clash with Ras the Exhorter, the narrator's fortunes overall seem to have turned, and in this passage he reflects on the success he has found in his role within the Brotherhood. Where previously he moved through New

York anonymously and was often treated badly by those around him, under his new identity he finds fame and respect among the people of Harlem.The narrator experiences many reinventions of his identity over the course of the novel, a fact that confirms the impression that his true self is "invisible" beneath these various guises. This invisibility, though in many ways a curse, allows him the fluidity to assume different roles, thereby giving him a sense of freedom and allowing him to witness many different sides of society.

Once again, this passage highlights the importance of names, whose particular significance within African American communities originated during slavery. It is through the good reputation of his new name that the narrator is finally treated with respect by those around him; at the same time, the fact that he was given the name by the Brotherhood and did not choose it himself does not bode well. White people bestowing a name on a black person echoes the practice of slaveowners naming their slaves, and suggests that the narrator is of instrumental value to the Brotherhood––they have a use for him, but do not really care about him as a person. Once again, the narrator has slipped into a new identity without choosing that identity himself, thereby relinquishing his autonomy and self-definition to others.

Chapter 20 Quotes

❝ Why did he choose to plunge into nothingness, into the void of faceless faces, of soundless voices, lying outside history?...But not quite, for actually it is only the known, the seen, the heard and only those events that the recorder regards as important that are put down, the lies his keepers keep their power by.

Related Characters: The Narrator (speaker), Tod Clifton

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 439

Explanation and Analysis

The narrator has witnessed a series of events that have made him seriously question his faith in the Brotherhood. Brotherhood membership in Harlem has dropped, Brother Tarp has disappeared, and the narrator has encountered Tod Clifton on the street selling racist Sambo dolls. In this passage, the narrator ponders Clifton's choice to leave the Brotherhood and "plunge into nothingness... outside history." His role in the Brotherhood has provided the narrator with a sense of purpose and importance, and as a result he sees the outside world as a "void of faceless faces and soundless voices." This image directly links to the condition of invisibility that the narrator eventually comes to realize is his inevitable fate.

Although he doesn't see it yet, eventually the narrator appreciates the freedom that comes with anonymity, and views the sense of identity given to him by the Brotherhood as false because it requires him to surrender his own autonomy. Furthermore, by telling his own story in his own terms, the narrator places himself within history in a way that reflects his authentic experience, as opposed to submitting to the "lies" authority figures use to stay in power.

❝ Men out of time, who would soon be gone and forgotten...who knew but that they were the saviors, the true leaders, the bearers of something precious? The stewards of something uncomfortable, burdensome, which they hated because, living outside the realm of history, there was no one to applaud their value and they themselves failed to understand it....What if history was a gambler, instead of a force in a laboratory experiment, and the boys his ace in the hole?

Related Characters: The Narrator (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 441

Explanation and Analysis

The narrator has witnessed Tod Clifton be murdered by the police, and has stumbled in a state of shock into the subway. He observes the people around him, who don't care about the Brotherhood and who the narrator judges to be "men out of time, who would soon be gone and forgotten." During this part of the novel, the narrator undergoes a crisis of faith in the Brotherhood. On the one hand, the ideology of the Brotherhood depicts history as akin to "a force in a laboratory experiment" that can be accurately predicted and manipulated, and thus membership in the Brotherhood gives the narrator a sense of control over history and makes him believe that he can change the racist, unjust society in which he lives for the better.

However, the narrator's increasing distrust in the Brotherhood is accelerated by witnessing Clifton's murder. He begins to doubt whether history can be controlled; the

frenetic and unpredictable events of his life seem to suggest that history is more like a "gambler" than a scientific force. The narrator is also troubled by the evident irrelevance of the Brotherhood to most ordinary people in Harlem. Although he at first judges the men he is observing to be inconsequential, he then wonders if they are in fact "the true leaders" of society, and whether it is the Brotherhood (and therefore also the narrator) who is in fact inconsequential.

Chapter 22 Quotes

Our job is not to *ask* them what they think but to *tell* them!

Related Characters: Brother Jack (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 473

Explanation and Analysis

The narrator has delivered a powerful speech at Tod Clifton's funeral, but one that he knows did not emphasize Brotherhood ideology enough to satisfy the members of the Brotherhood. Sure enough, he has been called into a meeting during which Brother Jack and Brother Tobitt criticize and ridicule the narrator for his speech and tell him that he doesn't truly understand the situation in Harlem. Brother Jack informs the narrator that he was "not hired to think," and goes on to say that the role of the Brotherhood is not to ask people what they think but to tell them. These words are directly reminiscent of Dr. Bledsoe's claim that he tells white people what to think, highlighting the similarity between the power-hungry figures of Brother Jack and Bledsoe.

This passage is the first time in which the Brotherhood's authoritarian, paternalistic nature is explicitly revealed. Thus far, members of the Brotherhood have described the organization as radically egalitarian, but Brother Jack's statement reveals that this is false, and that members of the Brotherhood, like so many other characters in the novel, only really care about having power over others. Once again, it is black people (in this instance, the population of Harlem) who are particularly targeted and whose agency and autonomy is denied.

Chapter 23 Quotes

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. A vast seething, hot world of fluidity, and Rine the rascal was at home. Perhaps *only* Rine the rascal was at home in it.

Related Characters: The Narrator (speaker), Rinehart

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 498

Explanation and Analysis

After being harassed by followers of Ras the Exhorter, the narrator decides to buy a pair of dark-lensed glasses to wear as a disguise. His plan does not work exactly as intended, however, because the people of Harlem now all assume that he is Rinehart, a shady yet beloved character who variously takes on the personas of pimp, gambler, and preacher. In this passage the narrator reflects on the impression he has gained of Rinehart's life through the reactions of people who have assumed he is Rinehart. Although the narrator knows that Rinehart is a "rascal," he concedes that Rinehart's dishonesty and fluid identity allow him to experience the world as a place of endless possibility. The narrator concludes half-ironically that Rinehart "was years ahead of me and I was a fool."

Once again, the narrator is seduced by the reinvention of identity, a process that requires a person's true identity to remain forgotten or "invisible." Although the narrator condemns the ways in which Rinehart misleads people, he has come to believe that the world is suited to such fluidity and dishonesty. Having become disillusioned with the idea that the world is either fair or predictable, the narrator admits that in order to survive in the "vast seething, hot world of fluidity," perhaps it is best to operate in the chameleon-like fashion of Rinehart.

I began to accept my past and, as I accepted it, I felt memories welling up within me. It was as though I'd learned suddenly to look around corners; images of past humiliations flickered through my head and I saw that they were more than separate experience. They were me; they defined me.

Related Characters: The Narrator (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 507

Explanation and Analysis

The narrator has spoken with Brother Hambro about the Brotherhood's plan to abandon the people of Harlem, and was disturbed by Hambro's response that sometimes people need to be sacrificed for the greater good of the Brotherhood's mission. Having left Hambro's apartment, the narrator reflects despairingly on the hypocrisy and moral bankruptcy of the Brotherhood, and admits that Brother Jack is just as bad as Mr. Norton. Caught up in this state of rage and disillusionment, the narrator suddenly comes to terms with his past, accepting his memories and "past humiliations" as the things that constitute his identity. This is a pivotal moment in the novel in which the narrator, rather than seeking a new source of hope and reinvention, finds peace with who he is.

In this passage, the narrator realizes that being "invisible" does not have to mean denying his past or rejecting the memories that make up his identity. In fact, reckoning with his own history gives the narrator a new perspective on life, which he likens to suddenly gaining the ability to "look around corners." This statement implies that the narrator's former naïveté was perhaps based in his refusal to accept who he truly was, a position that blinded him to reality.

Chapter 25 Quotes

❝ 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 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 Jacks and the Emersons and the Bledsoes and Nortons, but only from their confusion, impatience, and refusal to recognize the beautiful absurdity of their American identity and mine.

Related Characters: The Narrator (speaker), Ras the Exhorter, Brother Jack, Young Emerson, Dr. Bledsoe, Mr. Norton

Related Themes:

Page Number: 559

Explanation and Analysis

The narrator has found himself in the middle of a riot that's broken out in Harlem, and he has encountered Ras the Exhorter dressed as an Abyssinian chief, carrying a spear and riding a horse. Having recognized the narrator, Ras orders his men to hang him, ignoring the narrator's explanations that he is no longer part of the Brotherhood. Faced with the prospect of his imminent death, the narrator reflects on the bizarre, "simple yet confoundingly complex" situation in which he has ended up. The calm with which he confronts the prospect of death reveals a newfound sense of acceptance of the sinister and unpredictable nature of reality, and indicates that the narrator no longer wishes to control "history."

This sense of freedom and acceptance is echoed in the narrator's admission that he no longer feels he has to run from "the Emersons and the Bledsoes and Nortons, but only from their confusion." The narrator's new level of wisdom and maturity is emphasized by the fact that he has given up hope of escaping power-hungry figures without succumbing to total disillusionment and despair. While almost everything he once believed about the world has been upended, he still believes in the importance of patience, wisdom, and compassion, and seems to have discovered a newfound appreciation for the "beautiful absurdity" of life in American society.

Epilogue Quotes

❝ Let me be honest with you—a feat which...I find of the utmost difficulty. When one is invisible he finds such problems as good and evil, honesty and dishonesty, of such shifting shapes that he confuses one with the other...I was never more hated than when I tried to be honest. Or when, even as just now I've tried to articulate exactly what I felt to be the truth. No one was satisfied—not even I.

Related Characters: The Narrator (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 572

Explanation and Analysis

The narrative has jumped back to where it began, with the narrator living as an "invisible" man in his "hole." He has admitted that he accepted his present situation reluctantly, but that having understood the nature of reality, he has no other choice. In this passage he admits that he has always found it difficult to be honest, because "I was never more hated than when I tried to be honest." The truth of this statement can be found throughout the novel, from the

moment when the narrator's parents urge him to forget his grandfather's dying words, to the narrator's hostile reaction to the advice given to him by the ex-doctor, to Brother Jack's harsh criticism of the narrator's emotionally genuine speech at Tod Clifton's funeral.

In each of these instances, characters respond by immediately attacking the truth-teller, rather than pausing to consider whether what they are saying is valid. At first, the narrator reacted to this pattern by constantly seeking to live up to other people's expectations, thereby embodying the advice given to him by Dr. Bledsoe—that it is necessary to lie to white people in order to keep them happy. Later in the novel, the narrator adopts a more radical, strategic form of dishonesty by imitating the chameleon-like deceit of Rinehart. However, the narrator cannot rely on this strategy either, as in this state good and evil become "such shifting shapes" that it's impossible to distinguish one from the other. In this passage the narrator resolves to be honest with the reader, thereby highlighting the importance of giving a truthful account of one's own story.

> Who knows but that, on the lower frequencies, I speak for you?

Related Characters: The Narrator (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 581

Explanation and Analysis

The narrator has explained that, despite all that has happened to him, he has accepted his own humanity and is still able to love, and that he is now ready to emerge from "hibernation." He reflects on his reason for writing his story, and imagines the reader reacting in a negative way to his explanation, criticizing the narrator for being attention-hungry. He refutes this position and in the final sentence of the novel suggests that "on the lower frequencies" he might speak for "you," the reader.

There are a number of ways to interpret this sentence. "The lower frequencies" may refer to the narrator's life on the fringes of society; perhaps he is referring to his mission to give a voice to the experience of being oppressed as a black person in America.At the same time, the "you" in this sentence could be anyone, and "the lower frequencies" perhaps refers to the fundamental humanity that all people share––even those who do not want to admit it. The narrator may be implying that while on the surface he is "invisible," beneath this lies the truth of his consciousness and authentic identity. The sentence is further complicated by the fact that the narrator uses the phrase "speak *for* you" as opposed to "speak *to* you." The novel is filled with moments in which certain characters speak for other characters, thereby denying these other characters their right to self-determination and agency. However, in the final sentence the narrator suggests that their is perhaps a better way for people to speak *for* one another, by articulating genuine emotional truths about human experience.

SUMMARY AND ANALYSIS

The color-coded icons under each analysis entry make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. Each icon corresponds to one of the themes explained in the Themes section of this LitChart.

PROLOGUE

An unnamed narrator introduces himself as an "invisible man." He says that he is a real man of flesh and bone, and that he possesses a mind. He also states that he is invisible "simply because people refuse to see me."

The narrator is introduced to the reader as a disembodied voice, someone who has lost part of his identity through the inattention of the society that surrounds him.

The narrator elaborates on his invisibility. He indicates that it is not a physical defect of his own, but rather a mistake of the "inner eye" of others. There is something flawed in the way they perceive the world outside themselves. He also states that there are certain advantages to remaining unseen, although sometimes he doubts if he really exists.

The narrator wishes to focus on the fact that his position of invisibility has nothing to do with his essential character, but is the product of other people who wish to recognize him as something that he isn't—it is not his own choice.

The narrator recounts an anecdote: one night he bumped into a white man who cursed at him. Enraged, the narrator attacks him, head-butting him and demanding that he apologize. The other man continues to struggle, and the narrator nearly slits his throat. The narrator realizes that the man doesn't even see him, and that he is like a nightmare to the man. The narrator runs off, unnerved but laughing.

The narrator's metaphor of invisibility is related to race. Though he has not explicitly mentioned it, the anecdote confirms that the narrator is black. The narrator suggests that his blackness is the reason why the white man doesn't recognize the narrator as anything more than a bad dream.

The narrator notes that most of his action now is done softly, to not awaken the sleeping. In this way, he siphons off power from the electric company, using it to light his hideout for free. He tells us that he lives in a forgotten section of the basement of a whites-only building. He calls his home a "hole," and compares himself to a bear in hibernation.

The narrator has confirmed earlier that invisibility has the benefit of allowing him to act unseen. The act of secretly taking power (a simple metaphor itself) from the white power company is a sign of the narrator's underground resistance.

The narrator has lined every surface of his apartment with light bulbs to consume as much energy as possible. He says he needs the light because he is invisible, and that it "confirms my reality." When he is alone, the narrator listens to Louis Armstrong, who has "made poetry out of being invisible."

By attempting to take as much power as possible, the narrator proves to himself that he has an identity beyond what the white power structure prescribes for him. Armstrong is presented as a contrast: a black man in the public eye who is never seen for who he is.

The narrator recounts an episode of listening to Louis Armstrong. He is accidentally given marijuana instead of a cigarette one night, and smokes it at home while he listens to music. The experience triggers a vision, where the narrator finds himself "hearing not only in time, but in space as well." He is drawn down into the dream of the music.

Louis Armstrong makes popular music, but it is also based in the blues. As the narrator listens, he begins to hear the layers of black history that have meshed together through time to create the complexity of Armstrong's music.

In the vision, the narrator hears an old woman singing a spiritual, and then sees a fair-skinned woman being bid over by slave-owners. He then hears a passionate sermon being preached on the "Blackness of Blackness," complete with call and response. The preacher emphasizes that black is "bloody" and that the sun is "bloody red."

In his vision, the narrator sees the layers of black history that are transformed into a dreamlike sermon. The sermon tells him that "black," skin color, and "bloody," violence, have gone together ever since black men and women were brought to America.

The narrator tears himself away from the sermon and encounters the old singer of spirituals he heard before. The woman tells him that she loved her white master, who fathered her sons, though she also hated him. They hear the woman's sons laughing, and the woman explains that the master promised to free them but never actually did it. She admits that she poisoned her master to keep her sons from murdering their father.

The narrator speaks with a woman who is emblematic of the confusing legacy of race in America. Her master is her oppressor, yet she is linked to him in ways that cannot be easily dissolved or repaired. She is forced to kill her master to free her children, but at great pain to herself.

The woman tells the narrator that she loved her master, but she loved freedom more. The narrator asks her what freedom is, but she tells him that she has forgotten and that "It's all mixed up." The woman becomes confused, and one of her sons appears and threatens the narrator for upsetting his mother. The son grabs him but lets him go. The music becomes thunderously loud, and the narrator thinks he hears Ras the Exhorter before coming out of the dream.

Despite the fact that the woman has killed her master, it is not clear if the woman and her sons are yet "free," which prompts the narrator's question. When the son threatens the narrator, it becomes clear that freedom may be a difficult, painful thing to ask about. The answer to the question may be difficult to accept.

Back on the surface, the narrator hears Louis Armstrong singing the words of "Black and Blue." The narrator realizes that the music demands action, although few really listen to its message. He also notes that he has now stopped smoking marijuana, as it "inhibits action." He tells us that he believes in action, and that his hibernation is a preparation for "a more overt action."

When the narrator emerges from his dream, the words of "Black and Blue" have taken on the weight of America's conflicted race relations, and they express injustices that still continue. While marijuana allowed the narrator to access these thoughts, he knows that he will have to act concretely to create change.

The narrator addresses the reader, sensing that the reader must find him irresponsible. He admits that he is, indeed, irresponsible, as someone would have to recognize him for him to have responsibility. He says he is not responsible for attacking the white man on the street, as the white man controls that "dream world" in which he has been made invisible. Finally, he asks the reader to "bear with him" while he explains how he got to this point.

The narrator here addresses a hypothetical reader that might blame him for existing injustices, claiming that he has refused to cooperate in the system. The narrator explains that because the system has never given him anything, he cannot be "responsible" for its shortcomings. Instead, he proposes that people who refuse to see the world as it is are those at fault.

CHAPTER 1

The narrator takes us back twenty years from the point of the Prologue. He says, "All my life I had been looking for something…I was naïve." He says it took him a long time to realize that he was "nobody but myself."

The narrator describes a past state of mind in which he did not know his identity. In that time, he was willing to believe the narratives that were supplied to him by elders and superiors.

The narrator recounts that he was once ashamed that his grandparents were slaves. Now he feels ashamed that he used to feel ashamed. Eighty-five years ago his grandparents were told that they were free and equal. The narrator recalls his grandfather's dying words. His grandfather tells his family to keep fighting, that he has been a traitor his whole life, and to "agree 'em to death and destruction." The family is appalled by these words.

The narrator reflects on an earlier period of the 20th century, suggesting that a newly educated black class felt ashamed of a past that was no fault of its own. The narrator's grandfather appeared to be in this line, wishing to forget the history of slavery, but on his deathbed admits that the struggle against white oppression is still ongoing.

The fiery words of the narrator's grandfather seem strange, as he was always considered "meek." The young narrator is warned by his parents to forget his grandfather's words. However, the words stick with the narrator, partly because he can't make sense of them. They remain an enigma that haunts him, especially as he is a successful young student, praised by whites. He feels guilty for some treachery that he can't explain, and feels his grandfather's words are "like a curse."

At first, the narrator cannot understand that his grandfather was fighting against oppression: in his work he was subservient to white men. However, as he succeeds as a student the contradictions of the system become more apparent: it is not clear if white men wish for him to succeed or not. The narrator's simple worldview has become complicated.

At his graduation, the narrator gives a speech praising humility as the secret of success, though he doesn't actually believe it. The speech is highly praised and the narrator is invited to give the speech at a meeting of his hometown's white leaders.

The present-day narrator recognizes the ambition of his speech. At the time, the narrator did not actually feel humble, but rather knew that "being humble" was the thing to tell white people.

The narrator arrives at the hotel ballroom where he is to give his speech, and is informed that there will also be a boxing match, a "battle royal" fought between certain black classmates of his. He is invited to take part in the battle royal as well.

Although the narrator's invitation to speak is seemingly an honor, the prestige is quickly undercut by the fact that his speech is not considered any more important than a grotesque piece of entertainment.

In the ballroom, all the white leaders of the town are smoking and drinking together. The narrator is uneasy about the battle royal, as he knows the other participants are tough guys from his school who don't like him. All the same, the boys dress and are given boxing gloves. They emerge into the smoke-filled ballroom, where the town leaders, already drunk, are crowded around something the boys can't see.

The other boys conform to a racist white stereotype of unintelligent but athletic black boys, and it hurts the narrator to know that his talents are not taken even slightly seriously. In the ballroom, the narrator realizes that the white leaders of town are willing to show off their baseness in private.

The boys are taken to the front of the ballroom, where they see a beautiful and naked blond woman who is performing for the town leaders. Entranced, the narrator is overwhelmed with both fear and desire for the woman. The boys are terrified and embarrassed by their desire, but the town leaders force them to watch. The dancer, described as "detached," is chased through the ballroom by the frenzied men. They begin to toss her in the air, but she barely escapes.

The naked white woman is a symbol of sexual power, something that the black boys have been taught is completely taboo for them. Accordingly, the town leaders, indulging in their own debauchery, use it to torture the black boys. In private, the town leaders lose all sense of public decency, working themselves into a frenzy to chase the naked woman.

Immediately after, the boys are thrust into the ring for the battle royal. As the boys are blindfolded, the narrator tries to remember his speech. The boisterous town leaders yell racist epithets, and the narrator is filled with terror. The bell rings and the match begins. The narrator runs around the ring, trying to avoid the punches and bodies that he can't see. All of the boys fight against each other in the smoke and chaos.

The battle royal reveals the way in which members of the black community are perceived by whites: at best, they are a source of cruel amusement. At worst, they are non-existent. The battle royal allows the town leaders to express their aggression toward the black boys in a "safe" way.

The narrator tries to pretend he is knocked out, but is yanked back up. He tries to avoid as much of the fighting as possible. Suddenly he notices that the boys have been leaving the ring one by one, intentionally leaving him to fight against the biggest boy, named Tatlock, for the final prize. The blindfold is removed and the narrator tries convince the boy to let him go down easily. He even offers to pay him five and then seven dollars. Tatlock refuses and knocks the narrator out.

As much as the narrator would like to opt out of the battle, the town leaders quickly notice his shirking. He is forced to fight in a senseless battle against his peers, representative of one way that white men try to control blacks—by pitting them against each other. The narrator realizes that it isn't worth fighting against Tatlock to satisfy the crowd, but Tatlock simply wants his money.

The narrator is picked up and dragged to a chair with the other boys. The boxing ring is taken away and a small rug is brought out. The rug is covered with dollar bills and coins of different denominations. The boys approach around the rug and are told to take their money. When a signal is given, the boys jump on the rug, which they find to be electrocuted. The boys try to collect the money anyway, despite the pain, while the town leaders watch for their amusement.

Every part of the battle royal is transformed into a subjugation of the black boys. The boys cannot be simply paid for entertainment provided. Instead, the town leaders turn even giving payment into something that is for their own cruel enjoyment, removing all dignity from the event. The white leaders enjoy themselves watching a spectacle of torture.

As the narrator tries to collect the money, he reaches out for a chair leg to steady himself. The chair is occupied by a community leader named Mr. Colcord, who tries to push the narrator off from the leg. The narrator is surprised when he finds himself trying to topple the chair and push Colcord onto the rug himself. Although seemingly drunk, Colcord soberly kicks the narrator hard onto the rug, where he writhes in agony. As he rolls off, he sends the rug sliding, ending the spectacle.

Despite the humiliation, the narrator still wishes to be paid. However, the narrator finds himself resisting the cruelty of the town leaders despite himself. However, Mr. Colcord is quite aware of the narrator's attempt to turn the tables. By kicking the narrator back onto the rug, Mr. Colcord makes the absolute relationship between white and black clear.

The boys are paid five dollars each, except for Tatlock, who gets ten for winning the match. At first the narrator is told to leave with the other boys, but is soon brought back to give his speech. With condescension, the narrator is introduced the town leaders, who clap and laugh. The narrator begins to recite his speech, echoing the words of Booker T. Washington in calling for blacks to make friends with whites and to show humility.

After the cruelty of the battle royal, the narrator's speech seems like an afterthought. The words of the speech suggest cooperation between the white and black communities, but it is unclear what "cooperation" or "humility" means when black people like the narrator are so obviously mistreated by the men in the room.

The narrator tries to swallow back his blood while he speaks. Whenever the narrator says a large word, the men jokingly yell at him to repeat it louder. When asked to repeat the phrase "social responsibility," the narrator accidentally says "social equality," a phrase the leaders had not expected to hear. They become enraged, and ask the narrator what he means by his slip up. He assures the men that the phrase was a mistake.

The decorum of the speech (and by extension, the white community) is shown to be a hoax: no dignified place would heckle the speaker or let him speak while his mouth bleeds. When the narrator mentions "equality," saying something the town leaders don't want to hear, it becomes clear that they can quickly take away everything they have given him.

The narrator finishes his speech and the town leaders shower him with applause. The school superintendent presents the narrator with a calfskin **brief case**. He is told to look inside the brief case and discovers a scholarship to "the state college for Negroes." The narrator is elated, even after he finds out some of the coins he scrambled for were tokens instead of real money.

The narrator says everything the town leaders want to hear, and the leaders reward the narrator with a scholarship. It is implied that that the scholarship and the school are products of same system that allows for scenes of humiliation like the battle royal.

Everyone in the community congratulates the narrator, and he feels temporarily safe from his grandfather's words. However, that night he has a dream of his grandfather, who tells him to open the **brief case** and look inside. He finds an envelope with the state seal: inside the envelope is another envelope, and another inside that one, and so on. In the final envelope, he finds an engraved paper that reads, "Keep This Nigger-Boy Running." The narrator awakes. Lastly, the present-day narrator admits the dream is recurring, but at that time could not guess its significance.

The narrator feels the happiness of limited success in a white man's world. However, his grandfather's words indicate that success in the white-controlled world is fleeting or illusory. In his dream, the narrator's scholarship is transformed into a command to keep him "running." The scholarship is a way to fool the narrator into thinking he is making progress while he is actually kept subservient to white interests.

CHAPTER 2

The narrator recalls the beauty of his college campus. He says he thinks of it often in his hole. He gives a florid description of flowers, dorms, the moonlights, and other aspects of the scene. He remembers the central statue of the college's Founder. In his pose, the Founder seems to be lifting a veil, but the narrator is "unable to decide whether the veil is being lifted, or lowered more firmly in place."

For the narrator, the college seems nearly magical, a place where he can advance himself and earn a place at the top of black society. The Founder, resembling the real-world Booker T. Washington, is the hero of the school's model, but it is unclear if the school itself fights against or preserves white interests.

The narrator remembers that in the beauty of the college in the spring, when millionaire benefactors from the North would come to visit and inspect the campus. They would come and look and leave checks when they left, a product of the "alchemy of moonlight."

The narrator hints that part of the school's "magic" is that white donors support it. It is the money of these millionaires that allow the school to look picturesque, but it is also unclear why they are interested in supporting the school.

The narrator remembers chauffeuring for one of these millionaires in his junior year, a man named Mr. Norton. He is an old and aristocratic man from Boston, one of the college's original founders. The narrator is eager to please Mr. Norton, and apologizes for every small mistake. With time to kill before his next meeting, Mr. Norton tells the narrator to drive anywhere he pleases.

When the narrator is introduced to Mr. Norton, Mr. Norton seems almost larger than life. Mr. Norton is a man who is responsible for creating the college, the place where the narrator believes his dreams will be fulfilled. In his gratitude, he is willing to do anything for Mr. Norton.

Mr. Norton recounts the early days of the college, telling the narrator that he only helped assist the Founder's vision. He tells the narrator that the college and its students are part of his "pleasant fate." The narrator turns the car down an unfamiliar road, an area that Mr. Norton says he doesn't recognize.

Mr. Norton's stories of the Founder make Mr. Norton seem almost mythical to the narrator. In his naïveté, the narrator is also leading Mr. Norton off of the familiar paths to which he is accustomed.

The narrator asks Mr. Norton why he became interested in the school. Mr. Norton tells him that he feels connected to the destiny of the black race. Mr. Norton tells the narrator that he is part of Mr. Norton's fate, and that whatever he choses to do will become part of Mr. Norton's legacy.

It is revealed that Mr. Norton donates to the college because of an abstract sense of destiny. Mr. Norton is interested in students like the narrator because their success will increase his own legacy and power. His generosity is really selfishness.

Mr. Norton then explains a second reason, telling the narrator that he once had a daughter. He exalts his daughter's beauty, saying that "to look upon her was to drink and drink and drink again." He shows the narrator a miniature portrait of his daughter, and the narrator agrees that she is beautiful. Mr. Norton recounts that she became ill and died in Italy, and that his philanthropic work is all done in her memory.

Mr. Norton's attachment to his daughter is very strong, and the language he uses to describe her beauty is sexualized. It is subtly implied that there is something out of the ordinary in Mr. Norton's love for his daughter, an unconscious attachment that causes his philanthropy.

Mr. Norton tells the narrator "you are my fate." He asks the narrator to promise to tell him what he becomes. The narrator finds the conversation to be a little crazy, but agrees to someday tell Mr. Norton his fate. Mr. Norton continues to talk about the destiny of "the race," saying that the Founder had the power of a king or a god because he influenced so many lives.

Mr. Norton's obsessive repetition of "fate" underscores how misguided and fanciful his idea of the college is. He knows nothing about the narrator. To accept Mr. Norton's idea of fate would make the narrator "invisible," lost in another man's idea of the world and of him, the narrator.

The narrator drives the car into an unfamiliar territory near campus. Mr. Norton admits not recognizing the area, which is mostly populated by poor shacks. At Mr. Norton's command, the narrator stops in front of a dingy log cabin. The narrator is suddenly sorry that he drove to this area, as he recognizes that the cabin belongs to Jim Trueblood, "a sharecropper who had brought disgrace upon the black community." Once a well-liked singer of spirituals, Trueblood is now reviled up at the college.

It becomes clear that Mr. Norton's knowledge of the college is slim, as the area becomes completely unrecognizable to him just a few miles from campus. Outside the bubble of the college, the harsh conditions of the post-slavery south are apparent. Trueblood is similarly a sign of social ills that the wishful thinkers of the college would wish to obscure in order to keep the millionaire's money flowing.

The narrator tells Mr. Norton that the cabin is from "slavery times," which confuses and disturbs Mr. Norton. Outside the cabin, there are two pregnant women washing their clothes. The narrator tries to steer Mr. Norton away from the women, but Mr. Norton insists on trying to talk to them. The narrator tells Mr. Norton that Trueblood is hated at the college but won't explain why. Noticing that there are two pregnant women but only one husband, Mr. Norton asks for an explanation. Reluctantly, the narrator explains that Trueblood has impregnated both his wife and his daughter.

The idea that black homes from before the Civil War could still exist shocks the ignorant Mr. Norton, who wishes to believe that his actions have fundamentally changed the conditions of the black community. The narrator tries to steer Mr. Norton away from Trueblood's cabin, but it is clear that there is a whiff of scandal that attracts Mr. Norton.

Mr. Norton is stunned by this information, and asks repeatedly if the story is true. The narrator affirms it, and Mr. Norton is horrified to an unusual degree. Simultaneously, Trueblood himself appears from his cabin. Mr. Norton insists that he must speak with Trueblood. Ashamed but too afraid to disobey, the narrator follows Mr. Norton as he approaches Trueblood, who has a grisly wound on his face.

Mr. Norton's reaction to the crime of a man he does not know is disproportionately strong, and Trueblood's crime seems closely linked to Mr. Norton's sexualized description of his own daughter. Mr. Norton is offended, but secretly he is also titillated.

Mr. Norton asks Trueblood if the story of his deed is true and remarks, "You did and are unharmed!" The narrator notices a trace of envy in his voice. Trueblood replies that he feels all right. Excited, Mr. Norton takes Trueblood into the shade and asks him how he is faring. Trueblood begins to tell his story.

By asking to speak with Trueblood, Mr. Norton uses the pretext of philanthropy to mask a voyeuristic desire to hear about Trueblood's incest.

Trueblood remarks that before the impregnation no one would help him, but now curious people are more than ready to offer him aid. The college tried to pay to send Trueblood away from the campus, but Trueblood refused. When the whites of the area found out what Trueblood did, they listened intently to his story and offered him help as well. He now has more work than ever before.

Trueblood's crime is an important signal of race relations: to the black community, he is a symbol of the backwards past. However, to whites, he is a symbol of black inferiority, and the local authorities are more than happy to listen to and publicize his story.

Trueblood begins by telling them that when they were at their poorest, he, his wife Kate, and their daughter Matty Lou all slept in the same bed together to fight off the cold. While worrying at night, Trueblood hears his daughter saying "Daddy." Trueblood begins to weave a poetic tale, evoking his past memories. He wonders if Matty Lou is thinking about a boy he wants to discourage, and Matty Lou begins rubbing against him. He then tells Mr. Norton he fell into a dream.

Trueblood is a singer and storyteller, and as he begins to speak his character grows more complicated. The complex nature of his storytelling underlines that he is more than simply an ignorant criminal. His power of speech represents traditions and talents that are native to black culture and cannot be easily wiped away.

In his dream, Trueblood goes to see a man named Mr. Broadnax to buy some meat. Against protocol, he goes into the house, only to find no one inside. He walks into a white bedroom. The smell of women is rising, and Trueblood sees a white woman step out of a grandfather clock. Trueblood tries to escape through the clock but the woman is holding him back. He breaks her hold and runs into the clock.

Trueblood's dream focuses on the appearance of a white woman. Similar to the white woman before the battle royal, the woman in Trueblood's dream represents something taboo for a black man. The dream places Trueblood's crime in dialogue with the history of white oppression.

In the dream, Trueblood runs down a tunnel until he begins to float. He sees a graveyard ahead, then a burst of electric light. Trueblood wakes up to find that he is having sex with Matty Lou, who is hitting him and shaking. Realizing that he is already inside her, Trueblood rationalizes that he enjoys the feeling and needs to see the event through. The narrator tries to interrupt the story, but Mr. Norton silences him.

Trueblood rationalizes his crime as something inescapable: he has already begun, so he might as well see his act through. Trueblood's terrible crime is reflective of both his hopelessness and the power of a taboo desire that lies deep beneath the social norms of the community.

In the story, Trueblood's wife Kate discovers the moment of incest and screams. Kate starts throwing objects at Trueblood and then grabs his shotgun. Trueblood pleads with her not to "spill blood," and Kate attacks him instead with a hot iron. Trueblood resolves to take his punishment, but when Kate returns with an ax, Trueblood dodges the blow that nearly cuts off his head. He gets a nasty gash. Kate drops the axe and begins to vomit.

Kate's reaction to the incest reinforces the grotesque nature of Trueblood's action. Trueblood has broken one of the central conventions of society: the traditional roles in the family of parent and child. Trueblood first says that he will take Kate's punishment of the ax, but ultimately his will to survive is too strong.

Trueblood, filled with dread, waits to be struck down by god but is not. Kate takes Matty Lou and the other children away from the house. Trueblood confesses to a preacher, but the preacher is so aghast he sends Trueblood away. Trueblood can only sing the blues. He returns to his house, where Kate and Matty Lou assume he has run off. He discovers that both Kate and Matty Lou are pregnant, but he resolves not to leave them. He concludes, saying that even though his family won't speak to him, he's better off than before.

Trueblood's story finds no resolution in religion. God doesn't strike him down and the preacher is unable to accept his repentance. Trueblood retreats to singing the blues, a traditional black expression of woes that are too terrible to express any other way. In part, Trueblood's story emphasizes the way in which misery is the most typical black story in America, and that whites are happy to help prop up his failure.

After hearing Trueblood's story, Mr. Norton has become completely pale. The narrator asks if Mr. Norton is all right and convinces the shaken trustee to return to the car. Mr. Norton gives a hundred-dollar bill to Trueblood, telling him to buy his children some toys. The narrator is angry with Trueblood for being the one that Mr. Norton rewards, despite his sickening deed. Weakened, Mr. Norton says that he needs to have a "stimulant," or a drink, to calm himself. Still wishing to please, the narrator heads for the Golden Day, the only bar nearby.

Mr. Norton earlier said that the fate of black people was part of his destiny. If Trueblood can be considered part of Mr. Norton's destiny, the hundred-dollar bill is designed to assuage Mr. Norton's guilt. Mr. Norton is again divided, both aroused and horrified by Trueblood's story. The simplicity of Mr. Norton's narrative about black progress has been shattered.

CHAPTER 3

As the narrator drives Mr. Norton to the nearest bar, he recognizes a group of veterans from the nearby insane asylum. The patients are also heading to the Golden Day, and the narrator curses his bad luck. One of the patients is pretending to be the drum major of the group, and he stops the narrator's car, acting as if it's still World War II. The narrator manages to get past the aggressive drum major by pretending that Mr. Norton is General Pershing.

The veterans from the mental asylum are a potent symbol of another group of people that have fallen outside the view of Mr. Norton's "destiny." The veterans are men who served their country in World War II, but who are virtually unrecognized due to their skin color. They have suffered deep trauma and have nothing to show for it.

A weak Mr. Norton asks again for a stimulant, and asks who the man who stopped them was. The narrator replies that he's a "shellshocked" veteran. The narrator is determined to arrive at the Golden Day before the vets, knowing that they will cause havoc when they arrive. He also wonders why Mr. Norton should be so upset by Trueblood's story.

The veterans are a large blind spot in Mr. Norton's small worldview. Between the veterans and Trueblood, Mr. Norton has discovered a world of black experience that he wasn't ready to see. The experience overwhelms his delicate sensibility.

The narrator leaves Mr. Norton in the car and rushes into the Golden Day to buy whiskey. The bar is already filled with vets from the asylum. The men, who all used to be professionals, act and speak strangely to the narrator, who describes it as "a game whose goal was laughter and whose rules and subtleties I could never grasp."

The narrator emphasizes the fact that most of the men present were once exactly the type of men that Mr. Norton would have proudly embraced: black men who have risen into the professional class. However, their previous work has amounted to nothing.

The narrator elbows his way to the bar and asks the bartender, named Halley, for a double whiskey to carry out. Halley refuses the "schoolboy" narrator, telling him that everyone has to drink inside. The narrator tells Halley that Mr. Norton is sick and can't come in, but Halley still refuses.

The narrator's experience with Halley reveals how eager to please the narrator still is. The idea of being unable to supply Mr. Norton with his drink makes the narrator deeply anxious.

The narrator begins to return to Mr. Norton, anxious about bringing him into the increasingly rowdy bar. The patients' attendant is nowhere to be seen. When he returns, the narrator finds that Mr. Norton has passed out in the car "like a figure of chalk." Deeply worried, he runs back into the bar to ask Halley for help.

There is something unusual in the way that the patients have been completely abandoned by their attendant. Their freedom in the Golden Day is a sign of society's neglect, as well as an indication of the men's power when left to their own devices.

Halley refuses the narrator whiskey again, but two mental patients overhear the narrator's cries and agree to help him. While the patients help the narrator they banter amusingly, as one claims that Mr. Norton is Thomas Jefferson and that he is his grandson. Mr. Norton is brought into the bar and set down in a chair in the middle of the room. A patient slaps Mr. Norton, diagnosing him with a case of mild hysteria.

All of the speech of the patients has an element of truth to it, a reflection of the old idea that men who seem crazy often have insightful things to say in a fundamentally crazy society. Mr. Norton is indeed like Thomas Jefferson, a noble "founder" who conceals his injustice and sexual desire (just as Thomas Jefferson, who wrote the Declaration of Independence, kept and slept with his slaves).

Halley gives the narrator a bottle of brandy, and the narrator feeds the alcohol to Mr. Norton. Mr. Norton revives, asks where he is, and is told that he is in the Golden Day. The mental patients begin talking to Mr. Norton, including one man who tells Mr. Norton his theory of the cycle of races through time.

Mr. Norton has been brought to a bar that could not be farther away from his idea of the black community. The speeches of the mental patients confirm how much of the world lies outside of Mr. Norton's "destiny."

The patients' attendant, Supercargo, appears on the balcony and shouts to ask what's going on. Supercargo, a huge man, is drunk, and Halley asks a prostitute upstairs to sober him up. But when Supercargo shouts again for order, the patients in the bar attack Supercargo, rushing at him up the stairs.

Supercargo only briefly appears before he is attacked, and it is clear that he is not able to control the unbridled energy of all of his patients. Free of any pretensions, the patients seek to destroy the man who controls them.

Anarchy breaks out in the Golden Day. Supercargo is kicking patients down the stairs while patients begin to throw bottles of liquor. The patients grab Supercargo and drag him down the stairs. They then beat him savagely. The narrator is excited and feels that he wants to join them. The patients lay the now unconscious Supercargo on the bar.

The patients' beating of Supercargo has elements of the feeling of overthrowing any oppressor, and the narrator feels the patients' excitement immediately. The energies of the disenfranchised young men will no longer be kept in check.

One of the mental patients, an educated ex-chemist, tells the narrator that he should leave, as the patients have lost control. The narrator agrees, but he has lost Mr. Norton. After searching, he finds Mr. Norton under the stairs, passed out again. He has never been so close to a white man before, and the proximity frightens the narrator. Another patient, later known as the ex-doctor, tells the narrator to stop screaming (which he has been doing without realizing it), and that Mr. Norton is "only a man."

In the heat of the overthrow, there are still mental patients who are sane enough to warn the narrator to leave—not everything is as it seems. As the narrator comes into close proximity with Mr. Norton, it seems to break another taboo of normal race relations. The ex-doctor reminds the narrator of the falsity of this idea: Mr. Norton's whiteness doesn't make him untouchable.

The patient helps the narrator take Mr. Norton up to the balcony. Three girls from upstairs help them and give Mr. Norton a room to lie down. The patient reveals that he is an ex-doctor. He tells the narrator that Mr. Norton is simply shocked. The girls gather around Mr. Norton and begin to talk about his sexual prowess. The ex-doctor sends the girls out of the room and tells the narrator to find some ice for Mr. Norton.

The ex-doctor is another example of a skilled professional who has been marginalized due to his skin color and his experience in the war. As the girls talk about Mr. Norton's sex life, they also emphasize the strange mythology of sex in race relations.

When the narrator returns with ice, the ex-doctor tells him that Mr. Norton will be all right. Mr. Norton revives and the narrator is sent to fetch a glass of water for him. When he returns, the ex-doctor is speaking with Mr. Norton. Mr. Norton is impressed, and remarks that the ex-doctor has the same diagnosis as his specialist. The ex-doctor tells him that he was in France with the Army Medical corps.

The ex-doctor is a patient among the rowdy members of the Golden Day, but he is also a unique individual with both a history and fully formed thoughts. He is as skilled as any white physician, a fact that surprises Mr. Norton.

The narrator asks Mr. Norton if he would like to return to the campus now, but Mr. Norton insists on staying and hearing more about the ex-doctor's life. The doctor tells the narrator to listen, remarking that the narrator might take something from the story of his life. The ex-doctor tells Mr. Norton that he was a student of the same college as the narrator, and was a successful brain surgeon in France. However, he returned to America because of ulcers and the idea that "my work could bring me no dignity."

Again, Mr. Norton is drawn toward an aspect of black experience that he hadn't previously known existed. The doctor's story is one of deep disillusionment, even after reaching a relatively high level of accomplishment. The ex-doctor has endured a different kind of invisibility, where his skill cannot truly be seen for what it is because of his skin color.

A prostitute named Hester walks in on the scene, telling the three men to be happy, and that she will send them drinks. The ex-doctor tells Mr. Norton that he's blushing, meaning that he must be feeling better. The narrator is amazed at the ex-doctor's manner toward Mr. Norton, as he speaks freely to a white man without fear of the consequences. Fiercely, the ex-doctor tells them that he was beaten for saving a man's life with his skill.

The ex-doctor's free manner of speech is contrasted with the narrator's desire to please Mr. Norton at all costs. The narrator's experience is still tied to the college and its promise of advancement within the white power structure. The ex-doctor has abandoned the possibility of this advancement, allowing him to say what he pleases.

The narrator again says that it's time to go. The ex-doctor tells Mr. Norton that the narrator doesn't understand his story, and calls him "invisible." The ex-doctor next questions Mr. Norton, asking why he's interested in the college. He laughs at Mr. Norton's idea of "destiny," and tells them that it's fitting that the narrator and Mr. Norton came to the Golden Day together, as neither can understand what's going on. Mr. Norton is angered and rises to leave.

The ex-doctor is the first person in the novel to mention invisibility. The narrator still accepts the promise of the black college too thoroughly to understand the ex-doctor's story of disillusionment. The ex-doctor's position as a mental patient allows him to freely criticize Mr. Norton's absurd sense of destiny.

The narrator and Mr. Norton try to escape from the bar, which is still occupied by the rowdy mental patients. The narrator pushes through the crowd and out the door, only to realize that he's lost Mr. Norton again. Halley pushes Mr. Norton out the door, but Mr. Norton has passed out again. The narrator and Halley ask if he's dead, but Mr. Norton wakes up again. Angry and silent, he climbs into the car, and the narrator begins driving him back to campus.

Although Mr. Norton seemed to be offended by the ex-doctor's words, the return to the chaotic atmosphere of the Golden Day underscores how unable to understand the situation Mr. Norton really is. Mr. Norton passes out again, a sign of his fragile sensibility being shattered by the day's experiences.

CHAPTER 4

As the narrator drives Mr. Norton back to the campus, he is filled with fear. He wonders if Mr. Norton is angry with him, and what people at home will think if he's expelled. In his head he blames Trueblood for making Mr. Norton sit in the sun so long, which forced him to take Mr. Norton to the Golden Day.

After the day's long detour, the narrator is far more worried by Mr. Norton's displeasure than he is by the genuinely disturbing things that he has seen. He tries to blame Trueblood instead of himself, though he is the only one with something to lose.

The once familiar and beautiful campus seems to threaten the narrator. The narrator imagines himself apologizing to Mr. Norton, assuring him that he's not like Trueblood or the clientele of the Golden Day. They stop at Mr. Norton's rooms and Mr. Norton asks for Dr. Bledsoe, the school president. The narrator tries to apologize to Mr. Norton, but Mr. Norton is impassive.

The college only seemed perfectly beautiful to the narrator as long as it was the scene of his advancement. Facing expulsion, it seems far more threatening. The narrator apologizes to Mr. Norton in order to claim that he isn't part of the culture Mr. Norton saw through the day.

Walking to Dr. Bledsoe's office, the narrator reflects that Bledsoe is everything he wishes to become: successful, well off, and respected by whites. When the narrator reaches Dr. Bledsoe, Bledsoe immediately knows that something has happened. The narrator stammers a brief summary of the car trip, and Dr. Bledsoe becomes furious. Dr. Bledsoe says that he thought the narrator was smart enough not to let Mr. Norton do what he wanted. He tells the narrator that he only shows whites what he wants them to see.

Dr. Bledsoe's cynical words shock the narrator, who has taken everything he has learned at college so far at face value. It was unthinkable to the narrator that he might have influenced Mr. Norton or guided him to stay away from Trueblood—to do anything but do as Norton asked. The narrator can no longer assume that Dr. Bledsoe's message represents simply humbleness and cooperation with whites.

Dr. Bledsoe rushes to Mr. Norton's quarters with the narrator behind him. Dr. Bledsoe, after composing himself, apologizes profusely to Mr. Norton. Dr. Bledsoe blames the narrator for his carelessness, but Mr. Norton is gracious and says the incident was not the narrator's fault. Mr. Norton says he will explain everything, and sends the narrator away. Dr. Bledsoe tells the narrator to be at chapel in the evening.

Dr. Bledsoe's behavior in front of Mr. Norton is a sharp contrast with his earlier anger at the narrator. It is clear that Bledsoe presents one face to white men and another to his black students. Mr. Norton says that he will explain, but it is doubtful that he has really understood the day's experience.

As the narrator leaves Mr. Norton's quarters, he runs into a girl who asks him to take a message to her boyfriend. The narrator assumes the message is to arrange a tryst. He imagines the girl sent home pregnant "in less disgrace than I." Filled with anxiety, the narrator returns to his dorm room, unable to understand Dr. Bledsoe's un-humble words.

For the narrator, the girl's message is a painful reminder of the rhythms of college life. The narrator realizes that he will no longer to be able to stay within the college's atmosphere of innocence.

In the narrator's room, his roommate teases him and heads off to dinner. A small student appears and tells him that Dr. Bledsoe wishes to see him now in Rabb Hall, where Mr. Norton is staying.

The narrator's roommate is another example of the familiar, comfortable environment that the narrator will soon be leaving.

The narrator knocks and enters Mr. Norton's room. Mr. Norton greets him, telling him that Dr. Bledsoe had to leave, and to see him in his office after chapel. Mr. Norton reassures the narrator that he was not at fault, and that he has explained this to Bledsoe. The narrator promises again to try to tell Mr. Norton his fate. The narrator leaves for chapel, somewhat uplifted by Mr. Norton's kind words.

The narrator is temporarily relieved by Mr. Norton's assurance. However, the narrator forgets the way in which Dr. Bledsoe easily disregarded Mr. Norton's desires when they spoke earlier. The narrator still believes completely in the wisdom of Dr. Bledsoe.

CHAPTER 5

The narrator recalls walking with other students to chapel at dusk. He describes the scene as a dense mixture of sounds and people "moving not in the mood of worship but of judgment." The narrator's mind is racing as he enters the chapel.

Walking toward the chapel, the narrator notices the college's beauty, but he also reflects on the way in which the chapel allows the community of the college to gather as a tribe that accepts some and rejects others.

In the chapel, the narrator gazes at the rows of silent people, and remembers other evenings spent listening to sermons with pleasure. He thinks of the attending people as masked, and the millionaires playing themselves as they give out their millions. The narrator remarks that the sessions at chapel helped create an entire worldview with the college at the center.

The present-day narrator realizes how powerful the rhetoric of the college was. The speakers at the college were able to create the idea that for the black men and women gathered, the college is the center of their entire lives, and that everything they can experience is contained there. At the same time, they are presenting a picture to the white donors to keep those donations flowing.

The narrator recalls that he used to debate on the chapel stage. He imagines himself giving a speech full of a barker's "Ha!" He imagines trying to use his array of empty noises to reach the elderly matron who sits in the back of the chapel, envisioning her as a link to the past and to the Founder.

The narrator's recollection of his recent past is already nostalgic: he knows that he will no longer climb the stage and that he will never reach the elderly matron. His link with the Founder is being severed.

Up on stage, Dr. Bledsoe is attending to the gathered millionaire donors. The narrator notices that Bledsoe is able to touch white men, and recalls his own close encounter with Mr. Norton. Bledsoe's ease looks like an act of magic. To the students, Bledsoe is even more imposing than the white millionaires, and the narrator recounts Bledsoe's rise from humble beginnings to become a black leader and statesman.

Within the context of the college, Dr. Bledsoe is the model of everything the narrator wishes to become. For the narrator at this time, to be able to touch and talk to white men (as Bledsoe does) is the highest possible achievement, and Bledsoe is seen as a figure with his own mythology.

The service begins with a single girl singing a cappella in the rafters. The black man on stage other than Dr. Bledsoe, later named as the Reverend Barbee, a fat and ugly man with black-lensed glasses, gets up to speak. He begins speaking about the early days of the college, when the Founder was still alive. He launches into a long speech describing those "Days filled with great portent."

Barbee's speech can be seen from two perspectives of the narrator's life: to the narrator of the Prologue, the mythos of the Founder is ridiculous. To the narrator of the moment in chapel, the speech is deeply moving. It is also a painful reminder of the world the narrator will soon be leaving.

Barbee begins from the days right after emancipation, a time of fear and suspicion between blacks and whites. Barbee says that the Founder's contributions are well known, and that for the black community he "showed them the way." He compares the Founder to Moses leading his people out of Egypt.

Barbee elevates the Founder into a nearly religious figure, a man who singlehandedly saved the black community and brought them out of hardship.

Barbee recounts a story of an attempt on the Founder's life. While the Founder was traveling in the country, a strange man appeared to him and warned him to hide in a nearby cabin. The Founder ignores him, and soon after is shot by a group of men. The shot grazed the Founder and he fell unconscious. Upon waking, he hid out in the cabin mentioned by the unknown man, where an old slave nursed him back to health.

Barbee's anecdote of the Founder takes many cues from religious imagery, including the conversion of Saul into Paul. With the story of escaping death, Barbee converts the Founder into a figure destined *to help the black community out of its bondage.*

The founder escaped hidden in a wagon of cotton. Barbee compares the Founder's escape to escape of all black men and women into freedom, insisting that the Founder's journey to freedom is their journey too. The narrator asks a student sitting next to him what the preacher's name is, and is told that he is Reverend Homer A. Barbee, from Chicago.

Barbee continues his enlargement of the Founder's legacy, indicating that the Founder has laid the groundwork for the escape of all black people into freedom. This statement makes the Founder seem more like the owner of an ideology.

Barbee now recounts the Founder's death, holding the audience in rapture. He recalls a tour of several states, during which Dr. Bledsoe was present as well. The Founder was still spreading his message of freedom and cooperation. The Founder was speaking eloquently to a packed auditorium when a man in the crowd asked him "What is to be done?" The Founder was silent and began to collapse. At first, he shrugs off the incident as a case of exhaustion.

The fact that the Founder collapses after the question "What is to be done?" seems to be a sly reference to the ineffective nature of the Founder's (or Booker T. Washington's) proposals and ideas. Ultimately, the Founder's hard work alone is not enough to fight against systematic white oppression Nothing is to be done.

Bringing the speech to its sad climax, Barbee tells the crowd he knew the Founder's days were numbered. Though at first they tried to forget the Founder's fatigue, the Founder soon fell ill in his train car. Barbee recounts visiting him on his deathbed on the train, and that with his last words the Founder told Dr. Bledsoe that he must "Lead them the rest of the way."

As the speech begins to wrap up, Barbee deliberately recognizes the continuity of authority between the Founder and Dr. Bledsoe. It is clear that the college is a place that has a single ruler, and Dr. Bledsoe is designated to be the man who wields the power.

Barbee tells of the funeral and aftermath of the Founder's passing. Dr. Bledsoe presided over the events, taking up the Founder's mantle. The "sorrowful train" toured the Founder's body and was met with respect wherever it stopped. Barbee describes the anguish that accompanied the train.

Barbee's description of the mourning for the Founder finishes his elevation to an almost godlike position. It is noted that even white men paid their respects the Founder, an ambiguous token of respect.

Barbee describes the Founder's death as also a birth, and remarks that the college has grown considerably since his passing. Finishing his speech, he tells the crowd that "Great deeds are yet to be performed."

While Barbee intends for the crowd to feel a "birth" in their inclusion into the college, this increases the pain of the narrator's feeling of separation.

The narrator is immensely moved by Barbee's speech. As he wipes his eyes, he hears a commotion. Barbee has tripped over Dr. Bledsoe's legs, and two white trustees give him his cane. The narrator realizes for the first time that Barbee is blind.

Barbee's blindness is an ambiguous symbol. On one hand, it suggests that he is unaware of his surroundings, or blind to the real world truths that his mythologizing of the Founder obscure. On the other, his eloquence compares him to another blind poet, Homer, with whom he shares his name.

The narrator remarks that Barbee "made me both feel my guilt and accept it." The service continues, but the narrator isn't listening anymore. When he hears his mother's favorite spiritual, the narrator bursts into tears and runs out of the chapel. However, the service ends soon after, and the narrator realizes it is time to go see Dr. Bledsoe. He is sure Bledsoe will be unsympathetic after Barbee's rousing sermon.

Barbee's speech helps convince the narrator of his own unworthiness. The narrator is still in the mindset that the college is everything to him, and as a result is terrified to see Bledsoe, who he assumes will punish him severely in proportion with the Founder's goodness.

CHAPTER 6

The narrator watches the other students returning from chapel to their dorms, talking about Barbee's speech. He enters the building that contains Dr. Bledsoe's office, but panics and rushes back out into the night. He follows a group of boys to distract himself, but when he finds himself at the college's gate, he turns back. The narrator reaches Bledsoe's office.

The feeling of shame and guilt is so great for the narrator that he can barely stand to face Dr. Bledsoe. He knows that the man who is everything he admires will judge him and find him unworthy. He wants to disappear, but doesn't know any alternative than to take his punishment.

In Dr. Bledsoe's office, Bledsoe begins softly. The narrator hopes that Mr. Norton has helped soften his punishment. Bledsoe recounts the day's events, saying that it "wasn't enough" to merely show Trueblood to Mr. Norton, but that he had to take him to the Golden Day as well.

Initially, the narrator has hopes that Dr. Bledsoe or Mr. Norton will recognize his good intentions, but it quickly becomes clear that Bledsoe is not interested in intentions.

Bledsoe criticizes the narrator for his stupidity, telling him that as the driver, he should have been in control of where the car was going. Bledsoe tells the narrator that he should have deceived Mr. Norton, saying, "the only way to please a white man is tell him a lie!" Bledsoe asks the narrator whose idea it was to go to the slave quarters, but the narrator insists that no one told him to drive there.

Dr. Bledsoe reveals his deeply cynical attitude toward donors like Mr. Norton. Mr. Norton only thinks he knows about the college, and Bledsoe insists that it is the narrator's responsibility to fool Mr. Norton. Bledsoe suggests that he actually controls the white donors, and not vice-versa.

Bledsoe asks the narrator about the ex-doctor, and the narrator repeats part of his story, including his words that the narrator believes that "white is right." Bledsoe says he will investigate the ex-doctor, saying that he should be "under lock and key."

Bledsoe is very interested in the ex-doctor, as he represents the opposite of Bledsoe's method. The ex-doctor is not afraid to tell white men what he thinks, despite the consequences.

Bledsoe tells the narrator that he has disgraced the college and the entire race. He says that the narrator must be punished for his actions, and that he plans to get rid of him. The narrator knows that Bledsoe promised Mr. Norton not to punish him, and he becomes outraged at Bledsoe's decision to break his word. The narrator yells at Mr. Bledsoe, telling him that he'll go to Mr. Norton and that he'll fight.

Dr. Bledsoe's decision to violate Mr. Norton's wishes represents the ultimate rupture of the narrator's sense of the world. For the narrator, it is a simple rule that a black man follows white orders. Bledsoe seems to be working against the very principles of the college he represents.

At first Bledsoe seems enraged by the narrator's show of disobedience, but he then becomes merely amused. He laughs at the narrator and tells him that he doesn't even know the difference between "the way things are and the way they're supposed to be." Bledsoe tells the narrator to tell anyone he likes about the broken promise, but that it won't matter. Bledsoe tells him that the only person who controls the school is Bledsoe himself.

Dr. Bledsoe gives the narrator a lesson on the difference between appearances and realities. The narrator has assumed the world is the same as it appears to, that Mr. Norton can influence Bledsoe and that there is due process against injustice. Bledsoe suggests that the reality is the power he has over the narrator to do what he wants.

Bledsoe continues, telling the narrator that he is "nobody," and that white men like Mr. Norton will only hear what they want to hear. Bledsoe tells the narrator that his power is the ability to tell white men what to think, at least in the subjects he knows. Bledsoe says that this is his position, and that he will do whatever is necessary to stay where he is.

Bledsoe has power, and his only objective is to maintain the power he has. For him, there is no more important principle. He lets the narrator know that the narrator has no power to exercise against him.

After this, Bledsoe calls the narrator a "fighter," and that he likes his spirit. He tells the narrator that instead of expelling him, he wants the narrator to go New York for the summer. Once there, he will work until he saves up next year's tuition fees. Bledsoe says he will provide the narrator with letters of introduction to his business contacts in the city. Last, he tells the narrator he has two days to settle everything before he goes to New York.

It is not made exactly clear why Dr. Bledsoe sends the narrator to New York. In the moment, the narrator feels that Bledsoe is giving him a chance to earn back his good standing with the university. However, later it becomes apparent that Bledsoe's decision has more to do with keeping the narrator from becoming troublesome to the college.

The narrator leaves Bledsoe's office, barely able to walk after the news that he is to leave school. The day's events float through his mind. The narrator feels like he did everything that was expected of him only to be rebuked. Still, he tries to convince himself that Bledsoe is right, and that he will work hard to return to school.

The narrator has tied his identity to the idea that he is a successful student. Now, partly expelled, the narrator feels the dislocation that comes from abruptly finding oneself living a new way of life. Still, he tries to reconcile himself to Bledsoe's verdict.

The next day, the narrator returns to Bledsoe's office and tells him that he is already prepared to depart. He apologizes again, and Bledsoe warns him not to become bitter. The narrator is told to return to the office in a half hour, as time is needed to prepare his letters of recommendation. Bledsoe sternly warns the narrator not to open or read the letters. They say goodbye, and when the narrator returns, the letters are ready. The narrator hurries to the bus.

The narrator approaches Bledsoe one last time to assure Bledsoe of his commitment to the school. He decides to leave early to prove to Bledsoe that he is eager to follow orders. Bledsoe seems to reciprocate, having letters of recommendation written for the narrator, but these letters are also not what they seem and will turn out to have serious negative consequences for the narrator.

CHAPTER 7

In the empty station, the narrator buys a ticket and boards the bus to New York. There are only two other people on the bus, who turn out to be the ex-doctor and an attendant named Mr. Crenshaw. The narrator is unhappy to see the ex-doctor, as he wishes to forget all about the previous day's incidents.

The ex-doctor is in many ways similar to the narrator. Both are men who used to possess high ideals but have been forced to confront a world that is not interested in them as individuals.

The ex-doctor asks after Mr. Norton, and also asks the narrator if school is already out. The narrator tells him he is taking a job in New York. The ex-doctor begins to tell the narrator that he'll change when he's in New York. He also says that the narrator might even dance with a girl, something he calls an "easily accessible symbol of freedom."

If the narrator has previously cast the black college as the center of his life, here for the first time the ex-doctor speaks about the power of New York. New York is seen as a place big enough and different enough to change a person's identity for good.

The ex-doctor explains that he is being transferred to Washington D.C. After many months of attempting to transfer, he is sure that his conversation with Mr. Norton has something to do with it.

The narrator has the suspicion that Mr. Norton or Dr. Bledsoe has arranged the ex-doctor's transfer in order to keep him at a safe distance from campus.

The ex-doctor tries to give the narrator some advice, telling him, "Play the game, but don't believe in it." He tells the narrator that he might even win the game: "You're hidden right out in the open—that is, you would be if you only realized it." Crenshaw tells the ex-doctor that he talks too much.

The ex-doctor warns the narrator not to confuse the appearances and true intentions of men like Bledsoe. He advises the narrator to be canny in a world that doesn't recognize him, and to use his invisibility to his advantage.

The ex-doctor asks Crenshaw if he's ever been north before, implying that many men used to head north after they'd committed a crime. Crenshaw vehemently denies that he committed any crime, and tells the ex-doctor that he wishes he would become depressive and stop talking.

It is implied that Crenshaw is part of a history of black men who left the south, fleeing crimes they may or may not have committed. The narrator also joins this tradition, searching for a new identity in the north.

The bus finally gets going. The ex-doctor and Crenshaw change buses at the next stop. The ex-doctor has more advice at parting, including telling the narrator to "Be your own father" and that "the world is possibility if only you'll discover it."

The ex-doctor's last advice is more general, asking him to take advantage of the open possibilities of his situation. "Be your own father" suggests there is no true role model other than oneself.

The narrator begins to feel more hopeful as the train enters New Jersey. He plans to work hard and return to college in the fall, hoping to be a campus celebrity with his knowledge of New York. He is excited about his letters from Dr. Bledsoe, and imagines himself acting sophisticated in his business meetings.

Despite the ex-doctor's advice, the narrator still imagines himself linked to the world of the college campus. He has a fantasy of a smooth rise to the top, where Bledsoe's influence will allow him to find prestige.

The narrator gets off the bus and boards the subway to Harlem. He is shocked by the crowdedness of the train. As the train begins running he is pushed up close against a white woman. Panicked, the narrator wishes to protest his innocence to the woman, but quickly realizes that no one is paying attention to him. The narrator exits the train as quickly as possible, determined to walk to the rest of the way.

New York from the beginning provides a strong contrast to the social codes of the south. The subway is an example of the way in which people are crowded together in an urban space. The narrator is used to thinking it's dangerous to be so close to a white woman, but he has yet to adjust to the norms of the north.

As the narrator enters Harlem, he is astounded to see so many black people in an urban environment. He is especially impressed when he sees a black police officer directing traffic. He recalls the ex-doctor's words that New York is a city of dreams.

Harlem is partly a vision of black self-determination, a part of the city where black people largely control their own affairs. Seeing blacks in power is novel to the narrator.

On the street, the narrator hears passionate words being spoken, and is attracted toward a crowd. He discovers Ras the Exhorter (though he does not yet know his name) making a shrill speech about driving the whites out of New York. The narrator is amazed that a riot doesn't break out and that Ras is allowed to speak without the police dispersing the crowd.

Ras is a black nationalist, someone who calls for the complete separation of whites and blacks. From the beginning of the narrator's stay in Harlem, it is clear that racial tensions can easily be brought to a boil.

The narrator wanders up to two white policemen and asks them where Men's House is. The policemen ask if he is new to the city, and warn him to be careful. They point the narrator in the direction of Men's House, where the narrator will rent a room. Behind him, the voice of Ras seems to become more violent.

The policemen imply that the narrator has wandered too close to Ras' violent political rhetoric. Everything is still new to the narrator, and he does not quite yet understand the place of Ras in Harlem's landscape.

CHAPTER 8

The narrator's room at Men's House is small and clean. One of the room's only furnishings is a Gideon Bible. The Bible reminds the narrator of the home, and he thinks both of Dr. Bledsoe and his father's attempt to establish family prayer.

The bible is a small reminder of the world that the narrator has left behind, the world of his family and of Down South religion. Everything else in New York is almost completely foreign.

The narrator is proud of the letters from Dr. Bledsoe, and wishes he could show them to someone. He plans to look for a job the next day, settling into a routine and attempting to make the most of his time. At the same time, he remembers Dr. Bledsoe, a remembrance that causes him resentment.

The narrator believes that Dr. Bledsoe, despite punishing him with expulsion, still wishes to help him. Dr. Bledsoe's letters represent the narrator's illusion that his hard work and good intentions will naturally help him advance in life.

The next day, the narrator takes the subway to Wall Street and marvels at the tall buildings. He watches the black messengers taking money across town, and wonders if everything that goes on is being watched. Eventually, the narrator finds the office of the trustee where he intends to deliver his first letter. Nervous and unsure of protocol, the narrator waits outside the office for a while.

On Wall Street, the narrator encounters a place that is a true center of power, far beyond anything he's seen in the south. The fact that the narrator feels that he's being watched indicates his awareness of the immense power that operates in New York.

The narrator enters the office and meets a young secretary. He gives the secretary his letter of introduction, and she takes the letter to another room. Some time later, she reappears and looks at the narrator "oddly." She informs him that Mr. Bates, the first trustee, is simply too busy to meet him today, and that he will hear from Mr. Bates by mail. Disappointed, the narrator leaves his address, but is unworried by the incident.

The narrator's first attempt to use one of Dr. Bledsoe's letters is a failure, but the inexperienced narrator is still unaware that he will be unable to reach the white leaders of New York. The narrator's experience is emblematic of the near impossibility of a black man penetrating the closed ranks of the power elite.

Over the next few days, the narrator delivers letters to several secretaries of the trustees he is supposed to meet. He is not successful in reaching the trustees, but makes little of it. In the afternoons, he explores the city. Mixing for the first time with whites that are uninterested in him, the narrator thinks about the way he conducts himself. He is unsure how to act in his new environment.

The narrator's first experience is repeated over and over, demonstrating the narrator's complete isolation from a connection that might help him obtain a job. At the same time, the narrator is gaining experience through his time in New York, learning a new life living among both black and white people.

After a few days, the narrator becomes impatient with his letters. He has only one more letter to distribute, addressed to a Mr. Emerson. Time is beginning to run short: the narrator knows he needs to a get a job soon to earn enough money for school. Instead of giving the letter to a secretary, the narrator writes a letter to Mr. Emerson, requesting an appointment.

By writing a letter directly, the narrator demonstrates his first lack of faith in the directions of Dr. Bledsoe. It has become apparent to him that Bledsoe's letters are not so effective as he imagined, and thus he has to begin to find his own way forward.

The narrator thinks of Mr. Norton, wishing he could see him again. To the narrator it seems like a great deal of time has passed, though it has been less than a month. He writes Mr. Norton a letter that he drafts over and over again, asking to work for him. However, his letter receives no reply.

The narrator's attempt to reach out to Mr. Norton reveals the farcical nature of Mr. Norton's idea of "destiny." Mr. Norton knows nothing of and cares nothing for the narrator's particular struggle.

The narrator begins to doubt his plan to get work, despite the encouragement of the secretaries. He distracts himself at the movies, but dreams of his grandfather and grows depressed.

The narrator's dream of his grandfather is a reminder that he has deceived himself into thinking that white men would help him.

The narrator senses that he is part of a plan that he doesn't understand. He imagines that Dr. Bledsoe and Mr. Norton are somehow behind his lack of success in finding a job. The narrator is beginning to grow desperate, as his money is running low. He doesn't even have the money for the train fare home. He tells himself to have faith, and that something good will happen the next day. On cue, he receives a letter from Mr. Emerson.

The narrator begins to grow consciously skeptical of Dr. Bledsoe's "help." However, as an ambitious young man, he cannot help but believe that something will go his way. Eventually, he receives the small chance that he believes will allow him to continue forward in New York.

CHAPTER 9

On a sunny day, the narrator sets out to meet Mr. Emerson. He wonders what is going on back on the college campus, and suddenly feels sure that something good will happen that day.

Emerson's letter has temporarily convinced the narrator that he will resume his old life at college after earning his tuition.

Near the curb, the narrator sees a man with a cart full of blue papers. The blues man is singing an old blues song that compares the body parts of his loved one to animals. When the narrator comes alongside him, the blues man asks him a strange question: "Is you got the *dog*?" The narrator is unsure how to answer the question, and the man implies that the narrator should know, as he's also from down south.

The blues man addresses the narrator with traditional black banter, a reminder of the cultural background that the narrator has in many ways forsaken. Both his banter and the blues he sings are the products of a culture that has learned to express its sorrow in a covert way.

Exasperated, the narrator finally replies that he doesn't have "the dog." The blues man tells the narrator not to get mad, as he thought that the narrator was trying to "deny" him. He says that maybe the dog has a hold of the narrator instead, and that he himself has got "the bear" clawing him. He calls Harlem a "bear's den," but also "the best place in the world for you and me."

The narrator is unable to return the blues man's banter, and becomes angry at what to him seems like silliness. "The dog" and "the bear" are expressions for hardship and trouble. The blues man indicates that Harlem is both a trying place and a haven for black people.

The narrator asks what the blues man is doing with all the blue paper. The man replies that they're real blueprints, even though he can't build anything with them. The man says that people are always changing their plans, to which the narrator replies, "You have to stick to the plan." The blues man introduces himself as "Peter Wheatstraw [...] the Devil's only son-in-law" and continues with his banter, which the narrator begins to like, although he does not know how to reply. The blues man departs, singing his blues as he walks off.

The blues man's blueprints are representative of the many possible future plans that have gone unfulfilled. The blues man collects these possibilities, making him a repository of both past intentions and future actions. The narrator, who still believes in a simple path of ambition, is unable to see the power of the blues man's flexibility. Peter Wheatstraw is a name from folklore and was also a famous blues musician in the 1930s.

The narrator reflects that he's heard talk like the blues man's all his life, but only now noticed how strange it really is. He notices the musicality of the blues man, thinking about the strangeness of the song and its lyrics, and for a moment feels proud of his race.

For the first time, the narrator begins to have an appreciation of the power of his own roots and culture. The musicality, cleverness, and resourcefulness of the blues man are all responses to a history of hardship.

The narrator enters a drugstore for breakfast. The man behind the counter offers the narrator a special of pork chops, a southern dish. The narrator, taking offense to being automatically seen as southern, orders a plain meal of orange juice, toast and coffee. The narrator hopes he will be a little different when he returns to school.

The narrator is still searching for a transformation of himself in New York, and wishes to believe that he is not automatically perceived as southern. However, changing his breakfast order is a sign of the superficial way the narrator perceives his change.

The narrator thinks about Dr. Bledsoe, noting that the students never know how he acts when he's away from campus. He thinks that this difference is part of what makes Bledsoe a good leader, as "he was never out of our minds." Finally, the narrator thinks that maybe he knew this all along. As he leaves, the narrator notices pork chops being served to a white, blond man.

The narrator begins to understand the difference between appearances and reality. Dr. Bledsoe is able to maintain the appearance of ease and power by concealing his activities away from the college. The blond man undercuts another assumption by the narrator about appearances—the blond white northerner is eating a meal the narrator thought would mark him as too southern.

The narrator arrives at Mr. Emerson's office. He inspects the office, which is filled with a huge map and exotic oddities from around the world. The narrator assumes the business must be an importing company. A blond man with glasses (young Emerson) asks the narrator what his business might be.

Mr. Emerson's office indicates the global power exercised by the white elite. A man like Mr. Emerson almost effortlessly creates change throughout the world, a level of power into which the narrator now has a brief window.

The narrator explains his appointment and hands young Emerson his letter. Young Emerson leaves with the letter and the narrator goes back to inspecting the room, noticing Chinese statues and an aviary of tropical birds. Young Emerson seems to be reading Freud's *Totem and Taboo*. Certain items in the room remind the narrator of relics from slavery times in the college museum.

The narrator is reminded of his college's relics of slavery, and this comparison makes it clear that the exotic items in the room are the product of a power that is capable of subjugating and exploiting other cultures. Men like Emerson take what they want for their own economic gain.

Young Emerson returns and invites the narrator into his office. He sits down and asks the narrator what it is he wishes to accomplish. The narrator tells him he wishes to get a job in order to return to school. Young Emerson asks the narrator more questions, including his age and what he thinks of his college. He asks the narrator what he would think of transferring, and the narrator says reluctantly that he's never thought of it.

Young Emerson is the first white person in New York from the elite who has spoken with the narrator. Young Emerson seems sincerely interested in the narrator and his ambitions, but is deeply skeptical of the narrator's continued attachment to his plan to return to the black college.

When asked, the narrator tells young Emerson that his career goal is to become Dr. Bledsoe's assistant. He asks the narrator how many letters of introduction he was given, to which the narrator tells him seven. Young Emerson is clearly displeased, but the narrator can't seem to figure out why. Young Emerson mentions that he has just had a difficult session with his analyst.

Young Emerson frequently mentions his analyst, indicating that he is concerned with a type of psychological self-examination that is previously unknown to any character in the novel. However, while he wishes to help the narrator, it implies that his motivation for doing so may be self-interested, a form of self-help .

Suddenly, young Emerson asks the narrator if two strangers can speak to each other with total honesty. The narrator doesn't understand the question. Young Emerson tells the narrator he must disillusion him, as there is a "tyranny" involved in his request for a job. The narrator doesn't understand, and simply wants to see Mr. Emerson (the trustee) and have a word with him.

Emerson's request that he and the narrator speak with each other honestly is ultimately impossible. Both men have too much invested in their own disparate narratives of life. In many ways, the narrator cannot be honest with himself, holding onto the dream of Dr. Bledsoe's letters.

Young Emerson tries to give the narrator advice, but the narrator doesn't want to hear it. Young Emerson tells the narrator not to go back to the south, as there is more freedom in New York City. He tells the narrator that it would be "best" for him to forget college all together. The narrator begins to get angry, blaming young Emerson for not letting him see Mr. Emerson. Young Emerson reveals that Mr. Emerson is his father.

Still under the impression that Dr. Bledsoe wishes to help him, he accuses young Emerson of being self-interested in refusing to let him see Mr. Emerson. It seems that there may be something true to his self interest: young Emerson has cast the situation as a psychological struggle against his father.

Unable to convince the narrator any other way, young Emerson opens the letter of introduction and lets the narrator read it. Dr. Bledsoe's letter instructs Mr. Emerson to mislead the narrator, allowing him to hope that he will return to school when it is no longer possible. The narrator is dumbstruck by the news that the letters were intended to impede him. The narrator says he only wanted to return to college, but young Emerson tells him he can no longer do so.

By letting the narrator read Bledsoe's letter, young Emerson severs the narrator's last hopes of returning to the black college. It has turned out that Bledsoe has acted far more perniciously than previously thought. The result is a deep disillusionment for the narrator.

Young Emerson tries to offer the narrator a job, first as his valet, then mentioning an opportunity at Liberty Paints. The narrator, dejected, turns him down. To the narrator, the entire situation seems like a joke. As he returns home, he hears a familiar tune, an old song about tying up a robin and plucking him. The narrator starts humming the tune and soon compares himself to the robin.

It is unclear if young Emerson's offers of help are truly altruistic or if they are motivated by an obscure sense of guilt. The narrator, shocked, discovers that his entire trajectory since the beginning of the book has been misguided. The song of the robin helps remind him that he has roots beyond the college.

The narrator wonders if young Emerson had an ulterior motive of his own, as everyone else seems to have one. At home, the narrator is filled with anger toward Bledsoe. He begins to laugh and plot his revenge, telling himself that this time he will make the first move. He calls Liberty Paints, as mentioned by young Emerson, and the factory tells him to report to work the next morning.

The episode of Bledsoe's letters fundamentally changes the way the narrator thinks about the world. The man who he aspired to emulate has deeply and cynically betrayed him. He now understands that he will be given nothing easily, and decides to harness his anger to take his next steps.

CHAPTER 10

The next day, the narrator heads to Long Island to report to work at Liberty Paints. The factory is emblazoned with patriotic symbols, along with a sign asking to "KEEP AMERICA PURE." In the factory office, the narrator is interviewed by a man named Macduffy. He is then sent to work for a Mr. Kimbro.

The imagery of the Liberty Paints factory symbolically links patriotism to the idea of color. It is implied that Liberty Paints has an idea of "pure" color, meaning that certain colors are acceptable while others are not.

The narrator is taken to a locker room, where he is told to change his clothes. The man showing him around remarks that "colored college boys" like him are being brought in to fight against the factory's union.

For the first time, the novel mentions organized labor, indicating that there is a tension between the white labor union and the black workers in the factory.

As the narrator enters his new workplace, he hears a man swearing violently on the phone. The narrator is told that the voice belongs to Mr. Kimbro. The narrator is introduced to Mr. Kimbro and is quickly set to work. Kimbro takes the narrator into a long room stacked with different paints.

Mr. Kimbro is represented as a short-tempered man, someone who is not particularly interested in his employees beyond their ability to fulfill his orders.

Mr. Kimbro tells the narrator that he doesn't have time to explain himself more than once. Kimbro opens a bucket of white paint, and instructs the narrator to stir ten drops of black "dope" into each white bucket. After stirring, the narrator is supposed to paint a small sample from each bucket. Kimbro tells the narrator to just do what he's told and to not think about it.

The narrator begins to experience paid labor as an inhumane activity. Kimbro tells the narrator not to think, as he is completely uninterested in the narrator as a person. Kimbro is only interested in extracting the narrator's labor.

The narrator begins by following Kimbro's directions strictly. He wonders if only the government uses the "Optic White" paint or if it's used on the college campus. Kimbro returns to check on the narrator's work, approves, and tells the narrator that the white paint is being shipped to cover a government monument. Lastly, Kimbro tells the narrator to refill his dope in the tank room.

There is a direct symbolism to the narrator's activity of stirring black droplets into white paint. The black droplets disappear into the white paint and make it more effective, a sign of the ways in which black labor is used to make white products. However, the black labor is seldom recognized.

Unfortunately, Kimbro does not tell the narrator where the tank room is or how to refill his dropper. The narrator finds the room but can't figure out which tank has the right dope in it. There are two black tanks between which the narrator can't tell the difference. The narrator chooses the dope that smells the closest to his sample and returns to work, beginning to mix quickly.

Although Kimbro has told the narrator not to think, a situation quickly arises in which the narrator must exercise his judgment. The narrator goes to the tank room to look for the "right" black dope, a metaphor for the right way to act for his boss.

Later, the narrator checks his painted samples. Instead of smooth strips, he finds a "sticky goo." Panicked, the narrator works hard to finish mixing all of the buckets before Kimbro returns.

The "sticky goo" is a sign of how easily the seemingly pure white paint can be disrupted. The narrator himself is another "incorrect" black element in the factory.

Kimbro discovers that the samples are still wet. The narrator tells Kimbro that he followed his directions, but Kimbro grabs the dropper and smells it, quickly realizing that the narrator has used the wrong dope. He becomes furious, asking the narrator why he would use a paint remover for the dope. When the narrator explains that the smell was similar, Kimbro tells him that you can't smell anything around all the paint fumes.

Kimbro is a superior who expects the narrator to work like a machine, but who does not give the narrator the correct instructions to complete his task. He is a sign of the way in which the game is rigged against employees like the narrator, who isn't told the rules of the game, but is punished when he breaks them.

Kimbro takes the narrator into his office and calls upstairs, telling the main office that he is not satisfied with his new employee. However, there is not yet anyone to replace the narrator, so Kimbro takes the narrator out onto the factor floor and they finish mixing the correct dope into the Optic White.

Despite the fact that Kimbro intends to fire the narrator, he still uses him to finish mixing the white paint. The narrator is being discarded after being utilized to help create another white product of the white system.

The narrator thinks he's going to be fired, but he is instead sent to a new assignment. He will now be working for Lucius Brockway in the basement. Brockway, an old and wiry black man, quickly tells the narrator that he doesn't need an assistant. The narrator turns to leave but Brockway reconsiders, noting that this is the first time he's ever been sent a black man.

Brockway is a departure from the narrator's exploitative relationship with Kimbro. Brockway is the only man in the basement of the paint factory, representing the black labor base at the bottom of the economic system. At the same time, he is protective of his position and seems skeptical of the narrator.

Brockway asks if the narrator is an engineer, indicating that the previous assistants were intended to replace him. Brockway tells the narrator that he cannot be replaced. The narrator is told to read the gauges and to wipe them clear in order to make sure none of the machinery gets too hot.

The white factory owners have tried to replace Brockway over and over, but his skills cannot be easily replicated. Brockway senses that the narrator is not a threat, or that he can be easily manipulated.

The narrator wonders how Brockway got his job, despite having no education. He speculates that Brockway has been there since the beginning, and is probably the only one who knows the way the basement works. Brockway functions like an engineer, though he is paid like a janitor. The narrator notices that the basement is not simply an engine room, but that paint is being made there.

Brockway is represented as part of an older black generation. He has the experience and knowledge to be a highly paid employee, but he is happy with the marginal pay and status that he receives from the white factory owners. He "knows his place" in the white system.

The narrator helps Brockway in the basement, turning valves and shoveling raw materials. Any question that the narrator asks is met with suspicion from Brockway. Brockway eventually tells the narrator that he makes the "vehicle" of the paint in the basement, and that nothing in the factory would work without him. Mr. Sparland, the owner of the factory, makes sure that Brockway doesn't retire.

It is revealed that Brockway is one of the most important employees in the factory, the man who makes the base of the paint before it is turned into Optic White. This further illustrates the way in which the factory system depends on the cooperation of unacknowledged black workers like Brockway.

Brockway tells the narrator that they are the "machines inside the machine," despite the fact that others think that the machines run themselves. Brockway tells the narrator that Optic White is the foundation of Liberty Paints, and that Brockway himself came up with the slogan for Optic White himself: "If It's Optic White, It's the Right White."

The white owners underestimate the importance of an employee like Brockway: they now take his skillful work for granted. Brockway's coining of the Optic White slogan (in which "white is right") illustrates his complicity with the white regime that ignores his work.

Brockway tells the narrator to go get his lunch. The narrator returns to the locker room, only to stumble upon a union meeting by accident. The union members ask the narrator who the foreman is. When he tells them that it's Mr. Brockway, the union men become enraged and try to throw the narrator out of the meeting. Some men call the narrator a "fink," a name for an anti-union informant.

Although the union is supposed to fight for the equality of all of the employees of the factory, the narrator is struck by the union's overwhelming hostility to him when he enters the room. The union is more interested in protecting the interests of its white members than in welcoming the narrator.

The union members ask if the narrator would like to join the union. Before he can reply, several members object, calling the narrator a fink for working with Brockway. The union moves to give the narrator a trial session with the union in order to investigate whether or not he's a fink. The narrator immediately becomes angry with the superior posturing of the union men. After accepting him against his will, the union leader lets the narrator collect his lunch. The union leader tells him it's nothing personal, but the narrator leaves without saying a word.

Brockway is allied with the owners of the factory due to his age: he comes from a time in which a black man could never consider challenging the authority that had given him his job. Because of this, the union opposes his complicity, but it seems just as likely that they are wary of him because of the color of his skin. The narrator is struck by the way in which the union completely denies his right to speak.

The narrator returns to the basement, where Brockway immediately asks what took the narrator so long to get his lunch. When the narrator begins to explain that he ran into the union, Brockway explodes with anger. Brockway is vehemently against the union, and tells the narrator to get out of the basement immediately. The narrator tries to explain the situation, but Brockway tells the narrator he'll kill him if he doesn't leave immediately.

Neither the union nor Brockway is interested in the narrator as an individual: to them, he is either on one side or the other. The mere mention of the union causes Brockway to turn against the narrator, as Brockway assumes that the narrator is part of a new generation of upstarts.

The narrator reflects that he has been trained his whole life to "accept the foolishness of such old men as this," but that today's ill-treatment has crossed a line. The narrator begins to yell back at Brockway, and the two begin to fight. The narrator feels a stab and believes that Brockway is trying to use a knife on him. He elbows Brockway and hears the "knife" skitter away.

The narrator reflects that the Brockway's behavior is part of a black cultural history of complete deference to one's elders. However, the narrator has been completely invisible at his time at the factory, and Brockway's anger causes the narrator's own newfound anger to flare.

Clearly bettered by a younger man, Brockway gives up fighting. The narrator insults Brockway for his ignorance and tells him that he's acting crazy. The narrator curses both Brockway and the union. Brockway asks if he can collect his teeth, and the narrator realizes that that was the "knife" from before: Brockway had bitten him.

For the first time since Bledsoe's office, the narrator begins to speak his mind to his adversaries, helping to shape his identity. At the same time, Brockway is revealed to be a sad opponent: an old man crippled by a lifetime of service to the white bosses.

Brockway explains his hatred for the union. He tells the narrator that they're after his job, and that even worse, the black men in the lab are trying to join the union too. The narrator says he doesn't know anything about that and extends his hand for Brockway to shake. As they shake, they begin to hear hissing from the boilers. Brockway tells the narrator to go turn some important valves.

For Brockway, the idea of joining the union would be unthinkable. As someone old enough to remember the time of slavery, he has been conditioned to remain subservient to whites. Behind the times, he is unaware of the ways in which he is exploited.

Brockway tells the narrator to turn a certain valve, "the white one," to stop the pressure, but when the narrator turns it the pressure only increases. When the narrator calls again for Brockway, he's nowhere to be found. The narrator tries to turn the valve the other way, but quickly realizes that Brockway is trying to kill him. An explosion engulfs the narrator like a great weight. Later, when he awakens, he can hear Brockway's voice telling someone that the narrator wasn't cut out for the job. The narrator is too dazed to respond.

Despite winning the fight, Brockway is a tougher adversary than he seems. Unable to cope with the humiliation of defeat, Brockway deliberately uses his knowledge of the basement to injure the narrator. The earlier handshake, which had seemed to unite two generations of black men, proved only to be an illusion. Brockway is firmly entrenched in his way of life and will not change.

CHAPTER 11

The narrator finds himself in a white chair in a hospital setting, wearing white overalls. He is given medicine and hears voices talking about his condition. He hears that he will be kept under observation for a few days. The doctors ask the narrator questions, but he can barely respond. In the sterile environment, the narrator's mind seems "blank." The scene recedes from the narrator.

In the hospital setting, whiteness is equated with cleanness and health. The narrator has a great deal of difficulty collecting his thoughts after the explosion at the paint factory, an indication that after his failed experience he is even more severed from his past life and himself.

When the narrator's mind clears again, he finds himself strapped down inside a "glass and nickel box." The narrator believes he hears sounds like music coming from far away but can't identify them. He thinks of silly songs from his childhood. He also hears what sounds like doctor's voices.

When the narrator finds himself in the box, he has become more of a specimen in an experiment than a patient. The white, sterilized space confuses him, allowing his mind to wander back to the familiarity of childhood.

A doctor with thick glasses asks the narrator how he's feeling. The narrator replies that he doesn't have enough room in the box. The narrator overhears that the box is designed to treat him instead of surgery, replacing the effects of a lobotomy. The doctors talk about the societal benefit of the treatment, and also wonder if the machine will work differently on a black man.

There is something unreal about the hospital facility, which is never described in realistic terms. The doctors don't treat the narrator like a human, and their speech seems informed by eugenics, the idea that certain races are biologically inferior to others.

The doctors continue to discuss the best way to treat the narrator, and one doctor suggests castration. The doctors eventually agree to treat the narrator with huge electric shocks. The narrator is shocked so hard that his body writhes. Seeing this, a doctor remarks, "They really do have rhythm, don't they?"

The doctors, supposedly members of an ethical profession, quickly reveal that they are cruel and careless. They shock the narrator to try to "cure" him, though his only "illness" is his blackness.

The narrator realizes he should be angry at this cruel treatment, but he only feels distant. After the treatment, the narrator can barely move inside the box. He feels the world as a series of indistinct sensations. He realizes that voices are trying to speak with him, but he cannot understand or answer them.

The narrator's mind has been potentially damaged by shock treatment, and he is unable to summon the anger that guided him earlier. Having lost his last opportunity, he feels no need to speak with the doctors.

When the narrator regains semi-consciousness, he sees two doctors above him arguing heatedly. A man approaches the box with a card that reads "WHAT IS YOUR NAME?" The question jolts the narrator, who realizes that he can no longer remember his name. The man asks him again, but he is incapable of answering. A series of similar written questions follow, and the narrator realizes he can't think of his mother's name either.

After the torture of modern medicine, the narrator is given a strange psychotherapy. The narrator realizes that the question of his name is no longer meaningful to him: he no longer feels like the person who previously held his name. He has become estranged from his own past experience.

After several questions of identity that the narrator cannot answer, one of the doctors writes "WHO WAS BUCKEYE THE RABBIT?" The question, appealing to black southern folklore, makes the narrator angry, but also it helps him focus his identity. He begins to associate himself with Buckeye the Rabbit. The doctors also ask about Brer Rabbit, another variation of the same folktale figure.

The narrator is unable to think coherently about his own identity, but the doctor's question has a twofold effect. It is reflective of the narrator's invisibility, as the doctors simply wish to recognize him through an obvious piece of black culture. However, it is also a piece of the narrator's past that he has long ignored.

The narrator realizes that the question of his identity is a kind of game or "combat" that he's playing with the doctors. He still cannot answer who he is. He thinks of trying to escape from the hospital machine, but realizes that it's impossible. He thinks to himself "When I discover who I am, I'll be free."

The "combat" the narrator recognizes is a tension between the role the doctors expect him to play and the identity he wishes to define for himself. The narrator knows that blackness is part of his identity, but is still unsure how.

Two doctors and a nurse remove the lid of the hospital machine and tell the narrator to get out. He is informed that he is in the "factory hospital." The nurse helps the narrator climb out of the machine, after which doctors examine him. They remark that he is unusually strong, and end the exam by telling the narrator that he's "cured."

It is revealed that the hospital is actually attached to the factory, illustrating the way in which seemingly independent enterprises are part of a total system. The same factory that was responsible for the narrator's injury has "cured" him of it.

The narrator dresses and is taken down an elevator to a reception room. He is told that the director of the factory will see him shortly. The director treats the narrator impersonally, asking what his name is but then looking at the narrator's medical chart before the narrator can answer. The director tells the narrator that he's cured. When the narrator tells the director that he'll be happy to get back to work, the director tells the narrator that he is being released, as he is "not ready for the rigors of industry."

The narrator's meeting with the director of the factory is a bureaucratic formality, in which the director is far more interested in the factory's potential liability than in how the narrator is actually feeling. By releasing the narrator, the factory is protecting its own interests, shielding itself from a potentially disgruntled employee.

The director tells the narrator to find a new job, something less strenuous. He also tells the narrator that he will receive compensation for his injuries if he will sign a paper absolving the factory of liability. The director tells the narrator that occupational hazards are part of growing up.

The factory's compensation is intended to dissuade the narrator from thinking about (or suing for) the workplace accident. The director indicates that the injury was educational, part of growing up, which signals that the narrator should expect to be harmed by the factory system and the world in general.

Unexpectedly, the narrator asks the director if he knows Mr. Norton. The director tries to ignore the question, but the narrator asks him again. The director finally replies that he does not know him. The narrator jokes that Mr. Norton and Dr. Bledsoe are old friends of his. He is surprised by his new way of speaking to the director, and realizes that he is no longer afraid. Feeling very different, the narrator takes the train back to Harlem.

By asking the director questions about Mr. Norton and Bledsoe, the narrator breaks the formality of the meeting. The narrator is coming closer to the position of someone like the ex-doctor, who is not afraid to say what he thinks to a white superior because the superior has nothing to offer him.

CHAPTER 12

When the narrator exits the subway into Harlem, he is suddenly overcome by weakness. Barely able to walk, he nearly collapses.

The narrator is still weak from his experience at the hospital, an indication that he has not been cared for properly.

A large black woman named Mary Rambo asks the narrator what's wrong. He replies that he's just weak, and tells her he's staying at Men's House. Mary Rambo tells him that Men's House is nowhere to stay for a man in his condition, and with the help of another man named Ralston the narrator is taken to stay at Mary Rambo's house. Mary is apparently well known in Harlem for helping those in need. Mary puts the barely-conscious narrator to bed.

Mary Rambo is an example of the goodness that can come from cooperation in the black community. Mary is happy to take the narrator home to nurse him to health, as she believes that all black people should look out for one another. Her belief in community is a source of strength for the narrator.

The narrator awakens in Mary Rambo's house. Mary is across from the bed, reading the paper. Mary tells the narrator that he can leave after he's had some soup, and that she could tell that he came from a hospital. The narrator says that he didn't want to trouble anybody.

The narrator is still in the position of thinking of himself as a complete individual, isolated from the concerns of the greater community. Mary, by insisting on helping him, reminds him of the strength of community bonds.

Mary asks the narrator both why he came to New York and what he intends to become. The narrator tells her that he used to want to be an "educator," but that now he doesn't know. Mary tells him to make sure to do something that is a "credit to the race." She tells him that the young black people are the ones who have to change society. Finally, she tells the narrator not to become corrupted by New York, and that he can always come back if he wants to rent a room.

The narrator's desire to become an educator is merely the leftovers of his past dream. The narrator has only learned about himself through negatives: he sees the examples of paths (like Bledsoe's) that he does not want to follow, but he does not know how to define what he actually is *or wants to be.*

Feeling somewhat better, the narrator returns to Men's House. The lobby of the building seems different to the narrator, full of men who are "caught up in illusions." He feels contempt for the collection of college boys, washed-up preachers, and well-dressed nobodies. Knowing that the men will disdain him when they learn that his dream of college is over, he realizes that he can no longer stay at Men's House.

Upon his return to Men's House, the narrator comes to feel that it is symbolic of his past hopes of easy success, as well as the illusions of others who have come to New York seeking meaning or salvation. He knows that the path he has to take is radically different.

In the lobby, the narrator hears a man holding forth whom he mistakes for Dr. Bledsoe. Instinctively, he empties a spittoon over the man's head. The narrator immediately realizes that the man is not Bledsoe, but is in fact a prominent Baptist preacher. The narrator runs out of the lobby before anyone can catch him. Later, he pays a porter to slip his things out of the building. The "amused" porter tells him that he has been banned for "ninety nine years and a day."

By attacking the supposed Dr. Bledsoe, the narrator illustrates his desire to act more aggressively against the hypocrisy of the system that has wronged him. The act also burns his bridges with Men's House, ensuring that he will have to find his own way, separate from all the other puffed-up young men.

The narrator moves into Mary Rambo's house, which he finds pleasant except for Mary's constant talk about "leadership and responsibility." The compensation money from the factory quickly runs out, and the narrator must look for work again. Despite his lack of funds, Mary doesn't criticize the narrator, feeding him as well as ever at dinner.

Although the narrator respects Mary, he has some reservations about her community-oriented worldview. He recognizes that there is strength in her sense of togetherness, but he also wants to be recognized as his own person.

When the narrator isn't looking for work, he begins to read obsessively at the library. He also wanders the city late at night when he has a little money. Mary is his only friend in New York, a force of stability in his life. She also makes the narrator feel as if something is expected from him, some future contribution of leadership. The narrator passes the time this way until the winter.

The narrator is entering a new period in his life. He has taken the responsibility of education upon himself instead of depending on answers from others. He does not know what he will do yet, but he is beginning to discover that he is someone different than the person who simply wanted to become Bledsoe's assistant.

The narrator remarks that his time in New York had already changed him, filling him with a voice of anger and revenge. The narrator compares his new feelings of hot anger to the "ice cap" of his old way of thinking. He remarks that slowly but surely, the ice is beginning to melt. He remembers how much he wished to return to college, but also knows that his dream has been severed in one "snap!"

For his entire life, the narrator has been trained to respect the order of the white-controlled system. Now that that world has definitively failed him, he begins to consciously recognize the injustices present in that system. The result is a deep-seated anger that will drive him to action.

The narrator hears all the contradictory voices of the past swirling in his head. He is suddenly filled with the desire to make speeches. As he walks through the city, words he can barely control spill from his lips. One day, he notices that winter has come.

The key to the narrator's future begins to open in his desire to make speeches, a sign that he is beginning to find his true role from the ashes of his past as a debater.

CHAPTER 13

Unable to endure his own thoughts and worries, the narrator rushes out into the street for a walk. He begins walking downtown through the ice-covered streets. As he walks he examines all the varied aspects of the Harlem community.

Despite the fact that the narrator is beginning to find himself, he is still confused and unsure of his new role. By walking through Harlem, he attempts to orient his relationship to the community.

The narrator spots a man on the street with an "odd-looking wagon," and immediately smells the aroma of baked yams. The odor reminds the narrator of childhood and of the south. The narrator approaches the man and buys a yam. He eats the yam immediately, and is overcome by its deliciousness. The yam man gives the narrator hot butter to eat with the yam. The yam makes the narrator homesick.

The yams are a symbol of the relationship between the narrator's past and present. Much of the narrator's past is best left discarded (such as his relationship with Bledsoe), but he still has a history. He still is from the south and still likes yams, which are a reminder that one cannot reinvent oneself entirely overnight. Compare this to earlier in the novel when the narrator chose not to eat the chop because he wanted to avoid looking southern.

The narrator has a moment of realization, deciding that he will no longer act according to what others think of him. He will eat a yam on the street if he wants to. He remarks that many blacks are ashamed of their own culture, even the things that they like. He imagines Dr. Bledsoe's shame if the narrator were to accuse him of being a "chitterling eater." He resolves to be ashamed no more, and buys two more yams from the yam man.

For his entire life, the narrator his been trained to think that certain typical objects of black cultural life (such as yams or chitterlings) are shameful or represent a kind of black inferiority. The narrator realizes that there is no reason to dislike yams other than to gain white approval, which is something that no longer interests him.

The narrator keeps walking and takes a side street. He nearly stumbles over a pile of junk set out in the street. Soon he realizes that a crowd is gathered, and that the "junk" is part of an eviction taking place. Two movers and a marshal are dispossessing an elderly couple, the Provos, from their apartment, a fact the crowd regards impassively. The narrator hears scattered words that something ought to be done about the eviction, but no one actually takes action.

The eviction of the Provos is an incident that makes white oppression tangible: instead of a vague system to resent, the Provos are really being thrown out of their house. While the gathered crowd expresses its anger and resentment, no one is bold or organized enough to do anything to prevent their dispossession.

The old woman, Sister Provo, protests her ill-treatment in the street, asking the movers to take their hands off of her Bible. The crowd begins to get angrier, and the narrator too feels outraged when he sees Sister Provo sobbing. The narrator examines the couple's clutter thrown into the street. He recognizes both knick-knacks and his documents that display their history, including Brother Provo's "freedom papers" from 1859. The narrator feels as though he too is being dispossessed.

By looking at the couple's material possessions, the narrator becomes aware of the complicated history through which the couple has lived. Brother Provo was once a slave, and it seems to the narrator that he has come through his entire life to find nothing better than slavery on the other side. The couple becomes emblematic of an entire history of dispossession.

Sister Provo tells the marshal that she wants to go back into the apartment to pray, but the man refuses to let her back into the apartment. The crowd sides vocally with the old woman, asking the marshal to let her back in. Sister Provo suddenly rushes up the steps and is rebuffed by the marshal. She falls backwards, and the crowd begins to turn violent, threatening to rush the marshal.

By refusing Sister Provo the opportunity to say a prayer in her own apartment, the marshal shows that the law that he presumes to uphold is itself deeply unjust. By striking Sister Provo, the marshal crosses a line that the black crowd cannot abide.

Before the crowd can attack the marshal, the narrator steps to the front of the scene and begins giving a speech, telling the crowd that they are a "law-abiding people." With some fits and starts, he tries to convince the crowd to organize around a leader instead of indulging in violence. He asks the crowd to examine the possessions of the Provos, to see the bric-a-brac as the sum of two lives. He also discovers that Brother Provo is 87 years old.

The narrator seizes his opportunity and suddenly finds his calling: when he speaks, the gathered crowd listens. His forceful speech attempts to strike a balance between following the law and indicating that the law itself is unjust.

The narrator begins to weave a narrative of the Provos, telling the crowd that Brother Provo's work for many years as a day laborer has come to nothing. Rhetorically, the narrator asks the crowd what happened. With the crowd on his side, the narrator tries to convince the marshal to let the Provos back into the house for 15 minutes in order to pray. The marshal refuses, telling the narrator that he has his orders.

The narrator's speech is a history of the black struggle in a post-slavery society. Despite all of Brother Provo's hard work, he has not been given the opportunity to succeed in a world that is aligned against his skin color. Although it is moving, the narrator's speech has little effect on the marshal, who seeks to enforce his orders at all costs.

The narrator tries to keep speaking in order to keep the crowd under control, but is soon bypassed by the anger that he himself has sparked. The crowd rushes past him and overtakes the marshal. As the crowd attacks, the narrator yells that they should have a prayer meeting in the apartment. The men begin to take the possessions of the Provos back into the apartment.

The narrator has discovered the power of his words to rouse the crowd to anger, but it also seems clear that this anger, once raised, is not so easily controlled. However, it is clear that the narrator's speech is a great success.

While the crowd restores the apartment, the narrator notices a few white men have joined the crowd to help. When he asks, they refer to themselves as "friends of the people." The white men make the narrator uneasy, despite their seemingly good intentions. One of the white men calls for everyone to stage a march.

The narrator notices the intrusion of the members of the Brotherhood. There is already a sense on the part of the narrator that these white men—even though they identify themselves as friends of the people—are meddling, as the dispossessions seem like an issue that is only the concern of the black community.

Soon, the crowd hears the sirens of police cars. When the police arrive, they question the narrator, who replies that the crowd was simply cleaning up the sidewalk. The police send in a "riot call," asking for reinforcements.

What seemed at first to be a small incident of eviction has ballooned into a riot. The police, being aware of the threat a posed by a potential race riot, respond in force.

The narrator, realizing the situation is about to get out of hand, decides that he needs to escape. A white woman, another from the unfamiliar group, points him in the correct direction to escape. She tells him to go over the roofs to the other side of the block. She also compliments the narrator's speech, telling him that he moved the people to action. The narrator thanks her and rushes up the stairs.

A woman from the Brotherhood gives the information that the narrator needs to escape. Although he is confused by the woman's presence, he is glad to know the escape route and is pleased by her compliment. The woman prepares Brother Jack's approach later in the chapter.

As the narrator makes his escape over the snow-topped roofs, he looks behind him and sees a man following him. The man doesn't seem to be a police officer, but the narrator still tries to get as far ahead of him as possible. As he runs, the narrator begins to regret his role in causing a riot. He reaches the end of the block and returns to street level, trying to look inconspicuous as he walks aware from the scene.

At first, the man following the narrator gives the impression that the police are trying to catch the narrator. Why else would a white man be chasing the narrator over the rooftops? However, when it becomes clear that the man is not a police officer, the chase takes on an element of mystery.

Just as the narrator thinks he's escaped detection, the voice of Brother Jack pierces him from behind, complimenting the narrator on his powers of persuasion. Brother Jack calls himself a "friend" and an "admirer," but the narrator is skeptical. Brother Jack asks the narrator to get coffee with him.

Brother Jack is unlike any white man the narrator has previously encountered, as he seems to want to meet the narrator in a way that the narrator does not fully understand. Jack seems actually interested in the narrator.

At a cafeteria, the narrator examines Brother Jack, a small white man with a bouncy step. He feels that something about Brother Jack's demeanor is a little unreal. Jack returns with coffee and cheesecake, and begins to compliment the speaker's rhetorical abilities. Jack also remarks that people like the Provos are "dead-in-living" and that the narrator shouldn't worry about individuals. The narrator finds Jack's "double-talk" way of speaking to be strange.

Brother Jack's insistence that the narrator shouldn't worry about individuals is the first sign of Jack's abstract attitude toward the world, in which the currents of history are more important than individual people. However, it was exactly the narrator's interest in the individual lives of the Provos that caused him to take up their struggle.

Brother Jack offers the narrator a job with his organization, telling him that they need a good speaker to represent Harlem. The narrator is unconvinced by Jack, and asks if anyone would really listen. Jack reassures him that there are people waiting to hear him. The narrator turns Jack down. Jack gives the narrator a telephone number to call should he change his mind.

It is not yet apparent to the narrator that Brother Jack's opportunity represents something different from the white status quo. The narrator is flattered, but he cannot understand why Jack would be interested in him.

The narrator leaves Brother Jack, unsure what to make of him. He is not sure if Jack's offer is a trick. The narrator remembers his escape over the roofs, and realizes that Jack also was trying to flee the scene undetected. He thinks of the eviction again, imagining what it would be like if it happened to Mary Rambo. Knowing that Mary couldn't be so helpless, his spirits are lifted as he returns home.

When the narrator realizes that Brother Jack was also escaping over the roofs, it becomes clear that Jack is not simply another member of the white power structure, since he too was wanted by the police. Jack's opportunity becomes a possibility for the narrator to define himself.

CHAPTER 14

When the narrator returns to Mary Rambo's, the smell of cabbage reminds him of his lack of funds. It occurs to him that Mary must also be short of money, and he realizes that he cannot realistically turn down the job that Brother Jack has offered him. The narrator looks at the telephone number, realizing that he hadn't even learned the organization's name before rejecting it.

The narrator is wary of Brother Jack, but his return to Mary's house reminds him of practical necessities. Mary has been supporting the narrator, and he feels that he owes her repayment in the very least. Beyond that, it seems possible that the job is maybe even something over which Mary could be proud.

Feeling indebted to Mary, the narrator decides to call Brother Jack's number. He tells Mary that he has to take care of some business, and Mary tells him to return quickly so that he can eat dinner.

The narrator feels guilty about the level of support that Mary gives him, which is nearly unconditional.

Brother Jack seems unsurprised by the narrator's phone call, and tells the narrator to meet him as quickly as possible. When the narrator reaches the given address, a car pulls up with Jack and some other men inside. Jack tells him that they're headed to a party. The car speeds downtown through Central Park. Eventually they arrive at a strange, expensive-looking building called the Chthonian.

There is an air of secrecy over Brother Jack's activities, and there is something dreamlike about the way that his car travels through Central Park at night. The building's name, the Chthonian, indicates that the organization is "underground," but also relates the building to something almost dreamlike.

Brother Jack and his group enter the building, and the narrator has the sense that he's been there before. A "smartly dressed" woman named Emma opens a door for them, and the narrator is caught in her gaze. Inside, the narrator is amazed by the lavish interiors of the rooms. The group enters a large room filled with well-dressed men and women. The narrator feels uncomfortable, but no one pays him any special attention.

The narrator is deeply impressed by the sophistication and glamour of the inside of the Chthonic. Later, when it is revealed that the building belongs to the Brotherhood, it seems obvious that there is something wrong with the luxury that the Brotherhood allows itself while fighting for the equality of all men.

Emma serves a drink to the narrator and to Brother Jack. Jack tells Emma that the narrator simply rose up out of a crowd, and Emma seems impressed. However, when the narrator turns his back, he hears Emma questioning Jack. Emma wonders if the narrator's skin is black enough to be their representative in Harlem. Jack silences Emma, but the narrator is angered by their exchange. He resolves to be careful, including being careful drinking liquor.

From the very beginning the Brotherhood reveals itself to be an organization that is more interested in the image the narrator presents than who he is as a person. Emma's question of his blackness is deeply cynical, as she suggests that a darker-skinned man would be a better representative of their black interests. The Brotherhood may want to use the narrator for a good cause, but it still wants to use him.

The narrator is asked to join a "business" meeting in the library. Brother Jack explains about the Brotherhood, telling the narrator that the organization's goal is to work for the betterment of all people. Jack tells him that his organization has been waiting for someone like the narrator, and that his job is to move the people to action. Brother Jack asks the narrator if he'd like to be "the new Booker T. Washington." At first, the narrator thinks he's joking, but quickly realizes he's serious.

The Brotherhood is revealed to be a thinly-veiled replica of the real life Communist Party. The decision to name it the Brotherhood reflects Ellison's desire to make the organization seem more like both a fable and a bad dream. While Jack claims that the Brotherhood works for the betterment of all, his proclamation is very abstract—they're not helping people, they're helping "the people."

An unnamed man with a pipe interrupts Brother Jack's passionate words, asking him to speak more "concretely" and "scientifically." Brother Jack tells him not to interrupt, and returns to exalting the great men of the past. He tells the narrator that they are at a crisis point in world history, and that things must be changed. The narrator is very impressed with his words, and asks if they think he's the right man for the job. Jack tells him that he will rise to the occasion.

The man who interrupts Brother Jack is representative of the power of ideology in the Brotherhood: the members of the Brotherhood believe that they are "scientists." In their mind, their judgments on history and social situations are infallible as long as they cohere to their vision of the world.

Brother Jack inquires about the narrator's living situation, and the narrator explains his lodgings with Mary. Jack tells the narrator that it is best if he moves, and that the Brotherhood will find him new quarters. Jack also tells him to stop writing home to his family. Emma gives the narrator a slip of paper that contains a new name, the name he will be known by as a member of the Brotherhood. He is asked to go by his new name at all times. Last, the narrator is given $300 and a weekly wage to pay off his rent and buy new clothes.

The Brotherhood demands that the narrator cut himself off completely from his past life, including his association with Mary. The decision to enter the Brotherhood comes to seem similar to taking the vows to priesthood: in order to join the Brotherhood, one must dedicate oneself completely, give up ones entire past. Most importantly, the narrator takes on a new name, a further erasure of his old identity.

The members all drink "To History" and return to the large room to socialize. The narrator is introduced to everyone by his new Brotherhood name. As Brother Jack and the narrator go from group to group, the narrator vows to himself that he will work hard and model his life after the Founder.

The Brotherhood drinks to history because they are completely sure that their vision of the world will come to pass. Their assurance passes onto the narrator, who is inflated by Jack's statement that he too can become a historical figure. Once again, the narrator is inspired and blinded by the hope of being important.

The narrator is standing by the room's piano where a group of Brotherhood members are singing. A very drunk man asks the narrator to sing a spiritual, telling the narrator that he likes the way black people sing. Brother Jack loudly protests that the narrator does not sing. The drunken man keeps pressing, and eventually Jack has him removed from the party.

Even within the Brotherhood, an organization that fights for equality, there is racist behavior. However, there seems to be something particularly extreme about Brother Jack's reaction, suggesting that there is something political in his desire to protect the narrator.

All the members of the party are deeply embarrassed by the drunken man. The narrator, however, is amused, and begins laughing uproariously. Soon the entire room is laughing, as if the narrator's laughter has given everyone else permission to laugh as well. A woman apologizes directly the narrator, telling him that not all Brotherhood members are so "highly developed." The narrator is somewhat put off by her apology, and muses that there must be a way for the man to ask him to sing without it being seen as racist.

The narrator finds the behavior of the politically correct members of the Brotherhood to be more baffling than the behavior of the drunk man. The drunk man had somewhat good intentions at heart: he simply wanted to hear the narrator sing. The sensitivity of the Brotherhood towards questions of race starts to seem fragile and unrealistic.

Emma asks the narrator to dance with her. The narrator takes up her challenge, telling himself that he must never appear surprised around these people. The narrator dances and drinks until 5 a.m., after which he returns home. Mary has changed his bed, and the narrator feels a wave of gratitude toward her. He is saddened that he will have to leave Mary so soon, but he decides to trust the Brotherhood's decisions.

The narrator feels a deep conflict between the pleasure of acceptance he has found with the Brotherhood and the debt that he feels he owes to Mary. However, ambitious as he is, he decides to take his opportunity to follow the Brotherhood, forsaking Mary's community togetherness.

The narrator thinks about how happy Mary will be when he pays back the rent that he owes her. He is afraid of telling her that he's moving, thinking that his abrupt decision will seem like ingratitude. He also reflects that there are certain things he dislikes about Mary, particularly her tendency to think using "we" instead of as an individual.

Although the Brotherhood is also an organization that seems to value community and common values, the narrator's decision to join the Brotherhood is represented as something that will help the narrator find his own individual role.

The narrator thinks about simply leaving the money in an envelope without saying goodbye to Mary. Next, the narrator thinks back on the night and decides he will have to become as articulate as the members of the Brotherhood, who seem to know how to say exactly what they mean. His thoughts a muddle, the narrator falls asleep.

Although the narrator owes a great deal to Mary, he is still afraid of what she will think of his decision to leave her. He is also afraid that Mary won't understand the Brotherhood and its abstract goals. Although he is moving forward, the narrator is also running away from his past again.

CHAPTER 15

The narrator is suddenly awoken by a loud clanging noise. The heat has gone off, and someone is banging the pipes in complaint. The noise is deafening, but the narrator realizes he needs to hurry to perform all of the day's tasks. He needs to settle his account with Mary and buy himself new clothes before calling Brother Jack.

When the heat goes off in the neighborhood, the residents bang the pipes to protest. This banging is seen as a reflection of the black community's group mentality, as the banging wakes everyone up without regard for individual privacy.

Angry at whomever is banging the pipes, the narrator begins banging the pipe himself. Looking for something with which to hit the pipe, he spots a cast-iron **coin bank** in the shape of a distorted black man. When one puts a coin in the hand of the man, the bank "eats" the coin with a wide grin. The narrator is surprised he has never noticed it before. He feels hatred toward Mary for allowing such racist imagery to remain in her house. He begins striking the pipe with the bank.

Despite the fact that the narrator hates the banging, he too joins in, senselessly venting his anger. The coin bank is the symbol of certain outdated values that people like Mary maintain. Never properly educated, Mary does not necessarily see the problem with owning the bank, which to a more informed eye is a racist symbol. The narrator feels angered by Mary's lack of progressiveness.

When the narrator strikes the pipe with the bank, it shatters into fragments. The narrator hears Mary coming toward his door—the din has also awakened her. With a scold, Mary asks if any of the racket is coming from the narrator's room. Fearful that Mary will see that he has broken the **coin bank**, the narrator tells Mary that he is still dressing. The narrator sweeps the pieces of the bank into a bundle and puts them in his overcoat pocket.

The narrator shatters the bank, symbolic of an attempt to destroy outdated values that perpetuate images like the bank. However, after destroying the bank, the pieces still remain, and the narrator has no idea how to remove them. The fragments of the bank demonstrate the difficulty of erasing certain historical legacies.

The narrator comes downstairs, where Mary insists on making the narrator a good breakfast. They drink coffee while the knocking continues. The narrator tries to tell Mary about the money he's made, but she tells him not to worry about his rent. The narrator tries to explain and give Mary the money. Mary is shocked to see the rent money and asks the narrator if he's been playing the lottery. This provides an excuse for the narrator and he says he has.

Mary's unconditional support of the narrator continues: not knowing that he has a job, she continues to provide the best for him that she can. The narrator is not comfortable telling the reason that he has the money, which indicates that the narrator does not consider joining the Brotherhood to be a thing that would make Mary proud.

Mary first tries to get the narrator to keep the money, but the narrator tells her that he has enough. He tells Mary that his luck is changing. Mary asks him if he dreamed of the right number, but before the narrator can lie any further a flood of cockroaches streams into the kitchen, brought out of the recesses by the banging on the pipes. Mary and the narrator kill the roaches together. Afterward, the narrator gets ready to leave.

The narrator's excuse for winning the money is focused around a dream he doesn't get to explain, which creates an interesting parallel to the dreamlike atmosphere the narrator found at the Chthonic, the place where he actually received the money.

As the narrator leaves the apartment, he puts the pieces of the **coin bank** in his **brief case**. The narrator is determined to get rid of the coin bank as soon as possible, but he fails in every attempt. First, an old woman yells at the narrator for putting his trash in her trash can and makes him take it back.

The narrator finds that he cannot easily dispose of the coin bank's imagery. This reflects the idea that the imagery is not simply Mary's but also a part of his own growing up, and that he shares the legacy of its negative imagery. It's not something he can just leave behind.

Next, the narrator tries to drop the package in the snow, but a good Samaritan picks up the package and chases down the narrator. When he narrator tries to pretend that the package isn't his, the man becomes suspicious. Thinking that the package is "a gun or stolen goods," the man becomes angry with the narrator for potentially getting him into trouble. The narrator flees the scene with the coin bank, worried that the man might call the police.

The narrator's inability to dispose of the bank is repeated. The man who tries to give the package back to the narrator quickly becomes convinced that it is a type of contraband. Through this exchange, Ellison suggests that contraband and the signs of racism are perhaps not so different from each other, and that each do serious harm.

On the way to his shopping, the narrator sees that the public disturbance he instigated has made the papers. He buys new clothes and then heads across town to receive his new apartment. It is relatively large and comfortably furnished. The landlady who shows him the room is a member of the Brotherhood, and the apartment is filled with books and pamphlets the narrator is supposed to look over. The narrator decides to get rid of the **coin bank** later, deciding that he needs to focus himself for rally later that night.

Although he does not even know how the disturbance ended, the narrator is very proud that his action has been recognized and publicized. When he buys new clothes and receives his new apartment, his transformation into a new man is nearly complete. However, the coin bank still lingers, suggesting that total transformation may not be possible.

CHAPTER 16

In the evening, Brother Jack and some others pick up the narrator in a taxi and drive to Harlem. The narrator is nervous, knowing that he is supposed to give a speech. Jack leads the men into the dressing room of an arena and tells them that they will wait until the audience gets larger.

The narrator's first action of self-discovery was an impromptu speech, but now he is being asked to make a speech in front of a large audience. He is naturally nervous at the increased expectation.

Brother Jack asks if the narrator has looked over the Brotherhood material, and instructs him to listen to what the other speakers say before him. The narrator will speak last. Left to his own devices, the narrator looks at the picture of an old boxing champion. He remembers a story his father told him about the boxer, and marvels that he has ended up in this same arena. The narrator feels agitated but knows he must trust the Brotherhood now.

Although the narrator has just joined the Brotherhood, Brother Jack has already begun to indicate that there is a correct way to speak about the Brotherhood's affairs. The narrator has a flash of remembering his past, but understands that he has chosen to follow the prescriptions of the Brotherhood, giving up that past.

The narrator feels nervous and self-conscious. He can barely recognize himself in his new suit and new name. He realizes that he is entering a new phase of his life, distanced from the battle royal or the hospital machine. No one now will recognize him as his old self, not even Mary. Yet he also notices that his grandfather's dissenting voice is still in him.

The narrator begins to recognize that by embracing the Brotherhood, he is making a decision to change his life irreversibly. However, by feeling his grandfather's voice, the narrator indicates that he has a new skepticism in him that he did not possess before.

The narrator walks out into the alley for some air. He remembers a burned-out sports arena from his childhood, an immense hole that was used as a dumping ground. A syphilitic man lived near the hole, and the narrator feels threatened by the memory of him. Snapping out of it, the narrator looks down the alley and sees three mounted policemen. He decides to let Brother Jack know about their presence.

The narrator's remembrance of the burned-out arena is nearly like a dream. The arena is also a negative of the arena in which the narrator is about to make his speech, while the syphilitic man suggests certain forces of fate for which the Brotherhood has not accounted.

Inside, the sound of the crowd is beginning to rise. The narrator thinks of a dog named Master from his childhood: "I liked, but I didn't trust old Master." He thinks the same thing about both the roaring crowd and Brother Jack. As the noise rises, Brother Jack ushers the speakers out onto the stage.

The narrator's skepticism comes out: the narrator wants to believe that Jack and the Brotherhood are the answer to his problems, but he senses that an unquestioning, completely trusting attachment could be dangerous for him.

The group of speakers passes through a passage out into the arena. The crowd roars louder and the narrator is temporarily blinded when the spotlight hits him. The speakers walk up to the platform as the crowd sings "John Brown's Body." The narrator notices a great deal of police, but Brother Jack reassures him that the police are there tonight to protect them.

The spotlight has literally been cast onto the narrator. After all of his seeking and foiled ambitions beforehand, the narrator has still managed to earn himself a place in an organization that values him highly. Even better, the Brotherhood promises the social righteousness that has been denied to him.

The speeches of the rally begin. At first the narrator tries to remember phrases from the speeches, but quickly gives up. The excitement of the crowd alone carries him forward. Someone pulls the narrator's coat sleeve, signaling that it is his turn to speak.

All of the other Brotherhood speakers speak according to a strict party line, repeating phrases in a way that agrees with the party ideology.

The speech gets off to a shaky start, as the narrator is not comfortable using a microphone. After a quick adjustment, the narrator realizes that the crowd is on his side. He has already forgotten the Brotherhood terminology, so he decides to give the kind of protest speech he knows how to give.

The narrator is not ready for the intense focus of a large crowd at first, but he soon adjusts to the power that he wields over the crowd. Instead of Brotherhood jargon, he decides to speak in a way that will energize the crowd with outrage.

The narrator tells the audience that certain people think they are "dumb" and "common." The narrator offers the rejoinder that the people are actually uncommon because they let themselves be treated poorly. He turns to the subject of dispossession, telling the audience that if they don't resist, their oppressors will succeed in dispossessing them.

The narrator speaks in a way similar to the rabble-rousing cadences of southern preachers, a tone of voice that his black audience can easily understand. His tone, combined with his message of resistance, succeeds in reaching the crowd.

The narrator says that everyone gathered has been dispossessed of one eye, causing them to see only in "straight white lines." He tells the crowd that they are like two blind men walking down opposite sides of the street. When bricks start getting thrown, the two men blame each other, although there is really a third man in the street throwing bricks at both of them. The narrator tells the crowd that if they band together, they will be able to see their way forward.

The narrator's image of one-eyed members of the Brotherhood will prove particularly true later, when it is revealed that Brother Jack only has one eye. The narrator's image emphasizes the importance of attempting to act as a community, knowing that not everyone can individually understand the total of all social ills.

As the narrator's speech begins to climax, Brother Jack comes to his side and gives him a small warning not to "end your usefulness before you've begun." However, the narrator moves forward to the emotional peak, telling the audience that by speaking before them he has come to feel "more human." He begins to cry. He ends by calling himself "a citizen of the country of your vision," and asking the people to unite to end dispossession.

Brother Jack's warning is ominous, as it is not exactly clear what the narrator is saying wrong. However, the narrator's speech is growing increasingly personal and dramatic, as opposed to the rote party lines recited by the other speakers. Jack is already afraid of the narrator becoming too powerful for Jack to control.

The speech is met with thunderous applause. Several members of the Brotherhood congratulate the narrator. However, when the narrator returns to the back room, the reception is not so positive. The man with the pipe calls the speech "unsatisfactory." Brother Jack becomes very angry, and the two men argue over the correct way to lead the Brotherhood forward. The man with the pipe calls the speech "hysterical, politically irresponsible and dangerous."

The narrator discovers another harsh example of the difference between appearances and realities. Publicly, the narrator's speech is a huge success, as it has energized the audience. However, in the back room of the Brotherhood, the speech is judged by its adherence to the party ideology.

Brother Jack, visibly upset, asks the other members of the backroom committee what they thought of the speech. Opinion is divided, though largely negative. Brother Jack tells the committee that it is important to raise the excitement of the public, and that without energy nothing can be accomplished. The brother with the pipe says that the narrator must be educated in the proper "scientific" terminology of the Brotherhood.

The dissent of the Brotherhood committee shows that the Brotherhood members are divorced from reality: they only want to change to come in the way that they predict it. By indoctrinating the narrator, they hope that the narrator will become easier to control, as his value can be measured by his following of party orthodoxy.

It is decided that the narrator will be temporarily removed from the public eye. He will receive lessons in political theory from Brother Hambro. The narrator is upset, but Brother Jack reassures him, telling him that such a period of "indoctrination" was inevitable.

Despite his success, it is decided that the narrator will have to learn the ins and outs of the Brotherhood's ideology. This decision is made to keep the narrator in line, as it is realized how dangerous his speaking ability really is.

The narrator returns home, exhausted from his effort. He feels lucky that the speech went over successfully, and notes that it was totally different than any speech he would have given in college. The narrator thinks about the phrase "more human," remembering his college literature course and deciding that he's not really sure what it means. He then thinks of Bledsoe and Norton, and laughs that their efforts have made him even more important and dangerous than they could have imagined.

Despite having crossed the threshold into a new life, the narrator realizes that certain spontaneous things he did came from his past (such as the phrase "more human"). He is still a product of his past experiences, and even his success in the Brotherhood is related to his earlier desire to revenge himself on Bledsoe and Mr. Norton.

CHAPTER 17

Four months later, Brother Jack calls up the narrator and takes him on a ride. The narrator is curious where they're going, but doesn't ask any questions. He wonders if something is happening at the Chthonian, but it turns out that Brother Jack is simply taking him to get a drink in Harlem. The go to a Spanish bar named El Toro.

The time for the narrator to become a working member of the Brotherhood has arrived. The way in which Brother Jack picks him up is similar to the mystery he used when he brought the narrator to the Chthonian, signaling the importance of the moment.

Since the speech, the narrator has seen Brother Jack very infrequently. The narrator has been submerged in lessons from Brother Hambro, working harder than he ever has before. At nights, the narrator attends rallies and meetings, learning about the workings of the Brotherhood. Though he has been out of the public eye, the narrator is still recognized at meetings as a kind of hero.

The narrator's indoctrination has begun. By learning the Brotherhood's ideology, the narrator has become familiar with every aspect of the Brotherhood. Similarly, as he goes to meetings, the narrator is met positively, helping to make him feel comfortable within the Brotherhood's system.

Brother Jack asks the narrator how his lessons have gone. Jack tells him to master the Brotherhood's ideology, but tells him not to "overdo it." Jack tells him that it is important to find a balance between dry theory and words that inspire the public, and that theory always comes after practice. The narrator tells Jack that he will try to do what is required of him.

Brother Jack, who considers himself the leader of the Brotherhood, uses ideology when it is convenient to him. He is unlike other members of the committee, who have an unswaying dedication to the faith of the Brotherhood. Jack is more interested in power.

Brother Jack informs the narrator that he is to become the chief spokesman of the Harlem district the next day. He instructs the narrator to get the people of Harlem active in the movement of the Brotherhood. However, Jack also warns the narrator not to "underestimate the discipline" of the organization, letting him know that he is answerable to the entire Brotherhood.

The narrator's dreams of advancement are finally being achieved. He will now be an important member of the Harlem community. However, Jack's warning is ominous, indicating that the narrator should not act as too much of an individual. Later, the narrator will disregard this advice.

Brother Jack decides to show the narrator the offices of the Harlem chapter of the Brotherhood, telling him that he has to see someone there. When they arrive they run into Brother Tarp, an older man with a limp who lives at the offices. Brother Tarp welcomes his new spokesman, telling the narrator that he admired his speech at the arena. Jack tells the narrator that Tarp is in the office anytime the narrator might need him.

Brother Tarp is an older member of the Brotherhood, a man who represents an unstinting dedication to fulfilling the Brotherhood's wishes. He will become an inspiration to the narrator. The office also represents a new realm of possibility and discovery for the narrator.

The next day, the narrator arrives on time to his first meeting in the offices. Brother Jack is there as well, and notes that everyone is present except for Brother Tod Clifton. Brother Jack informs the members that the narrator is charged with increasing the membership of the chapter.

Brother Jack's chief interest is to increase the Brotherhood's membership in Harlem. He never mentions any specific piece of social reform he would like to achieve, suggesting that his interest in Harlem is strictly political—he wants Harlem and the people in it, in one way or another, to help the Brotherhood's goals (whatever they are).

A tall, dark, and handsome man enters the meeting, and he is identified as Tod Clifton. Brother Jack asks why he is late, and Clifton replies that he had to see the doctor. Clifton has been injured in a clash with Ras the Exhorter's men. Jack describes Ras as a "black nationalist" and tells Clifton to take care in dealing with him.

Tod Clifton is introduced as a potential rival to the narrator: he is handsome, strong, and well established in the Brotherhood community. Clifton also reintroduces the threat of Ras, who is the Brotherhood's chief rival for influence in the Harlem community.

The meeting continues. The narrator suggests stepping up the Brotherhood's fight against evictions. Clifton quickly agrees with the narrator. The narrator suggests that the Brotherhood reach out to community leaders in Harlem, as dispossession is not a partisan issue. It is assumed that the community leaders will have to fall in line to support a popular concern.

Although Clifton is presented as someone who might challenge the narrator in his position of power, it quickly is shown that he is loyal to the interests of the Brotherhood. This will make his later disappearance all the more mysterious.

The narrator recalls that he saw Ras the Exhorter when he first came to Harlem, only that he didn't yet know his name. The Brotherhood members tell him that Ras opposes cooperation between blacks and whites. Brother Jack warns Clifton that the Brotherhood is strictly against violence.

Whereas Ras believes in the separation of whites and blacks as different races that will never be able to cooperate, the Brotherhood seems to believe in the equal cooperation of all people.

Brother Jack departs, and the narrator examines the Brotherhood members at his disposal. He can't quite place any of them as a "type." Initially, he is worried that Clifton will resent the narrator's leadership role, but quickly finds that Clifton is friendly and cooperative. Clifton tells the narrator how to deal with hecklers, and lets him know that their strategy will be "bigger than anything since Garvey."

The individuality of the chapter members like Clifton is a stark contrast to Brother Jack's lack of interest in any individual. While Brother Jack plans his grand political ambitions, it is the work of individuals on the ground like Clifton and the narrator that helps create change.

Later, the narrator is speaking on the street at the top of a ladder. A crowd has gathered to listen to his speech. As the narrator speaks, Clifton catches his eye, pointing out that Ras the Exhorter and his men have begun to infiltrate the crowd. A fight breaks out, and Clifton asks the narrator if he can use his fists.

Although Brother Jack told Clifton that the organization is nonviolent, the aggressive nature of Ras and his men causes the Brotherhood members to fight back.

In the chaos of the fight, streetlights are broken. Ras' men and the Brotherhood fight in darkness. The narrator beats off an attacker. In the darkest area, the narrator finds Clifton and Ras fighting hand to hand. Ras pins Clifton and draws a knife to kill him. However, Ras decides that he can't kill a fellow black man.

Unlike previous adversaries that the narrator has faced, Ras is not interested in power for power's sake. He refuses to kill Clifton because he absolutely believes in his idea of black righteousness. For Ras, it is wrong to kill another black man, even if he is a traitor.

Ras tells Clifton that he shouldn't work with whites, stating that they will only betray him in the end. The narrator attacks Ras from behind, hitting him with a pipe. Ras continues speaking to both men, exhorting them to stay true to their African roots and not to betray their people. Ras says that the Brotherhood's money is unclean, and that they must be attracted to its white women. Last, he tells Clifton that he could have been a black king.

Ras' speech, despite being somewhat crazy, is hypnotic and seductive for Clifton and the narrator. Until the Brotherhood, the narrator has never experienced anything but oppression and betrayal at the hands of white people. Though the Brotherhood promises it is different, Ras easily raises the narrator's suspicions.

Ras continues his exhortation, but the narrator tells him that the Brotherhood will still be out making speeches on the street every night. Ras vows to fight them, telling them again that they're betraying their race. Clifton strikes Ras, and Ras falls down as the two Brotherhood men run from the police sirens. Clifton tells the narrator that Ras is crazy, but also warns that he is very strong on the inside. Finally, Clifton remarks that "sometimes a man *has* to plunge outside history," or else risk insanity.

Clifton has spent longer with the Brotherhood than the narrator has, and he is accustomed to the Brotherhood's rhetoric about the inevitability of historical events. Ras is someone who suggests a world that is much more chaotic and unpredictable than the clear visions of the Brotherhood. Clifton is very sensitive to this seeming contradiction.

The next day, the narrator arrives back at the Brotherhood offices. Brother Tarp comes into the narrator's office and puts up a portrait of Frederick Douglass, asking the narrator simply to look at him once in a while. Through the day, the community leaders all fall in line with the Brotherhood. The narrator (under his new name) is quickly becoming quite famous, and he laughs when the head of Men's House addresses him with respect.

Brother Tarp may have put up the picture of Frederick Douglass for a variety of reasons. It may be because Frederick's story is a story of the possibility in self-discovery. Frederick Douglass transformed himself from a slave into one of the great statesmen of the age. The narrator hopes he will be able to emulate Douglass' prestige and moral authority.

A few Sundays later, the Brotherhood throws a parade to promote its role in the community, for which the narrator organizes a special drill team to perform. The narrator's status continues to rise, as the Brotherhood goes out of their way to promote his name. Retrospectively, the narrator reflects that he loved his work during "those days of certainty." During that time, he believed that his words had an almost magical power. Meanwhile, he has embraced the Brotherhood wholeheartedly, and he sees its teachings and ideals everywhere he goes.

In the beginning of the narrator's time with the Brotherhood, everything he does is successful. His wildest dreams of success and prestige are being fulfilled. However, the present day narrator realizes that he was simply seeing what he wanted to see, allowing the entire world to conform to the Brotherhood's ideology without thinking about it critically.

CHAPTER 18

One day, the narrator opens an inconspicuous piece of mail to discover an anonymous note. The letter is a warning: "*Do not go too fast.*" The letter tells him that although he has been successful so far, it is still a white man's world. It says that if he proceeds too rapidly he may be "cut down."

The anonymous note is the first sign that something may be amiss in the narrator's involvement with the Brotherhood. The message is reminiscent of Brother Jack's warning during the narrator's arena speech.

Shaken by the note, the narrator calls Brother Tarp into his office. He sees his grandfather in Tarp's eyes. The narrator asks Tarp if he knows anything about the letter, but Tarp doesn't have any useful information. Tarp tells the narrator that he looks like he's seen a ghost.

The narrator sees his grandfather in Tarp's eyes because he regards Tarp as a reliable support who won't simply tell him what he wants to hear.

The narrator sits Brother Tarp down and asks him what the other members of the Brotherhood really think about him. Tarp replies that people only say positive things about the narrator, and that he's sure to make a good leader. Tarp tells the narrator not to worry, and remarks that even the narrator's most unusual suggestions have been accepted. Tarp points out a poster that forecasts the multiracial future of America "After the Struggle." He indicates that some members were originally against the poster, but it turned out to be a success.

The narrator fears that someone is resentful of his quick success in the Brotherhood. Although the narrator is interested in his own power and prestige, he is also legitimately invested in the Brotherhood's message of helping to better the lives of all people. Tarp's reassurance is legitimate, suggesting that everyone knows that he is doing his best to work for the Brotherhood.

Brother Tarp asks the narrator if he's from the south, to which the narrator says yes. Tarp tells the narrator that although he (Tarp) has a limp now, he wasn't always lame. Tarp tells him that he got the limp dragging a chain in a chain gang for nineteen years. He says that he didn't do much, but that he "said no to a man who wanted to take something from me." Tarp tells the narrator that he eventually escaped by pretending that he drowned during a flood, and that he's been looking for freedom ever since.

Tarp's story on the chain gang is a reminder to the narrator that there are things that are more important than public recognition or his position in the Brotherhood. Tarp lost everything he had due to a cruel injustice, and joined the Brotherhood because he sincerely believes in its message of social betterment—he wants to find and create freedom for the oppressed.

Brother Tarp shows the narrator the shackle that he wore on the chain gang. Tarp tells the narrator that he can have it, calling it a "luck piece." The narrator examines the worn and twisted metal and raps it against the desk. The narrator isn't sure he wants the shackle, but accepts it anyway, comparing it to a family watch passed from father to son. The moment wells up many memories for the narrator, but he suppresses them.

Tarp gives his leg shackle to the narrator as a reminder of the continuous nature of the struggle against injustice. The narrator is unsure he wishes to accept total responsibility for carrying on the fight against such inequalities, but he does so anyway, knowing that inequality and cruelty is part of his own history too.

Tarp's gift and words of encouragement leave the narrator feeling positive, even after the shock of the anonymous note. The narrator thinks that the note must have been sent by an enemy of the Brotherhood, someone trying to create disunity in the ranks. Still, he cannot figure out who might have sent the note.

The narrator's talk with Tarp has helped reassure him that he is not surrounded by enemies. However, despite knowing that there are more important things to worry about, the narrator is still plagued by the mystery of the note.

Brother Wrestrum, a large black man, enters the narrator's office after Brother Tarp leaves. Wrestrum points at the shackle and tells the narrator that he dislikes it. Wrestrum believes that members of the Brotherhood should not "dramatize our differences," and that they should instead focus on the things that make them all similar.

Brother Wrestrum criticizes the shackle because it makes him feel uncomfortable. Wrestrum believes that things like the shackle will divide the members of the party based on the differences in their history. Wrestrum cares about the Brotherhood, and thinks it is necessary to suppress the individuality of its members in order to preserve the power and cohesiveness of the Brotherhood.

Brother Wrestrum begins to speak about the Brotherhood in a circuitous way, emphasizing that the members must be vigilant. He says that there are some members who don't truly believe in "Brotherhood." Wrestrum says that he works every day to root out anything in himself that might go against the Brotherhood.

Wrestrum seems to be a zealous advocate of total orthodoxy for everyone who is a member of the Brotherhood. In reality, Wrestrum uses his sense of righteousness as a weapon to wield against other members of the Brotherhood.

The narrator, filled with dislike for Wrestrum, wonders if he might be the one who wrote the anonymous note. He holds up the note to where Wrestrum can see it, but Wrestrum shows no recognition. The narrator compares Wrestrum's zeal to the way certain people feel about religion, a remark that Wrestrum finds offensive.

The narrator notes that Wrestrum's attitude of political purity is almost like a religion, in which people can either be only true believers or heretics. This way of thinking is the opposite of democratic thinking, where different opinions are mustered into a coalition.

Wrestrum gets to his business, suggesting that the black members of the Brotherhood have their own banner in order to be able to identify themselves. Wrestrum recounts an incident in which Tod Clifton accidentally ended up beating a white member of the Brotherhood. The narrator says he'll bring Wrestrum's idea to the attention of the committee, remaining noncommittal.

Wrestrum's suggestion of identifying flags has a sinister, almost military tone. By using banners to identify who the true members of a group are, the Brotherhood would create a division between its inner circle and the people it would hope to attract into its ranks. Wrestrum's suggestion is designed to create factions.

While Wrestrum is in his office, the narrator receives a phone call from a "picture magazine" asking for an interview. The narrator tells the reporter that he is very busy, but that he should try interviewing Brother Clifton instead. As Wrestrum listens to his conversation, the narrator remarks to the reporter that he himself is simply a cog in the machine of the Brotherhood. Normally the narrator would refuse the interview, but Brother Wrestrum's presence leads him to accept.

Sensing that Brother Wrestrum is listening to his every word, the narrator suggests that the magazine interview Clifton, hoping to avoid Wrestrum's meddling. However, the narrator accepts the interview out of a sense of pride, knowing well that he is a far more powerful member of the Brotherhood than Wrestrum.

The narrator forgets about the interview until two weeks later. The narrator is called to the Brotherhood's downtown headquarters, where the mood is serious. In a meeting moderated by Brother Jack, Brother Wrestrum accuses the narrator of using his prominent position in the Brotherhood for personal gain. Wrestrum calls the narrator "one of the greatest dangers ever confronted by our movement." The narrator becomes very angry.

It turns out that Wrestrum's earlier speech about the purity of Brotherhood was the lead up to accusing the narrator of crimes against the Brotherhood. Wrestrum's accusation is a crude example of the way in which individual, petty interests are able to disguise themselves as general issues of the Brotherhood's welfare. Wrestrum uses concern about the Brotherhood's purity to attack those within the party that he wants to take down.

When asked for specifics to support his accusations, Brother Wrestrum shows the committee the magazine interview, claiming that the interview is all about the narrator instead of about the Brotherhood. The narrator denies the accusation and tells the committee that Wrestrum was even there when the interviewer called him. Wrestrum ups the ante of his charges, telling the committee that the narrator wants to become a "dictator" who controls everything that the Brotherhood does uptown.

The narrator realizes he has let his guard down by accepting the interview in order to spite Wrestrum. Wrestrum is simply envious of the narrator's elite position within the Brotherhood. However, it is also clear that the narrator is very proud of the power that he has achieved within the organization. There are hints that Wrestrum's accusations are part of a power play he is making within the Brotherhood.

The narrator dismisses Wrestrum's accusations as lies and calls Wrestrum a scoundrel. Brother Jack tells the narrator not to lose his temper, and then instructs him to leave the committee while they examine the magazine interview. The narrator is upset that Wrestrum has dragged him down to his level. The narrator is called back into the room, and Jack informs him that the interview is considered harmless. The narrator calls Wrestrum's actions "criminal," but Jack insists that he was simply acting in the interest of the Brotherhood.

Although Wrestrum has apparently slandered the narrator, Brother Jack protects Wrestrum, saying that he only had the best interests of the Brotherhood in mind. Between Wrestrum's accusation and the anonymous note, it is clear that someone is dissatisfied with the narrator's newfound power within the Brotherhood.

However, Brother Jack tells the narrator that his name has only been cleared with regard to the interview. The narrator becomes extremely angry, indicating that the proceedings of the meeting are absurd. In response, Brother Jack and other members state repeatedly that "The movement has many enemies." The narrator is told that the charges must be investigated due to their serious nature.

While the interview itself is seen as harmless, the committee essentially agrees that the narrator has become too powerful within Harlem. When the narrator asks for an explanation of the decision he is not given one, suggesting that the party has turned against him or that the party considers any individual as insignificant and not worthy of receiving an explanation from the larger group.

The committee decrees that until the charges are cleared, the narrator is suspended from his post in Harlem. He is given the choice of either becoming inactive or of accepting a new assignment downtown. The narrator accepts the new assignment and is told he will now be lecturing on the "Women Question."

The narrator's relocation downtown is a type of exile, removing the narrator to a region where he exercises much less influence. That the narrator, who has an intimate knowledge of black history and the unfair treatment of black people is asked to speak about the "Woman Question" (i.e. equality for women) shows that the Brotherhood is trying to limit the narrator's power by having him focus on something he knows little about.

The narrator is stunned by the news of his reassignment. He feels as if he was just beginning to understand the power structure of the Brotherhood. However, he feels that he has come too far with the Brotherhood to abandon it now. He tries to accept the new assignment, reassuring himself that he can speak about any subject. Finally, he is sorry to leave Tarp and Clifton. He heads downtown to his new assignment.

There is a distinct sense that the narrator has been put in his place by the members of the committee, especially Brother Jack. At the same time, the narrator has invested himself completely in the Brotherhood, including its ideology. He has forgotten to play the game without believing in it, and has been punished for believing in appearances.

CHAPTER 19

The narrator feels excited to give his first speech on the Woman Question. The narrator knows the topic will generate interest, and also feels that the women will be interested in him for his blackness alone. The lecture goes well, and the audience asks many questions after.

Downtown, the narrator feels a new kind of invisibility. Despite the high level of education of his audience, he knows that he is interesting as a sexualized object instead of as an informed speaker on feminism.

After the lecture, the narrator is caught off guard when a woman (later called the hostess) approaches him. In a flirting manner, the woman tells him that she would like to discuss the Brotherhood's ideology further with him. The narrator catches the woman's cue of innuendo and agrees to stop by her apartment later for coffee.

Despite his time living in New York, the narrator is still unsure how to interact with white women—a sense of taboo still haunts him. He is surprised by the hostess' advances, but his curiosity and desire overcome his natural fear of the complications.

The narrator arrives at the hostess' apartment and is impressed by its luxury. The hostess, who is wearing a voluptuous red evening gown, tells the narrator that she is interested in the Brotherhood's "spiritual values" and the narrator remembers Brother Jack's words about wealthy people who donate to the Brotherhood to assuage their guilt.

The hostess' flimsy pretext for initiating a sexual relationship with the narrator is an interesting variation on the way in which the Brotherhood's ideals can be used to achieve personal ends.

As the narrator admires the wealth in the apartment, the hostess informs him that her husband is out of town on business. They agree to "discuss ideology" on the sofa, and the hostess' offer of coffee quickly turns into an offer of wine. The hostess remarks that she is a little afraid of the narrator, and that there is something "primitive" in his voice.

By deciding to make their meeting about Brotherhood ideology, the hostess and narrator mask their personal interests. When the hostess describes the narrator as primitive, it displays that part of her interest in the narrator has to do with his blackness.

The narrator and the hostess speak briefly about the "Woman Question," and the hostess tells the narrator that women should be "absolutely as free as men." After a few words, the narrator discovers that the hostess is only inches away from him. They embrace, and the hostess leads the narrator into her bedroom.

For the narrator, his natural fear of initiating a contact with a white woman remains intact. At the same time, the hostess realizes the power that she has over the narrator, using it to satisfy her curiosity.

As the narrator is drawn toward the bed, he hears a loud ringing sound. The narrator assumes that someone is at the door, and begins to become afraid. However, the hostess tells him that's it's only the telephone. The narrator asks if the call might be her husband, but the hostess replies that the narrator doesn't have any reason to worry. She indicates that her husband isn't interested in the noble pursuits of the Brotherhood.

Besides the ingrained taboo the narrator feels, he is also aware that he is committing adultery. Despite the fact that he lives in the north, sex between white and black partners is still considered socially controversial. The narrator's unconscious transforms the telephone into the doorbell, making a faraway threat seem nearby.

To reassure the narrator, the hostess answers the phone; the call turns out to be the hostess' sister. The narrator stands by the bed, feeling both desire and guilt. When she returns, he gives in to his desire and the couple goes to bed.

The narrator also realizes that his involvement with the hostess could be a kind of political trap. Nevertheless, he is overcome by his desire and his own curiosity about white women. (Also, remember how Ras told the narrator and Tod Clifton that they had probably only joined the Brotherhood because of their attraction to white women.)

Later, the narrator is unsure if he's awake or dreaming because his senses are in such confusion. He hears a noise and looks up to see a man in the doorway. The man converses with the hostess as though they are husband and wife, but the husband seems unconcerned that the narrator is in bed with his wife. The man tells the hostess to wake him early in the morning, as he has work to do.

After sleeping with the hostess, the narrator is filled with a dreamlike sense of unreality. His encounter with the hostess is something he would never have thought possible in his past life. To make matters even stranger, it seems that the hostess' husband is aware of and uncaring about the arrangement.

The narrator is confused by the situation. He wants to linger in bed with the hostess but also realizes that he should leave as soon as possible. He dresses and leaves the apartment. He expects to run into someone on the way out, but his path is completely clear. He is unsure if the presumed husband was a dream or the product of relaxed morals created by wealth. He feels anger toward women for interfering in his plans.

Even if the hostess and her husband simply live an unconventional lifestyle, the hostess' husband is now another potential witness that could be involved in exploiting the narrator's sexual dalliances. It is clear that in sexual power games, the narrator is in over his head.

The next day, the narrator is sure his indiscretion will be discovered, but no one says anything. The unknown man from the previous day reminds him of an important member of the Brotherhood, but he cannot figure out whom. He wonders if the whole event was some kind of trap. The hostess calls and asks if he will return for "further discussion," and the narrator agrees that he will. The narrator feels that he has failed an important test, but his position in the Brotherhood remains stable.

The narrator is tormented not so much by guilt over committing adultery as by the fear that his affair might be exposed, resulting in a loss of his position. Presumably the Brotherhood's lecturer on the Woman Question is not supposed to sleep with his students. However, the lesson the narrator receives is one of banality: no one is really interested in the sordid details of his private life.

The narrator continues his lectures on the subject of women, but learns to play his role and to separate the "biological and the ideological." He feels that the audiences of mostly women seem to expect something from him, but he is not sure what it is. He knows that it doesn't have to do with what he's saying in his lectures. The narrator tries to forget about the audience's strange sense of anticipation and "unburdening."

The narrator realizes that sexuality is a powerful tool, one that is capable of ensnaring people despite their best intentions. It is safer for him to abstain from such adventures. All the same, he notices the strange way in which the women he lectures continue to see him as an object of desire.

One night, the narrator is summoned to an emergency meeting at headquarters. The narrator assumes that the meeting's subject is either Wrestrum's charges or his tryst with the hostess. Anxious to discover his fate, the narrator arrives at the meeting late.

The narrator has become so caught up in the turmoil of his private life that he assumes that the Brotherhood's meeting must be about him. However, this is not the case.

In the meeting, the narrator is told that he is done lecturing on the "Woman Question." However, what follows is unexpected: Tod Clifton has disappeared. Brother Jack asks if the narrator knows anything about his disappearance. The narrator answers that he does not. He is told that Clifton has "failed in his assignment," and that Ras the Exhorter is gaining influence in Harlem. The narrator is instructed to return to the district to regain the strength that the Brotherhood has lost. The narrator curses himself for offending the committee. His separation from Harlem seems to have erased all of the previous gains.

The disappearance of Tod Clifton marks a turning point in the narrator's relationship with the Brotherhood. It is clear that much has happened in Harlem without the narrator's awareness. Clifton was the narrator's strongest ally in the Brotherhood, as well as the man most capable of fighting against Ras' black nationalism. Without Clifton, the role of the Brotherhood in Harlem is significantly weakened.

CHAPTER 20

Upon the narrator's return to Harlem, the area seems unfamiliar. He feels as though the rhythms of Harlem have changed in his absence. The narrator goes to a bar named Barrelhouse's Jolly Dollar, looking to meet one of his regular contacts, a man named Brother Maceo.

While Harlem seems to have gotten angrier in the narrator's absence, the change in Harlem is also likely a function of changes in the narrator, specifically his relationship to the Brotherhood. Without his faith in the Brotherhood ideology, Harlem looks very different.

The narrator discovers that Brother Maceo isn't in the bar, but decides to have a beer while he waits for him. The narrator encounters two familiar men at the bar. When he calls them "brother," the men get offended, saying that he's no brother of theirs. The narrator shifts down the bar away from them, sure that they recognize him, and sure that the mood toward the Brotherhood has shifted.

The two men that the narrator meets at the Jolly Dollar are a signal that the Brotherhood has declined in popularity since the narrator's new assignment. It seems likely that the Brotherhood is hiding something from the narrator, since otherwise attitudes could not have shifted so rapidly.

Barrelhouse, the bar's owner, greets the narrator, who is relieved to see him. When Barrelhouse begins to serve one of the two antagonistic men, the man asks Barrelhouse why the narrator is calling everyone "brother." Barrelhouse sets the men straight, telling them that the narrator is *his* brother, and that they can leave if they don't like it. Barrelhouse confesses to the narrator that there are many people who feel like the two men, and that many people who were once employed by the Brotherhood have now lost their jobs, including Brother Maceo.

Barrelhouse's explanation begins to explain the two men's antipathy toward the Brotherhood: many men have lost their jobs with the Brotherhood. The Brotherhood's program for the community has radically changed in the narrator's absence, but the narrator cannot figure out why this should be the case.

The narrator is amazed by how quickly the situation in Harlem has changed. He waits a little longer for Maceo, finishes his beer, and leaves the bar. Outside, he can't see a single sign of Brotherhood activity on the streets of Harlem.

The Brotherhood seems to have virtually disappeared from Harlem. This seems to indicate some kind of ulterior motive, but again the reason is a mystery.

The narrator arrives at the district offices, looking for Brother Tarp. However, Tarp is nowhere to be found. Tarp's bed and possessions have disappeared, along with the poster of Frederick Douglass. The narrator realizes now that he is all alone. He orders the remaining members the district to form teams and search for Tod Clifton, whose disappearance remains as mysterious as before.

First Clifton, now Tarp has disappeared from the Harlem offices. The narrator's two strongest allies have disappeared without any explanation, leaving the narrator isolated in the Harlem office. The events have the marks of a political power play.

While looking over the district records, the narrator notices that membership in Harlem has fallen as the Brotherhood began to focus more on national and international issues, as opposed to local politics. The narrator tells himself that he will have to ask the committee for an explanation.

The narrator cannot understand why the Brotherhood would choose to shift its focus at the height of the group's popularity in Harlem. He feels that the Brotherhood was making progress by showing people a difference in their daily lives.

The narrator waits to be called to the normal strategy meeting, but no word arrives. Aware that something is up, the narrator attempts to call headquarters to get in touch with someone. He is unable to get in touch with any of the Brotherhood leaders. Convinced that he has been excluded from the meeting, the narrator heads downtown to headquarters. When he arrives, he finds that the meeting is indeed in session, and that there are strict orders that the meeting remain undisturbed.

The narrator is being iced out of the Brotherhood's strategy meeting, implying that action is being taken against him. While the narrator first dreaded being called to a meeting that might expose his indiscretions, being omitted from a meeting seems even more troubling.

Angry at being left out of the decision making progress, the narrator decides that the Brotherhood can contact him when they're ready. He goes to buy a pair of shoes instead of worrying about it. The narrator takes a walk in his new shoes, and turns off of 42nd Street to avoid the crowds.

Feeling disillusioned with the organization that has ruined his efforts in Harlem, the narrator decides to let the committee do what it will, a decision with potentially dangerous consequences.

On 43rd Street, the narrator sees a group of people gathered around a strange, clipped voice. The narrator recognizes a boy, a friend of Clifton's, standing just outside the crowd. The boy is watching a policeman on the other side of the block who seems to be approaching the crowd. The narrator addresses the boy, but the boy turns and whistles back toward the crowd. The narrator can't tell if the whistle concerns him or the policeman. The narrator moves into the crowd to see what's going on.

Clifton's friend is the first sign of Clifton that the narrator has seen since his return to Harlem. However, the narrator's perspective is temporarily limited to the fringe of the crowd. He cannot see who might be at the center of the crowd or who the owner of the clipped voice might be. If it is Clifton, he has become completely hidden.

At the center of the crowd the narrator sees a dancing **doll** of cardboard and tissue paper. The doll is designed to be a "Sambo," a kind of black caricature, that dances when its operator pushes it down. The doll writhes with a "sensuous" motion, and the narrator is both disgusted and entranced. As the doll dances, a strange voice barks out an exaggerated sales pitch, promising happiness for twenty-five cents.

The Sambo doll is a grotesque image of a black performer who subserviently entertains for whites. The doll's exaggerated movements conjure images of black rhythm and sensuality. The narrator is shocked by the racist image.

The narrator looks for the source of the barker's voice, only to discover that the barker is in fact Tod Clifton. The narrator and Clifton's eyes meet, and Clifton smiles contemptuously while his sales pitch continues. The narrator feels deeply betrayed, and spits on the **Sambo doll**.

Far worse than the racist dolls themselves is the fact that it is none other than Clifton who is their barker. For the narrator, Clifton's decision to drop out of the Brotherhood to sell Sambo dolls feels like a cruel and senseless rejection. Though Clifton's shift seems to suggest that he himself came to the conclusion that he had become a kind of Sambo, dancing for the Brotherhood, and in his despair he has chosen to embrace that fact.

Before anything else can happen, another whistle comes from Clifton's boy. A policeman is coming to break up the show. Clifton picks up the **Sambo dolls** and tries to lead the crowd around the corner in order to continue the show. Both Clifton and his audience quickly disappear, leaving the narrator behind, bewildered by his discovery. He sees one of the Sambo dolls lying on the ground and picks it up.

Clifton's quick getaway seems appropriate to his abandonment of the Brotherhood, choosing to fly by night instead of upholding the Brotherhood's abstract ideals.

Looking at the **doll**, the narrator wonders how Clifton fell so far so quickly. He then recalls Clifton's words about the need to "fall outside of *history*." The narrator recognizes that his life is so invested in the Brotherhood that to abandon it would mean abandoning everything. The narrator keeps the Sambo doll in his pocket.

Clifton's words on history return to the narrator as the ultimate rejection of the Brotherhood's sterile view of the world. Clifton's decision to sell Sambo dolls is a denial of the Brotherhood's vision of progress, suggesting that nothing really changes, and that the Brotherhood is no different than the other elite or powerful.

The narrator rounds the corner into Bryant Park. In the park he sees two men, Clifton and a police officer. The policeman tries to stop Clifton to fine him for the street show, but Clifton resists the officer. When the officer pushes him, Clifton punches the officer, who falls to the ground. In retaliation, the officer pulls out his gun and shoots Clifton. Clifton crumples to the ground. The whole event takes place in a matter of seconds.

As Clifton is shot, his own protest of the Brotherhood's vision of progress is mirrored in his death. Despite the Brotherhood's profession of historical inevitability, they are still unable to address massive injustices. The shooting of an unarmed man such as Clifton is just one example.

The narrator tries to approach Clifton, but is waved off by a police officer who tells him to cross the street. The narrator tells the officer that Clifton is his friend. The officer replies that Clifton is dead. Another cop asks the narrator a few questions about Clifton. A white boy who was watching the event tells the narrator that Clifton throws a good punch.

Clifton's punching skill is the last memory that he leaves to the world, ensuring that he has truly plunged outside of history. Instead of a figure fighting for the righteousness of the Brotherhood, Clifton will be forgotten behind the police tape.

The narrator wanders into the subway, shocked by Clifton's death. He cannot compose his thoughts, and wonders why Clifton would give up the organization that had meant everything to him. He thinks again of Clifton's words about falling out of history, and notes that only certain men get to record history. The narrator thinks that Clifton's history will never be written by the white men who killed him.

Before Clifton's death, the narrator was skeptical of the actions the Brotherhood was taking, but still remained immersed in its ideology. The death of Clifton reminds the narrator that the ideology itself of the Brotherhood is flawed, and that history is not a perfect machine.

Down on the platform, the narrator takes a good look at the people of Harlem for the first time. He watches three young men in zoot suits, calling them "men outside of historical time." The three men, like most of the rest of Harlem, aren't interested in the Brotherhood. The narrator wonders if these strange men aren't the "true saviors" of their race. For the first time, the narrator begins to have doubts about the Brotherhood and its "scientific" certainty.

With a new awareness of the strangeness of history, the narrator sees the men in zoot suits as potential agents of change. However, the men in zoot suits have a kind of power exactly because they don't think about history. They have no narrative they need to uphold, allowing them to move freely in possibility.

The narrator follows the three men into the subway, continuing to watch them. He wonders what his relationship is to men like them, as well as to other members of Harlem. The narrator exits the subway, weak with grief. He sees a group of boys running out of a candy shop with stolen goods. The scene makes the narrator realize that little has changed, and that his love for the Brotherhood's ideas allowed him to ignore the lack of real progress in Harlem.

When the narrator now looks as Harlem, he no longer sees the cogs of the Brotherhood's inevitable change. Instead, he sees a stream of nearly random lives, each absorbed in his or her daily particulars. The Brotherhood has forgotten the particulars, and along the way has missed that it has not changed much of anything.

CHAPTER 21

The narrator returns to the Brotherhood offices in Harlem. He is too heartbroken to tell the members of Clifton's death. He wonders what Clifton must have thought when they saw each other earlier that day. The narrator regrets his impulsive display of temper.

After Clifton's death, the narrator feels deprived of a resolution. He will never be able to ask Clifton exactly why he was selling the Sambo dolls. The answer is lost from history.

The narrator examines the **Sambo doll** again and is filled with deep loathing. He wonders how the doll works, and quickly discovers a nearly invisible thread that let Clifton control the doll from a distance. The narrator is filled with guilt, thinking that perhaps he could have gotten into a fight with Clifton and saved him from the police officer.

The narrator's discovery of the invisible thread indicates that there was more to Clifton's action than a senseless act of racism. Clifton still retained a kind of control over his actions, even after departing from the support structure of the Brotherhood.

The narrator still can't make sense of Clifton's decision or his death. However, he decides to organize a public funeral for Clifton. The narrator hopes that the funeral will help reclaim Clifton's positive legacy. He also hopes that the funeral will re-energize the community and attract members back into its ranks.

The narrator's decision to organize a funeral is his last vestige of an attachment to the Brotherhood. The narrator hopes that he can combine the memory of Clifton with the serious political issue of his death, sparking the community.

Several members of Clifton's Youth Brigade have heard the news of Clifton's death. The young men and women are overcome with grief. The narrator tries to raise the outrage of the young members, but they are simply stunned by the news.

The narrator, despite his grief, is attempting to remain politically minded when he speaks to the Youth Brigade. However, his words ring hollow in the wake of Clifton's death and the Brotherhood's abandonment.

The narrator tries to call headquarters again but receives no answer. He decides to go ahead planning Clifton's funeral by himself, throwing himself into the work. Collections are made and meetings are organized.

The narrator's decision to act alone is portentous in light of Brother Jack's earlier advice to never act as an individual without the consent of the Brotherhood committee.

The funeral is held two days later, and is designed to attract the maximum number of people. The funeral begins with a slow procession down the street, as the mourners carry black flags and banners. A band accompanies the procession. Soon, all of Harlem gathers to watch the spectacle of the procession. The narrator is unsure why the people have come out to watch, but wonders if perhaps Clifton's death is an opportunity for the people to come together and "express their protestations."

With the funeral, the narrator creates a place for the Harlem community to express its sorrow in a communal way. Some have come just for the spectacle, but others may feel that Clifton's death expresses their individual disenfranchisement by the white power system. By appealing to popular concerns, the narrator has helped energize the community again.

A man in the procession begins singing an old spiritual called "There's Many a Thousand Gone." A euphonium in the band joins him, and soon the entire procession bands together in song. The narrator recognizes that "something deep had shaken the crowd," something stemming from the song. The funeral procession reaches its final destination, an open park in Harlem.

By invoking a spiritual, the members of the black community reflect upon their shared cultural history, a legacy of pain and injustice that has been passed down from generation to generation. The international concerns of the Brotherhood cannot tap into this very local and specific pain.

A huge crowd gathers in the park. The narrator realizes that he is supposed to give a speech, but finds that he has no words appropriate for the occasion. The narrator becomes angry at the expectation of the crowd, and begins by telling the crowd to go home. He says that he has nothing to tell them, and that they know the facts of Clifton's death. However, the narrator's command quickly becomes the refrain of a passionate speech he gives celebrating Clifton. He thinks that Brother Jack wouldn't approve of the speech's political content, but that he has no choice but to continue.

Although the narrator tries to make his speech about Clifton political, he finds that he is unable to do so. Perhaps he has discovered part of his identity that is uncomfortable celebrating Clifton as an abstraction, and instead prefers to think of Clifton as an individual. Clifton ultimately gave up on the world of the Brotherhood, but the narrator believes that Clifton's life is still worth celebrating.

The narrator concludes his speech on a note of grief and bitterness. Sitting down, he realizes that he has failed in his political aim. However, the crowd is clearly affected by the speech. The funeral ends and Tod Clifton is buried.

The narrator is unable to organize the crowd to act, a failure of his waning Brotherhood duties. However, his speech about Clifton has tapped into the public's anger, stoking the fires of action.

The narrator walks home, exhausted from his effort. He still has hopes of organizing the crowd's energy into political action. The narrator walks through a Harlem market and feels the tension from the funeral in the air. He resolves not to let this opportunity go to waste.

The narrator still believes that he will be able to organize the community's energy into a productive political movement. However, the risk is that without some organization, the community's tension could erupt into violence.

CHAPTER 22

The narrator is finally called into a meeting with the committee of the Brotherhood. The committee is sitting around a small table in half-darkness. The members are smoking.

The scene of the meeting is ominous, and in the smoke and darkness it is clear that the committee intends to put the narrator in his place.

Brother Jack asks the narrator how the funeral went. The narrator is surprised to learn that Brother Jack did not attend the funeral. He tells Jack that the turnout was enormous. Brother Tobitt begins to attack the narrator, questioning his decisions. The narrator tells the committee that he tried to get in touch with them, but when they become unresponsive he moved forward on his "personal responsibility."

The narrator still believes that the Brotherhood is interested in his actions, but it soon becomes clear that the committee has turned against him entirely. His greatest crime is acting without the authority of the committee: the Brotherhood demands that the individual remain subservient to the group.

Brother Jack and the committee pounce on the narrator's choice of words, criticizing his use of "personal responsibility." The narrator tells the committee that he is sorry they missed the funeral. Brother Jack mocks the narrator, calling him "the great tactician." The narrator asks Brother Jack what he means by his sarcasm, and Jack says that he means to discipline the narrator.

Jack and the others mock "personal responsibility," as for them no one has responsibility other than themselves. For the narrator to exercise personal responsibility implies that he has power and authority which the committee insists that he does not.

Brother Tobitt continues to mock the narrator. The narrator attempts to explain the reasoning behind organizing the funeral, but the committee doesn't want to listen. Brother Jack tells him that the funeral was wrong because Clifton had betrayed the organization by deciding to sell **Sambo dolls**. The narrator replies that Clifton had many contradictions, but was not really a traitor. He also points out that the shooting of an unarmed man is more politically important than anything the man might have been selling.

The committee is not interested in anything other than the fact that the narrator has acted without their approval. Ultimately, the situation boils down to the committee's need to consolidate power over the narrator. Even the injustice shown to Clifton is ultimately unimportant to the committee, as the individual fact of his death is not currently useful for the committee and its plans.

The narrator tries to explain to the committee that the **Sambo dolls** aren't important, and that the black community in Harlem needs an opportunity to express their legitimate grievances. He tells the committee that all they can see is a potential threat to the Brotherhood's prestige.

The committee is very worried about the Sambo dolls and risk that Clifton poses to the Brotherhood's reputation. But the idea that people might express their grievances is totally unimportant to them.

Brother Tobitt attacks the narrator for presuming to speak for all black people. When the narrator retorts by asking what Tobitt's source of knowledge is, Tobitt proudly tells the narrator that his wife is black. The narrator begins to needle Tobitt, telling him that he clearly knows all about what it's like to be black.

Brother Tobitt claims a place of privileged knowledge because he is married to a black woman. Tobitt is an example of a white man claiming the authority of a black perspective when it suits him, something the narrator finds laughable and repulsive.

Ultimately, Brother Jack informs the narrator that he was not "hired to think." Jack says that the narrator's only responsibility is to listen to the committee. Even if the committee is wrong, the narrator is not allowed to question their decision. Brother Jack tells the narrator to let the committee handle the strategy, as they are "graduates," while the narrator is only a smart beginner. The narrator replies that the political situation in Harlem is the one thing he does know about, and they would do well to listen to him.

Brother Jack makes the chain of command in the Brotherhood absolutely clear: the narrator is now instructed to never act on his own initiative. Such a thing might have been possible in the past, but the committee recognizes that the narrator's power is dangerous. By punishing him, they intend to keep him under their control, despite the consequences on the ground.

Brother Jack tells the narrator that the committee has decided against demonstrations such as the funeral, telling the narrator that they are no longer effective. The narrator replies that the demonstration is the only effective thing in Harlem lately; the people there believe that the Brotherhood has abandoned the neighborhood. This, the narrator explains, is the reason for Clifton's disappearance.

Brother Jack's words that the demonstrations are "no longer effective" are clouded in secrecy. It almost seems as if the committee is interested in actively avoiding the grievances of the black community. Ultimately, their reasoning remains opaque to the narrator.

After hearing the narrator's report, Brother Jack finally says that the committee's job is not to ask people what they think, but rather to tell them what to think. The narrator accuses Jack of acting like the "great white father." Jack tells the narrator that he is the people's leader, but the narrator replies that maybe he should consider himself "Marse Jack."

Brother Jack underlines the central secret of the Brotherhood: they are only interested in their own vision of the future, and they will attempt to impose their will on others if they must. The narrative of the Brotherhood is exposed as just another power play.

Brother Jack is infuriated. He leaps to his feet and grips the table. Convulsed by his anger, Jack's glass eye falls out of its socket. At first, the narrator believes he is hallucinating, and is disgusted by the sight of the empty eye socket. He quickly realizes that all the other members of the committee already know about the eye, and that Jack is using the eye to disorient the narrator and gain an advantage.

The narrator is deeply disturbed by the revelation of Jack's glass eye, which seems like an object from a dream. The eye seems to symbolize Jack's limited vision of the world, a vision without a perspective other than Jack's egomania.

Accordingly, Brother Jack asks if the eye makes the narrator feel uncomfortable. Jack is proud of the eye, and he tells the narrator that he lost the eye "in the line of duty." Jack tells the narrator that the narrator doesn't understand the meaning of sacrifice, and that all discipline is actually a form of sacrifice. The narrator recognizes that Brother Jack is partly blind and is incapable of seeing the narrator.

Jack believes that the loss of his eye is a demonstration of his will to sacrifice himself. In fact, Jack has sacrificed his own sense of humanity and decency in order to impose his will on the world. The recognition of the limits of Jack's vision makes the narrator feel like he was invisible to Jack and the Brotherhood all along.

Brother Jack puts his glass eye back in. He then asks for the time, and remarks that it is time for the committee to get going. As he leaves, he tells the narrator to remember his discipline and to watch his temper. He instructs the narrator to go see Brother Hambro again. As the committee leaves, the narrator feels like he's watching a bad comedy. He feels that he can't continue his fight for justice without the Brotherhood's support, but also that he will never feel the same passion for the Brotherhood again.

After everything the narrator has been told, he is now simply told to go back to Brother Hambro for more indoctrination. The narrator feels deeply disillusioned by the sense that he has worked tirelessly for the Brotherhood only to return to the beginning of the journey. He recognizes that the Brotherhood is another story in which he can no longer truly believe.

CHAPTER 23

The narrator goes to the bar beneath the Brotherhood meeting place and orders a drink. The men in the bar are carrying on a heated discussion about Tod Clifton. They ask what the narrator thinks, but the narrator replies that he can't answer: Clifton was one of his best friends. The men leave him alone.

After the ordeal of the meeting of the committee, the narrator feels incapable of doing any more arguing over Tod Clifton. The narrator wishes to put aside politics and simply recognize Clifton as his friend.

As the narrator walks down the street, he notices that the people of Harlem are energized over Clifton's shooting. He feels a twinge of hope. He resolves to go see Brother Hambro that evening.

Even after the committee's reprimand, the narrator sees that his individual effort has still had an effect in the community.

The narrator comes across Ras the Exhorter giving a speech on the street. Ras points out the narrator and indicates that the Brotherhood is to blame for Tod Clifton's death. He asks the narrator what the narrator plans to do to address the shooting. The narrator is unable to answer the question, but tells Ras to stop abusing Clifton's memory for his personal gain. Some members of the crowd stand up for the narrator.

As the Brotherhood remains inactive in the community, more and more members of Harlem are drawn to the easy answers that Ras' black nationalism provides. With the community energized by Clifton's death, Ras' advocacy of violence seems increasingly appealing.

As the narrator leaves Ras' circle, two of Ras' men follow him down the street. They grab the narrator near a movie theater and begin to beat him. Fortunately, the theater's doorman pulls Ras' men off of the narrator. The narrator thanks the doorman and moves on, noting that Ras is growing bolder.

Ras recognizes that the narrator is still a powerful force in the Harlem community, even without the support of the Brotherhood. Ras seeks to silence the narrator in order to increase his own power.

While trying to hail a cab, the narrator notices three men in suits, all of whom are wearing **dark-lensed glasses**. The narrator is suddenly struck with an idea. He runs into a drugstore and buys his own pair of dark glasses, the darkest he can find. He puts the glasses on and goes out into the street again, hoping that this disguise will allow him to travel through Harlem unnoticed.

The idea of a disguise is a new one to the narrator: all this time, despite not knowing who he was, he was still trying to present his authentic self to others. He hopes his disguise will give him a new sense of protection.

Walking down the street in his new **dark glasses**, the narrator is approached by a beautiful woman. The woman has mistaken him for another man named Rinehart, who also apparently wears dark glasses. At first the narrator plays along in order to talk to the pretty woman, but the woman soon realizes that the narrator is not Rinehart and grows angry with him. She also informs him that Rinehart always wears a hat. The narrator rushes into the nearest store to buy a hat.

Here Rinehart is introduced as the alter ego of the narrator. In many ways, Rinehart is everything the narrator is not. Whereas the narrator had been all sincerity, Rinehart is all disguises, and is recognized primarily by his flashy attire.

Now in glasses and a hat, the narrator is repeatedly mistaken for the man named Rinehart. He decides that he will have to learn more about Rinehart if people are going to be mistaken so often. The narrator comes across Ras' crowd again. In his disguise, no one recognizes the narrator as a member of the Brotherhood. Ras informs the crowd that he is no longer Ras the Exhorter, but will instead be known as Ras the Destroyer. Ras tells the crowd that "the *time has come!*" The narrator wonders what Ras means.

Rinehart seems to be one of the most popular men in Harlem, as the narrator is suddenly recognized everywhere. This universal recognition suggests that Rinehart is a strange kind of everyman, known to all parts of the community. As for Ras, his name change to Ras the Destroyer suggests that he is moving toward an increase in destructive activity.

Wishing to test his new costume further, the narrator returns to Barrelhouse's Jolly Dollar, looking for the two men who insulted him last time. Barrelhouse doesn't recognize the narrator, and the narrator orders a beer. At the counter, the narrator sees Brother Maceo, the contact he missed last time. He speaks to Maceo, asking him how his ribs are, but Maceo doesn't recognize him. Maceo, judging him by his dress, assumes that the narrator is looking for trouble.

With his hat and glasses, the narrator resembles a street tough as much as he resembles his old self. The unstoppable success of the narrator's disguise reflects the fact that all people perceive their neighbors superficially. It only takes a small change for the narrator to become invisible even to someone he knows.

The conversation between Brother Maceo and the narrator escalates first into an argument and then into outright conflict. At first, the narrator is simply playing the part of Rinehart, but the stubborn Maceo begins to make the narrator angry. Very quickly, he is ready to hurt Maceo. Before anything can happen, Barrelhouse breaks up the fight, telling "Rinehart" to get out of his bar.

The narrator's disguise is perhaps too effective: driven into playing the role of Rinehart, the narrator begins to take his feud seriously. The narrator's change in behavior is reflective of the ways in which the way society perceives a person can easily and fluidly change that person's behavior.

Back out on the street, more men recognize the narrator as Rinehart, and the narrator is beginning to learn to speak the language. One man asks "Rinehart" for a job. An old woman approaches the narrator, asking him for the final figure of the numbers game. The narrator realizes that Rinehart runs the numbers, which is partly why he knows so many people. He tells the woman that he isn't Rinehart, and the woman informs the narrator that he doesn't have Rinehart's shoes.

It is starting to become clear that Rinehart is involved in many different businesses in Harlem, many of them disreputable. Rinehart is representative of a kind of go-between in the black community, a man who is involved in some of everything but has no fixed interests. Rinehart works in the margins of society.

A squad car stops the narrator, asking for their cut of Rinehart's money. The narrator tells the police that he isn't Rinehart. The police say that the money had better be there by morning. A group of men rush up to the narrator, asking if the police are harassing him. They immediately recognize that he isn't Rinehart, saying that Rinehart would be driving his Cadillac at this time of night.

Rinehart is also familiar with the police. With the knowledge that Rinehart is involved with police bribery, Rinehart's abilities come to seem a little more sinister. Not only is Rinehart symbolic of opportunity and possibility, but also the exploitation of those possibilities.

The narrator keeps walking, hoping to have escaped Rinehart's territory. However, a woman appears behind the narrator, recognizing him as Rinehart. She speaks to him suggestively and tells him not to turn around, as her "old man" might be following them. The girl tries to put money in "Rinehart's" pocket, but the narrator turns around and confesses his identity. The woman is extremely beautiful, and the narrator says he's sorry he isn't Rinehart. The woman takes her money and runs off.

In the growing list of occupations, Rinehart also acts as a pimp. When the narrator sees the beautiful woman behind him, he becomes more aware of Rinehart's seductive powers. Through Rinehart's craftiness, he can succeed in obtaining nearly anything he wants in Harlem. Rinehart's power is an interesting contrast to the power of the Brotherhood, which presumes to transform the world for some abstract idea of betterment. Rinehart, instead, just seems to slide through it, using his charm to get what he wants.

The narrator continues his walk and notices a neon-lighted church. He takes a handout from the church, only to discover that Rinehart is the church's minister. The narrator is shocked by the apparent contradiction of so many of Rinehart's identities. The narrator enters the church and is greeted as the reverend by two women. The narrator decides it's better just to play along. The church is both mysterious and tacky, and the narrator becomes overwhelmed. The narrator steps out and removes his costume.

Finally, in the biggest leap of possibility, it becomes clear that Rinehart is not simply a man of the underworld. Rinehart can act as both pimp and preacher, and his ability to manipulate the hopefulness of the people who gather in his "church" is emblematic of his great power. Rinehart's chaotic power is a deep challenge to the narrator's understanding of an orderly world.

The narrator wonders if it is possible for Rinehart to be all of the figures that he seems to be. He reflects that Rinehart's world is the world of possibility, a fluid environment where one can act however one pleases. The narrator refers to Rinehart as a kind of "rascal." The narrator decides to go see Brother Hambro, thinking that the members of the Brotherhood will never be able to understand Rinehart.

Here Rinehart is linked to the tradition of tricksters in black folklore, a heritage that extends back to traditional African gods. Rinehart's magic is based in being able to turn anything close at hand to his advantage. He depends on the belief of the people he manipulates, but the people of Harlem are more than willing to believe in Rinehart.

The narrator takes a cab to Brother Hambro's residence. When he arrives, Hambro is putting his son to bed. The narrator asks Hambro what's to be done about his district, but Hambro tells him that nothing can be done without upsetting the Brotherhood's larger plans. Hambro tells the narrator that the members of his community will have to be "sacrificed." The narrator feels that beneath it all, something about Rinehart is bothering him. Hambro tells the narrator that his district's progress needs to be slowed down for its own good, and that disciplined members will understand.

The abstraction of Brother Hambro's theories stands in sharp contrast to the pure opportunism of Rinehart. Similar to his thoughts about Clifton's plunge out of history, the narrator has the feeling that the Brotherhood's ideology cannot account for Rinehart. While Rinehart may be sinister, he is not so dangerous as Hambro's ideology: the Brotherhood is willing to sacrifice all of Harlem over a vague theory, Rinehart, meanwhile, is just in it for himself.

The narrator tells Brother Hambro that those who are being sacrificed should at least be aware of their sacrifice. Hambro simply replies again that it is all necessary for the Brotherhood's master plan. Hambro goes on to explain that "it's impossible *not* to take advantage of the people," an attitude that the narrator derides as "Rinehartism," meaning "cynicism." Hambro finally says that the narrator must believe in the ultimate wisdom of the Brotherhood. Unable to accept this conclusion, the narrator leaves Hambro feeling worse than when he arrived.

Hambro's dedication to his ideals is so thorough that he is able to justify what would otherwise seem like a deeply unethical decision to purposefully neglect the people of Harlem. Ultimately, Hambro's theory is not only designed to justify such decisions, but to make them seem reasonable and inevitable. For the narrator, such theorizing is the height of cynicism.

The narrator walks along the park, thinking about the Brotherhood and Rinehart. He worries that if the people willingly accept Rinehart's charlatanism, that his own struggle doesn't matter, and that he is completely invisible. The narrator realizes that the Brotherhood doesn't see him either, and that the black people of Harlem are simply numbers in a ballot box to be counted. The narrator feels that he has simply exchanged Mr. Norton for Brother Jack without making any progress whatsoever.

By recognizing Rinehart, the narrator recognizes how far away from change his community is. The narrative of the Brotherhood was simply something that allowed the narrator to feel as though he had a purpose. All the while, the Brotherhood was actually manipulating him for its own self-interest, a situation no better than the naïve optimism of Mr. Norton.

The narrator is flooded by memories of the past, realizing that it is his entire past that defines his identity. He resolves to take up his grandfather's words and to "overcome them with yeses." The narrator will continue to do the Brotherhood's bidding, cheerfully knowing that their plan is foolish and flawed. He will mislead the Brotherhood into thinking that everything in Harlem is fine when the opposite is actually true, transforming himself into an agent of the Brotherhood's destruction.

After trying to find his identity through so many organizations that led him astray, the narrator's grandfather is the only solid thing that has remained continuous through his life. The narrator decides that the Brotherhood is simply another element of the white power system, and that he must attempt to undermine the organization from within.

The narrator begins to hatch a plan to infiltrate the Brotherhood hierarchy. He decides that the easiest way to get to the source of information is through a woman. Knowing that a party is coming up soon at the Chthonian for Brother Jack's birthday, the narrator thinks about seducing Emma to gain more information. The narrator confirms to himself that he is ready to use "Rinehart methods."

The narrator believes that he has learned from the cynicism of Rinehart, justifying his attempt to exploit a Brotherhood woman for political information. However, it is unclear if the narrator is truly capable of such devious actions.

CHAPTER 24

As the narrator prepares his undermining of the Brotherhood, Harlem has become inflamed with violence. The narrator hears that clashes are breaking out throughout the neighborhood. Despite his wish to destroy the Brotherhood, the narrator admits that things in Harlem look very bad.

The narrator is aware of Harlem's deteriorating state, but tells himself that it is necessary to ignore it in order to destroy the Brotherhood. In doing so, the narrator justifies violence in a way that is not normal for him.

The narrator lies to the committee, reporting that conflict in Harlem is dying down and that the narrator plans to organize a clean up campaign. The narrator barely believes the credibility of the lie, but the committee loves the plan. He also shows the committee a roll of made-up new members. The narrator believes that his goal is to allow the Brotherhood to ignore the reality on the ground; he will say whatever the committee wants to hear.

Initially, the narrator's attempt to "yes" the Brotherhood to death seems successful. In lying to the committee, the narrator is taking full advantage of his invisibility. The committee does not recognize who he is, so he decides to use his invisibility for covert action.

At the Chthonian, Brother Jack's birthday is celebrated. The narrator tries to approach Emma, but something in her demeanor warns the narrator away. He realizes that she is too politically canny to let herself be sexually manipulated. The narrator looks around the party for a second choice.

The narrator's "Rinehart-style" plan proves to be more difficult to execute than he imagined. The narrator has no notable experience in seduction, and his plan soon grows increasingly desperate.

The narrator spies a woman named Sybil, a woman who had previously approached the narrator during his lecture series. The narrator had never taken up her innuendo before, but now sees his opportunity. He knows that Sybil is the unhappy wife of one the Brotherhood's most prominent members. The plan goes smoothly, and the narrator arranges for Sybil to meet him at his apartment the following evening.

The narrator succeeds in preparing Sybil for a seduction. The narrator hopes to extract important information from Sybil, but he also risks degrading himself—and using her, another person, another individual—without knowing for certain that Sybil will be useful to him.

The narrator spends the day preparing his apartment for Sybil's visit, buying alcohol, food, and flowers for the rendezvous. He tries to imagine what Rinehart would do in the situation. However, the narrator quickly admits that he "bungled" the situation. He mixes the drinks too strongly, and he and Sybil both quickly become drunk. In addition, Sybil is totally uninterested in politics and has nothing interesting to tell the narrator. As the narrator tries to talk to Sybil, she can only treat him as the image of a black man, asking him to perform certain black stereotypes.

The narrator does not quite have Rinehart's experience in exploiting possible opportunities. The situation is further complicated by the fact that Sybil is also using him, treating the narrator like a sex object, demanding that he fill stereotypical roles for her pleasure. The situation is risky, as the narrator is sacrificing part of his dignity, becoming invisible again all for an unfulfilling reward.

As Sybil and the narrator get drunker, Sybil tells the narrator that she has a particular fantasy. She asks the narrator to pretend to rape her. The narrator tries to discourage her from this idea, telling her that they should go for a walk instead. However, Sybil insists. She recalls that a black man raped a friend of hers, and Sybil elevates the anecdote into a sexual fantasy. She confesses to the narrator that she thinks she might be a nymphomaniac.

Sybil's desire to be raped by the narrator is the fullest expression of racist desires encoded in the heart of their interaction. The narrator is debased as well by agreeing to participate in the obscene ritual, selling himself for information that Sybil doesn't even have. The moment is indicative of the narrator's own loss of direction.

The narrator begins to feel pity for Sybil's sad fantasy. Sybil grows increasingly insistent that the narrator should pretend to rape her. The narrator continues to give Sybil drinks, hoping that she will pass out. The narrator writes an obscene message across Sybil's belly with her lipstick, but soon regrets doing so. He uses benzene to wipe the message off. Sybil eventually passes out.

Now that the narrator has embroiled himself in the situation, he cannot figure a way to get himself out. The narrator's decision to seduce Sybil is a move for power that has gone horribly awry, revealing how little power the narrator really has against the Brotherhood.

When Sybil wakes, the narrator lies and tells her that he performed the rape fantasy. Sybil, still drunk, believes him and becomes overjoyed. The narrator plays along, feeling sorry for Sybil. Sybil asks if they can do it again sometime, and the narrator facetiously replies that they can do it every Thursday at 9pm. As Sybil curls up in his arms, the narrator feels ashamed of himself.

By indulging Sybil's rape fantasy, the narrator acts in a cowardly manner. This is one the narrator's deepest points of disillusionment, as his plan to disrupt the Brotherhood has been thoroughly overturned, resulting in a grotesque situation that is out of the narrator's control.

The narrator dozes off, only to be awoken by a telephone call. Sybil tells him not to answer, but the narrator picks up the phone. A member of the Brotherhood tells the narrator to get up to Harlem immediately. The man on the phone says that there is "Bad trouble," and the narrator hears the sound of glass breaking over the phone. The narrator briefly wonders if the call is a trick, or if it concerns his tryst with Sybil, but he quickly resolves to go uptown.

It was already known that the situation in Harlem was beginning to deteriorate. The narrator's escapade with Sybil was a type of distraction from the important events going on behind the narrator's back. The narrator had lost himself, but the news of Harlem's trouble rouses him back into action.

As the narrator prepares to go uptown, the drunken Sybil tries to convince him to stay. The narrator packs his **brief case**, noticing that the contents have become quite heavy. The narrator takes Sybil out to the street and tells her stay put while he catches a cab on Fifth Avenue. Sybil calls the narrator "boo'ful" over and over, and the narrator muses that that's the sound of "true affection." Sybil's "boo'ful" also makes the narrator feel invisible.

As the narrator prepares to return to Harlem, Sybil represents the possibility of abdication: the narrator doesn't owe the Brotherhood anything, and he could easily continue his dalliance with Sybil, imagining it to be the resistance that it surely isn't. However, the narrator rejects Sybil, accepting the reality of Harlem.

As the narrator heads uptown, a taxi pulls up—with Sybil inside. She asks the narrator to take her up to Harlem with him. Instead, the narrator gives the taxi driver five dollars to drive Sybil home. The narrator is relieved to have gotten rid of Sybil, only to run into her again on 110th Street, waiting for him under a street lamp. Sybil begins to run barefoot up the street, asking the narrator to catch her. She eventually falls over, still drunk. The narrator hails another taxi and sends Sybil home again. The taxi driver tells the narrator that the situation in Harlem is very bad indeed.

Despite his desire to shake off Sybil and return back into political life, Sybil is very persistent. Her repeated return seems like a joke similar to the disposal of the coin bank. No matter what the narrator does, the strange sexual tension of white women returns to haunt the narrator. However, the narrator must cast off the question of Sybil in order to return to Harlem.

The narrator realizes that he himself is still drunk. He hurries up toward Harlem. The narrator recalls his first time entering Harlem, which now seems long ago. Feeling a strong sense of expectation, the narrator crosses under the bridge on 125th Street and finally enters Harlem again.

In returning to Harlem alone, the narrator has the feeling that he is crossing an important threshold. He is entering a place that has deeply shaped his identity, only to find that the situation has changed once again.

CHAPTER 25

Soon the narrator can hear abundant gunfire. Suddenly, the narrator is pushed aside by four men dragging a safe through the street. The narrator jumps away as he hears gunfire, but is hit by a bullet. The bullet has grazed his head, and blood runs down his face. Another man has been killed, and the discarded safe has hit the trolley's third rail, showering the street with blue sparks. The narrator gets up, and a man hands him his **brief case**.

Harlem has become a complete warzone. Ironically, the narrator's head injury is quite similar to the head injury sustained by the Founder in Reverend Barbee's speech. Here too the narrator has a near death experience. He finds that he is alive, but he has lost all sense of what it is that he should do.

All of Harlem seems to be consumed by chaos. The narrator joins up with a group of men, the two most prominent of which are named Dupre and Scofield. The men are moving through Harlem, looting any store they can find. Dupre is wearing several hats and several pairs of suspenders. The men look at the narrator's **brief case** and assume that he has filled it with his own loot. The brief case is heavy, and the narrator remembers that he still has Mary's **coin bank** inside of it. He puts all of his papers, including Clifton's **Sambo doll**, into the brief case.

The looting men are similar to the situation the narrator described in the Prologue: they do not feel that they are responsible, as the white power structure has never given them anything to be responsible for. As a result they loot with abandon. The narrator's brief case is not filled with loot, but rather with the relics that form his accumulated history.

As the men move through the riot zone, the narrator asks the men how the riot started. None of the men know for sure, but one implies that the riot started because of Tod Clifton's shooting. The narrator is amazed that Clifton's death has caused so much destruction. Another man tells them that Ras the Destroyer caused the riot.

The looting men are sure that the riot is somehow motivated by racial tensions, though they are unsure of the specifics. The men are taking the opportunity of something in the air to express the general grievances of their continued mistreatment.

Dupre tells the narrator that the men are "fixing to do something what needs to be done." The men break into a hardware store. Every man is given a flashlight and batteries, and the narrator feels happy to follow along instead of being in charge. Next, the men fill buckets with oil and carry them out from the store. Dupre tells them that their destination is just around the corner.

By collecting the buckets of oil, the looting men escalate their destruction from random looting to a regimen of systematic destruction. The narrator is not sure where they are going, but with no sense of direction, he is happy to simply follow the orders he is given, just as he followed the orders of Bledsoe and of the Brotherhood for so long.

As the men walk, they run into a crowd of men pulling a milk wagon. On top of the wagon is an obese woman in a pinafore who is drinking beer from a barrel. The woman sings loudly as the men slowly haul her down the street. The narrator feels saddened by the spectacle, and Scofield remarks that things are being taken too far.

The narrator begins to see the true byproducts of the riot: instead of liberating itself, the black community is taking the time to destroy itself with debauchery. The spectacle is an example of the way in which the community's anger has failed to focus itself into something productive.

The men arrive with their buckets at a huge tenement building where most of the men live. Dupre instructs the men to take their buckets to the top of the building to dump their kerosene, making sure that all the rooms are clear of people. The narrator asks where the men will live after they burn down their home, to which Scofield replies that the only way to get rid of such terrible conditions is to burn them down. A pregnant woman tries to stop Dupre from burning the building, but he shrugs her off, telling her that no more men will be born in such an inhumane building. The narrator wonders what Brother Jack would think of a man like Dupre.

Dupre's decision to burn down his own tenement building—his own home—is one of the most radical moments of the entire novel. By Dupre's logic, the tenement must be burned down, as otherwise generations of black people will continue to be born into its squalid conditions. By burning the tenement down, Dupre forces change, though it is not necessarily clear that change will be for the better. However, the men are willing to try their luck, and to strike at the power structure that has put them in this position.

The narrator goes up the tenement with Scofield and the two men splash their kerosene as planned. After the building has been evacuated, Dupre gives the signal to light matches. The men light the fire and rush down the stairs. The narrator realizes that he's left his **brief case** up with the fire and runs back upstairs, telling himself he's had it too long to give it up now. The narrator retrieves his brief case and stokes the fire further before running back down.

With the decision to help burn down the tenement, the narrator's identity is once again being transformed. Not long ago, the narrator of the Brotherhood would have attempted to calm the men down. Now the narrator sympathizes with their sense that none of them have anything to lose.

After the narrator exits the tenement, a voice in the crowd recognizes him by his Brotherhood name. Another voice calls out to catch the narrator, indicating that Ras the Destroyer is looking for him. The narrator disappears into the crowd. He wonders why the Brotherhood called him if it was too late to do anything about the situation. He resolves to head toward the district offices.

Although the narrator no longer believes in the Brotherhood, he cannot easily escape his history in the community, including enemies like Ras. As the narrator wonders about the phone call, it becomes clear that the Brotherhood's relationship to the riots is quite strange.

The narrator runs into Scofield again in the street. They encounter a man who is bleeding profusely, and the narrator helps tighten the man's tourniquet to stem the blood. A boy asks if the narrator is a doctor, to which the narrator says no.

While this moment is one description of the chaos on the street, it also fleetingly compares the narrator to the ex-doctor, indicating that they are now in a similar position of knowledge.

Scofield tells the narrator that he seems familiar, but doesn't recognize the narrator as a member of the Brotherhood. The two men come across a squad of white-helmeted policemen who are being attacked with bricks from the tops of the neighborhood buildings. The policemen run for cover and begin shooting back at the buildings. Scofield and the narrator run for cover, and the narrator thinks Scofield has been hit. He discovers that Scofield is all right, and Scofield pulls out a pistol to start shooting back at the cops.

Scofield and the narrator watch the riot escalate into all-out war against the police. Scofield chooses to begin firing at the police, a sign that the night has become about more than simply looting stores. The riot is instead becoming a symbol of resistance against continued white oppression. For one night, men like Scofield are united in showing their anger to those in power.

The narrator overhears a conversation in which a man says he wants to do some "fighting back" if there's going to be a race riot. The term "race riot" puts the night in context for the narrator as he begins to realize the Brotherhood's true intentions. The committee had been hoping for a riot all along, knowing that the black rioters could never triumph over armed police. The narrator understands that by "yessing" the committee, he actually enabled them to carry out their plans unhindered. Disgusted, the narrator runs from the shooting, cursing the Brotherhood.

When the narrator hears the term "race riot," the reasons for everything that has gone before become clear. Brother Hambro had indicated that the Harlem community would be "sacrificed," but the narrator did not realize that the sacrifice would occur in such a horrible way. The idea that the Brotherhood guessed or knew that the riot would happen, or even tried to create the conditions so that the riot would happen, is an example of the cruel realities created by abstract theories.

As the narrator runs through the streets he sees pandemonium and looting everywhere. Suddenly he sees a white body hanging from a lamppost. The narrator becomes terrified, noticing seven hanging bodies. He is shocked and relieved to discover that the bodies are actually mannequins. Though individually harmless, they are a dark premonition of what could happen. The narrator thinks of Sybil and keeps running.

The mannequins that the narrator sees are a vision of the future possibility of a race riot. A situation in which black and white people are actively killing one another does not seem so far away to the narrator, who is afraid of the tremendous violence that would be sparked by such an event.

Ras the Destroyer is riding through the streets of Harlem at the head of his gang. Ras is dressed as an Abyssinian chieftain, complete with spear, shield, and a big black horse. He calls to the men on the street to stop looting, asking them to join him on a raid of Harlem's armory. Seeing Ras, the narrator searches his **brief case** for his **dark-lensed glasses**, only to find that they've been crushed. Suddenly, the narrator finds himself trapped in the crossfire between the police and the forces of Ras.

Ras has completed his transformation, taking on African garb in order to emphasize his full rejection of white principles and the white world. Increasing racial tension only makes Ras stronger, as increased conflict makes it easier to believe Ras' screeds and charges against all white men. In the middle of a war zone, the disguise of Rinehart proves to be useless, as there is no hopefulness to exploit.

Ras' men spot the narrator, and Ras throws his spear at him, which misses and lodges itself in one of the dummies. The narrator tells Ras that he is no longer is a member of the Brotherhood, as the narrator is against a race riot. Before the narrator can fully explain himself, Ras orders his men to hang the narrator. Three men grab the narrator, but the narrator grabs Ras' spear and uses it to defend himself. The narrator tries to explain to Ras that a race riot plays into the hands of the whites, but Ras won't listen.

The narrator seems to have discovered a sense of self beyond the Brotherhood, insofar as he is dead set against the violence entailed in a race riot. However, it is far too late to explain the manipulations of the Brotherhood to Ras: in his eyes, their deviousness only proves his point about the evil nature of white men. To Ras, the narrator reminds a traitor to his race.

Ras shouts again to hang the narrator, and the narrator realizes that if he is hanged the tragedy might bring the community closer to liberation. However, he soon reconsiders, thinking that it would be too absurd to die at the hands of Ras after everything he's been through. The narrator throws the spear back at Ras, piercing Ras' mouth and locking his jaws shut. The narrator runs from Ras' men.

The narrator considers sacrificing himself, but quickly decides against it. From his perspective (and against Brother Jack), there has already been too much sacrifice that has come to nothing. By running, the narrator chooses to prolong his resistance.

Ras' men chase after the narrator and struggle with him, but the narrator breaks free and keeps running. The narrator feels himself struck with a burst of water from a broken water main, and is almost run down by a mounted police officer. The narrator tells himself that he has to make it to Mary's house.

In the chaos of a city that is coming apart at the seams, the memory of Mary's house is the most comforting thing the narrator can think of. Despite the narrator's other misgivings, the community spirit of Mary is sorely needed.

Having escaped the commotion somewhat, the narrator overhears a group of men talking about the wild evening. One describes the eventual encounter between Ras and the police force, with Ras charging the police on his horse. The man recounts that Ras used his spear and shield in close combat before fleeing from the police. The other men barely believe his story, but the storyteller insists that it's true.

By depicting the narrator as overhearing the later events of Ras' uprising, Ellison chooses to make Ras into a dreamlike, nearly mythical figure. Already dressed as a chieftain, Ras engages in an old-fashioned charge against the police, cementing the idea that despite his power, Ras is a kind of anachronism who cannot hope to truly succeed.

The narrator begins to look for Brother Jack, convinced that finding him is the only way to destroy the Brotherhood. As he searches, he runs into a trio of white men in civilian clothes. The men are armed with bats. The men ask the narrator what he has in his **brief case**, and the narrator instinctively runs from them. Running from the men, the narrator falls down an open manhole into absolute darkness.

The narrator's desire to find Brother Jack is never given a satisfying resolution, as there is no way the narrator can win against Jack's accumulated power. When the narrator flees the white men—because as a black man he still has to flee from white men—he finds his ultimate invisibility by falling down a hole, a sign of the loss of his ability to act.

The narrator realizes that he has landed upon a load of coal. The men tell the narrator to come out of the hole, but the narrator tells them to come and get him. The narrator continues to taunt the men, who place the cover back over the manhole in retaliation. The narrator is trapped in total darkness. He feels tired, and thinks to himself that he should have gone to Mary's. The narrator falls asleep.

Although the narrator cannot escape the hole, he is able to taunt the white men until they cover up his manhole. By the end of the riot, the narrator has been completely silenced in darkness, a metaphor for the deep-seated and seemingly hopeless situation of race relations and the position he has been in his whole life.

When he awakens the next day, the narrator realizes he is still trapped in the hole. Realizing that he needs to make light, the narrator searches through the coal until he finds a dropped book of matches. The narrator is forced to open his **brief case** to use the paper inside for a torch. He begins by burning his high school diploma, which lights the room. The narrator sees that he is in a deep basement, big enough that he cannot see the whole space. He sets out looking for an exit.

However, the narrator cannot give up and die in darkness. The narrator manages to make a light by burning the contents of his briefcase, which represent all the history that the narrator has accumulated over his journey. While this history is important, it is more important as something to be consumed than a burden to be carried through life.

As the narrator searches through the basement, he burns Clifton's **Sambo doll** for light. Next, he takes out the anonymous note and begins to burn it. As it burns the narrator realizes that the note's script is the same as the slip that gave him his Brotherhood name. He realizes that Brother Jack was the author of the anonymous note. The narrator begins to scream and accidentally extinguishes his light.

As the narrator finally realizes that Brother Jack was his chief adversary in the Brotherhood, the depth of his own past deception becomes apparent. The organization that seemed to provide the best chance to improve the world turned out to be more sinister than any other, more willing to use and discard people.

Now immersed in darkness again, the narrator stumbles down a long passage. He does not know how much time passed. The narrator feels himself trapped in a state between dreaming and wakefulness. He has a vision of himself as a prisoner of all his past enemies, including Ras, Brother Jack, Mr. Norton, and Dr. Bledsoe. The narrator tells his captors that he is done running. The captors castrate the narrator with a knife, and the narrator's parts fly up and float over a bridge. Brother Jack asks the narrator what it feels like to be free of one's illusions. The narrator tells his captors that his seed is wasting along with their sun and their moon. At the end of the vision, the bridge strides off like a machine.

The narrator's dream of his opponents provides a small current of hope. Despite the fact that the opponents castrate him, they are unable to destroy the narrator's vision of the world. The narrator tells his opponents that the continuation of his people is inevitable as the moon and the sun, and he believes that they will continue on despite any oppression. However, it is a bittersweet dream, indicating that there may be only pain and destruction for the narrator and his future descendants.

The narrator awakes again in blackness. Realizing that he cannot return to his old life, he decides to take the opportunity to think about his life in peace and quiet. He resolves to "take up residence underground."

The world as he knows it has failed the narrator. The only remaining option is to spend time underground until either he or the conditions above ground begin to change.

EPILOGUE

The narrator tells us that we've heard all the important information. He confesses that he has come to accept his position in the hole. The narrator says that he can't tell if his life in the hole puts him in the avant-garde or in the past, but that he'll leave those decisions to men like Brother Jack.

The narrator's position in the hole is intermediate: he has not rejected the world outright, but he no longer participates in it either. The narrator decides to refrain from judging his historical position, suggesting that to do so is misguided.

The narrator says that he will try to be honest, a feat which he finds to be difficult. He remarks that he was never more hated than when he tried to be honest, and never more loved than when he lied and told men exclusively what they wanted to hear. The narrator says that he has become "ill of affirmation."

One way of viewing the narrator's struggle through the book is his difficulty in being honest, especially the difficulty in being honest with himself. Truthfulness is the way to change injustice, even if people do not always want to hear.

The narrator continues his meditation, saying that sometimes a man's feelings "are more rational than his mind," and that these feelings can pull a man in several directions. He says that he is tired of trying to "to go in everyone's way but my own." Now the narrator truly realizes his invisibility, and remarks that he began as nothing and returned to nothing.

It has become apparent to the narrator that often he ignored his unconscious desires in favor of something that his intellect told him was the best way to go, including many of his actions with the Brotherhood.

The narrator indicates that his hibernation is not enough for him. He says that his mind won't let him rest, and that books and jazz aren't enough. The narrator thinks of his grandfather over and over, despite the failure of his own experiment in "yessing." He is still unsure what his grandfather's words mean, and suggests that perhaps his words have something to do with taking responsibility and recognizing the connectedness of men.

The narrator is not content to simply rest and contemplate his situation. His disposition still requires that he try to act. The words of his grandfather remain the most important memory in his life, but he understands the words differently now. His grandfather wasn't merely speaking of sabotage, but also of self-empowerment.

The narrator asks what the next phase after his hibernation should be, and confesses that he does not know. However, he says that he has learned that the world has infinite possibilities, and that men should embrace this fact. He uses this idea to suggest the importance of diversity, and argues against conformity.

The narrator, not knowing how to move forward in the struggle of race relations, implies that the way forward must be a possibility that as of yet remains undiscovered. He indicates that the true danger is in thinking all possibilities have been explored.

The narrator says he is reminded of something that happened in the subway the other day. He saw a lost old gentleman on the subway platform. When he approached, it turned out that the man was Mr. Norton. The narrator asks Mr. Norton if Mr. Norton recognizes him. Mr. Norton does not remember the narrator and asks him if he knows the way to Centre Street. Mr. Norton asks the narrator why he should know him, and the narrator replies that he is Mr. Norton's destiny. The narrator asks if Mr. Norton is ashamed, which causes Mr. Norton to become indignant. Before the narrator can continue, Mr. Norton hops into the next express train.

The return to Mr. Norton brings the narrator's progress full circle from his youth. Mr. Norton's sense of destiny remains as absurd as ever. However, meanwhile the narrator has changed immensely, becoming more like the ex-doctor in his ability to speak freely with Mr. Norton without fear of consequences. Mr. Norton is still completely ignorant, but at least the narrator his no longer beholden to his pointless and patronizing whims.

The narrator returns to his meditation. He says that sometimes he considers returning down south, but quickly reminds himself that "the true darkness lies within my own mind."

The narrator knows that no change in scenery will alter the fundamental problems of injustice, which rest in the mind.

The narrator asks himself why he bothers to write down his story. He answers himself by saying that the process of writing is therapeutic, that it allows him to remember and helps draw him back up into the world. He remarks that despite everything that has happened, he is still able to love, and that love may even be necessary.

Ellison suggests that the narrator's decision to write or tell his story is itself a political action, a way to clear the air and reorganize stale thoughts about the nature of race and other issues.

The narrator compares himself to his grandfather, saying that he must accept his own humanity just as his grandfather did. Finally, the narrator says that he is ready to end his hibernation, and that he will soon come up to the surface for breath. He says that a plan of living must never lose sight of the chaos against which it is conceived. Finally, he says again that he is invisible, and that as a disembodied voice there was nothing he could do but "rave." He speaks a final line: "Who knows but that, on the lower frequencies, I speak to you?"

The narrator notes that part of his own long search for an identity was hampered by his refusal to recognize himself or "accept his humanity." The narrator indicates that perhaps the time to take action has come. His final words indicate that he hopes that his words may reach readers on a deep, fundamental level, far below their intellects—which can be so easily manipulated—to what may rather be termed their hearts or souls, their true individual selves.

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