



THE CORINTHIAN
The Journal of Student Research at Georgia College

The Corinthian

Volume 4

Article 9

2002

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Recommended Citation

Shelton, Stephanie (2002) "Expressionism in Invisible Man and Catch-22: Extreme Emotion in a Chaotic World," *The Corinthian*: Vol. 4 , Article 9.

Available at: <https://kb.gcsu.edu/thecorinthian/vol4/iss1/9>

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Expressionism in *Invisible Man* and *Catch-22*: Extreme Emotion in a Chaotic World

Stephanie Shelton

Being alone and surrounded by chaos would hardly encourage one to be calm and rational. Therefore, it is not difficult to appreciate M.H. Abram's definition of expressionism. He says expressionism is denoted by an author "expressing in [his] art [. . .] violent extremes of emotion" while depicting an "individual standing alone and afraid in [. . .] society which is disintegrating into chaos" (58-59). These elements of expressionism reject realism in favor of expressing "a vision—of human life and human society" (58). Applying these components to Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man* and Joseph Heller's *Catch-22* enables the reader to better grasp the often bizarre reactions of the novels' protagonists. In the works, Ellison's *Invisible Man* and Heller's *Yossarian* act in extreme ways as they struggle alone in chaotic worlds.

Ellison clearly demonstrates that his Protagonist is isolated in a disordered society. After exposing one of his college's white sponsors, Mr. Norton, to questionable society, the Protagonist meets with the school president, Dr. Bledsoe (137). In the meeting, the young man realizes how unpredictable his world is. As Bledsoe talks, the Narrator reflects, "For three years I had thought of myself as a man and here with a few words he'd [Bledsoe] made me as helpless as an infant" (144). He wonders, "How had I come to this? I had kept unswervingly to the path placed before me, had tried to be exactly what I was expected to be, had done exactly what I was expected to do—yet [. . .] here I was stumbling along" (146). The Protagonist thought he understood the way his society worked. He chose a path and stuck with it, reaping rewards for his efforts. However, after meeting with Bledsoe, the rug is pulled from under him. He is reduced from man to child, and he no longer knows how to function in his world. He is surrounded by a new, chaotic landscape he does not know how to navigate.

Later, after he joins the Brotherhood to improve social conditions, he believes he has found his way (382). However, during the Harlem riots, he realizes he is still alone. He is shocked to recognize

that the Brotherhood is responsible for the riots. He thinks, "It was not suicide, but murder. The committee had planned it" (553). Again, after thinking he has found the right road, he realizes he has been going the wrong way and chooses to leave the Brotherhood and act on his own.

James Albrecht says in his article that the Protagonist faces "American individualism [. . .] placed] firmly in the context of American race relations" (47). Albrecht's assertion demonstrates that the Invisible Man is alone, due to his quest to understand his personal place in the world, as he forges through a society brimming with racial conflict. This understanding supports the presence of expressionistic elements in the text and helps further communicate the Protagonist's dilemma. Clearly Ellison presents an individual facing a violent world he cannot understand.

Heller's Yossarian faces a similar crisis. He too stands isolated in a society out of control. Norman Podhoretz says Yossarian seems to live in "a gigantic insane asylum" of which he is the only sane resident" (4). Yossarian seconds this image as he walks through the Eternal City. He thinks to himself, "[I know] how Christ must have felt as he walked through the world, like a psychiatrist through a ward of nuts, like a victim through a prison full of thieves" (425). The officer's world is one of absolute chaos, and as the only sane member, Yossarian is completely alienated from society. Thus, Heller too incorporates the expressionistic element of the individual alone in a frightening world.

In addition to isolating their characters, Ellison and Heller have their protagonists react to the bizarre cultures around them in extreme ways. Albrecht says of the Invisible Man, "The narrator's development in the novel can be read as preparation for his adoption of a [. . .] mode of action [. . .] The narrator learns he must assert the particularity of his experience against the competing ideologies" of his society (56). In addition he says, "[W]e express our humanity only by engaging the resistant world" (57). Albrecht suggests the Protagonist must act, and his actions must be extreme to challenge the prevailing notions of his world. Ellison shows his Invisible Man doing so when he finds his landlady Mary's bank. He says, "For a second I stopped, feeling hate charging within me, then dashed over and grabbed it, suddenly as enraged by the tolerance or lack of discrimination, or whatever, that allowed Mary to keep such a self-mocking image around" (319). He smashes the bank into a pipe and then feels "the iron head crumble and fly apart in my hand" (320). His reaction to such sentiments is clearly

excessive. After all, it is only a money bank, but when he sees the bank, there is not a single moment of rational thought. He says he is seized with "hate" and mindlessly begins beating the bank against the pipe. Later, when he tries to get rid of the broken pieces, people keep insisting, "Take the damn stuff!" and refuse to let him throw it away (330). His inability to throw the bank away suggests his society's refusal to part with a racial past and stereotypes. He cannot rid himself of the Sambo image because his world still supports such ideas. Therefore, to brook the overwhelming tide of racism, the Protagonist must respond to the extreme.

Yossarian responds with intense emotion too. After his friend Nately and eleven others die, the bombardier stands with a "vivid, beaten, grimy look of deep, drugged despair" (389). Colonel Cathcart and Sergeant Whitcomb, examples of why Yossarian's world is so hopeless, rejoice that twelve deaths mean "twelve more form letters of condolence that could be mailed in one bunch" (389). Yossarian alone fully understands the loss of the men's lives, and in response to such a backward world, he begins to walk backwards. He "march[es] backward with his gun on his hip and refuse[s] to fly any more missions [. . .] continually spinning around as he walk[s] to make certain no one [i]s sneaking up on him from behind" (403). Podhoretz says this is due to the necessity of behaving in "the extremest and supremest" ways in such a chaotic place. Yossarian's response is certainly the "extremest." He refuses to walk forward and must constantly spin around to prevent anyone from sneaking up on him, and to protect himself from the lunatics who surround him, he carries a gun on his hip. If anyone in a realistic setting responded in such a way, he would be the crazy one. However, since Heller institutes the expressionistic element of unrealistic and exaggerated emotion, Yossarian's paranoia and grief seem to fit the insane world he inhabits.

Both Yossarian and the Invisible Man stand alone in disordered worlds, and each man reacts in extreme ways within his world. The characters' alienation and unrealistic reactions are examples of Heller and Ellison incorporating specific elements of expressionism into their works. In realizing the presence of expressionism, the reader can better appreciate the often bizarre events occurring in both novels, and in doing so, have a greater admiration of the novels' messages.

Works Cited

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