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Research Paper

The Lens of Truth: A Critical Response to The Role of Rinehart in Ellison's *Invisible Man*

Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man* often takes a metaphorical or surreal approach to the issues Ellison wishes to discuss, leading to many different interpretations of the novel's symbolism. One of the novel's most famous ideas is that of Rinehart, a character the protagonist is repeatedly mistaken for. Many scholars subscribe to the notion that Rinehart is symbolic of the "anonymity and possibility" (Kostelanetz 302) of "the Negro world in the North" (302), a chance to assume many new identities and embrace the "possibility of invisibility" (Horowitz 248), using it as a benefit rather than a handicap. Others argue that Rinehart is representative of "the limitations of… self-revision" (Cheng 132) or "ingenuity [that] knows no moral boundaries" (Wright 169). Rinehart is a far more malicious figure than many scholars attest, symbolic of the stereotypical amorality perceived from a black person living in an urban setting, as well as representative of the deception of others for personal benefit, conformity, and the abandonment of personal values in order to get what one wants. Critics who lean towards the negativity of Rinehart leave out several details that could help their side even more, such as the reinforcement of stereotypes, morality, and even comparisons to other novels.

Exploring *Invisible Man* requires a brief overview of the story and basic themes. The novel follows the life of an unnamed young black man, who introduces himself as invisible. Not literally impossible to see, but "because people refuse to see [him]" (Ellison 3). His life is plagued by misfortune brought upon by bad luck, deceitful peers and a racist, indifferent society, which follows him from his home in the Deep South to the streets of Harlem. The protagonist, henceforth known as the IM, gets expelled from college, caught in an explosion at a paint factory, spends a few years manipulated by a collectivist cult and finally ends up living in a coal cellar lit with stolen electricity. The idea of "invisibility" stems from white society's general inability to perceive "individual values with a community whose thinking is preindividual [*sic*]" (Horowitz 239), according to them. The novel, while technically following the story of one person throughout, is at its core an anthology of problems faced by African-American society in the early 1950's, also taking shots at influential African-American orators like Booker T. Washington and Marcus Garvey and their respective ideologies.

The IM's encounter with Rinehart, so to speak, occurs late in the novel when he purchases a set of dark green sunglasses from a drugstore to avoid being recognized by the incensed black separatist Ras the Exhorter and his followers. Different people around Harlem soon begin greeting him as someone named Rinehart, who he apparently resembles when he puts the glasses on. Rinehart is a man of many different occupations that never appears in the flesh. The IM feels a rush of power from his time in this new identity, perceiving "a brief glimpse of the possibilities posed by Rinehart's multiple personalities" (499). However, it is here where scholars begin to make the mistake of zeroing in on what Rinehart *represents* rather than what Rinehart actually *is*.

Take Ellin Horowitz's article "The Rebirth of The Artist," for example. She argues that the IM's journey serves as "a series of… initiatory experiences" (Horowitz 240), undergoing hardships for the sake of personal enlightenment. All of this occurs so the IM will emerge from his struggle "with the godlike power to create" (238) after a period of hibernation. Horowitz also claims that Rinehart serves as "[t]he metaphysical center of the novel" (248), representative of the ability to survive "in a world… where no one is anyone" (248) through the adoption of many different personas. To Horowitz, Rinehart is not one person, but many different people under one name, "a chameleon" (248) that can alter his persona whenever he needs to, defeating the idea of invisibility by embracing it.

Horowitz's argument about Rinehart accommodates her idea of personal enlightenment nicely, but it overlooks something crucial. While Rinehart does indeed possess multiple different identities, "Rine the runner and Rine the gambler and Rine the briber" (498) to name a few, all of these identities boil down to one essential identity, Rine the stereotypical black thug. The IM's interactions with people indicate that Rinehart is someone amoral even if his persona is technically different. When a woman mistakes the IM for Rinehart, she quickly backs away and warns him to "better not let [Rinehart] catch [the IM] pretending to be him" (483), as though Rinehart will seek revenge for something as petty as being imitated. Later, a pair of white policemen mistake the IM for Rinehart as well, threatening him to "better have [their] cut in the regular place" (492), implying that Rinehart gives the local corrupt cops a cut of the money from a criminal racket in exchange for not getting arrested. A young woman even affectionately sidles up alongside the IM, calling him "Rinehart, *daddy*" (494), a term prostitutes use to refer to their procurer, heavily implying that Rinehart is a pimp as well. It seems that no matter what identity Rinehart adopts at the time, he is always a criminal or at the very least someone that frightens others, and a stereotypical one at that. Even in his priest persona, an individual that is supposed to be without sin, Rinehart is implied to be a phony, his advertisement full of puffery that labels him a "*spiritual technologist*" (495) and the IM wanting to tell everyone present at the church that “Rinehart was a fraud” (497). Horowitz herself even refers to this persona as a “charlatan-Reverend” (248). Rinehart, despite being touted as a character that represents multiple different sorts of people, really seems to only fit into one model, just with a different coat of paint for each person.

Alice Bloch’s article “Sight Imagery in *Invisible Man*” succinctly explains itself in its title, discussing the role of sight and blindness throughout Ellison’s novel. To her credit, Bloch makes an observation that Horowitz previously overlooked in her article, that of Rinehart being “a ‘universal’ Negro, for he is all that stereotype invokes” (Bloch 267). Bloch also asserts that Rinehart’s dark glasses serve as a means to draw the IM closer to all of the different “phases of Negro life… which before he had been too wrapped up in empty platitudes to see” (267). Part of her argument’s metaphor involves the idea that “When one puts on sunglasses, everything appears… closer to black” (267), blotting out the “‘white’ light” (267) and allowing the IM to “see” the problems of his race without any bias or interference from manipulative characters like Brother Jack.

While cleverly utilizing the idea of darkness and acknowledging the stereotypical nature of Rinehart, Bloch’s article overlooks a small but important detail that undermines her argument about the IM being brought closer to his own people as a result of his experience as Rinehart. Namely, the color of the sunglasses the IM wears, being green rather than black. This point seems minor at first, but remember that Bloch’s argument hinges on the idea that the glasses bring the IM specifically “closer to black.” The IM perceives the world “in a green vagueness” (483) when he dons the glasses, the world being darker, but also distorted. The color green carries many different connotations throughout fiction, but the most salient for this section of the novel involves that of neon. The glow of neon lights are omnipresent in urban areas, cities lit up with multicolored ads for products and services eager to take the public's money. This world of gaudiness and chicanery is the world of Rinehart. The IM stumbles upon a neon-lit advertisement for Rinehart's church, mentioning that the letters "glow[ed] dark green" and "wonder[ing] if it were from the lenses or the actual color of the neon tubes" (495). The view of Rinehart is so saturated with green already that his sight and that of a neon sign are one in the same, the glasses serving as a look into a world distorted by artificiality.

Richard Kostelanetz' article "The Politics of Ellison's Booker: *Invisible Man* As Symbolic History " seeks to discuss how Ellison represents key events in the history of black America with metaphors throughout the novel, citing it as "the most comprehensive one-volume… symbolic--treatment of the history of the American Negro in the twentieth century" (Kostelanetz 282). He discusses the novel symbol by symbol and what each one says about history, and thus speaks of Rinehart in fairly broad terms. He argues that Rinehart is a representation of the "anonymity and possibility" of "the Negro world in the North" (302), a means of disappearing and starting a new life in a world with less prosecution than before.

Kostelanetz' article is a decent meditation on the racial symbols littered throughout *Invisible Man*, but the massive scope of his argument and countless multi-layered metaphors in the novel disallow careful scrutiny of certain topics, especially that of Rinehart. Kostelanetz' idea of Rinehart representing anonymity falls flat largely because the IM's disguise seems to attract loads of attention from strangers, and speaks more to the pleasures of conformity than anything else. Ironically, it seems that the IM's efforts to look like any young black man at the time is precisely what gets him noticed by others. The IM specifically chose the pair of dark green sunglasses in order to look like everyone else, as he spots three black youths dressed in identical clothes and “all wearing dark glasses” (482), urging him to hurry to the nearest drugstore and purchase his own pair. It seems that every passerby on the street becomes eager to ask him “What you sayin’, daddy-o” (484) in his new outfit. A certain phrase that the IM stumbles upon during his time masquerading as Rinehart also takes on a wholly different meaning when examined in this context. When the IM examines a pamphlet from Rinehart’s church, it urges the followers to “BEHOLD THE SEEN UNSEEN/BEHOLD THE INVISIBLE” (496). His new identity, that is, looking exactly like everyone else, seems to revel in the attention of others, as it exclaims in big bold text for everyone to drop whatever they were doing and take a look at this previously invisible man, who, by imitating other people, now finally appears to have an identity. In attempting to hide from everyone by embracing a stereotype, the IM ends up with even more attention than he previously had as he gets rid of his old appearance in favor of one that looks just like everyone else.

Despite his spotty assumptions about what Rinehart represents, Kostelanetz does correctly identify Rinehart as a symbolic character, if someone who never appears in the flesh can even be called a character. It is important to realize that no matter what role others assign to Rinehart, he is only ever referred to as one name, Rinehart. If one truly wanted to have Rinehart be the symbol of “the everyman,” why give him such a distinct name? Why not something simple, or even several different names? Many assert that this name is symbolic as well, and they are correct about that, as Ellison stated that he chose Rinehart’s name in order to invoke the “suggestion of inner and outer” (qtd. in Schafer 232), a man “both rind and heart” (498). However, this idea of inner and outer paints Rinehart as symbolic of deception along with all of the other previously discussed themes. Deceit is a running theme throughout the novel, a good example being Tod Clifton's Sambo dolls which "ha[ve] two faces" (446), in this particular case representing the seemingly progressive personality of Clifton himself and his eventual two-faced betrayal of the IM and The Brotherhood by peddling racist Sambo puppets. Rinehart represents the "inner and outer" aspects of deceit, that is, the ideas one outwardly expresses and what one actually believes. After talking with Brother Hambro and realizing that The Brotherhood duped him with their manipulative ideology in yet another example of deceit, the IM sits alone in the park and thinks about what he should do next. He realizes that the best way to actually reach the people of Harlem is "to do a Rinehart" (507). According to the IM, in order for one to "do a Rinehart", one must act as though they believe in something without truly believing in it. The IM's version of this is "tell[ing] Harlem to have hope when there was no hope" (507), or at least "until [he finds] the basis of something real" (507). The IM uses Rinehart, by name, as a figure of deceit and lies, spouting something that he does not truly believe in to people who are willing to listen. Rather frighteningly, this tactic is very similar to the ones utilized by the most manipulative characters in the novel, telling others to believe a certain thing or behave in a certain way while they themselves believe no such thing or have ulterior motives. Take Dr. Bledsoe, who claims that the IM can return to college after a year of work when in reality he has no intention of ever letting him back in, secretly mentioning that the IM "is no longer a member of [his] scholastic family" (191) in his sycophantic recommendation letters. This also traces back to the Horowitz counter-argument from earlier, with Rinehart being indicative of amorality. It seems that Rinehart not only represents those who do bad things, he also represents those who would lie to others for their own benefit.

Though much of this discussion so far has involved the refutation of various critical reactions to Rinehart, it would be disingenuous to claim that every critic to ever write about Ellison's novel fails to recognize the negativity in the idea of Rinehart. In fact, several critics acknowledge the corruption and self-destruction that Rinehart could bring about. However, there are some factors that critics of this mindset have overlooked that they could potentially utilize to strengthen their arguments.

Anne A. Cheng's article "Ellison and The Politics of Melancholia" takes a decidedly psychoanalytic and abstract slant to her argument, and thus requires a thorough examination. She discusses the Freudian idea of melancholia, an unhealthy form of grieving "where loss gets denied and yet maintained" (Cheng 124), and how it plays into *Invisible Man*. Melancholia is a cyclical process where a person "fails to mourn and give up the lost object" (124) and thus ends up incorporating it into their being. Cheng applies this to both sides of the racial spectrum, mentioning that the racism of whites centers around "not so much annihilating the other as keeping the other in their proper place" (124), either keeping the people they oppress at a safe distance or thinking of them in stereotypes (and thus not having to consider them real people). Black people must cope with being "the one excluded and the one performing the exclusion" (125), simultaneously being what white people have both turned away from and will not let go of, and having an inability to either accept or let go of white society themselves. Cheng claims that Rinehart "turn[s] the condition of melancholia into a kind of strategy" (131), turning what should be a lack of identity into "pure potential" (131) that can adopt any persona he pleases. However, Cheng mentions that in the IM's world, where no identity exists, the draw to completely submit to the Rinehart persona is dangerous "if not downright destructive" (132), with the potential to completely overwrite his real personality in favor of one that can change depending on whoever he is currently interacting with.

Slippery as the nature of psychoanalysis may be to get a grasp of, Cheng makes a very good point about the negative nature of Rinehart, that of the irresistible draw to a nebulous identity that could erase his old one. However, one factor that Cheng overlooks that could strengthen her assertion that Rinehart is a dangerous identity to adopt involves how Rinehart strokes the ego of white racial melancholia, proliferating stereotypes that make white melancholia feel more justified. As has already been discussed in the Horowitz counter-argument, it seems that most, if not all of Rinehart's different roles seem to involve stereotypical black criminal personas. More credit to Cheng, she does acknowledge that one might interpret Rinehart's strategy as "a performance of type that can… be stereotyping" (131) sometimes. However, she does not discuss how much these stereotypes that Rinehart represents mean to white people. Ellison has already shown that even supposedly enlightened and progressive white people such as Mr. Norton early in the novel are drawn to African-American stereotypes like ants to sugar, with his insistence to interact with Jim Trueblood. Trueblood embodies the white phobia of a "big black rapist" (Horowitz 242), speaks in an uneducated "field nigger" (241) dialect and draws comparisons to offensive black paraphernalia like "a wagonful of watermelons" (Ellison 55). Walking caricatures like Trueblood only serve to proliferate the stereotypes that white society makes up about African-Americans in order to keep them neatly categorized "in their proper place" and firmly in a melancholic state of not-quite-existence. It is precisely those stereotypes that Rinehart plays into, as he looks like all the other young black men dressed like "an empty imitation of a Hollywood fad" (482). This hyperfixation on stereotypes like these also shows when, as noted earlier, two white police officers approach the IM in his Rinehart disguise. When the IM tells the cops that he is not Rinehart, they shine a flashlight in his eyes and warn him that he "better be by morning" (492). It appears as though the police officers are only comfortable interacting with a stereotype that fits into their idea of racial melancholia, like Rinehart , as they immediately threaten the IM to start acting the way they want with thinly veiled threats of police brutality as a fear tactic to get what they desire. The fact that the person they thought was Rinehart does not act like a walking stereotype that cries "Hey now!" (485) and does not use black slang makes them uncomfortable enough to have them quickly drop their friendly facade and revert back to being typical racist cops, as their sense of black people as "the other" has been upset. Cheng makes an interesting argument about the existential conflicts that can arise from adopting an ever-shifting identity, but fails to discuss the other dangers of proliferating stereotypes that justify white melancholia in the minds of racist people.

John S. Wright's article "Ellison's experimental attitude and the technologies of illumination" discusses Ellison's experimental literary techniques, the importance of light and electric imagery in the narrative of *Invisible Man*, as well as Ellison's reactions to the authors of the 1920's, particularly F. Scott Fitzgerald and Ernest Hemingway. Put briefly, all of these factors combined leads him to say that Rinehart's glasses are an "Ellisonian riff on Gatsby's green light" (Wright 169), referring to Fitzgerald's classic novel *The Great Gatsby*. However, he does not explore this idea beyond simply making the observation, Wright explaining that he believes "the reader… [will make] connections well ahead of [him]" (168). While it is refreshing to see a critical article that respects the reader's intelligence enough to not spell everything out for them, Wright's reluctance to explore his own idea in depth means that some details that could help identify the negativity of Rinehart are excluded.

If one dissects the comparison idea brought up by Wright, they would discover multiple intriguing points against Rinehart involving both morality and temptation that are waiting to be written about. Without going too far into the criticism of another novel, the light in *The Great Gatsby* appears to represent the free, innocent life that no one is able to obtain, always there, always bright, but always out of reach. The most obvious contrast between the green light and green glasses is that the light from *Gatsby* illuminates the darkness, "green… flashing… across the bay" (168), while the sunglasses from *Invisible Man* dim the world "in a green-tinted gloom" (485). The age-old correlation of light with "good" and darkness with "evil" is tempting to fall back on here, especially given the subject matter of this paper, but such an elementary comparison would oversimplify things. A much more interesting perspective to take is Wright's own idea about Rinehart that he does not elaborate on. He claims that Rinehart represents "ingenuity with no moral boundaries" (169). As such, the dimming effect of Rinehart's glasses serve as a representation of the IM loosening his moral shackles and "[catching] a brief glimpse of the possibilities" (499) of utilizing his intelligence in less-than-savory ways to find success. Contrast this with the light in *Gatsby*, where the characters, who are already corrupt to some degree, witness a small glimmer of moral purity. Also consider that both images represent fantasy worlds, but with some distinct differences. In *Gatsby*, as previously said, the green light serves to represent a world free of corruption, but it is symbolically far beyond the reach of the main characters, the inability to get to it represented by a body of water. The green world of Rinehart in *Invisible Man* can also be read as the IM's dream reality, one where he is recognized and respected, even by people he does not know. Unlike that of *Gatsby*, however, this world can be reached in a sense. The IM says that his "entire body start[s] to itch, as though… just removed from a plaster cast and… unused to the freedom of movement" (499) upon seeing the world of Rinehart. However, in order to join a reality like that of Rinehart, one must do the opposite of the light in *Gatsby* and forgo their morals, becoming a dealer in league with corrupt policemen, or a violent criminal, or a pimp. Wright's idea of Rinehart's glasses being a parody or riff on Fitzgerald's green light is a fantastic conduit to argue Rinehart's amorality, almost enough to warrant a paper of its own, but Wright's reluctance to expand upon his own idea subtracts some of the power his article could have possessed.

The final critical essay on *Invisible Man*, William Schafer's "Ralph Ellison and The Birth of the Anti-Hero," discusses the journey of the IM, rather similarly to Ellen Horowitz's article, but from the perspective of the IM's anti-heroic journey rather than growth into an artist. He argues that the IM passes through three symbolic phases, a clear parody of the Uncle Remus tales, first as Buckeye the Rabbit, a "swift clever animal living by its wits" (Schafer 229), then Rinehart "the fox" (231), "a master of deception" (232), and finally hardens into Jack-the-Bear, a "formidable" (233) anti-hero who "lies in wait… listening for the hero's call" (233). Schafer is also the most devoutly against Rinehart of the selected critics, describing the various roles of Rinehart as "many shifting amoral identities" (232) and even referring to him as "a tempter" (232). This is rather appropriate, as Br'er Fox usually assumed an antagonistic role in the original Uncle Remus stories. But despite accurately referring to Rinehart as a negative force, Schafer leaves out some details that could strengthen both his argument about anti-heroism and the argument about Rinehart's role as an amoral figure.

As discussed previously, Rinehart is a figure that offers “freedom without… responsibility” (232), only obtainable by deserting one’s morals. During his time impersonating Rinehart “the fox,” the IM enters the chapel where Rinehart’s congregation is gathered, and something disturbs him. A group of “motherly old women of the Southern type” (497) approach him, and he can hardly speak to them. The IM’s time growing up in the deep South makes him feel horrible at the sight of kindly old Southern ladies that remind him of home being manipulated by a charlatan. This gives a new perspective to the moment when the IM “shuck[s] the dark glasses… of Rinehart” (232). The IM claims that he gave up on adopting the Rinehart persona because “It was too much for [him]” (498), the world he saw being “too vast and confusing to contemplate” (499), it should be noted that he immediately removes the Rinehart disguise after encountering Rinehart’s congregation and experiencing “a nameless despair” (497). While the IM undoubtedly feels overwhelmed by what he experiences as Rinehart, the proverbial straw that breaks the camel’s back is something that aggravates his personal set of morals. Not only does this tie in nicely with Schafer’s idea of the anti-hero passing through stages similar to that of Uncle Remus’s characters, as those are of Southern heritage, but it also shows that despite everything the IM has been through and the questionable decisions he has made, he refuses to take the low road and holds on to his values, a solid indicator of an anti-hero, as well as highlighting that Rinehart is an amoral figure who challenges one to abandon these morals in favor of living in a fantasy world.

Looking at *Invisible Man*, it is not a tremendous surprise that Ellison never felt that he could top his first novel. Just about every chapter introduces a symbol or character that could merit about half a dozen research papers longer than this one, while most books struggle to even have one such talking point. However, it is interesting that so many critics do not acknowledge the amoral nature of, arguably, one of the most prolific symbols in the entire novel, or if they do, gloss over it or do not acknowledge it enough. The idea of Rinehart is a stroke of genius, a character that never appears but is mentioned countless times, playing many roles while playing none at all, giving a simultaneously concrete and nonexistent identity to a man that has none. But therein lies the rub. Critics get too caught up in the idea of Rinehart that they do not take the time to examine him carefully, failing to notice the amorality, deceit and artificial conformity in his character, gushing over his intangibility and potential her offers the IM instead. If the IM had chosen to become like Rinehart, or even become Rinehart, he would have imprisoned himself in an identity just as shallow and fluctuating as his current one, only this time with a name and a pair of glasses that are, at the end of the day, just like anyone else's.

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