

“The End Is in the Beginning”: The Riddle and Interpretation of Ellison’s *Invisible Man*

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Abstract—In the prologue of *Invisible Man*, the narrator states that “the end is in the beginning” and supplements it with the metaphor of “boomerang”. More than encapsulating his experience, this essay tries to show that “the end is in the beginning” is operating in two other senses: narrative progression and thematic meaning. The narrative progression of the whole novel is epitomized and prefigured in the opening narrative. Thematically, the interpretation of the novel cannot ignore the riddle—grandfather’s deathbed advice which is given in the opening narrative and repeatedly returned to throughout the novel. As critics have turned from identity readings to political readings of the novel, the riddle is especially important and deserves more attention than it has received. To appreciate the narrative and thematic end-in-the-beginning, the essay will undertake a cognitive unpacking of the riddle and on this basis make a detailed stylistic analysis of the opening narrative.

Index Terms—*Invisible Man*, riddle, deathbed advice, narrative progression, cognitive, stylistic

I. INTRODUCTION

Invisible Man has been acclaimed as a twentieth-century masterpiece of American fiction and has established Ralph Ellison as one of the major American writers of the century. Since its publication in 1952, it has been widely read and studied by readers and critics. There is an “enormous, existing body of critical work on *Invisible Man*.”¹ Various components of the novel have been showered in critical attention but the riddle—the deathbed advice is still under-explored. This could be a serious neglect, the more so when recent critics have felt, as articulated by Posnock in the introduction to *The Cambridge Companion to Ralph Ellison*, that “the existential or ‘identity reading’ of *Invisible Man* is inadequate: biased to the inward and psychological, this reading ignores the political, thus sundering what Ellison entangles.”² Amid the heightened awareness of political significance of the novel, the deathbed advice is especially important, for the political message of the whole novel has it as an important part. It is a recurring motif in the novel. The novel-memoir begins and ends with it, with the wiser protagonist-narrator at his endpoint of growth trying to seek lessons from it: trying to “study the lesson of [his] own life,”³ he confesses, “my mind revolved again and again back to my grandfather. And . . . I’m still plagued by his deathbed advice . . .” (p.560). His mind reverts to his grandfather and his advice at important stages of his life, on his fateful drive with Norton (p.40), at the moment of expulsion from college (p.144), when hunting jobs in New York (p.167), before his first Brotherhood speech (p.327), when he contemplates turning against Brotherhood (p.497), in the final event of Harlem Riot (p.552). The advice has been a constant puzzle for him and has been respectfully left as such by otherwise perceptive critics. It has to be left as a puzzle to the protagonist, so that he could “boomerang” a long way before he finds himself (p.560), which process makes up the novel. But if we leave it as a puzzle, we would fail to see the author’s design for it and much of our critical interpretation of the novel would miss the mark. This essay is an attempt to help fill the gap by making a careful cognitive analysis of the deathbed advice using blending theory. On this basis, the essay discusses the interpretation of the novel in terms of its thematic meaning and narrative progression.

In the past two decades, cognitive-stylistics has been gaining momentum and has played an important role in opening the field of literary criticism to interdisciplinary investigation.⁴ Cognitive analyses have been shown to illuminate literary interpretation in meaningful ways. In the present case, the cognitive unpacking of the riddle contributes to our understanding of the thematic meaning and narrative progression of the novel.

II. UNPACKING THE RIDDLE

Blending theory as developed by Fauconnier and Turner⁵ establishes that conceptual integration or conceptual blending is a basic mental operation that is indispensable not only for intellectual work, but also for basic everyday thought. It plays a decisive role in human thought and action and is at work even in the simplest mental events in

¹ Callahan, “introduction,” 12.

² Posnock, 5.

³ Ellison, *Invisible Man*, 559. All subsequent references are to the Vintage Books edition of *Invisible Man* published by Random House in 1972 and page numbers are enclosed in brackets after each quotation.

⁴ See Semino and Culpeper, (2002); Stockwell, (2002); Gavins and Steen, (2003); Brône and Vandaele, (2009).

⁵ Fauconnier and Turner, *The Way We Think*, (2002).

everyday life. At first glance, the grandfather's deathbed advice is no more than a crude metaphoric view of black life befitting an uneducated black peasant, but a closer look indicates that a lot more is going on and blending theory enables us to see that the old man's mind is engaged in what could be described as constructing a complex integration network. If we content ourselves, as most previous critics do, with squeezing a general import from the deathbed advice based on our initial impressions, we will miss its hidden complexity and function, and the puzzle will remain a puzzle not only to the protagonist. The deathbed advice is as follows:

Son, after I'm gone I want you to keep up the good fight. I never told you, but our life is a war and I have been a traitor all my born days, a spy in the enemy's country ever since I give up my gun back in the Reconstruction. Live with your head in the lion's mouth. I want you to overcome 'em with yeses, undermine 'em with grins, agree 'em to death and destruction, let 'em swoller you till they vomit or bust wide open. (p.16)

To understand the advice requires constructing two blending networks. In the first network, we have the input space of black life as our focus of understanding and the input space of war as the other framing input. The war space contains the topological elements: traitor, spy, enemy's country, surrender of arms, with traitor/spy and enemy as participants. Let's first focus on "spy". In the war space, the spy is engaged in a most dangerous mission and can fulfill his mission only by living among the enemy, pretending to be one of them, winning their trust, while disguising his real identity, allegiance and intention. His intention can only be achieved if he succeeds in masking, in deception. A successful spy, so to speak, should be a master of masking, masking being necessary training and requirement for him. The grandfather who has been a spy for years since he lays down arms without being caught and killed is arguably a successful spy, a master of masking. There are at least two aspects to this. On the one hand, he moves in the enemy's country with dexterity, manipulating the sympathy of the enemy; on the other, he can never be the man he feels like being, never afford to be true to himself, which sacrifices are required of a spy.

As is often the case with spoken language, "a spy in the enemy's country ever since I give up my gun" should be a more accurate formulation of his thought than the earlier wording "a traitor all my born days", which is, not surprisingly, more emotionally loaded. Succinctly, he is a traitor or more accurately a spy since he surrenders. In the war space, the sheer act of surrendering makes a soldier traitor (to his people and cause), to all appearances. But there is another possible sense to traitor as well. If the soldier after surrendering and winning the enemy's trust secretly maneuvers against them without their knowledge, by being a spy, he can be said to be a traitor to the enemy. Consequently, the self-identifying spy-traitor is loaded with quite different emotions. In the first sense, he is revealing the true man he always is—the misunderstood man finally comes into his own; in the second, he is disclosing a fatal secret which has to be reserved for the last minute. What is brought out by our cognitive structuring of the war space is that, in a nutshell, there are two possible utterer meanings of "traitor", two voices speaking through it, so to speak, and there is no reason for us to be led by the naïve protagonist to which one he recognizes. The grandfather's "traitor" does not have to be relative to the enemy, a point espoused by O'Meally when he reads the life as "a war wherein to be a good soldier, snapping to attention and obeying all orders, is to work against one's people and oneself."⁶ The protagonist says, "he had been the meekest of men" (p.16). That means he has been a completely different person from the militant former-self who fought the enemy with his gun. But all turns out to be false appearance as revealed clearly by "spy": he actually has never changed, he is the same militant man as before, only his militancy is put into the secret work of spying and he holds steadfastly to his cause and his people, with or without arms. In the focus input which we are concerned with, our knowledge of the context gives us the schematic story of the freed black man living his life in the American South amid racial hostility from the white man, that black living revolving around the focal point of white-black relationship. In this input, we have a participant—the grandfather who is a former slave living his freed life as a meek peasant, "a quiet old man who never made any trouble" (p.16). In the cross-space mapping of the two input spaces, the white man and the enemy, the meek black peasant and the traitor/spy, American South or America and the enemy's country are respectively counterparts. In the blend, we have black life as war and black living as fighting in disguise (and suffering in silence if we look at it from the other side).

The second blending network also has the input space of black life. The other input space is organized by the frame of fight between man and beast. The black son who would follow his father's steps from the black-life input is the counterpart of the beast fighter in the beast-fighting input, the white man is the counterpart of the beast and black living is fighting beast. In factual terms, no normal man will be so mindlessly brave as to put his head in the lion's mouth to fight it. It might be contemplated as a different space, that of a circus show of lion tamer with his lion. But that space has to be replaced by beast-fighting to achieve congruence with other spaces in the integrated network. We will see that this act makes sense in the conceptual blend of beast-fighting and man-fighting. There is a cross-space mapping between the beast-fighting input and the man-fighting input from the first blending network. The schematic structure of a weak party fighting against a strong party is common to the two input spaces. The spy who risks his life in the most dangerous place of the enemy territory maps onto the daring fighter who exposes himself to the greatest possible danger, and the enemy who is in the position of power and control and can inflict instant death maps onto the lion who can kill and eat the human prey at any minute. In the blend, the advised way of black living is therefore a daring entry into dangerously close contact with the white man. This is an important message not only of the deathbed advice but of the

⁶ O'Meally, "The Rules of Magic," 165.

whole novel.

Up to now, we have seen a multiple blend with three input spaces. The counterparts are as follows:

MAN-MAN WAR	BLACK LIFE	MAN-BEAST FIGHT
spy	black man	human prey
enemy	white man	lion
enemy's country	American South or America	lion's mouth or body

The linguistic form of the last sentence, with vocabulary and syntax from the three input spaces, explicitly points to this multiple blend. "Overcome", "undermine" and "to death and destruction" are typical vocabulary from the input space of war, "overcome" and "undermine" being what the spy is actually doing and "to death and destruction" his ultimate goal. As we know, the spy in the war space is not typically marked by yes-saying, grinning and agreeing: his trick is to pass as a member of the enemy, not to be upheld as a model of yes-sayer. Therefore, "yeses", "grins" and "agree" are more likely from the input space of black life, being advised behaviors for the black son. "Let 'em swoller you till they vomit or bust wide open" is obviously from the input space of lion fighting and this "them" can only be understood to refer to the lion but the same "them" in the earlier part of the sentence "overcome 'em with yeses, undermine 'em with grins, agree 'em to death and destruction" cannot have the same reference: the uniform use of the deictic "them" in the sentence integrates lion, enemy, white man into a unit, hence the existence of the multiple blend.

In the multiple blend of the advice, the white man/enemy/lion is threatening the existence of the black man/spy/prey, and the advised behavior for the black man is to agree, yes, grin/keep up the disguised good fight/enter the lion's body, and the black man will come out the winner. It is significant that in this life-and-death fight, the victor wins by spying, by apparently yielding not by direct confrontation and he appears the one destroyed but turns out the invincible. In reality, in the Southern power structure, the black is the weak party, vulnerable to death and destruction by the white man. The grandfather's advice is to keep on fighting against the white man, not by direct confrontation, not by separating from them, but by living in close contact with them, getting accepted as members by masking and acting meek, in the belief that in due course the black will win. If we relate the global understanding of black life brought by this complex integration network with the historical context of black struggle, we can come to the understanding that, first and foremost, the grandfather does not opt out of the American society: he is anti-segregation and pro-integration. He does not approve of open warfare, violence, confrontation, to which the black radicals readily resort. He does not approve of bleaching their Negro souls either. His scheme is to accept the status quo and get accepted, and then gradually undermine it.

How to get it done? This is where the power of the novel lies: the answers lie with readers. Instead of faulting Ellison for offering no political resolution, we should see the potential scheme for action sounded in the riddle, which will become clearer as we move on. The readers are left with an invitation for "improvisation", for creating the kind of society they would like to live in, as the "society [is] caught in the process of being improvised out of the democratic ideal,"⁷ rather than with a troubling lack of political resolution.⁸

Significantly, the blending serves to add intentional framing to black living, the intentionality here involving persistent resistance against the dominating group, militancy under the guise of meekness, courage, strategic and deceptive use of yeses and grins, endurance, and steadfast hope and belief. Whether it is to live with the head in the lion's mouth or to be a spy in the enemy's country, it requires enormous courage. That the old man tells his son to keep up the good fight he has been engaged in until death implies that it may take generations for them to achieve their end, and the invoking of traitor, spy, enemy from our encyclopedic knowledge of war aggrandizes it as a cause of a people rather than an affair of some individuals. It takes persistence, endurance, unswerving faith, etc. to fight for such a cause. Besides, to be in the lion's body until the lion throws one up is to fight and wait steadfastly and hopefully for the final day of light, of freedom. The intentionality is further intensified by biblical allusions. Note that the grandfather signifies upon biblical text, as Paul instructs Timothy to "fight the good fight of faith,"⁹ he asks his son to "keep up the good fight," and while God frequently delivers his believers from the lion's mouth, he wants his son to "live with [his] head in the lion's mouth." The biblical text is, in Gates's sense, repeated with a black difference¹⁰: their faith is not in God but in their cause and final victory, and their hope for delivery is not placed in God but in their own power.

Not engaged with resolving the meaning of the advice, the present cognitive analysis is about spelling out the largely unconscious cognitive processes involved in constructing the advice. That explains its greater explanatory power. For one thing, it enables us to see that some interpretations of the advice are too simplistic to capture its hidden meanings. For example, the reading of the advice as "double message of humility and enmity, seeming accommodation and inner resistance"¹¹ misses layers of meaning and virtually puts the grandfather in the same group with the scoundrel power-monger Bledsoe, who, hiding his inner resistance before whites, uses his seeming humility or accommodation to win power to oppress blacks. For another, this cognitive analysis, coupled with detailed stylistic analysis, enables us to

7 Ellison, *Collected Essays*, 466.

8 Cheng, "Politics of Melancholia," 135. Cheng reports, "many critics in Ellison's time as well as in our own have been troubled by what appears to be the lack of political resolution in *Invisible Man*."

9 1 Timothy 6:12 (King James Version).

10 See Henry Louis Gates, Jr., *The Signifying Monkey*, xxii-xxiii.

11 Dickstein, "Ralph Ellison, Race," 135.

see the narrative of the opening chapter and of the whole novel in a new light.

III. THE RIDDLE UNIFIES THE OPENING NARRATIVE IN IRONIC COUNTERPOINT

The opening chapter both begins and ends with grandfather and his words, which frame the large portion of the narrative of the protagonist and the battle royal. On the basis of our cognitive unraveling of the riddle, a detailed stylistic analysis will reveal them to be in ironic counterpoint, which unifies the opening chapter.

Let's first examine the protagonist's reaction to the advice. It not only reveals his current state of consciousness, but also, structurally, foreshadows plot development of the novel. The protagonist is puzzled by the advice, because "grandfather had been a quiet old man who never made any trouble, yet on his deathbed he had called himself a traitor and a spy" (p.16). In other words, what puzzles him is the incongruity between, to use a simple dichotomy, appearance and reality implicated by the advice. In his idealization, appearance is reality. So, from grandfather's words, he makes out a simple equation: meekness is treachery, therefore danger. His puzzle reveals him to be naïve and sincere, that is, in terms of his beliefs about white society.¹² At a deeper level, his puzzle is his refusal to face the reality of the bankruptcy of the accommodation strategy for social climbing announced by his grandfather on his deathbed. Blinding himself to the reality, he clings to his single-minded belief in white philanthropy. When he was praised by white men for his "desirable conduct", he felt guilty that "in some way [he] was doing something that was *really* against the wishes of the white folks that if they had understood they would have desired [him] to act just the opposite" and he was afraid that "some day they would look upon [him] as a *traitor* and [he] would be lost."¹³ He "was considered an example of desirable conduct—just as [his] grandfather had been" and his grandfather had been "the meekest of men" (p.16). Clearly, the desirable conduct is "meekness". Recall that his grandfather advises his son and grandchildren to make strategic and deceptive use of yeses and grins, to wear the mask of meekness. It is exactly for its false appearance that the old man advises the "desirable conduct". Ironically, the protagonist wants appearance to fit reality for white men: he wants the desirable conduct to be "really" desirable to them.

More revealingly, he unthinkingly takes "traitor" as betraying white men. As suggested earlier about "traitor", there are two voices in this word; the voice the protagonist automatically seizes on reveals not just his comprehension of a single word, but more importantly his point of view on the world, his belief system. His presupposition shows that he automatically pledges loyalty to white men and judges from their perspective, so grandfather's wisdom becomes a "curse" (p.17), holding him back from relishing white men's approval without feeling guilty to them. Two generations removed from his grandfather, he drifts in the opposite direction. While his grandfather advises double-dealing with white men, to accomplish "no" through saying "yes", ironically, he takes pains to do just the opposite: he tries to be true to his words, which effort can be seen in his speech-making. On graduation, he made an "oration in which [he] showed that humility was the secret, indeed, the very essence of progress" (p.17). Using "oration" for a graduation speech is inappropriate, inflated rhetoric, showing the excessive importance he attaches to his speech. The verb "show" is a revealing word, through which we know the protagonist actually tries to be true to his words, to match his doing with saying, and this "showing" endeavor is carried over to the ensuing episode of battle royal and is cast in an ironic highlight.

As is already clear, the naïve protagonist stands as an ironic contrast to his traitor-spy grandfather. Missing the contrast between them may lead to misguided interpretations that deprive the protagonist of individuality. A case in point is an interpretation of the advice that says "these then will be the tactics the Negro will employ for survival... He will pretend to agree to his invisibility" and the novel goes on to record "the hero's various initiation rites into invisibility."¹⁴ The critic uses "the Negro" to designate a people, an undifferentiated mass, including the protagonist, and he takes the advice as a dictate that this undifferentiated mass will inevitably and uniformly follow. An unarguable exception is the protagonist himself, who will not employ the advised tactics. By putting the protagonist in the same mass with the grandfather and everyone else, the critic fails to see his individuality and reduces him to invisibility, missing the magnitude of meaning the characterization of the protagonist has for the novel.

The major scene presented in the opening chapter is the battle royal. Put simply, the plot of battle royal is: a group of black boys are blindfolded and forced to fight each other for the entertainment of a prominent white audience. This plot has rich racial connotations. As Ellison reveals, "It is a ritual in preservation of caste lines."¹⁵ "It was a rite which could be used to project certain racial divisions into the society and reinforce the idea of white racial superiority."¹⁶ With its images burning into readers' minds, it is a structurally and thematically important episode. It encapsulates the Southern racial reality and the whole world of the novel. Many critics have acknowledged the importance of the battle royal. The scene is "a prefiguration of almost everything else in the novel,"¹⁷ or "a great part of the novel, indeed, is in that initial episode."¹⁸ As Baker Jr. observes, most of the images and themes of battle royal scene recur in slightly altered forms

¹² He is capable of trickery; for example, in the battle royal, he tries to bribe Tatlock to pretend to lose to him.

¹³ Ellison, *Invisible Man*, 16-17, (emphasis mine).

¹⁴ Margolies, "History as Blues," 134-5.

¹⁵ Ellison, *Shadow and Act*, 175.

¹⁶ Ellison, *Going to the Territory*, 49.

¹⁷ Vogler, "Somebody's Protest Novel," 76.

¹⁸ Klein, "Ralph Ellison," 114-5.

throughout the narration¹⁹. Although the episode is thematically most important, its positioning immediately after the deathbed-advice-imparting scene seems merely a structural arrangement based on time sequence and place of occurrence, and the totality of them, i.e. the opening chapter, no more than a preponderant assembly of two most important events. But our unraveling of the deathbed advice enables us to see the later event in a new light. The battle royal is more than an event that comes later in plot development; viewed in connection with the deathbed advice, it is an ironic development of the latter.

Before battle royal started, the black boys “had words” (p.18), i.e. they had a verbal fight. The stylistic detail “had words” appears irrelevant to the plot development but if we examine it in relation to earlier textual details, i.e. the fighting theme of the deathbed advice, we can see that the inter-racial warfare of the deathbed advice is given an ironic rendering in intra-racial verbal fight. Moreover, the plot carries this irony to dramatic effect—at the battle royal, they put up a bloody physical fight. A close reading of the text brings a minor detail into our attention: in the fight, the protagonist “glimpsed a boy violently punching the air and heard him scream in pain as he smashed his hand against a ring post. For a second [he] saw him bent over holding his hand, then going down as a blow caught his unprotected head” (p.23). The textual expenditure on this boy seems to be for the purpose of making fun of the pitiable boy’s misaimed punch. Three pages later, after the fight, appears a sentence “One boy whimpered over his smashed hand.” This detail echoes with the earlier description of the boy. The continuous narratorial attention to the boy does more than furnish a complete story of an unnamed boy for our laughter: it carries the irony through. The intended target of the boy’s punch is the other black boys and he puts so much force into it that he still whimpers over it after the fight. The inter-racial warfare of the deathbed advice is ironically and forcefully acted out in intra-racial fight. Instead of fighting against white men, the black boys are engaged in fighting among themselves, in black-against-black fight. The apparently casual detail of the boy is a subtle stylistic means to enforce the irony that the boys fight against each other with such force as against the deadliest enemy. The battle royal is actually an ironic enactment of the “good fight” advised by the grandfather.

Amid their fighting, intimate access to the protagonist’s thoughts is given in two elaborate presentations of free indirect thought. One occurs when he was in the middle of fierce fighting. “I began to worry about my speech again. How would it go? Would they recognize my ability? What would they give me?” (p.24) From this, we can see the importance he attaches to his speech and to the judgment of whites. The other is: “I was confused: Should I try to win against the voice out there? Would not this go against my speech, and was not this a moment for humility, for nonresistance?” (p.25) This occurs when he was about to defeat his rival left in the ring with him to slug it out for the winner’s prize. Hearing a white voice yelling that he had his money on the other boy, the protagonist was confused and dropped his guard. A blow to his head settled his dilemma for him. The plot here makes the protagonist a ludicrous figure; in this sense, “He is more a comic than a tragic hero.”²⁰ His thinking “Would not this go against my speech, and was not this a moment for humility, for nonresistance?” links with earlier details: his interpretation of the advice, his graduation speech in which “he showed that humility was the secret, indeed, the very essence of progress” (p.17). As analyzed earlier, “show” means that he tries to match his behavior with his words, which endeavor continues here. He still wants to “show” the humility he preaches in his speech and this “showing” endeavour is ironically crowned with a blow to his head.

When we examine his speech in relation to his grandfather’s deathbed advice, rather than by itself, we find that the speech is an ironic echo of the advice. The subject of the speech is also inter-racial relationship, but the theme is “humility”, directly contradicting the fighting theme of the advice. His speech advocates making friends with the next-door neighbor—the Southern white man, while his grandfather advises secretly making enemies with the white man. Most revealingly, the mature narrator’s comment on his younger self’s gulping down blood while continuing his speech is “What powers of endurance I had during those days! What enthusiasm! What a belief in the rightness of things!” (p.30). This piece of narratorial wisdom reveals the ludicrous misplacement of the younger protagonist’s “endurance”, “enthusiasm” and “belief”, ironically echoing the intentionality that the grandfather advises for the fight against the white man, placing the protagonist under ironic spotlight.

Let’s examine in more detail how the protagonist and other black boys are treated during the battle royal. They are “rushed up” to the front of the ballroom, “pushed” into place (p.18), shouted at and provoked to fight each other. Blindfolded, sweat-washed, they stumble about “like drunken dancers” (p.23), fighting hysterically. At last, they are fooled to grab fake money from an electrified rug. They are told to be “on their knees” around the rug and called on to pick up the money. As they try to get themselves free of the electrocution, they are “pushed” onto the rug, or even “lifted” and “dropped” on the charged rug (p.27). And the white audience roars with laughter at their painful contortions. The way they are handled reminds us of the way animals are handled in a circus. Like animals in a circus show, the boys are manipulated and fooled to give the audience fun. The battle royal is virtually a circus show, a farce, staging amid an anarchic atmosphere of noisy excitement the performances of innocent black boys who are all along unaware that they are the performers. The stylistic details function to foreground it. The white blonde dancer who is exposed to the view of black boys for their humiliation, who is chased and tossed by white men, is depersonalized just like the protagonist’s group. “Turned into something less than human—beast, mask, object,” the treatment she receives is “a

¹⁹ Baker Jr., “A Forgotten Prototype”.

²⁰ O’Meally, “The Rules of Magic,” 182.

counterpart to the depersonalizing of the hero himself.”²¹ The black boys and the naked blonde are connected in their common depersonalizing, in their manipulation as animals, as the protagonist finally makes the connection, “I saw the terror and disgust in her eyes, almost like my own terror and that which I saw in some of the other boys” (p.20). Dehumanized in a like manner, at the money-grabbing section, a boy was “lifted into the air, glistening with sweat like a circus seal, and dropped” (p.27). Providing insight into their treatment is the dream the protagonist had at the end of day, which the narrator reveals he “was to remember and dream again for many years after. But at that time [he] had no insight into its meaning” (p.33). It indicates that the dream is an unconscious projection of insight into his experience. “I dreamed I was at a circus with [grandfather] and that he refused to laugh at the clowns no matter what they did” (p.33). The insight this dream affords is that the battle royal is in fact a circus show and the black boys are the clowns, which is why the grandfather refuses to laugh at the clowns.

Depersonalized and dehumanized as clowns unknowingly, the protagonist preaches “humility is the secret of progress” in his speech. Being a clown himself, the protagonist called his rival in the boxing ring “stupid clown” (p.25). What foregrounds his ignorance and naivety even more dramatically is the fact that he takes secret pride in his intelligence. He prides himself on his intelligence and hence feels superior. He thinks his intelligence marks him off from the other boys, so he attaches great importance to his speech which could show his superior intelligence. But the importance he attaches to his speech is given an ironic comment by the fact that his speech was “almost forgotten” as part of the program. When he was finally allowed to deliver his speech, the white audience paid him no attention, talking and laughing until he accidentally blurted out “equality”. He believes that “only these men could judge truly [his] ability” (p.25), but ironically, his judges are not there to judge his ability but to see how well he accepts “his place”, as a man warned “you’ve got to know your place at all times” (p.31) at his accidental slip of “equality”. His intelligence is treated by the white audience as the target of mockery. He thinks his intelligence differentiates him from the group of “tough” boys but ironically, he is recognized only by his color: he was there to give the speech but was recruited on the spot to take part in the fighting and his speech-giving was almost forgotten as an arrangement. He is treated just as the other black boys, “crowded together in the servants’ elevator” (p.18). He thinks his intelligence distinguishes him from his “peasant” grandfather, so after being awarded with a briefcase for his speech, he stood beneath his grandfather’s photograph, carrying the awarded briefcase in hand, and “smiled triumphantly into [grandfather’s] stolid black peasant’s face” (p.32). The use of the epithet “peasant” shows clearly his sense of superiority based on his belief in his intelligence. The adjunct “triumphantly” shows his delight at his success brought by his intelligence. But his grandfather turns out to be the more intelligent one and he is the one mocked for ignorance, which is projected into his dream and takes him years to realize.

This is the starting point of the hero’s journey of life in white society which makes up the novel. He starts out as a naïve boy with illusions both in white society and in his intelligence, which is shown clearly in the above analysis of the battle royal. As the analysis of the opening narrative shows, the hero and the battle royal are in ironic counterpoint to the grandfather and his deathbed advice. As the novel later makes clear, these two points span the journey of the hero: the distance between them is what he has to travel in order to achieve growth.

IV. THE RIDDLE AND NARRATIVE PROGRESSION OF THE NOVEL

In the process of the hero’s growth, the deathbed advice has a significant role to play. Although he tries to forget the advice, his mind keeps reverting to it at critical stages of his life. His reaction to the advice marks his stage of growth. He does not really grow until he accepts his past and the advice. As the author Ralph Ellison points out, “[grandfather] represents the ambiguity of the past for the hero, for whom his sphinxlike deathbed advice poses a riddle which points the plot in the dual direction which the hero will follow throughout the novel.”²² As the hero goes in one direction, his growth goes in the other. As his life progresses forward, he will have to look backward, to restructure his past. His dismissal of the advice marks his pre-invisible days, days when one set of his illusions is replaced by another: from his fateful drive with Norton to his expulsion from college, his illusions in white philanthropy are replaced by illusions in the goodwill of black leadership, which are in turn replaced by his illusions in raceless politics when he joins the political organization of Brotherhood. When he finally gets disillusioned with Brotherhood, his real growth begins as he starts to embrace his past and the deathbed advice. His growth from “illusion to reality”²³ is the process of his coming to terms with the advice. He makes a literal translation of the advice to his situation with Brotherhood. He starts yessing the white men and confirming their decisions in order to destroy them. But it is he and his black folks who turn out to be the destroyed in the final event of Harlem Riot. He reflects, “my grandfather had been wrong about yessing them to death and destruction or else things had changed too much since his day” (p.552). At last in the epilogue, when the narrator has recounted the whole course of his life, he realizes that in trying out his grandfather’s advice, he has taken the advice literally, “perhaps he hid his meaning deeper than I thought... Could he have meant—hell, he *must* have meant the principle, that we were to affirm the principle on which the country was built and not the men...” (pp.560-561).

²¹ Langman, “Reconsidering ‘Invisible Man’,” 122.

²² Ellison, *Shadow and Act*, 70.

²³ Ellison, *Collected Essays*, 219.

In the light of the unpacking of the deathbed advice, we are in a position to see that how the advice is interpreted tells us more about the hero's state of consciousness than about the meaning of the advice. The function of the advice lies in its being reacted to. As our unpacking shows, the advice is on inter-racial relations and the intentional framing achieved by the blending is that the inter-racial warfare is a cause for generation after generation and not an affair of some individual men. It is not difficult for us to see that the hero, when carrying out the advice literally to destroy the Brotherhood, does not yet see the grand racial dimensions of the advice. He thinks within the confines of individual men and instant gains. In the epilogue, at the very end of the story, we see the protagonist-narrator finally comes to the understanding that the advice is beyond individual men, as he says "we were to affirm the principle...not the men" (p.561). On the other hand, as the narrator puts special emphasis on the principle and the interrelatedness of their fates, as he reflects, "weren't we *part of them* as well as apart from them and subject to die when they died?" (p.562), we can see that the narrator is re-accentuating the deathbed advice in a democratic context—he is openly polemical. This is part of the reason for critics' impression that the affirmativeness of the epilogue is "desperate, empty, unreasonable, and programmatic optimism"²⁴ or "sudden, unprepared and implausible."²⁵ Moreover, his hinting at the deeper meaning of the advice and his acknowledgement of his inability to figure it out, "I can't figure it out; it escapes me" (p.562), may well be an invitation for readers to dig into it; that is where the political power of the advice lies. Its unresolvedness invites improvisations.

V. CONCLUSION

This essay has applied blending theory to the unraveling of the riddle—grandfather's deathbed advice in *Invisible Man*. On the basis of the unpacking, we are able to see in a new light the narrative structure of the opening chapter and narrative progression of the whole novel. The opening narrative, which consists of advice-imparting and battle royal, progresses on the logic of time only superficially; at a deeper level, the hero and the battle royal are in ironic counterpoint to the grandfather and his deathbed advice and these two points span the whole journey of the hero. The opening narrative epitomizes and prefigures the narrative progression of the whole novel. The novel returns to the advice at the end and highlights it as an unresolved riddle. Thematically, this is an invitation for political improvisation out of the advice.

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²⁴ Klein, "Ralph Ellison," 109.

²⁵ Howe, "Black Boys Native Sons," 115.

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