



Shadows of an Invisible Man

*The role of individuality in
Invisible Man and Brave New World*

By John Coughlin - Winter 1997

My first exposure to Aldous Huxley's Brave New World came when I was about 10 ten years old. My mother was teaching a catechism class to a room full of junior high students, and having been brought along for lack of a babysitter, I was sitting in the back working my way through my "Classics of Science Fiction" coloring book. Twenty worlds all bound together between a dogeared, oversized cover, it was the favorite of my growing collection. Working from beginning to end, I had already made my way through the shifting desert landscape of the Martian Chronicles, across the iron deck of the Nautilus, entwined in the glistening tentacles of a giant squid, and into the tropical jungles of The Lost World, thick with bubbling tar pits, enormous ferns and dagger-toothed dinosaurs. Now, finally, I found myself on the very last page of the book. It was a page I had dreaded, for it didn't feature any of the fixtures of science fiction I found so appealing - no flashing computers or stoic aliens. No, this page depicted an emaciated young man, eyes wide and terrified, hands raised before his face as if he were awaiting the blow of an axe. Around him spun what seemed to be a never ending double helix of human embryos encased in bottles. Many years later, I can still see those eyes and remember how even at the time I thought he looked to me as if he was about to be crushed beneath some huge, unseen object.

Fast forward into the future - languishing between jobs after graduating from college, I was staying at my sister's apartment and one afternoon, bored, picked a copy of Invisible Man off her bookshelf. Reading through the prologue, I found myself fascinated by the nameless narrator, surviving like a mole under the weight of a dark and unsympathetic city. As fate would have it, I didn't get the opportunity to finish the novel at that time, but the impression I was left with was that here too was a man who had been crushed beneath some faceless, unstoppable force.

Just recently having completed both books in their entirety, I am once again struck by how similar they are in theme. Both books are, without a doubt, political in nature, and at this level, seem completely dissimilar - Invisible Man attempts to illuminate the social entrapment of Black Americans, while Brave New World cautions against an over-reliance on technology and the amorality it can potentially inspire. At a deeper level, however, both books are also about the status of the individual in society, and it is here that there is a remarkable similarity between the two novels. For in both, we see men fighting against societies that devalue their individuality and thereby lessen their sense of identity and self worth. "I've always tried to create characters who were pretty forthright in stating what they felt society should be" said Ellison in a 1963 interview (Graham and Singh, 85). This statement captures the underlying theme of both novels : that an ideal society is one that is founded upon the ability of individuals to assert themselves freely and without prejudice. Close examination of both works show that while they are wildly different in many ways, at this one level, they are very much the same.

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In order to see this similarity in theme more clearly, we must first peel back the layer of political meaning, which isn't easy. As previously stated, these are both political novels on the surface, and sixty years of critical commentary that has focused specifically on this level has done little to make an alternative reading any easier: conventional wisdom tells us that Invisible Man is a treatise on the state of Black America, and Brave New World is a cautionary tale of the misuse of technology. However, we can find support for the idea that these stories are primarily about individualism in the comments of the writers themselves. "All novels are about certain minorities",

says Ellison "the individual is a minority. The universal in the novel - and isn't that what we're all clamoring for these days? - is reached only through the description of the specific man in a specific circumstance" (Graham and Singh, 9). Huxley says something along the same lines in the forward to the anniversary issue of Brave New World when he says "the theme of Brave New World is not the advancement of science as such; it is the advancement of science as it affects human individuals" (Huxley, 16). Both statements suggest that Ellison and Huxley are more concerned about the state of the individual than the state of society, and this is an important distinction for one of the more subtle points of both novels is that the health of society is determined by the health of the individuals of which it is composed.

The sickness inherent in both societies becomes apparent early on. In Invisible Man, Ellison erects a classed society in which a select group of people use the narrator for their own selfish purposes, refusing to see the inherent individual worth beyond the color of his skin. One of our first examples of this is when Mr. Norton, the wealthy supporter of the Institute the narrator attends, describes how the students there are all building blocks in his destiny. "I mean that upon you depends the outcome of the years I have spent in helping your school," says Mr. Norton, growing teary eyed upon reflection of his charity, "That has been my real life's work, not my banking or my researches, but my first hand organizing of human life" (Ellison, 42). By asserting that he is responsible for "organizing" the young narrator's life, Mr. Norton is implying that he is somehow responsible for the man's future worth to society. This is of course diametrically opposed to the idea Ellison is trying to develop in the book, that such achievement (and its accompanying sense of accomplishment) rests entirely on the shoulders of the narrator. Enforcing this point during one interview, Ellison remarked that the narrator "must assert and achieve his own humanity; he cannot run with the pack and do this" (Graham and Singh, 16). In order for the narrator of Invisible Man to achieve humanity, therefore, he must shed the misconception that his life has been organized by anyone but himself, and count any achievement as solely his own.

Mr. Norton's use of the word "organization" in the quote above is not without significance when comparing Invisible Man to Brave New World, for in this second novel, we see a society where organization has been taken to the extreme. In the Brave New World, the highest tiers of individuals (labeled as Alphas and Betas and led by the illustrious Mustapha Mond, an Alpha double plus) have organized the more numerous lower classes (Deltas and Epsilons) into what they consider efficient and contented sub-races, "modeled" on nothing so cold and inhuman as an iceberg:

"The optimum population," said Mustapha Mond, "is modeled on the iceberg - eight ninths below the water, one ninth above."

"And they're happy below the water line?"

"Happier than above it. Happier than your friend here, for example." He pointed.

"In spite of that awful work?"

"Awwful? They don't find it so. On the contrary, they like it. It's light, it's childishly simple. No strain on the mind or muscles."

(Huxley, 172)

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The Alphas and Betas believe that they have invented the perfect workforce - one that is happy, well organized, and above all, incapable of asserting individual will against them because of their lower intellectual capabilities and preoccupation with their work. When Mr. Norton talks to the narrator of Invisible Man about his fate, we see shades of Mustapha Mond : "If you become a

good farmer, a chef, a preacher, doctor, singer, mechanic, - whatever you become, and even if you fail, you are my fate" (Ellison, 44). In keeping with the mission of the Tuskegee Institute, it is noteworthy that the vocations mentioned by Mr. Norton are all ones that will keep the narrator out of a position where he might challenge Mr. Norton's authority by asserting his own. Mr. Norton is, in essence, organizing the narrator into a perfect Epsilon, pigeonholed into an innocuous social position and securely submerged "below the waterline".

The idea of keeping an individual preoccupied with meaningless tasks so that he might never question his own individuality is an important one, for throughout Invisible Man we are reminded of the line "keep the nigger running". The narrator spends most of the book doing just that, shuffling from one situation to the next almost against his will, until we wonder whether he'll ever stop and evaluate where he's at and where he's going. "The major flaw in the hero's character, " says Ellison, "is his unquestioning willingness to do what is required of him

by others as a way to success" (Graham and Singh, 15). It is because of this willingness to fulfill others expectations that he is never able to get a firm grasp on his own identity or sense of individuality. It is not until the end of the action, when the narrator has slipped out of society completely and found himself alone and isolated, that he is finally able to stop running and evaluate himself as an individual based on his own terms.

The citizens of Brave New World are constantly running, too. From birth they are hypnopaediacally conditioned to dread being alone, for isolation breeds introspection which in turn fosters a sense of individuality. This is expressed in a wonderfully satiric scene where Bernard takes Lenina out on their first date - he suggests that they go for a walk along the mall and talk, but she, finding such an activity completely distasteful, instead persuades him to take her to the Semi-Demi Finals of the Woman's Heavyweight Wrestling Championship. Later, when they are returning home, Bernard stops his helicopter over the English Channel so that they might look out over the waves in contemplation:

"It makes me feel as though..." he hesitated, searching for the words with which to express himself, "as though I were more me, if you see what I mean. More on my own, not so completely part of something else. Not just a cell in the social body. Doesn't it make you feel that way Lenina?"
But Lenina was crying. "It's horrible, it's horrible," she kept repeating. "And how can you talk like that about not wanting to be a part of the social body? After all, every one works for every one else. We can't do without any one. Even Epsilons..."

(Huxley, 69)

That the fabric of the Brave New World is strengthened by needless labor is later born out by Mustapha Mond. "The experiment was tried, more than a century and a half ago," he says, describing why Epsilons work seven hour days, "The whole of Ireland was put on to the four hour day. What was the result? Unrest and a large increase in the consumption of soma; that's all" (Huxley, 172). In the Brave New World, as in Invisible Man, isolation from labor leads inevitably to unrest and instability. The solution? To keep the citizens running by having them perform worthless labor under the auspices that they are contributing to society.

Worthless labor is not the only way that the powers that be in Invisible Man and Brave New World exercise control over their societies. In both novels, hallucinogenic drugs are perceived as evils that dull the senses and destroy one's sense of urgency and desire for action. In Brave New World this comes in the form of soma, a perfect designer drug the citizens consume whenever they have the slightest psychological or physical ill ("One cubic centimeter cures ten gloomy sentiments" counsels Lenina in one scene (Huxley, 69)). In many ways, soma represents the perfect form of mind control, as it ultimately dulls all stimuli that would move an individual to revolution. In Invisible Man, the importance of drugs in suppressing one's individuality and desire for action is not as pronounced as in Brave New World, but we see it here and there, particularly in the book's prologue when the narrator talks about a vision he had while smoking marijuana. "I haven't smoked reefer since", he says, "not because they're illegal, but because to see around corners is enough (that is not unusual when you're invisible). But to hear around them is too much; it inhibits action. And despite Brother Jack and all that sad lost period of the Brotherhood, I believe in nothing if not action" (Ellison, 13). While the reefer in Invisible Man is decidedly less sinister than the soma in Brave New World, this passage nonetheless illustrates a common theme in both books - that drugs have the ability to warp reality and subdue the individual into a mode of inaction.

In reality, however, it's not really drugs the writers are rallying against, but rather what they symbolize - the ability for any artificial stimuli to distract an individual's attention away from his fight for self assertion. Ellison discusses the use of symbol in one interview where he talks about Picasso: "symbols serve a dual function:

In this regard, drugs in both stories are a symbol for an easy out in the oftentimes painful search for identity.

they allow the artist to speak of complex experiences and to annihilate time with simple lines and curves; and they allow the viewer an orientation, both emotional and associative, which goes so deep that a total culture may resound in a simple rhythm, an image." (Graham and Singh, 10). In this regard, drugs in both stories are a symbol for an easy out in the oftentimes painful search for identity.

Do the heroes of Invisible Man and Brave New World find their individuality, and if so, how? In Invisible Man, this is hard to say, for we are confronted with a narrator who is really at the beginning of a new story. Having severed himself from society, he supposedly has become aware of his own identity. Nonetheless, we can't help but feel a little bit skeptical of this revelation - didn't we see variations of this already, first in his expulsion from school, then in his discovery of Dr. Bledsoe's treachery, and then in his entry into the Brotherhood? It's not unfair to wonder if

this new found "invisibility" is really a more enlightened state of being or just another dead end he'll eventually have to wander out of. Without having "another chapter" to tell us, it's impossible to say for certain, but my personal opinion is that the character has found the wisdom for which he was searching. I believe Ellison probably intended it that way, too. "Each time he allows someone else to define him," says Ellison "to give him an identity or an identity which he tries to assume, he runs into difficulty. And so in the last chapter, he becomes aware of this when he starts burning all these papers to make light for himself" (Graham and Singh, 259). Thus, the invisible man finds his sense of individuality by burning away all of his old identities and by disassociating himself from the society that created them. This final act makes the ultimate tone of the book uplifting, at least in the sense that the narrator has found what he was looking for, and in that it offers a glimmer of hope for others involved in a similar quest.

The situation in Brave New World is quite a bit different, but not without some interesting parallels. First, as in Invisible Man, Bernard and Helmholtz are ejected from society by being shipped off at the novel's end to an island where they will live the rest of their days in exile with other "revolutionaries". There, Mustapha Mond assures them, they can pursue their individuality to their hearts content without "infecting" other elements of society. Bernard and Helmholtz, when compared to the narrator of Invisible Man, however, have a much more muted reaction to this affirmation of their individuality (Bernard, when told he is to be exiled, actually becomes so hysterical that he has to be sedated in soma spray). In this sense, they have not discovered their true sense of identity, but rather stumbled into it accidentally.

A closer parallel to the narrator of Invisible Man exists in the character of John. He possesses a sense of individuality from his introduction, however, so his journey is less one of discovery than of reaffirmation. It is in John's ultimate fate that we see perhaps the most interesting dissimilarity between Invisible Man and Brave New World, for unlike the narrator of Ellison's novel, John cannot separate himself from society - Mustapha Mond has determined that he will remain a part of it whether he likes it or not.

"He said he wanted to go on with the experiment. But I'm damned," the Savage added with sudden fury, "I'm damned if I'll go on being experimented with. Not for all the Controllers in the world. I shall go away tomorrow too."

"But where?" the others asked in unison.

"The Savage shrugged his shoulders. "Anywhere. I don't care. So long as I can be alone."

(Huxley, 186)

And off John goes to be alone, but his separation from society proves a short one. For the denizens of the Brave New World have by this time become infatuated with his exotic ways, and it is not long before they have hunted him down, forced him to conform to their will, and ultimately driven him to commit suicide out of an overwhelming sense of betrayal and guilt. Thus, for John there is no escape in exile. The message here is considerably darker than in Invisible Man: the only way out for the true individual in such a world is death.

It is extremely interesting to note here that in his foreword to the anniversary release of Brave New World, Huxley describes John's lack of choices in asserting his individuality as a flaw of the novel, and remarked that if he were to re-write it, he would have John travel to an intermediary world between the Indian reservation whence he came and the Brave New World, where "he had an opportunity of learning something at first hand about the nature of a society composed of freely co-operating individuals devoted to the pursuit of sanity" (Huxley, 15). Had the book been written this way, I believe it would have been closer in spirit to Invisible Man in that there would have been a glimmer of hope, however small, that an individual might still assert himself and find his own identity. Be that as it may, however, we are left instead with only the Brave New World and its crushing social conformism that leaves no room for individual identity.

Following this same line, there is one other interesting (albeit troubling) parallel between the two novels, and this is a comparison between the characters of Todd Clifton and Lenina. Both characters, like the narrator of Invisible Man and John of Brave New World, seem to have a moment of self enlightenment, but it is a strange inversion of the enlightenment experienced by the primary characters. In Lenina's case, this moment comes when she visits John in the very last scene:

"The young woman stood, smiling at him - an uncertain, imploring, almost abject smile. The seconds passed. Her lips moved, she was saying something; but the sound of her voice was covered by the loud reiterated refrain of the sightseers...The young woman pressed both hands to her left side and on that peach bright, doll beautiful face of hers appeared a strangely incongruous expression of yearning

distress. Her blue eyes seemed to grow larger, brighter; and suddenly two tears rolled down her cheeks. Inaudibly she spoke again; then, with a quick, impassioned gesture stretched out her arms towards the Savage, stepped forward..."

(Huxley, 197)

Now compare this with the narrator's description of Todd Clifton in Invisible Man:

"It was Clifton, riding easily back and forth on his knees, flexing his legs without shifting his feet, his right shoulder raised at an angle and his arm pointing stiffly at the bouncing doll as he spieled from the corner of his mouth."

"Who else wants little Sambo before we take it on the lambo. Speak up, ladies and gentleman, who wants little...?"

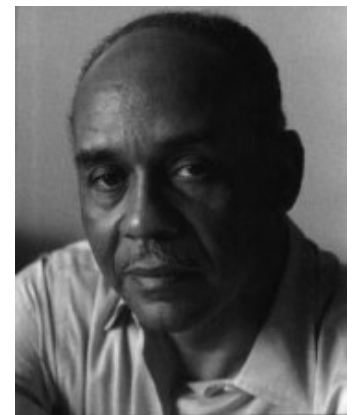
(Ellison, 433)

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In Brave New World, Lenina realizes the virtue of John's ways and shows for the first time in the novel true affection for someone despite her conditioning. Similarly, in Invisible Man, Todd Clifton sheds his aura of respectability and becomes a dealer of Sambo dolls on the sidewalk. In both cases, the characters are demonstrating their individuality by disassociating themselves with what is expected of them. In

comparing their fates with those of the main characters we can see another interesting parallel: Lenina lives where John dies; Todd dies where the narrator of Invisible Man lives. It almost seems like Lenina and Todd act as counterweights to what is happening to the main characters (John and the narrator, respectively). In Lenina's conversion maybe we are supposed to see a tenuous thread of hope for the individual, while in Todd's death, the inevitable fate of someone who bucks the system. Thus, perhaps the tone of the respective novels, as determined by the fate of its primary characters, is not intended as an absolute, but rather as only one possibility.

Whatever the case may be, both Invisible Man and Brave New World share many common traits as works of literature. Symbolically, they are representative of an individual's fight for recognition and self determination in a tyrannical society that devalues individual worth. Despite their many similarities, however, the novels seem to diverge in their final opinion of whether the individual has a place in our society. Perhaps this is in the nature of the novels themselves, for each was written with a slightly different intent : Invisible Man to inspire indignity towards an existing American system, and Brave New World to inspire fear and loathing towards one which we still have time to avoid. It seems to me that it is because of this close affinity to our own distinctly American reality that Invisible Man offers a ray of hope to cling to where Brave New World does not. The invisible man must persist, because if he does not, there is no hope for our future. "The thing that Americans have to learn over and over again," said Ellison in an interview shortly before his death, "is that they are individuals with individual vision" (Graham and Singh, 391). It is upon the strengths of these individuals that our entire society is built. And unlike John, the embattled savage of Brave New World, whose desperation I recognized even as a child peering into a coloring book, the individuals in Invisible Man still have the power to make themselves heard and continue the grand cycle of applying their "individual vision" to the tapestry of society.



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