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The City is Full of Bugs

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Throughout modern literature, metaphors and symbolism are used as devices to capture the thoughts and feelings of the characters, as well as to comment on the plot and paint a more vivid picture of the environment the story takes place in. This essay explores the use of symbolism and metaphor in Ralph Ellison’s *Invisible Man*, focusing on a particular scene inside Mary Rambo’s apartment in the middle of the novel. The use of symbolism in the novel is extensive, and many objects and characters serve as metaphors for social classes and groups, and often these representations also function as direct satire for various political groups, folkways, and the expectations or prejudices of the time period in which the novel is set. The objects and events that take place in Mary Rambo’s apartment go beyond symbolism to include a forecast of future events while simultaneously satirizing racial stereotypes and act as a metaphor for the plight of the Black residents of Harlem. In chapter 15 of the novel, the anonymous tenant who angrily pounds on the steam pipe until roaches begin pouring out of the ceiling symbolizes the growing hostility of the Harlemites for lack of a humane existence and foreshadows the race riot in the climax of the novel. The metaphor of the blackface iron bank used to strike the pipe is also explored, as well as the metaphor of roaches as representative of the Harlem residents.

As the narrator of the novel, the unnamed invisible man shares his experiences in a coming-of-age novel over the course of several years spanning his time as a youth in the segregated Deep South steeped in Jim Crow laws and abject racism to time studying at a black college and eventually to his role in a race riot in the streets of 1930s Harlem. In the beginning of the text, especially cruel white socialites force the narrator to participate in a degrading and violent boxing match, after which he is paid with coins placed on an electrified rug that shocks the narrator both mentally and physically before being given a leather briefcase with the papers that grant him access to a black college. The briefcase serves as the first important object symbol in
the text, functioning as an ironic gift from the white aristocrats, containing not only a letter of recommendation as an outstanding public speaker, but unbeknownst to the narrator, a note encouraging the reader of the documents to “Keep this nigger-boy running” (Ellison 33), a recurring theme throughout the novel. The narrator’s college experience is cut short after being asked to drive Mr. Norton, an important white trustee of the college, into town. Norton orders the narrator to stop at the home of Jim Trueblood, a local curiosity famous for impregnating his daughter ostensibly by accident. The encounter with Trueblood affects Norton so powerfully that he demands to be taken to the closest tavern for whiskey. Norton becomes indisposed amongst ostracized black academics at the Golden Day Tavern, where he receives care from a prostitute. The narrator is expelled over the incident by Dr. Bledsoe, a self-interested and disingenuous black man described by the narrator as an Uncle Tom and whom the narrator blames for his misfortune in Harlem, where he is ordered to take a sabbatical of undetermined length.

In New York, the narrator further feels his distance from the white ruling class that marginalize or ignore him, leading to the invisible man moniker he adopts to relate his social situation. Another black Harlem resident, Mary Rambo, befriends the narrator, and he stays in her apartment while briefly working for a paint company whose labor union alludes to and mocks the communist leanings of the time period. The narrator eventually leaves Mary and her rented room to join “The Brotherhood,” a socially progressive but manipulative organization satirizing major political groups prevalent during the Harlem Renaissance. The invisible man works tirelessly as a public speaker and social organizer for The Brotherhood while Brother Tod Clifton and Brother Trap serve as metaphors for black social organizers running from a complicated past and that surrender to the expectations and prejudices of white society, respectively. As a social organizer, the narrator competes with the more radical Ras the Exhorter,
the leader of the black power organization that satirizes the Black Panther party. The race riot
that culminates in the end of the novel serves as the final instance of disillusionment for the
invisible man, who ultimately rejects all of society and withdraws to an abandoned underground
dwelling to hide from the society that ignores or persecutes him.

The first significant metaphor in the apartment scene is the anonymous tenant who bangs on
the steam pipe. The identity of the character is purposefully withheld so the banging on the pipe
from somewhere else in the building can be more clearly understood to represent the anger of all
the tenants, and in fact all of the poor residents of Harlem. The violent pounding of the pipe is
unlikely to give any result that would satisfy the unnamed tenant, and thus is an impotent but
powerful reaction that comments on the irrational but justified anger felt by the residents. The
superintendent has abandoned his duties to the building, just as the upper class of New York
have abandoned the poor in Harlem, and the people react with rage that will not bring about any
desirable change. Mary Rambo vents her frustration to the invisible man, saying “They know
when the heat don’t come up that the super’s drunk or done walked off the job looking for his
woman, or something. Why don’t folks act according to what they know?” (Ellison 320). The
narrator recognizes the futility of the tenant banging on the pipe, and his anger begins as a
reaction to the irrational actions of his fellow tenants as he shouts to the banging ceiling: “No
respect for the individual. Why don’t you think about those who might wish to sleep? What if
someone is near a nervous breakdown…?” (Ellison 321-322). The banging of the pipe as an
uncivilized and impotent action also serves to satirize the simplistic and irrational actions of the
people of Harlem, explicitly pointed out when the narrator calls out to no one in particular,
“Why don’t you act like responsible people living in the twentieth century?” I yelled, aiming a
blow at the pipe. ‘Get rid of your cottonpatch ways! Act civilized!’” (Ellison 320). The banging
grows louder and stronger until the roaches spill out of the ceiling, just as the citizens of Harlem grow ever more angry until an outpouring of hostility takes over the city.

The roaches that finally burst forth and scatter symbolize the anger of the residents boiling over and foreshadows the race riot at the end of the novel. Like the residents that are eventually moved to action by their tumultuous environment, the narrator witnesses the roaches being driven out by the angry pounding: “I saw a small drove of roaches trooping frantically down the steam line from the floor above, plummeting to the floor as the vibration of the pipe shook them off” (Ellison 326). These roaches are also residents of the building in Harlem, and the reference to the slang term of the 1930’s era “bugs” meaning crazy or agitated should not be overlooked in a close analysis of the meaning of this event in the novel. The agitation felt by both tenants and bugs should not overshadow the point Ellison makes here about restless masses becoming a mob. The lack of a humane existence needs only a catalyst to erupt into violence, whether knocking on a steam pipe or speeches made by the narrator or Ras the Exhorter. Mary Rambo relates her sentiment when speaking to the narrator; “Some folks just live in filth’ she said disgustedly. ‘Just let a little knocking start and here it comes crawling out. All you have to do is shake things up a bit” (Ellison 326).

The bank that suddenly appears in the narrator’s room is yet another objective correlative within in the novel which is critical to understanding the events in Mary Rambo’s apartment, and the rest of the novel. The bank represents racial stereotypes and is used to hit the pipe in anger, serving as a metaphor for black anger striking the silver pipe of white authority and the meager accommodations that have run out for the black residents of Harlem. The bank is clearly an object that represents racism through the use of blackface and minstrelsy, it is described as “A very black, red-lipped and wide-mouth Negro… his face an enormous grin, his single large black
hand held palm up before his chest” (Ellison 319). The mechanism of the bank serves to extend the metaphor of racial prejudice; the narrator describes “A piece of early Americana, the kind of bank which, if a coin is placed in the hand and a lever pressed upon the back, will raise its arm and flip the coin into its grinning mouth” (Ellison 319). The symbolic request “FEED ME” written across the chest of the figure and the exaggerated physical features of the bank represent the prejudice and hatred of blacks in the time period who were seen as dependent upon whites to “feed them” with a living. Even a decent living has been made impossible for the Black Harlemites in the novel, and eventually the narrator’s own anger causes him to use this symbol of black oppression to strike the silver pipe, possibly representing white prosperity or authority; “Then came a crash of sound and I felt the iron head crumble and fly apart in my hand. Coins flew over the room like crickets, ringing, rattling against the floor, rolling. I stopped dead” (Ellison 320). The coins are described by the narrator as choking the bank, and Rosemary Hathaway has argued that these object symbols along with the briefcase itself represent a deeper symbolism to the scene in Mary Rambo’s apartment as the invisible man attempts to hide what he has done. Hathaway argues that “The shards of the blackface head and the coins it had been choking on get fed to the case, which is itself ‘choking’ on the lies and false promises fed to the narrator by Bledsoe and Emerson” (5-6). Rather than provide a sense of relief at breaking the object that symbolizes the hatred of his people, the bank and coins will become a recurring theme throughout the novel that the narrator tries several times to get rid of, but finds it impossible to do so. The literal and figurative weight that the invisible man carries with him throughout the novel is an intentional metaphor describing the inability of Blacks to rise above the prejudice of White society. Hathaway relates, “As traumatic as the history such objects represent might be, hiding, discarding, or destroying the objects themselves cannot erase or alter
the history they represent” (8). Ellison has carefully chosen the objects in the novel to specifically represent the theme of racial tension and eventual revolt that pervades the novel as a whole.

Significant objects like the bank and the roaches appear suddenly and are not anticipated by the reader, instead placed at key points in the novel to shed light on the novel’s subject matter. The narrator could have simply kept banging on the pipe with his shoe heel, but the bank is introduced to show that black anger specifically is what clashes against the authority of the steam pipe. Hathaway argues that the contents of the briefcase also comment on black identity and persecution as “All of the objects come together in the narrator’s briefcase as tangible evidence of the complex modes of identity production” (9). Only in the end of the novel when the invisible man finally decides to drop all the expectations of his prescribed identities and stigma of the objects he once treasured is he able to rid himself of the briefcase and its contents:

The briefcase becomes a repository or traveling museum of African–American history, jumbling relics of slavery with contemporary icons based on black stereotypes, as well as the papers spelling out the narrator’s new Brotherhood ascribed identity. Later, the briefcase and its contents transform into a weapon when the narrator uses it to fight off attackers during the Harlem riot. (Hathaway 2)

The evolution of the briefcase from racial and social baggage as well as quite literal baggage to being used as a weapon against his opponents is the final metaphor of the briefcase that was once a gift from cruel whites. Burning the documents that worked along with his former naiveté to keep him running represents the ultimate evolution of the character into complete invisibility not just from whites, but down into a hole where he seeks sanctuary from all of society.
Further evidence of the importance of objects as symbols in the novel is revealed in the way Ellison uses the objects to move the plot along and often the objects represent a shift in motivation and thinking for the invisible man. Hathaway explains how these object symbols push the narrator to new locations and changes in his self-perception by pointing out that, “At several pivotal moments in the novel the narrator, presented with or confused by some object of material culture, is forced into a new path, or into a new understanding of his identity. Indeed many of these objects take on a sort of talismanic function for the narrator” (2). The briefcase presented to the invisible man after the battle royale marks the beginning of what he believes to be the beginning of his chosen profession as an orator. The events in Jim Trueblood’s cabin and the Golden Day are the cause of the end of the narrator’s academic career, but the departure from school and his journey north are represented by the papers given to him by Bledsoe. When the invisible man stops to buy a yam from the street vendor, he commits to no longer be driven to conform to the ideals of a white society that hates him. The object symbol of the yam represents a mental change in attitude and rejection of a former conviction to live up to the expectations of whites, while embracing his own unique heritage; Donald Shaffer has also analyzed the encounter with the vendor as metaphorically driven:

The frost bitten yam becomes a symbol of rural and urban conflict; the ‘unpleasant taste’ blooming in his mouth is an indication of his growing disillusionment in the city. The brutal cold that ruins his yam symbolizes the physical forces he faces as a black migrant in the city, while the yam itself symbolizes a sense of wistful nostalgia for home and place. (Shaffer 10)

When the invisible man witnesses the death of Tod Clifton, it marks the beginning of the end of his career with the Brotherhood, and the scrap of paper containing his new Brotherhood name is
another symbol of change that provides him with a new identity and begins his career as a puppet for the political party. The leg chain-link that Brother Tarp presents to the narrator is a reminder of the brutal past of African Americans, and predicts the stand he will take against the Brotherhood after Tarp mysteriously disappears; this is yet another example of an object symbol used by Ellison to foreshadow future events in the novel.

The roaches in Mary’s apartment not only symbolize the Harlem residents in upheaval, but predict the climax of the novel. As previously stated, the roaches and the tenant share the space of Mary’s apartment, both relatively quiet and accepting of their fate until the roaches are stirred up by the pounding and the tenants are shaken by the inequality of life and the words of the narrator and Ras as instigators of revolt. The apartment itself can be understood as a place of sanctuary from the conflicts of the novel until the mounting anger forces the inhabitants into action, Shaffer describes the symbolism of the apartment thusly: “The domestic sense of Mary’s apartment is represented here as a dialectical space signifying both an ideal of place and belonging- the proverbial promise of the north- as well as the incessant conflict or rural and urban meaning that defines black migrant spaces in the city” (10). The comparison is dissimilar in that the roaches are immediately killed while the narrator and the Harlemites at least are able to destroy some of the dilapidated and unsafe housing they were forced to live in. However, the metaphor is made complete again when we see the invisible man eventually reject the entire city and retreat into his underground home to reconsider his real identity and place in society. Like the roaches, the narrator is driven out into the light by anger, but forced back into the dark by the inability of the riot to solve his own problems as well as the problems faced by Black Harlem residents. Yet by the end of the epilogue, the narrator is able to confront and accept his invisible status in society and is ready to reenter it, showing that “Ironically, his ‘hole’ becomes a
symbolic figure of the enduring quality of black urban life inasmuch as it represents black folk’s ability to overcome oppressive structures in order to create a whole way of life” (Shaffer 5). The roaches stirred up by angry tenants that symbolize the residents of Harlem awoken by injustice and harsh treatment can be understood as a literary conceit when the metaphor is extended to reflect the events that the roaches foreshadow.

The roaches in Mary Rambo’s apartment are squashed and swept up for removal, similar to the manner in which the residents of Harlem are disenfranchised and manipulated by the ruling white class. The final overarching metaphor is that Harlem is full of bugs about to be stepped on by the boot of white authority. The bugs are moved out of the dark and into the light by the mounting anger only to be destroyed, just as the residents’ anger culminates in a race riot. Both the roaches and the tenants are seen by the authority as a nuisance and unsanitary, in the case of the bugs, the narrator and Mary are the oppressors of “The filthy, stinking things” (Ellison 326). The authoritarian role of white police on horseback outside the Chthonian, and in the riot at the end of the novel is played out by the invisible man and Mary in the Harlem apartment; “I swung the broom, battering and sweeping the squashed insects into piles. Breathing excitedly Mary got the dust pan and handed it to me” (326). Unfortunately for the bugs and the residents of Harlem, their brief stand against authority is ineffective and the violence solves nothing in the end. All will be crushed under the wheel of social injustice as the roaches are intolerantly crushed by the broom.

The varied and metaphorically rich objects found within Ellison’s text are used strategically as chronological place markers for transitions in the narrator’s life and poignantly represent issues of race and oppression that the narrator continues to struggle with. The entire novel can be seen as a superb example of how literature uses objective correlatives to offer
additional meaning and context that careful reading will illuminate. The bugs described in the apartment serve as the perfect example of racial themes played out within the text. The white ruling class view the black residents as nothing more than an infestation, and Harlem as the insect nest that has to periodically be shaken up, purging the insects out of hiding to be exterminated.
Works Cited

