

Cooperation in the Face of Defection: The Prisoner's Dilemma in *Invisible Man*.

By Anthony Stewart

The death of Rosa Parks on October 24, 2005 reminded us that the 1950s were not just the post-war calm before the anti-war storm of the 1960s. As Morris Dickstein writes, "In the standard views of American culture after the war, and especially of the 1950s, the arts and intellectual life turned deeply conservative, reflecting the imperatives of the cold war, the migration to the suburbs, the new domesticity, and the rise of McCarthyism" (125). Of course, the *Brown v Board of Education of Topeka* decision of 1954, the lynching of Emmett Till in 1955, the integration of Central High School in Little Rock, Arkansas in 1957, not to mention the 381-day Montgomery, Alabama bus boycott initiated by Parks' refusal to relinquish her seat, are just a few of the events that combine to signal a socio-political turbulence that did not require the zeal of a petty junior senator from Wisconsin for their lasting historical significance. The memorializing of Parks, the first woman and only the second African American ever to lie in state in the Capitol Rotunda, signifies how much things have changed since the day of her protest, but also suggests how complicated the questions remain around the issues that inspired her to stay seated on December 1, 1955 when asked by a white man to take her ostensibly proper place at the back. Published in 1952, and awarded the National Book Award in 1953, *Invisible Man* is very much a novel of the 1950s.¹ African Americans returning from Europe with the belief that their service abroad would result in improved treatment at "home," instead encountered "all those acts, legal, emotional, economic and political, which we label Jim Crow,"² as Ellison writes in his 1949 essay, "The Shadow and the Act." The elaborate complex of subtle and overt rules that comprised Jim Crow put great pressure on the everyday decisions made by African American citizens.

One form this pressure took was the knowledge that the results of one's own decisions would necessarily be qualified, perhaps even nullified, by decisions made by

those in positions of power, whether official power, or merely power based on the caprice of skin colour. The prisoner's dilemma, a fascinating game theory model for analyzing how one's decisions affect oneself as well as the wellbeing of someone else, emerges from the 1950s and enables an analysis of the signal event in the life of Ellison's narrator,³ his expulsion from college.

That this model was a product of the then-emerging military-industrial complex (it was used to weigh the costs of a nuclear strike against the then-Soviet Union) adds a further political resonance to the contribution the prisoner's dilemma is able to make to the illumination of *Invisible Man*, as a model derived within an inherently conservative industrial matrix may be pressed into service in the examination of a critical text of the American literary canon. The prisoner's dilemma serves as both a rhetorical and a mechanical hermeneutic device that contributes to a thoroughgoing understanding of the relationship between the narrator of *Invisible Man* and Dr. Bledsoe. In addition, it highlights the important distinctions to be drawn between these two characters and Jim Trueblood, the sharecropper whose story of incest sets in motion the events that lead to the playing of the prisoner's dilemma. By way of conclusion, I will briefly consider how the workings of the prisoner's dilemma also help characterize Parks' political and ethical motivations, motivations that also underpin what becomes the Civil Rights Movement. The somewhat confusing lexicon of "cooperation" and "defection" constitutive of the prisoner's dilemma actually helps fashion this description of the Civil Right Movement by drawing our attention to the "principle" to which Ellison's narrator refers at the novel's end. This principle of American democracy as a common good identifies how cooperation with that common good required Parks' defection from the interests of the Jim Crow system.



Much has been written about the prisoner's dilemma since the term was coined in 1950 by Albert W. Tucker, a consultant with the RAND Corporation (Poundstone 8).

Robert Axelrod describes the basics of the prisoner's dilemma as follows:

The original story is that two accomplices to a crime are arrested and questioned separately. Either can defect against the other by confessing and hoping for a lighter sentence. But if both confess, their confessions are not as valuable. On the other hand, if both cooperate with each other by

refusing to confess, the district attorney can only convict them on a minor charge. Assuming that neither player has moral qualms about, or fear of, squealing, the payoffs can form a Prisoner's Dilemma. (125)

The dilemma, then, is that "individuals engage in pairwise interactions with two behavioral options. They must simultaneously decide whether to cooperate or to defect" (Hauert and Stenull 261). What must be understood about the prisoner's dilemma, and what is crucial to understanding how it obtains in *Invisible Man*, is that, as William Poundstone explains, "the common good is subverted by individual rationality. Each player desires the other's cooperation, yet is tempted to defect himself" (216). "Cooperation" means cooperation with the interest of the other player. In Axelrod's description, cooperating means staying silent. "Defection" refers to breaking ranks with the other player, in other words, confessing with one's own self-interest in mind.

If Player A defects (confesses) and Player B also defects (Table 1, bottom right), then each receives the "punishment for mutual defection"⁴ (indicated by the 1's). If Player A cooperates (stays silent) and Player B also cooperates (top left), then each receives the "reward for mutual cooperation." The central problem, and the reason the arrangement is called a dilemma, is that if Player A defects and Player B cooperates (top right), then Player A receives the "temptation to defect payoff" (he goes free, represented by the 5) and Player B receives the "sucker's payoff" (he alone receives the maximum sentence, represented by the 0). But Player B is also aware of these potential payoffs, and so is just as tempted to defect, possibly receiving the temptation to defect payoff for himself and leaving the sucker's payoff to Player A, if A were to cooperate (bottom left). So, even though the common good would be best served by the cooperation of both players, each fears the other will defect, and so each will tend to defect unilaterally. Poundstone sums up the problem: "In a true, one-time-only prisoner's dilemma, it is as hard to justify cooperation as it is to accept mutual defection as the logical outcome. Therein lies the paradox" (122). With its weighted outcomes based on individual decisions, the prisoner's dilemma is an especially provocative hermeneutic theory when examining a text by an African American writer. The choices of defection or cooperation have long been characterized variously for and by African Americans, along with the prospect of many different levels of reward or

punishment. As in the prisoner's dilemma, these rewards or punishments are inevitably affected by the simultaneous decisions of others.

Ellison would no doubt have approved of a theory derived from mathematics being called upon in an analysis of *Invisible Man*, since he famously describes his own novel in numerical terms, revealing the significance of the 1369 light bulbs that illuminate his narrator's secret apartment, in "The Art of Fiction: An Interview,"

The three parts represent the narrator's movement from, using Kenneth Burke's terms, purpose to passion to perception. These three major sections are built up of smaller units of three which mark the course of the action and which depend for their development upon what I hoped was a consistent and developing motivation. . . . Each section begins with a sheet of paper; each piece of paper is exchanged for another and contains a definition of his identity, or the social role he is to play as defined for him by others. (218-19)

One last detail to include about the nature of the prisoner's dilemma before proceeding to an analysis of who participates in the prisoner's dilemma in *Invisible Man*--and as importantly, who does not--is to clarify that the prisoner's dilemma is not a zero-sum game, in which one player wins to the extent that the other loses. Presciently, the novel provides an example of the zero-sum game in its Prologue, in which a prizefighter encounters a yokel in the ring. Although the prizefighter dominates the bout most of the way, his domination does not matter at all, once the yokel, "rolling about in the gale of boxing gloves, struck one blow and knocked science, speed and footwork as cold as a well-digger's posterior. The smart money hit the canvas. The long shot got the nod" (8). That's a zero-sum game; there is no ranked payoff that the prizefighter receives for having led most of the fight. Coming second is coming last.

Another type of game that recurs in Ellison's work is the "fool's errand," in which the deck is stacked against an individual, who is forced to play along or risk being humiliated, beaten or worse. One particularly vivid instance of the fool's errand in Ellison's non-fiction is recounted in "An Extravagance of Laughter," in which a "very black-skinned young man" is tormented and eventually beaten unconscious by two Phoenix City, Alabama policemen because his surname happens to be "Whyte." The two policemen "forced Whyte to pronounce his name again and again while insisting that they simply

couldn't believe that such a gross misnaming was possible" (634). The fool's errand in *Invisible Man* is signaled by the instruction to "keep this nigger-boy running,"⁵ as the narrator erroneously pursues his ambitions, not knowing that they have already been irrevocably foreclosed upon by the cynical Dr. Bledsoe.

With the framework of the prisoner's dilemma in place, we may now turn to the nature of the two principal players in the novel itself, when the narrator encounters a conflict in which his decision brings with it a weighted system of potential payoffs, a system whose ultimate result is affected by the simultaneous decision of another player. This moment is his argument with Dr. Bledsoe about Mr. Norton, the wealthy white benefactor whom the narrator ill-advisedly drives to the Quarters, a poor area near the college where Jim Trueblood lives with his wife and daughter, both pregnant with his children. Norton is the sort of man upon whom "an unshakable innocent, immature, eager to get ahead, trained in the habits of deference and humility through which blacks in America had traditionally gotten by" (Dickstein 135) would desperately want to leave a positive impression. Once the narrator has returned Norton to the college, harried but largely unharmed, he must appear in Dr. Bledsoe's office for punishment and a lesson.

Bledsoe is also an important man, of course. For the purposes of the prisoner's dilemma, though, even with the understanding that both Norton and Bledsoe are men the narrator admires, they are qualitatively different from one another. The narrator could never enter into a prisoner's dilemma with Norton because the power imbalance is simply too great. There is no conceivable decision that the narrator could make that might threaten to impinge negatively upon a man like Norton. This point is made abundantly clear at the end of the novel when the narrator fortuitously encounters Norton in a subway station and the benefactor does not remember ever having even met the narrator, let alone the chaotic adventure they once shared. The implications of the prisoner's dilemma are most clearly demonstrated by the ways in which the narrator's interests compete with Dr. Bledsoe's.

Bledsoe's role in the prisoner's dilemma also helps illustrate the role that racial stereotypes play in the novel, more particularly how certain stereotypes are played off against others. The narrator describes Bledsoe as "the example of everything I hoped to be: Influential with wealthy men all over the country; consulted in matters concerning the race;

a leader of his people; the possessor of not one, but *two* Cadillacs, a good salary and a soft, good-looking and creamy-complexioned wife" (101). The narrator also acknowledges that "some of the fellows" call Bledsoe "Bucket-head" behind his back, although he never has (101). The remainder of his description is also significant: "What was more, while black and bald and everything white folks poked fun at, he had achieved power and authority; had while black and wrinkle-headed, made himself of more importance in the world than most Southern white men. They could laugh at him but they couldn't ignore him" (101). The narrator does not stop here to reflect upon the cost Bledsoe has borne in attaining this attenuated brand of authority, although he appears aware that there must be some cost, as his description makes clear in his repeated references to Bledsoe being "poked fun at" and "laughed at." Returning twice to Bledsoe's blackness hints as well at the narrator's intuitive apprehension of the president's vulnerability.

The narrator's repetition of Bledsoe's physical characteristics suggests Homi Bhabha's formulation of the stereotype:

Fixity, as the sign of cultural/historical/racial difference in the discourse of colonialism, is a paradoxical mode of representation: it connotes rigidity and an unchanging order as well as disorder, degeneracy and daemonic *repetition*. Likewise the stereotype, which is its major discursive strategy, is a form of knowledge and identification that vacillates between what is always 'in place', already known, and *something that must be anxiously repeated* ... as if the essential duplicity of the Asiatic or the bestial sexual licence of the African that needs no proof, can never really, in discourse, be proved. (66, emphasis added)

Through his description of the college president, the narrator makes Bledsoe into a site for this anxious repetition. But Bhabha's focus on the state of ambivalence that he sees as "central to the stereotype ... ensures its repeatability in changing historical and discursive conjunctures; informs its strategies of individuation and marginalization; produces that effect of probabilistic truth and predictability which, for the stereotype, must always be in *excess* of what can be empirically proved or logically construed" (66). The notion of ambivalence suggests the excessive nature of Bledsoe's own anxious repetition as he embarks on another fool's errand, the definitive refutation of his own stereotyping. His ownership of *two* Cadillacs is especially significant, as it literalizes Bledsoe's anxious and excessive repetition.

The question of stereotypes is central to determining the players in the novel's instance of the prisoner's dilemma because it helps delineate relative power positions, as well as uncover a surprising locus of power within the text. That locus is Jim Trueblood. While Trueblood is not a player in the prisoner's dilemma, his role in the story helps clarify the game theory model's application. How he begins recounting his tale of taboo registers Bhabha's point about the role of repetition in a way that is tellingly different from the repetition in which Bledsoe is engaged: "He cleared his throat, his eyes gleaming and his voice taking on a deep, incantatory quality, as though he had told the story many, many times" (53-4). Houston Baker, in his central essay on the role of Trueblood in *Invisible Man*, writes that "when the farmer begins to recount the story of his incestuous act with his daughter Matty Lou, he does so as a man who has thoroughly rehearsed his tale and who has clearly refined his knowledge of his audience" (326). The force of the stereotype actually secures Trueblood's livelihood in the days after his story makes its way into the conversation of the surrounding area.

In his examination of black minstrelsy in *Native Son*, Mikko Tuhkanen makes a point very similar to Baker's. Tuhkanen discusses Lacan's game theory, arguing that

a slippage of activity and passivity is characteristic of the potentially emancipatory blackface strategies: the black performers who have put on the masks created for and by the white gaze can fool their audience by "playing (like) an idiot." Yet, as the theorists of minstrelsy without fail emphasize, such strategies can be destructive to the performers themselves in that the minstrel mask threatens to possess the subject behind it. As soon as the player, whether of even and odd or of the minstrel stage, begins to believe in his/her own deception, the game spins out of control. (23)

Tuhkanen's account of the "potentially emancipatory" nature of the minstrel performance clearly distinguishes between Trueblood's contingent performance and both the narrator's and Bledsoe's obvious belief in the masks that they don for the satisfaction of the white gaze. Their games spin out of control in a way Trueblood's never does. If these characterizations apply to Bigger Thomas, as Tuhkanen argues, they apply possibly with even more force to Jim Trueblood. The sense of performance is all the more patent in the case of Ellison's sharecropper since he lives and prospers from his manipulation of the

image he presents to the white world. Thomas, by contrast, has a fleeting moment of power but ultimately is arrested and awaits execution as his story ends.

Trueblood exhibits his control over his circumstances when he invokes white power against the blacks who run the college. When the blacks, who are ashamed of him, try to make Trueblood leave the area, he complains to Mr. Buchanan, "the boss man" (52), who gives him a note to take to the sheriff (reinvoking the mechanics of the fool's errand, but this time to Trueblood's advantage). The scene as Trueblood describes it demonstrates the anxiety of repetition for the purpose of locating the stereotype but Trueblood's own insouciant ambivalence resists any imposition of fixity. As Trueblood explains:

[the sheriff] ask me to tell him what happen, and I tole him and he called in some more men and they made me tell it again. They wanted to hear about the gal lots of times and they gimme somethin' to eat and drink and some tobacco. Surprised me, 'cause I was *scared and spectin' somethin' different*. Why, I guess there ain't a colored man in the county who ever got to take so much of the white folkses' time as I did. (52-3, emphasis added)

Trueblood is at first worried that his fool's errand might end as others have, probably with his own lynching. However, he realizes eventually that he has something the white men desire, the opportunity to repeat what they already believe about the blacks who live among them, a belief in their sexual perversion. Baker seizes upon the capitalist nexus at play in the reiteration of the stereotype as enacted by Trueblood: "Trueblood, who assumes the minstrel mask to the utter chagrin of the Invisible Man ('How can he tell this to white men, I thought, when he knows they'll say that all Negroes do such things?'), has indeed accepted the profit motive that gave birth to that mask in the first place" (340). Whereas Bledsoe's "cynical accommodationist careerism" (189), in Trevor McNeely's felicitous phrase, makes that character appear reprehensible, Trueblood sees quite clearly the world in which he lives. To the whites in the town, and to some blacks, including the narrator, he may in fact be a stereotype of the illiterate, over-sexed "field nigger," but Trueblood intuitively realizes what Bhabha has realized about stereotypes, that they are fraught with ambivalence:

It is recognizably true that the chain of stereotypical signification is curiously mixed and split, polymorphous and perverse, an articulation of multiple belief. The black is both savage (cannibal) and yet the most obedient and dignified of servants (the bearer of food); he is the embodiment of rampant sexuality and yet innocent as a child; he is mystical, primitive,

simple-minded and yet the most worldly and accomplished liar, and manipulator of social forces. In each case what is being dramatized is a separation--*between* races, cultures, histories, *within* histories--a separation between *before* and *after* that repeats obsessively the mythical moment or disjunction. (82)⁶

Much of Bhabha's characterization of the stereotype describes Trueblood, the innocent yet worldly recounter of a true, but now well-rehearsed and profitable, story. Stereotypes, then, are like God--both everything and nothing, existing because people choose to and just as crucially, *desire* to, believe in them. Trueblood, in a sense important to the outcome of the novel and explanatory of his exclusion from the prisoner's dilemma, simply chooses not to believe that he is a stereotype. *He* knows his life is more complex than the urge to stereotype will permit.

Trueblood recognizes two crucial things. First, by satisfying the repeated desire of others, he gains materially. The one-hundred-dollar bill that Norton gives him at the end of his story is only the latest compensation he has received. Second, his very existence threatens the order that attempts to objectify him in the first place. As Leonard Cassuto has written: "the objectified (and thus grotesque) human being is not both human and thing but neither; not double--like Bhabha's hybrid--but in between. Bhabha says that hybridity of the object makes the basis of the colonizer's authority 'problematic' and thus causes him to become 'tongue-tied'" (17). Cassuto's argument usefully qualifies Bhabha by exploring "the 'mutation' of the other," and "ultimately focuses on the objectifier's dilemma and his complicated struggles to write his way out of it" (17). The objectifier's dilemma is at least as complex as the prisoner's and Trueblood knows this, whereas his more educated "betters" do not. Stereotyping, then, is a lot of work and requires the sorts of strategies and tactics that are required from chessmasters or skilled athletes, as well as minstrels. It is also a game that the preternaturally calm and now relatively prosperous Trueblood seems mostly amused by. At one point, the narrator actually catches Trueblood smiling at him "behind his eyes" (61). Stereotyping cannot account for such layered interiority. Trueblood's calm stands in sharp contradistinction to the earnest strivings and schemings of both the narrator and Dr. Bledsoe.

One additional point must be made about Trueblood's role in understanding who plays and who does not play in the novel's round of the prisoner's dilemma, before turning back to the game itself. Trueblood sees the terms of the game he is playing with a clarity that neither of the other two men does. But he also sees *their* roles clearly, even if they do not understand his or, for that matter, their own. While recounting the part of his story in which the local blacks scheme to remove the sharecropper and his family from the area, he says: "Them big niggahs didn't bother me, neither. It just goes to show yuh that no matter how biggity a niggah gits, the white folks can always cut him down. The white folks took up for me. And the white folks took to coming out here to see us and talk with us" (53). Trueblood knows what Bledsoe seems not to know, that his power is contingent upon the favor of the dominant culture. Bledsoe, as we'll see later, instead believes that *he* is power. Trueblood knows that Bledsoe may be "cut down" by the real centre of power at any moment.

The sharecropper's insight into the narrator is even more telling since he already knows what the narrator takes the entire novel to learn. The narrator begins his story with these prophetic words: "I was naïve. I was looking for myself and asking everyone except myself questions which I, and only I, could answer. It took me a long time and much painful boomeranging of my expectations to achieve a realization everyone else appears to have been born with: That I am nobody but myself" (15). This hard-won knowledge is the same knowledge, in almost identical words, to which Trueblood arrives after the night he impregnates his daughter: " I sings me some blues that night ain't never been sang before, and while I'm singin' them blues I makes up my mind that *I ain't nobody but myself* and ain't nothin' I can do but let whatever is gonna happen, happen" (66, emphasis added). The homology between these two statements throws into sharp relief the common condition of the sharecropper and the college student. The principal difference between them is that the college student does not *get* this similarity until he has endured the many ordeals detailed in his narrative. What he learns, ultimately, is that he has actually, unwittingly, been trying to become more like Trueblood and less like Bledsoe all along, more like the figure who knows he is being stereotyped, understands the ambivalence of this process, plays along, but finally dismisses it (lets whatever is gonna happen, happen), and less like the figure

who knows he is being stereotyped, does not understand its layers of ambivalence, and misguidedly believes he has conquered it.

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The foregoing analysis of Jim Trueblood's role as stereotype clarifies what is at stake for the narrator and Dr. Bledsoe in the playing of the prisoner's dilemma that decides the narrator's fate for much of the remainder of *Invisible Man*. In her essay, "Game Theory and Ellison's *King of the Bingo Game*," Diane Long Hoeveler focuses her attention on "the image of game playing and the theories surrounding games as an expression of both the futility and the special challenges posed to Black culture in contemporary America" (39). And while these special challenges find expression every day in contemporary America, it is the model of the prisoner's dilemma that actually characterizes the challenges that Ellison's narrator encounters, but also represents, as he tries to comprehend the complex and ambivalent forces working against his discovery of his own autonomy.

Dr. Bledsoe stands in useful conflict with the narrator, as both are vulnerable in the face of some higher power--the narrator to Bledsoe and Norton, Bledsoe in turn to Norton and other men like him, or, more to the point, other men whom he wishes to be like. In Dr. Bledsoe's office, after the encounter with Jim Trueblood, the college president tells his young charge: "You've got to be disciplined, boy, . . . There's no if's and and's about it" (141). The narrator's reply signals the beginning of the prisoner's dilemma: "But you gave Mr. Norton your word" (141). Now both men must make decisions. The narrator instinctively, like Trueblood, looks to the source of real power. He knows that the "biggity" president might be cut down by the wealthy white benefactor. While he is of course terrified by the prospect of being expelled, he has no power at all if he attempts to confront Bledsoe man to man. However, if he capitalizes upon Bledsoe's vulnerability, he thinks he may stand a chance in their confrontation.

"I'll tell him," I said. "I'll go to Mr. Norton and tell him. You've lied to both of us"
"What!" he said. "You have the nerve to threaten me . . . in my own office?"
"I'll tell him," I screamed. "I'll tell everybody. I'll fight you. I swear it. I'll fight!"
"Well," he said, sitting back, "well, I'll be damn!" (141)

Each of these four lines reveals an important point in the conflict. First, the narrator recognizes that even the president of his college has a vulnerability that might be exploited

for his own gain. Second, the president is offended by the breach of hierarchy and decorum signaled by the student's willingness to threaten him within the sanctum of his own office, one of the trappings of his ostensible power. Third, the narrator does not reflexively back down once the president's semblance of power is invoked. And finally, the president recognizes that he is going to have to approach his young adversary differently than through overt intimidation. The four statements indicate that the president is not invulnerable and so he is put on something approaching a par with the narrator.

I am not contending that Dr. Bledsoe has the same stakes in the decision matrix as the narrator, but it is important to note that for each the stakes are high, relative to his respective position. Bledsoe does not want to lose face in the eyes of Norton, since his power is dependent upon his relationship with men like Norton. Bledsoe's lengthy disquisition on the nature of power actually contradicts itself, when, in his parody of I Corinthians 13: 4-8, he proclaims: "Power doesn't have to show off. Power is confident, self-assuring, self-starting, and self-stopping, self-warming and self-justifying" (142). Leaving aside that he has replaced "love" from the original with "power," his emphasis on the self points up the fallacy in his proclamation and reveals his true vulnerability. Here again, we encounter the anxious repetition Bhabha identifies as constitutive of the stereotype. Bledsoe is right. Power doesn't have to show off. The image of the paternalistic but completely self-assured Norton provides the example of power that Bledsoe would like to invoke, although invoking it aloud necessarily undermines it. Even in the face of the impressive display of power he makes in this scene, the sort of display that cannot help but impress a college junior, it should not impress us. The simple irony is that if his power were as unassailable as he says it is, he would not feel called upon to make the demonstration about his power that he does, least of all to an underling. Bledsoe even acknowledges this fact, when he describes his situation as "a nasty deal and I don't always like it myself. But you listen to me: I didn't make it, and I know that I can't change it. But I've made my place in it and I'll have every Negro in the country hanging on tree limbs by morning if it means staying where I am" (143). No common good for him. Bledsoe's demonstration of his ostensible power is hollow at best, chilling at worst, as he calls up the constant threat to African Americans during the time at which the novel is written--the

lynching--and reveals his awareness of the profound vulnerability that comes with citizenship in what Ellison would later term "segregated democracy" (821).

When the narrator threatens to expose Bledsoe as a man who does not keep his word, he declares that he is willing to defect, not just reflexively cooperate, as might be expected of a subordinate. When Bledsoe says, "well, I'll be damn" and then tells the narrator, "Wait, wait" (141), as the young man prepares to leave the president's office, presumably to find Norton, Bledsoe feigns a willingness at least to consider cooperation. With each character willing to engage in the prisoner's dilemma, we may now examine their relative payoffs. Four possibilities exist: both may defect (neither accepts any blame for the trip to the Quarters), both may cooperate (each accepts some blame), one may defect and the other cooperate, and vice versa. What happens in the narrative is represented by the lower left-hand square in Table 2: Bledsoe defects (accepts no blame), the narrator cooperates (accepts some blame). Of course, part of this acceptance of blame is not saying anything to Norton about this conversation.

Let's come back to what actually happens later. For now, it is worth considering the hypothetical possibilities. If both cooperate (top left), the most equitable outcome and the one in which the common good is best served, then Bledsoe accepts some blame for what happens to Norton and appears magnanimous, a good leader, and a loyal man who is willing to support his underlings even when one of them makes an error in judgment. The narrator accepts some blame and appears mature, willing to accept the consequences of his actions, and an example to be followed by other young citizens. These prospects justify the reward for mutual cooperation of 3. If both defect (bottom right), both may be viewed quite negatively. Bledsoe appears disloyal, heavy-handed, and unwilling to accept the responsibility that accompanies the authority of his office. (This is how he ends up looking, of course, since he does defect. However, since the narrator cooperates and does not tell Norton about Bledsoe's breach of his promise not to punish the narrator, Bledsoe does not look this way to Norton, only to us.) The narrator also appears disloyal, but in addition, he looks insubordinate, and possibly dangerous to the status quo. A man like Norton might easily be led to think, "If this educated young black man cannot be trusted to submit to the authority of his own kind, at what point might he turn on us?" Because of

these negative implications, the payoffs are quite low for both, represented by the punishment for mutual defection of 1.

Perhaps most intriguing is the prospect in which the narrator defects and Bledsoe cooperates (top right). In this scenario, Bledsoe appears to have been out-manuevered by a college junior. He appears hardly a man of judgment or magnanimity, but merely naïve and possibly not even someone who deserves the exalted office he holds. The narrator appears canny and savvy, a young man who knows how to get what he wants and how to play the game. To someone like Norton, a defecting narrator and a cooperating Bledsoe shows the narrator as one who might be quite easily controlled because of his own ambition, in other words, a younger version of Bledsoe himself.

But, of course, none of this happens. Bledsoe's display of power convinces the narrator of his invulnerability, leaving the young man with the illusion that his own defection would be futile. As a result, he accepts the blame and says nothing, cooperating. Bledsoe, anticipating the narrator's cooperation, defects, expelling the narrator from the college, and leaving us in the bottom left-hand square. Noteworthy here is how the significance of Bledsoe's decision is hinted at by the narrative, even as he succeeds in duping the narrator, as he says, "I like your spirit, son. You're a fighter, and I like that; you just lack judgment, though lack of judgment can ruin you" (144). These words are truer than the narrator knows, since the irony buried within them is that the narrator's own lack of judgment in playing the prisoner's dilemma with someone like Bledsoe will, in fact, ruin him. When the president grandly condescends to provide the narrator with "letters to some of the school's friends" (145) in order to help the narrator find work after his expulsion, he has won the game, consolidating his temptation to defect payoff of 5, and leaving to the narrator the sucker's payoff of 0.

For the *coup de grâce*, Bledsoe sends the narrator on a fool's errand, which manifests itself in the novel in the historically fraught expression, "keep-this-nigger-boy running." The magnitude of Bledsoe's defection is doubled by the nature of the letters that he sends the narrator away with, letters which, in accordance with the customs of the fool's errand, he insists the narrator not open. The letters say, in part, that "it is to the best interests of the college that this young man have no knowledge of the finality of his

expulsion" (190), meaning that Bledsoe has not only defected in terms of the prisoner's dilemma, but has defected a second time as well, in concealing from the other player the full extent of his defection. Bledsoe's reference to the narrator's mistake as a "most serious defection from our strictest rules of deportment" (190) creates a sense of the almost innate relationship between the novel and this game theoretical model, and provides a further irony still, as Bledsoe actually misapplies the label of "defector" to the player who actually cooperates.



We know where all of this leaves the narrator as he begins the journey that culminates with his realization that he is "nobody but [him]self" (15). The final question to be addressed here is: where does the playing of the prisoner's dilemma leave us as the novel ends with the narrator's closing declarations on the principles of American democracy? Nicole A. Waligora-Davis refers to Ellison's "own nationalist project, his own rebirth of America: a dawning racial consciousness on the part of black Americans who not only must concede their invisibility in American society, but also must accept their history, a history that renders them responsible for realizing America's democratic promise" (397). Waligora-Davis's summary of the acceptance of both responsibility and invisibility as concomitant conditions for African Americans reiterates my initial introduction of the prisoner's dilemma into the analysis of *Invisible Man*. One must still make decisions, even if those decisions are nullified by the decisions of others. The narrator's decision to cooperate, by preparing to emerge from his hole as the novel ends, signals the beginning of the realization of the American democratic promise to which Waligora-Davis refers.⁷

If we know, as game theory tells us, that in a single iteration of the prisoner's dilemma one is always better off defecting, irrespective of what the other player does--in order to avoid receiving the sucker's payoff--then we also know that in an iterated prisoner's dilemma (multiple repetitions of the game), "you benefit from the other player's cooperation. The trick is to encourage that cooperation. A good way to do it is to make it clear that you will reciprocate. Words can help here, but as everyone knows, actions speak louder than words" (Axelrod 125). The model of American democracy that Ellison champions throughout his writing career encourages cooperation instead of defection. The

Stewart: *The Prisoner's Dilemma in Invisible Man...* 197

narrator explains his revelation at the end of the book, when he says, "in spite of myself I've learned some things" (579). What he has learned is that each of his antagonists may interact with him in a one-time fashion and may, as a result, defect. But his realization is: "It's 'winner take nothing' that is the great truth of our country or of any country. Life is to be lived, not controlled; and humanity is won by continuing to play in face of certain defeat" (577).⁸ This resolution explains the following assertion near the novel's conclusion: "There is, by the way, an area in which a man's feelings are more rational than his mind, and it is precisely in that area that his will is pulled in several directions at the same time" (573). Here, he is talking about the common good, an ideal that arises from the classic description of the prisoner's dilemma as well as from the nature of American democracy. Trueblood has rejected others' attempts to make him one thing or the other and is now comfortably grotesque, as Cassuto would have it. That is, Trueblood is living in between categories spawned by the ambivalence of the stereotype. Bledsoe uses the prisoner's dilemma as an opportunity to consolidate his attempts to be one thing, namely, a powerful man who is willing to contemplate even the most monstrous atrocity to maintain his position. But neither man is motivated by a sense of the common good like the narrator is. The narrator has learned that repetition, here repeated iterations of the prisoner's dilemma, *may* lead to what Ellison would later describe as the perfection of the American democracy, "the inclusion, *not* the assimilation, of the black man" (582). But again, the model is one of tension, not guarantee. The model of the prisoner's dilemma is particularly apt in relation to *Invisible Man* because it demonstrates that one might make a reasonable decision and the result may still be expulsion. In other words, the game is to encourage cooperation, which requires repeated interactions, even at the risk of being occasionally "Bledsoed."

The somewhat counterintuitive terminology of the prisoner's dilemma may be employed more intuitively in analyzing the political strategies that motivate what comes to be known--after Rosa Parks' decision--as the Civil Rights Movement. It is worth redeploying this terminology by way of conclusion. The problems posed by lexicon of the prisoner's dilemma begins with the connotations of "cooperation" and "defection." These two words suggest simultaneously cooperation with or defection from both the authorities and one's accomplice. It is the district attorney, after all, who will decide what penalties the

two prisoners receive, in the classic description of the dilemma, but this penalty is influenced by the choice each prisoner makes simultaneously. Neither wishes to receive the harshest available penalty, which is why each is tempted to defect from what is obviously the common good (mitigated punishments for both) irrespective of the other's decision.

But the terminology actually helps throw into sharp relief the actions of one previously unknown woman on one December day in 1955. It also explains the revelation that occurs to an unnamed narrator contemporaneous with Parks' decision at the end of his lengthy consideration of his place in twentieth-century America. Parks' decision to remain seated is clearly a defection, when considered in relation to the interests of the other player in this momentous iteration of the game theoretical model, the other player being J.F. Blake, the bus driver who demanded that Parks yield her seat to a white passenger. Blake similarly defects from Parks' interests, as evidenced by his requirement that she accede to the will of a system of rules intended to inscribe her own inferiority upon her. The prisoner's dilemma requires that there be some outside agent that determines the relative payoffs. In *Invisible Man*, that agent, implicitly, is Mr. Norton. Between Parks and Blake, the outside agent is the apparatus of Jim Crow segregation. Blake is not as vulnerable as Parks in this instance of the prisoner's dilemma because the infrastructure of Jim Crow has an interest that is inseparable from Blake's; whereas the hypothetical district attorney in Axelrod's model does not care who defects, the agent of the law in 1955 Birmingham certainly does. As Bhabha has made clear, repetition of the inferiority of the stereotyped object betrays an anxiety about the truth of the claims of inferiority in the first place. Therefore, it is paramount for Blake and the proponents for Jim Crow that Blake defect from Parks' interests, thus repeating the stereotyping claims. This anxiety is all the more apparent if we imagine Blake's vulnerability if he were to have sided with (cooperated with) Parks and allowed her to remain in her seat. If he cooperates with her, then he can expect the infrastructure of Jim Crow segregation to turn against him, with all of the severity that might befall a white man taking the side of a black woman.

But more important than her defection from the interests of J.F. Blake and the individual agents of Jim Crow is her *cooperation* with the "principle" that Ellison's narrator

extols at the end of *Invisible Man*. It is this principle that Irving Howe does not understand in "Black Boys and Native Sons," as he famously criticizes what he calls the "sudden, unprepared and implausible assertion of unconditioned freedom with which the novel ends" (113), and similarly which is often misunderstood or underestimated by those who criticize Ellison's politics.⁹

Ellison's narrator actually articulates the cause with which Parks cooperates, in contradistinction to the cause from which she defects, as he finally stumbles upon the meaning of his grandfather's enigmatic dying words: "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, or at least not the men who did the violence" (574). As he gains the rhetorical momentum that culminates his narrative, the narrator considers a number of options that all point to the recognition of the overarching principle with which all Americans are ultimately instructed to cooperate:

Or did he mean that we had to take the responsibility for all of it, for the men as well as the principle, because we were the heirs who must use the principle because no other fitted our needs? Not for the power or for vindication, but because we, with the given circumstance of our origin, could only thus find transcendence? Was it that we of all, we, most of all, had to affirm the principle, the plan in whose name we had been brutalized and sacrificed--not because we would always be weak nor because we were afraid or opportunistic, but because we were older than they, in the sense of what it took *to live in the world with others* and because they had exhausted in us, some--not much, but some--of the human greed and smallness, yes, and the fear and superstition that had kept them running. (Oh, yes, they're running too, running all over themselves.) (574, emphasis added)

As the narrator continues to figure out the mutual requirements within the American democracy, he articulates the necessity for cooperation to which Ellison returns repeatedly in his writing. As Lucas E. Morel notes: "In 1965, when Ellison gave [the interview published as 'A Very Stern Discipline'], integration was a highly charged political concept. Ellison deliberately used the word 'integration' to illustrate how profoundly he saw the connection between what he was doing in his stories and what others were doing in the streets for the Civil Rights Movement" (2). Put simply, integration is cooperation. The activism of cooperation with the principle is the model for the political strategies of the Civil Rights Movement.

The choice to act against type, to defect from the demands of the stereotype, carry with them the sort of destabilizing power that Cassuto sees in the grotesque, a power registered in David J. Garrow's description of the moment on the bus when Parks makes her statement. Once Blake says he will have her arrested, "Mrs. Parks told him to go right ahead, that she was not going to move. Blake said nothing more, but got off the bus and went to a phone. No one spoke to Mrs. Parks, and some passengers began leaving the bus, not wanting to be inconvenienced by the incident" (12). While Garrow focuses on the inconvenience of the other passengers, one can safely presume a high degree of anxiety at such a moment. When the stereotyped object refuses that stereotyping--defects--the destabilizing effect is palpable. The further point that all of this anxiety is caused by the decision of just one woman emphasizes once more the requirement to repeat the status of the stereotype as stereotype. Even a single defection from Jim Crow cannot be ignored.

By the end of *Invisible Man*, the narrator has been given every encouragement to defect from the principle, to act solely based on his own interests, as Bledsoe and Trueblood, in their different ways, do. James Seaton has written, in his article, "Affirming the Principle": "The narrator's willingness to allow readers to note the strengths as well as the failings of Bledsoe and Ras implies that he has incorporated the lessons he has learned in the course of the novel; his ultimate willingness to 'affirm the principle' is not a sentimental expression of naïve idealism, but a result of hard-won experience" (27). What he learns, and what Ellison wants his reader to realize, especially at a critical juncture in American history, is that the longer view of the American democracy requires cooperation and, more important, the encouragement of cooperation in others. This encouragement can obviously take many forms, and emerges from a specific moment in American history. In the end, the question is what interests citizens decide to cooperate with and defect from, recognizing that there are different payoffs that accompany each decision. *Invisible Man* signals the imperative of claiming one's rightful space within the workings of democracy. What is certain is that this claiming of space, this encouragement of cooperation, cannot be achieved through isolation, hibernation, or the refusal to play.

Notes

¹ The exchange between Barbara Foley and Brian Roberts, in *Journal of Narrative Theory*, situates Ellison's novel within the politics between the "late 1930s and the early 1950s" (Foley 229), while the present argument focuses on the prospective political implications of *Invisible Man*, looking forward from the publication of the novel in 1952, through to the events of the 1950s already mentioned, and then to the Civil Rights Movement of the late 1950s and 1960s.

² Ellison, Ralph. "The Shadow and the Act." [1949]. *The Collected Essays of Ralph Ellison*. Ed. John F. Callahan. Modern Library Edition. New York: Random House, 1995. 305. All references to Ellison's non-fiction are taken from this edition and noted parenthetically in the text.

³ I will insist, perhaps pedantically, upon calling the narrator "the narrator," and not "Invisible Man" as is often done, because to call him "Invisible Man" is still to name him and one of the crucial stylistic decisions Ellison makes in the novel is to leave this character unnamed.

⁴ The terms "temptation to defect," "reward for mutual cooperation," "punishment for mutual defection," and "sucker's payoff" emerge from Robert Axelrod's *The Evolution of Cooperation* (8). I rely heavily on both Axelrod's discussion and William Poundstone's *The Prisoner's Dilemma* for my understanding of the dilemma.

⁵ Leon Forrest, in "Luminosity from the Lower Frequencies," provides an extended explanation of this fool's errand:

For in the old South, a form of black baiting which had its genesis in slavery would proceed as follows: A Negro newcomer would arrive upon the scene, looking for gainful employment; he would go to a prospective white employer. This ordinary small-town white businessman would immediately spot the fact that this was not one of the local blacks and would tell the black outsider that he did not have work at this time but that he did know of someone who might have jobs available down the road, perhaps.

The white businessman would then give the horizon-seeking black a sealed letter to take to the next prospective employer. Upon reaching the next white man, the letter would be presented, opened by the white man, read and mused over, and then the Negro would hear the same old story--"no jobs" here but perhaps "up the road," and then the white merchant would scribble something on the note, reseal the communiqué (like the Negro's fate), and hand the letter back to the outreaching dark hand. This would happen again and again, until the black finally opened the letter and read the message, or got the message, and read out his symbolic fate (or some variation upon the theme): "To Whom It May Concern: Keep This Nigger-Boy Running." (278-79)

The extent of Bledsoe's duplicity is measured, then, by the fact that an anti-black game dating from the time of slavery is the particular fool's errand on which he sends the narrator.

⁶ Engaging with Bhabha's notion of mimicry in the colonial context, Hsu Hsuan characterizes the ambivalence of the stereotype in terms of double-binds:

Thus racism confronts its victims with a series of double-binds. The narcissistic relation alternately effaces racial specificities and imposes a crushing or hyper-aggressive consciousness of them. Similarly, the racial gaze renders black subjects both invisible and *too* visible within a given picture. On the one hand, blacks are seen as embodiments of stereotypically constructed differences (Pullman porters, tom-toms, tobacco plantations, etc.); on the other hand, they are overlooked as subjects with the capacity to actively define their relation to their own historicity. (115)

Like Bhabha's catalogue of ambivalences, Hsuan also points up the inherent instability at the heart of these racial constructs.

⁷ In "Notes on the Invisible Women in Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man*," Claudia Tate predicts "that the Invisible Man's efforts to leave the underground, though valiant, will be aborted time and time again, since he has no mother to give him birth. The womb that encases him cannot deliver him to the aboveground region" (265). Tate's provocative reading overlooks the fact that the narrator knows his reemergence may not work out positively, but he must reemerge, cooperate with the principle, anyway.

⁸ This resolution echoes that of another early twentieth-century intellectual whose legacy is marked by his willingness to work against the grain of his time, George Orwell, who writes in one of his "As I Please" columns, from November 29, 1946: "I think one must continue the political struggle, just as a doctor must try to save the life of a patient who is probably going to die" (IV, 248-49).

⁹ In his prologue to *Ralph Ellison and the Raft of Hope*, Morel provides examples of some of the main positions with respect to Ellison's politics. Regarding Ellison's politics in general, I am inclined to agree with Morel's statement: "*Invisible Man* represents 'political hope' in at least two ways: first, by what the narrator is able to learn and teach through his own journey *up* the river to freedom and enlightenment: second, by what the novel as a novel conveys about Ellison's demonstration of the freedom and possibilities available to black Americans, white Americans, and human beings, simply, when faced with barriers to their development as individuals." (8)

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Stewart: *The Prisoner's Dilemma in Invisible Man*... 203

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Prisoner's Dilemma in *Invisible Man*

Table 1

	Prisoner A cooperates	Prisoner A defects
Prisoner B cooperates	3, 3 Reward for mutual cooperation	5, 0 Temptation to defect, Sucker's payoff
Prisoner B defects	0, 5 Sucker's payoff, Temptation to defect	1, 1 Punishment for mutual defection

Prisoner's Dilemma in *Invisible Man*

Table 2

	IM cooperates	IM defects
Bledsoe cooperates	IM accepts blame-3 B accepts blame-3	IM accepts no blame-5 B accepts blame-0
Bledsoe defects	IM accepts blame-0 B accepts no blame-5	IM accepts no blame-1 B accepts no blame-1