

American Racism and the Legacy of Slavery: Ralph Ellison's Struggle to "Tell It Like It Is"

Ralph Ellison's essay "Tell It Like It Is, Baby," details Ellison's intellectual struggle to confront the reality of American racism and the legacy of slavery. In the first part of his essay, Ellison explains that a letter he received from a childhood friend named Virgil forced him to confront these heavy, oppressive topics. Virgil seeks information and insight from Ellison regarding recent political events concerning African Americans, and he lists a series of questions that he wants Ellison to answer. Most of his questions relate to some aspect of the contemporary black experience, and Virgil concludes by asking Ellison to "Tell a man how it is." Ellison describes his struggle to answer Virgil's letter; ultimately, he failed to complete the task on his first try. Ellison could not satisfactorily respond to Virgil in a way that addressed the complexity of the answers to his questions. Ellison is unable to forget the letter, and the unfinished task haunted him for years. Ellison goes on to explain that finally, after nearly ten years of contemplation, he has completed his "real" response to Virgil. And so, in "Tell It Like It Is, Baby," Ellison provides his thoughts on American racism by describing an intricate dream that transcends multiple locations, time periods, and scenes. So how can the dream, and by implication Ellison's thoughts, be interpreted? Surprisingly, the answer is not obvious. The dream is extraordinarily complex and allows for many interpretations of its meaning. However, even though the essay is not easily translated, we can generate hypotheses that begin to unravel the meaning of Ellison's analysis. One hypothesis connects Ellison's obsession over fatherhood to his analysis of the American government. As the deeper meaning of Ellison's dream unfolds, his fixation with masculinity prevents him from including a female perspective in his dream.¹

¹ Ellison, Ralph. (1969). *Tell it like it is, baby*. (pp. 29-46).

The dream, which consists of six major scenes, is terrifying, visceral, chaotic, absurd, irrational, and at times contradictory. The dream opens with Ellison walking down a street in Oklahoma, expecting to meet his deceased father. But the meeting never occurs, and Ellison is devastated. The dream shifts location to Washington D.C., and Ellison finds himself walking down the street with an agitated crowd. The mob carries a body, and the sight of the corpse triggers Ellison's memory and lurches him into a new dream within his dream. This time, he is at the hospital visiting his sick father for the last time. After reliving the time shortly before and after his father's death, Ellison is shifted back to the mob scene in Washington D.C. He realizes that the mob carries the corpse of Abraham Lincoln, and he is forced to watch the mob brutally defile Lincoln's body for entertainment. In one final shift in perception, Ellison is suddenly watches the scene from the outside as if he was looking at a movie screen. He is then transported back into the scene and finds himself and the Negro pallbearers looking into a large hole in the ground. The dream ends cryptically after Ellison sees the crowd from earlier at the bottom of the hole "sitting at a table making a ghoulish meal of some frightful thing that a white sheet hid from view" (44).

Ellison's dream directly responds to Virgil's questions. First Virgil asks, "What are you doing over there in Rome with all of those Italians?" Ellison left America to live abroad at the time Virgil wrote him, and Ellison's dream provides many insights into the psychological condition that pushed him to live outside of the U.S. One possible answer to Virgil's question is that Ellison wishes to distance himself from the sense of loss and failure associated with being black in the midst of American racism and the legacy of slavery. In the first scene of the dream, Ellison is suddenly filled with "expectations of pleasantness," and he intuitively realizes he is on his way to meet his deceased father (33). However, as he walks towards a man he expects to be

his dad, the man becomes a stranger. This part of the scene is filled with a sense of loss, broken promises, and a sense of personal failure. Ellison feels as though he “had lost something precious” (33). He blames himself, wondering, “What had I failed to do?” The sense of loss and personal failure generated by this scene continues throughout the rest of the dream and characterizes the black experience Ellison depicts. Ellison may be generating these sentiments to describe the frustration with being treated as a second-class citizen. In the context of the essay as a whole, which portrays a failure of the American political system to uphold promises Lincoln made to blacks, one could argue that Ellison’s answer to why he has left America is that his experiences in America have only given him a sense of loss, failure, and broken promises. His experiences have been so negative that he would rather live abroad than in the United States.

Ellison uses his weak position in his dream to show racism’s inescapable force on black life: no matter how blacks behave, work, or live their lives, they will always be judged critically through the lens of racism. Ellison points out in his dream that even hard work and achievement do not earn blacks respect or equality in American society. In the dream, as the crowd continues to tear Lincoln apart, Ellison is suddenly becomes a slave child wearing a loincloth. This retrogressive image conveys an overwhelming sense of disenfranchisement; Ellison is rendered powerless by his extremely young age as well as his position as a slave which is the ultimate representation of oppression and subordination. Ellison’s new image conveys persistent racial stereotypes that continued to define blacks in American society. Ellison realizes that he is “literate, a slave who could read” (37). Just as in his real life, Ellison has distinguished accomplishments that indicate his remarkable talent and respectability. However, in American society, no matter how many incredible achievements he earns, he is defined within the context of his race. This is another confinement that racism imposes on his identity. No matter how

impressive or talented he is, at the end of the day, he will be seen and treated as a young black slave boy.

Ellison's constant powerlessness emphasizes the lack of agency blacks experience in a society infiltrated with American racism. This is likely also a reason he chose to live abroad. One example of Ellison's lack of agency is his jealousy of other blacks who are allowed to remove themselves from the horrific mob scene:

“The four negroes were again beaten... then sent fleeing into the darkness. I tried to follow them, but was quickly restrained. *But why not me*, I thought, *Why not me as well?* For I wished to join them in their forced detachment, I envied them their anonymity, their freedom to *not* participate. But my brown skin and slave's garment notwithstanding, I was held and forced to the front of the crowd.” (40).

In this scene, Ellison wishes to remove himself from the mob, but he is forced to stay against his will. Later in the same mob scene, Ellison watches in horror as the crowd transforms Lincoln's body into the Happy Hooligan cartoon character. In the process, the crowd grotesquely manipulates and contorts Lincoln's body. After the transformation is complete, “the Negroes were forced to put the body upon it [the railway wagon] and then made to pull it through the cursing, flailing crowd” (40). A crowd member yells out a racially charged slur at the Negroes, and even though Ellison's anger is visceral, he is paralyzed with inaction: “I wanted to kill him along with all the callous crowd, but was too powerless *and* too fascinated, too held by horror and the anguished need to see it ended” (40). One may have expected Ellison's dream to allow him to exercise more agency, control, and power since his own mind was in control of the narrative. At the least, it seems like a dream would be an opportunity to escape an oppressive reality. Ellison's experience is diametrically opposed to that assumption. The daily oppression

he endures is so corrosive that it has eaten its way into every level of his reality, even his subconscious. Even though this scene is his own dream, he cannot make his own decisions about where he wants to be. Ellison cannot act out against the mob in any way; he can do nothing but watch in horror as the scene unfolds. The powerlessness Ellison feels through most of the dream demonstrates the extent to which blacks are intentionally disenfranchised by the American social and political structures. Outside of his dream, where he had more control over his position, perhaps Ellison was exercising his “freedom to not participate” (40) by relocating himself outside of the American political system.

Another possible answer to why Ellison is in Rome is to escape the violent barbarism of American racism. In the dream, the crowd personifies the ideology of American racism. The mob is violent, irrational, unpredictable, and shockingly destructive. The crowd viciously defiles Lincoln’s body with an unending hunger: “They were insatiable...not even the ultimate protest of decomposing flesh could halt them” (38-43). Ellison is horrified as he watches individuals fight to rip Lincoln’s clothes off and compete to grotesquely distort the corpse. One part of the crowd’s performance was a “contest... to see who could kick the corpse into the most fantastic positions” (41). The brutal violence of the mob combined with Ellison’s powerlessness to stop the mob creates an atmosphere of paralyzing terror. The scene’s atmosphere conveys the multifaceted horror of American racism which destroys black life and well-being. Ellison’s description of the mob conveys the terrorizing effect of racism on black life. Blacks were forced to live in a society that posed a constant threat to their safety. It is understandable that when faced with such an oppressive force, Ellison would elect to live elsewhere.

Next, Virgil wants to know if Ellison is “keeping up with what’s happening here at home” (29). Ellison’s response seems to answer with the question: how could he *not* be? Even

though Ellison has physically distanced himself from the United States, it becomes increasingly clear through his dream that his experiences in the U.S. are still very much a part of his conscience, identity, and humanity. Ellison's dream is solely focused on American racial politics. The content of the dream seems to suggest that Ellison's struggle to distance himself from American racism was futile; even though he has control over his physical proximity to the United States, he has little control over his perspective. This exasperation is demonstrated in the dream by his inability to control the content of his dream as well as his sudden and uncontrollable shift between perspectives:

“Now I was no longer a child. The scene became a scene on a movie screen, which I was watching from a distance and with a feeling of utmost clarity, as though I grasped the mystery of all experience. Then, just as suddenly, I was in the scene again, only now the mysterious Negroes were resting on their spades around a great hole” (44).

Similarly, Ellison demonstrates a shift in perspective when the mob first confronts him. He sees Lincoln's body, which seems “familiar,” and he is transported into another dream as he moves “forward with a feeling of dread, thinking, ‘It's happening again’” (35). Ellison's aggravating fluctuation between perspectives could represent his frustrating experience with a shift in perspectives in real life.

Virgil's final and most important question is for Ellison to “Tell a man how it is,” which Ellison primarily answers through themes and images of fatherhood (29). Ellison's struggle with losing his father is explored in nearly every scene. Why was this important for Ellison to emphasize fatherhood in his answer to Virgil? Ellison uses his relationship with his father as a metaphor for African Americans' relationship with the American political system. In many ways, a political system parallels the role of a father for its citizens. Like a father, a polity should offer

protection, loyalty, belonging, and safety. Ellison's struggle with fatherlessness reflects the enduring hardships suffered by African Americans who are abandoned by a parental political figure that had promised guidance, protection, and nourishment. However, African Americans are not afforded these benefits; they were abandoned by U.S. political system.

Ellison's metaphor also explores how these tainted relationships adversely affect the psyche and individual development of the people they affect. Ellison lost his father at a young age, and his fatherlessness profoundly affects his identity and personal development. He constantly worries that growing up without a dad means he will be "fatally flawed and doomed" in countless areas of his life (36). Ellison's sense of abandonment and consequential struggle for manhood mirrors African Americans' exclusion from the American political system and subsequent struggle for full citizenship and equality. Using this metaphor enables Ellison to explore the deeply personal effects of American racism on black life. In the same way that Ellison considers his damaged relationship with his father as integral to understanding his own identity, he sees the deficient relationship between American legal, political, and social institutions and African Americans is crucial in understanding the black experience in the wake of American racism and slavery.

Ellison's emphasis on fatherhood begins in the first scene when Ellison suddenly senses that something meaningful is about to happen. He is "filled with the expectation of some pleasantness, some long-looked for reward," and he intuitively realizes he is going to see his father (32). Ellison yearns for this meeting; he has been questioning his own identity since his father died, and the meeting would be an opportunity for Ellison to seek approval and advice from his father. Unfortunately, the meeting never occurs. If this scene is examined as a metaphorical representation of the greater African American political experience, the long

awaited “expectation of some pleasantness” occurring at the beginning of the dream beautifully captures the sentiments of African Americans and the expectation for the African American political situation after the emancipation of slavery. If this reward is examined in the context of the political relationship of African Americans to the United States political system, the “reward” blacks are expecting could be freedom and subsequent legal, political, and social integration into American society (32).

Ellison’s “long-looked for reward” has much broader meanings when examined within the context of African American history; it represents the initial promise of freedom and equality from the American government followed by decades of discrimination and second-class citizenship. When the Emancipation Proclamation went into effect, slavery had existed in the United States for over 200 years. Freedom had been “long-looked for” and was finally delivered, and this huge advancement for African American human rights seemed like the first of many steps that would take place to begin to correct injustices of slavery. As such, African Americans were “filled with the expectation” that they would be treated as free American citizens. This expectation was reaffirmed initially by the government’s advocacy projects during Reconstruction that assisted blacks by granting full citizenship, giving legal protection, and transitioning them into society with the Freedman’s Bureau. Unfortunately, in many ways the U.S. government failed to uphold their commitment to protecting black political freedom and equality. The Freedman’s Bureau was shut down prematurely, and state governments often undermined constitutional amendments that were passed to grant blacks legal rights. For example, the 15th amendment gave black men the right to vote, but state governments often tried to impede blacks from exercising this right by instituting measures like literacy tests. Literacy tests were notoriously confusing and difficult to pass. One Louisiana literacy test had thirty

questions that needed to be completed within ten minutes. The test taker had to get every single question correct to pass the test. The directions warn, “be careful as one wrong answer denotes failure of the test”. Alabama’s literacy test included questions like “Name the attorney general of the United States,” and “If a person charged with treason denies his guilt, how many persons must testify against him to prove his guilt?”² Blacks were also disenfranchised by rigid segregation. The Jim Crow south institutionalized race separation in Southern towns and brutally enforced rigid social rules that prevented blacks and whites from interacting. Under this system, blacks were denied equal access to public spaces and goods, and they were also denied equal protection under the law even though this right had been constitutionally granted to them. Ellison articulates blacks’ disillusionment with the United States government when it failed to treat them as fully free and equal citizens. The betrayed relationship between blacks and the political system is critical to understanding black life in the United States.

Ellison reiterates the connection between familial and political fatherhood by comparing his father to Abraham Lincoln, a prominent political leader greatly involved with African Americans’ rights and political freedoms. In the dream, Ellison’s forced confrontation with Lincoln’s corpse evokes the same emotions he felt when his father died. Lincoln’s image triggered Ellison’s most emotional memory about his own father (35). His emotional reactions to each of the deaths are so related that the first time that Ellison sees Lincoln’s body in the dream, his memory jars him to a new scene in the hospital where he last saw his father alive. As the scene unfolds, another parallel between the two men’s deaths is revealed; Ellison’s father was never buried because his mother could not afford it (35). This bothers Ellison even years later. Ellison is both sad and ashamed that his father was left unburied. Similarly, the crowd’s

² *Alabama, louisiana literacy test.* (2010). Retrieved from <http://www.crmvet.org/info/lithome.htm>

treatment of Lincoln's body horrifies Ellison. Lincoln, like Ellison's father, never receives a proper burial. Instead, the frenzied mob disgracefully rips Lincoln apart.

The notable similarities between Lincoln and his father demonstrate Ellison's conscious effort to construct his personal experience as a metaphorical representation of African Americans' struggle with American racism. The similarities between Ellison's father and Lincoln indicate a possibility that Lincoln is a father-like figure to African Americans. However, as with his own father, this pseudo-fatherly relationship is riddled with complexities and imperfections. Personally, Ellison struggles with feelings of abandonment and crippling fear about his ability to become a man. Ellison's struggle with these multifaceted emotions reflects a comparable complexity in the relationship between blacks and Lincoln. On the one hand, Lincoln issued the Emancipation Proclamation that freed slaves in the South during the Civil War. On the other hand, Lincoln never saw himself as an advocate for African Americans, nor did he act as one. Some of his comments during the Lincoln-Douglas debates are undeniably racist. For Ellison and other blacks, this dynamic complicated their feelings towards Lincoln. In the essay, Ellison fluctuates between characteristics of regality and grotesqueness when describing Lincoln, allowing him to articulate the ambivalence that he feels towards Lincoln. Thus, through scenes of political fatherhood and paternal fatherhood, Ellison successfully answers the last of Virgil's questions, but only in part.

After years of consideration, Ellison was able to construct a satisfactory response to Virgil's questions because he finally pinpointed a technique that would allow for the full expression of the "bafflingly complex" nature of American racism and the legacy of slavery. Ellison is able to respond to the complexity of these issues by using an equally complex form—a dream-- to construct the essay. More specifically, this form allows him to communicate

inexpressible features of the problem at hand. An example is Lincoln's ambivalence and his relationship with blacks. The dream also brilliantly expresses the absurdity and tragedy of race relations in America in a way that normal prose would fail to capture. Dreams can be irrational, delusional, illogical, and based on fears and emotion. Using a dream as a medium to describe his reaction to racial politics in the United States reveals that Ellison thought American racism shared dream-like qualities; both are irrational, delusional, illogical, and based on fears and emotion rather than reason.

It may not be immediately apparent to the reader that Ellison is systematically answering Virgil's questions through describing his dream. One could argue that Ellison's response to Virgil should not even qualify as "answering" his questions because he delivers his response in such a convoluted and unclear manner. However, Ellison could not respond to Virgil in a matter-of-fact manner if he wanted to genuinely answer his questions. Ellison could have answered Virgil in a clear and direct manner if the topic of discussion was simple, clear, and easy to talk about. However, American racism is none of those things. The experience of growing up as a black man under relentless and inescapable American racism is so complex, confusing, terrifying, and irrational that it would be impossible to use normal prose to describe and discuss its nature.

Even though Ellison explores many intricacies of American racism and the legacy of slavery, there is a component of the black experience that he fails to represent. The female experience is neither valued nor included in the essay, and Ellison is misogynistic in some areas of the text. There are several critiques that could be made regarding Ellison's portrayal of women in the essay. Ellison always characterizes women in an overwhelmingly negative fashion.

Secondly, Ellison's choice of imagery, plot content, metaphors, and symbolism are hyper-masculine. Finally, Ellison's essay omits any type of female perspective.

Ellison's derisive diction is a recurring element in his descriptions of women in the dream; he tends to use words with evil connotations like "sinister," "vicious," and "wrathful." Ellison encounters several female strangers throughout his dream. His characterizations of these women are noticeably negative. Ellison goes out of his way to characterize women as sexual predators or monsters. In one part of the mob scene, Lincoln encounters an unstable crazy woman who is "hysterically screaming like a great tropical bird." The woman "sniffed solemnly at a bottle of smelling salts" and proceeds to taunt Ellison who is convinced she is intentionally trying to aggravate him. Her movements are sporadic and abnormal; she "bent double, then back" as she laughed, and Ellison describes her scent as "female senility laced with threat and mystery" (41). This woman's actions are so over the top that she comes off as a caricature. She has no redemptive qualities. Ellison's grotesque portrayal of women minimizes their role to revolting entertainment. Ellison's misogyny is even seen in the smallest details of the text. As Ellison moves through a crowd, he "became aware of the strangely sinister, high-frequency swishing of women's skirts" (34). It is striking that he characterizes anything he associates with females as menacing, even a sound.

In addition to Ellison's commitment to portraying all females in a negative light, masculinity permeates every feature of the essay including imagery, themes, and symbolism. Ellison constantly uses phallic imagery in the dream. In the opening scene, he walks over "a horde of catalpa worms" being eaten by birds. The worms "were everywhere, the walk smeared green and white with their pulp and skin" (32). At the beginning of the next scene, Ellison passes a "tall, equestrian statue" in the middle of a public square. The rider's face is victorious, but his

“saber had lost three-fourths of its blade” (33). Further into the dream as the crowd is moving through the streets, Ellison sees “the Washington Monument, seeming to break through the floor of a barren plain like a periscope from the sea, rushing to meet us. There we were there, at the base of the austere shaft, where the four Negroes were again beaten to a halt and made to lay their burden on the grass, then sent fleeing into the darkness” (40). The worms, the rider’s sword, and the Washington Monument are overtly phallic. Interestingly, the phallic imagery in every scene is distorted in some way. The worms are smeared onto the sidewalk, the sword has been broken, and the monument stands over a scene in which Ellison has no agency or control. The distortion of these phallic images may represent emasculation. One could argue that this is closely linked with Ellison’s overwhelming concern with developing his manhood in the absence of his father. As mentioned previously, Ellison’s concern with his manhood parallels African Americans’ struggle for citizenship and agency within the American political system. The emasculated imagery, then, reflects the lack of power and agency Ellison and blacks experience at the hands of American racism.

Surprisingly, Ellison’s portrayal of his mother continues this trend of disrespect towards women. Ellison only mentions his mother in one scene in the dream even though she raised him as a single mother. Even though his father was not there to help his mother, Ellison still credits his father for giving his mother all of her strength (36). Ellison does not speak to any extra personal struggles his mother had to endure while raising two young boys on her own after her husband died. Instead, he criticizes her for mishandling his father’s death. He learned years after the fact that when his father died, “difficulties with money and the weather caused his [the father’s] body to be withheld from burial until it stank in the dark back room of the funeral parlor. Such was her [mother’s] respect for the naked reality of the human condition” (35). This

resentful and snide remark seems out of place since the body was left there as a result of financial constraints, not as a result of laziness or apathy. It seems as though the body being left in the morgue has little to do with his mother's sense of respect for the human condition as Ellison suggests, and much more to do with the family's financial situation.

Since Ellison is so concerned with the effect of not having a father will have on his own identity, one may wonder why Ellison does not place any value in his relationship with his mother, who nurtured and raised him after his father's death. Did his mother have no positive effect on his development? Ellison spends quite a bit of time anguishing over fatherhood and its affect on his personal development, but he gives no merit whatsoever to motherhood, which is arguably just as important to a child's growth and maturity. Even though his mother raised him on her own, Ellison characterizes the father as the more important parental role. Ellison valued fatherhood, fathers, and men significantly more than their female counterparts. When examined side by side, Ellison's disrespectful and dismissive attitude towards his mother juxtaposed with his obsession over his father illustrates the extremity of difference in his attitude towards each sex.

An additional implication of Ellison's description of parenthood is that he marginalizes the significance of motherhood to the black experience. Ellison never indicates any appreciation for motherhood or the positive ways motherhood impacts society. Contrastingly, he constructs fatherhood as a vitally important element of a black child's development; he sees it as so crucial to a normal life experience that he even uses fatherhood as a metaphor to describe the U.S. government and its tragic abandonment of one of its children, the African American population. When Ellison's description of each parental role is examined side by side, it becomes abundantly clear that Ellison does not attach nearly any value to this particular female role, especially

compared to the value he attaches to fatherhood. Again, this representation marginalizes the significance of female life experiences.

Ellison omits any valid female perspective from his conception of the black experience. The only female perspective he comes close to representing is his mother's, but he ultimately criticizes her judgment. The other women in the dream are crazy, angry, sex puppets, or inadequate. The plot, imagery, themes, and symbolism of the essay are all male-oriented. In addition to masculine imagery, the themes of the essay function within an entirely masculine framework where everything is discussed within the context of manhood and fatherhood. Male figures and male relationships dominate all aspects of the essay; female figures are criticized, and female relationships are devalued. As discussed earlier, Ellison defines the black experience by equating it to his search for manhood. In doing so, he portrays the black experience as entirely masculine and entirely omits the experience of half of the African American population.

Does Ellison have good reason to marginalize women in the essay? To consider this point, one might look at the function of women in the text. It can be argued that since Ellison explores American political failures through the context of fatherhood and manhood, it would be unnecessary to incorporate any concepts or imagery related to females into his analysis. Another defense of Ellison's misogyny could be that one of Ellison's most important goals in the text is to capture the grotesque essence of American racism, and his portrayal of women is a technique to establish that atmosphere.

However, Ellison's choice to exclude positive portrayals of femininity or a feminine viewpoint is problematic if his essay is meant to speak for the entire black population. An obvious consequence of a limited perspective is the exclusion of other equally valid arguments and perspectives. Using the male black experience as the default experience flippantly denies

that the black female experience is different in some ways than the male black experience. Omitting any female perspective from the essay is problematic because leaves out a crucial aspect of the female black experience: constant vulnerability to sexual violence. Sexual violation of black women was an institutionalized practice of slavery and the Jim Crow era. This constant threat informed the psyche and life experiences of black women. One could argue that acknowledgement of subjugation to sexual violence is crucial to understanding the essence of the black experience because this sexual violation of black women was an integral part of maintaining the white power structure. Either way, Ellison's misogyny does not make his commentary any less interesting or less important; it is just worthwhile to note that this essay does not speak for black women, and extra consideration needs to be taken to examine their additions to the conception of a black experience.

Ironically, by marginalizing the female experience in his narrative of American race relations, Ellison accurately represents a historical truth about the magnitude of discrimination against black women. Black women even endured discrimination within the black community where they struggled for agency. Black women were routinely denied leadership roles within the black community; this even held true for political movements they contributed to like the Civil Rights Movement. The exclusion of women cannot be dismissed as a mistake or coincidence; there were competent female activists ready and willing to donate their efforts to the movement. Black female interests were routinely excluded from political discussions within the black community and the broader American polity. Rosa Parks famously refused to give up her spot on a bus and she was subsequently claimed as a representative of the civil rights cause. However, a recently discovered essay written by Rosa Parks brings to light that Parks was actually first and foremost an anti-rape activist, not an anti-segregation activist as our cultural folklore has

constructed her to be. She was a lifelong advocate against the institutionalized violence and sexual assault of black women practiced under Jim Crow.³ It is telling that Parks is widely celebrated as a hero in American culture, but her authentic political motives as a women's rights activist are not widely known or discussed. The misrepresentation of Parks' goals is indicative of the routine marginalization of black women in American society. The voices of black women were routinely hushed or silenced, and their interests were excluded from political discussions. Ellison's male-centric essay inadvertently testifies to the pervasive prejudice black women faced within their own racial community, and it also reveals an unexpected similarity between Ellison and Lincoln. Ellison mimics Lincoln's ambivalence. In the essay, Ellison describes the ambivalent nature of Lincoln; he is both regal and grotesque. Ellison also fluctuates between intellectual brilliance and grotesqueness. Ellison's brilliance lies in his intellectual ability to describe ideas whose complexities transcend words and basic rationality (like American racism and the legacy of slavery). On the other hand, Ellison grotesqueness manifests in the prevalent misogyny of the essay.

How does Ellison justify using a dream to tell Virgil about reality? Dreams are confusing and bizarre, but they still instinctually represent some deeper truth. In order to "Tell a man how it is," Ellison specifically explores the personal emotional agony caused by American racism. It would be impossible to authentically represent the psychological terror of American racism with normal prose. Ellison's use of a dream to "Tell it like it is" represents the reality of the situation through blacks' personal experiences with American racism. His dream does not hand-feed the reader background information like normal prose might. Instead, Ellison inserts the reader into

³ Danielle L. McGuire. (2010). *At the dark end of the street: Black women, rape, and resistance--a new history of the civil rights movement from rosa parks to the rise of black power*. New York: Knopf.

his own personal experiences with American racism and the legacy of slavery. Visualizing Ellison's experiences, the reader encounters and confronts the visceral fear and agony that plagues every black life.

A dream inherently conveys the chaos and randomness of the situation as well. Ellison's journey to comprehend and articulate the horror of American racism and the legacy of slavery is guided by Virgil's reasonable and straightforward questions about being black in the United States. By using a dream to intellectually respond to an academic question, Ellison emphatically denies that there is a shred of logic or rationality in American racism; it is so inherently absurd and irrational that he can only represent it authentically with a form that is out of touch with reality. Ellison's dream also displays how American racism's destruction permeates every single level of human life. It corrodes political commitments, community cohesion, family relationships, and the subconscious of each individual living in this reality. Ellison uses his own relationships to demonstrate the destruction that American racism has caused in countless areas of his life.

Ellison was not the first author to live in Rome while writing literature with the helpful guidance of a friend named Virgil. Dante Alighieri famously penned his account of his journey through hell in Inferno. Ellison's essay draws on this tradition and is meant to portray American racism and the legacy of slavery as a contemporary version of hell. Instead of Dante's ordered universe where every human has an ordered place, this nightmarish state is defined by violence, chaos, and disorder. In this way, Ellison attacks the logic of American society; it is defined by its irrationality.