

*Ras in Invisible Man*

Ras the Exhorter/Destroyer is a Black nationalist who Ellison uses as a foil to the unnamed protagonist. Throughout the novel, the two men stand almost in direct opposition to each other. From the beginning, the narrator endeavors to be the consummate Black citizen, whose progress and advancement is rooted in humility and subservience to whites. He expresses as much in his high school graduation speech and demonstrates it through his efforts to be model student, dutiful employee, and loyal member of the Brotherhood. Ras, on the other hand, is an unapologetic segregationist, who advocates for an autonomous Black diaspora. I think it's easy to write off Ras as a violent extremist who is single-mindedly driven by his hate for white people. While there is truth in that perspective, readers would be remiss to base their entire understanding of Ras merely on that which he opposes. One must consider the underlying convictions that drive his beliefs and actions.

For better or for worse, Ras, at his core, is a man who loves and honors his people. A charismatic orator, robed in a sort of righteous anger, he rallies Blacks to form their own, separate nation. He does not support the integration or cooperation of separate races and believes that Blacks can only recognize their full potential when they are completely free from white influence and oppression. His focus on separation and self-reliance as the only means to Black advancement is part of the reason why he so hates the Brotherhood. They are a multiracial group that purports to strive for equality of all people, regardless of race. It's important to note, though, that Ras' burning anger toward and hatred of the Brotherhood does not supersede or override his strong sense of principle. We witness this during his violent scuffle with Brother Clifton, during which Ras declares: "Mahn, I ought to kill you. Godahm, I ought to kill you and the world be better off. But you black, mahn. Why you be black,

mahn? I swear I ought to kill you. No mahn strike the Exhorter, godahmit, no mahn” (Ellison 370)! Though Ras hates Clifton, viewing him as a traitor to his race for working with whites, he does not allow himself to kill Clifton, because Clifton is Black. This instance of self-restraint is easy to overlook, but it’s an important trait to acknowledge, especially for a character who is repeatedly described and is easy to write off as wild, fractious, and savage. Though it may not seem like it at first blush, he does, in fact, operate within a set of laws and morals, albeit self-governed, that prioritizes the Black race and prohibits him from harming a fellow Black man.

As far as fears, Ras professes, in no uncertain terms, not to have any. “Ras is not ignorant, nor is Ras afraid. No! Ras, he be here black and fighting for the liberty of the black people when the white folks have got what they wahnt and done gone off laughing in your face and you stinking and choked up with white maggots” (368). However, I think the very thing for which he fights belies his chief concern, which is that Blacks will remain blind to whites’ suppression and mockery of them. As a result, they are destined to be forever relegated to the bottom rungs of society, unable to escape their suffering or to secure their independence and freedom from the dominant culture.

I’m honestly not entirely sure how Ras brings about the final crisis of the novel. My best guess is that despite his seemingly unwavering sense of self and identity and his laser focused objective of uplifting Blacks, he just ends up being a pawn in a much larger game. The riot he incites works to harm his people rather than help them. Ras the Exhorter officially changes his name to Ras the Destroyer and that’s exactly what he wrought: destruction. In the midst of the chaos, the narrator has an epiphany. He wonders:

“Could this be the answer, could this be what the committee had planned, the answer to why they’d surrendered our influence to Ras? ...It was suicide, without guns it was suicide ... I knew with a shattering dread ... I could see it now, see it clearly and in growing magnitude. It was not suicide, but murder. The committee had planned it. And I had helped, had been a tool” (553).

Through the narrator and Ras, we come to understand that acquiescence and malignant coercion, though they may appear to be opposite paths, can yield equally harmful results.

Works Cited

Ellison, Ralph. *Invisible Man*. New York: Vintage International, 1995.