

“Ralph Ellison and the Politics of White Liberalism”  
Roger L. Noyes  
State University of New York at Plattsburgh  
(2004)

Ralph Ellison’s landmark novel *Invisible Man* represents an important break from the “protest” tradition of Richard Wright. The difference in Ellison’s work is that he focused not on the brutalities of racism but, more subtly, upon problematic social relations in which race is a salient factor. His artistic critiques turned to the concerns of intraracial relations and, perhaps more boldly, to the attitudinal conflicts of white liberals in social interactions with African-Americans. This paper examines, through Ellison’s use of character development, white liberal attitudes that in many instances encourage black misbehavior – foremost out of “white guilt” for past racism and, secondly, because of the lure of financial or psychosexual benefits.

The essay also studies Ellison’s skilled command of irony, which he employed in ways that show how such versions of liberalism (despite their seeming opposition to racism) look to “black rage” or misbehavior as the only legitimate social reality for blacks, and, so, impose one-dimensional subjectivities upon multi-form human identities in the way that the notion of “invisibility” is patterned throughout *Invisible Man*. The paper links Ellison’s work to contemporary discussions of liberal ambivalence, as examined in the works of Cornel West and Gordon MacInnes. It also shows how even on the level of art criticism, Ellison’s intellectual brush with the critic Irving Howe typifies white liberals’ regard of black subjectivity.