

The Prologue

Chronologically occurs after the 25 chapter of the book

- A direct address to sensitize the reader to what he/she will read—gives you the effect of the events of chapters 1-25 before you learn about the events themselves.
- Causes reader to ask “what happened that led to this?”

Retrospective first person narrator

- You’ll need to note the marked difference between this “I”—the retrospective, older narrator—and the “I” of chapters 1-25—the younger, participating character.

Motifs of the novel are introduced in the Prologue:

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| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Invisibility • Sight/Insight—Light/Darkness (Truth) • Identity • Alienation | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Freedom • Spiral of History • “Boomeranging” • Significance of music |
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Invisibility

- sociological and psychological—not supernatural
- failure to be recognized precipitates violent behavior to prove your existence—seldom successfully
- argues that dreamers and sleepers can’t see reality

Hibernation

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| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Underground retreat near Harlem, though not in it • 1,369 light bulbs | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “A hibernation is a covert preparation for more overt action.” • Admission of irresponsibility—irresponsibility as denial |
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Non-naturalistic elements

- Ellison commented on his prologue that he wanted to “throw the reader off-balance” and prepare him/her to accept certain non-naturalistic effects.”
- These non-naturalistic effects enable the reader to experience the aesthetic equivalent of the sharpened and sensitized perceptions that IM’s acceptance of his invisibility has given him. His heightened perceptions give him, as he says, “a slightly different sense of time.”
- The reefer-induced dream is an example—involves ideas of blackness both making and unmaking you, ambivalence of black emotions towards whites, freedom.

Allusions

- To Plato’s “Allegory of the Cave” (use of light as enlightenment)
- To Dante and his Inferno (“... descended like Dante into its depths”)
- To Louis Armstrong and the song “(What Did I Do) to Be So Black and Blue”

Punning—“What did I do to be so black and blue?”

Time

- element of time speeds up, slows down
- changes in “mood and tempo”

The Battle Royal-Chapter 1

Chronology

- Flashback “some twenty years earlier”
- Rite of passage—high school graduation—passage from adolescence to maturity

The narrator

- Young, naïve, taught to stay in his place
- Searching for identity
- Believes that “humility is the essence of progress”, but demonstrates some “weltansicht”—a special view of reality—seems to understand that behaving exactly as the white people want wouldn’t really be what they wanted if they understood—feels guilty

Significance of grandfather's dying words

- “overcome ‘em with yesses”
- contrasts with parents' conciliatory attitude—adaptation to “white world”

Battle Royal

- Allegorical
- Ambivalence toward naked white woman—equally repulsed and attracted
- Futile humiliation—coins are brass advertising tokens—symbol??
- Focus on mistake in speech—“equality” instead of “responsibility”
- Introduction of the brief case—“some day it will be filled with important papers that will help shape the destiny of your people”—watch what goes into the brief case, each item is significant
- Tangible reward—scholarship—but how might this be ironic?

Circus Dream

- Non-naturalistic element
- Envelopes representing years
- “Keep this nigger-boy running”
- irony—dreamers can't see reality, yet IM gets a glimpse of reality in this dream

Single day during IM's Junior year in college

Four mise-en-scenes: 1) sharecropper's cabin, 2) Golden Day bar/brothel, 3) college chapel, 4) office of college President

Cabin—chapter 2

Jim Trueblood (“true blood”)

- Characterized through own voice and words
- Contrast of black/white with Mr. Norton

Mr. Norton

- Thin characterization
- Becomes comic prop in Golden Day scene
- Opening conversation offers best clues to character

Norton/IM conversation

- “I know my life rather well”—shows smug satisfaction with self
- egotistical gratification in relationship with college
- psychological exploitation—his fate depends on college
- relationship with daughter

Black involvement in Mr. Norton's fate is deeper/darker than he expects—his obsessive interest in Trueblood's story is possibly a manifestation of his own sexual feelings for his daughter—the uncivilized black man has acted out the white man's fantasy—he has “looked upon chaos and are not destroyed” (maybe Norton's own internal chaos?)—“You feel no inner turmoil?” Points out that people spend all of their lives building elaborate social constructs to govern behavior, when chaos itself is the truest reality.

Trueblood accepts his reality—he knows he has “done the worst thing a man could ever do in his family” but he returns to live with his family—“I'm a man and a man don't leave his family.” Does Norton accept his true reality? Does he know who he really is, or does he wear a mask?

Trueblood's dream

- Search for fat meat leads him to Mr. Broadnax (“Broad-in-Acts”, whose altruism has sexual and racist undertones) and he enters through front door (forbidden)
- Enters a white bedroom, where a white woman steps out of grandfather clock wearing a white nightgown
- Struggle on bed, Broadnax does not interfere, says “leave ‘em do it”
- After sexual encounter with white woman, Trueblood enters the clock, note sexual imagery
- Awakens to his wife's screaming—involved in intercourse with daughter

Reactions of others to Trueblood's story

- Norton—listens intently, ignores IM's pleading to leave, face drains of color, opens wallet (avoids daughter's picture) and gives Trueblood \$100
- IM—humiliation (although some fascination), sense of shame
- White people—give Trueblood money because he fits the barbaric stereotype of the black man as a savage with base, vile instincts
- Black people—disassociate with Trueblood because he represents the stereotype they are trying to overcome

Golden Day Bar/Brothel—chapter 3

Scene of madcap comedy with the centerpiece being the overthrow of Supercargo, the superego (tyrannical repressor), authority figure and the vets as the id (aggressive energy)

Reversal—those who seem the craziest really aren't

Is the situation with these vets appropriate material for farcical treatment? Ellison's motive(s)?

Farcical, low comedy as food for real thought and reflection. What can we learn from this scene?

Comedy with an ethnic/racial component a distinctive trait in American humor (just think of all the Pollock jokes you know!)—

Ellison argues that no one sees the absurdity of a situation more than someone who lives it. Some of the situations are painful, but it is precisely because they are painful that they have to be treated humorously—otherwise people would turn off to it

Significance of the “doctor” vet's advice and insight—he sees reality

- Tells Norton that “to some you are the great white father, to others the lyncher of souls, but for all, you are confusion come into the Golden Day
- “You both fail to understand what is happening to you. You cannot see or hear or smell the truth of what you see—and you looking for destiny! It's classic! And the boy, this automaton, he was made of the very mud of the region and he sees far less than you To you he is a mark on the scorecard of your achievement, a thing and not a man; a child, or even less—a black, amorphous thing. And you, for all your power, are not a man to him, but a God, a force—“

College—chapters 3 & 4

IM believes in “the principles of the Founder with all [his] heart”

Foundation in reality

- The Founder—Booker T. Washington; the college—Tuskegee Institute in Alabama (Ellison attended there himself until he left for NY in his Junior year, like IM).
- An actual statue of Washington is there, like the one IM describes. The inscription reads: “He lifted the veil of ignorance from his people and pointed the way to progress through education and industry.” The crouched Negro is shown thick-lipped, barefooted, while Washington himself is shown lighter-skinned, dressed as a gentleman. Is it significant that Washington was half white???
- Washington taught that Negroes should “renounce social equality as a goal and accept white supremacy as a precondition of their [Negroes] attaining an improved economic condition”—ideas echoed in the IM’s graduation speech.

Compression of narrative—The opening pages of chapter 5 attempt to encapsulate the emotional experience of three collegiate years

Contrast between southern whites and northern philanthropists—rhetorical complexity of the treatment of this issue—if it is so significant, why is it not more fully presented? Possibilities:

- Already enough density (food for thought) in the Southern chapters of the novel
- Southern white racism no longer a “fresh fictional subject” in 1940
- Near omission of southern white racist makes for a less depressing context in which the IM is to learn/grow
- Since this is something that the IM lives with, it is something he inherently knows and doesn’t have to learn about in the course of his development, thus there is no reason it should figure in a bildungsroman text

Speech of Homer A. Barbee

- identity blurred with that of Bledsoe—IM points out that Bledsoe has used the same rhetorical techniques that Barbee does
- Greek poet Homer blind, so is Barbee
- In speech, founder compared to: Moses, “black Aristotle,” Christ
- Speech traces birth and death of a hero
- Mockingbird trills right after Barbee loses glasses, ends speech. Significance?

Reactions to the speech

- IM deeply moved, begins to accept a guilt for the scenario with Norton at the Golden Day
- Reader realizes that speech is “fluff” composed of banal language, tired tropes—contrasts with speech of Trueblood that is honest, real, and authenticates itself

Bledsoe’s Office—chapter 6

Bledsoe’s true nature revealed—sees himself above other members of the black race (and probably the white race, too)—knows how to “act the nigger” to manipulate the white men and use situations to his own advantage

- Compares with Trueblood in that he, too, “rapes” for power—Trueblood rapes his daughter and gets money, Bledsoe rapes the black race
- “As we approached a mirror Dr. Bledsoe stopped and composed his angry face like a sculptor, making it a bland mask, leaving only the sparkle of his eyes to betray the emotion I had seen only a moment before.” (ch 4)
- “You can’t be soft with these people. We mustn’t pamper them.” (ch. 4)
- “You’re black and living in the South—did you forget how to lie?” (ch 6)
- “This is a power set-up son, and I’m at the controls.” (ch 6)
- “I’ve made my place in [the white man’s world] and I’ll have every Negro in the country hanging on tree limbs by morning if it means staying where I am.” (ch 6)

“Out of the fire, into the melting pot”—the second encounter with the “Doctor Vet”—chapter 7

Earlier at the Golden Day, the vet diagnosed IM as someone who didn't understand “the simple facts of life . . . Already he's learned to repress not only his emotions but his humanity.”

On the bus, the vet offers a prescription in the form of the following advice:

- Gain self-understanding rooted in an accurate knowledge of the world
- Recognize your invisibility
- Be your own father—discover the possibility of the world

Vet calls New York a “dream” offering freedom and possibility, IM uses these words later when he arrives, but has failed to recognize the ironic undertones and cynicism of the vet. The vet says that northern freedom would have to be symbolic and take the form of man's most easily accessible symbol of freedom—woman. He says that IM is moving “out of the fire, and into the melting pot.”

First impressions—chapter 8

IM recounts his first impressions of the city upon his arrival

- “spell of power and mystery”
- impersonality of city dwellers
- alternation between fantasies of success and uncertainty

Contrasting characters—the cartman and Emerson's son—chapter 9

Comic restatement of the contrast in Trueblood and Mr. Norton

The cartman

- Blues-singing, southern Negro
- In the city, but doesn't have the city in him—retains southern identity
- Stimulates southern folk memories and causes a wave of homesickness in IM, but IM maintains resolve to sever his roots

Mr. Emerson's son

- Weak sense of identity (like Mr. Norton)
- Overtones of homosexual tastes
 - “with us its still Jim and Huck Finn”
 - focus on his hip-swinging stride, and his comments on IM's athletic build
 - reference to the Calamus Club—Calamus was the name of the section from Walt Whitman's Leaves of Grass dedicated to the subject of manly love
 - suggests that he and IM must converse in naked honesty and frankness
- parent/child relationship as malaise (as with Norton)

“Poor Robin” song and ironic comment on Bledsoe's treatment of IM

“White is Right”—the Liberty Paint Factory experience—chapter 10

Paint factory a representation of white America—motto was “Keep America pure”—metaphorical overtones of racial purity

The color of purity is white (think of white wedding dresses—brides are thought of as “pure”). In this case, the whiteness is intensified by the addition of 10 drops of a black substance in each bucket.

Pattern of 10's

- 10 black boys in the Battle Royal
- 10 drops of black liquid in the white paint
- at time Ellison wrote IM, the black population in the United States was 10% of the total population of the country

What is suggested by the addition of the black drops? Possibilities:

- Drops represent Negroes who emulate white values and aspirations and thereby endorse and strengthen the white American way (like Booker T. Washington)
 - IM wonders if the college, which depends on white dollars for survival, is painted in optic white. The white Founders, like Mr. Norton, feel purer through the patronage of Negroes and identification with their destiny.
- Drops represent those Negroes who, like Lucius Brockway and Jim Trueblood, are manipulated into playing a role in the maintenance and intensification of the whiteness of society.
 - Trueblood used by whites as an example of the savagery of the Negro race—they “pay” him for providing that example; Lucius Brockway coins the slogan of optic white, for which he is paid a bonus

The Kimbro section—Kimbrow and IM see the same color differently (“a gray tinge glowed through the whiteness, and Kimbro failed to see it”)—significance?

- Is the paint an optical illusion?
- Does this represent the fact that American reality looks different to blacks than to whites?
- Does this maintain the idea that for white Americans blacks are invisible?
- Could this suggest that careful calculation and manipulation is necessary to maintain the “whitewashing” of America?

- IM was left to solve the “problem” of putting the wrong liquid in the paint. Kimbro thinks he has done this successfully. Does this show that when left alone or when imperfectly controlled, blacks will begin to make their presence visible in America?
- Absorption of black into white and the appearance of grayness is accompanied by descent—IM is immediately sent to a job in the basement (foreshadows IM’s voluntary descent later into the hole)

The optic white is used to paint national monuments—possibly represents a whitewashing of American history. Other references to whitewashing: the stones at the college, Lucius Brockway’s comment about painting coal with optic white.

The Lucius Brockway section

- Brockway a representation of the underpaid and undereducated substratum of black labor on which northern industrialism was built
- An “Uncle Tom” character, he is comfortable with the white exploitation of him, and doesn’t want to upset it—this is clear from his distrust of the union
- The fight between Brockway and IM shows the psychological pressure felt by blacks as a result of their manipulation by whites—the same reason the 10 boys fought in the Battle Royal, the same reason that 2 men will nearly kill one another in chapter 17, and that a riot erupts in Harlem in chapter 25.

The explosion—a “blast of black emptiness that was somehow a bath of whiteness”

Erasing memory—the factory hospital—chapter 11

Intense expressionism—realistic surface distorted

IM’s consciousness represented through hallucination-like distortions—attempts to convey a sense of his psychological turmoil and an epitome of what happens to black identity in the industrialized north

The “machine”

- Hospital machine a synecdoche for the melting pot—designed to neutralize or destroy one’s sense of racial identity and render it powerless
- Gestalt principle—properties not derived from the sum of its parts
- “. . . the result is as complete a change of personality as you’ll find in your fairy-tale cases of criminals transformed into amiable fellows
- A “rebirth” of sorts—Machine attached like an umbilical cord and must be cut from IM’s belly
- When the machine is detached, narrative shift from expressionism to realism
- Though IM is physically free from the machine he is not truly free from the white machine—he feels he is “in the grip of some alien personality”—he still doesn’t understand his identity in white America

Searching for Identity—Mary Rambo, the eviction, and Brother Jack—chapters 12 & 13

Mary Rambo urges IM to be “a credit to the race,” urges leadership

Feeling of alienation from and hostility toward the residents of Men’s House, who hold on to “illusions” of utopia

Sale of ointments on the street “guaranteed to produce the miracle of whitening black skin”—white=greater happiness, notion of “white is right”

The “Yam Man”

- Sells “Car’lina yams”—counterpoint to IM’s earlier refusal to eat pork chops and grits, purchase and open eating of yam=acknowledgement of kinship to African Americans
- Yam man insists “everything what looks good ain’t necessarily good”

Eviction of the dispossessed couple

List of items on the street representative of black past (like the items in the college museum)

- “knocking bones”
- Newspaper portrait of Marcus Garvey (founder of Universal Negro Improvement Association and supporter of the “Back to Africa” movement)
- Paper announcing the freeing of a slave

Impromptu Speech

- Dispossession
- Book of dreams (“Seeing Eye”) filled with blank pages, the eye blind
- Characterization of black people as slow-to-anger and law-abiding (recollect “kill’em with yesses”)

Advice of white woman to remain anonymous to the police to maintain effectiveness

Brother Jack

- White man, “friend of the common people,”
- IM senses a quality of unreality, as if Brother Jack is acting a part
- Offers IM a job—IM distrustful

Recognizes college training as “Bledsoing”

The Brotherhood chapters

The Brotherhood = The American Communist Party

Criticism of 2nd half of book:

- Characters less developed
- More realism with less symbolism
- Episodes more extensively explained—less suggestive

Joining the Brotherhood—Chapters 14-16

Mid-country peace vs. dangerous zoo, pg. 299—metaphorical meaning?

“It was as though we had plunged suddenly into mid-country peace, yet I knew that here, somewhere close by in the night, there was a zoo with its dangerous animals. The lions and tigers in heated cages, the bears asleep, the snakes coiled tightly underground. And there was also the reservoir of dark water, all covered by snow and by night, . . . buried beneath black and white, gray mist and gray silence.”

Party at the Chthonian

Emma

- “Their leaders are made, not born. Then they’re destroyed. You’ve always said that.” (302)
- “But don’t you think he should be a little blacker?” (303)

Taken together, these two quotes foreshadow IM’s *use* within the brotherhood. He will have to abide by the rules, and he will be under the control of the committee, composed of white men and black men like Brother Wrestrum, who do not identify with their racial roots. Emma feels IM is not black enough to be the representative they need.

Brother Jack

- “How would you like to be the new Booker T. Washington?” (305)

Assigned new identity—they don’t want him as himself

Stereotypes exist even within the Brotherhood (notion that “*all* colored people sing” p. 312)

The Negro Bank

- Self-mocking image at Mary Rambo’s arouses hate
- Puts it in briefcase
- Inability to get rid of it (Inability to escape racial identity)

Speech in the athletic complex

- Image of prize fighter who lost sight in the ring
- IM’s sense that he was “becoming someone else”
- References to sight and blindness within and outside context of speech
- Raises emotion, but fails to appeal to crowd’s “intelligence”
- Speaks of becoming more human

“Training” with Brother Hambro—brainwashing?

The Harlem District—Chapters 17 & 18

Notion of freedom within framework of the Brotherhood’s discipline—how can you be free under the scientific approach?

Tod Clifton

- Moved “with an easy Negro stride”, “very black”
- “Afro-Anglo-Saxon contour of his cheek”

Ras the Exhorter

- Exhorter = inciter, agitator
- Representative of the Black Nationalists

Reference to Marcus Garvey

Confrontation with Ras and his supporters

- Ras calls the black men in the Brotherhood “Uncle Toms” (reference to black people who sell out and give in to the white man, allusion to Stowe’s novel Uncle Tom’s Cabin)
- Questions “brotherhood” between men of different color
- IM is “contaminated” but Tod “the real black mahn” due to differences in color
- Asks if Tod and IM are “awake or sleeping”
- Echoes the vet’s comments that white men subdue black men by giving them white women (white man subjugates black man through white strumpets, while they teach the “good” white women that the black man is a rapist—refer to Sybil in ch. 24)
- Echoes grandfather’s comments about being a traitor to the black people for the white people

Clifton’s insight—“sometimes a man *has* to plunge outside history” What does he mean by this? Consider—what gets recorded in history? Who decides what is important? IM feels Brotherhood gives he and Tod a chance to be a part of history—but does it?

Focus on names

- Origin of Ras’s name (title of respect in the east)
- IM’s new name “getting around”
- Frederick Douglass’s name change—a more white name than his original name? (Douglass was the son of Harriet Bailey, a very dark skinned slave, and a white man, probably his mother’s master)

IM recognizes duality of his personality—the one that can't escape his past and the new Brotherhood identity
Anonymous letter—"friendly" advice about the white man's world p. 383—carries the message that if he does too much for the Harlem community, the Brotherhood will strike him down.

Brother Tarp (name an anagram of "trap")

- Reminds IM of grandfather
- Gift of Fredrick Douglass picture—shows Tarp's knowledge of historical struggles and pride in great black men
- Leg iron—"heap of signifying"—gesture of kinship on the part of Tarp
- Tarp becomes IM's most trusted advisor—turns to him about anonymous letter, looks for him when he returns to Harlem after Tod's disappearance
- Tarp's departure foreshadows IM's revelation about the Brotherhood in chapter 22

Brother Wrestrum

- Although black, lacks identity with black brothers—satisfaction in white brothers being forced to shake hands, smugness
- Focus on things blacks and whites have in common
- Don't dramatize the differences
- Charges IM with being an opportunist—Wrestrum's hostility toward younger and more successful black men

Given a new assignment—The Woman Question

IM puts Brotherhood papers in his briefcase and leaves

The Woman Question—Chapters 19 & 20

Affair with white woman

- determines need to "keep the biological and ideological carefully apart"
- Images of black men in positions of servitude having affairs with "master's" wives (chauffeurs, Pullman porters)
- References to confusion between reality and dreams
- husband doesn't seem to see IM

Return to Harlem—men in bar accuse IM of having "white fever"

Barrelhouse tells IM that Brotherhood has stopped fighting for men in Harlem

Brother Tarp gone

Disappearance of Tod Clifton

- Selling "Sambo" dolls—IM feels betrayed—is this a real betrayal?—Tod realized the motives of the Brotherhood and gave up the fight—defiance of white control/oppression
- Sambo doll put in pocket with Tarp's leg chain—similarity? (both symbols of black oppression)
- Pigeon imagery—who is the pigeon, Clifton or IM?
- Death of Clifton

IM's "realization" p. 444—"I'd been asleep, dreaming"—blames self for Tod's death

Clifton's Funeral—Chapters 21 & 22

The Hero's Funeral

- IM's "personal responsibility"
- Brother Tod Clifton—Our Hope Shot Down (Clifton represents black potential)
- References to name, illusion in funeral speech
- Sees crowd as individuals—awareness of the colorful people around him, people he'd missed because of his Brotherhood involvement

The Brotherhood's Reaction

- IM didn't follow Brotherhood's plan—acted on "personal responsibility"
- "First an oration over the body of Brutus"—reference to *Julius Caesar* and being a traitor
- Tobitt believes he understands negros because he is married to a negro girl
- "You were not hired to think" p. 469

Brother Jack

- "great white father"
- glass eye—symbol of blindness—no more capable of clear "vision" than Bledsoe or Norton

IM's disillusionment and awakening "I was just awakening from a dream. I had been boomeranged around." (476) For the first time, Grandfather's advice begins to make sense to him. He understands what is going on within the Brotherhood

The Rinehart chapters—Chapters 23 & 24

Confrontation with Ras

who accuses the “deceitful organization” of responsibility for Clifton’s death

Calls black men in the Brotherhood “black stooges:

Initially purchases dark glasses as a disguise from Ras and his men, then recognizes the potential in being confused for Rinehart—a figure of shifting identity

Bliss P. Rinehart’s characterization

- Lover of women
- Greeted as “daddy-o” and asked what he was “putting down”—“putting down” suggests involvement in illegal activity
- A “zoot suiter”—a gambler
- A “runner” and a “number man”—one who takes bets on unpredictable numbers
- Encounter with police who ask for “their cut” show that Rinehart pays off corrupt police to avoid arrest
- “Spiritual Technologist” who takes people’s money in return for his parroting sermons he has heard

Final attempt for stability within Brotherhood

- Visit to Brother Hambro
- Hambro admits that black people will be sacrificed for the good of a future “ideal” society

Disillusioned with the Brotherhood

- realization that important business not shared in committee meetings
- decides to use grandfather’s advice and “overcome ‘em with yeses—must use one of their women to get “inside” information—Sybil
- Sybil believes in the stereotype of all black men as rapists—begs IM to rape her—IM won’t, he gets no information because he won’t prolong the relationship

The Riot

- Ras’s name change from the Exhorter to the Destroyer
- IM’s realization—the Brotherhood was using Ras, too
- Flinging of spear—nature of Ras’s injury significance—it locks his jaw and prevents him from speaking
- Uses briefcase as a weapon—contains tokens of the past
- Stumbles into manhole—origin of his life underground
- Burning the papers of the past—discovers the author of the anonymous letter
- Dream-sequence confrontation with Emerson, Jack, Bledsoe, the school superintendent

The Epilogue

Expresses a sickness with yesing ‘em to death

Names self “invisible man”

Considers interpretations/implications of Grandfather’s advice

Black people have to affirm the principle on which the country was built (the principle was greater than the men and their violence) or

They have to take responsibility for what has taken place

Encounter with Mr. Norton, who doesn’t remember the young man who was his “destiny”

Makes a plea for diversity—understands that diversity is manifested by people like grandfather who saw human nature so clearly and Mr. Norton with his cloudy vision

Reference to “heart of darkness” pg. 579

Communicating his story relieves some of his anger and bitterness—follows Aristotle’s concept of art as catharsis

Admits paradox in his feeling and understanding, but leaves the underground to accept his “social responsibility”