

Richard Wright, *The Man Who Lived Underground* (2021) – Part II, chapter 7

[A black man named Fred Daniels has fled to the sewers after having been falsely accused of murdering a white couple. While in hiding, he retrieves sundry items and valuables by entering people's basements, and notably steals money that he plasters on the walls of his hideout.]

He felt in his pocket for a cigarette and was astonished when he pulled forth a fistful of ticking golden watches that dangled by gleaming chains. Idly he stared at them, then he began to wind them up; he did not even attempt to set any of them at a certain hour, for there was no time for him now. After he had wound them carefully his eyes strayed over the green-papered walls and
5 a slow, mocking smile formed on his lips. He was as sorry for himself as he looked at that money as he had been for the man he had seen stealing it; his memory was merged with the lives of others and he no longer appreciated the mood of high deviltry that had bubbled in him when he had decorated the walls. But, since he had the watches in his possession, he had to dispose of them in some way. He held the watches and heard their awful ticking and he hated
10 them; these watches were measuring time, making men tense and taut with the sense of passing hours, telling tales of death, crowning time the king of consciousness.

He turned to the tool box and took out a handful of nails and a hammer and he drove the nails into the papered walls and hung the watches upon them, letting them swing down by their glittering chains, ticking busily against the background of green bills with the lemon sheen of
15 the electric light shining upon the metal watch casings, converting discs of yellow into blobs of liquid. Hardly had he hung up the last watch when the idea upon which he had been working extended itself; he took more nails from the tool box and went around the walls and drove them through the green paper and then took the box of rings and went from nail to nail and hung up the gold bands. The white and blue diamonds sparkled with quiet and brittle laughter, as though
20 enjoying a hilarious secret. The room had a bizarre and ghostly aspect; the yellow light tinged the green money with a fiery cast and, against this blazing backdrop, the gold of the rings and watches, and the blue-white laughter of the diamonds, leaped burningly to life.

He was suddenly conscious of the gun sagging at his hip and he drew it from the holster. He had seen men fire guns in movies, but somehow his life had never led him to contact with
25 firearms. A desire to feel the sensation others felt in firing a gun came over him. Someone might hear... But if they did, they would not know where the shot had come from. Not in their wildest imagination would they think that it came from *under the streets*! He tightened his finger on the trigger; there was a deafening report and it seemed that the entire underground had fallen upon his eardrums and in the same instant there flashed an orange-blue spurt of flame that died
30 quickly but lingered on as a vivid afterimage. He smelt the acrid odor of burnt powder filling his lungs. Abruptly he dropped the gun.

The intensity of his emotions ebbed and he picked up the gun and hung it upon a nail on the wall; then he hung up the cartridge belt. He saw the jars of diamonds and at once he had another idea. He lifted the jars and turned them bottom upwards and the entire contents dumped upon
35 the ground. One by one he picked them up and peeled the tissue paper and piled them in a neat heap. He wiped his sweaty hands dry on his trousers, lit a cigarette, and commenced playing another game. He was a rich man who lived aboveground in the black sunshine and he was strolling through a beautiful park of a summer morning, smiling, nodding to his neighbors, sucking an after-breakfast cigar. Many times he crossed the floor of the cave, avoiding the diamonds with his feet, yet subtly gauging his footsteps so that his shoes, wet with sewer lime,
40 would strike the diamonds at some undetermined moment. After five minutes of sauntering, his right foot smashed into the neat heap and the diamonds lay scattered in all directions, glinting at him with a million tiny chuckles of icy laughter. Oh, shucks, he mumbled in mock regret,

45 intrigued by the damage he had wrought. He continued walking, ignoring the brittle fire. He felt that he had locked deep within his heart a glorious triumph.

50 He flung the diamonds more evenly over the dirt floor and they showered rich sparks, collaborating with him. He went over the floor and trampled the stones just deep enough for them to be faintly visible, as though they were set delicately in the prongs of a thousand rings. A baleful, icy glare bathed the cave. He sat on the chest, lit a cigarette, frowned, and shook his head. Maybe *anything's* right, he mumbled. Yes, if the world as men had made it was right, then anything else was right, too. Any action a man took to satisfy himself—*theft or murder or* 55 *torture*—was right. To banish such thoughts, he turned on the radio. A melancholy piece of music rose. Brooding over the diamonds on the floor was like looking up into a sky full of stars; the illusion melted into its opposite: He was high up in the air looking down at the twinkling lights of a sprawling city. The music ended and a man recited news events. In the same attitude in which he had contemplated the city, so now, as he heard the cultivated tone, he looked down upon the land and the sea as men fought, as cities were razed, as armies marched or planes scattered bombs upon open towns, as long lines of trenches wavered and broke. He heard the names of generals and the names of towns and the names of rivers and the names and numbers 60 of divisions that were reported in action on different fronts. He saw black smoke billowing from the stacks of warships that neared each other over wastes of water and he heard them speak the language of death as flame belched from their huge guns and red-hot shells screamed across the surface of the night seas. He saw hundreds of planes whirling and droning in the air and heard the clatter of machine-guns as they battled each other and he saw planes blazing and smoking as they fell. He saw steel tanks rumbling across fields of ripe wheat to meet other tanks 65 and there was a loud clang of steel against steel as numberless tanks collided. He saw troops with fixed bayonets charging in waves against other troops who held fixed bayonets and men groaned as steel ripped into their bodies and they went down to die... The voice of the radio died and he was looking down at the diamonds that twinkled on the floor before him.

Intro

Ellison, *Invisible Man* = story of continuous falls of a black man who experiences many forms of betrayals and injustices. Ends up living underground, where he can be freed from the oppressing violence of American society.

Ellison drew inspiration from a tale by his predecessor, Richard Wright, who penned *The Man Who Lived Underground* during the war but only published it as a short story. It deals with a black man who faces severe police brutality but manages to hide in the sewers before being jailed. The passage under scrutiny takes place after the character's theft of valuables, which he has gathered in his hideout. The third-person narrative voice depicts his unexpected use of his trove, as he turns watches and diamonds into decorative elements. While the scene is confined to the underground hideout, the character's reflections and imagination enable a form of escape from seclusion. Yet, the outside world that he sees in his mind's eye is marked by war and death, so that the end of the vision coincides with a return to life.

As a result, I would argue that this excerpt can be read as a seemingly aimless enjoyment and contemplation of beauty which enable a reversal of values where freedom and happiness can only be found in seclusion and retreat from a threatening world.

Plan

- I. Of entrapment and liberty: narrating a liberating confinement
 1. An unobtrusive narrative voice recreating raw perceptions (l. 28 gun being shot + use of “and” or “then” as coordinators)
 2. Of unexpectedness and immediacy (l 16-17 “hardly had he...the idea extended itself” + l 25 “the desire came over him” + “emotions ebbed” l 32 + “astonished” l 11 + “suddenly conscious” l. 23 + “abruptly he dropped the gun.” – short sentence // adverb l.31) + “at some undetermined moment” (41)
 3. Freedom in entrapment: no others, or only hypothetical “someone might” (25) or mediated (films, radio) + actions implying no restrictions: “was no time” (4) “dispose of them in some way” (10), “letting them swing” (13) “playing another game” (35)
- II. From sight to vision: sensory perceptions sprouting a morbid hallucination
 1. Senses: light & sight + colors + “smelt the acrid odor” (30) + “a deafening report” (28) + “tightened his finger” (27) / “he felt in his pocket” (l.1)
 2. Beyond perceptions: “it seemed that the entire underground had fallen upon his eardrums” (28) + “vivid afterimage” (30) + **metaphor: “laughter”** as light (“chuckles of icy laughter” l. 43 + “quiet and brittle laughter” l.19 + “blue-white laughter of the diamonds” l.22) into both sound and emotion (// “leaped burning to life” l.22)
 3. A morbid hallucination: “the illusions (54) = up/down confused + “He saw” x4 (60-66) + “He heard” + “the names” x4 (58) – lex field of war, death & destruction
- III. Dirt and diamonds: a global reassessment of values and identities
 1. Time is money: of the uselessness of both → from financial and practical value to ornamental one + treading on diamonds with lime-covered shoes (40)
 2. A protean protagonist: “his memory was merged with the lives of others” (7); a movie star “feel the sensation others felt” (25 – firing a gun just as in movies); “He was a rich man who lived aboveground” (36) + “in mock regret” (43)
 3. Expansion and contraction of the environment: from confined space underground to down-ward looking vision of the world // expansion of questioning of values “anything is right” (l.50): nothing wrong or bad → no moral values

→ expansion that contrasts the character's apparent freedom with a world of death outside → there is no escaping the sewers; sort of confinement that is confirmed by the return to reality in the last sentence: the hideout is a refuge

Conclusion

The passage starts as a somewhat poetic depiction of a man freed from the shackles of society and norms, who can enjoy a recovered freedom to act as he pleases and can enjoy beauty without concerning himself with practical needs or monetary values. That experience is narrated through the character's senses, which gradually lead him from primary perceptions to a trance-like vision that enables him to mentally escape the confined space of the sewers. Yet, that expansion of the protagonist's perspective and the reassessment of moral norms lead him to a perception of the outside as deadly: in a world where everything is right, war and destruction contrast with the beauty of the light-filled hideout. Thus, the narrator symbolically depicts the fate of his character as being doomed, as he is bound to fall victim to the violence of society, and more particularly that which targets his skin color. That further reflects Wright's pessimistic take on race relations in America at a time when lynching and overt discrimination were still a norm to many. Indeed, the novel's vivid depiction of police brutality originally prevented its publication during World War II. Strikingly enough, the story of Fred Daniels has not lost its relevance eighty years later.