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ELLISON AS SOCIAL CRITIC: *A PARTY DOWN AT THE SQUARE* AND THE PROBLEM OF LYNCHING

J. GORDON HYLTON*

The murder of African Americans by white mobs was without doubt the most heinous aspect of black-white relations in the South during Ralph Ellison's formative years. In communities across the South, blacks were shot, hanged, or burned for real or imagined offenses in order to preserve what Wilbur Cash called the "savage ideal" of racial orthodoxy.¹ Although lynching was not a uniquely Southern phenomenon—in 1905, sociologist James Cutler called it America's "national crime"²—it was far more common in the South than any other part of the United States, including the Western Frontier.³ In fact, in the decades surrounding the turn of the twentieth century more than eighty percent of all lynchings in the United States occurred in the South.⁴ And while white lynch mobs sometimes turned on white victims in their efforts to maintain community norms, the overwhelming number of Southern lynchings involved a black victim. Historian W. Fitzhugh Brundage's detailed study of lynchings in Georgia between 1880 and 1930 revealed that 441 of 460 (or more than ninety-five percent) of lynching victims were African Americans.⁵

Rooted in Southern white distrust of the efficacy of formal legal institutions and the belief that a certain amount of force was necessary to maintain the "proper" boundaries between the races, lynching was the most extreme

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1. W.J. CASH, *THE MIND OF THE SOUTH* 90, 93-94 (1941).

2. JAMES E. CUTLER, *LYNCH-LAW: AN INVESTIGATION INTO THE HISTORY OF LYNCHING IN THE UNITED STATES* 1 (1905).

3. For a discussion of the numerical prominence of Southern lynchings, see W. FITZHUGH BRUNDAGE, *LYNCHING IN THE NEW SOUTH: GEORGIA AND VIRGINIA, 1880-1930*, at 2-3 (1993).

4. 2 ALAN BRINKLEY, *THE UNFINISHED NATION: A CONCISE HISTORY OF THE AMERICAN PEOPLE* 477 (3d ed. 2000).

5. BRUNDAGE, *supra* note 3, at 262. Brundage also found that in Virginia the comparable numbers were 70 of 86. *Id.* While there were a small number of occasions where whites and blacks joined together to lynch other whites, Brundage found no evidence of all-black mobs lynching white victims. *See id.* at 80-90.

of a variety of extra-legal measures that were used to keep the region's African-American population under control.⁶ Although rarely approved of by the "elite" of Southern society, lynch mobs could often count on Southern sheriffs and police officers to either assist them in their efforts, or at least make no effort to challenge them, and could act with the confidence that they were unlikely to be made legally accountable for their actions. And while critics of lynching did exist in the South—African Americans, white women, and Protestant ministers were often outspoken in their opposition—such critics, until the 1940's, were met with widespread hostility in the white community. Although roundly condemned by Americans outside the South, the racially motivated lynch mob remained a seemingly intractable feature of the Southern landscape.⁷

The literature of lynching has produced no more poignant work than Ralph Ellison's posthumously published short story, *A Party Down at the Square*.⁸ The story recounts in a grim, matter-of-fact fashion the horror of an Alabama lynching, as viewed from the perspective of a white boy from Cincinnati who is there staying with his uncle.⁹ Although the narrator

6. The literature on Southern attitudes toward race and violence is voluminous. In addition to BRUNDAGE, *supra* note 3, see EDWARD L. AYERS, *VENGEANCE AND JUSTICE: CRIME AND PUNISHMENT IN THE 19TH CENTURY AMERICAN SOUTH* (1984). For additional perspectives, see DICKSON D. BRUCE, JR., *VIOLENCE AND CULTURE IN THE ANTEBELLUM SOUTH* (1979); CASH, *supra* note 1; JOHN HOPE FRANKLIN, *THE MILITANT SOUTH, 1800-1861* (Harvard Univ. Press 1970) (1956); MICHAEL STEPHEN HINDUS, *PRISON AND PLANTATION: CRIME, JUSTICE, AND AUTHORITY IN MASSACHUSETTS AND SOUTH CAROLINA, 1767-1878* (1980); and BERTRAM WYATT-BROWN, *SOUTHERN HONOR: ETHICS AND BEHAVIOR IN THE OLD SOUTH* (1982).

7. For opposition to lynching within the South, see BRUNDAGE, *supra* note 3, at 161-244 (chs. 6-8).

8. RALPH ELLISON, *A Party Down at the Square*, in *FLYING HOME AND OTHER STORIES* 3 (John F. Callahan ed., 1996) [hereinafter ELLISON, *A Party Down at the Square*]. Biographical details pertaining to Ellison in this essay are, unless otherwise noted, taken from RALPH ELLISON, *An Extravagance of Laughter*, in *GOING TO THE TERRITORY* 145-97 (1995) [hereinafter ELLISON, *An Extravagance of Laughter*]; *Ralph Ellison, 1914-1993*, 114 *CONTEMPORARY LITERARY CRITICISM* 84 (1999); and GREGORY STEPHENS, *ON RACIAL FRONTIERS: THE NEW CULTURE OF FREDERICK DOUGLASS, RALPH ELLISON, AND BOB MARLEY* 114-47 (1999) (ch. 3).

9. Ellison actually reveals very little about the narrator. It is only near the end of the story, when the uncle refers to his nephew, somewhat jokingly, as "the gutless wonder from Cincinnati" that we learn he is not a native. ELLISON, *A Party Down at the Square*, *supra* note 8, at 10. From the way that the narrator describes the actions of adults, we know that he is not yet an adult. On the other hand, he is old enough to attend a midnight lynching and to be left on his own once he and his uncle arrive at the town square. All of this would

provides little direct evidence of time and place, clues in the story and elsewhere suggest that the time is the late 1930's, and the place is the county seat of Macon County, Alabama.¹⁰

The narrator learns of the impending lynching when two men stop by his Uncle Ed's home one evening and inform the narrator and his uncle that there is going to be "a party down at the Square." By the third sentence of the story, the narrator has arrived at the town square at midnight where "everybody was mad and quiet and standing around looking at the nigger."¹¹ The intention of the mob is to burn the black victim alive in front of the courthouse. Whites from all over the county are present and some appear to have driven in from Phenix City, which is in a neighboring county. The county sheriff is present at the event, but he is there only to control the crowd. He neither participates in the lynching nor does he make any effort to prevent it.

The narrator never tells us the victim's "crime," probably because he himself does not know. (In the story's opening sentence, he states, "I don't know what started it."¹²) However, this piece of information seems irrelevant to the crowd. Nor does the reader learn any personal details about the victim, although it appears that his surname is Bacote. (On several

suggest that the narrator is an adolescent.

10. Clues as to the location and appropriate date of *A Party Down at the Square* are contained in a later Ellison short story entitled *Flying Home*. RALPH ELLISON, *Flying Home*, in *FLYING HOME AND OTHER STORIES*, *supra* note 8, at 147. In that story, a character briefly refers to the events of the earlier story and identifies them as occurring in Macon County, Alabama (an actual county which includes Tuskegee, where Ellison attended college from 1933-1936). Moreover, passing references to Phenix City (which is located on the Alabama-Georgia border just to the east of Macon County) and the "Birmingham highway" in the story itself confirm the east central Alabama location. Also, since the story clearly takes place in the county seat—the lynching occurs in front of the courthouse—the setting must be Tuskegee, which was, of course, the Southern town that Ellison knew best.

As for the date of the story, *Flying Home* takes place during the early years of World War II, and the events pertaining to the lynching are referred to as though they had occurred in the relatively recent past. This suggests that the chronological setting must be roughly the mid-to-late 1930's, which would correspond to the years that Ellison lived in Macon County. Furthermore, references to large numbers of automobiles and to a TWA airliner in the story suggest that the setting is the 1930's rather than an earlier period.

11. ELLISON, *A Party Down at the Square*, *supra* note 8, at 3.

12. *Id.*

occasions the narrator refers to him as “that Bacote nigger.”¹³) The ritualistic nature of the event and the tenacity of the mob is emphasized by the fact that the participants are indifferent to the freezing rain, heavy fog, and the high winds that provide the meteorological backdrop.

The mob’s concentration is temporarily broken when the disoriented pilot of a TWA airliner spots the light of the bonfire and mistakes it for an airport beacon. When the plane starts to descend upon the town, the roar of the engines causes the crowd to scatter. Eventually, the pilot recognizes his error and pulls the plane out of its approach, but not before it severs several power lines. As the winds push the dangling electrical cables toward the crowd, one comes into contact with a white woman in the crowd who is immediately electrocuted. The narrator describes the impact as making a sound “like when a blacksmith drops a red hot horseshoe into a barrel of water, and the steam comes up. . . . The shock had turned the woman almost as black as the nigger.”¹⁴ Although the lynching of African Americans was often justified by the proclaimed need to protect the dignity of white women, this unfortunate female had shown precious little dignity in her desire to witness the brutal execution of the victim, a fact that was only highlighted by her very undignified death.

Not to be deterred by the intervention from off-stage or by the death of one of its members, the crowd reassembles and watches the victim burn alive. Ignoring his pleas to slit his throat, the crowd instead cheers when the apparent mob leader throws gasoline on the black man. When the fire burns through the ropes holding him to his funeral pyre, the now badly disfigured man makes a desperate effort to escape but is pushed back into the fire again and again and is once again doused with gasoline. Having seen enough, the narrator tries to leave but cannot because of the weight of the

13. It is possible that Bacote refers to the victim’s geographic origins but contemporary maps of Macon County, Alabama, contain the name of no such community. It is also possible that Bacote might be the name of the victim’s “employer” if he was a sharecropper. However, the surname Bacote is not uncommon in the South and is usually associated with African Americans. For example, Clarence A. Bacote was an African-American scholar who authored *THE STORY OF ATLANTA UNIVERSITY: A CENTURY OF SERVICE, 1865-1965* (1969). Moreover, during the mid-1990’s, the University of Alabama men’s basketball team featured a black player named Damon Bacote. See *RICHMOND TIMES DISPATCH*, June 23, 1999, at E-6 (profile of basketball player Damon Bacote).

14. ELLISON, *A Party Down at the Square*, *supra* note 8, at 7.

crowd behind him pushing constantly in an effort to get a closer look at the target of their rage. Finally, the “Bacote nigger” dies, and the narrator, now visibly sick, runs to his uncle’s home alone.

The narrator’s revulsion is so great that he cannot leave the house for three days. He learns, however, that a second African American was killed trying to leave the county after hearing about the death of the first victim. (According to Uncle Ed, “[T]hey always have to kill niggers in pairs to keep the other niggers in place.”¹⁵) The story concludes with a final scene, several days later, in Brinkley’s General Store in which a bitter white sharecropper complains that “it didn’t do no good to kill niggers ’cause things don’t get no better.”¹⁶ Others in the store tell the speaker to shut up, and he does, but as he leaves, he spits a “big chew of tobacco” on the floor of the store. The store owner attributes the behavior to the fact that he has denied the cropper credit, but the narrator cannot help but notice how hungry the cropper looks, and he concludes that he won’t stay quiet for long. He also reveals his own quiet agreement with the white cropper—that “it didn’t seem to help things”—and his resolve never to attend another “party.” In his final remarks, he pays a form of tribute to the courage of the black victim: “God, but that nigger was tough. That Bacote nigger was some nigger!”¹⁷

ELLISON AND LYNCHING

Although there is no evidence that Ellison ever had direct contact with an actual lynching, the scenario, if not the actual event, for *A Party Down at the Square* was drawn from his personal experiences. In 1933, Ellison left his native Oklahoma City to enroll as a music student at Alabama’s famed Tuskegee Institute, the African-American college founded by Booker T. Washington. Ellison arrived in Alabama at a time when the fallout from the notorious Scottsboro trial had created an extremely hostile climate between blacks and whites. As Ellison later wrote, “[T]he town and the surrounding countryside were undergoing a siege of lynch-fever stirred up by the famous trial in which the Scottsboro boys were charged with the

15. *Id.* at 11.

16. *Id.*

17. *Id.*

rape of two white girls on a freight train.”¹⁸ (The United States Supreme Court had reversed the original conviction of the nine black teenagers the year before Ellison’s arrival in Tuskegee, but the retrials were going on during the time that he was living in Alabama.¹⁹) Ellison and his fellow students were particularly suspicious and fearful of the poor white population of Macon County whose “capacity for racial violence” was not to be underestimated.²⁰

In addition, as a member of the Tuskegee jazz orchestra, Ellison also had the opportunity to travel on a regular basis between Tuskegee and Columbus, Georgia, travels that revealed to Ellison the vulnerability of all blacks, including college students, to whims of Southern law enforcement officials and the anger of whites in groups.²¹ As he later recalled,

[Y]ou were surrounded by whiteness, and it was far from secure in its power. It thrived on violence and sought endlessly for victims, and in its hunger to enforce racial discrimination, it was most indiscriminating as to its victims. It didn’t care whether its victims were guilty or innocent, for guilt lay not in individual acts of wrong-doing but in non-whiteness, in Negro-ness. Whiteness was a form of manifest destiny which designated Negroes as its territory and challenge.²²

The decision to make the narrator an Ohioan was also a by-product of Ellison’s experiences. In the summer of 1936, Ellison travelled to New York City, ostensibly to earn money for his senior year at Tuskegee by working in the cafeteria at the Harlem YMCA. In his free time he explored the cultural possibilities of the city, meeting Langston Hughes and Richard Wright in the process.²³ By the end of the summer, he had become enamored of the New York artistic and literary world and decided not to

18. ELLISON, *An Extravagance of Laughter*, *supra* note 8, at 167. Ellison would return to the theme of the brutality of a Southern lynching in chapter 15 of his posthumously published novel, *Juneteenth*. See RALPH ELLISON, *JUNETEENTH* 294-97 (John F. Callahan ed., 1st Vintage Int’l ed. 2000).

19. The United States Supreme Court case was *Powell v. Alabama*, 287 U.S. 45 (1932). For the Scottsboro case generally, see DAN T. CARTER, *SCOTTSBORO: A TRAGEDY OF THE AMERICAN SOUTH* (rev. ed. 1979).

20. ELLISON, *An Extravagance of Laughter*, *supra* note 8, at 166.

21. *See id.* at 167-72.

22. *Id.* at 172.

23. *Id.* at 146-48.

return to Tuskegee. He remained in New York until the fall of 1937 when his mother's ailing health required him to move to Dayton, Ohio, where Mrs. Ellison had moved the year before. Unfortunately, shortly after his mid-October arrival, his mother died in a Cincinnati hospital. For a variety of personal reasons, Ellison decided to remain in Dayton.

In Dayton and Cincinnati, Ellison encountered a different part of the "North." Although New York City was not the racial paradise that he had naively imagined, the range of opportunities for African Americans was far broader there than in southern Ohio. Moreover, unlike the case of New York, which was geographically far removed from the South, Dayton nearly abutted it. While New Yorkers generally expressed shock and aversion to lynching and other extreme forms of anti-black behavior in the South, the whites he found in Dayton, while perhaps disapproving in theory, seemed to accept it without outrage.

While in Dayton, Ellison was befriended by a prominent black attorney, William O. Stokes, who encouraged his literary ambitions and allowed him to use his law office to work on his writing. Ellison remained in Dayton until April 1938, and it was during this period that his literary career began in earnest. In all likelihood, he began work on *A Party Down at the Square* at this time. Following his departure from Dayton, he returned to New York where he lived for the remainder of his life. Once he decided to tell the story of the Macon County lynching from the perspective of a white observer, the choice of an Ohio narrator allowed Ellison to comment on the indifference of many northern Americans to the problem of lynching, and it saved him from the need to recreate directly the perceptions and thoughts of a Southern white, which may have been beyond his literary capabilities at that time.

The story Ellison tells also reflects his own analysis of the root cause of lynching. In his memoir, written in the 1980's, Ellison endorsed the view that the virulent race-baiting of the white South was linked to the depressed economic conditions of poor whites. Rather than attempt to come to grips with the causes of their poverty and ignorance, poor whites took solace in the fact that they were members of the superior race and that as individuals they occupied a higher social status than the great mass of blacks among whom they lived. To secure this illusion and insure the acquiescence of poor whites to existing economic conditions, African Americans were made the target of daily rituals built on anti-black stereotypes and epithets. While these rituals ordinarily remained in the realm of the symbolic, in times of racial tension the need to reassert white supremacy manifested itself in "the

form of a rite in which a human victim was sacrificed.”²⁴ To quote Ellison at some length:

It then became a ritual drama that was usually enacted in a preselected scene (such as a clearing in the woods or in the courthouse square) in an atmosphere of high excitement and led by a masked celebrant dressed in a garish costume who manipulated the numinous objects (lynch ropes, the American flag, shotgun, gasoline, and whiskey jugs) associated with the rite as he inspired and instructed the actors in their gory task. This was the anthropological meaning of lynching, a blood-rite that ended in the death of a scapegoat whose obliteration was seen as necessary to the restoration of social order. Thus it served to affirm white goals and was enacted to terrorize Negroes.

....

. . . And thus it does not matter if its sacrificial victim be guilty or innocent, because the lynch mob’s object is to propitiate its insatiable god of whiteness For the ultimate goal of lynchers is that of achieving ritual purification through destroying the lynchers’ identification with the basic *humanity* of their victims.²⁵

The depiction of Southern whites in *A Party Down at the Square* is entirely consistent with this view. Neither the identity of the victim nor the nature of his alleged crime appears to matter at all. Members of the mob seem incapable of individual action and neither inclement weather nor a man-made tragedy can keep them from pushing forward for a closer look at the target of their rage. In fact, the attention of the mob is so focused upon their objective that they miss completely the multiple ironies surrounding the evening’s events. The classic rationale for the use of extra-legal violence against black males was that left undisciplined they would pose a threat to white women. However, in this particular effort to reinforce the racial superiority of the white race, the mob’s action has led to the death of a white woman who not only has died a gruesome death but has turned *black* in the process (as a consequence of the current running through her body).

24. *Id.* at 177.

25. *Id.* at 177-78.

Similarly, in the aftermath of the lynching the county suffers calamities of almost Biblical proportions. The night of the lynching the wind carried the flames from the bonfire to residential areas and one of the town's finest houses burned to the ground. The windstorm that was brewing the night of the lynching turned out to be a cyclone which wreaked devastation for three days, leaving the county littered with dead sparrows and broken tree limbs and branches, and, as the narrator described it, "put the town in a hell of a shape."²⁶ To add insult to injury, Trans World Airlines was apparently planning to sue those who had started the fire for the damage done to its airplane. But rather than interpret this as retribution by nature or God for their actions, the whites of Macon County instead go out and lynch another black man.

Of course, this indifference to irony and symbol is hardly surprising. So obsessed is the mob with maintaining white supremacy that it is willing to repudiate Christianity itself. When the dying black victim appeals to his tormentors for Christian mercy—he wants them to go ahead and slit his throat so that his suffering will end—the leader of the mob tells him, "Sorry, but ain't no Christians around tonight. Ain't no Jew-boys neither. We're just one hundred percent Americans."²⁷ But the Americanism of the mob cares nothing for fundamental American values like due process and the rule of law. Law enforcement officials ignore their sworn duty to uphold the law, and the mob's leader apparently feels that his actions this night will enhance his chances of being elected sheriff the following year. The county courthouse, which ought to symbolize the values that the mob rejects, is the venue of choice for the execution, as though this will somehow stamp the mob's actions with an aura of legitimacy. Moreover, the symbol to which the mob truly pays tribute is not the courthouse, but the statue of the unrepentant Confederate general which adorns its grounds and overlooks the execution.

The northern narrator comes off only slightly better than his counterparts in the crowd. He at least has the decency to be repulsed by the events, but only after he witnesses them. Even then, he is more sickened than enraged. Instead of inspiring the narrator to campaign against injustices such as the one he has just witnessed, the events only lead him to resolve never to attend another lynching. While he may express a certain

26. ELLISON, *A Party Down at the Square*, *supra* note 8, at 11.

27. *Id.* at 8.

degree of admiration for the courage of the victim and skepticism about the effectiveness of the mob's actions, he keeps these feelings to himself, to the point that he barely even shares them with the reader.

At some level the story can even be read to disparage the African-American leadership of Tuskegee. The premise of Booker T. Washington's movement was that through discipline and self-help American blacks could earn the respect of whites. Well, nowhere was Washington's handiwork more apparent than in Macon County (in the form of Tuskegee Institute), but the situation is no better there than anywhere else in the South, as the events of this particular night prove. The deferential approach of Washington and his disciples has clearly failed, at least in the sense that it has done nothing to convince the region's whites that their black counterparts are worthy of respect, let alone equality.

Nevertheless, the story does provide some basis for optimism, and it comes in the person of the embittered white sharecropper who appears at the end of the story. Denied credit at the local store even though he is a white man, the cropper begins to see that the ritualistic lynching of the two blacks has done nothing to improve his real condition. Although he may not realize it yet, the white cropper has taken the first step toward liberation. His real problems in life, his hunger, his economic impoverishment, and his lack of education, are not the product of Negroes refusing to stay in their proper places; they are rather the product of the unacceptable economic conditions of his region, and, as he begins to realize, no amount of virulent racism will solve those problems. Although no character other than the narrator is willing to agree with the cropper as the story ends, the fact that he had this insight at least raises the possibility that others may have it as well. If the local white population ever accepts that imagined racial superiority is not as important as economic and educational benefits, their willingness to join the lynch mob will disappear and their anger and frustration will be directed at other targets.

THE PECULIAR PUBLICATION HISTORY OF *A PARTY DOWN AT THE SQUARE*

Given its poignancy and literary power, *A Party Down at the Square* would probably be remembered with Richard Wright's apocalyptic poem *Between the World and Me* and Billie Holiday's haunting song *Strange Fruit* as eloquent Depression-era protests by African Americans against the inhumanity of the lynch mob. While Ellison's adolescent white narrator may have been incapable of drawing a political conclusion from what he

had witnessed, the readers of the magazines in which the story might have appeared would not have been so incapacitated. Unlike the white members of the lynch mob and the morally numbed narrator, such readers would have been repelled and repulsed by the cruelty of the white participants and may well have been inspired to take action.

It is not associated with the black protests of the 1930's and 1940's, however, because Ellison chose not to submit the story for publication in those decades or any later ones. While it was written sometime between 1937 and 1940 when Ellison (born in 1914) was still in his mid-twenties, it remained unknown to anyone but Ellison until it was found among his papers by his wife and his literary executor after his death in 1994.²⁸ Consequently, the story was not published until 1996 when it appeared in a collection of Ellison's early short stories called *Flying Home and Other Stories*.²⁹ It was at this time the title *A Party Down at the Square* was first attached to the story. (The manuscript itself was untitled, but the words chosen by Ellison's literary executor as the title occur in the story's second sentence.)

Ellison's reasons for deciding not to submit the story for publication are not known. It may well have been that for all its power, the story was for Ellison only a literary experiment or an attempt to see if he could write in a particular style. As John Callahan has noted, *A Party Down at the Square* bears very little resemblance to anything else in the Ellison canon.³⁰ Its narrator is white, not black (as was always the case with Ellison's fiction); the narrative style seems to derive far more from Hemingway than Faulkner or Melville (to whose writings Ellison's work is frequently compared); and

28. The actual date of composition of *A Party Down at the Square* has never been determined. The manuscript was found by Fanny Ellison and John F. Callahan, Ellison's literary executor, in a folder marked "early stories." The typeface of the pages and an address appearing on one of the documents suggest that the manuscripts in the folder date from 1940 or earlier. Moreover, since the fictional events recounted in *A Party Down at the Square* are mentioned in the Ellison short story *Flying Home*, which was published in the magazine *Cross Section* in 1944, the date of composition has to be earlier than that. For a discussion of the discovery of the manuscript, see John F. Callahan, *Introduction to FLYING HOME AND OTHER STORIES*, *supra* note 8, at ix, xx-xxiv.

29. ELLISON, *A Party Down at the Square*, *supra* note 8, at 3. The story also appeared in *ESQUIRE*, Jan. 1997, at 90.

30. *Id.* at 95.

it seems more overtly political, and perhaps in that sense less morally complex, than the rest of Ellison's work.³¹

In fact, one suspects that the political nature, particularly the left-leaning political nature, is the real reason that Ellison chose to suppress it for so long. Although Ellison is frequently characterized as a black conservative, and his best-known work *Invisible Man* has a strong anti-communist theme, his politics in the 1930's were decidedly leftist.³² Although this does not explain why *A Party Down at the Square* was not published at the time it was written, it may explain why Ellison never sought to publish it later in his life. While one obviously did not need to be a Marxist or a subscriber to the *New Masses* to oppose lynching, the association of this story with his early flirtation with left-wing politics, which Ellison had clearly repudiated by the late 1940's, may have given him a reason to "forget" about the story in later years.

Whatever Ellison's reasons for withholding the story from publication, it still stands as a masterfully written document and a searing indictment of Southern white mores in the 1930's. For the modern reader, there is probably no more effective introduction to the historical phenomenon of lynching. The story also carries a more universal warning of the dangers of subverting individual will to collective action. But most importantly of all, it provides evidence that Ralph Ellison's effort to grapple with the psychopathology of American race relations began long before the publication of his 1952 masterpiece, *Invisible Man*, and that his gift for social criticism was there from the beginning of his literary career.

31. Ellison did not make use of a white narrator until 1973, when he published a story entitled *Cadillac Flambé* in the literary magazine, *The North American Review*. This story was narrated by a white reporter named McIntyre and was apparently intended to be part of Ellison's long awaited follow up to *Invisible Man*. When that novel was finally published posthumously as *Juneteenth*, Ellison's literary executor chose not to include *Cadillac Flambé* as part of the text. Other parts of *Juneteenth* are, however, narrated by whites. For an account of the publication history of *Cadillac Flambé*, see N.Y. TIMES, May 23, 1999, § 6, at 50 (review of *Juneteenth*).

32. On Ellison's conservatism, see Greg Robinson, *Ralph Ellison, Albert Murray, Stanley Crouch, and Modern Black Cultural Conservatism*, in BLACK CONSERVATISM: ESSAYS IN INTELLECTUAL AND POLITICAL HISTORY 151-58 (Peter R. Eisenstadt ed., 1999). For evidence of his left-wing leanings in the 1930's, see Barbara Foley, *Ralph Ellison as Proletarian Journalist*, 62 SCI. & SOC'Y 537 (1998-1999) and Barbara Foley, *Reading Redness: Politics and Audience in Ralph Ellison's Early Short Fiction*, 29 J. OF NARRATIVE THEORY 323 (1999). For an explicitly Marxist reading of *A Party Down at the Square*, see *id.* at 326-29.