

Passage for Questions 8 and 9

For many African American writers, history and personal experience have reflected not diversity of opportunity, but limitation of opportunity. Their writings consequently demonstrate their (5) sense that literature should provide a unified, cultural identity in forceful opposition to that limitation. For Ralph Ellison and some younger contemporary novelists such as Charles Johnson, Leon Forrest, and John Wideman, (10) however, the problem seems the reverse. With African American life offering multiple perspectives and possibilities to these writers, how can one pattern of unification explain all? And if one pattern cannot, what identities are (15) available to their characters? In *Invisible Man*, Ellison's protagonist, like Ellison in his early life, experiments with a variety of roles. As he assumes new roles, each a result of racial pressure, he realizes (20) paradoxically that while his options should be decreasing, they are actually increasing. Most frightening to him is the prospect that there might be innumerable roles for him to play, that the perception of "infinite possibilities" would (25) become the terrifying perception of chaos; he might, in other words, be without any permanent "form." Ellison's protagonist's problem is the same epistemological problem as that of Herman Melville's character Ishmael in (30) *Moby-Dick* (1851): how to make definitions, especially of one's self. The only "plan" that Ellison's protagonist finds capable of shielding him from the chaos of living is a personal aesthetic plan for an individual rather than for a (35) people. As the novel progresses, the Invisible Man perceives that actively creating a personal style makes survival possible; as a style for himself he adopts the attitudes of traditional blues. (40) Johnson, Forrest, and Wideman, however, cannot rest easy with even such a hard-won solution as the blues, if that solution is used to serve only an isolated individual. For them, the blues are chiefly a triumphant and lasting part of (45) African American culture, rather than a solution to the problem of defining identity. In their novels, the individual, that archetypal figure of Western myth and fiction, often journeys forth from a rural Southern community to the urban (50) North, seeking to know himself and give form to his life. Eventually the reader realizes that this journey is, as Ellison explicitly states about the journey of his protagonist, cyclical. Yet it should be noted that, whereas Ellison's (55) protagonist concludes his quest as a lone individual once again, the protagonists of these other

novels reconfirm their identity as members of the African American community. No character like Ras the Exhorter, who attempts in *Invisible Man* to (60) unify the African American community, triumphs in these novels, as many of Ellison's critics think should have happened in *Invisible Man*; but their protagonists do not end underground, accompanied alone with their thoughts.

Question 9

Which one of the following terms could best be substituted for the word "chaos" (line 25) without changing the author's meaning?

- (A) racial pressure
- (B) literary incoherence
- (C) contradictory roles
- (D) limited identity
- (E) unstable identity