

In one of the final passages of the novel on page 580, Ralph Ellison states that humans accept they are human, which gives them both their capacity for action and forces them to use this capacity. The narrator begins by referring back to this grandfather, the “old slave,” then comparing his grandfather’s feelings to his own. The contrast between the grandfather, who “accepted his humanity,” and the narrator, who initially resists it, highlights the contrast between the slave and the free man. The narrator mentions this irony again when he discusses the doubts that his grandfather’s “‘free’ offspring” have had about their own humanity. Ellison also uses parallel structure with “he accepted,” emphasizing the mutual identities of “principle” and “humanity.” This humanity must exist for the principle to exist; this links back to the idea that humans must accept their humanity before they can take action on principles.

The tone changes in the next section, where Ellison begins to address the reader. This shift allows Ellison to directly advance the idea that humans must accept that they are human. Ellison challenges the reader through the repetition of the word “you’ll fail.” This repetition increases the urgency of the passage. The narrator also writes that “you’ll fail to see it even though death waits.” This links into the importance of action. If the reader “fails to see” the importance of accepting their humanity and taking action on their principles, death waits for them.

Ellison draws a comparison between a hibernating animal and the narrator in the next section. The narrator claims he must “shake off his skin” and “come up for breath.” Shaking off the old skin is something that animals, rather than humans, are able to do. Having done this, the narrator becomes more human. Similarly, coming up for air is something that humans must do. Ellison also makes the passage better reflect the capacity

for action by directly stating that the “hibernation is over.” The hibernation, something that animals typically take, ends when the narrator accepts his humanity. The “decision” that the narrator refers to includes accepting his humanity.

The final section of the passage deals with action. The narrator has already stated his capacity to take action, but this section deals more with the importance of taking action. Ellison uses the concept of death to do this. He begins by repeating the word stench. He then connects the “smell of death” with spring, typically associated with rebirth. This smell of death links back to the idea that humans must take action before they die. The speaker writes that “invisibility has taught my nose to identify the stench of death;” this period of inactivity has shown him clearly the imperative for taking action before he dies.