

# A role of stereotypes and restrictions in invisible man book

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## **I Have a Dream About Racism**

The American society that the narrator lived in in the novel *The Invisible Man* was modeled after the real society in America during the 1920's. It was a society plagued with racism, one in which no man was who he could be because of the judgement of others. The white man seemed to reign supreme; his word was law. They were the ones with the money and power, leaving everyone else to fend for themselves. It was a society in which the people had to bend to others thoughts and feelings to get by. The nameless narrator felt it all; the racism and the pressure to go by other names to fit in, but the invisible man responds to all of these negative characterizations by owning them.

The narrator begins his journey by talking of his grandfather, a man who grew up a slave. He felt the full weight of racism as he grew up, and knew that the War may have freed his people, but it did nothing to quench the hatred towards those people that are different. The white man continued to discriminate against blacks. The Civil War actually seemed to make the discrimination worse. The society had no rules to protect the freed slaves, only rules that protected slaves, so now, the white men could do whatever they wanted to blacks. It made racism easier, and the grandfather knew it. Some black people, such as the narrator and his father, decided to play along with what the white men wanted. For example, on his death bed, the narrator's grandfather said " Son, after I'm gone I want you to keep up the good fight... I want you to overcome 'em with yeses, undermine 'em with grins, agree 'em to death and destruction..." (Ellison, 13). They became

puppets, used and abused, but shouldered the pain for rewards. For this, they were rewarded, with being treated as a source of amusement and receiving scholarships and money. The narrator was given money for allowing a group of white men to watch him essentially be torture. Then, he was given a satchel and scholarship for telling his African American brethren to be like the whites. To submit and be loyal, to not put up a fight, for if they would do that, they could be like him: successful. The only standards this society had were the racist standards that the white men put in place, regardless of what a black individual thought of himself. The black people that lived in that society had to either bend to the racism and shoulder the pain, or fight back. The narrator always shouldered it for the rewards, and always felt pain for it. This is shown when the narrator says “ By kicking me into the dark, they’d made me see the possibility of achieving something greater and more important than I’d ever dreamed” (Ellison, 275). Although the narrator suffered at first when Dr. Bledsoe kicked him out of the college, he eventually reaped the benefits: he was in the dark initially, and then he saw the light, which happened to not be white, but instead was something great within himself.

The society that the narrator lived in did not allow people to be themselves. The characters are puppets, given names and told what they were to do. The narrator of the story was given many names and roles to play. From student to weed dealer, the narrator never got to decide for himself what he wanted to be. His path was laid out for him; he just walked on it thinking it was his choice. The narrator started as a child, haunted by his grandfather’s final

words. He switched those words around and followed them in his own way, becoming a good student. In fact, he became the best student and was Valedictorian, giving so wonderful a speech that he was chosen to give it in front of his city's prominent businessmen. He took on the role of entertainment for these men because they told him to. He took on the role of boxer for the money he knew they promised to give him. He suffered greatly for this, just as he suffered as a child haunted by his grandfather's words. This time it was physical pain he endured. Foster said, " Violence in literature, though, while it is literally, is usually also something else. That same punch in the nose may be a metaphor," and that is exactly what happens in the novel (Foster, 95). The narrator is literally getting beat up and shocked all for entertainment and some cash, but this fighting also shows that he is a mere puppet controlled by white people, which is the exact way the narrator responds to the society around him in all cases.

After this violent event, the narrator gave his speech as he originally planned to do, but was tormented by their lack of attention. For this suffering he got a grand scholarship that would allow him to ascend, or descend, to his next role in life: a college student. To pay for his tuition he took on another role, as a driver and tour guide for the rich men that funded the school. The narrator allowed others to direct and control all his actions, going from place to place becoming a person whose attributes were determined by the people around him. One example of this is when the narrator is mistaken for Rinehart, and he simply just assumes this identity. " It was very strange. But that about the hat was a good idea, I thought, hurrying along now and

looking out for Ras's men. I was wasting time. At the first hat shop I went in and bought the widest hat in stock and put it on" (Ellison, 374). It is at this point in the novel where the narrator learns to use his control of his own identity in the society in which he lives for his own benefit; he is invisible due to the fact that he can be what people want him to be because that is what will benefit him in the long run. Later on, when the narrator is shot by the cops and meets Scofield and Dupre, he meets them and immediately conforms to what those people wanted him to be. This is evident when he says " I felt no need to lead or leave them; was glad to follow; was gripped by a need to see where and to what they would lead" (Ellison, 420). The narrator join in on Dupre's plan to burn down buildings, simply because he wants to fit in; it is clear that he adapts his identity and actions to what others around him want.

At the end of the novel, when the invisible man flees, finds himself in the underground hole, and eventually realizes that he needs to emerge, the full response of the narrator to the society he lives in is made clear: " And the mind that has conceived a plan of living must never lose sight of the chaos against which that pattern was conceived. That goes for societies as well as for individuals" (Ellison, 450). In order to thrive despite the stereotypes and restrictions that are placed on the narrator, he is now aware that he has to understand the chaos, and simply be invisible within it. Any society can have a huge impact on individuals, but the invisible man finds that individuals can also have a huge impact on society.