

"the invisible man" by ralph ellison essay sample

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Invisibility and Blindness

Ralph Ellison's The Invisible Man is beaming with references to race, especially the racial indifference experienced by blacks in a society dominated by whites. The motif of "blindness" or "invisibility" is sketched almost throughout the novel which essentially revolves around the character of the narrator or of the "invisible man" so to speak. Ellison's literary exposure of the character of the narrator is a resounding indication of how blacks are treated in the society and how the dominance of whites greatly affects and distorts their perception of the world.

At the onset of the novel, the situation wherein the narrator is compelled to fight in the "battle royal" in the presence of the white superiors watching in a sort of entertainment indicates the initial proof which the novel seeks to highlight. While fighting with other blacks in the form of boxing, the narrator had to endure the challenge of fighting some of his schoolmates "as part of the entertainment (p. 3)".

Ironically, it appears that the situation besetting the narrator exemplifies his notion of black humility in order to achieve progress even in the appalling face of enjoyment by the white superiors. This signifies the presumption that blacks were treated as some sort of an "object of entertainment" rather than as human beings who should be treated as beings with a sense of dignity and humiliation.

The "battle royal" scene indicates that blacks were treated invisibly or blindly by the whites. This is in the sense that they were not *seen* as human beings who share the same character and emotions such as the whites who

fancy the blacks fighting against one another. More to being just another reflection of white supremacy and the subjugation of the blacks under the dictates of whites, the battle royal scene portrays how whites were blinded by their belief that, because they are 'supreme' all because of their color or race, they can treat those who are different from them such as blacks as mere objects that satisfy the needs and wants of whites.

Another part of the book which showcases the motif of blindness or invisibility is the part where the narrator accidentally brings Mr. Norton before the house of Jim Trueblood, a black man who impregnated Mr. Norton's daughter, as part of his task to tour the rich white trustee around the grounds. The fact that Jim lived in "a log cabin" in the college outskirts after bringing "disgrace upon the black community (p. 32)" indicates the presumption that his actions came at a price he had to pay. The fact that there was an apparent distance which isolated Jim from the rest of the college community obviously portrays another scene where isolation corresponds to a form of invisibility or blindness for the individual. That is to say, Jim has been displaced away from the 'visibility' of others for several reasons.

Perhaps the major reason to Jim's isolation is the fact that he committed an act which brought disgrace to the black community. It can hardly be doubted that, in a society seemingly dominated by whites, any black man who has committed a crime or corresponding concepts thereof towards whites will most likely be treated like an outcast unworthy of the attention of other people.

We have to be reminded of two crucial things: first is the idea that, after bringing disgrace to his community, Jim eventually had to face the consequence of social indifference not only from his community but from the whites; second is the idea that living in the outskirts of the college campus only heightened his invisibility and the blindness of the whites who for once surrounded him.

Perhaps the most revealing stage in the life of the narrator can be observed at the instance where Dr. Bledsoe called his attention and met with him. Meeting up with the college president, the narrator later finds out that he is expelled from the campus and is given by Bledsoe quite a number of letters of recommendation which will give him the ease of finding a job somewhere in the north. Like an epiphany, it indicates how the narrator came to realize that he is indeed an 'invisible man' who is now on threshold "of having to leave all this, of being expelled (p. 103)."

The picture looks complete after the pieces drew upon the thought of the narrator: expulsion from the campus and the letters of recommendation from the college president for a job somewhere in the north. All of these things correspond to the notion that the deception of the college president in creating false hopes for the narrator to return to school is equivalent to the belief that the narrator is indeed being treated as an 'invisible man'. The potentials of the narrator were greatly overshadowed by the perception of the college president that the school funds might soon dry up after the incidents.

Instead of giving more attention to the potential of the narrator, the college president departs from that thought and focuses more of his attention towards finally expelling the narrator from the campus and pushing him off somewhere in the north or New York supposedly "to get a job and earn money (p. 148)". Then and there the narrator ultimately realizes how 'invisible' he has become in the face of others.

Ellison further highlights the 'invisibility' of the narrator after he was able to find a job in Liberty Paint known for its reputation as the paint company where "the purest white can be found (p. 188)". The contrast can be found in the seeming irony: the narrator, a black man, working in a paint company specializing in making *white* paints. It appears that Ellison is trying to send across the impression that, in the context of the larger society, the dominance of whites dissolves the presence of blacks, outlining another shade of racial domination where the 'oppressed' are placed behind the curtain away from view.

After the race riot in Harlem, the narrator decides to stay somewhere within the locality instead of finally leaving and starting life anew. The narrator finds himself occupying an underground basement of a building away from the eyes of the world, making him literally 'invisible'. The underground basement served as the home of the narrator where he nested himself in the presence of hundreds of light bulbs unknown to the power company. These things tell us more than what meets the eye.

For the most part, the part where the narrator steals 'power' from the power company by connecting the wires to the hundreds of light bulbs in his

basement indicates the rebellion of the narrator, and of the black race in general, against those who have the ' power' in the society. It indicates how the black narrator is able to steal from a power company owned and dominated by whites even when he is ' invisible', unseen by the watchful and humiliating eyes of the powerful whites by turning his ' invisibility' from a form of racial discrimination into a form of a racial advantage.

Indeed, there are numerous symbolisms in Ellison's The Invisible Man which portray the racial indifference towards the black people by the whites. Through an exploration of the life of the narrator, Ellison is able to incorporate the reality of the black community into the pages of his novel. In the end, the narrator, albeit ' invisible', is able to visibly highlight the treacherous circumstances which push him back and the rest of his fellowmen behind the perception of the white-dominated society.

Work Cited

Ellison, Ralph. The Invisible Man. 2nd ed. New York: Vintage, 1995.