

Essay on invisible man by ralph ellison

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Invisible Man by Ralph Ellison was written on the heels of the World War II. It was a rebuilding time, a time of new birth for our nation. Ellison, an enlisted soldier came out of the war with haunting imagery that he crafted on the page. He exited the war filled with suffering and depression. He found isolation as a means of transitioning back into society. Invisible Man is a story of characters that chose to hide out from society, living underground.

I will argue why Ellison's satirical approach tapped into segregation issues and was a powerful and influential means of reaching an audience that can relate to its theme on many different levels. Death is an overwhelming subplot within the theme of Ellison's masterwork. He chose a satirical approach to lighten the weight of death. Yet, at the same time, the powerful impact that death has on individuals is viewed with clarity due to his poetic, colorful, and humorous means of reaching his audience.

He opens the story with satire while probing into the inner meanings of one's path in life. This, in effect, lays the groundwork for our protagonist, the narrator. Ellison penned, I was looking for myself and asking everyone except myself questions which I, and only I, could answer. (p. 15). this quote lets us in on the narrator's persona. It begins. Our protagonist—and narrator—is a young boy who overhears his grandfather's last dying words. These words remain deeply wedged within him, through high school and college.

Issues beyond death play important roles in this novel as well. Ellison digs deep and moves across thin ice, so-to-speak, when he brings in issues such as incest, stereotyping and exploitation of women to the table; thus, without satirical softening through dialogue and deep—even poetic—story telling,

readers might question his motive if he didn't take the stance of satire. The article *The Music of Invisibility* from *City of Words* offers a very telling analysis that helps in the argumentative stance I have taken in Ellison's work, *Invisible Man*.

Just as the narrator is about to be sent away from college for his behaviors at the bar and brothel, he senses that he is losing his own identity, the only one he's ever known. This identity was forged in his childhood. The letters from Dr. Bledsoe had the initial intent of guiding him to find a job that will, in turn, lead him into the bowels of his higher educational pursuits. They, instead, backfire. The letters hinder his progress, as it is Bledsoe's secret scheme to keep him as far away from higher educational pursuits as possible. We see the issue of death surface over and over in the story.

Early on, our narrator is led into a bar filled with mental patients from a nearby veteran's hospital. Ellison displays an elderly man, near death, who is pushed around in the bar by our 'mental' patrons. They treat our narrator and the old man like a toy, feigning any morale fiber whatsoever. A barroom brawl ensues with your stereotypical beer-bottle-throwing scene. Then, to satirize the situation further, our narrator leads the unconscious old man into an upper flat to get away from the warring men down in the bar. The upper room is filled with prostitutes who miss the gravity of this dying man's situation.

One prostitute says, " I sho do. I just love ' em. Now this one, old as he is, he could put his shoes under my bed any night. " (p. 88) Also, it's no coincidence that the bar and brothel are on the other side of the railroad

tracks. This represented an underground segment of society gone wild, yet another segregated piece of society growing in two directions: the pleasure seekers and, at the other end of the spectrum, we have the good-natured cynic. So, depending on what side of the track a person walks, their political stance will vary.

As our narrator returns to his college campus, he exits from the “ apparent” lower crust of society that dwells in saloons and goes window-shopping through brothels and enters his collegiate setting. Here, however, we see segregation in the lime light: his bubbly roommate enters with a hopeful girlfriend. The narrator states that she’ll probably become impregnated. This rude remark that he hoped will get a negative reaction actually wins him praise—denouncing this segment of society that claims higher status due to their educational pursuits.

We see how the symbol of fertility for college students is viewed in stark contrast to the middle-class expectations many of the students were raised in. Our narrator is confronted by campus officials for going to the bar and brothel in the first place and even called “ nigger,” which inflames our narrator—and rightly so. This hits the mark of segregation that Ellison was reaching for. He does it with biting clarity. They even threaten to expel our narrator and, the reverse-discrimination attempts by our narrator are of no use in this situation—at least in so far as the ruling official is concerned.

Ellison wrote, “ He said that I believed white was right,” I said. “ What? ” Suddenly his face twitched and cracked like the surface of dark water. (p. 140) The intensity of this argumentative scene is strengthened further by

Ellison's use of satire within a deeply scarred scene where segregation is toyed with. The official even goes on to yell at our narrator by asking if the man in question was "northern or southern." This geographic tip is almost a slap in the face and could only be softened, again, with Ellison's satire-like plotting and character development. Then, our narrator is staged into a scene of isolation by Ellison.

It is in this very state of isolation that the narrator begins to gain confidence. He wants to represent his school with pride. He goes to Harlem. Aboard a subway, our narrator is pushed into a white woman. She gives little, if any notice, of him. Even her lack of concern over the narrator's close proximity adds mysterious intensity to the scene as centuries of racial tension are nearly impossible to ignore. He, then, meets up with a huge contingent of blacks from Harlem. A riot is brewing; yet, the police lead him to the Men's House. Eventually, our narrator's agitation surrounding all this racial tension and segregation issues gets to him.

As the scene unfolds Ralph Ellison weaves sarcastic wit into the story by mixing rage into his thoughts with memories of our narrator's childhood. A vendor is seen buttering a yam which swells him with nostalgia. He is beyond feeling homesick as he is down in rage. He becomes vengeful over his own past. He attacks Bledsoe and is laughing at the same time. The yam becomes a form of life insurance, or a life policy. Why should he feel embarrassment of his youth? Instead, he chooses to eat them whenever he wants, and he'll be more than pleased. Ellison describes this satire in the following, "These here is real, sweet, yaller yams.

How many? “ One,” I said. “ If they’re that good, one should be enough. ” (p. 263) Ellison creates more satire—again with death. Here, the satire is the necessary writerly element that creates impact without losing the reader. I cut through a block in which there were a dozen funeral parlors, each decked out with neon signs, all set up in old brownstone buildings (p. 286). This satirical segment of the novel creates the humor necessary to softens the blow regarding respecting the dead and families in mourning. Rinehart is another key player in the storyline that is heavily tainted in satirical prose.

Rinehart is a very suspicious and distrustful member of the Harlem community who holds his share of power. Rinehart is also a manipulator. The narrator never meets up with Rinehart. He wears dark green shades and a big hat for a disguise—another agent of mockery crafted by Ellison that make fun of how society tries to hide from one another, yet they are always obvious to someone in the crowd of life; for the people walking the streets recognize him. According to the narrator, Rinehart has taken on many roles: zoot suit wearer, Reverend, and player.

He uses his reverend stature to manipulate others to believe in him and follow his requests. Rinehart is the poster-child manipulator of his culture. As the novel nears its end, our narrator makes a leap of faith, so to speak. He is tossed back into his own past and life experiences. Now he envisions his past as a unified whole. He believes in his Brotherhood experiences; for they have shown how blinded he was in his youth. He sees all the liars and hypocrites in society. He discovers that he can make them feel happy when he preaches what they want to hear.

This is yet another satirical slant taken by Ellison that wraps up his characterization and thematic nature. In closing, it is clear that the impact of Ellison's *Invisible Man* was so persuasive due to his knack for mixing satire into his storyline. With all the issues that he brought to light— segregation, racism, and gender inequality—satire was the lightening element that helped keep the story moving as our narrator discovered himself, first in isolation and finally as a member of this society filled with hypocrites and those yearning for equality.