

Narrative of frederick douglass and invisible man



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Work conditions for African Americans have not always been favorable and supportive for the integration of the race in a white predominant society. I will be analyzing the Narrative of the life of Frederick Douglass and the novel Invisible Man. Both books were written at different times in history, one during slavery and the other after the Civil war.

However both portray a common theme of racial inequality. While Douglass extracts African American discrimination from his own life experience, Ellison uses one scene to eloquently depict what truly happens to African Americans in their work place. Frederick Douglass accounts the mistreatment of African Americans by whites at their work place. The mistreatment is due to the belief of racial supremacy. It is also a result of a society completely impaired by the corrosive effects of slavery, the fear of free colored men taking over the trade, and poor white men left without employment. Hired for the position of caulking, Douglass was misled and re-assigned to be the carpenters' assistant at the beck.

The issue was that there was about seventy-five carpenters at the beck and Douglass was required to help every one of them. Although the work is strenuous and unfair African Americans and whites work alongside each other. After Douglass starts working, white carpenters begin to protest because hiring African Americans would eventually lead to white carpenter's unemployment. Many whites leave work assuring they would not go back until black carpenters were dismissed. Despite the fact that Douglass is not a carpenter, prejudice is aimed towards African Americans in general. The whites would mention that killing blacks is necessary in order to keep them from taking over the country.

Douglass' conflict with Mr. Covey, entitled the slave breaker is a turning point for him. From that point on, he determines what his attitude would be in regards to injustice. This incident leads him to strike back at any aggression, even if the outcome is death. Nevertheless, he is approached by four white carpenters who attack him with sticks and stones. The conflict almost kills him, leaving him seriously injured while almost losing his eye.

Instead of breaking the fight apart, the crowd of white carpenters watching would shout: " Kill the damned nigger" (Douglass 104). More distressful than the fight itself is the knowledge that nothing can be done about it. In the end, Douglass is the lucky one, because he escapes with his life and is not charged with striking a white man (a crime punished with death at the time according to Lynch's law). None of the white men would testify against the aggressors and the testimony of African Americans is insufficient to arrest them even in the case of death. Following his recuperation, Douglass is employed by Mr. Walter Price.

He immediately learns to caulk and within one year is among the most experienced caulkers. For Douglass the most iniquitous injustice is performed by Master Hugh, his slave master. Hugh demands Douglass to turn all his wages, simply because he has the authority to do so. While work in the shipyards give free and enslaved African Americans a great deal of freedom and opportunity, the work environments these men encounter are harsh and relentless.

Hard and strenuous physical labour is the only thing guaranteed upon entrance in these work scenes. In addition to this, there is no degree of

protection from either the bosses or the law. Although Maryland is a slave state, Baltimore is home for most of the free African Americans in the south. While this fact favors African Americans by giving them various job opportunities, it also exposes them to a prejudice that could not be expunged by legally freeing slaves.

Despite of all these circumstances Douglass considers Baltimore the pathway of his future freedom: “ Going to live in Baltimore laid the foundation, and opened the gateway, to all, my subsequent prosperity. I have ever regarded it as the first plain manifestation of that kind providence which has ever attended me, and marked my life with so many favors” (Douglass 18). Although *Invisible Man* was written in a post-slavery era, Ellison does not measure words to illustrate the unfair work setting for African Americans. The paint factory is located across Long Island bridge.

Due to the fog, visibility is dim, and the only visible words are: “ keep america pure with liberty paints” (Ellison 198) displayed in an electric sign. The name of the paint factory, Liberty Paints, depicts an American ideology; it reflects a country founded in the name of liberty and equality and yet so many suffered unjustness and oppression. *Invisible Man* thinks he will have a problem in mentioning Emerson’s name since he is there without his consent. However, upon saying Emerson’s name, he is immediately taken in and hired without further questioning. The paint factory is the only real job that *Invisible Man* is engaged in throughout the novel. This job is acquired only because of a white person’s patronage.

This delineates how hard it is for an African American to get a job without the reference of an influential person. Invisible Man is taken by a boy to Mr. Kimbro. Ellison does not mention the boy's race however right after he takes Invisible Man to Mr. Kimbro, he is mistreated and calls Mr. Kimbro a slave driver.

Invisible man's journey at the paint factory is not a promising one. He is immediately introduced to a northern man labeled a slave driver. The Northern's reputation at the time was the home of free black, and still Ellison is explicitly exposing that the reality is contradictory. Mr. Kimbro not only is prejudicial against Invisible Man but he also sets him up for failure.

He demands from Invisible Man an obedience without questioning or understanding. Upon failure at Mr. Kimbro's department, Invisible Man is sent to Mr. Brockway. Mr. Brockway is the only African American that holds a position at the factory - a position he acquired solely due to the fact that he helped found the factory.

He keeps his influential position by treating anyone who comes in contact aggressively and doubtfully. He works in a dark basement producing the paint that is mixed on the floor above. The success of the factory lays in his hands because he knows the system and blueprint. He does not, however, share his knowledge with anyone. He works for his own realization and not for the progress of his race.

When Mr. Brockway says " Our white is so white you can paint a chunka coal and you'd have to crack it open with a sledge hammer to prove it wasn't white clear through" (Ellison 217), he advocates that the Optic white, which <https://assignbuster.com/narrative-of-frederick-douglass-and-invisible-man/>

is only white visibly but its origin is a mix of dark colors, covers blackness. In fact the main and sole attribute of the paint is to cover blackness. The paint symbolizes the suppression of the black race and identity and those who have to forge their identities and own culture to conform to that imposed by Whites. Another organization Invisible Man encounters is the union, a highly segregated system which he is unaware of.

The members at the union meeting think he is a spy when they find out he is Brockway's assistant. When Mr. Brockway finds out, he threatens Invisible Man and commands him to leave the plant. Invisible man claims he is not from the union and they engage in a fight which results in an explosion. Throughout the novel, Ellison implies the reoccurring theme that if African Americans work together they most likely will win over the oppressor.

Both books, despite the time in history in which they were written, portray the same topic. The argument being made is that a White race supremacy could have never been achieved without impairing the Black race. Douglass and Ellison successfully exhibit an inflicting racial inequality that is carried through every single social and political structure in America. They expose an existing effort to somehow make the African American race impotent in all its aspects by extirpating them from their individuality as a race, their culture, customs, and self worthiness.