

# Invisible man a union of modernism and naturalism

[Literature](#), [Books](#)



Invisible Man A Union of Modernism and Naturalism The novel *Invisible Man*, by Ralph Ellison, is one of the most significant representations of African American achievement in the arts to date. The story follows an unnamed young African American man's journey through political and racial self-discovery as he tries to find an answer to his life defining question. The question is symbolically posed by the title of the Luis Armstrong song "What Did I Do to Be So Black and Blue".

Although most people would argue that *Invisible Man* is simply modernist, that is not the case. *Invisible man* is a piece of literature that embodies the themes and styles of many literary schools of thought woven together, the most dominant of them being Naturalism, and Modernism. Naturalism, like Modernism, was spawned from the idea of figuring things out for one's self. In the naturalist works there is an emphasis on socio-economic brackets; a person's height on the proverbial foodchain of society. Naturalists are committed to documenting the surfaces of American life and to probing its concealed depths... usually [focusing] on the desperate existence of characters" (Encyclopedia of American Literature) living in an urban slum trapped by: violence, the forces of heredity as they affect--and afflict--individual lives, and an indifferent deterministic universe. " *Invisible Man*" by Ralph Ellison reflects naturalistic tendencies by placing the main protagonist in violent scenarios to better reveal to the reader the socio-economic standing of the unnamed main character.

In the beginning of the novel the main character describes a time when he was walking the solemn streets of his Harlem slum when he was insulted by

a White man after mistakenly bumping into him. He immediately seized the man and asked for an apology and the blond face blue eyed man looked at him “ insolently and cursed at [him]” (Ellison 4). So the narrator took that as an invitation for violent behavior, which it was, and pummeled the man within an inch of his life.

In the book Ralph Ellison says that when the narrator saw the news report about the “ mugging” he laughed and called the man a poor blind fool (Ellison 5), for he knew that neither he nor the men were ever going to escape the violence and that only he unlike the “ sleepy ones”(Ellison 5) was aware of it. Another example of the narrator’s imprisonment under the lock of key of violence was after giving a beautifully written valedictorian speech he was invited to speak in front of a few distinguished white faced gentle to show his support of “ Negro humility. But the mob of Caucasian aristocrats had other things planned—they were going to, by all means, let him give his speech; just after they were finished parading him around and forcing him to fight a group of other African American young men. An Additional example of the narrator being trapped in an existence plagued by violent episodes is when he brings his charge, Dr. Norton, to a veteran’s brothel to get some whiskey, instead of glasses of whiskey and neighborly salutations they are met with violence. Dr. Norton is mistaken for “ John D. Rockefeller” (Ellison 81) and beaten unconscious by the insane bar patrons.

Throughout the novel the narrator gives his life history by way of stories from his past, each ending in, as Harold Bloom said in his Bloom notes, betrayal and explosive violence . The main protagonist cannot escape the

violence of his environment as it is with many naturalistic texts he is trapped by the violence. In naturalistic texts free will is not an option for the characters because they live in a deterministic society that says, in the case of the main protagonist of Ralph Ellison's "Invisible Man", you are invisible; you can never be visible because visibility is only achieved through having some social significance.

The determinists in a society will do whatever they deem necessary to keep you where they feel you belong. This sad truth is symbolized through the statue in the university yard. The statue is one of a slave kneeling before the founder who is pulling a veil more firmly over the face of the slave. The deterministic society allows you to live just as long as you do not become aware or seek to reach your full potential; turning people, especially African Americans, into sleep walking robots stuck in a state of involuntary hibernation. Ellison [also] suggests through his writing that many people, in particular black men, have been forever altered by their disturbing experiences" (Harlem Renaissance). The forces of deterministic society and how they affect individual lives are vividly depicted throughout the novel. The forces of deterministic society and how they affect individuals' lives is depicted in the story of Jim True-Blood, an uneducated African American sharecropper who attempts to stay and share a bed with his wife and daughter. But as time goes on he begins to participate in the most taboo of taboo behaviors, he begins to "lay" with both his wife and daughter. Jim True-Blood impregnates his wife and daughter, but instead of being chained and shackled he is rewarded with food and tobacco. Society is essentially sending a message saying that it is alright to participate in primitive practices like

incest when you're an uneducated black sharecropper, firmly placing the veils over the eyes of all the sleep walkers who are trapped in the deterministic society like all the characters of Naturalistic texts. Shortly after Naturalism there was the rise of Modernism; Modernism is associated with the rise of capitalism and rational thinking.

The Modernist movement can be summed up with the philosophical quote, "I think therefore I am," meaning I will only believe what I see and what I can prove. In general, Modernism although being a rejection of it really reflects the legacy of Enlightenment thought with its emphasis on the capacity for an individual to act as an "autonomous being" (Taylor) and essentially questions the universal truth. Modernist styles of writing consist of: fragmentation where the story is not told in linear order and authority figures are usually not trustworthy. Invisible Man" is like a "jazz performance"(Bloom) in the way it is improvised and fragmented . One scene the story takes place in the narrator's "hole" then the reader is taken to a southern plantation or the campus of a historically black university. In accordance with Modernist texts Invisible Man probes and questions the universal truths by depicting authority figures as untrustworthy. One example of an untrustworthy authority figure is the narrator's principal. The principal is traditionally a person whose motives need not to be questioned.

But in the story principal in a way punishes the narrator for being articulate and makes him "dance for his bananas" by forcing him to fight before being allowed to give his speech. The principal's treachery didn't stop there after the fight he along with his white colleagues thrumoneyon an electrified

carpet and told the unsuspecting participants of the "battle royal" (Ellison 15) including the narrator to pick up their compensation and laughed in satisfaction as they all screamed in pain and astonishment. Another example of an untrustworthy authority figure is Dr.

Bledsoe the president of the university the narrator attends and a paternal figure. After the mishap between the narrator and his white charge, Dr. Norton the narrator is harshly reprimanded by Dr. Bledsoe and is sent to New York to find work as he serves his semester long suspension. Dr. Bledsoe gives the narrator a sealed letter of introduction. The narrator having the utmost trust in Dr. Bledsoe shows the letter to many Wall Street interviewers with little success. But little did the narrator know that the sealed letter was the problem. Within the letter Dr.

Bledsoe had stated the narrator had been expelled and was a threat to the school. Like all the authority figures that he came to trust and look up to Dr. Bledsoe had betrayed the narrator, a very modernistic theme. As stated before *Invisible Man* embraces both themes and styles of Modernism and Naturalism. The use of naturalistic styles helps the reader understand that the narrator truly is a product of his environment by depicting his imprisonment in a cycle of violence and his role in a deterministic as well as how it affected his individual life.

But as the reader reads on the novels "burst the bond of naturalistic texts" (Bloom). As the novel evolves so does Ellison's style begins to become very similar to that of modernist pioneers like Faulkner and Eliot. Ellison uses rapid flow consciousness, and a series of abstract nouns joined together

by an overworked conjunction to (Bloom) as he said to reveal the truths of human complexity by probing the stereotypes that conceal theme Work cited Giles, James R. "naturalism." In Anderson, George P. , Judith S. Baughman, Matthew J.

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