

The effects of society on the individual's quest for divine understanding

[Literature](#), [Novel](#)



In the novels *Invisible Man* and *Siddhartha*, the protagonists find it necessary to completely isolate themselves from the influences of society in order to reach a stage of serene understanding, or “enlightenment.” Both *Siddhartha* and the *Invisible Man* initially seek understanding through following accepted methods. Both, however, eventually find themselves disillusioned with society’s techniques and choose to follow the outcasts of their respective civilizations. Despite the changes in their ways, both protagonists finally reach the conclusion that one must forge one’s own path in order to reach divine understanding. *Siddhartha*, son of the Brahman, was his family’s prodigy and highly thought of within his community. He was active in religious sacrifices and other sacred practices and was seen as a future prince among the Brahmans. “He practiced... the art of contemplation, the duty of total concentration” (1). Despite all this, *Siddhartha* failed to be satiated by society’s means: “*Siddhartha* had begun to nurture dissatisfaction within himself. He had begun to feel that his father’s love, his mother’s love, and also the love of his friend *Govinda*, would not always and for all time make him happy, content him, sate him, suffice him” (2). The overall situation was quite comparable to that of *Ralph Ellison’s Invisible Man*. The *Invisible Man* was similarly seen as having the potential for becoming something extraordinary. This much was acknowledged even by the whites, although expressed in a sarcastic, patronizing overtone: “Gentlemen, you see that I did not overpraise this boy. He makes a good speech and some day he’ll lead his people in the proper paths” (*Ellison* 32). Both protagonists, despite their shining potential, eventually shun the accepted norms and take their first steps toward separatist organizations.

For Siddhartha, this means becoming one of the samanas, homeless beggars who sacrifice all material possessions in the quest for enlightenment. The Invisible Man rebels by joining an organization known as the Brotherhood. These changes eventually leave both men unsatisfied however, and they still have a significant distance to “travel” before they can reach their ultimate enlightenment. Enlistment into these separatist groups was a setback for the respective protagonists, despite the progress they originally intended to make. The Invisible Man first sees the Brotherhood as an excellent opportunity to advance not only himself, but the black race as a whole. This desire to make a difference is what truly gives him the ability to distinguish himself among the other Brothers, and wins him acclaim as a great orator. “Let’s put it this way,” one recruiter for the Brotherhood croons, “How would you like to be the new Booker T. Washington?” (305) Siddhartha rose to similar acclaim among the samanas, though his eventual dissatisfaction came faster and with more pronouncement: Many things did Siddhartha learn from the samanas; he learned how to take many paths away from self. He took the path of liberation from self through pain, through voluntary suffering and conquest of the pain, of hunger, thirst, fatigue. He took the path of liberation from self through meditation, by consciously emptying his mind of all ideas. He learned to take these and other paths; a thousand times he left his self behind, for hours and days at a time he remained in a state of nonself. But even though the paths led away from self, at the end they always led back to self. (Hesse 8-9) This is where the paths of Siddhartha and the Invisible Man deviate slightly; while the Invisible Man carries on with his flawed organization, Siddhartha slips back into a mainstream life of material

pleasures and social pressures. His initially casual involvement with the merchant, Kamaswami, leads to his consumption by society's temptress, wealth. His flirtation with this destabilizing force eventually leads to his downfall, as he retreats further and further into disgust and despair. It is only at his spiritual death that his connections to the social world are irrevocably severed. It is here that both protagonists move into the third and final stage of their quests for enlightenment. In the last stage of their closely mirrored search for divine understanding, the Invisible Man and Siddhartha both come to the realization that true enlightenment must be found by oneself from within, rather than taught by others from outside. The Invisible Man's final revelation comes to him after analyzing the results of the great Harlem riot: And my problem was that I always tried to go in everyone's way but my own. I have also been called one thing and then another while no one really wished to hear what I called myself. So after years of trying to adopt the opinions of others I finally rebelled. I am an invisible man. (Ellison 581)The Invisible Man's act of burning the contents of his briefcase serves as a physical realization of his new philosophy of enlightenment. Siddhartha comes to his enlightenment by the river with the ferryman only after renouncing his earlier ways and searching within himself: But more than Vasudeva could teach him, the river taught him. He never stopped learning from it. Above all it taught him how to listen, to listen with a quiet heart, with an open, expectant soul, without passion, without a desire, without judging, without an opinion. (Hesse 57)In this passage, the river serves more as a metaphor for self-reflection than actually being a simple body of water. It is a parallel to Siddhartha's life, as " Siddhartha's prior births did not constitute a

past, and his death and his return to Brahma were not a future" (Hesse 58). The paths of the Invisible Man and Siddhartha, though separate at times, eventually can be viewed as close parallels to each other, with distinct beginnings, middles, and ends. The Invisible Man at first attends a Negro college, but later signs on with the Brotherhood in an effort to make a difference in people's lives. Siddhartha strove to find satisfaction by fulfilling his obligations as a Hindu, but later rejected this to learn the path to enlightenment from the samanas. These paths, however, do not lead to their desired result, as they are the paths trodden by others. Both men eventually find it necessary to block out all influences of society or other people in order to discover true inner peace and understanding.