

Invisible man by ralph ellison | analysis



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The main protagonist of Ralph Ellison invisible man is not the only one who remains unseen as the novel unfolds. Another element also cloaked in invisibility follows our unknown character throughout the novel, changing both beat and tempo as the novel develops.

Rather like the invisible man, the ongoing musical beat that runs through out the invisible man' may not be visible yet it is very clearly felt and heard. It is the distinct incorporation of the inflowing musical beat that allows for an interloping of ideas based upon the visible, the invisible and the creative with the novel.

The main theme within the 'invisible man' is that of the more obvious theme of invisibility. Ellison explores through the use of music such as in the form of jazz the moments or experiences where invisibility takes control. Such breaks in visibility signify a chance for the protagonist to escape and break the mould of the what can be called 'constitutional visibility' allowing for the exploration of ones own identity and individuality. An individuality and identity that is not in any way restricted to what is generally accepted as visible.

Such breaks that allow for such explorations to take place within the novel can be seen from the very beginning where in the prologue the protagonist recalls a certain incident:

Once I saw a prize-fighter boxing a yokel. The fighter was swift and amazingly scientific. His body was one violent flow of rapid rhythmic action. He hit the yokel a hundred times while the yokel held up his arms in stunned surprise. But suddenly the yokel ... struck one blow The smart money hit

the canvas. The long shot got the nod. The yokel had simply stepped inside of the opponent's sense of time.

Through such a passage the reader is able to see that there is an alternative to the scientific approach. The yokel uses time and space in order to overpower the violence of science allowing creativity to achieve success. The restriction imposed by science is overcome through the ability to analyze and interpret a situation differently. In the instance it was the yokel's ability to step into the time frame of the prize-fighter and thus provide for a different strategy towards victory. One that was able to unite creativity and originality. Rather like the same way the 'invisible man' uses the music of Louis Armstrong with the combination of the reefer to discover a rather unconventional way of listening to Armstrong's music, thus in that way offering new ways of interpretation.

Through the work of Victor Zuckerkandl, critic Nathaniel Mackey creates a rather interesting argument. Mackey states that 'because music exists the tangible and visible can not be the whole of the given world. The intangible and invisible is itself a part of the world, something which we encounter, something to which we respond' this statement can be seen running throughout the 'invisible man'. It is visible where the protagonist describes the dream like images evoked by the Louis Armstrong's music. These images run throughout the novel as seen at the very beginning by the incorporation of the prize-fighter and the yokel. These cuts and breaks in the narrative are essential to grounding this feeling and theme of invisibility whilst at the same time allowing Ellison to create improvisation through the use of language. Such technique is central to the very framework of the novel. The <https://assignbuster.com/invisible-man-by-ralph-ellison-analysis/>

novel itself flows like a piece of music, with one incident happening right after the other. Each incident offers a break, a certain point in which the protagonist is given a certain moment in which his identity and individuality are either challenged or asserted.

Even so Ellison does not rely on merely the invisible man to convey the W. Bell calls the portrayal of ' the historical quest of black American for identity in a society whose traditions simultaneously inspire and inhibit their impulse toward freedom and self-realization'. Characters like Trueblood immerse. Although he has committed the sin of incest, trueblood does not allow his guilt to bind him. He turns towards the blues for guidance and repentance. One can even say that trueblood turns inward, looking to himself and to what defines him as an individual. W. Bell says that ' the courage and discipline that Trueblood discovers in the blues are essential values that the hero must learn by acknowledging his folk heritage'. The character of the junkman that the hero meets later in New York is also a reinforcement of the idea of the blues as being part of the cultural heritage of the black community. The idea of jazz and the blues and the power that they were able to distribute lies in their ability to parallel the then black life. Writing in ' Living with music' Ellison is quoted as saying ' life could be harsh, loud and wrong if it wished, but they lived it fully and when they expressed their attitude toward the world it was with a fluid style that reduced the chaos of living to form' This idea is reinforced through the meeting of the invisible man with the junkman who unlike Trueblood is not ultimately dismissed by the protagonist, ' he had me grinning despite myself. I liked his words through I didn't know the answer. Id known the stuff from childhood, but had forgotten it; had learned

it back of school....'. Where as the tainted past of Trueblood causes the invisible man to cast him aside the quizzical performance of the junkman allows for him to grasp at his own heritage. A notion reinforced through the simple act of buying a baked yam from the street vendor soon afterwards.' I yam what I am'. It is these grasps at heritage and the acceptance of his own peoples strive for freedom that the invisible man must realise is the essential makeup of his quest for personal individuality and freedom. For they are, part of the make-up of who he is. What must also be noted is that throughout the novel and these incidents, the invisible man seems to have a certain type of plan that each time he strives to achieve. Yet as the novel progresses the plan changes. It is transformed from the mere wish of wanting to graduate and become as highly respected by the white community as Bledsoe. To wanting to work hard and be able to return to his school, to wanting assert himself within the brotherhood. To finally whilst in his hole, wanting only to assert his own humanity.

In Ralph Ellison ' The collected essays of Ralph Ellison. Ellison argues that it was the American dream that drove all Americans, ranging from different European nationalities to come to states and establish a better way of life. Even so, this was not the case for the then African slaves. Once freed these former slaves were now forced into finding a way of life that would enable them to be able to live within this European mix even though they were distinctively non-European. This, Ellison argues, resulted into an even more complex and thorough mix, eventually resulting in to the true beginnings of the American culture.

“ Having no past in the art of Europe, they could use its elements and their inherited sense of style to improvise forms through which they could express their own unique sense of American experience.”

To Ellison this clearly was parallel to Jazz as it was the one form of art that could both explain and identify the American experience. Just like jazz uses improvisation, to piece together different instruments playing their own spontaneous versions of the chords that create a song, so did the many different cultures and cultural traditions come together to piece the American tradition.

This piecing of the American culture and tradition is seen throughout the novel as the protagonists comes face to face with a variety of individuals, ranging from different backgrounds that have all come together to form what is termed as ‘ American’.

Ellison comments in his ‘ Shadow and Act’ that:

‘ The Blues is an impulse to keep the painful details and episodes of a brutal experience alive in ones acting consciousness, to finger its jagged edge and to transcend it, not by consolation of philosophy but by squeezing from it a near-tragic, near comic lyricism. As a form the blues is an autobiographical chronicle of personal catastrophe expressed lyrically...’

In other words what Ellison is stating is that the blues offer another medium through which the philosophy of life is brought out. A philosophy as such that revolves through and around the complexities of improvisation. The crude or white-washed walls of science are completely disregarded by Ellison for a far

more natural or artistic sense of being. Where ones path is life is defined by the tragedies and experiences he or she goes through, so that we are able to emerge triumphant in the end, whilst temporarily relying on the comforts of the present. This according to Ellison is the true essence of ones freedom of identity.

Albert Murray further expands on this in 'The hero and the blues' stating that the blues present us with a near ancient tragedy sort of existence where the hero is able to persist through life and through whatever ugliness that life presents to him through what Murray calls 'a device for making the best of a bad situation'.

Such a philosophy can be partly seen through the grandfather's words that the protagonist hears echoing through out the novel. His, the grandfathers, was a philosophy of yes-sing them. Such a philosophy may be on the surface regarded as a show of submission by the black man to the white mans dominance. Yet to the grandfather it was a way of survival. A way of like Murray says making the best out of a bad situation. In a world where the black community was regarded as lowly and inferior to the white community it is hard to see how a full on offensive would have helped in determine equality. In fact a full on offensive by the black man towards the white man would have left the black man poor, helpless and hungry. This show of submission is part of the grandfathers departing wisdom. A wisdom that urges our protagonist to fight in a defensive rather than offensive mode as this would be the fruitful result. This would be achieved by:

“ Live with your head in the lions mouth, I want you to overcome ‘ em with yess, undermine‘em with grins, agree‘em to death and destruction, let ‘ em swoller you till they vomit or bust open”

Although not completely understood by the main protagonist the grandfather had imparted a rather sphinx like riddle of an advice that although appeared to be that of subjection was actually a means of survival. By urging his grandson to say yes he is not urging him to bow down to the white man but rather assert himself. He is saying ‘ yes’ knowing that he has the power to say ‘ no’. His ‘ yes’ is a show of dignity, a statement stating that he is agreeing as a free man, not as a slave, and that that ‘ yes’ is a means of survival. The grandfather is not the only one to have picked up on this idea of having to say ‘ yes’ in order to survive. Bledsoe is another character who aims to ‘ yesses” the entire white race to death. Yet the difference between Bledsoe and the grandfather is that Bledsoe does it through complete selfishness. This is the danger that as Bernard W. Bell says Ellison is ultimately implying. ‘.. the danger of compulsive individualism in a laissez-faire social system based on the conflicting principles of egalitarianism and racism.’

The hero’s grandfather’s words are elusive and open to a wide scope of interpretation, yet for Ellison this was the exact embodiment of the meaning of jazz. Jazz as seen in Ellison’s essay ‘ The Charlie Christian Story’ was regarded by Ellison as

an art of individual assertion within and against the group. Each true jazz moment ... springs from a contest in which each artist challenges all the rest;

each solo flight or improvisation, represents ... a definition of his identity: as individual, as member of the collectivity and as a link in the chain of tradition. Thus because jazz finds its very life in an endless improvisation upon traditional materials, the jazzman must lose his identity even as he finds it.

Ellison last words echo the very theme of the 'the invisible man' and the final act of the hero within the book. For in order to become visible Ellison's hero has had to become invisible. And although our invisible man seems to have only become invisible by the end of the novel, what is conveyed through the hero himself is that he has been in fact invisible from the very beginning. This invisibility was a direct product of the white man, invisibility evoked through the hero's blind faith in the white man's word. Although the novel's hero does as his grandfather says 'agree'em', he does not 'agree'em to death'. His 'yeses' are ones that do not recognise his own individuality. The individuality of a black man who knows that although by agreeing the issue may not be confronted at least it is put out there. Another character in this novel that has the ability to say yes without being submissive is Mary.

"You have to take care of yourself, son. Don't let this Harlem git you. I'm in New York, but New York ain't in me, understand what I mean? Don't git corrupted."

Mary has chosen to agree in order to survive. Yet her agreement does not stretch as far as corruption 'I'm in New York, but New York ain't in me, understand what I mean? Don't git corrupted'. Mary has created an ideology

which allows for her survival, whilst at the same time ensuring her own honesty by not contradicting her own morals.

These are the punches the yokel was able to find in order to outwit the prize fighter. These are the parallel examples to 'the smart money hit the canvas. The long shot got the nod'.

The anonymous letter received by the protagonist later on in the novel is the first time the protagonist says 'yes' without being submissive. This time his 'yes' is accompanied by resentment and fear. Tarps actions of giving his chain link to the invisible man and his words 'don't think of it in terms of but two words, yes and no; but it signifies a heap more', offer another insight into the invisible mans grandfathers words.

To be able to find the true meaning behind his grandfather's word the invisible man chooses invisibility. This invisibility although offers a cloak of protection from the worlds corruption it, is unable to provide an escape from the workings of his own mind

"In going underground, I whipped it all except the mind, the mind. And the mind that has conceived a plan of living must never lose sight of the chaos against which that pattern was conceived."

It is through the workings of the protagonists mind that the reader is told about his experiences and life. It is also through the workings of the same mind that allow the invisible man to come to conclusion. A conclusion which causes him to realise, that although he believed himself truly free he was never free from the workings of his mind. These processes or thoughts are

the forces which lead him to realise that “ Gin, jazz and dreams were not enough. Books were not enough.” . By the end of the novel the invisible man has come to realise his grandfather words as part of his own social responsibility. It is at this point that the role of improvisation has diminished. The invisible man has come to relish his own social responsibility. A responsibility that embodies the individual yet at the same time re establishes the value of the community. A jazz player may improvise in a solo bringing out his own identity yet he must also work together with the rest of the group to bring out the larger part of the song. It is this larger part of the song, the bigger picture that allows for the protagonist to accept his social responsibilities. A bigger picture resulting not through, merely an understanding of improvisation but rather through the simple of act of forgiveness and love.

“ It’s ‘winner take nothing’ that is the great truth of our country or of any country. Life is to be lived, not controlled; and humanity is won by continuing to play in the face of certain defeat. Our fate is to become one, and yet many.