

# Slave oppression



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During the 19th century, slavery was an extremely dehumanizing period. The complete control over another human being's life brought many hardships and disappointments. Families were separated and, for African-Americans, the slave era was extremely depressing. Slaves were often beaten, or killed for the simple incompleteness of a task. Women had no rights and were used for cooking, for cleaning, and for the creation and nurturing of babies. There were often instances of lynching and burnings of African-Americans simply because of their skin color.

Slavery is uniquely American because it plays a major role in the formation of The United States today. During this time period, slave masters had the complete control over a slave. Slaves were bought as profit; therefore, they were considered to be property and did not have any freedom. Slaves worked long, extensive hours, most times without breaks. African-Americans were transported to The United States as slaves and their major struggle was surviving in an oppressive society. Ironically, Africans and African-Americans have a unique culture that captures the attention of other races—music, tradition, sports, language, and folk mythology.

Sometimes, blacks forget about the richness of their history and the significant accomplishments that have been made for the race to progress. Ralph Ellison and Ernest Gaines are two African-American authors who come from completely different backgrounds, but provide an interesting viewpoint on the struggle of an African-American. Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man* and Ernest J. Gaines's *The Autobiography of Miss Jane Pittman* are two fictional books, which both narrators are African-Americans who are struggling to survive in oppressing societies.

The setting of Ellison's *Invisible Man* takes place in between the 1940s and the mid-1950s and it focuses on the narrator, who never reveals his name. This is a time period when the United States did not provide equal opportunity for all of its citizens and there were many instances of racism. The narrator refers to himself as the IM (Invisible Man) because he feels unrecognized in society as an African-American. One of the struggles African-Americans faced is the stereotype that all blacks were entertainers for whites. An example of treacherous entertainment is the boxing match in which the IM is forced to participate.

To his surprise he is to "...see some of the most important men of the town quite tipsy...bankers, lawyers, judges, doctors, fire chiefs, teachers, merchants. Even one of the more fashionable pastors" (Ellison 18). The most important men of the town attend this boxing match of African-Americans under the influence of alcohol, which means they are ready to laugh and have a good time. This shows the cruelty of the treatment of African-Americans and how African-Americans were used as objects because the town's most professional business owners came to watch them humiliate themselves.

This boxing match symbolizes racism and how blacks are still being considered less of a person. This type of action cause blacks to feel belittle in the oppressive society. The Invisible Man feels, " blindfolded, [he] could no longer control [his] motion. [He] had no dignity" (Ellison 22). This causes the Invisible Man to " assert his own individuality in his own terms" (McPherson 177) which is peculiar to any African-American. This type of actions forces blacks during this time period to compete against one another.

For example, the Invisible Man states, “[He] felt superior to them in [his] own way, and [he] didn’t like the manner in which [they] were all crowded together into the servants” (Ellison 18). The invisible man felt he was better, and he did not belong in the same elevator with others. The narrator exemplifies his feeling of superiority by asking, “...why did they insist upon confusing the class struggle with the ass struggle, debasing both us and them—all human motives” (Ellison 418)? The IM is bursting with disappointment because a woman took the position he feels he deserve.

He does not want to be of equal level to that of a female. This demonstrates one of many examples of the Invisible Man’s struggle in an oppressing society. Another example of the racism during this time period is the use of African-Americans. During the 1940s, it was common to have African-American chauffeuring rich white families. The blacks were required to greet them with “ yes ma’am” or “ yes sir” while the blacks were often called “ boy”. In Ralph Ellison’s Invisible Man we see the narrator chauffeuring the co-founder of the college. His job was to chauffeur Mr. Norton around until Mr.

Norton’s next meeting. One may argue that a chauffeur is simply its name—a person who drives people from one destination to the next; however, Mr. Norton demonstrates racism as he is being chauffeured. He told the Invisible Man, “...your people were somehow closely connected with my destiny” (Ellison 41). The statement, “...your people...” (Ellison 41) is a racist people because the people of the world are one people, regardless of race or the color of one’s skin. These racist remarks are what cause African-Americans

to struggle in an oppressive society because they feel a lack of confidence to perform tasks.

This is proven when the narrator stated, “[he] was more afraid to act any other way because they didn’t like that at all” (Ellison 17). Mr. Norton demonstrates more racism by stating, “...you are my fate, young man” (Ellison 42). Mr. Norton meant that the Invisible Man’s success will be a reflection of Mr. Norton’s work and investment in the college. If the narrator performs well at the college, Mr. Norton will be able to brag saying, “ look at what I have done with this Negro”. Mr. Norton is putting pressure on the Invisible Man by explaining the significance of the Invisible Man’s success.

Ralph Ellison uses the IM to demonstrate the difficulty of equal treatment, even though the IM is a college student. There is no leniency or respect for the Invisible Man because he is African American. The IM experiences many struggles, but Ernest Gaines demonstrated the same idea of struggle in *The Autobiography of Miss Jane Pittman*. Similar to the IM, Jane Pittman faces the struggle of freedom when the Proclamation was passed freeing slaves. Uncle Isom, a man that is considered an advisor to the other slaves on the plantation.

He asks, “ What’s we to do? (Gaines 13) as a result of the blacks not knowing how to live a life of freedom. Jane Pittman attempts to go to Ohio with Ned, but she soon realizes they did not have anywhere to stay, nor was she able to provide for Ned or herself. As a result, she decides to stay at the plantation. Ernest Gaines is demonstrating the immediate struggle of free African Americans because they do not know how to operate outside of an

oppressive society as he “ becomes increasingly concerned with black history and black community” (Hicks). He uses Unc Isom early in the book to capture the reader’s attention to the robotic mindset the blacks carry.

Unc Isom is a man in his eighty’s that knew only the life of a slave. He is trapped in the slave mentality because that is all he knew. Unc Isom convinced most of the newly freed blacks to stay. Gaines continues to demonstrate the African-American struggle through Jane Pittman as she tries to move to Ohio. She soon experiences she is not “ free like everybody else” (Gaines 14). Though the Proclamation freed slaves; it does not change the cruel and unequal treatment in freed African Americans experience in this oppressive society.

As Jeannine Johnson states in her Overview of Autobiography of Miss Jane Pittman, Jane Pittman’s migration north is “ common in nineteenth-century slave narratives” (Johnson). Similar to the IM, Jane Pittman chooses to leave a lifestyle in search of a new and better one. Jane Pittman encounters this problem when she is constantly told “ You free here, Ain’t you heard about the Proclamation” (Gaines 27)? This is one of many instances in which Jane Pittman is rejected from help. Jane Pittman struggles exemplify how the African-American struggle is “ sensed as a natural cycle, wheeling slowly through the rebirth of a people, toward their inevitable collective liberation” (Hicks).

Ernest Gaines uses Jane Pittman’s struggle as a model to illustrate some of the ongoing actions of being the minority. Another major struggle for the African-Americans today is being the minorities in an oppressive society.

Ralph Ellison grew up among the poorest of people in Oklahoma, but he was able to receive a quality education. He used the IM as a model figure for being a minority, but also to further explicate how great of an impact the African-Americans have in today's American society. The Invisible Man recognizes this when he shouts, " I yam what I am" (Ellison 266)!

He shouts this because he is beginning to accept his culture and embrace himself as a person, which is why he paid twenty cents for more. He accepts his culture and he realizes that will be his way to freedom. Through the Invisible Man, Ralph Ellison shows, "...when a black man attempts to think beyond what has been thought before, or when he asserts a vision of reality which conflicts with or challenge's the community's conception, there is a movement, sometimes unconscious, to bring him back into line..." (Graham and Singh 177).

In contrast, Jane Pittman felt she was stranded in a slave environment. Though the proclamation is enforced and slaves were technically free, former slave owners use the proclamation as a form of bait to keep the newly free African-Americans. For example, Jane Pittman's former master says, " You free and don't belong to me no more. Got to fight your own battle best you can" (Gaines 12). Louisiana, like the other southern states, relies heavily on the slaves for plantation services and income. Because the proclamation is in force, the former masters realize they lost their way of making money.

As a result, they try to persuade blacks to stay and pay the blacks the bare minimum so they can still receive plantation and house work. Earnest Gaines

also experienced similar oppression, as work on a plantation, so he uses Jane Pittman as a reference point to exemplify the slave environment, even as late as the 1930s. Gaines was able to attend school, but he experienced the segregation as well. He uses Jimmy as a character to portray himself. As soon as the segregation law passed Jimmy left from the quarter, "...the same year they passed that law in Washington" (Gaines 229).

Jimmy recognizes the opportunity to attend school with the whites and he is looked at as "...the One" (Gaines 227). However, people of the town noticed Jimmy stirred away from religion when he left to receive his education and people use him to write letters when he comes home every couple weeks and holidays. Gaines uses Jimmy as a figure to indicate the possibility of being a minority within one's own race. Jimmy does something that is not ordinary; he decides to join a segregated school to receive the same education the whites received.

As a result, he receives criticism because it is not common for blacks to receive education immediately after the proclamation. After the proclamation free slaves, African-Americans are trapped in the mindset of enslavement. In the Invisible Man the IM shows his belief of being trapped in the slave mindset early in the book by stating Louis Armstrong is one of his favorite artists because, "...he's made poetry out of being invisible" (Gaines 8) and "...he's unaware that he is invisible" (Gaines 8). Ellison shows how society lives through the horrors of the slave era, and how the slave era negatively affects all of America's people.



People such as the narrator, despite the many talents they possess, self-destruct themselves and lose self-confidence. Naturally, people idolize others who contain similar interests; thus, the invisible man idolizes Louis Armstrong because he feels he can relate to some of the problems Armstrong faced. Based on a literary criticism of Ralph Ellison, “ he insulted countless people during his long life and made his wife’s existence a misery” (New Criterion). Because Ellison was raised with no father figure, he had to learn many of things on his own and it was more difficult for him to receive assistance.

He traps himself in the slavery mindset, but battles to be free. Similar to Ralph Ellison, Earnest Gaines also relates to the slavery mindset based on life experiences. Earnest Gaines is able to relate the slave mindset to the society in which we live today because he was an actual worker on a plantation in Louisiana. The bare moment of being on a plantation gives negative energy to the people working. Gaines uses Jane Pittman to exemplify the continuous mindset of being a slave. For example, in a conversation with Jimmy, Miss Jane Pittman says, “ I have a scar on my back when I was a slave.

I’ll carry it to my grave. You got people out there with this same scar on their brains, and they will carry that scar to their grave” (Gaines 241). She is mentoring Jimmy, and trying to get Jimmy to realize that people will disrespect and treat him unfairly. By Jane Pittman using her scars as an example, she is “...the invention of a young black history teacher who signs as ‘ the editor’ the ‘ introduction’ to the text” (Raynaud); meaning, she is a

role model and a living testament to the mindset the oppressive people has about slavery and why it should continue to exist.

Because Jimmy is considered to be the “ Chosen” one, he has a lot of pressure on his shoulders because the town has high hopes for him and depends on him. Jane Pittman tells him, “ Talk with them, Jimmy. Talk and talk and talk. But don’t be mad if they don’t listen. Some of them won’t ever listen. Many won’t ever hear you” (Gaines 241). Jimmy responds by saying, “ We don’t have time for that, Miss Jane...” (Gaines 241). Through these two quotes, Jimmy does not trust what Miss Jane tells him, despite the experiences and flaws she faced. He is scared to express the knowledge in which he contains because he is a minority in an oppressive society.

Instead of using the education he received with the whites, he begins to shut down and question his own people; the same people who support him and encourage him to do his best. On the contrary, Ralph Ellison demonstrates the Invisible Man’s scarcity on expressing his knowledge throughout the book. For example, when the Invisible Man chauffeurs Mr. Norton, one of the main donors to the college, to kill time, the donor says, “...You are my fate, young man” (Ellison 42). The Invisible Man lacks the knowledge to understand what Mr. Norton is talking about.

When Mr. Norton explains his thought, the Invisible Man has a broad idea of what the he is saying. Simultaneously, The Invisible man questions why the donor believes he is so important for the fate of the school. The donor explained to the Invisible Man how Emerson was important to his people. He states that Emerson, “ had a hand in shaping [his] destiny” (Ellison 41). The

white donor was able to convince the Invisible Man that Emerson had shaped the Invisible Man's destiny, though he nor the invisible man knew Emerson.

“ Yes, perhaps that is what I mean. I had a feeling that our people were somehow connected with my destiny. That what happened to you was connected with what would happen to me... ” (Ellison 41). The donor felt the need to demonstrate a feeling of power and superiority over the Invisible Man by convincing him that he is in college by “ fate” or “ chance”. In his critical essay, Christopher Hanlon also recognizes the donor's greed for superiority as he stated, “ Norton describes his own sense of subjection to an abiding “ destiny” or “ fate,” which for him seems always connected in some way to Emerson's philosophical legacy...” (Hanlon).

The Invisible Man does not recognize the tone or message of Mr. Norton's message. Though he does not understand the message or tone, it is ironic that he later believes he is a minority that is unable to strive in the oppressive society. Lastly, the segue that leads The Invisible Man to his downfall was him joining the Brotherhood. He was invited to the Brotherhood by Brother Jack, a member of the group. Brother Jack invited the Invisible Man after hearing an emotional speech he delivered about an eviction he witnessed after receiving deceiving reference letters.

The Invisible Man was supposed to deliver a speech at a rally for the Brotherhood when he witnesses a symbolic picture of a champion boxer blinded in a fight. He then recalls the story his dad told when the boxer “ had been beaten blind in a crooked fight, of the scandal that had been suppressed, and how the fighter had died in a home for the blind” (Ellison

334). The symbol of the blinded boxer is the greatest symbol in the book because it perfectly describes The Invisible Man's life.

As he took stage he was blinded by the spotlight which exemplifies how he "...never once consider[ed] that he, too, could possibly be blinded by the actions of those around him" (Thomas). In conclusion, Jane Pittman and the Invisible Man are two narrators who struggle to live through oppressive societies Jane Pittman received lives in a society where she experience slavery, the distribution of the Emancipation Proclamation, and the civil rights movement. She is a living textbook of information for those wanting to learn about her life and life in the late 1800s thru the 1960s.

Jane Pittman receives little assistance when attempting to depart to Ohio and she witnessed her husband die; however, she was able to survive and raise a son as if it were her own. The Invisible Man lives in a society where white people simply tolerate black people. The Invisible Man went to college, joins the brotherhood for his remarkable orator skills and abilities, and experience some life-changing moments. He has to chauffeur the co-founder/donor to his college, and tell the ridiculous story of Mr. Trueblood. When the IM joins the brotherhood, he thinks he will be a leader within the brotherhood.

He soon finds out the brotherhood is using his speaking abilities to their advantage and he realizes they do not care about his well-being. Ralph Ellison's, Invisible Man is still critical in today's society because many concepts in the book happen today. The National Basketball Association (NBA) experienced a "lockout" for financial reasons. The owners and donors

are similar to the bankers, lawyers and teachers that came to the boxing match in the Invisible Man. Another example is the issue with immigration in the United States.

The minority people, or the immigrants, are struggling with maintaining a healthy way of living in the United States' oppressive society. The immigrants are given dead end jobs which rarely supply enough to produce a comfortable living. Earnest Gaines' The Autobiography of Miss Jane Pittman has many concepts that are relevant in today's society. For example, the National Basketball Association (NBA) can be viewed as a modern day slave market; the team owners (slave masters), discuss deals and make trades for the basketball players (slaves).

The basketball players are constantly in a lose-lose situation because people outside of the world of sports say " they are just athletes who play a sport for millions of dollars". Similar to slaves, they never receive the amount of money they should receive and the team owners are the people that collect all of the income and receive the greater benefits. This type of oppressive society is hard to live in because the society has not accepted and embraced the events that occurred in the past.