

# Invisible man irony – assignment



**ASSIGN  
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Irony Irony is the use of words to express something different and often opposite to its literal meaning and it is a device that plays a major role in revealing the theme of a literary work. In *Inferno*, written by Niven and Pournelle, the main character, Allan Carpentier, travels into the depths of hell and finally escapes when he realizes who he is. Throughout his journey, the other people in hell do not want to accept that they are there, which in turn, is the reason they cannot leave hell. Those people could not accept who they really were as individuals and therefore could not move on.

In the novel *Invisible Man* by Ralph Ellison, irony is used to express the meaning of different situations and the true feelings of characters. By using irony throughout the novel, Ellison is able to express his theme through the main character, the invisible man. The narrator begins the story by telling the reader he knows, " I am invisible, understand, simply because people refuse to see me" (Ellison, 3). The narrator shows he has found himself. After the narrator's experiences through symbols, individuals, and institutions, he reflects and says, " I am nobody but myself" (15).

By exploring the invisible man's reactions to his experiences relayed by irony, the theme of invisibility is revealed and the narrator finds self-acceptance. As the narrator begins his quest for self-realization, Ellison shows the reader the narrator's inability to see the situation he is in. First he attends the Battle Royal, where the men that will be giving the scholarship to the narrator, force him to make a speech. The narrator explains his situation by saying, " The blindfolds were put on" (21). The narrator cannot see the people he is speaking to.

It is ironic because the narrator is trying to make a speech in a situation where he is unaware that the men are taking him seriously. Though the narrator is persistent to prove himself to these men, Ellison shows that they are not interested in what he has to say. The narrator explains, " I spoke even louder in spite of the pain. But still they talked and still they laughed, as though deaf with cotton in dirty ears" (30). Ellison shows that these men are more interested in their own entertainment than the narrator's speech.

The narrator is blind to the fact that these men have no interest in him. It is ironic that the narrator tries to find acceptance in people who do not pay attention to him. Through presenting these ironic situations to the narrator, Ellison shows his theme of invisibility. As the narrator continues his quest, he goes to college where Ellison points out how others perceive the narrator. While driving around Mr. Norton, a powerful white man who has spent his life donating money to the college, the narrator takes him to Trueblood's house.

Trueblood is a man who knows how society works from his experiences. While speaking to the narrator and Mr. Norton, Trueblood says, " It just goes to show yuh that no matter how biggity a nigguh gits, the white folks can always cut him down" (53). Trueblood blatantly tells the narrator that white folks have the ability to control him. But still, the narrator is unable to see the advice that is given to him. The narrator thinks that the men of power positions at the college, such as Bledsoe, the president of the college, and Norton, are there to help him.

But the vet, a black man that was once in the narrator's position, tells the narrator, " Perhaps had I overheard some of what I'm about to tell you when

I was a student up there on the hill, I wouldn't be the casualty I am" (91).

Ellison shows the reader the truth about the college but the narrator is unable to see the truth. The vet tells the narrator that his life is a casualty because he does not receive the credit he deserves for the work he did as a physician. Back at the college, Ellison again shows the narrator evidence that the college is giving the narrator blind support. When at chapel, the preacher, Homer A.

Barbee, makes a speech that makes the narrator feel connected to the college. The narrator says, " Now I knew that leaving the campus would be like the parting of flesh" (133). Barbee's speech made him feel as if he was attached to the college, but this speech is in fact coming from a blind man. The narrator shows that he realizes Barbee's blindness when he says, " For a swift instant, between the gesture and the opaque glitter of his glasses, I saw the blinking of sightless eyes. Homer A. Barbee was blind" (133). It is ironic that a blind man is giving the narrator hope about the college when he himself cannot see it.

The narrator is letting himself be deceived because he does not see the ironies he faces at the college. Through the individuals and experiences at the college, Ellison conveys his theme of invisibility. On the bus to New York, Ellison deliberately reintroduces the vet into the novel. The vet has given the narrator useful advice about life. On the bus the vet tells the narrator, " Come out of the fog" (153). He tells the narrator to stop looking for acceptance from other people or institutions, and to find acceptance within himself. In New York the narrator truly thinks Bledsoe tries to get him a job.

At the narrator's last interview, young Emerson, a businessman, realizes the ambition that the narrator has and comments, "Ambition is a wonderful force, but sometimes it can be blinding." (184). He tells the narrator that one's ambition could hide the truth that persists around them. Emerson tells the narrator that he is possibly blinded by his ambition but the narrator does not obtain his advice. While working at Liberty Paints, whose slogan is "Keep America pure with Liberty Paints" (196), Ellison gives the narrator another sign that people of power and institutions use the narrator.

When making the optic white paint, black drops were added to make white paint whiter. When the narrator questions this process, Kimbro, the manager of the paint-mixing department, says, "You just do what you're told" (200). The process of making the paint parallels the Liberty paint company. The process of the paint factory is ironic because it uses black to make white. It is significant that the narrator participates in the process because he puts the black drops in the white paint and this contributes to his self-deception.

When the narrator learns the responsibilities of Lucius Brockway, he thinks, "How an apparently uneducated old man could gain such a responsible job" (211). When the narrator says this, he shows that he knows that the black man does all the work but receives no credit. This contributes to the narrator's self-deception because he shows that he knows he is being used, but does not do anything about it. The use of the paint factory is an irony because not only is it made with black drops, but the paint is also used as a mask. Through the use of irony in the paint factory, Ellison continues to convey his theme of invisibility.

At Mary's house, Ellison uses irony through a symbol to show his theme of invisibility. Mary is a comforting young black woman whom the narrator lives with. In Mary's house, the narrator finds a coin bank. This symbol is described as, " The kind of bank which, if a coin is placed in the hand and a lever pressed upon the back, will raise its arm and flip the coin into the grinning mouth" (319). By seeing this, the narrator becomes enraged and wonders why Mary has such a " self-mocking" (319) symbol in her home. The narrator describes the bank again by saying, " It was choking, filled to the throat with coins" (319).

It is ironic that the narrator is offended by Mary keeping the bank in her house, when in reality, the narrator is in the same position as the bank. At the same time in the novel the narrator is being told what to say in the Brotherhood. He is being fed this information that he does not know if he believes in himself. Due to his anger, he breaks the bank but when he tries to get rid of it, he is unable to do so. It is ironic that the narrator is unable to get rid of the broken bank because it is a symbol of the situation he is experiencing.

Through the use of irony in the coin bank, Ellison conveys his theme of invisibility. Later after a trip to the factory hospital, the narrator begins to realize that it doesn't matter what people think of him. While eating yams on the street he exclaims, " I am what I am! " (266). But just as the narrator finds freedom in himself, Brother Jack, a powerful white man in the Brotherhood, recruits the narrator as a speaker for the Brotherhood. The Brotherhood is an organization that believes in the liberation of the black people.

Upon his introduction into the Brotherhood, Emma asks Jack about the narrator, " But don't you think he should be a little blacker? " (303). Ellison shows that the narrator hears Emma's comment when he thinks to himself, " So she doesn't think I'm black enough" (303). This is ironic because Ellison is obviously pointing out that the Brotherhood only wants him because he is black, and not because of whom he is as a person. This contributes to the narrators self deception because he sees that they want him for his blackness, but still the narrator tries to find acceptance in a group that is not interested in him.

Ellison shows both the narrator and the reader that the Brotherhood is more concentrated on the image of the Brotherhood rather than the universal purpose, but the narrator sees that their interests are not the same. The narrator says, " While I have always tended to think in terms of ' me'... Brother Jack and the others talked in terms of ' we', but it was a different, bigger ' we'. " (316). The narrator understands that the Brotherhood has a different objective than he does, but he still thinks that he should search for approval in this institution.

This is ironic because the reader knows the Brotherhood is using the narrator, but he still tries to find acceptance in this institution, which contributes to his self-deception. Ellison again shows the narrator's blindness during a speech that the narrator makes for the Brotherhood. The narrator is put into the spotlight where he is blind to the situation in front of him. He says, " Blurred figures bumped about me. I stumbled as in a game of blind man's bluff...next time I stood in the spotlight it would be wise to wear dark

glasses" (347). The narrator feels blind because he cannot see the situation he is in.

This scene reflects back to the Battle Royal where the narrator was blindfolded and had to make a speech. It is ironic that he is making a speech for the brotherhood when he cannot see what is in front of him. After the speech, Jack criticizes him and tells him, " It was incorrect" (349). Even though Jack thinks the speech was incorrect, the narrator thinks he did what he was supposed to do. The narrator says, " I realized that I meant everything that I have said to the audience" (353). The narrator shows that the Brotherhood is not the organization through which he should express himself.

While thinking about his situation, the narrator discovers individuality. The narrator says, " I could glimpse the possibility of being more than a member of a race" (355). It is ironic that in an organization like the Brotherhood, the narrator can see the possibility for individuality because the Brotherhood is a group which suppresses individuality. Ellison shows that the Brotherhood suppresses the narrator's chances of self-discovery. While the Brotherhood explains the narrator's new assignment to him, they tell him, " You will have freedom of action-and you will under strict discipline to the committee" (360).

Ellison shows that each time the narrator feels he is free, the Brotherhood suppresses that feeling. It is ironic that the narrator continues to be in this organization that suppresses individuality when he is trying to find individuality. Ellison uses irony seen through the Brotherhood to convey his



theme of invisibility. While observing Clifton selling the sambo dolls on the streets of Harlem, the narrator overhears him singing. Clifton is a black member of the Brotherhood who one day disappeared. Clifton sings about the sambo dolls, " Shake it up, shake it up!

He's Sambo, the dancing doll...Shake him, stretch him by the neck and set him down, He'll do the rest" (431). The symbol of the sambo doll is ironic because like the doll the narrator is being manipulated. It shows the narrators self-deception because he laughs at it even though it portrays him. It is a resemblance of the narrator because the Brotherhood tells the narrator what to do. They do not let the narrator think for himself. The manipulation of the sambo dolls portrays the way the Brotherhood toys with the narrator. Through the use of irony with the sambo doll, Ellison conveys his theme of invisibility.

While walking down the street, the narrator puts on a disguise to hide himself from Ras' men. Ras is a militant speaker and leader of his own freedom organization. The men chase after the narrator because the narrator speaks on behalf of the Brotherhood. Ras even tells the narrator that the Brotherhood is using him, but the narrator refuses to take his advice. After walking down the streets in the disguise, several people mistake the narrator for Rinehart. Rinehart is a man who has many different identities. Surprised, the narrator says, " He was around and others like him, but I had looked past him" (493).

Here the narrator shows that he has looked past the reality in front of him. Later, the narrator says, " I wanted to know Rinehart and yet, I'm upset

because I know I don't have to know him, that simply becoming aware of his existence, is enough to convince me that Rinehart is real" (498). It is ironic that a man can exist without seeing him. This is important because it shows the narrator that in life people do not have to accept you for you to exist. All along the narrator is looking for acceptance in other people, but now he sees that he does not need other people to accept him.

At this instant, the narrator realizes Rinehart's invisibility. The narrator realizes that one does not have to be known to be real. By using irony through Rinehart's invisibility, Ellison conveys his theme of invisibility. In the end of the novel, the narrator is trapped in a sewer where he cannot see to get out. It is ironic that Ellison places the narrator in this situation. He tries to find paper to burn, but has no luck. The narrator says, " I'd have to open my brief case. In it were the only papers I had" (567). It is ironic that he has to burn these papers because each paper is a symbol of his quest for acceptance from other people.

He burns these papers in order to see. The narrator needed to stop trying to find acceptance in other people and begin finding acceptance in himself. It is important that he burns these papers resembling the past because they were symbols of his attempts at finding acceptance in other people or institutions. Ellison does this to show that the only way the narrator can move forward is by finding acceptance in whom he is. Through the use of different ironies shown through symbols, individuals, and institutions, Ellison conveys his theme of invisibility.

Throughout the novel Ellison uses many symbols of irony through symbols, individuals, and institutions. Through each symbol, individual, and institution, Ellison conveys his theme of invisibility. In each example of irony, Ellison shows the reader that the narrator is trying to find acceptance from another person or institution. In the end Rinehart is introduced and shows the narrator invisibility. Ellison's definition of invisibility is to be visible only to yourself. Ellison shows that people refused to see the narrator. It is ironic that the narrator thinks he can find acceptance in people that refuse to see him.

Ellison shows the reader that it does not matter what others see you as, but how you see yourself. In the epilogue the narrator says he is not yet ready to go back out into the world, but he is optimistic and he says his return will be soon. Like Allan Carpentier of *Inferno*, the narrator can move forward only when he realizes who he is. The narrator realizes that no one sees him, so now the narrator has the ability to move on. Universally, Ellison shows that ones self perception is more important than how other perceive them.