
The Prejudice And Racism Themes In Invisible Man By Ralph Ellison

The Invisible Man by Ralph Ellison, depicts the tragic story of a black man's journey from the American South to Harlem, New York during the 1930's , and how this journey and the people he met along the way altered his perception of his personal identity. This young man, the unnamed narrator/protagonist of the book, ultimately comes to believe that he is invisible – that his real self is unseen because those around him are blinded by their own prejudices. Throughout this journey, each community he enters views him only in accordance with the members' views of how he "should" be, and this occurs even in communities -- such as the college he attends--where one would expect more enlightened thinking. The narrator comes to understand that society as a whole has preconceived ideas or notions about the identities of certain groups, particularly with respect to ideas based on the color of a person's skin, and sadly, that these preconceived notions cannot be changed. Further, these perceptions can begin to affect a person's own view of himself, and in order to be free of that, a person must work to extricate himself from these views.

The narrator opens the novel by reminiscing about his youth. He remembers when he had not yet created his own identity or realized that he is "invisible." At the time, the narrator perhaps naively "visualized (himself) as a potential Booker T Washington" who could achieve success through education and labor (18). The narrator then relates a time when, as a good student, he was invited to give his high school graduation speech at a gathering of the town's leading white citizens. When he arrived, the narrator discovered that he was actually invited to provide part of the evening's entertainment for a roomful of drunken white men as a contestant, with his other black classmates, in a "Battle Royale". Rather than being treated with respect, the young men are rushed into a ring and forced to stand while a woman danced with a "slow sensuous movement", as if to entice them sexually, for the amusement of the white men, who did not see the young black men as equals, but more as animals. Then, the young black men were blindfolded and forced to fight each other, physically, in what the narrator describes as a "Battle Royale." This "battle" in some sense symbolizes the struggle of the blacks in the real world--each young man at the event was there for the purpose of achieving success. However, instead of being treated with respect for their educational achievements, they are pitted against each other by the white men, in a bizarre activity, much like a dog or cock fight. This scene thus epitomized the struggles among blacks for success in a society controlled by white men, who tease them with success but then place it just out of reach. In another sense, this scene also demonstrates how this social and political power structure can affect one's own actions. After enduring these experiences, the narrator is finally permitted to give his speech. In his speech , the narrator brings up the concept of "Social Responsibility", which was received with an uproar of laughter from the drunken crowd. The narrator then changed the topic of his speech to "social equality" also to no avail and ultimately, "began where (he) left off, having them ignore (him) as before" (30-31). This correlates with the narrator's actions throughout the novel, in that to some extent, his actions in simply doing what others expect of him not only reinforces the distorted view others may have of him, as a young black man, and also works to affect the narrator's development of his own identity.

The narrator, using the scholarship, attends the black college and in so doing, continues his

quest for acceptance and identity. During college, the narrator continues to learn how people are often unable to see past preconceived notions of how others should behave. In order to gain acceptance, the narrator must suffer dealing with the white philanthropist of the school, Mr. Norton, "A Bostonian, smoker of cigars, teller of polite negroe stories" who hides his racist nature by donating money (37). Mr. Norton encapsulates a part of society that wears a mask to racism. With Mr. Norton, the narrator is afraid to speak honestly and candidly, in fact, he is afraid that with one small word, he could ruin his entire reputation. By carefully selecting his words and being silent at times, the narrator thus continued to model his behavior on that which was expected of him.

Later, the narrator chauffeurs Mr. Norton to the old slave quarters on the outskirts of the campus. There they meet Jim Trueblood, an African American who is known throughout the college community for his sensuous encounter with his daughter. This part of Jim Trueblood's background perpetuates the racist idea that Africans Americans act as if they are animals. Oddly, this appears to be the very reason Mr. Trueblood is revered by the white people in the college community. In fact, Jim Trueblood's character is more than the incident with his daughter, yet it becomes clear that he understands that the perception of his identity by society will never change, and accordingly, in order to save his family he must appear to act as society expects him to act, he must "move without movin", he must progress in society without seeming to progress at all (59). In other words, he must be invisible.

Finally, while in college, the narrator encounters Dr. Bledsoe, an African American who is actually blind to the truth that he is controlled by white society. Dr. Bledsoe chooses to perpetuate the myth of white supremacy. He understands that "white folk tell everybody what to think" (143), however, he fails to understand that he himself is being controlled to act in certain ways solely to please the white people. In fact, he appears to become a simple puppet – too blind to see reality, and too self-involved to care. In fact, Dr. Bledsoe made the narrator actually leave the school, because the narrator had shown Mr. Norton certain realities that did not support the view of the school Dr. Bledsoe wished to portray.

In his search for self, the narrator moves to Harlem in New York and joins the "Brotherhood." The Brotherhood was an organization which indicated a wish to fight for a more just world, with more equality among the races. The Brotherhood offered its members money, and a place to live. At first the brotherhood seemed as if it was an organization which was going to help fight for the rights of African Americans and in so doing, bring them closer together as a community. In reality, the narrator discovers that the job of the brotherhood "is not to ask them what to think but to tell them" (473). The Brotherhood trained its members what to say and even what to think, and continuously reminded the narrator to focus on the "brotherhood" over the "individual". Further, although the Brotherhood sought social equality, it required that each member remain anonymous. Each new member was required to leave everything behind and start living a new life with a new identity. In this manner, the Brotherhood negated each member's own personal identity. While the narrator was pleased to participate in this organization, he was again naïve, as he did not at first realize that the Brotherhood was really just going to use him as a tool. Just as the white people involved in the Battle Royale could not see past the narrator's skin color, the Brotherhood saw only the narrator's traits, or rather his ability to speak.. Again, the narrator was not being allowed to exert his own individuality.

In the final two chapters of the book, the narrator ultimately comes to realize that to the outside world, he is truly invisible. At the end, the narrator falls into a dark hole in the street, where there

is no light, and everything is dark. In order to see, the narrator begins to burn letters and papers from his briefcase -- these are papers he had accumulated from his past. In a real sense, this symbolizes the narrator destroying the written views of the communities from his past. The narrator falls asleep and dreams of being harmed, physically by a member of the Brotherhood. Upon awakening, the narrator comes to understand that he was used, and more, he was used for the color of his skin. The world as he knew it has failed him. Ultimately, the narrator decides he must live his own life--a new life without illusions or fake ideals, a life where he would be the master of his identity, and ultimately, would be able to help himself and his African American community.

Throughout "Invisible Man," Ralph Ellison depicted a young man's journey through hopeful optimism and belief in the system, through disappointment and misuse that affected the young man's identity. Each community the young man entered had established prejudices and beliefs, and accordingly had preconceived expectations of the young man's abilities and personality. The young man began to behave in accordance with these expectations and in so doing, destroyed his personal identity. This young man, the unnamed narrator/protagonist of the book, ultimately comes to believe he is invisible -- that his real self is unseen because those around him are blinded by their own prejudices. Through this struggle, the narrator realizes that he must destroy the expressed viewpoints of the past, which he does figuratively when he burns his papers. In the end, the narrator ultimately comes to realize that he must rely on his own internal views to create his own identity -- that if he relies on outside forces to tell him who he is, he cannot become his own person.