

An Investigation of White Power in *Invisible Man*

Research Question: How is the extent of white supremacy and power revealed in Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man* through the protagonist's struggle?

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Abstract

This extended essay aims to investigate how white supremacy is portrayed in the novel *Invisible Man* and how the struggles of the protagonist, an unnamed black man, reinforce the notion that the white population controls the entire social system wherein he evolves. It examines the narrator's experiences of being discriminated against, suppressed and manipulated throughout his life. The system created by the superior whites is one in which the individuality and freedom of black people are lost. They have a collective identity of being Negroes, like a label slapped upon them. Their identity is not determined by who they are but by the requirements of society, which is ultimately controlled by the powerful whites. The invisible man does not realize that he is being used and that his identity is being shaped by others until it is too late. In conclusion, the invisible man toils hard to gain success, but as he derogates from the roles determined by others in this white-dominated society, he encounters various setbacks that bring him down. He is misunderstood and ignored throughout his life and ends up isolated, literally and figuratively.

The inspiration for this extended essay came from Richard Wright's novel *Black Boy*. After reading and studying Wright's masterpiece, I became enthralled by the descriptions of the struggles and life of African-Americans living under the Jim Crow system. My exposure to the discrimination faced by these people made me want to learn more about their lives and what they underwent. It was sad but fascinating. When I spoke to my English teacher about it, she recommended another novel in the same genre, *Invisible Man*. I found the novel very intriguing and decided to explore its various thoughts on race and identity in my extended essay.

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Introduction

In Ralph Ellison's literary masterpiece, *Invisible Man*, the protagonist repeatedly falls into traps set by the ruling white authorities and is helplessly knocked around by everyone until he breaks. The various appalling forms of prejudice he faces in a white-dominated nation test his ability to survive in a society that is against his very existence. The protagonist is unlike many other black people who, despite living their entire lives under the oppressive system, fail to become conscious of the implications of the ordeals their entire race undergoes. The narrator grasps the extent of the control whites have over his life and those of the entire Negro race but is rendered powerless to do something about it. This power allows the whites to freely exploit black people who are oblivious to their dominion. The discrimination that the invisible man faces throughout his life forces him to reconsider his own individuality.

The abysmal fate of the invisible man forces the reader to ponder upon the extent of white supremacy in America under the Jim Crow system of the late 19th to mid-20th century and the futility of any attempts to rise in such a society. Merely living became an arduous task for millions of African-Americans that hoped to find a place in the "Land of the Free". The oppression and discrimination that they faced in all walks of life not only hurt them physically but also incapacitated them to the extent that their minds crumbled into dust, leaving abused entities with their humanity stripped from them.

Awareness of the Oppression and Corruption in the System

The society in the world of *Invisible Man* is built in a way that suppresses the black population, expects subservient behavior, and deprives them of opportunities. The novel's protagonist undergoes an arduous journey in which he is shunned and cast away despite striving

to be a living example of good conduct. The social roles imposed upon blacks reflect the dominating control of white authorities and the clear social hierarchy that dictates the behavior of both races. The narrator is taught to stay in his place: do what he is told, acknowledge whites as superiors, and treat them with the utmost respect. His fallacious understanding of the system renders him incapable of detecting the manipulative abilities of the characters he encounters and falls prey to. Through the protagonist's oblivious nature and erroneous understanding of the society's construction, Ellison conveys the idea that many African-Americans under Jim Crow lived their entire lives without realizing the real circumstances in their lives and were thus incapable of mutiny. How could they rise up against the system put in place to ensnare them if they were unaware of what was truly happening? The invisible man is confronted with ceaseless impediments that devastate him. Nevertheless, the strife he endures opens his eyes to the brutality and malice of the Jim Crow system and the unjustified animosity displayed by the whites towards Negroes, albeit too late.

Much of the African-American population possesses a vague cognizance of the oppressive system and its deceptive mechanisms. The Negroes' false notion of freedom is a component of this malicious system. As discrimination continued throughout American history, the hollow and meaningless nature of this freedom became evident. The narrator's grandfather, a freed slave, is exceptionally aware of the ruling white class's power. Unable to stand his treacherous qualities of impotence, meekness, and inability to oppose his race's oppressors, he despises himself for 'betraying' his own blindfolded people. Filled with anguish, he believes that the only way to rebel is to make himself seem obedient and submissive. "I want you to overcome 'em with yeses, undermine 'em with grins, agree 'em to death and destruction..." (Ellison 16). The old man's last words create doubt in the protagonist's mind every time he compliantly does what he is told.

“When I was praised for my conduct I felt a guilt...even though they were fooled and thought they wanted me to act as I did” (Ellison 17). Despite being equivocal about his reasons for yielding to the wills of others, the narrator continues to do so throughout his life. Ellison demonstrates the invisible man’s equivocation of the scheme to repress the black population by portraying him as a man who impetuously follows the path laid out before him. Furthermore, Ellison implies that resistance against the established social order is not an option for the narrator, who even fails to recognize the purpose of such an arbitrary system of control and falls repeatedly into pits dug out for him.

Ellison expresses that there is no ‘black individual’ for the whites; each one is just another object, a tool whose only purpose is to provide them amusement. The protagonist encounters countless forms of ubiquitous prejudice and racial discrimination from not only the whites but also members of his own race. Enduring years of oppression has created a perpetual fear in the minds of blacks that manifests itself into distrust towards the malevolent white authorities and also their own people. When the narrator delivers a speech on humility, accentuating the need for Negro compliance and meekness, it is lauded by his entire community even though he doesn’t truly believe what he is saying. His speech is music to the ears of white men, who appreciate a young Negro spreading the ‘right’ message of black submission among his people. When the narrator arrives at the hotel for the speech, he is forced to take part in a battle royal by viciously fighting his schoolmates in a ring until only the last two remain standing and then scampering along an electrified mat containing coins. The rich white men assembled there revel in the torment of helpless, young Negroes. The protagonist remains oblivious to the truth that he is being used and adheres so incessantly to the wishes of others that he completely neglects his own feelings, desires,

and purpose. The Jim Crow system reduces black people to a mere presence, where each of them is just like the other: another puppet to be worn on the hand, played with, and discarded.

The repressive Jim Crow system creates multiple layers of corruption and extortion that enmesh countless Negroes searching for a way out of the system's control. No amount of hard work will allow a black individual to rise because the social constraints call for the eradication of any emerging Negro with even a hint of power. Dr. Bledsoe succumbs to this venal system and discerns a single method of escape: to become corrupt himself. He is appointed as a spokesman for his entire race, as the Negro college principal. In reality, this is another prudent method of monitoring the community's condition where white authorities designate certain Negroes to keep other, even more backward and oblivious ones under control. Bledsoe, however, erroneously interprets this rare responsibility as his absolute, undeniable power and authority. "The only ones I even pretend to please are *big* white folk, and even those I control more than they control me" (Ellison 142). He does whatever he needs to maintain that control, even if it means having to "act the nigger" (Ellison 143) at times. Oblivious to this, the invisible man admires his great principal, who appears to most Negroes as an authoritative black man with some influence over whites. Bledsoe hatches an elaborate scheme to keep the white authorities under the illusion that he is doing their bidding by providing false accounts of the black race's progress and the community's real condition. When his deceit of both whites and his own people is exposed due to the Trueblood and Mr. Norton incident, Bledsoe is consternated. To quickly suppress any further chinks in his armor, he expels the cause of his troubles. Eliminating the narrator is a small price to pay for the selfish, power-hungry Bledsoe if it means that he still gets to hold onto his throne and reputation. The harsh and punitive diction Ellison employs through Bledsoe's speech informs the bitter reality of the system and what it does to black people. "You're a black educated fool, son....You're

nobody, son. You don't exist....I'll have every Negro...hanging on tree limbs" (Ellison 143). Ellison's characterization of Bledsoe reveals his awareness of the system's operations. He divulges to the narrator: "The white folk tell everybody what to think....I know that I can't change it" (Ellison 143). The principal's revelation leaves the protagonist numb with shock. He grasps the extent of his impotence and lack of control over his destiny and identity. Ellison stresses that the invisible man cannot choose what he wants because he's not in power and must do what all blacks are taught to do: obey.

The Letter: A New Beginning Destroyed

The Jim Crow system creates a social structure that produces the illusion of hope and freedom to black people but snatches every opportunity they get to achieve their dreams. The African-American is subdued by forces and social mores beyond his control. Any efforts to improve his living conditions result in failure. For young black men living in the South, the North was a promise of prosperity and a new beginning. The narrator sees the same beacon of hope and arrives in Harlem with a bag full of dreams and aspirations. "For me this was not a city of realities, but of dreams, perhaps because I had always thought of my life as being confined to the South" (Ellison 159). Oblivious to the reality of the cruel Jim Crow society, the narrator is forced to head North and leave everything he holds dear: his past, his place at the college, and his place in the South. "I took a last longing look....In less than five minutes...the best of all possible worlds was gone....I watched the flashing past...feeling that I was moving into the unknown" (Ellison 155-156). Although he is dejected by his expulsion, he reassures himself by believing that these mishaps are for his own good and somehow, everything will eventually fall into place. His hopes are higher than ever as he plans to not only return to college later that year but also to enjoy the

fabled and seemingly unrestricted way of living in the North. His letters of recommendation from Dr. Bledsoe raise his confidence of getting a job, and success, to unprecedented levels. However, the invisible man's naive nature and assumptions that a new beginning will rid him of past troubles make him more vulnerable than ever. When none of the letters yield results, the protagonist's vast reserves of hope are depleted and soon transform themselves into suspicion and apprehension. "My doubts grew....Perhaps all was not well....All the secretaries had been encouraging" (Ellison 170). The protagonist's nonchalant attitude blinds him to the truth and makes him overlook the possibility that something may be amiss. His immense trust in the system is unjustified as he expects not to face defeat despite having seen how other Negroes are treated. Ellison asserts that these false notions about the working of the system feed the invisible man's reserves of hope and render him oblivious to the tricks of a pernicious society that simply does not want people like him to live in it.

The invisible man's unreasonably high expectations do not match the reality of his world. This results in comminuted hopes until he realizes his own imbecility and the antagonistic nature of his society. Mr. Emerson's reply to the protagonist's letter prompts him to falsely believe that his opportunity of getting a job has finally arrived. A conversation with Mr. Emerson's son reveals a truth so unsettling that the narrator is left dazed and numb with misery. Bledsoe has deluded him by sending him away to Harlem with false hope. The narrator can never go back as it was never Bledsoe's intention to accept him back into the college. "Everyone seemed to have some plan for me, and beneath that some more secret plan" (Ellison 194). At this point, the protagonist feels absolutely broken and Ellison emphasizes his desolation through his reaction to the bitter truth. The narrator cannot believe that Dr. Bledsoe, his idol, could resort to such treachery, albeit the incident with Mr. Norton. "What did I do? I always tried to do the right thing..." (Ellison 191). He

is still under the false impression that he can “go back to college and remain there” (Ellison 188) and that Dr. Bledsoe’s directives will lead to guaranteed success. Mr. Emerson’s son grasps the extent of the protagonist’s exploitation. Instead of letting him continue on the path of delusion, he chooses to expose the narrator to the reality of the system. “Because to help you I must disillusion you....Who has any identity anymore anyway? It isn’t so perfectly simple” (Ellison 187). The narrator’s anguish engulfs him to the extent that he ignores Mr. Emerson’s son’s advice: “There is no point in blinding yourself to the truth” (Ellison 192). The invisible man has nowhere to turn, no place to seek refuge from the tragedy in his life. Through the narrator’s downfall, Ellison argues that a black man would only see the truth and comprehend the extent of his impotence when the veil of delusion was lifted from his eyes. The writer implies that any efforts to fight against the system and emerge victorious would be thwarted and lead to ruin in this supremacist society. Harlem, the emblem of new opportunities, also emerges as a place where the invisible man does not belong. The city of prospects wrenches his only source of hope away from him: a job, and leaves him with nothing but shattered dreams and despair.

A New Form of Hypocrisy: Deceit of the Brotherhood

The Brotherhood is an organization in which the protagonist seeks refuge from the strife in his life, but it proves to be another corrupt institution that pulls his strings. It seems to be the only way out of his devastating predicament, a place where he can fit in, voice his opinions, and make use of his talent for public speaking. The narrator finds the prospects of making yet another fresh start extremely appealing, especially upon getting a new job, apartment, life, and name. With that name, the Brotherhood thrusts a new identity upon him, intending to exploit his oratory skills and exert their influence over the black population. “We need a good speaker....who can articulate

the grievances of the people” (Ellison 292). The white leaders need a black man to become the icon of their organization, someone that the black community can identify with, and trust. They thus recruit the invisible man as the black spokesman for the Harlem district, a puppet that will do their bidding. Through the Brotherhood’s shrewd manipulations of the narrator, Ellison implies that black people are mere resources for the whites to consume and become even more powerful. The emergence of the protagonist and Ras the Exhorter as leaders makes their schemes easier to implement. Ellison depicts how the whites divide and conquer the black community by creating a rift between the ones supporting the narrator, a man under the illusion that whites are his friends, and the ones supporting Ras, a man who is thoroughly bitter about the whites. This rift is exactly what they need in order to prevent the unification of blacks and maintain their dominance. Ellison’s characterization of the protagonist as an ambitious but unpretentious man further reinforces the futility of attempts to find a place for a black man because there simply isn’t one. The reader discovers how a new, seemingly ideal place turns out to be yet another institution corrupted by the system that extorts a hopeful, young, black man into submission.

The success of black people, albeit rare, threatens white supremacy and such notable Negroes are eradicated. The Brotherhood leaders promptly appoint the invisible man as a representative of the Negroes in Harlem, intending to use him as a pawn. He is a false beacon of hope that common black people crowd around, due to the false notions that the organization is working in their interests. The narrator’s overwhelming success and popularity amongst the black masses begin to sting people like Brother Tobbit and Jack, making them resentful. Once they realize that he is slipping from their grasp, they become hostile and reprimand him for taking his own decisions *without* their consent. They condemn him for even the slightest mistake, such as the interview for a local magazine, in which they accuse him of making the Brotherhood all about

himself. The invisible man essentially becomes a dog on a leash. As soon as he is unleashed and runs free, the owner, the Brotherhood, tries to put the leash back on him. The leading white members cannot allow the invisible man to roam free and act independently, so they suppress him to prevent him from gaining control. Ellison asserts that such a conspiracy to bring him down is inevitable. The Jim Crow system will never allow a black man to rise to such a prominent position because it threatens the framework of the white-dominated society.

The protagonist's realization of the Brotherhood's betrayal bewilders him and his repeated failures to fit in lead him into desolation. When he uncovers the inherent conspiracy of misusing him to stir up public sentiments and instigate race riots, he is dumbfounded. The narrator feels a sense of treachery similar to when he discovered Bledsoe's truth. The deceitful Brotherhood is a symbol of the corrupt, white-dominated society of that time, indifferent towards the people's welfare. It controls and manipulates him by exploiting him in the name of working for the black community. Emma, a Brotherhood member, says, "Their leaders are made, not born. Then they are destroyed" (Ellison 302). Through Emma's comment, Ellison foreshadows the invisible man's fate because he too will be made, essentially molded, into a leader that common people flock towards but then end up ravaged. His extermination leads the Negro public astray and they have nowhere to turn. Ironically, the narrator becomes one of the major reasons for the conflict and self-destruction of the blacks. Derogating from the roles imposed upon him undoubtedly leads the narrator to his doom. He realizes how he has been beguiled and takes refuge in his own exile by secluding himself from the cruel world in an underground hiding place and accepting his invisibility and powerlessness. Through the protagonist's allegorical and physical retreat, Ellison conveys the abysmal life and fate of a rebellious black man in the American society. He asserts

that a black man is destined to end up defeated and secluded in this supremacist society. The malicious forces of this world seem to conspire in exterminating blacks and any hint of resistance.

Conclusion

The invisible man suffers from the ramifications of a society built upon racial discrimination to the extent that he loses everything: his home, his family, his job, and most importantly, his identity. “Throughout the novel, the narrator struggles to attain freedom against various barriers put in his way, and every barrier is, first of all, racially constructed....[T]hese barriers isolate and alienate the black man from the main institutions of American life” (Powers 3). These constraints suppress the black people and prevent them from progressing. They cannot rise in this society because the ones pulling the strings, the whites, do not want them to. The protagonist tries incessantly to make himself seem obedient, well-behaved, educated and sophisticated. This meekness plays a major role in his downfall as he neither thinks for himself nor explores what he truly wishes to. The invisible man is appreciated when he abides by social rules and other people’s wishes but despised when he does what *he* wants to. “[M]y problem was that I always tried to go in everyone’s way but my own” (Ellison 573). Ellison implies that no matter how you behaved with the whites, whether you were bitter or compliant, you would receive the same malevolent treatment reserved for Negroes.

The narrator is betrayed, shunned, misunderstood and manipulated by so many people that he grows to view everyone with apprehension. No matter where he goes, he faces hostility and discrimination, whether it be from a hateful white woman, angry because he has used her trash can, or from a man on the street who accuses him of disposing of a gun or stolen goods. From Ras the Extorter’s mob of angry and agitated followers, to trusted people close to him like Dr. Bledsoe

or Brother Jack, the protagonist is mistreated until he breaks. Nothing is actually how he thinks it to be: he rises up the ranks of an organization that supposedly works for the welfare and advancement of the blacks. But in reality, it is working to push them deeper into the pit of misery. Tobbit betrays him by accusing him of attempting to take over the Brotherhood. Jack backstabs him by putting on a facade of kindness and concern when talking to him but secretly plots to bring him down, even writing an ominous but anonymous warning letter. After being hurt so many times, the invisible man is devastated. He stops getting back up and exiles himself in an underground room. He exists without existing. Ellison's message is clear: the narrator is merely another bug to be squashed by the supremacist Jim Crow society. He is human; yet, every person he encounters refuses to see past the 'Negro' label permanently attached to him. He truly becomes what Ellison refers to as 'invisible' "because people refuse to see [him]" (Ellison 3). The effect of such alienation is drastic: a man loses his worth as a sentient human possessing a personality and becomes a drop in the ocean of despair.

The protagonist is trapped in this society and cannot escape from his life's adversities. "No, I couldn't return to Mary's, or to the campus, or to the Brotherhood, or home....The end was in the beginning" (Ellison 571). The invisible man's life is destined to end in disaster because the white supremacist society is one in which a black man is simply shattered. It doesn't matter where he goes, whether it be North or South, there is no place for a man like the narrator in this society. If he wants to fit in, the only role that will accommodate him is that of a witless, primitive, subservient black man, lacking identity, personality, and dignity. In a society based upon the discrimination of blacks, the Sambo doll represents the black man's vulnerability and helplessness. Negroes only have two choices: to obey or be eliminated. The invisible man goes through countless struggles before he realizes this. His undoing is impending because he is *not* a Sambo doll, and

because he attempts to defy the imperious system. Each change leads him to another dead end and he realizes the boundaries erected by the whites around him and others of his race.

In essence, Dr. Bledsoe's words best encapsulate the idea of white dominion in American society. "Power doesn't have to show off. Power is confident, self-assuring, self-starting and self-stopping, self-warming and self-justifying. When you have it, you know it" (Ellison 142). Ellison reveals to us how pervasive white supremacy is and points to the inevitability of downfall for black people in the pernicious Jim Crow system of the late 19th and early 20th centuries. He does so by exposing us to the invisible man's endless struggle and its effects on the psyche of a man broken by the system. The system plays with him and once satisfied, spits him out with the other abused beings of the past. Ellison's narrator takes the reader on a journey through the various institutions of American society that makes one thing overt: each of these institutions is brimming with the strife of Negroes under the irrevocable control of the whites. All things considered, the invisible man's battle with white power is not an anomaly, but rather a shared battle engulfing the entire black population of America that has one choice: to lose.

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