

The theme of Identity, Invisibleness, & Blindness in Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man*

"I am an invisible man...I am a man of substance, of flesh and bone, fiber and liquids – and I might even be said to possess a mind. I am invisible, understand, simply because people refuse to see me" (Ellison 258). This quote from the opening lines of Ralph Ellison's famous novel, *Invisible Man*, struck a chord in the literary world. Ellison's novel and writing capabilities showed the world that African American writers had undeniable substance and talent that was needed for literary progress. Although Ellison's writing was thought-provoking for everyone who came across it, he was critiqued and scrutinized for his existential work. His work always drew an insurmountable question to the reader's mind – who am I? The *Invisible Man* challenged any reader to think about his or her identity and what it means to be invisible. In 1952, when *Invisible Man* was published, it instantaneously became a nationwide hit. It drew the reader to not only how they perceived themselves but how they figured the world perceived them as well. His theme and motifs of identity, blindness, and invisibility remain a captivating topic of discussion in the literary world to this day.

Invisible Man's major theme lies within the realm of one's own identity. The narrator and main character of *Invisible Man* starts the prologue by stating that he is, first and foremost, an invisible man. Many readers can attest to the trouble with their identity and try to discern if they are invisible or not. Throughout the novel, the narrator takes the reader on a whirlwind discussion on how identity can be troubling for anyone, particularly when race is involved. The reader learns that the narrator is of African American descent; however, he or she never actually learns his name, which plays a great part in one's own identity. In an interview for the *Paris*

Review with Alfred Chester and Vilma Howard, Ellison is asked: “[is] the search for identity primarily an American theme?” to which he responds, “It is *the* American theme. The nature of our society is such that we are prevented from knowing who we are” (10). Ellison plainly states that the way society is set up thwarts anyone from truly identifying who they are. During the time of publication, African Americans were struggling to identify themselves in a society that had rejected and enslaved them for over three hundred years (“A History of Slavery” n.p.). Although African Americans were constitutionally free from slavery in 1865 with the 13th Amendment, many were trapped within a society that told them what their identity should be. In *Invisible Man*, the narrator lived in an America where the color of his skin already told others all they needed to know about his identity. Throughout the 581-page novel, the narrator is given his identity by the people and society around him – he never questions it. Ellison wants the reader to acknowledge that this is a major flaw in the narrator’s character and a major flaw in our society (Ellison 10). Ellison believes many people accept themselves as what society wants them to be when, instead, they should boldly be whoever they feel they are. The trouble with identity is that people are afraid to embrace their own. In the epilogue, the narrator has an iconic epiphany – he is the creator of his own identity. Ellison says, “In the epilogue, the hero discovers what he had not discovered throughout the book: you have to make your own decisions; you have to think for yourself” (11). Once the narrator realizes that he can decide who he wants to be, he will be free from the chains society has put around him. He will become who he wants to be. He will have his own identity.

Blindness is both an interior and exterior motif in *Invisible Man*. The themes of blindness and invisibility go hand-in-hand throughout Ellison's novel. He not only shows the reader the blindness of white Americans but of African Americans as well. According to the article "Invisibility and Blindness in Ellison's *Invisible Man* and Wright's *Native Son*" by Alejandro Lopez Miralles, "...these conditions [of invisibility and blindness] are complementary: 'If I am invisible to you, you are blind to me'" (59). The narrator struggles with invisibility due to his blindness. He acknowledges numerous times that he is invisible and is okay with it, but he lacks the understanding that his blindness has led him there. The narrator is blind to his blindness but is highly aware of the blindness of others around him. He acknowledges that the white Americans around him are blind to see the potential he holds. That seems to be an issue many bigoted white Americans face when dealing with a race outside of his or her own. In the mid-twentieth century, racial stereotypes of African Americans led white Americans to become blind to the talents, creativity, and prosperity African Americans held. Although some white Americans are blind to the individuals of another race, they are not the only ones with blindfolds over their eyes. In Ellison's novel, African Americans are blindfolded metaphorically and literally in the Battle Royal scene, where the narrator and nine other men are blindfolded in front of an all-white male crowd before they are thrown into a ring to fight against one another. In Miralles' article, he says that "the boys' blindness is stressed because they allow themselves to be blindfolded, accepting their racial stereotype of submission" (61). The boys allow themselves to be publicly humiliated when they allow the white men to blindfold them. They are feeding

into what the white men want by making themselves seem less than human beings. In this scene, the boys fight each other and are blind to who they should be fighting, which is the white man. Ellison shows the reader that both African Americans and Caucasians can be blind to one another.

Along with identity and blindness, invisibility is a key theme in Ellison's *Invisible Man*. In the prologue of the novel, the narrator says that, "I am invisible simply because people refuse to see me" (Ellison 258). The narrator believes that everyone around him sees "the surroundings, themselves, or figments of their imagination[s]" but never actually him (Ellison 258). Ellison makes it seem as though the society he lives in doesn't have a clue that he is there, and to an extent, that is true. For African Americans, or any race besides Caucasian, the struggle to be recognized fully by society has been an issue for an innumerable amount of years. Racial superiority fits in with Ellison's invisible theme. The narrator is inferior to other Caucasians not because he lacks education or capability but simply because he is African American. The society he is born and bred into has taught him that the color of his skin makes him appear invisible to others. He is invisible because society refuses to fully acknowledge his natural-born American rights, even though he is as free and as human as anyone else. Ellison makes it clear that the narrator has clear knowledge of his invisibleness and how he accepts it. This is another major flaw of the narrator and a flaw that non-Caucasian races accept in society still to this day. Ellison wants the reader and the narrator to realize that his or her race is as important as the next. To reach this realization, the narrator says that he had to be invisible first to understand that he is

nobody but himself (Ellison 264). The narrator goes through a long, grueling process of self-reflection and internal racism to figure out that he is invisible because he chooses to be. Ellison wants the reader to, if nothing else, take away the key fact that no one else can make themselves who they are except for them. Society in all parts of the world will try to tell people of all races who they can and cannot be, but that decision lies within.

Ellison embodies the idea of self-realization and racial empowerment. The *Invisible Man* makes all readers question themselves and if they should accept what society is telling them to. He brings to light that African American novelists and scholars are an intelligible part of the literary world and need to be recognized. He makes readers understand that being invisible is simply an allowed state of being. The power of being invisible is in the power of a person's own hands, not in anyone else's as it may appear. The narrator of *Invisible Man* is relatable to people of all racial backgrounds with his identity crisis, own blindness, and battle with invisibleness.

Works Cited

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