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Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man*: American Nightmare

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A classic from the moment it first appeared in 1952, *Invisible Man* chronicles the travels of its narrator, a young, nameless black man, as he moves through the hellish levels of American tolerance and cultural blindness.

Scholars have taken notice of *Invisible man* ever since its release and continue to scrutinize the novel for good reasons: it is fascinating; it brings forth many interpretations and debates; it questions one's role in society; it addresses racism, etc.

We experience the American racist society during the first half of the 20th century through the eyes of its narrator – an unnamed young Afro-American – who is forced to undertake a journey from his hometown in the south of America to the North in New York City, after he is rusticated from college. His journey comes to metaphorically represent his quest for self-enlightenment, which begins with blind ignorance, moves towards disillusionment and ends with political, social and spiritual development, having recognized the power of being “invisible”.

Ellison through the narrator is critiquing the racist's tendencies in America. He wants to give a firsthand experience of what it means to be a black in White America? How blacks are invisible in the eyes of white people? Why is the protagonist invisible despite of having the persona of human body? Why invisibility becomes as expression of inferiority, misery, rejection, etc? Ellison is asking such questions through his veiled narrator.

The author, in particular, is said to have drawn inspiration from the critical works of American writer and civil rights activist W.E. B. Dubois. Dubois in his work *The Souls of black Folk* wrote that the Afro-American lived in “double-consciousness” where he/she always looked at one-self ‘through the eyes of others, of measuring one's soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity’. Dubois along with Ellison tries to demolish the negative image and arise a positive one in this novel.

The notion of double consciousness emphasizes the pain of black people in a racist society. And Ellison's invisibility is talking about race, the black race in America that has been rendered invisible because of the predominant “Euro-centric” notion of superiority. He feels that the Americans cannot see anything beyond the black skin and the only mark of distinction is the White and Black Skin. They fail to understand the fact that even the blacks are individuals and have an identity.

The author has divided the novel into three parts --- the prologue, the narration and the epilogue, all of which help the reader trace how the protagonist evolves from 'victimhood to survival, from disillusionment to enlightenment'.

The narrator begins his story at a very crucial moment of his life, the graduation ceremony which marks the transition from innocence to maturity. The protagonist is a very good orator. Upon giving an excellent speech at his high-school graduation, the narrator is invited to deliver the same speech again at a gathering of prominent white citizens. The narrator sees this invitation as an opportunity to reach out his dreams. After a traumatic experience in Battle Royal, when he is finally made to deliver the speech, he incorrectly uses "social equality" instead of "social responsibility" only to earn the wrath of the guests.

The *Invisible man* later on becomes a victim of Dr. Bledsoe's politics which takes him to the North of New York City where he learns the bitter truth from Mr. Emerson that his letter of introduction is framed to "keep the Nigger boy running". This comes to stand for the journey that he is later forced to take, first at the hands of Dr. Bledsoe and later on behalf of the Brotherhood, where he is deliberately left hanging with no recourse to better his position in life.

The young Emerson helps the narrator to get a low-paying job at the Liberty Paints plant, whose trade mark color is 'Optic White'. When he enters the premises of the paint factory, he sees a huge electric sign which reads, "Keep America pure with Liberty Paints". Here, Liberty Paints becomes symbolic of the racial inequality prevalent in America. Ellison uses this symbolism to indicate how purity in America is considered to be synonymous to everything white.

Shortly after an accident at the paint factory, the narrator witnesses an old black couple being evicted out of their home. On seeing the white men clearing their house, he gets disturbed and instinctively breaks into a speech that captivates passerby. It is here that he meets Jack, who later asks him to join the Brotherhood and help for equality of all races. With this he embarks on a new journey, with him having to subvert his own individuality in order to meet the expectations of powerful white men.

With the realization that the Brotherhood has never bothered about the interests of the race, he decides to disassociate from the Brotherhood. Fortunately, the narrator manages to evade death by jumping into a coal cellar, where he stays for days, oblivious to the world. Coal again becomes a highly symbolic element in the narrator's path towards enlightenment.

It is only after his final descent into the coal cellar, that he is able to rise and make sense of the power of his black identity. In the blackness and nothingness of the hole, the narrator is able to reflect on his life and get clarity about his black identity. He now comes to believe that the only way he can restore his blackness, is by rendering himself invisible to the world.

Thus by the epilogue, the narrator is able to erase the white 'consciousness' through which he earlier evaluated himself and also to strip himself of the desire to be like whites. Finally it is the

invisibility that allows Ellison to create a black male subjectivity. He takes the notion of invisibility for his own advantage by hiding in the cellar. Also the notion of 'identity' as constructed by the white society is questioned by Ellison and at the same time he has given the answer in the epilogue.

Ellison returns to his reflection by saying that the darkness is inside your mind, it is not your physical appearance that is making you inferior. So one has to light up the mind just like Ellison has lightened the coal cellar with 1,369 bulbs. Exterior light symbolizes the enlightenment of the interior. As he reflects on his life, he moves from darkness to enlightenment. He realizes he has the power to transcend form and reality because now he has clarity of vision which has brought a radical transformation in his perspective.

So we can see that on one hand the novel focus on the limits of the black people yet he makes that very fact into an advantage. As the narrator of the novel realizes that invisibility itself can be illuminating to understand him as human being and by the end of the novel he has learnt to assert his own power, moreover his creativity also arises from his invisibility and therefore Ellison says that African-Americans must learn to triumph over their invisibility and not succumbed.

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