

Research Article

Lessons in the Politics of Self-Creation in Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man*.

Louis Mendy

Associate Professor, Cheikh Anta Diop University Dakar.

ABSTRACT: Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man* is an advocacy against racism in post-slavery America. The narrator in the story experiences much trauma, due to the fact that people refuse to see him because of the color of his skin. Although a promising college student, his future is jeopardized by the white authorities and even by Dr. Beldsoe who should have been proud of that young man of his own race. The narrator's innocence and "blindness" refrain him from realizing, right at the beginning, that his invisibility is so well incrustated in the American social system that he cannot rely on other people, be they white or black, to achieve visibility. After his disappointing experience with the Brotherhood, the narrator goes into hibernation by hiding in a cellar. His introspection helps him to discover his own self and thereby understand people meanness. He finally realizes that his invisibility cannot be turned into visibility, as long as that system is a pervasive one in the American society.

KEY WORDS: America, Brotherhood, Hibernation, Innocence Invisibility, Narrator, Post-slavery, Racism, Visibility.

Introduction.

It is surely horrendous for somebody to feel and live their invisibility and indeed very hard to try to turn that invisibility into visibility. We can judge our capacity of seeing our counterparts, but we cannot evaluate theirs in relation to us. Ralph Ellison's novel *Invisible Man* has raised some crucial issues on the dichotomy between visibility and invisibility in post-slavery American society and for O'Malley:

By linking the narrative act to the achievement of identity, Ellison places his protagonist in a tradition of Afro-American letters that originated with the slave narratives of the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Although these earlier texts were written at least in part, to generate funds for and interest in the abolitionist's cause, they also enabled the writers to name themselves before a culture that had denied their full humanity (O'Malley, 27).

Ralph Ellison's novel has been recognized as one of the finest achievements in modern American fiction, as well as an outstanding work of fiction about the African American experience. One of the striking points of the novel is the nameless narrator, because a name is an important part of an identity somebody socially needs to exist and be affectionately recognizable in the eyes of the others. The story revolves around a man who deals with racism that makes him invisible in his imagination. For the author, invisibility does not mean that the narrator is a ghost or a man with a transparent skin, but an invisible man by virtue of how others react to him. This invisibility is the trauma of the narrator in so far as he is strongly convinced that people do not accept his biological reality; which is something different from the scientific experiments and explorations that led to the invisibility of a man in *The Invisible Man* by G. H. Wells.

Bearing in mind the bulk of critical works on Ralph Ellison's novel, this study is limited to the exploration of the journey of the narrator from the framed world of invisibility that he feels, because of others, to his final introspection that will certainly lead to his capacity to face that sad social reality in America.

The first section of this article deals with the innocence and "blindness" of the protagonist or narrator, while facing the

ambient racism in his natural environment. The second one focuses on the episode of the Brotherhood during which he learns a lot about people's meanness in the American society. Finally, the third one expounds on the introspection of the protagonist in order to transcend the code of invisibility.

I. The Protagonist's Innocence and "Blindness".

The dramatic side of the story starts when the young protagonist, although aware of his invisibility, believes that he can become visible in the eyes of adults, especially the white people whom he wholeheartedly thinks capable of helping him to climb the social ladder to become "somebody". That innocence and "blindness" before such a sad reality, leads Ellison's hero to finally discover the real world of sleepwalking people: 'because he has decided that the world is full of blind men and sleepwalkers who cannot see him for what he is, the narrator describes himself as an 'invisible man' '. (SparkNotes Editors, 'sparknotes on Invisible Man' Sparknote.com). Since people of the narrator's like do not exist for the Whites, they have therefore got no values within themselves and consequently, they do not deserve to be visible.

One of Ralph Ellison's general beliefs is that the American society is so pervaded by color-bar that some people are prevented from knowing who they are and, in *Invisible Man*, this struggle for self-definition is applied to individuals, groups and sometimes to the society as a whole. One of the great successes of the book is Ellison's ability to interweave those individual, communal and national quests into a single complex vision.

Invisible Man appears as a clash between innocence and human prejudices or a struggle between illusion and reality. In this sense, the book is part of the literary tradition of bildungsroman and initiation tales or stories for younger men and women who confront the larger world beyond the security line of home. Those young people only attempt to define themselves in their society. Through the hardships in the life of the narrator, Ralph Ellison lays emphasis on the individual's need to free himself from the powerful influence of societal stereotypes, while bringing to light the different

forms of deception that must be overcome before an individual can fully achieve self-awareness.

Because of his young age, the protagonist innocently falls in the trap of a strong desire to do what is required of him by others, especially by adults, as a way to success. In the initial episode, he is invited to deliver his valedictory speech before the white authorities of the city. Strangely enough, he is conned with other black boys into engaging in a "battle royal", a blindfolded fist fight in which the last standing participant is the winner. O'Malley asserts in his article:

The invisible man might have learned from the battle royal episode to mistrust appearances, since the riotous scene of which he was part bears little relation to the ceremony he had expected. He might have begun to suspect the power elite at large because his audience treated him rudely. But the briefcase and scholarship he receives for delivering his speech eclipse all his earlier unpleasantness. They confirm his assumption that if he does what the world expects of him, he will be rewarded respect and acceptance (O'Malley, 30).

That racist kind of entertainment consists of directing Blacks against Blacks. Although this inhuman act of the authorities is very clear in the reader's mind, the narrator is "blinded" by his eagerness to succeed because he believes that his speech on Blacks' social responsibility before high-ranking white personalities is going to open wide the doors to success for him:

The M.C. knocked on a table for quiet. "Gentlemen", he said, "we almost forgot an important part of the program. A most serious part, gentlemen. This boy was brought here to deliver a speech which he made at his graduation yesterday..." "Bravo" "I am told that he is the smartest boy we've got out there in Greenwood. I'm told that he knows more big words than a pocket-sized dictionary". Much applause and laughter. "So now, gentlemen, I want you to give him your attention" (Ellison, 29).

The quintessence of the speech lies on the social responsibility of Blacks to seek Whites' friendship by developing friendly relationships with the Southern white people. What he has failed to lay stress on though is the fact that friendship comes from a mutual desire to be together. It takes at least two people's willingness to strike up real friendship. Since such an idea is not in the minds of the white southerners, the narrator reveals to the reader his innocence and "blindness" in that predominantly white society where black people are not taken into account as human beings, simply because they are supposed to be invisible: "Throughout the novel, the narrator grows from blind ignorance to enlightened awareness, as he begins to listen with an open mind to question, and to draw connections between experiences of others and his own life" (Cliffnotes on *Invisible Man*, 16 March 2016/lit/C/invisibleman/).

Even the president of the college he attends after his high school graduation does not see him because they are both invisible. Although Dr. Bledsoe does not seem to perceive his own invisibility, he nevertheless thinks that he belongs to the world of visibility because he is a well-read man and a great professor with much knowledge that a lot of white southerners do not have. However, Dr. Bledsoe seems to fear being equaled in degrees and fame by brilliant black students like

the narrator. Other Negroes, rising up to him, would certainly jeopardize his "privileged" position. No wonder then, that he expels the protagonist from the College and sends him to New York. He makes hope that if he finds a job and saves money, he can apply for admission again in the next fall.

The so-called recommendation letters of Dr. Bledsoe to trustees in the city of New York are only meant to keep the protagonist "locked up" in the northern part of the country for good. However, thanks to the kind-hearted son of Mr. Emerson, one of Dr. Bledsoe's "friends" who are supposed to help the narrator to transmute his dreams of high education into actualities, that he understands that he has been banned from the College. And consequently, he is unlikely to become a doctor like Bledsoe. He finally realizes that he has been rejected, betrayed and deceived by somebody he has always looked up to, a man who is supposed to be a role model for most young black people. The narrator finally understands that he has always been as invisible to the white people as to Dr. Bledsoe:

The bearer of this letter is a former student of ours (I say former because he shall never, under any circumstances, be enrolled as a student here again) who has been expelled for a most serious defection from our stricter rules of deportment....it is to the best interest of the college that this young man have no knowledge of the finality of his expulsion...however, it is to the best interests of the great work which we are dedicated to perform, that he continue undisturbed in these vain hopes while remaining as far as possible from our midst (Ellison, 190).

Ralph Ellison shows in the novel that an individual is not trapped by geography, time or place. He believes that human beings can overcome those obstacles to independence if they are willing to accept the responsibility to analyze existence in an independent way. After the terrible shock caused by Dr. Bledsoe's letter, the narrator decides to become his own master by facing the reality of life in New York.

Thanks to an old lady named Mary Rambo, the narrator gets an accommodation despite his state of reduced circumstances. Old Mary is a charitable woman who does not see money in every contact with another human being. The protagonist is then allowed to have bed and board until he obtains a regular employment:

"Now see here boy", she said gruffly. "I don't want you worrying me about your rent this morning. I'm not worried 'cause when you get it I know you will pay me. Meanwhile you forget. Nobody in this house is going to starve. You having any luck lining up a job?" (Ellison, 323).

Mary kindly helps the protagonist until he meets Brother Jack of the Brotherhood. The organization employs him because of its great hope that the narrator is a possible future leader of the black community.

II. The Brotherhood's Episode and the Narrator's Discovery of People's Meanness.

The Brotherhood is an association of black people fighting against injustice and for the respect and social promotion of Blacks. It appears as a rift in that cloudy world. Although, the narrator believes that he is finally visible and real to the Brotherhood, the sad reality is that he is not. Despite the name

that is given to him, and that has never been revealed to the reader the protagonist realizes later on, that he has never left the world of invisibility. According to O'Malley, he thinks that:

His disillusionment (the result of his conversation with Emerson) operates like a hot red light; it causes the "ice" to begin to melt and makes it impossible for him to continue to ignore his feelings. The pain of living at such an intense level of self-awareness makes the protagonist especially susceptible to the influence of an organization such as the brotherhood. Despite his resolutions, the Brotherhood tempts him irresistibly by offering him a system of beliefs that both differs strikingly from the one that deceived him and promises to restore meaning and thus quiet to his life. Its superficial differences notwithstanding, the Brotherhood's ideals prove, of course, to be as unreliable as the American dream (O'Malley, 36).

The encounter with the Brotherhood occurs through Brother Jack, a leading figure of the organization, witnesses the narrator's speaking up in favor of an elderly couple who have been evicted:

"Sure" I called, "take everything. Take it all, hide that junk! Put it back where it came from. It's blocking the street and the sidewalk, and that's against the law. We're law-abiding, so clear the street of the debris. Put it out of sight! Hide it, hide their shame! Hide our shame". "Come on men", I yelled, dashing down the steps and seizing a chair and starting back, no longer struggling against the thinking about the nature of my action. The others followed, picking up pieces of furniture and lugging it back into the building. (Ellison, 281)

That bold and daring act is so powerful and unpredictable that the entire crowd reacts in a positive way to the appeal to restoring the black couple's human dignity. Ellison deals with the invisibility of the protagonist which is not a physical condition, but the result of the actual refusal of others to see him as a dignified person, as well as the communal effort of African Americans to define their cultural identity. The novel revisits the history of black people's experience and alludes indirectly to historical figures who serve as role models for Ralph Ellison's protagonist and Hersey states:

Some of the effects of the novel are certainly missed for readers who do not recognize the parallels drawn between Booker T. Washington and the founder of the college headed by Dr. Bledsoe; between Marcus Garvey and Ras the Destroyer or between Frederick Douglass and the protagonist himself (Hersey, 45).

The narrator's strong speech that has moved and pushed everybody to action is of paramount importance in the struggle of the black community, to define and identify itself within the American culture. The Brotherhood is nothing else, but a movement working for an American society free from injustice, racism, exploitation and where every man's dignity is preserved:

"What are we doing? What is our mission? It's simple; we are working for a better world for all people. It's that simple. Too many have been dispossessed of their heritage, and we have banded together in brotherhood so as to do something about it. What do you think of that?" (Ellison, 304)

The narrator is then recruited as the spokesman of the Brotherhood which is rather like a communist party. In fact the members are obliged to work under cover most of the time. The episode of the Brotherhood also recalls the time of McCarthyism in America when the people suspected of being communists were denounced and usually sentenced to jail.

Armed with a new name supplied by the organization, the protagonist eagerly takes on his duties in Harlem. He successfully builds up a good membership there, and effectively competes with rival associations such as the one headed by Ras: the Destroyer. The latter is an African American nationalist who is reminiscent of the historical figure Marcus Garvey. Instead of being rewarded for his remarkable work, the narrator is, all of a sudden, reassigned to a downtown position as the consequence of his giving an unauthorized interview. By doing that, the organization has restored all the protagonist's ties to the past by making him lose his illusions and retreat into anonymity or invisibility. His protests result in a climatic showdown in the relationships between the narrator and the Brotherhood. O'Malley adds:

Predictably; his experience with the Brotherhood recapitulates his disaffection with the principles the college embodies. In the Brotherhood (as in the college); the invisible man undergoes the ordeal of an undeserved punishment; in both cases he subscribes and accommodates himself to the sentence. Both the Brotherhood and the college betray his faith a second time; however; in each case, the second betrayal occasions his final disillusionment (O'Malley, 36).

Eventually, the narrator realizes that he is being used by Jack. He certainly understands that the Brotherhood is willing to sacrifice the progress made in Harlem for the larger ends of the Association. He also knows that his own dream of becoming somebody like Dr. Bledsoe is a sham. Thus, the protagonist faces another failure in his attempt to reach visibility through the Brotherhood. He gradually comprehends that he needs to work hard to understand the reason why he is still invisible.

III. The Narrator's Introspection for Self-discovery.

As the book nears its conclusion, the protagonist learns that he is not just invisible to Jack, but to everyone else. To Jack he is not a real, living and breathing individual, but a vehicle to advance the goals of the Brotherhood. As the story progresses the narrator becomes aware that Jack is just as mean and prejudiced as the many other people he has already met. Only after Tod Clifton is murdered, and he recognizes the Brotherhood's complicity in the Harlem Riot, does he understand the falsity of human nature. That conviction is confirmed when Jack abandons the Brotherhood and the goals of the black community without looking back. As Bloom puts it:

What he finally learns in the course of his radical adventures is that even for the Brotherhood, the Negro is a thing, an object, an instrument for power politics and of preordained historical design, rather than a divinely complex and complicated human mystery. He concludes, therefore, that he has been as invisible to the Brotherhood as he was, has been to all the others, and that the Brothers require his invisibility in order to delude themselves concerning their own historical identity (Bloom, 35).

When the race riot, that the Brotherhood has encouraged,

breaks out the narrator is pursued by armed men. He seeks refuge in a sanctuary underground where he is obliged to burn out the symbolic contents of his briefcase in order to see. By doing that, he destroys the prescribed identities that others have supplied for him so that he can prepare his own "hibernation" during which, he finally discovers himself. While in that "hibernation" he comes to the conclusion that invisibility is a fact in the conscience of its believers. However, through a personal introspection one should be able to understand such a fact:

He builds himself a room in the cellar of an all-white building and hibernates there contemplating his relationship to reality and the invisibility he feels is caused by his race. He lives in that hole until he runs into Mr. Norton one day in the subway and realizes that he will no longer conform to white expectations of him. Instead he will reclaim his humanity by being who he is and no longer struggling to change that (www.bookrags.com/notes/inv/Bio.html, March 2010).

Realizing one's invisibility means, as the narrator has done, going underground and whipping it all except the mind. Although the narrator, like other African Americans, is invisible before Whites and even some Blacks in the community; he has managed to make his invisibility reach the point of self-discovery through introspection. When people become conscious that invisibility is only a state of people's minds, they may try to transcend it by believing in themselves as individuals capable of making their dreams come true, whatever others may think or do.

Ralph Ellison has set out to move beyond the protest novel to portray a narrator whose life is not strictly defined by his race, but by his willingness to accept personal responsibility for creating his own life.

Conclusion.

Ralph Ellison's central theme in the novel is the quest for visibility, a quest that is quite recurrent in American literature in general and African American literature in particular. In *Invisible Man*, the combat for self-definition is wonderfully mingled with communal and national definitions.

Although innocence and blindness have characterized the protagonist's attitude at the beginning, he progressively realizes that the true sense of the world is something different from what he may take or learn from other people or from an organization like the Brotherhood. That political entity has enabled the narrator to understand the need to free himself from the powerful influences of societal stereotypes. It has also demonstrated the multiple levels of deception that must be overcome before an individual can reach self-awareness which is the ultimate goal of any human being.

Nobody can build their true identity when relying on other individuals' or communities' subjective stereotypes. The "hibernation" that the protagonist goes through is a crucial moment in the life of someone who wants to discover their self. Ralph Ellison optimistically asserts that human beings can overcome the obstacles while defining their real and true identities, if they are willing to accept the responsibility to judge existence independently, in order to work towards their visibility.

BIBLIOGRAPHY.

1. Bloom, Harold. 1996. *Ralph Ellison's Invisible Man*, Broomall, PA: Chelsea House Publishers.
2. Busby, Marl. 1991. *Ralph Ellison*, Boston: Twayne.
3. Cochoy, Nathalie. 1998. *Ralph Ellison, la musique de l'invisible*, Paris : Belin.
4. Ellison, Ralph. 1995. *Invisible Man*, New York : Vintage International Edition.
5. Gray, Valerie Bonita. 1978. *'Invisible Man' Literary Heritage: "Benito Cereno" and "Moby Dick"*, Amsterdam: Rodopi.
6. List, Robert, N.1982. *Dedalus in Harlem: The Joyce-Ellison connection*, Washington DC: University Press of America.
7. Mc Sweeney, Kerry. 1988. *Invisible Man, Race and Identity*, Boston: G.K. Hall.
8. Nadel, Alan. 1988. *Invisible Man criticism: Ralph Ellison and the American canon*, Iowa City: University of Iowa Press.
9. Reed, Mark. 1994. "The iron and the flesh: history as machine in Ellison's *Invisible Man*" *CLA Journal*. 37: 261-73.
10. Stephen, Mark, "Beyond Hibernation: Ralph Ellison's 1982 version of *Invisible Man*" *Black American Literature Forum*. 23: 701-21.
11. Wells, H. G. 1897. *The Invisible Man*, United Kingdom: C. Arthur Pearson.

WEBOGRAPHY.

- SparkNotes Editors (2002). SparkNotes on *Invisible Man*. Retrieved March 16 2016, from <http://www.sparknotes.com/lit/invisiblemen/>
- Cliffnotes on *Invisible Man*, 06 March 2010/[lit/C/Invisible Man/](http://lit/C/Invisible%20Man/)
- www.bookrags.com/notes/inv/bio/html/