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James Baldwin, Ralph Ellison, and the Invisible Man in the search for Black Consciousness

Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man* follows the journey of the narrator, who remains decidedly nameless throughout the book, as he becomes conscious of his place within the fabric of black culture. Living amidst the chaotic racial tensions surrounding him, the narrator realizes that to gain personal strength and power in his own life, he must use the racial bias that exists in his favor, and become an invisible man. The storyline traces the narrator's growth to solidifying his own identity in his choice to become invisible in a format that begins with an explanation of his present day wisdom, and then flashes back to track the events leading up to that point, all of which affected him and his mindset in some way. The reader follows this single installment of the narrator's life as he grows and changes, forming a comprehensive insight into his own power and where he fits within the black community. However, the book only documents a set number of years in his life, so it is left up to the reader to infer how the narrator's life changes after the last page of the book, since he will continue to have life experiences that will mold him as a person, as well as his outlook on his position within society. This universal concept of personal growth throughout life can be more clearly envisioned in *Invisible Man* with the application of a lens quote, made by author Ralph Ellison, on how his literature is applicable to all.

“‘When I was a kid, I read the English novels. I read Russian translations and so on. And always, I was the hero. I identified with the hero,’ Ellison said. ‘Literature is integrated.

And I'm not just talking about color, race. I'm talking about the power of literature to make us recognize again and again the wholeness of the human experience.” (Ellison).

With the application of certain lens texts, the reader can better understand how the narrator's experiences continue to change his perspective, and identity; the book represents the “wholeness of human experience” because it demonstrates how every human is constantly changing and growing as a result of the events they encounter. His story begins with a message from his grandfather that becomes a running theme throughout the book, of the fight for power in a world inherently turned against you. As the narrator carries this message with him, he encounters a slew of racial and personal struggles, and his own outlook becomes clear. This aspect to the story can be more easily understood with the application of this quote made by James Baldwin in an interview he had with the Paris Review:

“I remember standing on a street corner with the black painter Beauford Delaney down in the Village, waiting for the light to change, and he pointed down and said, “Look.” I looked and all I saw was water. And he said, “Look again,” which I did, and I saw oil on the water and the city reflected in the puddle. It was a great revelation to me. I can't explain it. He taught me how to see, and how to trust what I saw. Painters have often taught writers how to see. And once you've had that experience, you see differently” (Baldwin).

With this quote, the reader is allowed an insight into the narrator's perspective, as it highlights how experiences in the narrator's life lend themselves to how he then sees things differently.

When the narrator fully realizes the injustice that he has to live with as a black man, he chooses to become invisible, as mentally freeing himself from struggle of being oppressed and becoming

invisible is his own liberation. However, using racial injustice as a tool to become more powerful and grow one's own identity is characterized in the book, and the reader can trace the events that contribute to the formation of this mentality.

The reader discovers that the narrator's story is one he is writing strictly for his own benefit, instead of meaning it to be for a larger audience. He is documenting his personal journey for himself, and only through his own point of view. Through this, the reader is assured that events will be recounted in an honest manner, and only those events that were of importance to the narrator will be included. The story begins with a recollection of the message that his grandfather had left him with on his deathbed. He had said "“Son, after I'm gone I want you to keep up the good fight. I never told you, but our life is a war and I have been a traitor all my born days, a spy in the enemy's country ever since I give up my gun back in the Reconstruction. Live with your head in the lion's mouth. I want you to overcome 'em with yeses, undermine 'em with grins, agree 'em to death and destruction, let 'em swoller you till they vomit or bust wide open”” (Ellison 13). By this, the narrator's grandfather was telling him that the way to achieve a supreme level of personal power and strength was not to fight to invalidate racism, but to instead combat the idea of inequality by beating the white-based society present at the time with yeses and grins. The narrator then speaks of how these words caused “so much anxiety. I was warned emphatically to forget what he had said and, indeed, this is the first time it has been mentioned outside the family circle. It had a tremendous effect upon me, however. I could never be sure of what he meant” (Ellison 13). Throughout the book, the narrator slowly begins to understand what his grandfather meant, and understand the significance of his message. This is the first obvious experience that affects how the the narrator sees the world and his place in it.

Another specific instance that is made obvious to the reader as being a significant event that holds great influence over the narrator's life is the dream that he has, in which his fears of racial prejudice preventing him from virtually anything in life are realized, and made apparent to the reader. "I dreamed I was at a circus with him... he told me to open my brief case and read what was inside and I did, finding an official envelope stamped with the state seal; and inside the envelope I found another and another, endlessly, and I thought I would fall of weariness. "Them's years," he said. "Now open that one." And I did and in it I found an engraved document containing a short message in letters of gold. "Read it," my grandfather said. "Out loud." "To Whom It May Concern," I intoned. "Keep This Nigger-Boy Running." I awoke with the old man's laughter ringing in my ears. (It was a dream I was to remember and dream again for many years after. But at that time I had no insight into its meaning)" (Ellison 27). Again in this passage, the narrator acknowledges that he cannot yet fully comprehend the meaning of his dream, but the theme of a society dominated by racial prejudice that is keeping "This Nigger-Boy Running," is one that the narrator will struggle with and combat throughout the book. For example, when the narrator is sent to New York to deliver letters to benefactors of the university, only to then discover he had been tricked all along, and wasn't going to be let back into the school. Ellison personifies the racial inequality he dealt with in his own life in the characters in the book. The narrator learns how to deal with the consistent tilted scale of justice that is never in his favor. To quote Baldwin, "Painters have often taught writers how to see. And once you've had that experience, you see differently." Through his experiences, the narrator sees himself and his place in the world differently.

Ellison also uses symbols in the book to represent the racial inequality that the narrator struggles to live alongside. One example is the coin bank he finds just before he joins the Brotherhood, a black rights activist group. It becomes obvious through the narrator's depiction of the object, that it serves as an something that is objectified and forced into submission on account of white people's amusement and manipulation.

“ . . . the cast-iron figure of a very black, red-lipped and wide-mouthed Negro . . . stared up at me from the floor, his face an enormous grin, his single large black hand held palm up before his chest. It was a bank, a piece of early Americana, the kind of bank which, if a coin is placed in the hand and a lever pressed upon the back, will raise its arm and flip the coin into the grinning mouth” (Ellison 247).

Another example of Ellison's use of symbols in *Invisible Man* is the Optic White paint that the narrator is introduced to when he starts working at the Liberty Paint plant. Here, the narrator is listening to a worker explain his job. He tells the narrator that, ““Our white is so white you can paint a chunka coal and you'd have to crack it open with a sledge hammer to prove it wasn't white clear through”” (Ellison 155). The primary function of the paint is to cover blackness completely, Which Ellison uses as a metaphor to illustrate the dominant white power structure in America that, like the white paint, does all it can to extinguish black identity. Both these symbols are used by Ellison to demonstrate to the reader how the narrator saw himself within society. He was bothered by the coin bank because he noticed that the physical characteristics of the coin bank were stereotypical black features, and he may have been in part projecting his own self-consciousness, as well as his frustration for the entirety of racism in America. The symbol of the Optic White paint is used to show this as well. The narrator had not yet reached the point of

true self-power and hadn't yet become the Invisible man, for if he had, he would not have been affected by these objects that could be directly linked to racist tendencies.

The pinnacle event in the narrator's life occurs in his confrontation with Ras. In this moment, he realizes that acting on account of the expectations of others would not prove to be beneficial to himself in any way, and would only prove to be destructive.

“I looked at Ras on his horse and at their handful of guns and recognized the absurdity of the whole night and of the simple yet confoundingly complex arrangement of hope and desire, fear and hate, that had brought me here still running, and knowing now who I was and where I was and knowing too that I had no longer to run for or from the Jacks and the Emersons and the Bledsoes and Nortons, but only from their confusion, impatience, and refusal to recognize the beautiful absurdity of their American identity and mine. . . . And I knew that it was better to live out one's own absurdity than to die for that of others, whether for Ras's or Jack's” (Ellison 434).

When the narrator throws the spear back at Ras, he describes it “as though for a moment I had surrendered my life and begun to live again” (Ellison 434). This was rebirth was an enormous step in reforming his identity, one in which he led his own life and was free from the ties of racism and self-doubt.

The narrator comes to a turning point in his life when he is about to slit open a pedestrian's throat and kill them, but he instead decides against it and comes to the realization that killing that person will only give rise to the cause of the white man's prejudice. Instead, becoming an invisible man will give him the most power and control of his own life. Through his experiences, the narrator gains a new perspective that allows him to trust what he sees, and know

that only he can dictate his own identity, not society. This whole concept is highlighted with the use of the lens quote made by Baldwin, as the reader can draw parallels to how Baldwin's vision changed with experiences, as he learned to trust what he saw, just as the narrator's did as well. The narrator explains that his "problem was that I always tried to go in everyone's way but my own. I have also been called one thing and then another while no one really wished to hear what I called myself. So after years of trying to adopt the opinions of others I finally rebelled. I am an invisible man" (Ellison 444). The narrator reached a point in his life where he came to terms with the fact that people would continue forever to refuse to see him as a person before seeing him as someone with darker skin, so he declared his invisibility, and moved on in acceptance and in confidence of his identity.

Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man* follows the story of the narrator, and the reader pays witness to how things he experiences throughout his life helps him to grow and mature. Every moment or event that takes place in one's life plays a part in shaping the person that they become. A person's identity is built upon their perspective, and as one's perspective changes, their identity naturally does as well. The use of lens quotes taken from Ralph Ellison himself, as well as James Baldwin, can supplement the reader's understanding of how the narrator's experiences change the person he becomes and the outlook he achieves in becoming the invisible man, but also how life experiences are a universal topic that is not restricted to just the black community.

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