

Invisible Man: A Quest for Value

By Karen Z

Ralph Ellison's first novel, *Invisible Man*, opens with the words "I am an invisible man," describing the refusal of mainstream white America to recognize and appreciate African-Americans as individuals of value (Ellison 3). The narrator continues to speak throughout the book of his quest to find self-worth in pre-civil rights America. More specifically, the main theme of the novel speaks of the narrator's pursuit to be valued as an individual in a predominantly white society, a task that many other African-Americans in Ellison's time were finding to be more and more difficult. "He sees the necessity of redefining himself in his own terms, terms which, while rooted in his history and traditions, take account of his present and future possibilities" (Williams 145). We become aware of these possibilities by examining the narrator's history. The narrator seeks to find his voice through many events, including his valedictorian speech at the battle royal, his work ethic while at college, and his joining of the Brotherhood.

As readers, we are first aware of the narrator's ambition to be valued as an intellectual when he reads his valedictorian speech at the conclusion of the battle royal. By mistake, he includes the hotly debated phrase, "social equality," our first evidence of the social inequality and instability of African-Americans at this time. The narrator, accustomed to this social rift, doesn't consider it to be very significant, but continues to try to please the powerful white men. [written at eastern alamance hs in 04] In his own words, the narrator tells of his emotions upon receiving the briefcase and scholarship: "I was so moved that I could hardly express my thanks. A rope of bloody saliva forming a

shape like an undiscovered continent drooled upon the leather and I wiped it quickly away. I felt an importance that I had never dreamed” (Ellison 32).

Another instance where we become aware of the narrator’s quest for value in society is his record of performance in the southern college. It becomes clear to us as readers that the protagonist attempts to achieve social excellence through his rigorous studies at the all-black school. His grades and performance excelled enough to be allowed to drive those important multimillionaires around campus. It stands to reason that Dr. Bledsoe would only allow the most accomplished and prestigious students to handle such an important and respected position. By flattering Mr. Norton to the best of his ability, the protagonist demonstrates the need he feels to get on the good side of influential white men such as Norton. [written at eastern alamance hs in 04] He says, “I knew ... that it was advantageous to flatter rich white folks. Perhaps he’d give me a large tip, or a suit, or a scholarship next year” (Ellison 38). At this point in his story, the main character does his best to advance in society the only way that he knows how, by making himself inferior to whites.

Closer towards the conclusion of the novel, we become more aware of the narrator’s need to excel as a black man in a white society by his joining of the Brotherhood. When Brother Jack approaches him with the offer of a job, a prestigious position, and a chance for glory, it doesn’t take much time for the narrator to accept. Life for the narrator was going as smoothly as planned until he received a friendly word of caution from an anonymous supporter (Ellison 383). It is then that the narrator begins to realize that not everybody was supporting him. His career as a speechmaker starts to decline as he realizes that his “brothers” in the Brotherhood were simply using him to

accomplish their own goals and aspirations in life. In a trial by a biased jury, his former friends, his previous Brothers, decide to oust him from the Brotherhood, only to call on him in their time of distress [written at eastern alamance hs in 04] during the race riot at the conclusion of the novel. It seems that our narrator was on the verge of becoming a great political figure and an asset to the black community when he was prevented from fulfilling his role in society.

In conclusion, the famous novel *Invisible Man* follows the progress of the narrator as he attempts to find self-worth in a society dominated by a prejudiced white America. Through many phases of his story, we as readers see glimpses of his quest, from his valedictorian speech at the battle royal to his high performance in school, and finally in his membership in the Brotherhood. This powerful allegory not only serves as a fore-runner to civil rights, but also encourages all of us as readers to value ourselves as independent individuals.

Bibliography

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