

A Question of Identity

Kimberly Z

Authors use various techniques to establish a tone or to convey certain ideas. In *Invisible Man*, the author, Ralph Ellison, combines many different and somewhat obscure themes for this purpose. The theme of the question of identity is extended throughout the novel, and the reader is able to sympathize with the race and with the narrator as they struggle for individuality throughout the development of this theme. The struggle for identity is shown through differences of African Americans in the city and in the country, the lack of leadership within Harlem and New York City, and the narrator's various identities.

In the book, the question of identity is initially shown as an uncertain common identity for African-Americans in the country and those in the city. *Invisible Man* shows the struggle for blacks to identify with one another in the decades following the Civil War. In the country, African Americans are treated with less dignity than those of the city: the country blacks are forced to fight for wired coins (27) and are merely chauffeurs to people like Mr. Norton, while the city blacks could hold a position in a high person's office, as the protagonist seeks to do upon his arrival in New York (167). Even Lucious Brockway, an African American, is the only person capable of controlling the quality of the paint at Liberty Paint in New York (215). Furthermore, the African Americans in the suburbs seem to be less dignified than those in the city. People like Jim Trueblood represent the country, while the African Americans in the city are organized [written at e alamanca hs in 04] under complex bureaucracies, such as the Brotherhood. This unavoidable social difference in the ethnic group (due to lack of contact between the two units) kept the African Americans from solving the question of identity as a race and from solving the communication difference that divided the city from the suburbs.

Additionally, identity is a question for the race in Harlem and throughout New York as the African Americans struggle to unify under one leader. Ras the Exhorter fights the Brotherhood for the position of "spokesman," and this competition eventually increases the rift between two groups of black and

permanently damages the race's ability to solve the question of its new-found identity. This division keeps the race from becoming strong, a goal that both sides want to achieve but lose because they are unwilling to work together. Thus, the identity of the race is questioned more because the people are not unified under a common leader and cannot associate themselves with a familiar organization.

Furthermore, the question of identity is shown through the author's uncertainty of who he is. The audience does not even know his name. As the book progresses, the theme is augmented because the reader realizes that our hero is nameless and that his real name will never be revealed. When the narrator leaves the College to go to New York, he must change identities from the intelligent, well-to-do African American student to an unemployed man who only has shelter through the Men's House and benefactors like Mary and Brother Jack. A strong example of uncertainty of identity is when the narrator is hospitalized, hooked up to the machine, and then asked his name. When he is unable to give a response to any of the questions on the cards, such as "WHAT IS YOUR MOTHER'S NAME?" (240), the reader is reassured that the narrator's identity is a mystery. He is then given a new name and a chance to start over with his life, giving him an altogether different identity. When Brother Jack gives the protagonist a new name, though the audience [written at a distance] never knows what it is, he hands over yet another identity under which the narrator must live. Still further, the narrator's identity is mistaken for Rinehart's (483), and he wears Rinehart's identity like a mask, flipping from himself to someone else by simply placing a hat on his head. Clearly, the main character's identity is based upon society's views of him. As Gibson states, it is obvious that

the narrator depends entirely upon external definitions to define not only reality but also his own existence. What the central character finds out finally is that he is nobody—and that he is in no better position at the end of the novel than he was at the beginning. He is nobody because by the end of the novel he has cut off any possibility of social identification, and unless identity is conceived as metaphysical in character, it cannot exist

apart from a social context (Gibson 144).

Undoubtedly, the question of identity is also shown through the narrator's different personalities.

Throughout *Invisible Man* many different themes are developed, but a very prominent theme is the question of identity. This theme is explored [written at the time of the 1940s] as African Americans in the city and in the country struggle for a common identity, the African American population in New York City is divided into groups by struggling authorities, and the protagonist of the story tries to find out who he is. As the author explores this quest for identity, the protagonist and his race become symbols of each one of us individually and as a whole as we look inside of ourselves to discover who we really are.

WORKS CITED

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