Invisible Man Essay, Research Paper

Invisible Man – Identity

Essay submitted by Doug Lee

“Who the hell am I?” (Ellison 386) This question puzzled the invisible man, the

unidentified, anonymous narrator of Ralph Ellison’s acclaimed novel Invisible Man.

Throughout the story, the narrator embarks on a mental and physical journey to seek

what the narrator believes is “true identity,” a belief quite mistaken, for he, although

unaware of it, had already been inhabiting true identities all along.

The narrator’s life is filled with constant eruptions of mental traumas. The biggest

psychological burden he has is his identity, or rather his misidentity. He feels “wearing

on the nerves” (Ellison 3) for people to see him as what they like to believe he is and

not see him as what he really is. Throughout his life, he takes on several different

identities and none, he thinks, adequately represents his true self, until his final one, as

an invisible man.

The narrator thinks the many identities he possesses does not reflect himself, but he

fails to recognize that identity is simply a mirror that reflects the surrounding and the

person who looks into it. It is only in this reflection of the immediate surrounding can

the viewers relate the narrator’s identity to. The viewers see only the part of the

narrator that is apparently connected to the viewer’s own world. The part obscured is

unknown and therefore insignificant. Lucius Brockway, an old operator of the paint

factory, saw the narrator only as an existence threatening his job, despite that the

narrator is sent there to merely assist him. Brockway repeatedly question the narrator

of his purpose there and his mechanical credentials but never even bother to inquire his

name. Because to the old fellow, who the narrator is as a person is uninterested. What

he is as an object, and what that object’s relationship is to Lucius Brockway’s engine

room is important. The narrator’s identity is derived from this relationship, and this

relationship suggests to Brockway that his identity is a “threat”. However the viewer

decides to see someone is the identity they assign to that person. The Closing of The

American Mind, by Allan Bloom, explains this identity phenomenon by comparing two

“ships of states” (Bloom 113). If one ship “is to be forever at sea, [and] ?K another is to

reach port and the passengers go their separate ways, they think about one another

and their relationships on the ship very differently in the two cases” (Bloom 113). In the

first state, friends will be acquainted and enemies will be formed, while in the second

state, the passengers will most likely not bother to know anyone new, and everyone

will get off the ship and remain strangers to one another.

A person’s identity is unalike to every different viewer at every different location and

situation. This point the narrator senses but does not fully understand. During his first

Brotherhood meeting, he exclaimed, “I am a new citizen of the country of your vision, a

native of your fraternal land!” (Ellison 328) He preaches to others the fact that identity

is transitional yet he does not accept it himself. Maybe he thought it distressing being

liked not for being his true self but because of the identity he puts on or being hated

not for being himself but because of his identity. To Dr. Bledsoe, the principal of the

black southern university where the narrator attended, the narrator is a petty “black

educated fool” (Ellison 141). To Mr. Norton, a rich white trustee of the black university,

the narrator is a simple object intertwined with his fate, a mere somebody, he explained

to the narrator, that “were somehow connected with [his (Mr. Norton's)] destiny”

(Ellison 41). To the organizers of the Brotherhood, Jack, Tobitt, and the others, the

narrator is what they designed him to be. They designed for him an identity of a social

speaker and leader, and to his listeners and followers, he is just that. Those were his

multiple identities and none were less authentic than the others because to his

onlookers, he is what his identities say he is, even if he thinks differently.

The narrator always had a desire for people “who could give [him] a proper reflection of

[his] importance” (Ellison 160). But there is no such thing as a proper reflection

because his importance varies among different people. Subconsciously, he craves

attention. He wants recognition and status, and wants to be honored as someone

special. He must feel that he “can have no dignity if his status is not special, if he is

not essentially different”(Bloom 193), therefore he joined Brotherhood in order to

distinguish himself, and to identify himself. He gets what he wants, recognition and

fame, but it is not right he thought, for he is recognized only for his false identity; his

identity positions him in the center of thousands of attentions, yet he feels he is

unseen; in the brotherhood of thousands of brothers, yet he feels no one knows him.

This is his feeling of having a misidentity, but it is his conception of identity which is

mistaken.

To comprehend identity, it would be necessary to understand that, in a solitary state,

there is no need for identity, because identity is like a name, a label a person wears for

those around him to see. If a person is stranded on an island, what use will it be to

have a name? The narrator thought he “was becoming someone else”(Ellison 328) when

he acquired his new Brotherhood name, but a name change is simply a prescription for

an identity change in the same human being. A name ?V or rather call it identity – is

dynamic and interchangeable; a being is static. Rinehart, in the story, is an identity

which to different people implied a gambler, a briber, a lover, and a Reverend, and even

happened to be an identity the narrator incidentally acquires temporarily. The narrator

does not understand the fact that “Man is ambiguous” (Bloom 113), that man is looked

at differently from different perspectives, but how a man is seen will not alter the

person he is.

The same person in different states of identities will experience quite a deviation in the

way he or she is treated. The different treatments can lead to how one feels about

one’s own being, which in some cases might illusion oneself as being a different person.

John Howard Griffin, the author and narrator of the true-life novel Black Like Me

demonstrated the interchangeability of identities and its effects. For himself, a white

man, to understand how it is like to be black, he decides to “become a Negro” (Griffon

8) By simply darkening his skin with a medication, he gives up his life as a privileged

white southerner, and “walks into a life that appears suddenly mysterious and

frightening” (Griffon 9). Similarly the narrator steps into a life of northern privileges he

could only dream of when he was in the South. Probably “it was the clothes and the

new name and the circumstances” (Ellison 328) which is so unfamiliar to the narrator

that causes him to feel so different, and so strange, leading him into believing that he

is becoming someone else. Perhaps he is startled that people likes him so much, which

makes him think he “had become less of what [he] was, less a Negro” (Ellison 347);

much like how Griffin is shocked when he glares into a mirror that reflects a “stranger-a

fierce, bald, very dark Negro” (Griffon 191). But unlike the narrator who rejects reality

by assuming invisibility, Griffin stands face to face with the people who sees his new

identity. Although Griffin initially felt divided into “two men, the observing one and the

one that panicked” (Griffon 48), he eventually learns how people are seen through

multiple perspectives.

The narrator sees the meaning of identity as the universal perspective of a being. He

acquires fame and recognition through the influential role he played as a leading activist

of the Brotherhood, and thinks everyone will regard him that way. Feeling full of

confidence and dignity, he greeted two black fellows in a bar, thinking they would be

astounded to see him. But to his surprise, they “only ?K look at [him] oddly”(Ellison 416)

To those two, his fame is his notoriety because they do not like his race philosophy.

The narrator works for an ideology that promotes equality among all humans, whether

black or white, male or female, while the two black fellows hold an opposing ideology, a

popular conventional belief in blacks at the time that “insisted on respect for blacks as

blacks, not as human beings simply” (Bloom 33), Instead of being seen as a social

leader, he is seen by those two as a social disgrace for the black community.

The narrator sees himself as a walking stereotype. He is right because anyone who is

perceived through an identity is a stereotype because no identity reveals exactly how

a person is. Like a stereotype, identity exists externally from the person it identifies

because it exists within the eye of the viewer. The narrator during his fight with a

white man on the street suddenly realized that he is fighting a person that “had not

seen [him]” (Ellison 4). However that white man does see him, just that he is seen

through an identity not too sincere in respect. The narrator is disgusted with people

stereotyping him, therefore he wants to believe himself as invisible. He does not want

to speak at Clifton’s funeral yet the people will not leave until he performs what is

expected of him – to give a speech. He comes to view his fame as a stereotype no

different than that of those “black brothers who entertained them, [white people], with

stories so often that they [white people] laughed even before these fellows opened

their mouths” (Ellison 413).

The narrator can believe himself to be whatever he wants. But what he sees of himself

is not what others see of him. He cannot decide for others how to see him, although he

can influence the way people see him ?V just as easy as how J. H. Griffin adopted his

new identities when he “wakes up in a black man’s skin” (Griffon 161). According to The

Closing of the American Mind, all identities “depends on the free consent of individuals”

(Bloom 110). A president holds his identity only because people elect to see him that

way, otherwise he is like any ordinary Joe; even if he thinks of himself as really nothing

more than of common flesh and bones, he is no less a president because his identity is

for the public to perceive and not for himself. Even if there is a single person who

considers him a president, he is a president to that person. Just like how the narrator is

perceived as a “fink” when he stumbled into a Union meeting. That is his identity in that

particular occasion, to those particular people, despite he truthfully denies it. Because

identity is “something ?K which one has no control” (Griffon 7).

He believes he finally found his true identity when he realizes he is invisible to his

surroundings; therefore, he assumes invisibility. However, invisibility is only his way to

avoid reality. He is not invisible but simply not seen as what he thinks he should be

seen as. He feels invisible only because no one really understands him, but in reality,

can any person be fully understood? A person can only be understood to an extent. Not

even a brother or sister, a best friend, a spouse, or a person’s parents who created him

or her can totally understand. Nobody is seen exactly as what they want to be seen

as, but that does not mean they are invisible, just that the identity they have on might

not be what they desire for.

Despite the narrator’s belief that after his long journey, he has finally found the true

understanding of identity and discovered his real identity, he is mistaken, for all the

identities he experienced were real. He is the “same human individual”, seen differently

“only in appearance” (Griffon 161) and that shows invisibility is a false revelation. Every

different person who sees him, holds a unique perception of him, even if he does not

like how he is perceived; it is still a unique identity of his very being, and that identity

is real on a simple basis that it exist. Because identity is a tool for the beholder to

assess the identified, therefore it belongs to the beholder and not the identified.

Without people around, a person will not have an identity and there will be no need for

one. That is the whole reasoning behind identity.

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Invisible Man by Ralph Ellison

Essay submitted by Anonymous

Invisible Man is a story told through the eyes of the narrator, a Black man struggling in

a White culture. The narrative starts during his college days where he works hard and

earns respect from the administration. Dr. Bledsoe, the prominent Black administrator of

his school, becomes his mentor. Dr. Bledsoe has achieved success in the White culture

which becomes the goals which the narrator seeks to achieve. The narrator’s hard work

culminates in him being given the privilege of taking Mr. Norton, a White benefactor to

the school, on a car ride around the college area. After much persuasion and against

his better judgement, the narrator takes Mr. Norton to a run down Black neighborhood.

When Dr. Bledsoe found out about the trip the narrator was kicked out of school

because he showed Mr. Norton anything less than the ideal Black man. The narrator is

shattered, by having the person he idealizes turn on him. Immediately, he travels to

New York where he starts his life anew. He joins the Brotherhood, a group striving for

the betterment of the Black race, an ideal he reveres. Upon arrival in the Brotherhood,

he meets Brother Tarp and Brother Tod Clifton who give him a chain link and a paper

doll, respectively. I choose to write about these items because they are symbolic of his

struggle in his community fighting for the black people and of his struggle within himself

searching for identity.

The narrator works hard for the Brotherhood and his efforts are rewarded by being

distinguished as the representative of the Harlem district. One of the first people he

meets is Brother Tarp, a veteran worker in the Harlem district, who gives the narrator

the chain link he broke nineteen years earlier, while freeing himself from being

imprisoned. Brother Tarp’s imprisonment was for standing up to a White man. He was

punished for his defiance and attempt to assert his individuality. Imprisonment robbed

him of his identity which he regained by escaping and establishing himself in the

Brotherhood. The chain becomes a symbol between the narrator and Brother Tarp

because the chain also symbolizes the narrator’s experience in college, where he was

not physically chained down, but he was restricted to living according to Dr. Bledsoe’s

rules. He feels that he too escaped, in order to establish himself again (386). The

narrator identifies with Brother Tarp because he too is trying to be an individual free of

other people’s control. He does not want to be seen as a tool to be exploited, but

instead as a free-thinking human being. This chain which is an object of oppression

becomes a symbol of the link between the two generations, passing on the legacy and

pride of Brother Tarp’s accomplishments . Tarp fought for his freedom and rights and

now he is passing the chain onto the next generation who will take up his mission. Not

only is this chain a symbol of the link between the two men, but it is also serves as a

link to the past. Brother Tarp carries it around to remind himself of his imprisonment and

his fight for freedom. Similarly, it reminds the narrator of his own past and of the

circumstances of events that led to him ultimately working for the Brotherhood. It

reminds the narrator of his grandfather, an individual repressed by the system who

went through his entire life obsequiously saying yes to all the men in power. The

narrator also spent his life trying to please his superiors and in the end he had lost his

identity. He would follow instructions and became a tool to be exploited. For example,

he aspired to emulate Dr. Bledsoe, but the older man used him to promote his own

power. Additionally, the chain not only serves as a reminder of Tarp’s fight against

slavery, but is ultimately used as a weapon of defiance and an implement of strength,

as it is used by the narrator during a riot. Just as Brother Tarp lashed out against

slavery and the people that suppressed him, the narrator is metaphorically lashing out

at the injustice that he has seen. He ultimately discovers that he and the people of

Harlem have been used by the Brotherhood for the promotion of the institution’s power

and he is lashing out against this. During the riot, the narrator gets trapped in a hole

where he decides to stay in isolation and search for his own identity.

The other symbol that is relevant to the narrator is a paper doll given to him by Brother

Clifton. Brother Clifton, another member of the Brotherhood, is a dashing young Black

man who is sympathetic to the narrator’s ideas. Brother Clifton was an individual who

seemed to be stable and seemed to enjoy success in the brotherhood, but he

mysteriously disappeared. Clifton is next found by the narrator selling Sambo dolls on a

street corner. The narrator wonders why Clifton, an established and respected member

in the Brotherhood, would lower himself to becoming a street merchant. The

Brotherhood had shifted some of its emphasis away from Harlem and maybe Clifton felt

betrayed because the Brotherhood used him and then left him alone. It is no accident

that Clifton was selling puppet dolls because it is symbolic of Clifton’s sense of being

played as a puppet by the Brotherhood. The word Sambo is appropriate because it is a

term used to describe a Black who is manipulated by Whites. Clifton sense of

worthlessness is so extreme that he almost invites a situation which leads to his

demise. He resists arrest in a way that leads to his death because his identity and

purpose in life has been stripped away from him.

The narrator’s dilemma is similar to that of Brother Clifton. He comes to be convinced

that he has been used by people all his life and that this has stripped him of his

identity. As Clifton assumes the doll’s identity, the narrator assumes many other

people’s identities trying to discover who he is. The best example of this is when he

takes the identity of an individual named Rinehart’s. It is no accident that he chooses

someone with no single identity, himself, but rather a chameleon who is a preacher, a

gambler and many more personalities. Through this he broadens his horizons on many

different lifestyles and possibilities, but despite all these possibilities he cannot find

satisfaction.

At the end of the novel the narrator continues to fight for his community while the

brotherhood shifts its emphasis away from Harlem. He feels betrayed and attempts to

destroy the brotherhood. His plan does not work the way he expected it. Instead of

destroying the Brotherhood he invokes the people of Harlem to riot. In the riot he falls

down a hole where he goes into isolation. While in isolation he is able to contemplate

his situation more clearly and ultimately comes to terms with his identity. Unlike Clifton

who feels completely alone and lets himself be killed the narrator decides to, “shake of

his old skin” and go back into society.(580). He realizes that the people or institutions

(Dr. Bledsoe and the Brotherhood) he reveres are as flawed as the system they are

fighting. He grows to understand what the brotherhood and what Bledsoe could never

understand, that individuality does not exclude being part of a group. Ultimately, he

learned to be an individual for himself.

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