

Carthage College

The Invisible Man: Development Within a White Supremacist Society

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Cover Letter

- I. What did you discover about the field of English, or about writing, or about research, or about your text, or about the world, from the research and writing of this project?
 - i. During this project I discovered a couple different things some through research and some about Ralph Ellison's novel *The Invisible Man* and how it relates to the world around me. First, when I started research for this project I really wasn't sure how I was going to go about it since I had never done research like this and as in depth as I was going to be doing for this project. Through talking to Professor Brennan and realizing that starting small gets me places and opens up more questions and makes me think more critically I was able to think about questions to look for that would be answered in scholarly articles and/or questions that I wanted to continue digging into when writing my paper. When thinking about how this novel relates to the world around me I couldn't pinpoint one specific event since our world is in so much pain currently. I thought about the murder of George Floyd that happened in Minneapolis earlier this year and then more recently the shooting and riots related to Jacob Blake this past August. It stood out to me, the police brutality in this novel and how not much has changed in society and the view on Black Americans since this book was written in the 1950's. I also view the labor field the same way, though the labor force has changed it hasn't made the improvements it should with Black Americans since there is still unfair treatment and less opportunities for low to middle class Black Americans who don't have much authority.
- II. What did you discover about yourself through the research and writing of this project?

- i. Throughout this writing process I realized that not only did I not understand the extent to the mistreatment of Black American's, but I also didn't understand the immense effect white supremacy has on society within America. The basis of which is laid as the foundation and everything seems to revolve around it. Now, in today's society there are ways of trying to go against white supremacy and more fight and advocates for equal rights, but the foundation of white supremacy is there and I never really realized that is the basis of society.

III. What was the biggest challenge you faced as you worked on this project? How did you overcome it?

- i. The biggest challenge I faced while working on this project was learning my writing style throughout and incorporating that into my paper while I was learning it at the same time. I overcame this by talking through what I wanted to say in writing conferences with Professor Brennan, taking her advice and opening a new document every time I was starting something new and taking it as a fresh start so the writing and additions weren't as overwhelming as I had imagined them to be, and I also overcame it by practicing my writing style by giving myself options of how to write a sentence by writing it a couple different ways in order to decide which phrasing I liked better.

IV. what was your biggest success - or the thing you're most proud of - when it comes to this project?

- i. My biggest success or thing I am most proud of when it comes to this project are a couple things. One, I would say my perseverance when I felt as though I was at a rough patch and didn't know where to go because I always found a way through it and I always

felt as though I came out with more ideas for my paper. My other success when it comes to this project would be the fact that I could actually write a whole thesis paper and have the overall product be something I am proud of because throughout school I always LOVED English, but I was never good at it until I realized I was in a high performance English class my sophomore year of high school because my teacher saw something in me that I didn't see in myself. So the fact that I wrote an entire thesis on a book that I didn't know much about, liked every minute of it, and feel over accomplished is something I think is really neat.

- V. What experiences, skills, or knowledge that you've been developing would you like to carry forward in your life?
- i. What I want to take away from this experience is the confidence I have gained in my writing and myself, though not much, it's a lot more than I expected at the beginning of my English Major career. I also want to take my knowledge of in-depth research with me once I graduate since I want to be a journalist, a writer of really any kind, if I do journalism, news reporting, etc. I will want to have those research skills with me so I know how to start looking for stories, articles, etc. when I need to. The biggest thing I would like to take away from what I learned and have been developing is that it's good to have someone help guide me in my writing and that I am not the only one working on big projects. If I have a question on something or I need assistance trying to piece ideas, phrases, or words together that it's okay to ask for help.

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Abstract:

Throughout this essay, I argue that *Invisible Man* leads us to believe that the novel isn't solely about oppression, but rather seeing it about Invisible Man's growth throughout the novel as hopeful rather than critical as well as about empowerment of the black American along with being a coming of age novel. This matters because of the fact that Ellison doesn't always write in the novel that anything is being done by the oppressed or there is little growth among the oppressed. This changes the understanding of the novel because of how Ralph Ellison is making a point to emphasize the growth of the Invisible Man. I examine how the "*Invisible Man*" shows oppression of black Americans through the lens of white supremacist society. This brings up the question of: how can we develop from the experiences we go through during life and how does this help us grow? Through the lens of the theorist Hegel I look at the development of the Invisible Man through experiences they go through while on the path to figure out what it's like being a black American in a predominantly white American society where he might as well be invisible.

Introduction

In this paper I aim to address and explain the motifs throughout the Invisible Man that don't explicitly say and also don't have to, in order to emphasize the Invisible Man's growth within a purely white supremacist society while also learning and being empowered by his experiences. I use the lens of Hegel, the theorist, in order to talk about the Invisible Man's journey to self-discovery to find himself and realize that he is not invisible, rather invisible within a society that doesn't see him as a person rather more of an object or just a figure that takes up space within society. Within this paper I have 3 sections including, Understanding of White Supremacy, Obliviousness to Mindfulness, and finally Empowerment of the Self. In each of these sections I talk about how what the Invisible Man goes through ultimately guides him to be a black American of power rather than one of little substance.

Among many of the articles I have read a lot of the authors had much in common with what I am arguing in this thesis. Houston R. Baker talks about Ralph Ellison's critical formulations, which often suggest a radical dichotomy between lived experience and artistic representation throughout the Trueblood story of incest and family history. Judith Butler talks about the ways of power and how subjection is paradoxical. This can be seen throughout the novel by how white society takes advantage and how black American's don't have the ability to speak up for themselves and how they are being diminished within society. Ralph Ellison's Invisible Man, and it highlights the novels exploration of sociological concepts such as alienation, freedom, and the unconscious through Hegel and other theorist, though I will only be addressing Hegel's role within my essay and how his view on human development plays a big role in the Invisible Man and his journey of self-discovery. In the article of Daniel Weber he talks

about the nature of the metropolitan area and how it can help give opportunities to the Invisible Man's self-discovery journey. I emphasize all of what these authors and theorists are saying throughout my paper by using different experiences of the Invisible Man's journey starting from his lack of knowledge of white supremacy and his development through his experiences in New York, and his empowerment he is given through these experiences by the end of the book to go out and educate even though he is still looked at as invisible.

Throughout this paper I use Hegel, the theorist, in order to emphasize the Invisible Man's journey to self discovery, empowerment, and understanding of self. The point of Hegel is in order to understand yourself you have to understand what's around you and this also involves the use self reflection. Throughout the experiences he goes through starting in the beginning when he gets expelled from school to his speech in New York when talking in front of a crowd representing the Brotherhood.

Understanding of White Supremacy

Throughout the novel of Invisible Man the protagonist starts realizing that through his life not only does he feel as though he is not seen, the moments he goes through to emphasize that he is not seen as a person, rather an object or not seen at all, are what make the reader most aware of his growth throughout the novel. Upon analysis of the novel by Ralph Ellison the reader is made aware that the experiences that the Invisible Man goes through doesn't only emphasize the diminishment of black American's, but also the power that white supremacy has within society. Through the lens of Hegel I will emphasize this fact when talking about different parts within the novel that show white supremacy as a key feature in the Invisible Man's growth as a

character and also that white supremacy is a key factor in the diminishment of black Americans and their role in society.

The understanding of what white supremacy is wide spread and different, though the underlying definition is similar among all views, the belief that white people are superior to those of other races and thus should dominate them. This underlying understanding isn't understood by the Invisible Man because of the fact at the beginning of the book, especially, he is oblivious to what and how functioning in a white society really entailed. In the Battle Royal scene of the novel, his little to no understanding of what white supremacy means shows. He is so focused on giving his speech afterwards that he doesn't acknowledge the fact he is getting beaten up in a fighting ring for the sole purpose to see which man would be the last one standing in the ring.

“When we had dressed the M.C. came in and gave us each five dollars, except Tatlock, who got ten for being last in the ring. Then he told us to leave. I was not to get a chance to deliver my speech, I thought. I was going out into the dim alley in despair when I was stopped and told to go back. I returned to the ballroom, where men were pushing back their chairs and gathering in groups to talk” (page 29).

This emphasizes the fact he does not acknowledge the understanding of what it means to have power and privilege within society. He is sad and upset that after the fight and being beat up he still wanted to go and deliver his speech in which he thought he was doing in the first place. The reason giving his speech was so important to him was because he had the attention of white men, in which would never happen since of the superiority of whites are the primary focus and who society listens to most.

Given this lack of understanding from the Invisible Man the reader can see this vulnerability in various places in the beginning of the book as a part of his journey to find self. The Invisible Man gets expelled from school for not following the orders given by Dr. Bledsoe when guiding Mr. Norton around town and occupying him. Although, the Invisible Man was expelled Dr. Bledsoe provided him with letters and advice to go North in order to have a chance in getting a job, though this came with a catch. Dr. Bledsoe told the Invisible Man that he is not able to open the letters and to give them straight to the possible employer in order to get any job.

“Ill give you letters to some of the school’s friends to see that you get work,’ he said ‘But this time, use your judgement, keep your eyes open get in the swing of things! Then, if you make good, perhaps...well, perhaps... it’s up to you” (page 145).

This is important to note because of the fact that Bledsoe, as a black man who has authority, is showing that he has the ability to be on the same level of whites in authority in the north. The other part of note of this is that Bledsoe uses his level of authority to emphasize the Invisible Man cannot open the letters while traveling North and even when he gets there or he will not receive a job and if or when he receives a job it will serve him well.

Another part within the novel that emphasizes his lack of knowledge and also emphasizes the naive trait within the Invisible Man. During this time in the novel the Dr. Bledsoe was touching the white guests as they approached the stage and greeting them in which being a black man of authority, is okay in the eyes of society only because of authority.

“I too had touched a white man today and I felt that it had been disastrous, and I realized then he was the only one of us whom I knew - except perhaps a barber or a nursemaid - who could touch a white man with impunity” (page 115).

This is significant because of the fact that in this part of the Invisible Man’s journey he is realizing the advantages there are with being white and the affects of being the popular race. The word that’s interesting is the word “impunity”, which means exemption of punishment or freedom from the injurious consequences of their actions.

Obliviousness to Mindfulness

In the prologue, the Invisible Man describes where he is writing from, a coal cellar of a white-only building in which he is stealing electricity to illuminate the surroundings before him. He mentions that he is invisible, though he does not understand the depth of his invisibility until he goes through the experiences in which make him develop and grow to understand his place within a white supremacist society. He writes “I am an invisible man...I am a man of substance, of flesh and bone, fiber and liquids—and I might even possess a mind. I am invisible, understand, simply because people refuse to see me” (page 3). In order for him to understand the depth of his invisibility within society, though he realizes he is a person and people do not see him as he should be seen, the trials that the Invisible Man goes through emphasizes the oppression that black American’s go through, but also how going through life with realizations that oppression is real, their development as people is much bigger.

The Invisible Man, while in college took the superintendent, Mr. Norton, a white man on the board of trustees, on a drive in one of the college’s cars. While on this drive the Invisible

Man took Mr. Norton to a place called the “Golden Day” as well as to a man’s house named Jim Trueblood. While Mr. Norton seems to be a white male that would advocate for black American’s it soon turns out to be otherwise. When the Invisible Man and Mr. Norton go to Trueblood’s house the story of Trueblood’s family incest becomes the topic of discussion, which results in Mr. Norton giving a one hundred dollar donation after hearing of this.

“He stood shakily still staring intently at Trueblood. Then I saw him removing a red Moroccan-leather wallet from his coat pocket. The platinum-framed miniature came with it, but he did not look at it this time... Please take this and buy the children some toys from me” (page 69).

With this being Mr. Norton’s reaction to Mr. Trueblood’s story of the incest within his family, by giving Trueblood money it portrays that the behavior of incest and rape culture should be rewarded and he is also showing superiority over Trueblood who would be looked at as inferior to Mr. Norton primarily because of his race. Which prompts the response from the Invisible Man “You no-good bastard! *You* get a hundred-dollar bill” (page 69)! This reaction given by the Invisible Man emphasizes that not only does bad behavior get rewarded, but that the Invisible Man knows that it’s wrong to get rewarded for something as such. This response also clarifies a step within character development in a positive direction for the Invisible Man because of the fact that he is aware that not only did Trueblood’s bad behavior get rewarded, but that the giving out of money shows that even for bad behavior that white people are able to throw money around in order to show they are in a sense “helping” those who they feel need help and don’t look at it

as degrading. Afterwards, Mr. Norton and the Invisible Man return to the school where Dr. Bledsoe, the man who thought the Invisible Man was the right person to occupy Mr. Norton, gets the news of what went wrong and how things were handled while Mr. Norton was in the hands of the Invisible Man, which causes him to get expelled from the school.

When getting to the North he begins a job in a paint factory the Invisible Man runs into a discovery that doesn't only kickstart the journey to self-discovery in the North, it also makes him realize that being in a mainly white society and being a minority, it doesn't get a person far. While working in the factory the Invisible Man is told the way right way to mix the paint in order to get it to the correct color, Optic White. The mixing process which consists of the addition of a dark black mixture into a dull grey paint and mixed together properly it creates the perfect bright white color that, according to Mr. Kimbro, a white man who is the boss of the factory, says will cover almost anything. After the paint is made and ready to be shipped the Invisible Man realizes not only does his part not matter as much, but that in general when he relates this experience in the factory to the bigger experiences of society it's not that the person working doesn't get noticed, but rather those who are superior in society get recognized more than those who are inferior.

“Perhaps that is how things are done here, I thought, perhaps the real quality of the paint is always determined by the man who ships it rather than those who mix it. To hell with the whole thing” (page 206).

This is significant to the Invisible Man's development throughout the novel because of the fact he is realizing not only does he do work that doesn't get recognized, but he in fact goes unnoticed for his work altogether when it gets shipped out to the public. The value of the paint

isn't made apparent until the person who ships it out or the "face" of the company or product is the one gets credit.

Furthermore, while in the North the Invisible Man joins what is called the Brotherhood, who have the ideology of "saving the people", but in reality does what benefits the brotherhood and their doings within society. During the Invisible Man's time in the brotherhood he gives a speech in which he states

"They call us the common people but I've been sitting here listening and looking trying to understand what's so common about us. I think they're guilty of gross mis-statement of fact - we are the uncommon people" (page 342).

This is important because he is now realizing what he has been through and that the Invisible Man himself does not feel as though he is equal within a white society and calls the white society out for assuming that what they do within their society alludes to everyone being equal. When the Invisible Man points this fact out that black American's are in fact uncommon within society he gets in trouble with the Brotherhood for stating that fact since it doesn't benefit for all people.

Looking at the development of the Invisible Man through this lens doesn't only emphasize the growth of the Invisible Man, but it also emphasizes the diminishment of the black American population, which being in this place at the time of his speech clarifies that being in the right place at the right time encourages his understanding of self.

Empowerment of the Self

Early on in the novel the Invisible Man had made a statement about power and how the power a person has eventually shows off the amount of confidence and self-assurance a person has for themselves. Talking about the power he has emphasizes that he realizes in order for him to feel as though he has confidence within a white supremacist society and that even though he is invisible it's the start of the realization that he is having to do something about his invisibility within society. "Power doesn't show off. Power is confident, self-assuring, self-starting, and self-stopping, self-warming and self-justifying. When you have it, you know it" (page 142). This emphasizes not only the confidence in himself, but also emphasizes the Hegel theory in which emphasizes the part of the Hegel theory that knowing is not an idea, but rather an act since he is clarifying that not only does the Invisible Man know the idea of power, but in order to show any type power he has to have the confidence.

In the later part of the novel is when the Invisible Man really learns that not only is there empowerment of black American's within society he himself has been and needs to continued to feel the empowerment from what he has learned in order to move forward through life in a white supremacist society. When the Invisible Man is leaning up against the wall thinking about the events that had lead up to this moment. There had been an outrage over Clifton's death that sparked a speech from the Invisible Man himself.

"It was as though I'd learned suddenly to look around corners; images of past humiliations flickered through my head and I saw that they were more than separate experiences. They were me; they defined me I was my

experiences and my experiences were me, and no blind men, no matter how powerful they became, even if they conquered the world, could take that, or change one single itch, taunt, laugh, cry, scar, ache, rage or pain of it. They were blind but blind, moving only by the echoed sounds of their own voices” (page 508).

This quote specifically is when he is putting it altogether, which makes it more clear to the reader the acknowledgement of the Invisible Man that he has grown himself as a character throughout the novel. This part of the book where he starts to have this self-realization is important, especially in the way he describes it, because of the fact that there is analysis with this process of self-discovery and it’s not only described to the reader, along with also bringing up a change with imagery, and tone of the book through rest of the novel.

Throughout this paragraph there is a couple things I would like to uncover and talk about more in depth what the meaning of it is in relation to the Invisible Man himself and his journey of self-discovery. First, I want to point out the word “suddenly” because of the fact that it didn’t *just* happen, it was a progression throughout the novel, but only now did he notice his invisibility by being a black American within a white society and what that really meant. All of the experiences that he has gone through may have caused a realization of how to act and live within the white dominated society, but nothing came suddenly other than the realization of challenges he has gone through, which have made him a character of a better self by the end.

Going off of this in the next little section of this quote where he says “images of past humiliations flickered” (page 508), this is important for the Invisible Man because he realizes

that though he has grown since moving to the North, everything that he has gone through that has affected him in some way, he is invisible and those events make the invisibility reality for him. Within this section I think it's important to highlight specific parts that makes the reader understand what the Invisible Man has gone through and how he came to this realizations of experiences and self-development. The first part I find important would be the "past humiliations flickered". The word "past humiliations" gives the readers the knowledge that what he had gone through wasn't always "educational" in the sense of knowing he was going through these experiences for a reason or that they would affect him in the way they did. When the Invisible Man de- scribes the "humiliations" as a "flicker" through this memories makes it almost movie-like. That what he went through is an experience the he recognizes was supposed to lead him in the direction of finding himself. This part of recognition is important because along with the phrasing of "flickered" and "past humiliation" he is dealing with an inner time crunch to figure out how to go forward with the information and growth he feels as though he now has.

Moving on to the next part in the Invisible Man's monologue he describes to the reader how he is his experiences and his experiences are him "I was my experiences and my experiences were me, and no blind men, no matter how powerful they became, even if they conquered the world, could take that" (page 508). Here the Invisible Man indicates to the reader and self that those experiences he had gone through up to this point are ones that now makes light of what being invisible actually means being a black American within a white dominated society. The parts within his recognition of his experiences and self and how they were so related is emphasized through the words "I was" and "were me". These two phrases gives the reader a sense of "past" which can help clarify for the reader that the recognition of being the experiences

he has gone through is the evidence, in a sense, to why he feels invisible and how powerful this realization of invisibility has become, which is emphasized through the use of the word “conquered” and how it clarifies that this recognition of self had an impact.

The last part of this recognition monologue from the Invisible Man states that nothing can make the realization of this any better or make any light of it in that it was okay in order to take what he has “suddenly” realized, “could take that, change one single itch, taunt, laugh, cry, scar, ache, rage or pain of it. They were blind bat blind, moving only by the echoed sounds of their own voices” (page 508). The repetition of feeling and description words of the Invisible Man and what he felt as he went through the memory and realization of these experiences that define him as a person is important to note because of the fact that these experiences and feelings of who he was and the path to finding himself within a white society meant.

The other part of this where the Invisible Man realizes that he didn’t noticed that these experiences had affected him the way he did because they flew blindly and only listen to their own voices until now when the Invisible Man began to hear their voices as well. All of these instances within his realization help him in him in finding himself because throughout all of his experiences that had defined him and who he now was, though still invisible, he felt as though they had taught him different things about himself and now that he had been through what he did he can be a better person because of it.

In relation the Invisible Man’s self-discovery here can also be linked to Hegel’s theory of development because of the fact that Hegel’s view on realization is described as “being, essence, and concept”, although being and essence take priority over the concept. The experiences that he

had gone through in which he now realizes that are a part of him and he is a part of them emphasizes this part of Hegel's theory. The other part that Hegel talks about in his "*Self-Understanding and Self-Realizing Spirit in Hegelian Ethical Theory*" is the topic of being and it's comparison to essence and how they go hand in hand. The part that emphasizes this most is him realizing his experiences had meaning behind them. While being in the middle of these experiences and living his day to day life it is hard for him to really grasp what the meaning is behind something, if there is one. When he has these recognitions of how his experiences had affected him he is being within the essence of character development.

Like the prologue, the epilogue ends with the Invisible Man in the same cellar reflecting on his invisibility. Though, this time he decides that he can no longer stay silent, stay in the cellar, and hibernate away from society.

"I'm shaking off the old skin and I'll leave it here in the hole. I'm coming out, no less invisible without it, but coming out nonetheless. And I suppose it's about damn time. Even hibernations can be overdone come to think of it. Perhaps that's my greatest social crime, I've overstayed my hibernation, since there's a possibility that even an invisible man has a socially responsible role to play" (page 581).

This here emphasizes the growth and empowerment of the Invisible Man with him realizing the experiences he goes through not only helped him realize where he stands within a white society, but that something has to be done about the education of black American history, if black Americans are going to crush the stereotype of being less than in a white supremacist society.

Conclusion

In conclusion, throughout this paper I aimed to address and explain the motifs of the Invisible Man which weren't explicitly portrayed throughout the novel and they didn't have to be, in order to emphasize the Invisible Man's growth within a purely white supremacist society while also learning and being empowered by his experiences. I used the lens of Hegel in order to talk about the Invisible Man's journey to self-discovery to find himself and realize that he is not invisible, rather invisible within a society that doesn't see him as a person rather more of an object or just a figure that takes up space within society. Throughout the 3 sections included in this paper, Understanding of White Supremacy, Obliviousness to Mindfulness, and finally Empowerment of the Self, I talked about how what the Invisible Man goes through ultimately guides him to be a black American of power rather than one of little substance.

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