

Human Reality of *Invisible Man*

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Introduction

Invisible Man(1952) by Ralph Ellison tends to be placed on a protest novel, however this novel necessarily sees elements in addition to being a protest novel particularly when I analyze the “Underground” described at the end of story. Ellison revealed in an interview that he did not write *Invisible Man* as a protest novel about American society. I would like to consider what kind of theme is described in this novel.

1. Underground as special space for blacks in America

First, the story of *Invisible Man* is spoken by the narrator from underground in the form of a kind of protest. He falls into a manhole when he is escaping from a riot. He attempts to return to the past from his own experience from inside the underground. There are multiple meanings of the underground. The historical fact of the Underground Railroad is important in explaining why underground could be a special place for blacks. The Underground Railroad was a secret society of northern people in America who tried to promote the escape of blacks from slavery in the southern states during the 19th century, and certainly, it performed the function of making underground a term of value for blacks. There was not actually an underground escape road, however, the fact that blacks looked as they were disappearing, likened the concept of an underground as secret society called “Underground Railroad”. Underground was one of the desirable ways to gain freedom for blacks to lose chasers, and it was an escape route through which they could disappear from slavery and they could resist. As for the relation with Underground of Ellison, Langston Hughes, whose grandfather was Conductor at the Underground Railroad contracted a friendship with Ellison later in Harlem. Richard Wright tempted Ellison into the writing profession adopted underground as a keyword in *The man who lived underground*(1942). It is easy to imagine that not only Ellison was affected by that novel but also they had common values as black men. In addition, Richard Wright suggested that Ellison read Dostoevsky’s novel, *Notes from Underground*(1864). It can be seen that Ellison might have a sense of values on various levels with respect to the term Underground.

2. Reasons why *Invisible Man* is categorized as a protest novel

I consider the contents of the story. It begins with a prologue of the narrator in the first person talks, the narrative of the past from the underground which ends in an épilogue in which the narrator reflects on his own experience in the underground. Looking through the story, the last words that his grandfather left is of the most importance to the narrator.

“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, *Invisible Man*, 15)

These last words give a strong impression to readers. This statement of opposition is repeated in the beginning and end of the story by the narrator, namely it could be said that his grandfather’s philosophy affects the narrator’s values. Furthermore, that night the narrator receives the document of the scholarship to the university placed in brief case from a powerful person, and the narrator has a dream that his grandfather appears. The narrator is told by his grandfather to read the document aloud. The contents of the document are: “‘To Whom It May Concern,’ I intoned. ‘Keep This Nigger-Boy Running.’” (33) In this quote we see that the narrator unconsciously tried to find keys to own his identity in the last words of his grandfather. The narrator entered university safely. However, Dr. Bledsoe who is the president of the university is going to kick him out of the university. Dr. Bledsoe tries to introduce the narrator to Dr. Bledsoe’s acquaintance to earn school expenses for the next year, giving seven letters to the narrator one-sidedly: “I beg of you, sir, to help him continue in the direction of that promise which, like the horizon, recedes ever brightly and distantly beyond the hopeful traveler.” (187) All the letters imply that the narrator should run forever as a cog in the wheel. The narrator can not help being amazed at the fact that he was kicked out of the university. The last words of his grandfather begin to become realistic with Dr. Bledsoe’s letter. The narrator starts to work immediately in a paint factory and assists the work of Lucius Brockway who is an old black man working for years alone in a boiler room inside underground.

He has chosen to remain buried in the cellar, to define himself as the end of possibility, with one blueprint of reality in his mind, the blueprint of the building foundations of Liberty Paints....Because of that act the future still shines through him, dimly as in a boiler room darkly, for now he is the king of an underworld city, the emperor of Dis.(Scruggs, *Sweet Home*,121)

How can Lucius Brockway be seen as subverting white society? As Charles Scruggs suggests above, Lucius Brockway is a pioneer for the narrator as Dis (Pluto) which is the King of Hades in Roman mythology. According to A. Robert Lee, Lucius Brockway stands for a hibernating badger beyond the range of light in the underground. The narrator could have the possibility to behave as necessary to live in white society as a black man like his grandfather in the underground of the paint factory. If the narrator were not carried to the hospital because of an explosion in the boiler room, he would become a badger like Lucius Brockway. The narrator changed places. However, those places are not any sort of ideal ones for him. The narrator finally moves to the “ideal” space, the Underground, the peculiar one for blacks. The last words of his grandfather influence his move to the Underground and this is considered as a protest activity by white society. Therefore, the reader can regard *Invisible Man* as a protest novel because the will of the narrator’s grandfather’s generation affects Lucius Brockway and the narrator.

3. Insistence of *Invisible Man*’s significance by Ralph Ellison

According to Ralph Ellison’s insistence: “my book [*Invisible Man*] is not an autobiographical work.” (*Shadow and Act*, 167) We can see that *Invisible Man* is not autobiography. And Ralph Ellison explained the reason why he wrote *Invisible Man*.

If I were asked in all seriousness just what I considered to be the chief significance of *Invisible Man* as a fiction, I would reply: Its experimental attitude and its attempt to return to the mood of personal moral responsibility for democracy which typified the best of our nineteenth-century fiction. (*Shadow and Act*, 102)

Ralph Ellison showed a problem that most blacks had been made into stereotypes in previous works. He respected Mark Twain as a great American novelist from the 19th century because Ellison considered that Twain described Jim as a human being and not a black stereotype. However, on the other hand, Ellison could not identify with Jim because Jim is also described as a stereotypical black coming out of the negative history of blacks in America. Ernest Hemingway ignored blacks to an extreme. Furthermore, for Ellison he was the writer who had removed the moral elements from “naturalism” that Twain portrayed, and sublimed his minimalist method of expression. A famous Russian author is also a writer who Ellison admired in the 19th century. Homage to *Notes from Underground* of Dostoevsky can be seen in the beginning of *Invisible Man*. *Notes from Underground* begins with the sentence “I am a sick man”, whereas *Invisible Man* of Ellison begins in a sentence “I am an invisible man”. And the situations of the two narrators in those novels correspond in terms of looking back on their past twenty years in the underground. Dostoevsky’s novel is often placed with pro-

test novels or autobiographical ones. However, the theme Dostoevsky described in his novel should not necessarily be identified with Dostoevsky's narrator in his novel. Dostoevsky mentioned that he was proud of being able to describe true reality to a vast majority of human beings. In other words, Ellison recurred to reality. In 1953, Americans selected *Invisible Man* for the National Book Awards to evaluate it as a novel which revolutionized American society and has frequently been treated as an important novel representative of contemporary "black" writers. "The Underground" in the story describes a peculiar space for the narrator and blacks when this narrative is interpreted as a protest story. However that space confines and contains the stereotypical black man, which Ellison rejects. For Ellison, the underground was not a space of creation or protest but a place that expressed human reality in the United States, which Mark Twain and Hemingway, who succeeded in pursuing naturalism, were not able to describe.

4. Hope the narrator is given by "Blacks" around him

The narrator, through his experiences, comes to understand another meaning of the message that the narrator's grandfather left on his deathbed. His grandfather presumably is released from slavery by the Emancipation Proclamation in 1863. Indeed, the status of blacks has practically not changed to a superior one after the Reconstruction. They have had to live under white society as other Americans separated from the white mainstream. For him, his life is an undesirable one, opposite of equality, which was the dream on which the United States was founded. The narrator's grandfather leaves a "will" that urges his descendent to keep up the good fight, challenging blacks to coexist with whites together in American society in the lion's mouth. If they are able to step inside with courage, old mainstreamers would have to choose either to vomit, bust or find a way to coexist. Dr. Bledsoe's letter of "the hopeful traveler" can be considered his attempt to let the narrator dive into white society with foresight by kicking him out of the black college. He also holds a dream, whites and blacks living together, the same as the narrator's grandfather even though he lived in times when blacks were seen as inferior. Dr. Bledsoe has a keen insight into the narrator's capability and places his hope in the narrator. The narrator forms a resolution to try to leave the underground and go back above ground because he gradually begins to realize what "inwardness" is in his grandfather's message. Because the narrator puts a period to discern his way of life from his grandfather's message, he is not just a man who has shut down connection to America like Lucius Brockway, who is expecting the possibility to coexist may come sometime underground. He starts to have both styles black and American, and talking "I am an Invisible Man" as an individual, realistic person.

Conclusion

Ralph Ellison kept a frigid attitude toward the African-American Civil Rights Movement because he regarded it as an illusion. Affirmations of rights or beauty of blacks have a protest meaning for all Americans and make a person invisible at the same time. Ellison was criticized by blacks who made claims of “Black power”, however he would not change his stance. If his wish were to be defined, it would be to acquire equality for both blacks and whites, each as individual persons. Although Ellison was directly influenced by Richard Wright as a black and a writer, he explicitly extended his will, the reason he wrote *Invisible Man*, as a distinct approach from Wright. Objective coexistence is clearly distinguished from the protest Wright expresses. In Ara’s perspective, black and white cultures are not one-way communications but an equivalent interaction if she interprets this synchronism. For this reason, it can be seen that Ellison’s faith and pride develop American affluent society. The will left by Ellison brought an action to people who tried to separate blacks from America, and it transcended the border of blacks and went toward living together, which is the most important point Ellison advocated.

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