A Comparison Between The Native Son And Invisible Man

There is a thief in the night. He is as swift as the wind, and he swindles the most prized possessions. He will not be found in the safe of a bank, nor with a sack full of treasures upon his back. In fact, he is rarely ever found by anyone at all. He lurks in the shadows, and dons himself with the most trustworthy faces. His words spin from his mouth like spider's silk, glistening with dew. Yes, his words are beautiful and chivalrous, but underneath his armour of honor, there lies a foul man, indeed. This fiend, a friend of the devil, haunts every human being. Yes, the thief, this insidious soul, steals liberty. The ailment of his infliction does not discriminate. Yes, the lethal poison that traces the fangs of this predator can be found in the bloodstream of every man, woman, and child. As much one may wish to defeat this calamity, the perpetrator has not the ability to be caught. The trespasser is as tangible as air; he has the ability to wear the face of whomever he pleases. An organization of such complexity is unstoppable. In the novels Invisible Man and The Native Son, each of the two protagonists find themselves being robbed blind of his own liberty. Upon this discovery, the two men realize that this crime of pilfery riddles everyday life. But as the men continue to investigate, the two find that every man has a hand in the game, including themselves. In Invisible Man and The Native Son, the authors Ralph Ellison and Richard Wright, use anaphoras of blindness, symbolism, diction, coming of age philosophies, and fatalistic ideologies to illustrate the protagonist's journey to discover the true price of life in a segregated society: to lose one's sense of self-worth, and identity in order to protect themselves from the oppression of others.

Since the beginning of time, those with dark colored skin have been discriminated against. Some have justified it by means of claiming dark skin to be a symbol of delayed evolution, and thus being an indicator of an inferior person. However, this mentality was proven wrong in a 2002 study, conducted by Dr. Luca Cavalli-Sforza, that lead to the discovery that all humans share 99.9% of the same DNA. If this is the case, then why, for so many centuries, have people been so blind to the true nature of humanity? Invisible Man and The Native Son are closely related, in the respect that the two novels both dig down into the core and the heart of racism. A tool that Ralph Ellison and Richard Wright use to delve down, into this well-known, but untravelled world, is the anaphora of blindness. With this literary technique in hand, the authors unearth a new point of view on racism, that has never before seen the light of day. This is significant as other classic, American literature that focuses on racism customarily only shows the superficial dynamics between whites and blacks, which just barely skims the surface of what it is like to live in a racist society, In direct defiance of the American image of a black man, Ellison and Wright, instead escort the reader into the mind of the oppressed, exposing the psychological chains that are placed upon the victims of a segregated society.

As both novels begin, blindness is first found in the protagonists. As an outsider, the reader has the ability to comprehend situations more clearly than Bigger Thomas, from The Native Son and the Invisible Man, from Invisible Man. This approach allows the author to communicate to the reader the extent of which racism is ingrained into the protagonists, and the society that surrounds them. As the novels progresses, Bigger and the Invisible Man each frequently find themselves in situations where they feel their true identity is unseen. This feeling of a misunderstood character comes from the projection of other people's blindness. When this projection casts a shadow upon the two men their true selves are invisible. The men are only

seen as the preconceived prejudices of others. The idea of blindness and invisibility, thus, work hand-in-hand:

“I am invisible simply because people refuse to see me. That invisibility to which I refer occurs because of a peculiar disposition of the eyes of those with whom I come in contact. A matter of the construction of their inner eyes, those eyes with which they look through their physical eyes upon reality.” (1)

Blindness and invisibility do not discriminate. The ailment infects the oppressors and the oppressed, the rich and the poor, and the white and the black. A commonality between the two novels regarding the representation of blindness, is the particular diction people refer to the black population with. When Mary has dinner with Bigger, she makes an effort to be progressive. She ignores the social status quo and tries to talk to him as an equal. Despite her efforts to defy the standards of society, casual racism still manages to slip from her mouth. At one point she says to Bigger “You know, Bigger, I’ve long wanted to go into those houses and just see how your people live [...] I just want to see. I want to know these people [...] Yet they must live like we live[...] They live in our country... In the same city with us…”, (101). Her use of the phrases “your people”, “they”, and “us” instill a sense of separation. This way of speaking proves to be similar to that of Dr. Bledsoe’s dialogue. This style of diction highlights how the two communities fail to see individuality within the black race. As Bigger puts it “White folks and black folks is strangers. We don’t know what each other is thinking.” (487).

Blindness also surfaces symbolically in the characters of The Native Son and Invisible Man. Mrs. Dalton (The Native Son) and Reverend Homer A. Barbee (Invisible Man) are both physically blind. Dalton and Barbee’s blindness serves as a symbol of others ignorance. Mrs. Dalton, a white woman, personifies how others view blacks with inferiority. Mrs. Dalton’s blindness sets the stage for when the details of Mary’s whereabouts come up in question. At the beginning of the case, all parties involved ignore the plain and clear fact that Bigger is most likely responsible for her disappearance. The police consider the deed to be “too elaborated to be the work of a Negro mind” (275). Reverend Barbee, on the other hand symbolizes the blindness of the black community. Barbee serves as a testimony of how the black race does not have the ability to detect injustice. Reverend Barbee gives a speech praising Dr. Bledsoe, boasting about him to be “...he who had rallied the ignorant, the fearful and suspicious, those still wrapped in the rags of slavery.”, when in actuality he is a cruel man and a liar. Similar to the nature of Mrs. Dalton’s blindness, Barbee’s ignorance extends to other characters as well. Barbee’s powerful speech persuasively engages the entire chapel, including the Invisible Man; not a single person leaves unaltered by his words.

The time frame that the novels The Native Son and Invisible Man take place in are periods of growth. Both novels are set in a time where the protagonists are entering adulthood. Bigger Thomas, for the first time, is getting a job and moving out, while the Invisible Man is pursuing a college education, and chasing a career. Both boys, for the first time, are exposing themselves to the elements of the real world; the two protagonists are coming of age. As a part of Bigger and the Invisible Man’s coming of age, both protagonists learn how to adapt to the environment around them; a process that is a defining period of life for those growing up in a discriminating society. As Bigger and the Invisible Man embark on the journey into adulthood, the two men find themselves in situations that force them to examine their life. At the Golden Day, in Invisible Man, the protagonist sees, for the first time, a sliver of life’s hideous truth. He is told that to whites, a black man is nothing more than “a mark on the scorecard” he is only “...a thing and

not a man; a child, or even less – a black amorphous thing.” (78). In The Native Son, Bigger comes to the same conclusion himself after meeting the Dalton’s. The Dalton’s, on the exterior, appear to be charitable and progressive people, and even offer Bigger an opportunity to further his education. But Bigger learns that the same hand that is offering a him chance to get his education, is the same hand that holds his family firmly in place in the position of poverty. Through these moments of clarity the two men discover that they themselves have bought into the ideas of society, and blinded their own eyes with the rags of conformity, as the men have allowed themselves to be ruled by whites for so long without objection. Both men consider this awakening a gift, but the knowledge presents a weight the two men cannot shake. The weight of no longer having the ability to ignore the pressing oppression of racism.

“When you have been born into war, living in war as a child, when you have been in wars all your life...you develop a form of fatalism; you are always ready to die.”

-Oriana Fallaci

Fatalism is the philosophical idea that all of life’s events are inevitable and therefore immune to the influence of one’s action, words, or thoughts. This Greek philosophy denies that a person has the ability change what is destined to happen, and encourages a submissive attitude, as doing any different, theoretically, will not influence the eventual outcome. Ralph Ellison illustrates the detail of an inexorable future, in Invisible Man, through the unnamed protagonist and his initial inability to recognize meaninglessness of his actions. Richard Wright paints the same picture in The Native Son by creating a character who, despite desperate efforts, is unable to change his fate. The narrator from Invisible Man, tells the story of the novel as a flashback to his younger days. From the beginning of the book, it is clear that the protagonist is an optimistic boy with ambition. However, as the story progresses, these assets begin to dissipate as his endeavors only end in disaster, despite his triumphant efforts. In the regard of work ethic and ambition, one most assuredly say that the Invisible Man and Bigger are opposites. Nevertheless, the tale of a story with no happy ending is narrative is a commonality the two certainly share. Bigger lives in a small, claustrophobic world. The boy shares a room with his siblings and mother, and at the age 18 he is expected to carry the weight of supporting his family. When he is hired by Mr. Dalton, life seems to be getting a bit brighter, but this couldn’t be farther from the truth. In less than a day after being hired Bigger, in a misguided attempt to keep Mary’s secret outing unknown to her parents, kills her. Being black, Bigger knows the gravity of his situation, but before he even knows it, he finds himself up knee-deep in a handful of other unfortunate scenarios. The relentless pursuit to defy the fate that the two men have been assigned, prove only to be productive at one thing: keeping the “Nigger-Boy Running” (Ellison 33). Only when the two men can run no further, do the men finally realize the ineffectuality of their endless race.

Invisible Man and The Native Son are novels that focus in on the narrative of a victim of racism. Both novels follow a black boy as he journeys into maturity and questions for himself the dynamics of society. These works of literature prove to be significant as the novels shed a new light on the reality of being a victim of a segregated society. To live in a discriminatory society, as a minority, is to grow up without a sense of individuality. Racism demands submission and acceptance from the downtrodden in the face of oppression. In Invisible Man and The Native Son, the authors Ralph Ellison and Richard Wright, use anaphoras of blindness, symbolism, diction, coming of age philosophies, and fatalistic ideologies in order to illustrate the protagonist's journey to discover the true price of life in a segregated society: to lose one’s

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