

**TED ANKARA COLLEGE FOUNDATION HIGH
SCHOOL**

EXTENDED ESSAY ENGLISH B

“Is racism a restriction for forming the individual identities of African Americans or an obstacle for the society to truly perceive the identities of those individuals in the novel Invisible Man by Ralph Ellison?”

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ABSTRACT

This paper focuses on the influence of racism on formation and perception of personal identities of African Americans in the novel *Invisible Man* by Ralph Ellison. Whether racism is a restriction for forming the personal identities of African Americans or an obstacle for the society to truly perceive the identities of those individuals, will be evaluated. Ellison's perception of literature was that it was a powerful weapon to eliminate the corruption of society. In other words he used literature as a "moral instrument". His use of symbols and motifs conveys ideologies and facilitates the understanding of his ideas comprehensively enabling him to turn literature into a moral instrument. The symbols used such as Liberty Paint, Sambo Doll, Coin Bank and the undisclosed name of the narrator and motifs such as blindness and invisibility are seen as the most significant tools that the author used to convey his ideas. Each of them is analyzed regarding their direct and indirect effects on personal identities of African American people thoroughly. After this analysis, a conclusion about the thesis is reached and presented in this essay.

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

I. ABOUT THE AUTHOR.....	
II. SUMMARY OF THE NOVEL.....	
III. INTRODUCTION.....	1
IV. SYMBOLS.....	2
IV.a. Liberty Paint.....	2
IV.b. Sambo Doll.....	4
IV.c. Coin Bank.....	5
IV.d. Name.....	6.
V. MOTIFS.....	6
V.a. Blindness.....	6
V.b. Invisibility.....	7
VI. CONCLUSION.....	8
VII.BIBLIOGRAPHY.....	9

I. ABOUT THE AUTHOR

On March 1, 1913 Ralph Ellison was born in Oklahoma. Millsap Ellison was his brother, Lewis Alfred and Ida Millsap Ellison were his parents and they were living a middle-class life. They believed strongly in the value of education for their children and named their second son after poet Ralph Waldo Emerson, and his father told people that his son would grow up to be a poet as well.

Although Ellison entered the Tuskegee Institution on a scholarship to study music, in 1933, he spent a lot of time in the library reading modern classics. Later, in order to study sculpture, photography and visual arts, he moved to New York City where he wrote a book review for the author Richard Wright, who emboldened him to persevere a career in writing. Ellison had more than twenty book reviews and short stories and articles published in magazines within 8 years.

It is known that during World War 2 Ellison's faith in the Communist Party had been deprived because he felt African Americans had betrayed and Marxist class politics were traded over social reformism by the party. Ellison poured his anger out with party leaders in 1945 a letter to Wright, "*Maybe we can't smash the atom, but we can, with a few well chosen, well written words, smash all that crummy filth to hell.*" (Ellison, *Divided Minds*, 66-69) By these thoughts in mind, Ellison began writing *Invisible Man* which is partially his acknowledgement to the party.

Ellison delineates several ideologies in the novel such as communism and ideologies of Marcus Garvey and Booker Washington. He said he used his new fame to use literature as a moral instrument. (Ellison, *Divided Minds*, 70-72)

Invisible Man scrutinize the theme of racism in New York City in 1930s and man's search for his place in society thus his identity, through the viewpoint of an unnamed African American. His masterpiece, *Invisible Man* won the 1953 U.S. National Book Award for Fiction.

II. SUMMARY OF THE NOVEL

The narrator describes himself as an invisible man and starts telling the story, from underground. Most of his life he stays low profile, lives a meek life as a student. He is thrilled for being invited to give the speech that he has written to the town leaders, but little did he know he is summoned to fight a “battle royal” blindfolded with other African American men in front of them. After they fight, he is able to give his speech and when it ends, he is given a briefcase with a gift, scholarship to college in it.

He remains an obedient student and admires Dr. Bledsoe, who is dark-colored and heads the school. One day, the narrator is chosen to drive around, one of the founders’ of the college, Mr. Norton, but events don’t go as expected. Dr. Bledsoe expels him out of the college and gives him several recommendation letters for him to get hired in Harlem, which turns out they are letters demanding the recipient not help him. The narrator eventually takes a job at Liberty Paint where he makes white paint, and then is accidentally blown up. He wakes up in the factory’s hospital not remembering his own name, they give him one, but that name isn’t mentioned in the novel.

The narrator comes across with an old African American couple getting evicted from their apartment and urges to give an impressive improvised speech. One of those listening to this is Brother Jack, who is a white man and introduces the narrator with a multi-racial alignment with communist undercurrents, the Brotherhood. He makes some excellent speeches, but he gaining increasing prestige isn’t desired. So, the Brotherhood re-assigns the narrator to deal with women's issues downtown.

The narrator is able to return to Harlem after a couple of weeks only to find out that Tod Clifton, a dark-colored man from the Brotherhood, has been missing and all most all of the work he put into the community has vanished. He encounters Clifton selling Sambo dolls, which are racist, on the street and witnesses a police officer shoot Clifton. He organizes a funeral for Clifton, who is a traitor for selling the dolls through the perspective of the Brotherhood, and takes matters into his own hands. Because of that he is commanded to a meeting by the Brotherhood and they chastise him.

The narrator decides to visit Brother Hambro, who will plan a new program according to the instructions of Brother Jack. While he is walking around the street to get to Hambro, he meets Ras the Exhorter, an African American nationalist who uses Clifton issue to aggravate anti-Brotherhood attitude. Narrator purchases a prop or two in order to disguise him because he sees two men following him. He starts being mistaken for a man called Rinehart who is, a gambler, a reverend, a pimp and a fighter among other identities.

The narrator realizes the benefit of being invisible; he can have multiple identities. He learns that the Brotherhood is contravening to sacrifice the people of Harlem in service of a greater, unnamed cause, which the narrator speculates that the race riot bursts in Harlem was their plan all along. He ends up falling in a manhole; while he was running down the street as Ras the Exhorter urges further destruction. He physically and mentally awakens after the fall, and he decides to hibernate until he figures out a plan of action. He tells us that writing his story was helpful, made him ready to come out of hibernation and he conjectures if his story is speaking for us as well as himself.

III. INTRODUCTION

One's identity is the factor which distinguishes him from the other human beings and the concept of identity will be examined as the set of characteristics of a person that are definitively recognizable or known. There are several factors that compose an individual's identity: combination of one's physical appearance, race, gender, social status, education level, family, psychological state, society that he/she lives in, decisions and moral values and these concepts are firmly aligned. In the novel "Invisible Man" by Ralph Ellison, racism towards African Americans constrains factors that form one's identity thus, African Americans cannot form one. Like beauty, sometimes identity is in the eye of the beholder, meaning how people see you, who you are in the eyes of others. It is subjective, thus it differs from person to person. The more eyes look at us, the more discrete personalities we have in a certain sense. If one can have multiple identities, he can also have none. Racism can be an obstacle for the society to truly perceive the personal identities of an individual. On the other hand, racism is a restriction for individuals to form their personal identities because if there is oppression, then one cannot be independent while deciding, acting by his own values which results in not being able to form his personal identity freely.

IV. SYMBOLS

IV.a. Liberty Paint

In the society of the novel, white people try to cast the comfortable existence of dark-colored people out. The protagonist of the story is hired for a paint factory, Liberty Paint. The first thing that the factory introduces to him is that his work is basically *“to open each bucket and put in ten drops of this stuff. Then you stir it ‘til it disappears.”* (Ellison, 200) The thing that they mention as “ten drops of this stuff” is a black colored substance which is dropped in a bowl containing white paint. It first spreads into the white and then it is stirred until it vanishes, which is a metaphoric description of racism. In the society of the novel, white people exploit, destroy dark-colored people. Even if they exist, they are forced to disappear, just as the black paint being stirred until it disappears. While the narrator is wondering around in downtown of Harlem, he comes across with an old, dark-colored couple who were being evicted from their apartment. *“He says it’s in the bank, but you know he is the one. We’ve done business with him for over twenty years... It’s all the white folks, not just one. They all against us.”* (Ellison, 270) This quotation is from the dialog between the old couple who were being thrown out. White people want to cast African American people out probably because they don’t want to be living in the same district, same society with them. Even if the dark-colored people are law-abiding, honest, useful citizens they are forced to leave their place just like the eviction. A part of the white people in the society is extreme racists and they think African Americans don’t deserve to be in the same community with them. As a result, they cast dark-colored people out and that causes other white people to be blind to see that African Americans’ are also human beings and deserve to live equal with them. This blindness affects the perception of the African American society because human beings usually assume that the existing state of the world is the right state of the world. To further explain, if they don’t see any African American in their society and just come across them in a poor neighborhood or doing labor for them, they wouldn’t question if it’s the right way for how the African American should be regarded in the society. Therefore, this removal of the African Americans from the society prevents the perception of the true identity of them by the white people and just forces them to be regarded as inferior.

When you cover something up, you know it is there but you see it just by what it's covered with. That's just the way you want to see it and this is what white people are doing to African Americans people's real identities in the novel. Brockway, the dark-colored man, who was working at Liberty Paint, says "*Our white is so white you can paint a chunka coal and you'd have to crack it open with a sledge hammer to prove it wasn't white clear through.*" (Ellison, 217) to the narrator when he is describing how white the paint is. Whiteness of that paint can cover up anything as it's claimed by them and this means if they choose to see a coal as white, they can just paint it white and then that coal is white for them.. According to white people, African Americans are "stains" on white purity that need to be covered up. Thus they try to cover the identities of African Americans by imposing the fundamental value of their white culture, which is they are superior to the dark-colored people, similar to the white paint. With this imposition, the African Americans also feel the need to believe that the white people are superior to them and they cannot exceed the limitations that they are given by their society. Covering dark-people's identities by the imposition of their inferiority with predetermined prejudices makes white people unable to realize that they actually have identities which can also be superior to the white people.

"*If it's the optic white, It's the right white.*"(Ellison, 217) This is the slogan for Optic white paint; whitest paint of all time and this slogan is an indicator of prejudice. It can be inferred from this slogan that the whiter skin color you have, the righter you are. White people won't think that there is a possibility that dark-colored people can be right at any part of their lives. Therefore, dark-colored people will stop trying to justify their claims, rights, thoughts because they will think that there is no use to fight when you know you are going to lose. This prejudice leads to preventing the dark-colored people to form their own identities because whenever they would try to do something that white people think isn't right, they would stop trying for that since they know they would be punished. Consequently the lack of an environment for the dark-colored people for forming their individual identities result in a society with the lack of their identities and thus it is an obstacle for the white people to truly perceive the identity of the African Americans.

IV.b. Sambo Doll

While one's actions are in control of others, he cannot decide, act by his own decisions, thus cannot form his own identity, he is just a puppet of his superiors. The narrator comes across with Tod Clifton, who was a former member of the Brotherhood and missing for a while, was making a Sambo doll dance in the street. This Sambo doll was made in the image of a Sambo slave and represents the stereotype of the African American; lazy but obedient to his master. Dark-colored people are puppets and white colored people are the puppeteers and they are controlling the actions of dark-colored people. Just as the African American people are the puppets of the white people, the white people are the puppets of other white people who have higher influence compared to them. The white people at the top of the hierarchic order are spreading a lot of ideas including racism to control the society.

Controlling the society isn't only carried out directly such as the string used in a puppet show. It is also done by cleverly placing some symbols in the society which keeps the people reminded of the agenda of their controllers. The existence of toys like the Sambo doll is the constant reminder of the stereotype of the African American people. A person, who sees them, can think that all dark-colored people are like that which creates a prejudice. Also the people that already know the existence of that stereotype gets reminded of its existence, which solidifies the prejudice against the African American people. Prejudice clouds perception, a clouded perception makes it unable to see the true identities of people. Another effect of the existence of the Sambo doll is that people stop trying to be "someone" in the society because they think that the white people have already decided what kind of person they are, and even they aren't like they imagine, they cannot change this image. They can only stop trying to have a place in the society and that becomes a restriction for forming identity. Sambo doll also symbolizes the delayed awareness of the narrator and the dark-colored race. "*Clifton had been making it dance all time and the black thread had been invisible*" (Ellison, 446) From distance the Sambo doll seems like it moves by itself, but there are threads that control him and you can realize this later. African American people seem like they are free, they are independent but there are invisible threads, signifying oppression of the white people, upon them. This causes them to lose their ability and will to form their personal identities without realization, thus they easily obtain the desired identities prepared and decided by white people.

IV.c. Coin Bank

African Americans cannot set themselves free from the lives that have been given to them by white Americans and constitute their own way of life even though they are aware of it. Coin bank, which is in the shape of a beaming African American man, symbolizes the stereotype of the dark-colored people: servile and humble. The coin bank reminds him of the battle royal and he trashes it, but is unable to get rid of it. When he throws it into the garbage a white woman sees it, she doesn't want to keep her trashes at the same place with a dark-colored man, so she starts insulting him. The narrator says "*...garbage is garbage... I just didn't know that some kind of garbage were better than others.*" (Ellison, 328) and the woman replies "*I'm sick and tired of you Negroes mess up things for the rest of us.*" (Ellison, 328). The coin bank is the reality; the controlling power of prejudice of the white people and the narrator realizes it. When he tries to get rid of it, the white woman, stereotype of a white person having prejudice, serves as an obstacle. The narrator ends up underground when he was running away from the cops and in there he is conveying his thoughts about life to the readers. He says "*...strange disease that affects those black men whom you see turning slowly from black to albino, their pigments disappearing, as under the radiation of some cruel, invisible ray.*" (Ellison, 575) which is similar to the symbolism of the coin bank. African American people realize that white people are controlling, exploiting them but they cannot break free and form their own identities, instead they are becoming whiter, doing things that they hate by doings of white people and internalizing the way of life that is imposed on them.

IV.d. Name

The name of a person could be considered as the most important thing that refers to their personal identity since our name is the primary tool that we use while we introduce ourselves. Name of the protagonist is never mentioned throughout the novel but he has been given names several times, such as in the hospital, after the explosion in the Liberty Paint when he doesn't recall his real name and in the brotherhood. *"This is your new identity... That is your new name. Start thinking of yourself by that name from this moment. Get it down so that even if you are called in the middle of the night you will respond. Very soon you shall be known by it all over the country. You are to answer to no other."* (Ellison, 309) As the Brother Jack said, new name equals new identity. By giving the narrator a new name and making him internalize it, gives him a new identity that is consistent with the Brotherhood's accumulation. The narrator doesn't resist it, because he is yet unable to form his own identity due to the obstructions that have been mentioned throughout the essay.

V. MOTIFS

V.a. Blindness

People don't see what they are prevented to see, thus sometimes their prejudice, which is formed by the external forces, blinds them. In this context, blindness is a motif used repetitively throughout the novel. The boys who fight at "battle royal" are blindfolded, symbolizing the prevention to realize their exploitation by the white people. Also in the college where the protagonist studies, the Founder's statue in the garden doesn't have eyes and it can be interpreted as a reference to him being blind to see racist realities. Furthermore, Brother Jack is in lack of an eye and he replaces it with a glass eye, so he is partially blind. He represents the Brotherhood and his blindness refers to the Brotherhood being ignorant towards real problems of the society like racism, individual rights and following an anti-individualist path. In the realization of the narrator of Brother Jack's blindness he says, *"His left eye had collapsed, a line of raw redness showing where the lid refused to close, and his gaze had lost its command... And the others had known it all along. They aren't even surprised."* (Ellison, 474)

It can be seen that the others in the Brotherhood are accustomed to his blindness from the beginning, but it is the first time for the narrator to see it. This means that other Brothers are similar to Jack, they are all partially blind, the narrator isn't like them and he starts to see the real intentions of the Brotherhood, not caring about racism or the individuals, just now. For a long time the narrator cannot realize racist realities, just like the founder, and the true intention of the Brotherhood. It can be seen that the Brotherhood, similar to the white people, causes blindness through their member in seeing their real intents. There is a world represented to African Americans and they are blind to see that the world isn't real. You cannot form your personal identity according to the fake realities in a real world. So, if you are prevented from being aware of the authenticities or you neglect to see them, the identity that you constructed isn't accepted in the real world, thus forming personal identity is prevented.

V.b. Invisibility

Prejudice, misjudgments and the ignorance of the society lead to blindness and blindness results in invisibility. Regardless of the skin, eyes, hair or nails, their color is what people recognize first thus white people see the dark-color of African Americans' skin first. If they refuse to see the color of their skin, they refuse to see them, too. *"I am invisible, understand, simply because people refuse to see me."* (Ellison, 3) The protagonist of the novel's invisibility is neither a physical condition nor is he speaking literally. A blind man cannot see the person who is standing right in front of him, thus the person is invisible to the blind man. If a single person in the society is blind, others are able to see the man, meaning the man is visible. However, everyone in the society is blind, and then the man is invisible. If they don't see the man, the man isn't simply there. Thus, African American people become invisible to the rest of the society, and this is an obstacle for the society to perceive the real identities of them, since their identities are refused to be seen by others.

VI.CONCLUSION

In the novel, racism is a concept that is intensively portrayed to be having restrictive and destructive effects on African American people. At the Liberty Paint, forcing dark matter disappear in white paint in order to create “optic white” expresses casting out dark-colored people which becomes a restriction for forming identities. This casting out, covering dark-colored people’s identities with the desired white, blinds other people living in the society by shading their opinion about dark-colored people. The slogan of the optic white is an example of prejudice which blinds white people to perceive identities since due to the way they are perceived, there is no use of trying for African Americans. Besides the symbol of Liberty Paint, Sambo doll, a puppet whose actions are controlled is also a symbol. It symbolizes that the dark-colored people are controlled and not free to determine their own actions and thus cannot form their personal identity. Similar to the Sambo doll, Coin bank symbolizes an inability to form ones identity, by preventing them to break free from controlling power of prejudice of white people. Existence of these matters, are making white people unable to perceive the identities of African Americans. Furthermore, the name of the narrator never being disclosed shows that the narrator doesn’t internalizes given names, thus his identities. Moreover, dark-colored people such as the narrator being “blind” to see racist realities and exploitation of white people, unable them to form identities that can be perceived, because what they assume as reality are just presented to them by white people, not actual realities. If people are blind to see dark-colored people similar to the world in the novel, they are virtually invisible. Because of the biases against them, they feel they are only able to live in some roles that the society has prescribed to them and knowing their limits prevents them from achieving what isn’t expected from them. Therefore they are restricted from acting how they want and forming their true identity thus keep on living the identical role of which white people saw as appropriate for their whole community. Also in this process, it can be seen that through the prescription of these roles to their community, white people are conditioned to see them in a certain fixed role and thus not understand their individuality. As a result, with respect to the analysis of the theme of racism in this novel, it can be concluded that the ideology of racism is both a restriction for African Americans in the formation of their identities and an obstacle for the society to truly perceive their identities.

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