Tiffani West
Dr. Randall
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“Invisible Man” and the Loss of One’s Identity

The loss of identity is portrayed in a wide range within different types of literature. Identity is defined as the set of behavioral and personal characteristics by which an individual is recognizable as a member of a group (“identity”). A sense of identity provides evidence of personal identity. The loss of identity is apparent as a theme in most post-modern works. The main characters often experience the loss of identity. In American literature, the identity crisis is often generated by the characters’ conflicts. These conflicts are usually between person and group. The characters are unable to free themselves from the conflict between who they actually are and who society says they are supposed to be. These conflicts are what drives the characters to want to change. The characters’ awareness of their true selves is essential. To know one’s inner self is to know one’s purpose. Readers can see that the loss of identity is present throughout Ralph Ellison’s novel, “Invisible Man.” No matter how hard the “invisible man” tries, he cannot break from the mold of black society that has been put in place by the white society.

In Ellison’s novel, “Invisible Man,” the first thing the narrator does is introduce himself as an invisible man. Often times, “…Africans had to grapple with identity/image issues” (German Memory Contests). Readers can see that the narrator has a difficult experience of being black and faces the “…tragedy of black ghetto life” (Baym and Levine 208). Being a black man in a racist white society has its tolls on the narrator. The stereotypes and expectations of this racist society pressure the narrator to live an obedient life as the “model” black man. He feels
that he can’t act the way he wants to act. The “invisible man” has a conflict between self-
realization and the expectations of others. The large part of the identity crisis is shaped by others’
opinions, and the narrator says, “You ache with the need to convince yourself that you do exist in
the real world…” (Ellison 222). The narrator wants the opinions of others because he wants to
feel “…a part of all the sound and anguish…” (Ellison 222). Without these opinions he feels
lost. Although he makes an effort to achieve his own identity in this society, the narrator decides
that it is just impossible.

Ellison does a great job of this post-modern writing. Throughout “Invisible Man,” readers
are shown the “…post-modern strategy, which consists of getting lost only to recover oneself
finally with greater clarity and a more assured sense of identity” (German Memory Contests). As
the story progresses from beginning to end, Ellison shows readers “the difference between
conscious and unconscious achievement” (Gerard and Bjornson). Ellison explores the theme of
identity through the main character’s feelings and personal development, and the unnamed
narrator goes from being a member of one group to wanting to be his own person. The “invisible
man” adopts several identities, however, none of the acquired identities adequately represent
who the man is and, more importantly, wants to be.

At the beginning of the story, the narrator, who claims to be an invisible man, is forced to
participate in a battle royal with a other black men. The battle royal is conducted for white
entertainment. In this battle, the black men are blindfolded as they box one another on an electric
floor. The blindfolds represent the black men’s inability to see past the white supremacy. This
was one of the main reasons that kept the narrator from becoming his own self, from establishing
his own identity. Every black person he encounters abides by all the white rules in order to have
any kind of recognition. However, the narrator continues to ask himself, “Who the hell am I?”
All the narrator’s attempts to move forward and try to better understand himself are held back because of his skin tone. He is looked at as all the stereotypes surrounding the black race. He is not seen as the intelligent, educated, young man that he is. After the battle royal, previously mentioned, the invisible man is made to give a speech. After the speech, he is given a briefcase containing a scholarship to a Negro college. This briefcase is a symbol for the power the white society had over the blacks. The briefcase is given to him by the white benefactors listening to his speech. This further represents the racist manipulation and oppression of the invisible man’s identity. During the story, the invisible man carries this briefcase around. He drags along the burden of these stereotypes that attempt to define him. The narrator eventually decides to burn this briefcase. The burning of the briefcase represents the narrator moving on. He, in a sense, burns his past and “abandons the illusions pressed on him by outsiders” (Khorana and Yenika-Agbaw).

In “Invisible Man,” the narrator is a part of a Brotherhood organization. This organization is another way the man tries to identify himself. To the Brotherhood organizers, the narrator is exactly who and what they need him to be. He is what they designed him to be, a social speaker and a leader. The narrator is so desperate for some type of identity. He wants recognition and status. He strives to find this but also wants to be someone special, someone to be honored, so he joins the Brotherhood. He is made to be a speaker, but he knows this is not who he is. The narrator is then recognized only through his new, false identity. This does not help his identity crisis because he feels unseen even in this large group of people. He feels that no one knows him, so he changes his perceptions of himself.

The narrator says, “All my life I had been looking for something and everywhere I turned someone tried to tell me what it was…” (Ellison 221). He was aware of the control people had
on him. The narrator realizes that he had been searching for his identity through people. He knows that this has to stop because to be “…visible means to be constructed by others as a collection of general stereotypes rather than an individual” (Khorana and Yenika-Agbaw). This leads the narrator to “…migrate toward an understanding of what it means to be ‘invisible’ in terms of how people view us…” (Gerard and Bjornson). He begins to embrace his invisibility.

The narrator intentionally begins to isolate himself in order to better understand himself. He says, “I am invisible, understand, simply because people refuse to see me” (Ellison 220). The people choose to just not see the nameless narrator and he comes to terms with this. His invisibility is liberating to him. He also says, “It is sometimes advantageous to be unseen…” because there are advantages to being considered invisible. His blackness is his invisibility but he is okay with this.

Identity and individuality are two qualities people need to possess and “…a place must always be left for individuality” (Gerard and Bjornson). Identity and individuality are something that had been stripped from the African American race because of slavery and oppression. This is why the identity theme and the quest for individuality are mostly written about in African American literature. In “Invisible Man”, Ralph Ellison shows his readers what it’s like to be “invisible in a world where others refuse to see…” you (Mihalache). The other characters offer the invisible man “…diverse roles or ways of being”, but they do not present him with a “…satisfactory identity” (Mihalache). “Invisible Man” proves to readers that a person’s true identity cannot be satisfied by others’ opinions. Choosing to become a stereotype or what everyone expects a person to be, is not how a person should seek their identity. Falling victim to these stereotypes is not a way to find out who a person is or how they identify themselves. The “invisible man” must accept his invisibility and consider this his identity. The story of how the
invisible man comes to realize his invisibility is part of his self-discovery and of how other people cannot tell you who you really are, though they will try when or if given the chance.
Works Cited


"German Memory Contests: The Quest for Identity in Literature, Film, and Discourse since 1990." Choice Reviews Online 44.09 (2007): n. pag. Web.
