

Abstract

While conventional readings of *Invisible Man* primarily focus on its status as a race-critical novel, this BA thesis will discuss and develop the notion that the novel is in fact an experimental Bildungsroman whose narrator is a universal figure and whose development across the narrative is analogical to that of any person building their identity in today's late capitalist society. By analyzing key moments in the novel with the help of late-20th-century and contemporary critical, cultural and political theories, the text will arrive at an original reading that synthesizes those approaches, and which can be used to better understand even contemporary life. The first chapter will establish what precisely makes the text an experimental coming-of-age novel by introducing the genre's conventions that started in German Romanticism with Goethe, and will then trace these features and their distinctive emergences in *Invisible Man*. The second chapter will then consist of an analysis of the social system as it is presented in the novel, exploring the oppressive capitalist power structure that both requires and prevents the narrator's assimilation, and highlighting how specific characters in the novel cling to their power with no regard for the experience of others. This will be supported by theories and concepts critical of capitalist society and culture and I will show how these theories specifically apply in the novel, alongside some excursions into the unavoidable question of racism. The method will consist of a linear re-reading of important moments in the novel which elucidate the true nature of the authoritative powers that the narrator comes into direct contact with. The third chapter will then introduce contemporary political theory to dissect the ideologies present in the novel in the context of its other two layers of the individual and social, and to prove the text was ahead of its time not only in style, but also in content, when even theories developed more than 60 years later are very much useful in its interpretation. It will be shown how the novel implicitly argues that radical politics cannot ultimately accommodate the rich inner experience of an individual and that such political approaches by nature provide only an illusory semblance of agency to their supporters, as these ideologies are two-faced entities set on convincing the less experienced to join their cause without resolving the inherently negative consequences of the means they employ to achieve their purported goals. The ultimate goal of the thesis is thus to transcend the conventional reading of *Invisible Man* as the story of an Afro-American in a racist society to show that there are in fact multiple layers of experience at play simultaneously, just like in real life, and it is through a spectrum of critical, cultural and political theories that these semantic planes will be decoded.

Key Words

Ralph Ellison, *Invisible Man*, individuality, Bildungsroman, personal development, psychology, identity, naivety, innocence, universality, society, capitalism, oppression, racism, injustice, exploitation, cruelty, alienation, hegemony, community, politics, communism, fascism, ideology, subject, postmodernism