

A Study of Symbolism in Invisible Man

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Abstract: Invisible Man by Ralph Ellison is recognized as a monumental work of black American literature both at home and abroad, and has an undeniable place in the history of American literature. “Invisible man”, is a young black American who is eager to explore and prove himself. The book describes the process of his transformation from blindly worshipping white Americans to seeing the essence of white people, from being physically invisible to being psychologically invisible. Thus, further exposing the long-standing problem of racial discrimination in the United States and various anomalies in American society. In fact, every description in the novel is more than a simple narration of characters and scenes; they all contain profound symbolic meanings. This paper analyzes and summarizes the symbolism in Invisible Man by analyzing static symbols such as color, character, objects, and music, as well as dynamic symbols such as speech, behavior, and vision, in order to further elaborate the role of symbolism in Invisible Man in promoting the theme of the text.

1. Introduction

Ralph Ellison, one of the leading and famous American writers, has special views on the racial culture, social system and identity issues in America at that time. His book Invisible Man attracts a lot of attention worldwide. Ralph Ellison, has won the National Book Award and the Pulitzer Prize because of Invisible Man. The book has been praised by all major influential newspapers in the United States, confirming its unique place in American literature.

Invisible Man depicts the story of a black man who goes to the city to pursue his dream with the desire to acquire the respect of others. The story consists of approximately three parts. The beginning part is that the “invisible man” obeys the white man's words and gets college admissions, but when he accidentally lets the white school board see the filthy side of the black man's life, his dream is shattered. And then, the black headmaster withdraws him from school and gives him a fake recommendation letter. The second stage is “invisible man” finds a job in a paint factory, but is assassinated and goes into the hospital. Unfortunately, Doctors performs experiment on him, not cured him. The last stage is when “invisible man” joins a fraternity. The “invisible man” thinks that joining a fraternity is the thing that can realize his value, but in the end, it turns out that it is all a scam. Finally, the “invisible man” ends up falling into a hole in a confusion.

“Ellison, an outstanding black writer in the American righteousness scene, infuses elements of symbolism righteousness in large sections into the plot and still life of the novel in revealing the

journey of black people in their quest for self-identification. [1-3]” The use of symbolism is where the real book succeeds and excels. The author uses symbolism in almost every description of the plot and characters.

This thesis is made up of four main parts. The first chapter details the author's achievements and the environment in which the author grew up, giving us a more detailed understanding of the book. The second chapter introduces symbols and symbolism. They perform an essential role in this article. The third chapter focuses on symbols in this essay, analysing where symbolism is used and how these symbols move the story forward. The fourth part deals with the role of symbolism on the theme.

Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man* has a profound impact, and the use of symbolism in this book is even more ingenious, as the author uses symbolism to better reflect the process of psychological change of “invisible man” and better reveal the theme.

2. Introduction to the Author and His Novel

Ralph Ellison's place in literature is irreplaceable, winning the international prizes for which writers have always strived. *Invisible Man*, which he created, is known as a classic and has become a pearl in the history of literature.

2.1 A Brief Introduction to the Author

Ralph Ellison is born on March 1, 1914 in Oklahoma, a state where racial discrimination is not prevalent. This state where located in the southwest of the United States is a relatively marginal state, And it is not very cohesive, and it does not really become the forty-sixth state of the United States until 1907 when Oklahoma belonged to the United States, Therefore, racial discrimination is not yet evident. Some of the native American customs is not prevalent or even exist here, and the racial discrimination is not as inveterate as in other states. So Ralph Ellison, who live in this environment, does not put whites and blacks in opposition to each other.

In addition, Ralph Ellison's mother has to raise the entire family since Ellison's father dead. The whites provide jobs for his mother, so Ellison is not hostile to the whites. His mother also takes back music discs and books from the white family, which gives him the opportunity to learn about music and paves the way for his future development. As a result, Ellison dose not overstate the hatred between blacks and whites in his work.

Raffle Ellison receives a scholarship to study music at school, but because of money problems he leaves school in his third year at university to earn money. With the help and influence of people like the famous black poet Langston Hughes and the novelist Richard Wright, he begins his own literary journey. In 1952, he publishes his novel "*Invisible Man*", which is written over seven years.

2.2 A Brief Introduction to the Social Background

The *Invisible Man* is produced under the influence of the Second World War, when the world is in constant war and the dramatically changes. The volatile international situation is also a source of concern for the United States. Following the principle of national interests above all, blacks gradually succumb to whites.

In the United States, although the black legally enjoy the same rights as whites, they are still discriminated against in real life. White Americans are still superior and enjoy all kinds of preferential treatment. Racial discrimination is still deeply rooted. As the economy and technology developed, the economic development of the areas where blacks lived became more and more backward, while the development of the North became better and better. This has led to a gap

between blacks and whites. Some people with advanced consciousness realize that the inequality in economic development and politics for the backward development of their own people. A series of chain reactions of underdevelopment economy also stimulates the awakening of the black.

In the mid-nineteenth century, realist social literature becomes popular throughout the world. Modernism also takes over in America. Realist social literature believes that the most important thing in writing is truth. A large number of excellent works have a profound impact on the world. In the United States, black literature, Jewish literature and other minority literature have developed rapidly, and a series of outstanding works have been born. Black writers no longer strictly distinguish between modernism and realism, but combine the two organically. They create a large number of protest novels to accuse and criticize American society, which set off the "Harlem Renaissance" that is once popular in the American black literature. *Invisible Man* is born in this period. In addition, symbolism becomes popular. Therefore, under the influence of these cultural backgrounds, Ellison uses a lot of symbolic techniques in the novel *Invisible Man*.

In short, *Invisible Man* is formed in response to the general background of the times. Influenced by domestic and foreign economic culture, Ellison is able to create a work full of his own style. Moreover, this work is a true reflection of the state of society and cultural background at home and abroad.

3. Symbol and Symbolism

"A symbol refers to anything that stands for or represents something else beyond it-usually an idea conventionally associated with it. The term denotes a kind of sign that has no natural or resembling connection with its referent[4-6]" It is mainly to show the draw line things with specific matters, which have some kind of connection or similar characteristics between the two things. This engages the reader's interest in reading. There is no standard answer to symbolism, especially literary symbolism, and the reader needs to read carefully to understand the subtleties and feel the fascination of reading.

Symbol is usually divided into two broad types: universal symbol and contextual symbol. Universal symbols are the more common things. Generally, such symbols convey the same meaning. Both the user and the reader acknowledge this situation by default. The reader does not have to research what this symbol means. The common universal symbols and their implying meanings are listed: the national flag signifies the ideals of nation; roses signify beauty; cultural symbols like the color white is a symbol of sadness in Asia while in west symbolizes purity. To a great extent, literary symbols are adopted by writers for special purposes in the specific context. A symbol can be a person, a place, an action, or a situation.

France is the birthplace of symbolism, and this literary technique is subsequently spread to other countries. Symbolism is used not only in literature, but also in theater, art and aesthetics, and many other disciplines. The social environment of the time causes a lot of discontent among intellectuals, and they use symbolism to express their discontent. In literature, almost anything - especially objects, characters, settings and actions - can be symbolic, if the author wants it to be. Implied and emphasized meanings are always hidden behind ordinary objects. It will be helpful to study the use of symbolism in literature. Many classic works with symbolic meaning leave a mark on the reader's mind.

For symbolism, it does not emphasize excessive exaggeration, does not force excessive brightness, and does not pretend to be obscure, but achieves a balance of brightness and obscurity, giving people a sense of puzzlement, half-light, half-dark, with a strong sense of reality and profundity[7-8].

Therefore, symbolism can enrich the plot and connotation of the story, and has great

thoughtfulness. Symbolism is mainly divided into pre-symbolism and post-symbolism. The pre-symbolism is mainly to establish a connection with the outside world by means of its own organs to increase the literary connotation, while the late symbolism is mainly combined with the religion and culture of the time in Kali to enhance the artistry[9]. Symbolism conveys certain meanings through certain images. There must be some connection between these images and their meanings. In the field of literature, symbolism can further express the emotions of a character or express a theme in a more interesting way. The basic theories and creative methods of symbolist literature play an important role in realist literature and lay the foundation for it. Symbolism both diversifies the meaning of symbols and gives the reader more clues to the motivations, personalities, and themes of the characters.

4. Conclusion

The invisible man uses a lot of symbolism to express the invisible man's thoughts and feelings, including the symbols of colors, objects, words, actions, identity, visual symbols and blues music, which can be used to make reader understand the theme of the article and the author's excellent writing skills.

The novel is more like a man narrating his story to us, in which no derogatory words are used to indict the hypocrisy and indifference of the whites, but rather a great deal of symbolism is used to express this idea. The reader can see the selfishness and hypocrisy of the white man and the ignorance and oppression of the black man in the various symbols. The reader can feel the helplessness and anger of the protagonist in each of the symbols.

In general, the symbolism of this novel is worthy of our study and reference. It perfectly expresses the theme of the novel, deepens the idea of the work, and is thought-provoking and evocative. The use of these symbolic techniques, which aptly and cleverly emphasize the theme of the work, makes the novel "Invisible Man" a masterpiece of modernism and symbolism, and enables the author to establish his position in the literary world with this novel.

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