Sight Imagery in "Invisible Man"
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RALPH ELLISON'S *Invisible Man* (Random, 1947), written in the 1940's, seems a preview of today's racial conflict. A young Negro, raised in the South, tells of his attempts to become a leader of his people within a white man's world, and how he is thwarted by the ambitions of Negroes and whites alike. He is first humiliated by the leading whites of his town, then betrayed by the seemingly honorable president of his college, and finally, after moving to New York and becoming the leader of the Harlem branch of the Brotherhood, finds his work sacrificed in the interests of the dictates of the "committee." It is at this point that he realizes his invisibility, that he has no personality of his own but is, in fact, shaped by the needs of others. Invisibility, then, emerges as the focal point of the novel. The hero of the story could have been any man—black, white, yellow—but its impact is greater because of the contrast between black and white, a contrast which should enhance individual differences, but instead, emphasizes the rift between the groups. The worth of the novel, then, is not simply its early sensitivity to the crux of today's racial problems, but its perception of the heart of the difficulty: the failure of men to see each other as individuals. Thus most of the people he meets do not perceive the narrator of *Invisible Man* because the "inner eyes" of traditions, racial barriers, and personal desires prevent them from seeing him as an individual. Sight, then, and lack of it, as implied by the word *invisible* become key images in Ellison's novel.

Lack of sight in a Negro indicates him as an "Uncle Tom," one who accepts and praises the impositions of the whites and insists that he is content with them. The narrator first encounters sightlessness on the campus of the small Negro college he attends by describing the statue of a man in the act of holding a veil over the face of a kneeling slave. The man depicted, the founder of the college, known for his saintliness and beloved by whites and Negroes alike, is described as having "empty eyes," and the narrator points out that he does not know whether the Founder is lifting the veil so the slave can see clearly or dropping it to impede his sight further.

Miss Susie Gresham, the college's old matron, is another Negro who does not
see clearly. She listens to a speech given in the college chapel with her eyes closed so that she only hears the sounds of the words but does not see who makes them. She listens to a speech by the Reverend Barbee who eulogizes the empty-eyed Founder. The climax of his speech comes, however, not with his description of the Founder’s resigned death, but afterwards, when Barbee falls and drops the dark glasses he is wearing, revealing that he is blind. The sightlessness of the “Uncle Tom” Negroes illustrates their inability to perceive the real needs of their people and the true motives of the white men.

In contrast to their empty, closed, and blind eyes are the clear, sharp eyes of Dr. Bledsoe, the president of the college, who can terrorize students and teachers at a glance. His clear sight foreshadows his statement to the narrator in which he reveals that despite his obsequious attitude towards white men, he understands their feelings about Negroes, and that he has consciously humored their beliefs to suit his own ends. It is after this revelation that the narrator goes north to find that Bledsoe has betrayed him.

There, as he matures, he slowly becomes aware of the subtleties of the racial conflict, both in the white’s attitudes towards the Negro and in the Negro’s reaction to these attitudes. In the first speech he makes for the Brotherhood, he describes his audience as blind in one eye to describe how the whites have treated them and how they have reacted to it: “They’ve dispossessed us each of one eye from the day we’re born. So now we can only see in straight white lines.” Half-sight, thus, is used to illustrate the awareness that problems exist, but there is no conception of what causes them or how to react to them.

**HALF-SIGHT** is not an exclusive quality of the Negro; the narrator encounters it in white men also. In them, too, it indicates the inability to perceive true solutions to problems. Brother Jack, the head of the Brotherhood, wears a glass eye in place of the one he lost working for the organization. What he cannot see is that instead of working with Negroes as a “brother,” he instead follows the old line of bearing the “white man’s burden.” Thus, the false eye he wears symbolizes his basic deviation from the ideals of brotherhood. His sight is artificial, then, rather than nonexistent. If he simply saw the Negroes and their problems incorrectly instead of sacrificing them, as he did his eye, to his desire for power, he would undoubtedly be pictured as wearing a patch. The moment when the narrator discovers that Jack wears a false eye emphasizes its significance. The eye suddenly “pops out” of Jack’s head at a committee meeting of the Brotherhood where the narrator learns that the people of Harlem are to be sacrificed to an undefined greater goal; where it becomes apparent that the words of brotherly love are only mouthings which hide the aim of stereotyping thought into the one proper pattern. Jack retrieves the eye and puts it in a glass of water where, magnified, it mocks the narrator, and he begs Jack to replace it—so everything will again appear normal; so the goals he so diligently worked towards will again seem honest and real.

Blindness to the truth characterizes white men as well as Negroes, and that blindness is easier for both to bear. The narrator, while attending college, is given the job of chauffeuring Mr. Norton, one of the school’s rich, white benefactors. He asks the complacent Norton what he would like to do and is answered, “Let me see . . .” and he is shown the reality of Southern Negro life: Jim Trueblood, respected by Negroes until in a “dream sin,” he commits incest. Then his own people reject him, and he is patronized by the whites. There is the “Golden Day,” a saloon
where shell-shocked veterans come to visit the prostitutes, and where Norton hears some frightening thoughts. Reality is too much for him, and he collapses under the strain.

White man's eyes come to symbolize the awe the Negro has of his power. Before the narrator goes to the interview with Dr. Bledsoe, where he first personally feels the effect of the whites' power over him, he sees the full moon rising and describes it as, "a white man's bloodshot eye." The first job he gets when he moves north is with the Liberty Paint Company. Their prime paint is called Optic White. This eye-white paint can cover anything, even the blackness of a lump of coal, just as the power of the white men can override the Negro's greatest efforts. The factory's slogan is, "If it's Optic White, it's the Right White," which the narrator ironically paraphrases into, "If you're white, you're right." He accidentally causes an explosion in the factory and when he awakens in the hospital, the first thing he sees is a white man looking at him out of a "bright third eye," which he cannot rationally explain. Here, too, when the doctors speak of giving him an operation, probably a lobotomy, which may deprive him of his personality, one of the most vivid images in his mind is the bloodshot, bulging eyes of a doctor peering at him through thick glasses. White men's eyes become, in a sense, hypnotic, in that they represent the power of white over black.

When one puts on sunglasses, everything appears darker—closer to black. When the narrator puts on sunglasses to disguise himself, he finally sees his people as they are. Instead of hiding him from his race, the darkness of the glasses brings him closer to them, because, when he wears them, he resembles a man named Rinehart. Rinehart may be looked on as a "universal" Negro, for he is all that the stereotype evokes. He is the hipster, the ladies' man, the numbers runner, the Harlem big man, and, at the same time, a preacher, telling the Gospels to a boogie beat. He is all these characters and more, depending on who sees him. Thus, when the narrator is taken for Rinehart, he comes into contact with all phases of Negro life, the phases which before he had been too wrapped up in empty platitudes to see. His dark glasses have the opposite function of those worn by the Reverend Barbee. He wears them to hide his blindness, symbolically, to hide his inability to see the true status of his dominated people.

Only as there is less and less "white" light does the narrator come to see clearly the dilemma of the Negro as an invisible man in a white society. When, finally, he falls into the darkness of a coal cellar and can literally neither see nor be seen, he understands the fact of his invisibility. Yet when he does see it, he is powerless to act because no one else recognizes his dilemma. To describe his situation, he compares himself to Jim Trueblood's bluejay which was stung by yellow jackets until it was paralyzed everywhere but its eyes and could do nothing but watch the insects sting it to death.

Of course, the narrator does not die, but seeks light so he can see a solution to his problem. Symbolically, then, he illuminates the ceiling and walls of the cellar into which he has fallen; thus, as he adds more light, his understanding increases. He finally comes out of the hole, because he does not want to remain invisible but wishes to be seen by the whites as he wants them to see his people. He wants them to be aware of Negroes as human beings. He as a Negro seeks light for himself and his people so they may see the nature of the white man's domination.

Sight imagery in Invisible Man is basic because sightlessness in others is implied in the concept of invisibility. By present-
in their notebooks. This exercise helps to familiarize them with many of the best known passages of the Bible which are not included in the longer selections studied.

The classroom work consists largely of reading aloud followed by informal discussion and the explanation of meanings. Some of the narrative portions are assigned for reading outside of class followed by class discussion. There are quizzes and tests and written theme work. The latter gives the students the opportunity to organize and express some of their own thinking in regard to the passages studied. Movies of the stories of Esther and Ruth are shown while we are studying those books.

Student reaction to the study of the Bible is excellent. Students find this study different from anything they have had before and consistently show interest and enthusiasm for it. One very bright boy from an upper income family told me that he had always thought that the Bible was a kind of prayer book and was amazed to find it full of interesting stories. I have polled student reaction by different methods and have found student approval almost universal. Only occasionally does a student express the view that the Bible should not be studied in public schools. Students of this opinion total less than one percent.

In our state, textbooks are furnished by the Boards of Education, but for our study of the Bible each student is asked to bring his own copy. We do furnish Bibles for any who do not have a copy or who have only a large family Bible at home which they do not wish to carry to class. We keep on hand copies of various translations. Catholic students either bring or are supplied with copies of the Douay Version or the Confraternity Edition. We also keep on hand copies of the Moffatt and the Smith-Goodspeed translations. Most of the students use the King James Version, but more and more are appearing each year with the Revised Standard Version. When there is doubt about the meaning of any particular passage, a comparison of the wording of different translations will often make the meaning clear.

In view of the importance of the Bible in the cultural heritage of English speaking people, we feel that its place in our literature course is paramount. The students themselves have shown over the years that they consider it time well-spent, and the Supreme Court of the United States has specifically stated that there is no constitutional objection to study in the public schools of the Bible as literature.

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ing characters in the novel as physically unable to see, the author conveys the idea that what people are really unable to see is the harsh reality which lurks behind the platitudes they spout. The reactions of the characters who actually perceive reality emphasize the harshness of it. Mr. Norton falls in a faint; Dr. Bledsoe becomes harsh and cynical; the narrator has a fit of madness. Unlike the others, however, the narrator becomes accustomed to the darkness of reality and tries to fill it with light,