

LESSON NOTE ON LITERATURE-IN-ENGLISH WEEK 4

SUBJECT: Literature-In-English
TOPIC: Non-African Prose: "Invisible Man" by Ralph Ellison cont'd
CLASS: SS2
WEEK: 4

Setting

The novel is set in twentieth-century America; first in the American South and later in Harlem. The South represents the bastion of black oppression where the most aggressive laws of white dominance prevail. There, blacks are considered subhuman and suffer much discrimination.

Themes

1. Racial inequality and prejudice

As far back as 1619 when 20 Africans were forced into indentured servitude (documented slavery) in Jamestown, Virginia, until 1865 when the American civil war ended, generations of Africans have suffered physical, physiological and psychological torture in the hands of the supremacist white Americans.

These racists minded white Americans believe they are in every aspect of life superior to blacks and therefore cannot afford to be treated alike. From Jim Crow laws to the Ku Klux Klan sect, whites have always sought to live in a distinct world, free from the stench of the black scourge created by the black people.

In the novel, the Battle Royal is one of the major incidents that foreground the issue of racism. The Narrator alongside other black students, is forced to watch a nude white lady dance sensuously (appealing to sense), after they are blind folded and made to fight one another for the white man's entertainment. As if that is not enough, they are made to scramble for gold pieces, which they later discover are fake. The Narrator is then given a platform to deliver a speech. All through the speech, the white men are busy conversing despite the Narrator's obvious physical pain.

The endorsement whites give to barbaric crimes committed by blacks is an indication that people are a bunch of backward thinking, barbaric apes, can be traced to this idea that blacks are inferior. This idea is illustrated in the novel through the story of Trueblood who committed incest by sleeping with his daughter. Trueblood had presented an incredulous story of how he impregnated his daughter while dreaming. The black community in response to this dastardly act, castigate, scorn and isolate him because of this heinous crime. The whites, on the other hand, sympathise with him. For someone who had before this time been unable to secure a job, they provide him one; they give him funds and tips from time to time.

Another indication of racial prejudice is when the white folks seize the Narrator for the fact that he is black to experiment their electric shock treatment on him even though he does not need it, when his body vibrates in reaction to the shocks, they laugh amongst themselves, saying that black folks too have rhythm. Other illustrations of the theme of racial inequality and prejudice in the novel include the eviction of the

black couple from their apartment by white marshals as well as the death of Clifton at the hands of a white police officer.

2. Disunity among blacks

The issue of disunity is sadly not limited to black and white polemics alone. In the novel, there is a certain feeling of superiority between Negroes from the South and those from the North. Some of the Negroes from the North feel very superior to those from the South.

Also, there is an assumption that upwardly mobile blacks look down on Negroes of lower status. In the course of the Narrator's dilemma with the college president, he is confounded when, he Dr Bledsoe, calls him a 'nigger', a derogatory term used by whites for blacks. Not only that, he deceitfully expels him from the college. One would have expected that being black, he would not use a fellow black's desire for visibility as a means of punishing him or her.

3. Identity crisis

The problem of identity is pertinent in black history because of the voluntary or involuntary movement of millions of Africans or Americans as slaves, most Africans-Americans are culturally rootless. They find it challenging to identify who they are, especially in a society where they are regarded as inferior. The idea is illustrated in the novel through the stylistic device of making the Narrator nameless. At no point in the course of the story do readers get to know the name of the narrator. Even the founder, despite all his good works and contributions to the black race, is not given a name. When the Narrator is required to change his identity as a condition for working with the Brotherhood, he has no problems about it. He gladly accepts the new name given to him and accepts it.

4. The futility of life's struggles

In the novel, the main character strives to create an identity of his own; his struggles end up being useless, simply because he is a black man living in a society that thrives on racial segregation. Throughout the novel, the nameless main character constantly migrates from one community to another. In every settlement, he is faced with a new set of prescribed rules as to how he ought to live as a black man. Hence he struggles to live by these standards and soon realizes that he cannot cope with such limitations.