

LESSON NOTE ON LITERATURE-IN-ENGLISH WEEK 5

SUBJECT: LITERATURE-IN-ENGLISH
TOPIC: NON-AFRICAN PROSE: "Invisible Man" by Ralph Ellison Cont'd
CLASS: SS2
WEEK: 5

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 True blood who committed incest by sleeping with his daughter. True blood 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.

CHARACTERS, THEIR ROLES AND SIGNIFICANCE

1. The Narrator

Role

The Narrator is the protagonist of the narrative. He tells the tale of his transition from naivety to enlightenment; from visibility to invisibility; from illusions to reality. He grows up in the south as a young student that is well liked for his subservience (subordination) and appreciation of the white race. He gives speeches that win him favours from the white populace because his speeches are tailored to suit the taste of the whites because he was sold the lie from birth 'whites are always right'. He chooses to remain blind to the deeds of the people around him. Despite the many counsels he receives from ideologists around him – his grandfather, vet doctor, Mary Rambo, Dr Bledsoe and many others – he chooses to see the good in all the white man's deeds so that he can climb the ladder of success. In the novel, it is seen that the efforts of the Narrator were frustrated, and he gradually begins to learn of his invisibility. After his experiences in the hands of Dr Bledsoe, Brother Jack, Brother Wrestrum and many others, he comes to realise what black is and what white is. He realises that he has sold his body, soul and spirit to please the whites and all his sacrifice amounts to nothing. In anger, he seeks revenge but is unable to. He slips into a manhole and there, he burns everything he earlier held as real and important.

Significance

(a) The Narrator is used to represent the naïve (inexperienced) group of blacks who believe in the infallibility and supremacy of the white race. This group of people have been so whitewashed that they have to go through a series of experiences before they can let go of their illusions. They chose not to learn from the experiences of others but their own experiences.

(b) in the novel, the Narrator's growth is very significant. From a gullible (naïve) young man, he becomes wise in the ways of the world. He comes to learn that deceit is the order of the day and he also masters the art a little too late.

(c) He sees the positivity in his invisibility and concludes that even invisible men have their quota to contribute to society.

2. Dr Bledsoe

Role

He is the president of the college the Narrator attends. From being a slop dispenser, he becomes the office boy of the Founder, then his friend and successor after his demise. He represents the dream of every college boy, the students deify him and the trustees respect him. He is skilled in diplomacy and deceit; he knows what to say and how to say it to get what he wants. He is a mastermind who is determined to remain at the corridor of power at all costs. He is the first person to give the Narrator a lecture on his invisibility. When the Narrator attempts to challenge the president's verdict on the 'crime' he committed, he tells him: 'you're a nobody son. You don't exist – can't you see that? The white folk tell everybody what to think – except men like me. I tell them; telling white folk how to think about the things I know about'.

Significance

(a) Dr Bledsoe signifies the prototype of highly placed blacks in the African American society who could do anything to remain in power. Having suffered to attain the level of success he has, he would not mind destroying his fellow 'niggers' advance his cause. He is portrayed as showy, deceitful and selfish. He is a

black man who pretends to be a servant to the white community. Bledsoe is ambitious and in an attempt to retain his position, he is prepared to have every black person in America killed.

(b) Dr Bledsoe signifies the perfect representation of the ideal image of the blacks conceived by the whites. He has perfectly mastered how to repress his emotions to please the whites. He tells them the kind of lies they want to hear and takes them to places they want to see.

(c) he is portrayed as flashy, deceitful and selfish. Bledsoe is ambitious, and in an attempt to retain his position, he is prepared to have every black person in America killed.

3. Brother Jack

Role

Brother Jack is the mastermind (Founder) behind the Brotherhood movement; a movement that claims to be objective in their dealings, treating everyone as one regardless of their pigmentation (skin colour). He is like every other white, snap like a general. He does not accept opposition neither does he listen to the opinion of the Narrator except it tallies with what he wants to hear. He tells the Narrator he is hired to speak and not to think. At the end of the novel, Brother Jack sees the Narrator and his fellow blacks as unseen, they are just members.

Significance

(a) Brother Jack's blindness in one eye is symbolic, it, in a way represents the blindness of all the members of the Brotherhood. It represents their choice to see things in a particular light, to debunk emotions and uphold science. It shows their ignorance at how the world works and the balance that is needed to make a change

(b) Jack's blindness in one eye is symbolic. It, in a way, represents the blindness of all the members of the Brotherhood. It represents their choice to see things in a particular light, to debunk emotions and uphold science.

4. Ras the Exhorter

He is later known as Ras the Destroyer; he is the mastermind behind the black group that is in strong opposition to the activities of the Brotherhood in the Harlem District. He, alongside his member, believes in the use of provocative speeches and violence. He kicks against every form of unity with the whites. He goes as far as confronting members of the Brotherhood who speak against his belief. To him, the Narrator is nothing but a whitewashed dummy who blindly obey every instruction of his white masters.

Ras the Exhorter is used by the writer to represent the group of blacks who believe strongly that nothing good can come out of the unification of the black white race. Based on their history of and experiences of slavery, torture and pain from the whites, these people believe that blacks are to unite and fight their common enemy: the whites