

## **Harlem to Hogan's Alley: Black Writing in North America**

Discuss how black men are in conflict with their identity in relation to ideas of blackness, masculinity and systematic racism in Wright's 'Native Son' and Ellison's 'Invisible Man'.

Wright's '*Native Son*' and Ellison's '*Invisible Man*' have both been described as influential novels of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. *Native Son* has often been called 'the finest proletarian novel of all'.<sup>1</sup> Both Authors focus on the black male experience using a male protagonist to represent the average black man in America. Both characters go through a crisis in identity using different ways to obtain power and gain an identity they can relate to. The two novels show how black men are ostracized from society and denied of an individual identity. Despite being published 12 years after '*Native Son*', The '*Invisible Man*' highlights similar issues and sheds light to the systematic oppression and identity crisis faced by black men during the 20<sup>th</sup> century. In this essay, the question I will be investigating is a matter of social injustice. I will be discussing how black men are in conflict with their identity in relation to ideas of blackness and masculinity, questioning what role systematic racism plays in this.

In order to answer this question, I will be using three main points of discussion. I will begin by analysing how fear and shame play a part in African American male identity, I will be questioning how this shapes their identity. Secondly, I will examine how African American's

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<sup>1</sup> Abdelkader Cheref, A native country for the invisible son: Portraits of the Afro-American Hero (Senia, 1991).

in *Native Son* and *Invisible Man* search for masculinity and power through violence and anti-social behaviour. I will also be analysing how this stems from the systematic oppression that promoted superiority towards white American's. Lastly, I will be discussing how systematic racism leads black men into an inevitable life of crime, incarceration and death. In relation to this I will be examining how systematic racism is something both Ellison and Wright identify as an invisible force that people are blind to.

Fear and shame play a large part in the lives of both protagonists in '*Invisible Man*' and '*Native Son*'. Throughout the novels, the reader is able to observe from a first-hand perspective how these feelings have an impact on the black male identity. Wright creates the character Bigger to represent the average African American man living in south side Chicago. Bigger's life is driven by fear of the white world. 'He passed his days trying to

defeat or gratify powerful impulses in a world he feared'<sup>2</sup>. This quote shows how Bigger is either focusing on suppressing these feelings or using other things in order to disguise his fear.

Fear and shame is also evident in '*Invisible Man*'. 'To repress not only his emotions but his humanity . . . [to be] invisible, a walking personification of the Negative, . . . the mechanical man!'<sup>3</sup>. Ralph Ellison identifies how fear and shame is such an intrinsic part of the black male's identity, he renders himself invisible. The fear and shame carried by African American men makes them feel less than human. The repression of these emotions creates a conflict in identity. 'All I wanted was to be a man among other men. I wanted to come lithe and young into a world that was ours and to help to build it together'<sup>4</sup>. Frantz Fanon recognises the identity crisis black men face. A lack of power and control of their own lives leaves African American men in the 20<sup>th</sup> century feeling emasculated and without a place in society. Aware that men are supposed to have power and control Bigger and men like him are made to feel ashamed and invisible. 'Shame, Shame and self-contempt. Nausea. When people like me, they tell me it is in spite of my color. When they dislike me, they point out that it is not because of my color. Either way, I am locked into the infernal circle.'<sup>5</sup> Fanon points out that shame is something carried around by black people. He describes the cycle of shame. Beginning with the projection of negative black stereotypes in the media, this shame leads to an internalised feeling of shame which then becomes a part of their identity. 'I am not

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<sup>2</sup> Wright Richard, *Native Son*, (Harper & Brothers, 1940) p73

<sup>3</sup> Ralph Ellison, *Invisible Man* (London : Penguin Books, 2001). P94

<sup>4</sup> Fanon Frantz, *The Fact of Blackness: and Visual Representation*. ( Seattle, Bay Press, 2016 ).

<sup>5</sup> Fanon Frantz,

ashamed of my grandparents for having been slaves. I am only ashamed of myself for having at one time been ashamed.’<sup>6</sup> Fanon describes this as part of ‘the black problem’.

African American’s are not given the opportunity to create their own identity. they are forced to see themselves through their oppressor’s eyes. ‘It is a peculiar sensation, this double, consciousness, this sense of always looking at one’s self through the eyes of others, of measuring one’s soul by the tape of the world that looks on in amused, contempt and pity.’<sup>7</sup> Du Bois describes the experience shared by many African American’s. The concept of double consciousness is evident in both ‘*Native Son*’ and ‘*Invisible man*’. Both characters are condemned because of the colour of their skin. Bigger fears that he will be labelled as a rapist if he is found in Mary’s room leads to his first murder. The Invisible Man constantly allows himself to be labelled by other people. ‘I am what they think I am’<sup>8</sup> This leads to him giving up on society and isolating himself. Wright and Ellison show the destructive consequences of negative stereotyping that instil shame in the black community. Both authors present characters that illustrate how white ideologies work to determine African American identity and use this as a part of systematic racism that destroys the lives of black men.

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<sup>6</sup> Ellison.

<sup>7</sup> DuBois W.E.B, *The souls of black folks* ,(Chicago:McClurge &Co,1903).

<sup>8</sup> Ellison, P283

Systematic racism can also be seen through the media. Black men were made to feel ashamed of their skin and emasculated by the media's representation of them. 'I passed on to a window decorated with switches of wiry false hair, ointments guaranteed to produce the miracle of whitening black skin. "You too can be truly beautiful," a sign proclaimed. "Win greater happiness with whiter complexion'.<sup>9</sup> This is an advert seen by the Invisible Man, Ellison illustrates the idea of white privilege through the use of this quote. 'win greater happiness' Ellison suggests being white gives you certain privileges. Adverts such as these were commonly seen in the media during this time and still in some countries across the world where whiter skin is seen as more beautiful and a sign of privilege. Both Ellison and Wright include advertisements here to show how shame is instilled into black people due to their darker complexion. 'He feels, and is made to feel, constantly filthy. I am white, that is, immaculate. I am the purified, the saved, the saintly, and the elect. It is the Black who is the incarnation of evil'.<sup>10</sup> This quote presents the views of many American's in the 20<sup>th</sup> century due to the representations of black people. This feeling of shame becomes an unfortunate part of their identity.

Both Wright and Ellison present the emasculation of black men within their novels. Bigger and the invisible man are made to feel emasculated and inferior. In order to gain back their masculinity, the characters engage in violent and anti-social behaviour. Wright and Ellison

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<sup>9</sup> Ellison

<sup>10</sup> Abdelkader Cheref, A native country for the invisible son: Portraits of the Afro-American Hero (Senia, 1991).

show how African American men alike to Bigger and the invisible man are victims of their circumstances. Bigger participates in a range of violent and anti-social behaviours. These actions are the result of fear, social conditioning and hostile living environments. Bigger lacks power in society and feels emasculated due to this. This leads to the murder of Mary and the rape and killing of Bessie. The rape of Bessie symbolises more than just sexual desire from Bigger, but an assertion of power and masculinity otherwise not obtained in his life. 'Rape was what one felt when's back was against the wall and one had to strike out.'<sup>11</sup> Wright argues rape is the social implication of Bigger's treatment and living conditions as a black man. Ruman indicates 'Bigger's rage might be linked to an assertion of his humanity'.<sup>12</sup> Bigger has no remorse, he sees Bessie as an object and an obstacle to his freedom. He releases his anger and need for power at the expense of Bessie's life. Rape is shown to be a way to gain power and masculinity. Wright shows this again in the fight scene between Bigger and Gus. 'Gus's lips moved towards the knife; he stuck out his tongue and touched the knife.'<sup>13</sup> Bigger forcing Gus to lick his knife is a symbol of rape. Bigger gains power from forcing Gus to symbolically perform oral sex on him. 'The kind of "power" acted out in the brutal sexual abuse is, in fact, a further expression. It does nothing to challenge the underlying oppression, but only passes on'.<sup>14</sup> Mercer discusses the assertion of power during sexual abuse. Relating this back to *Native Son*, Bigger only passes on his feelings of oppression towards both Gus and Bessie.

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<sup>11</sup> Wright p258

<sup>12</sup> Ruman Karim Abdul Racism and Hegemony by Gaze and Blindness in *Native Son*, (Bangladesh, 2016).

<sup>13</sup> Wright

<sup>14</sup> Aimé J. Ellis,. 'Boys in the Hood' Black Male Community in Richard Wright's "Native Son", (The John Hopkins University Press 2006), pp. 182-201

Wright portrays Biggers killing of Mary as symbolic of his defiance against white society and a subconscious assertion of power. 'It was not Mary Bigger was reacting to when he felt that fear and shame. Mary had served to set off his emotions. Emotions conditioned by many Mary's. And now that he had killed Mary he felt a lessening of tension in his muscles.'<sup>15</sup> Mary as a white woman represents the unobtainable privilege and American dream he will never have. After Mary's death, Bigger experiences feelings of power and freedom. He had shed an invisible burden he had long carried.<sup>16</sup> Wright describes Bigger as a time bomb waiting to explode. The murder of Mary can be viewed as Biggers moment of explosion. All the emotions he had repressed had been brought up by the presence of Mary.

Her presence alone reminds him of his 'blackness'. 'Blackness itself was pathologized as a deviant identity, and the black male was stereotyped (and subsequently mythologised) as a hyper-sexed, almost animal-like, entity'<sup>17</sup>. Carrington brings to light the identity given to Black men in America. Black men are presented to be barbaric, violent murderers. On the surface it is the fear of these labels that causes Bigger to kill Mary. 'He looks exactly like an ape!'... his skin is exceedingly black. His lower jaw protrudes obnoxiously, reminding one of a jungle beast'<sup>18</sup>. Bigger is described using animalistic references by the media after he is discovered as the killer of Mary Dalton. Wright reinforces the propaganda used within media to constantly perpetuate black men as violent, rapists and uncivilised. Wright and Ellison recognise a conflicting dynamic between black men and white women in relation to violence and sex. 'To caress her and destroy her, to love her and murder her.'<sup>19</sup> This quote is said by the invisible man during the battle royal scene. The oxymorons used by Ellison illustrate the feelings of desire and hatred from the black community. This is similar to *Native Son*.

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<sup>15</sup> Wright p144

<sup>16</sup> Wright p144

<sup>17</sup> Carrington Ben, Fear of a Black Athlete: Masculinity, politics and the body (2002)

<sup>18</sup> Wright p260

<sup>19</sup> Ellison.

The invisible man joins the brotherhood in hope to find a place in society where he has power and is seen as significant. The brotherhood although helping the black community, engage in anti-social behaviour. In 'Invisible Man' the protagonist feels powerful once he joins the brotherhood community. 'Brotherhood was something to which the men could give themselves completely; that was its strength and my strength'<sup>20</sup>. Being a part of the brotherhood gave the invisible man a voice and an identity he was constantly searching for. Despite feeling a part of something that opposed the system, the invisible man found once again his identity was something given to him and not something he acquired for himself. This then leads to his anti-social behaviour. The invisible man isolates himself and give up on society. Both authors show how anti-social and violent behaviour become a part of African America male identity due to socio economic conditions and need for power and identity in a society that shuns them.

Wright and Ellison consider the socio-economic factors that play a part in the poor living conditions of African America during the 20<sup>th</sup> century and still till this day. Using the character Bigger, Wright shows how the living conditions, misrepresentation in the media and various other factors, determines the fate of black men. The characters in the novel are blind to the system that either works for them or works to oppress them. This idea of blindness is also present in Ellison's ' *Invisible Man* . '

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<sup>20</sup> Ellison, p409



Wright portrays the challenging lives of African Americans in the 1930's. By using literary Naturalism, Wright describes the determining factors that shape characters' lives. 'Black Bigger did the things he did because American capitalist society has made an outcast of the black man.' Wright identifies capitalist society to be the cause of poverty in the lives of black men. 'He had heard it said that black people, even though they could not get good jobs, paid twice as much rent as whites.'<sup>21</sup> Bigger recognises the inequality between black people and white people. The lack job opportunities and support to get education, enables white American society to maintain the oppression of African American's. 'To be a poor man is hard, but to be a poor race in a land of dollars is the very bottom of hardships.'<sup>22</sup> Du Bois comments on the double oppression of being poor and black amongst rich people. He alludes to notion of systematic racism that ensures the system is rigged in favour of a certain racial demographic.

Ellison uses the invisible man to explore the challenges of living in 'a white man's world'<sup>23</sup>. He recognises the difficulty in finding a place in society as a black man. The battle royal scene conveys this. 'Blindfolded I could no longer control my motion. I had no dignity. I stumbled about like a baby or a drunken man'<sup>24</sup>. Ellison uses the blindfolding scene to symbolise the lack of control black men have within their society and control over their own

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<sup>21</sup> Wright, p279

<sup>22</sup> DuBois W.E.B, The souls of black folks,(Chicago:McClurge &Co,1903). P5

<sup>23</sup> Ellison

<sup>24</sup> Ellison, p22

lives. Ellison identifies the larger systems at work to ensure black men stay blind from what is going on beyond their interactions with each other. 'He has no power or use in society, he is made to feel as though he is sub-human.'<sup>25</sup> Carrington suggests society's representations of black people, places them on the outskirts of society and ensures they remain inferior. Both Wright and Ellison argue that these conditions determine the fate of African American's during the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

Wright uses blindness to convey the lack of knowledge both sides have on the systems that separate black and white American's. 'They have things arranged so that they can do those things and people can't fight back. The rich don't want to change things; they'll lose too

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<sup>25</sup> Carrington Ben, *Fear of a Black Athlete: Masculinity, politics and the body* (2002)

much.’<sup>26</sup> Not only are black people unaware of the larger scale of their oppression but white Americans are also unaware of the powers that allow them to live their American dream ignoring the consequences they see all around them. Mr. Dalton is blind to the connection between his wealth and Bigger’s poverty. He is unaware that his wealth is built upon a system of inequality and racism. ‘Bigger felt that a lot of people were like Mrs Dalton, blind.’<sup>27</sup> In this quote Wright uses blindness as a symbol of ignorance to both white privilege and the systems working to oppress the black community. Wright shocks us into recognition by using a dramatic and tragic storyline. He uses Bigger to wake up his audience to the severity of systematic racism and the result it can have.

In conclusion Wright and Ellison identify and outline the impact of systematic racism using two similar characters who have been forgotten by American society. Bigger and the invisible man are shamed and made to feel inferior due to the colour of their skin Through

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<sup>26</sup> Wright, p452

<sup>27</sup> Wright

investigating both novels it is clear Blackness is deemed inherently as the negative. Wright and Ellison convey the impossible task of dismantling this believe in order to be seen as valued members of society. Ellison and Wright convey the consequences of a systematic oppression and how this destroys and emasculates black men. By shedding light to these issues Ellison and Wright begin an important discourse on systematic racism for all Americans to acknowledge and work to eradicate.

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