Northern Oppression vs. Southern Tradition
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Assignment Description: Write a five page analysis of an American literary work published after 1945.

Ralph Ellison’s *Invisible Man* follows the narrative of a young black man who operates within the realm of imagined and real struggles. He plods through life with the optimism of naïveté, and eventually, the bitterness of a recluse. Ellison’s nameless narrator tells the tale of one who represents many. This protagonist’s aims are those of upward mobility and leadership – his youthful haughtiness, tempered with deference to whites and ambition, mark him as the prototypical tragic hero. That none of his goals are truly realized is his tragedy, and his path towards failure is rife with manipulation which marks him as a victim. In truth, the nameless youth is only a victim because of the oppressive ideologies and false consciousness that dog his every step. His realization of these facts is his only redeeming quality. Ellison puts forth a character that experiences hardships, and learns lessons from them in order to illuminate his readers.

Ellison wants to paint a picture of the world that his readers can utilize in real life. By highlighting representatives of two separate, but similar ideological state apparatuses – aspects of the superstructure that the state depends upon (Althusser 452) – Ellison depicts very real concerns in his fiction. While much of the novel is mired in ambiguity, the conclusion makes its goal quite clear: “What else but try to tell you what was really happening when your eyes were looking through?” (Ellison 581). The question, then, is what is really happening? The conclusive answer is that oppression surrounds everyone in ways that are inconceivable by many. Ellison enlightens his readers with the “disappointing fact that the society which claims to be founded upon the principles of freedom and equality nonetheless supported a brutal chattel slave system for over two hundred years” (Yarborough 33), and also highlights several features of economic oppression rampant in American society.

Even though the nameless hero proclaims “life is to be lived, not controlled” (Ellison 577), ideological state apparatuses exercise their domination with the practiced ease of those who take their sovereignty for granted. Ellison’s young protagonist shines as a bright example of one who has unlimited opportunity: he is a gifted speaker, is insightful (17), and is ambitious (18). The reader’s first glimpse of his talents, and future hazards, comes when he encounters a microcosm of societal power in the first chapter. This scene features ten black youths selected to participate in a Battle Royal for the embodiment of oppressive American society he will struggle with throughout the narrative. The Battle Royal hinges on the entertainment of “the most important men of the town” (18), and gives the reader several clues regarding economic oppression at the whim of the “economically privileged” (Tyson 52). It is quite obvious to the reader that these ten black youths selected to fight are subjugated based on their race alone. The crucial cues, which are reinforced later in the novel, point out the depth of
oppressive ideologies in the American system and are brought to light in this scene.

The white leaders who summon young black men for their entertainment represent the superstructure: the social, political, and ideological components of society that are supported by the economic base of power (50). The religious, legal, and political delegates (Ellison 18) present at the Battle Royal are firmly within the bourgeoisie -- displaying their control of economic and human resources (Tyson 50). Ellison's nameless hero, one of the ten young men taking part in the fight, believes he was invited to recite the speech he delivered at his high school commencement. This tragic hero's excruciating display of naivety shows that he is a representation of “the hero as victim” (Winther 115). He is a victim, along with nine others, of commodification.

The white leaders who organized the Battle Royal, in anticipation of the coming entertainment, are consuming beer, whiskey, and “black cigars” (Ellison 17). This consumption is telling in that even the literal objects they consume are black -- while they simultaneously objectify ten people without any qualms. Black objects are consumed, or observed in the case of the young men, for the pleasure of white men. By exercising their control and consuming these select commodities, these pillars of white society confer sign-exchange value on black objects, and people. Sign-exchange occurs when a commodity attaches a certain social status to its owner (Tyson 58). The literal consumption of the cigars displays the pervasive exploitation by white leaders, for the benefit of their peers.

In addition to the emblematic consumption by agents of ideological state apparatuses, the ten young men are forced to fight “blindfolded with broad bands of white cloth” (Ellison 21). Although the blindfolds simply appear to be another part of the entertainment, they represent much more. Part of the “manipulatory agencies” (Winther 115) that plague the proletariat is ideology itself. The ever-present ideology of the American Dream, the “myth [that] is firmly based on the widespread belief in the inherent justice of the U.S. economic system” (Yarborough 41) blinds those who are not in power. Such false consciousness, ideology functioning “to mask its own failure” (Tyson 55) simply perpetuates the current economic relationship. The blindfold is, so to speak, slipped over the eyes of the lower classes by white leaders. It is apparent to the reader that Ellison intends the message that the American Dream is a veil over all poor workers; the Dream is really only for whites, the veil is for blacks. These subtle interpretations of oppression -- through economic and political means--provide one with insight to Invisible Man's true meaning.

After undergoing several incidents that lead the narrator from college expulsion, to termination of employment at Liberty Paint -- which is “representative of American industry at large” (Winther 117) -- he ends up unemployed and alone in New York City. Ellison’s hero is eventually taken in by Mary, a woman who allows him to board for nothing (Ellison 298). After a short time he is recruited by Brother Jack, a white man, to be a “spokesman for [his] people and...work in their interest” (293). All of the nameless narrator’s previous experience leads him to be wary of this white man, but he succumbs because of his debt to Mary. Despite the protagonist’s realization of “his own exploitation” (Yarborough 48), he is swept up into the grand, albeit, and unclear plans of the Brotherhood (Ellison 310).
Aside from the brisk treatment of the narrator by members of the Brotherhood -- indicating that they are accustomed to getting exactly what they want -- they overwhelm him with a party that takes place in the lap of luxury (300-01) and a large sum of money with the promise of a handsome weekly salary (310). In addition to the money, Brother Jack gives the narrator a new, still unknown to the reader, identity.

Providing members with new identities is the reader’s first clue that the Brotherhood is merely the “big town” version of those white leaders from the Battle Royal back home. Brother Jack personifies both political and ideological aspects of the ideological state apparatus (310-11), and Brother Hambro, the hero’s mentor, personifies the legal aspect of the same (357). The Brotherhood operates under the leadership of Jack and several other white men (472), while Hambro, who is also white, is one of their chief theoreticians. These white leaders comprise the “Committee” (362), acting as the governing body of the Brotherhood. It is no mistake that both the Committee and the white leaders present at the Battle Royal are the physical embodiment of ideological state apparatuses. Although the Committee enjoys a much more formal structure, and appears to demonstrate racial tolerance (292), there are many underlying similarities between the two groups.

Much like the overt commodification of the black community for their entertainment, the Committee is guilty of the same crime, although, for political maneuvering (503). That Ellison’s hero is issued a new identity (309) upon entering the Brotherhood likens him to a product being issued a serial number. Furthermore, at a meeting during which the Committee is chastising their employee, the narrator, for doing what he thought was his job, Brother Jack exclaims that “crowds are only our raw materials, one of the raw materials to be shaped by our program” (472). This outburst illustrates that the masses are not guided, or utilized for their use value, but for their exchange value. The exchange value they confer is cashed in at a later time for political “alliances” (502) to further the Brotherhood’s unknown aims. Even the nameless hero is subject to the same commodification when he is told that he was “not hired to think” (496). He is simply a disposable object, one that is not given the respect to express an opinion.

In addition to commodification, the Brotherhood is guilty of creating a false consciousness. Committee members go about criticizing the narrator’s first speech as a “Brother” by calling it unscientific (350), meaning it did not follow their unspecified ideology. Although the nameless Brother undergoes indoctrination, it is worth mentioning that all discussion of ideology within the Brotherhood remains vague. This ambiguity leads to tension between the Committee and Ellison’s hero. Tyson asserts that “theoretical ideas [or ideologies] can be judged to have value only in terms of their concrete applications...their applicability to the real world (50). With this in mind, as well as the intended ambiguity of the Brotherhood’s true belief system, the reader is led to question how the Brotherhood’s dogma applies to the real world. The veiled nature of their ideology creates no clear goals, leaving it to be an ideal with the sole purpose of masking its own failure: i.e. false consciousness. If the Committee represents an ideological state apparatus, a construct being supported by the economic base, then they are just putting a new face on the “crummy lie [society] kept [the masses] dominated by” (Ellison 510). The recrimination inherent in this logic is that the Committee is simply the Northern
version of the Southern group that hosted
the Battle Royal.

By drawing upon this parallel that
Ellison put forth, one can see the goal of
_Invisible Man._ The connection of repressive
state apparatuses informs readers that
economic oppression of African-Americans
is not only a Southern “tradition.” The
pervasive oppression revolving around the
false consciousness and of the American
Dream does not only affect members of a
specific race, rather it affects members of a
specific socioeconomic class.

Ellison’s portrayal of “the hero as
victim” (Winther 115) coupled with the fact
that his hero is nameless, allowing him to
symbolize “everyman” provides a
cautionary tale for the reader. It is a hopeful
message, that the victimized narrator,
“because he has suffered and transcended
that suffering, he has become a more human
and humane American” (Trimmer 49). It is
asserted that this is a _hopeful_ message
because, after all, the traumatized narrator is
dictating his story directly to the reader, to
be aware at the outset rather than learning
his same lessons through similar hardship.

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