

Coal as the Fuel for a Mass Identity

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Oscar Wilde once advised, “be yourself; everyone else is already taken.” The protagonist of Ralph Ellison’s thought-provoking novel *Invisible Man* could really learn something about identity from Mr. Wilde’s wisdom. The author implements a motif of coal because its physical attributes, such as color and consistency, create a clear parallel between the material and the narrator’s racial background. Ellison alters the usages of coal—from violent to functional to isolating—in order to demonstrate how Invisible, the narrator, progresses: he initially rejects his African American heritage and associates himself with white society, but becomes increasingly inclined to accept his true roots. This exposes Ellison’s viewpoint that committing to a singular identity—in this case, one based solely on race—results in a disconnect from reality. Through strategically employing the motif of coal, Ralph Ellison conveys his two opinions regarding identity: people must accept all aspects of themselves, not just their heritage, and people must not identify with a group if they hope to establish a meaningful understanding of themselves.

Ellison opens the novel by displaying coal as a tool of violence, a concept that sparks fear; this corresponds to the narrator’s feelings toward his origins, for he rejects any association with his African roots. Coal first appears early in the work, when the narrator and a group of young African American men are fooled into picking up coins on an electric rug. Ellison uses simile to compare the experience of electric shocks to “roll[ing] through a bed of hot coals” (28). This immediately connects African Americans with coal, since the danger is something that only they, as a racial group, must experience. Further, since these coals bring about an “embarrass[ing]” (27) experience, Invisible’s shame about his roots becomes evident. The motif repeats when the narrator describes Dr. Bledsoe, the President of Invisible’s college, as a “coal-black daddy of whom [he is] afraid” (116). “Coal-black” refers to Dr. Bledsoe’s dark

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skin tone, highlighting his background. Also, “coal-black daddy” contrasts from the more familiar term, “sugar daddy,” underscoring that despite Bledsoe’s efforts to climb the social hierarchy, he is still more similar to coal than to sugar, grouping him into African American society. Again, this mention of coal occurs in a context of fear, because it reminds the narrator that the label “African American” is inescapable. Here, Ellison has the narrator desperately clinging to dreams of a white identity that is unavailable to him. By having the narrator fail and feel lost as a result, Ellison criticizes people’s tendency to strive to fit an unsuitable mold, rather than accepting themselves. The beginning of the novel includes images of coal that provoke fear, which illustrates the narrator’s irrational anxiety about his heritage.

Later in the novel, the motif of coal resurfaces in unnatural situations, which displays how the narrator is uncomfortable with the thought of accepting his race because he misconstrues the role of race in defining identity. When the narrator begins working at Liberty Paints, an engineer at the company named Lucius Brockway explains that “[their] white is so white you can paint a chunka coal and you’d have to crack it open with a sledge hammer to prove it wasn’t white clear through” (217). In this scene, Brockway—who is in a position of power relative to the narrator—suggests that there is value in changing the color of coal, which is analogous to “whitewashing.” This entails stripping an African American of his or her culture, and Brockway’s apparent pride in covering up inherent features—beyond simply external color—reinforces the idea that the narrator should reject his heritage. By presenting coal in this unnatural way, Ellison indicates that forming a meaningful identity requires people to embrace themselves entirely, so people should not conceal any traits. Later on, members of the Brotherhood—a society that uses aggression to counter white dominance—challenge their leader, Brother Jack, for adopting Invisible as an affiliate. When someone deems Invisible not “black enough,” he becomes defensive, wondering if he should begin to “sweat coal” (303). The narrator shows a complete change of heart, for he strives to wholeheartedly adopt the associations of his African American history to an extreme degree. Ellison portrays this approach as unnatural as well,

though, to challenge people's inclinations to assume a mass identity. The author uses a motif of coal to imply that the narrator goes about forming his character incorrectly; unlike *Invisible*, Ellison believes that race, along with other mass traits, cannot define an individual. Thus, both extremes—actively abandoning one's roots and attempting to embody an entire cultural history—are counterproductive because they implement such mass categorization.

Toward the end of the novel, Ralph Ellison incorporates coal acting as a fuel, which symbolizes the narrator's newfound dependence on his racial background to drive his understanding of identity. By choosing a resource that weakens with time, Ellison depicts *Invisible's* obsession with ancestry as a short-term solution to finding an identity, for he must eventually realize that his pursuit cannot be satisfied with a cultural categorization. When *Invisible* is walking along a street, he encounters coals performing their natural function, which brings about a sense of nostalgia. He recalls how he used to "bake [yams] in the hot coals of the fireplace" then bring "them cold to school for lunch" (262). Here, coal serves to bring heat, but the warmth is short-lived. Warmth is frequently associated with comfort, which corresponds to the inevitably fleeting consolation brought by *Invisible's* mass identity. Next, the narrator involves himself in a movement that requires people to violently "[splash] coal oil" (546). Coal reappears as a symbol of violence as opposed to a symbol of cultural pride, which sabotages any progress that the narrator had imagined towards an identity. Ellison does this in order to demonstrate how a mass identity is impractical because individual character cannot depend on a group. Finally, as a result of this betrayal, the narrator refuses to burn coal and instead burns paper, "scattering coal" (568). This scene shows *Invisible* surrounded by coal but opting to use alternative materials, portraying the substance as useless. This reveals how gravitating towards a mass identity leaves people emotionally burned and unable to reenter civilization. Ironically, the narrator's choice to group himself with others leaves him isolated from society. By illustrating the normal functions of coal, Ellison accentuates its inability to persist, which establishes the author's opinion regarding the temporary relief of racial identity.

Throughout this novel, Ralph Ellison showcases the motif of coal as a literary symbol for African American heritage, which helps him to communicate his position that identity forms as a result of self-acceptance and uniqueness. Coal first appears in fear-provoking situations, which reveals the narrator's initial rejection of his background. This establishes Ellison's point that identity requires an honest portrayal of oneself. Next, Ellison presents unnatural situations revolving around coal to clue readers in on the protagonist's misconception of identity. Finally, the author features coal's short-term functionality, capitalizing on the notion that it is not reusable, to expand the point that identifying with a group is unfulfilling. Overall, *Invisible Man* defines identity as an authentic compilation of unique qualities. Ralph Ellison designs the protagonist as a young man who is misled on his journey towards purpose in order to express the importance of self-realization, in the hopes that readers will establish a thorough understanding of their individual characters and, as a result, succeed in finding a sense of belonging. ●

Work Cited

Ellison, Ralph. *Invisible Man*. New York: Random, 1952.

Appendix



(Image from <http://netrightdaily.com/2012/03/time-to-end-the-war-on-coal/>)