

The Literary Effects of Metaphors and Symbolism: A Case Study on *Invisible Man* by Ralph Ellison

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Invisible Man is a novel written by Ralph Ellison, talking about how the protagonist struggled in society as an African-American, sought his own identity and sense of belonging, and finally accepted the reality of being “invisible” to live underground. The metaphors and symbols as key writing techniques in *Invisible Man* were analyzed in the paper with certain typical examples to reveal their research values for explorations of race issues in the book. The paper particularly highlights the tension embedded in the metaphors and the sarcasm conveyed through the symbols.

Keywords: *Invisible Man*, metaphorical tension, symbolic sarcasm

I. Briefing on *Invisible Man*

The writer of *Invisible Man* is Ralph Ellison. Inheriting the thoughts from Harlem Renaissance, Ralph Ellison is one of the most influential African-American writers. *Invisible Man* stands out for its unique perspective on identity-seeking within this thematic framework. During the early period between 1960s and 1970s, African-American literature underwent a transition from traditional “protest novels” with realistic descriptions to Bildungsroman narratives infused with surrealist and naturalistic elements. Ralph Ellison, as one of the representatives of the new school of African-American literature, explored the predicament of African-Americans from a distinctive view: “I am nobody but myself”. Ralph had the aspiration to reach the state of cultural integration between the black and the white, forming a national American culture for the new era. That’s why *Invisible Man* becomes a cultural research-oriented novel. For this reason, the current research subjects of the novel are mostly centered around the race problems and identity recognition showed as the essence of the book, but the literary language itself is somehow neglected. For example, Ralph’s resistance of the concept of “two Americas”, the relations between whiteness and masculinity, and the mid-century liberalism are discussed by some researchers. Besides, some Chinese researchers dig about metaphors and symbols of the novel, but comprehensive summary of the characteristics of the two literary techniques remain lacking. A deep exploration into this aspect of the novel could provide a singular perspective to know more about the psychological changes or the consciousness of the protagonist and the unique observation of people Ralph acquired in his life experiences.

The literary theories in the *Key Words of Western Literary Criticism* published by FLTRP will be utilized hereby to discuss the metaphors and symbolism in the book.

II. Analysis of Metaphors in *Invisible Man*—The Apt Tension of Metaphors in the Novel

At Ralph's time, there had been racial segregation. Many African-Americans aspired to get better education, entering universities without thinking why they should have not refused the system for separated colleges for them, or similarly, knowing its reason but pretended to accept the rules as the grandfather of "me" did in *Invisible Man*. Ralph dug deep into the silence of his group in this book with abundant metaphors and symbolic signs. Similes were utilized in large amount, describing scenes that shall be conveyed vividly, but metaphors differently imply how "me" reacted to events subconsciously. According to George Lakoff et. al, metaphors are the main mechanism by which we understand abstract concepts and express abstract reasons. Clifford Geertz, the renowned anthropologist who advocated for 'thick description' in cultural studies, emphasized that culture is a vast symbolic system, and mankind are cultural creations who are stuck in it. With an intent to study the thoughts and theme conveyed in *Invisible Man*, deep research about the metaphors and symbols into it is a paramount thing. This paper will focus on the metaphorical and symbolic characteristics of the novel, and reveal how the two techniques produce literary effects.

Metaphors can be divided into 3 categories—"active metaphors", "dormant metaphors", and "rigid metaphors". Active metaphors describe ones that had hardly been adopted before, while rigid metaphors refer to those used frequently in daily life by the common. For instance, "table legs" as a vivid metaphor has become one of the fixed usages in both China and English to refer to the end parts of a table. That is a "rigid metaphor". Differently, an active metaphor is like the time when an individual was firstly compared to an isolated island, people at that time would feel shock at it, almost regarding it as a conceit as the discrepancy is huge between the two things. Dormant metaphors, revealing the similarities between the tenor and the vehicle in a new, but not staggering way, are usually be seen in novels. There exists a tension between the tenors and the vehicles with the peak of it in active metaphors and the lowest tension in rigid metaphors. If grasped well, the tension between the tenors and vehicles would grab readers' attention to convey what the author intends to express. Metaphors herein of the novel unveil the subtle choice of vehicles by Ralph and his mastering of the metaphors' tension.

In the fourth chapter when "I" (the protagonist in the novel—written in first person, with certain omissions of quotation marks below to avoid repetition) faced a crisis that Dr. Bledsoe might kick me off university because I led Mr. Norton to see what should not be seen by him, Ralph used the metaphor "a small silken-haired, white-suited St. Nicholas" to show "my" feelings when ran into Mr. Norton again, especially because Mr. Norton comforted me by denying the whole process was my fault. In "my" eyes, the real decision whether I would be expelled was in effect up to Mr. Norton. His words were the orders of God, so I held huge gratitude when he said it was okay. Under that circumstance, Mr. Norton became the "St. Nicholas" for me, the Messiah for me to reserve my education opportunity I gained toughly from those white big shots. This metaphor was subtle enough to indicate how the black boy responded to supposed consolation when he mistook that he would stay in university as normal. "St. Nicholas", the model of Santa Claus, was a benevolent wealthy bishop sharing his property with needy ones. Kindness and generosity became the images of St. Nicholas, but the quality of him was endowed to Mr. Norton when "I" regarded Mr. Norton as "my" savior. It was an exaggerated distortion to put Mr.

Norton at the position of such a virtuous predecessor as “St. Nicholas”. So, the metaphor was full of meaning of sarcasms, even appearing twice in the book. Another place where this metaphor was set was in the Chapter two, the part when Mr. Norton’s appearance was described. From the lines, we could tell that the looking of Mr. Norton indeed bore similarity to St. Nicholas, but the high position related to the bishop “my” heart owed to Mr. Norton was a proof that “I” attached great importance to the power and recognition from the white. Ralph’s choice of this metaphor reflected the subconsciousness of “me” to relate the small favor (words with uncertain credibility explained for me) from Norton to the kindness of St. Nicholas, because the daily religious belief gave “me” the imagination space. The vehicle, naturally written, is both consistent with the character’s daily cognition of his belief, and an ironic display of how the white could influence the fate of the black. This metaphor belongs to the “active metaphor”, due to its novel application in describing a man as St. Nicholas, which was hardly adopted by others previously. It’s a great example of the appropriate tension between the tenor “Mr. Norton” and “St. Nicholas”, for the similarity exactly lies between them, but a sarcastic gap between their nature forms the magical tension for reader to sense.

In Chapter Twelve, a metaphor marks the character’s transition from naive aspirations of higher education to the awareness harsh reality of survival, and from humble submission to vocal advocacy for his group. This metaphor plays a pivotal role in the intermediate part of the novel, symbolizing the protagonist’s emotional and psychological transformation. The metaphor was depicted as “the ice was melting to form a flood in which I threatened to drown”, its significance lies in the absence of the tenor. It is one of the most suggestive metaphors, because the tenor must be inferred by readers. After exploration into such mentioned vehicle of this metaphor, the tenor could be speculated as the state in which “my” emotions will break out. Therefore, the metaphor forms a link between the abstract transfer of emotions and the specific scene of “melting ice”. The subtlety lies not only in the tenor’s latent expression but also in the tactful choice of the vehicle, which exhibited how the outrage inside me little by little elicited out by the miserable experiences in Harlem, as is contained by the connotation of the word “melt”. The cheating from Mr. Bledsoe, the oppression from the factory engineers and managers push the protagonist to a point where his heart is inclined to cry out against the inequality faced by his community, so it’s not so much a sudden realization as a gradual breakout. The slow process of recognizing the status-quo for me is a realistic pace consistent with an ordinary individual’s cognition, thus similar to the vehicle “melting ice”. Although this vehicle may bear more similarities with the tenor as an average one, there’s no doubt that the metaphor conveys the character’s incremental hatred towards the race prejudice by those that had hurt him, no matter they were white big shots, or the black guy of upper-class. Despite its feature as a “dormant metaphor”, which means it may also appear in other occasions due to its comparatively high frequency, the tension between this tenor and vehicle still exist to a degree in which readers would be guided to feel what the character could sense in accordance with the natural cognitive process of the character, evoking readers’ empathy.

Other examples of how Ralph made good use of metaphors to suggest the characteristics of the figures in the novel are the ones related to swearing from people at higher positions, or from those of lower-classes. It is the life-like words that endow the charm to the shape of characters. Sentences like “...but that you wound up at that sinkhole, that Golden Day”, “you two-bit, trouble-making union louse”, “He was a handkerchief-headed rat!” contain common metaphors said in daily life when people are in a fury (Ellison, 2005, p. 276). On the one hand, the first two sentences were from Mr. Bledsoe and Mr. Brockway, which shaped the characters of the arrogant

ones oppressing me. When these words are thrown up from Mr. Bledsoe and Mr. Brockway, it was a reflection of their real thoughts and their concealed true colors were unveiled. The noble ideals of establishing the university and the respected qualities of Mr. Bledsoe were what 'I' admired in the university, but Mr. Bledsoe changed his attitudes immediately after Mr. Norton was led by me to what shall not be discovered. All his gentle image, mild smiles and his kindness to students disappear instantly in such words of "sinkhole", as if his previous appreciation for the boy would be based on the boy's being loved by the white. In a similar way, Mr. Brockway's color became frightening the time he heard the bombing word "Union" for him no matter what I explained. His arrogance and fear of being replaced overflowed in the word "louse", because he was in a belief that his capability in the factory was unreplaceable. The metaphors in these sentences manifest how changeable those of higher classes treat towards "me". What's more, the metaphor, "handkerchief-headed rat", shows how indignant the woman was. Witnessing the bullying action from the white policeman and his crude conducts, the surrounding crowds produced a righteous feeling from their hearts. The woman was one of them, with her hatred towards compromise. Therefore, her words were a representative proof that most of minorities, opposed to concessions, agreed to resist, including African-Americans and those Asian-Americans, so those who retreated were like rats in their eyes. Here the metaphors are close to life, so readers could empathize the experiences of these life-like figures. Theoretically, the tension of such metaphors as "rigid" ones would have been small because of the frequent use of them in our daily lives, but it's the life-like words that call for our memory of individuals who indeed speak things like that and render us immersive in the plots, thus vitalizing the tension of metaphors.

As is shown above, the metaphors were arranged in every corner of the book to display the psychological activities and the observation of characters from the perspective of the protagonist, "me", grasping readers' attention. It could be regarded as a successful literary technique, because it displays apt tension between tenors and vehicles, whether the metaphors are "active", "dormant", or "rigid", achieving a high literary value.

III. Analysis of Symbols in *Invisible Man*—The Prominent Sarcasm of Symbols in the Novel

Closely tied to the theme, symbolism is extensively employed throughout the novel, among which the symbols of black and white colors appear in a high frequency. Generally, most writers utilize symbolism as euphemistic expressions to tell readers what they intend to deliver, leaving the thinking space and achieving the effect of a sudden enlightenment for readers. Often, readers cannot immediately recognize a symbol without careful consideration. Ralph, however, use evident symbols that readers can recognize without hesitation. The choice of these symbols is to reach sarcastic hints.

Taking the tenth chapter as an instance, "I" made my way to find a job in the factory as a worker stirring paint. It sounded like everything would go back on track if I worked following the prescribed order. However, with no experience, no teaching or training from Mr. Kimbro, and no basic professional knowledge about paint, I mistook another liquid as the needed one, so the irritable man dismissed me. It remains unclear whether this was due to prejudice against people like "me" or simply a result of my poor performance. There was a requirement to mix black liquid into the paint and then stir it until it becomes pure white, free from any stains of other colors. It was a challenging work, not lying in the addition of the black liquid, but of the stirring it into natural mixture. Herein the symbolism becomes obvious, even to readers who may not be particularly sensitive to literary devices, and it's about the races of two skins. Black represents African-Americans, while white stands for Americans

whose origins are from Europe. It's wise for Ralph to choose the paint as the symbol that is not abrupt in the chapter, consistent with the worker's job and paint principles. The paint bucket symbolizes American society mixed with at least both mentioned races, but it was sarcastic to be required to demonstrate only one of the two colors—white, illustrating how high the position of white people was at that time. The white occupied a dominant position as the white paint did in the bucket. If two colors were stirred, the normal situation would be a new color produced, but the black liquid was devoured in the bucket. Conspicuous words like “pure white” “as sound as the all-mighty dollars” clearly indicate the seemingly reasonable but actually ridiculous requirements, and the grey tinge caused by my mistakes was deemed as dirt. All the ridicule suggests that black guys had never been integrated into society as independent individuals. The sarcasm arises as the symbolism of American society is placed in it, because the convention of emphasizing white in the “bucket” sacrificed the visibility of the color of black. The satirical symbol is an echo with the title and the theme—visibility of “me” as a black boy and an individual who should be respected. There are a great number of symbols displayed through colors of white and black, like the “paint” in the novel.

Another place where symbolism plays a key role as a reminder of the agonizing past experiences of African-American is when “I” went into the office of Mr. Bledsoe, and found the “old leg shackle”. This is also a remarkable symbol that readers could recognize without hesitation. The function of the leg shackle is not only to express his anger at the history in a way not so radical and aggressive, but to reach the effect of lampooning the behaviors of people like Mr. Bledsoe, individuals of the same race with me but betrayed our group. According to the mental descriptions of “me”, my admiration for Mr. Bledsoe was apparent, for the great foundation laid for the university by him and the Leader, for the high position he had gained through years' accumulation and his gentleness and kindness to me. But opposite to my impressions, what Mr. Bledsoe did was like a kind of betrayal to my belief. He intended to kick me off university only for the reason of my having led Mr. Norton to places that should be concealed. What's worse was Mr. Bledsoe's words, nearly malicious slander towards me. “But in turn you dragged the entire race into the slime” “Nigger, this isn't the time to lie” (Ellison, 2005, p. 139). These statements shattered the “my” admiration and trust, especially the use of the derogatory term “nigger”, which I never expected to hear from Mr. Bledsoe (Ellison, 2005, p. 139). The so-called “the symbol of our progress”, the leg shackle, was actually only the tool of Mr. Bledsoe to acquire people's trust and respect. With the words blaming me, the shackle was thrown on the desk by him, because it was not of great significance for him, and not a warning of what his ancestors had experienced before, but a declaration in a conciliatory tone for him to gain the support of his group, a psychological suggestion for him to justify his conducts. It was hypocritical of him to claiming his loyalty to serving to his group, but simultaneously expelling his students away for the reason of destroying his own image in front of the white. All his insulting words and coward behaviors, the calling of “nigger” to his student, the thinking of his races who are brave to appeal the inequality as “patients”, and his flattery towards Mr. Norton by saying “you can't be soft with these people” (Ellison, 2005, p. 104), are obvious opposite behaviors of what he should do to help his group. In fact, the leg shackle was not a symbol of ‘progress’ but a reminder of the humiliating history that continues to linger, as well as a sarcasm on Mr. Bledsoe's betrayal. This symbol as a key element is also throughout in the whole novel whose frequency is as high as the colors. For example, in the 18th and 25th chapters, the leg shackle is one of the prime subjects of descriptions. According to the words in chapter 18, Brother Tarp was one of the victims of the “leg shackle” as he had worn it for a whole 19

years in the name of crimes. In fact, it was not the leg shackle that bounded Brother Tarp, and made him continuously suffer from the experience, but the so-called “justice” formulated by the white group that verdict him as a criminal without sufficient evidence. It is apparent that the unequal authority of the white has become the leg shackle to restrict “my” group, compared to the past leg shackle of real existence. The humiliation is gradually invisible to others, but noticeable to me.

Repetition could exhibit how important a symbol is, as clarifies above, the examples of colors and the leg shackle are frequent in the book. The “robin” is also one of such mentioned symbols. The robin appears for the first time in the lyrics when “I” was told that the so-called recommendation letters from Mr. Bledsoe were in effect orders that made things difficult for me, keeping me from finding a job. The robin is the kind of bird constantly preferred by poets or authors in countries all over the world. In this book, such symbol is no exception a key element worth digging. The tune whistled by the man and me was a traditional ballad, but the song seemed like a lament with deeper meaning for both of us, especially for me who was deeply distressed after learning the truth. It lies in the lyrics, because the robin appeared in repetition, and also haunted around my mind. “O well they picked poor Robin clean” was the revelation that I empathized with the robin, calling it “poor” bird (Ellison, 2005, p. 193). However, the poor robin was not the robin itself, but symbolizes the disadvantaged group, like African-Americans at that time. Questions like “who was Robin and for what had he been hurt and humiliated” “who had tied him and why had they plucked him” tortured me, maybe the scenes of being mocked by those white bigshots came back to me (Ellison, 2005, p. 193). In reality, the robin symbolizes me and others like me—black individuals “plucked” by white society. In the western culture, with the record of it relieving the pain for Jesus, the robin is seen as a pure and kind animal. Although blessed with holy religious meanings, the robins also became the victims, and were even oppressed by the followers of Jesus, forming a satirical effect. Its small size makes it an easy target for people to “pluck clean”, which is in the same nature of African-Americans’ disadvantaged position, though the figure of the guys was strong enough. The act of bullying such a pure creature symbolizes the sins committed by white society against black individuals. Therefore, the sarcastic meaning was produced naturally by taking the poor and little robin as a symbol of the big black individuals who had no strength to act in resistance. What is interesting is that during the same period when *Invisible Man* was published, another book with the similar theme, *To Kill a Mocking Bird*, contained this kind of bird as a central symbolism throughout in the book, so it can be seen that the robin was an impactful symbol in the culture, which could stimulate people’s feelings.

Importantly, there is an essential remarkable symbol appearing in the second half of the book, but containing one of the most central connotations of the novel. That is, the “name”. The new name equals to a new identity that was endowed to “me”, which was given to me without the agreement or any asking about “my” views. In the Chapter 14, the protagonist was still aware of himself in face of the new “name”, thinking that “I would be no one except myself—whoever I was” (Ellison, 2005, p. 311). This indicates that “I” had not yet fully fallen into the trap of blindly believing in the Brotherhood. However, due to the sense of glory and hot response from audiences of my speeches, I” gradually thought I had gained my rebirth through the name, and started to embrace a new life after joining the political campaigns that were energized by my speeches. Over time, I became lost in the directives of Brother Jack and the Brotherhood. By Chapter 17, I realized that “it seemed not to happen to me but to someone who actually bore my name” (Ellison, 2005, p. 379). It could be told that Brother Jack and the

Brotherhood were a kind of authoritative sign, and the new “name” of me symbolized an identity defined by the authority, instead of myself, changing my own cognition of how to view the world, and in what ideology to express my ideas. It can be further suggested in the 18th chapter that “I was only the cog in the machine”, which was arranged to one standard without any resistance or doubt, or the cog would be abandoned, and a new one will take the place of it. The tragic ending of the novel fulfills the prophecy of the relationship between the cog and the machine. This is a representative proof of how individuals are getting lost in the authoritative structures.

Remarkably, serve as ironic elements that reflect not only racial issues through the colors of white and black but also social problems such as the imbalance of power between individuals and authority, as well as class struggles highlighted through the suffering of vulnerable groups, symbolized by weak animals. These symbols permeate the entire book, playing vital role of sarcasm in subtle ways.

IV. Conclusion

With above examples analysis illuminated, the seriousness of racial issues naturally emerges. As readers know, the novel’s focus leans heavily on the keyword “invisible”, so the invisibility needs to be manifested in a strategic way to acquire the wanted effects. What’s more, due to the surrealism in the book, the sub-consciousness of the protagonist is also a highlighted part. The two points are exactly able to be revealed through the metaphors and symbols. Ralph employed metaphors with appropriate tension, like “my” desire of the saving from a “St. Nicholas” and the “melting ice” symbolizing my impulse to resist, to evoke the empathy of readers, and symbols with deep sarcasm to render them reflect on themselves whether they had committed such crimes towards “the robin”, or the people whose state was in the “shackle”.

With the aspirations that the metaphors and symbols could “speak” for the novel as the protagonist spoke for his race, the analysis was made in the paper.

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