

# INVISIBILITY AND BLINDNESS IN ELLISON'S *INVISIBLE MAN* AND WRIGHT'S *NATIVE SON*

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**Resumen:** El presente artículo examina dos conceptos clave de la literatura negra de los 40-50: la ceguera y la invisibilidad en el racismo. A través de Ellison y Wright, autores representativos del movimiento, discutiremos cómo estas ideas no sólo marcaron un antes y un después en la literatura sino también en el pensamiento de una sociedad que concebía las relaciones entre blancos y negros como un tópico casi tabú. Obras como *Invisible Man* y *Native Son*, altos exponentes del movimiento Afro-Americano, concienciaron a la sociedad de la necesidad de erradicar el racismo. Presentando los conceptos de ceguera e invisibilidad, estos autores enfrentaron al lector con la compleja naturaleza de este problema y sus factores subyacentes. En este estudio discutiremos cómo Ellison y Wright abordaron estos dos conceptos de forma similar. Además, las principales conexiones entre estas obras: simbología, metáforas, estereotipos y conductas de los personajes, también serán analizadas como los principales recursos literarios usados para explorar los roles de la ceguera y la invisibilidad. Este ensayo está dividido en cuatro partes: una introductoria donde se presenta el tema y el tipo de conexiones entre ambas novelas, dos apartados donde analizaremos los puntos comunes a través de la ceguera y la invisibilidad de los personajes, y un epígrafe final de conclusiones.

**Palabras clave:** ceguera - invisibilidad - Ellison - Wright - racismo

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**Abstract:** This article examines two key-concepts of the 40-50's black literature: blindness and invisibility in racism. Through the works of Ellison and Wright, representative authors of the movement, we are going to argue how these ideas not only changed literature but also the thought of a society that conceived the relationships between blacks and whites as a taboo topic. Novels like *Invisible Man* and *Native Son* as the highest exponent of the Afro-American movement made society aware of the necessity to eradicate racism. Presenting the concepts of blindness and invisibility, these authors face the reader to the complex nature of this problem and its subjacent factors. In this essay we are going to discuss how Ellison and Wright approached these two concepts in a similar way. Besides, the main connections between these works: symbology, metaphors, stereotypes and characters' behaviours, will also be analysed as the major literary resources used to explore the role of blindness and invisibility. This essay is divided in four parts: an introduction where the problem and the connections between the novels are presented, two parts where we are going to analyse the common points through the blindness and invisibility of the characters, and a final part with the conclusions.

**Keywords:** blindness - invisibility - Ellison - Wright - racism

## 1 INTRODUCTION

*Invisible Man is indebted to Native Son for certain themes such as the social 'invisibility' of blacks Americans and the 'blindness' of whites to their individuality (Johnson, 1989: 99).*

Reviewers like Johnson consider that Ellison and Wright's novels are closely related to each other for their depictions of blindness and invisibility. These two new concepts changed the social point of view about racism and made critics focus their attention on the flourishing black literature of the 40-50's. If previous novels like *Huckleberry Finn* showed only superficially the oppression of the white over the black, these two novels were more 'psychological' and added a new point of view: the black's blindness to revolve against his marginal state and his incapability of conceiving whites as individuals. In other words, racism is not only based on the way in which whites conceive blacks but also on the way in which blacks consider whites and even themselves. This revolutionary point of view made the concepts of blindness and invisibility to imbue a very important role in the everyday struggle against race differences.

The ideas of blindness and invisibility are essential in Ellison and Wright's thinking. Therefore, before analysing some of their passages it is important to approach these concepts. On the one hand, invisibility can be defined as "the situation of men whose individual identity is denied" (Lieber, 1972: 86). On the other hand, blindness is the state of those who refuse them as individual beings. Thus, these conditions are complementary: "If I am invisible to you, you are blind to me" (Foster, 2013). This close relationship is perfectly represented in the following reflection of the narrator in *Invisible Man*:

I am invisible simply because people refuse to see me. That invisibility to which I refer occurs because of a peculiar disposition of the eyes of those with whom I come in contact. A matter of the construction of their inner eyes, those eyes with which they look through their physical eyes upon reality (Ellison, 1952, in Nina, 2003: 2077).

Ellison and Wright introduced an innovative point in their novels: blindness is not only a matter of whites and invisibility a matter of blacks, blacks and whites can be mutually blind and invisible. While whites are blind because they conceive blacks as a mass rather than as individuals, blacks are blind for submitting to their inferiority and for not conceiving any white exception as an individual being. In *Native Son*, Bigger and Mary are blind to each other and so invisible. During the speech in *Invisible Man*, the narrator and the audience also manifest these conditions. Another point in common is that they portray blindness as a matter of self-perception, of how people regard their actions. The Daltons are blind because they do not admit the exploitation of high rented blacks.

Moreover, the blindfolded boys from the Battle Royal are blind for not recognizing their humiliation.

However, Ellison and Wright did not only represent these motifs by the characters' actions and thoughts, they went beyond and tried to depict blindness and invisibility in an illustrative way. Taking into consideration that Ellison was the disciple and close friend of Wright, their literary styles were very similar. Thus, they use metaphors, symbols and even a discriminatory language to represent blindness and invisibility. This is a very important point for two reasons: because we can find a lot of connections between these novels and because it is the best way to understand Ellison and Wright's approach to blindness and invisibility.

## 2 *INVISIBLE MAN*<sup>1</sup> BY RALPH ELLISON (1952)

In *Invisible Man* blindness and invisibility are often represented by metaphors and symbols. The passage of the Battle Royal<sup>2</sup> when the whites blindfold the boys resembles this idea in a very clear way. Critics like Muyumba agree with this and state that «Ellison blindfold the boys to play his themes of blindness and invisibility in the context of white viewership» (Muyumba, 2009: 60).

Therefore, when they «allow themselves to be blindfolded with broad bands of white cloth» (Ellison, 1952, in Nina, 2003: 2086), two different kinds of blindness are found: a literal and a metaphorical one. Through their literal blindness and their white cloths (note the colour), Ellison portrays the figurative blindness of both the boys and the whites. Consequently, their mutual invisibility is also reflected.

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<sup>1</sup> *Invisible Man* contains the same ideas about blindness and invisibility as *Native Son*. It can be considered as an extension of these concepts previously exposed by Wright. As one of the most important novels of black literature, it is an image of the black community's conscience during the fifties in America. Ellison's reflections represent the inner feelings of a race that was in a deep fight against discrimination. Thus, deeply inspired by *Native Son*, he published his masterpiece with the same essence.

<sup>2</sup> The Battle Royal, one of the most important passages of *Invisible Man*, is full of symbols, metaphors and events that illustrate the ways in which Ellison analyzed blindness and invisibility. The black protagonist is invited to give a speech about freedom in front of hundreds of whites. However, he is deceived and forced to participate in a racist show where he is going to be humiliated simply for the colour of his skin. He is forced to do cruel things like beating his friends and even being blindfolded. Ellison tried to represent how blacks are blind for allowing themselves to be humiliated and for submitting to their stereotype of inferior beings. Whites' blindness is also represented. Consequently, both races are invisible to each other as individuals.

The boys' blindness is stressed because they «allow» themselves to be blindfolded, accepting their racial stereotype of submission. The fact that «blindfolded [...] can no longer control their motions and have no dignity» (Ellison, 1952, in Nina, 2003: 2087) reflects their incapability to recognize their humiliation. Thus, they are invisible as human beings as much to the whites as to themselves. Moreover, the «white» cloths are symbols of the whites' blindness. They use them to blindfold the boys according to their traditional stereotype of savages. Ellison represents blindness in a more powerful way when the blindfolded boys are forced to beat each other:

Everyone fought hysterically. It was complete anarchy. Everybody fought everybody else. No group fought together for long. Two, three, four, fought one, then turned to fight each other, were themselves attacked (Ellison, 1952, in Nina, 2003: 2087-2088).

This literal blind fight is a significant portrayal of both boys and whites' figurative blindness. The boys are blind because they do not realize that they have to fight against the whites and not against the people of their own race. Moreover, their frenetic blind battle correlates with the whites' treatment of them: as they knock each other without distinction, the whites humiliate them not distinguishing who is who. Therefore, invisibility appears again in both races due to the blacks' lack of self-perception and the whites' prejudices against them.

Blindness and invisibility are also found in the whites' discriminatory language. During the Battle Royal they yell things like «I don't like his looks», «[L]et me at those black sonsabitches!» or «Kill that big boy!» (Ellison, 1952, in Nina, 2003: 2086-2088), manifesting their denial to see blacks beyond their stereotype of savages. Moreover, when the Invisible Man finishes his speech, the superintendent congratulates him saying things like «[H]e'll lead his people» or «the destiny of your people» (Ellison, 1952, in Nina, 2003: 2092-2093). Expressions like «your people» or «his people» suggest division and their incapability to see blacks as equal as the rest. Thus, blacks are invisible to them as individuals who can be integrated in society.

### **3 *NATIVE SON*<sup>3</sup> BY RICHARD WRIGHT (1940)**

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<sup>3</sup> *Native Son* is considered the first black literature novel that examined the psychology of both blacks and whites, being an inspiration source for subsequent authors. Bigger, the major character, has to struggle

As was stated, *Native Son* and *Invisible Man* are closely related. Therefore, the following analysis of some characters in Wright will show their common points. The first one is that he also uses metaphors to portray these themes. Just like the blindfolded boys, the literal blindness of Mrs Dalton represents the figurative blindness of all characters, but specially of herself and her husband. Reviewers like Giles state that «Mrs Dalton's physical blindness is a metaphor for the absence of insight into black suffering that characterizes the limited vision of herself and her husband» (Giles, 1995: 80).

One of the reasons why the Daltons are blind is that they are incapable of seeing Bigger beyond his stereotype of inferiority. When Mrs Dalton comes into Mary's bedroom –although she cannot see Bigger– she never imagines that he is there and much less that he is killing her daughter. Her literal inability to see him resembles their incapability to regard him as dangerous as any white. Like them, the police also ignores his intelligence, thinking that the murder and its cover-up were «too elaborated to be the work of a Negro mind» (Wright, 1940: 275). The literal blindness of Mrs Dalton is extended to characters like Jan and Mary, who do not understand Bigger's feelings. On the following lines, Bigger reflects on her blindness and realizes that other characters are blind too:

Jan was blind. Mary had been blind. Mr Dalton was blind. And Mrs Dalton was blind; yes, blind in more ways than one [...] Mrs Dalton had not known that he was in the room with her: it would have been the last thing she would have thought of. He was black and would not have figured in her thoughts on such an occasion. Bigger felt that a lot of people were like Mrs Dalton, blind... (Wright, 1940: 137)

Just like Mrs Dalton cannot see, the real conditions of Bigger's race are invisible to herself and her husband. They charge blacks with high rents and justify their actions stating that «to charge them less rent would be unethical» (Wright, 1940: 357). To consider it 'unethical' is to be blind by the prejudices of a racist society. Moreover, they do not accept that their intentions to help blacks are ways to conceal their own abuses. As Max said, their «philanthropy is as tragically blind as her sightless eyes!» (Wright, 1940: 421). The passage of the ping-pong tables shows their ignorance towards their own actions and the conditions of blacks (consider Max's emphasis in «see»):

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against the unfair power of whites like the Daltons and the justice. His life, full of crimes, confusion and anger, is a perfect representation of the conscience that blacks had during the fifties. A great part of the black community, influenced by the media racist propaganda, the justice and the ancestral thinking, submitted to the whites' dominium and only a few like Bigger remained to fight against it. Whites, also influenced by these aggressive ideas, could not conceive blacks as equal beings. This novel is the perfect representation of the fighting against pre-established stereotypes and the unfairness of the American discriminative society.

Mr Dalton: What this boy has done will not influence my relations with the Negro people.

Why, only today I sent a dozen ping-pong tables to the South Side Boy's Club...

Max: Will ping-pong keep men from murdering? Can't you *see*? [...] This boy and millions like him want a meaningful life, not ping-pong (Wright, 1940: 325).

The relationship of Jan and Mary with Bigger is very significant to continue exploring blindness and invisibility. While they fail to understand his feelings as an individual, he sees them as an oppressive white force instead of as people with good intentions. Thus, they are blind and invisible to each other. One example of Jan and Mary's blindness is their language, often discriminatory. Just like in *Invisible Man* the superintendent says things like «he'll lead his people» (Ellison, 1952, in Nina, 2003: 2092), their language also suggests division between races, making Bigger aware of his inferiority. The following lines of Mary exemplify this point:

You know, Bigger, I've long wanted to go into those houses and just *see* how your people live [...] I just want to *see*. I want to *know* these people [...] Yet they *must* live like we live [...] They live in our country... In the same city with us... (Wright, 1940: 101)

Although she pretends to be friendly, she ignores that expressions like “your people” and «these people», «they» and «we», or «our» and «us», have a sense of separation and increase Bigger's shame. Moreover, the sentence «I just want to *see*» (in italics) depicts her blindness, and her failure to see his individuality and feelings. Jan manifests the same when he asks: «You live with *your* people?» or «I see what they've done to *those* people» (Wright, 1940: 106-108).

The way Jan and Mary treat Bigger emphasizes much more their blindness. They are very friendly with him and even encourage him to have dinner in the black neighbourhood. Nevertheless, although they have good intentions, they do not really understand that he is not used to deal with white people, much less in this way. They are insensible to his emotions, blind to realize that he is uncomfortable. Thus, just like his feelings are invisible to them, Bigger also feels invisible:

He was trying desperately to understand [...] they made him feel his black skin by just standing there, one holding his hand and the other smiling. He felt he had no physical existence at all right then [...] He felt naked, transparent (Wright, 1940: 98).

However, this passage also proves that Bigger is as blind as them. To him, «white people were not really people; they were a sort of great natural force» (Wright, 1940: 144), a force that has always oppressed him. Therefore, he is incapable of seeing Jan and Mary in a different way, he cannot regard them as exceptions, as individuals who really pretend to be kind. In a conversation with Max, Bigger manifests his inability to see Mary beyond the

traditional stereotype of whites as oppressors:

She and her kind own the earth. She and her kind say black folks are dogs [...] Maybe she was trying to be kind; but she didn't act like it. To me she looked and acted like all other white folks... [...] She's the same colour as the rest of them (Wright, 1940: 380).

Like the white cloths in the Battle Royal, the symbol of the snow plays an important function in *Native Son*. It impedes Bigger to escape and even «blinds» him preventing him from seeing his surroundings clearly. Therefore, for being an obstacle and also for its «white colour», it represents the oppression of the white race against him (Foster, 2013). However, in the passage where Bigger confronts Jan with a gun, the snow can be –in a certain sense– a portrayal of their blindness:

They faced each other; huge wet flakes of snow floated down slowly, forming a delicate screen between them. Bigger had his hand inside of his shirt, on his gun. Jan stood staring, his mouth open (Wright, 1940: 201).

The «screen of snow» is like a barrier that symbolizes their inability to understand each other. On the one hand, Bigger is still incapable of regarding Jan as an individual, thinking about shooting him and not recognizing that violence is useless. On the other hand, Jan ignores Bigger's danger as an individual, being surprised and «staring with his mouth open».

The media has a powerful influence on blindness and invisibility. Films like *Trader Horn* –which Bigger watches– do not only corrupt the minds of the white race but also the minds of a black race that suffers their racist propaganda. When the announcer says things like «beasts fight beasts» –while blacks appear fighting lions– (Van Dyke, 1931), the media propagates a sense of white superiority that increases whites' prejudices against blacks and viceversa. Moreover, the newspapers also portray these conditions. They depict Bigger as a savage and condemn him before his trial simply for his skin:

He is about five feet, nine inches tall and his skin is exceedingly black. His lower jaw protrudes obnoxiously, reminding one of a jungle beast [...] It is easy to imagine how this man overpowered little Mary Dalton, raped her, murdered her [...] (Wright, 1940: 309).

Therefore, their role is decisive in his sentence. Influenced by their descriptions of Bigger, the judge does not appreciate Max's plea and condemns him without considering his background, a context influenced by all these racist propaganda. On this passage, Max criticizes the effects of the newspapers on Bigger's trial:

How can I make the picture of what has happened to this boy show plain when a thousand newspapers have already drawn it in lurid ink? Dare I put his fate in the hands of a jury

whose minds are already conditioned by the press of the nation; a press which has already reached a decision as to his guilt [...]? (Wright, 1940: 413).

## CONCLUSION

During the fifties, Afro-American literature presented a revolutionary vision of racism. The impact of blindness and invisibility in *Native Son* and *Invisible Man* made this movement to grow and to change the general social thought. Ellison and Wright based their works on their own experiences during childhood like the discriminatory treatment of blacks and their lack of rights, showing that racism was not as simple as a white oppressing a black: the way in which blacks conceive themselves was essential. They were blind to revolve against their stereotype of inferior beings and that was the main problem to solve the conflict. Thus, the ideas of blindness and invisibility played important roles in the interracial relationships.

The psychological approach of these novels depicted each character's thoughts, reactions and feelings to comprehend the causes, effects and mechanism of racism. As pointed out in the introduction, if previous novels were too superficial, dealing only with the figure of the white oppressor against the black, these novels went beyond presenting a new point of view where blacks are decisive. The prejudices against races based on the blind belief in the traditional stereotypes of blacks as savages and whites as oppressors, made both races to be blind and to conceive each other as a mass rather than as individuals, being mutually invisible as human beings. This is the essence of racism, the main message that Ellison and Wright tried to transmit in their masterpieces. The figure of a blind Bigger incapable of regarding Jan and Mary as exceptions, or the narrator in *Invisible Man* submitting to his stereotype of inferiority, represents how blacks can have the same prejudices as whites. Of course, whites like the spectators in the *Battle Royal*, the Daltons or Britten show the cruel face of the traditional stereotype of the white oppressor.

The similar style of *Native Son* and *Invisible Man* is a clear manifestation of the close relationship that both authors maintained during their professional lives. Their novels presented the same essence in content as well as similar references to the motifs of blindness and invisibility. In both works the reader can easily prove that the language, symbols and metaphors are clear portrayals of the characters' thoughts and the general context of the novel. All these literary resources can be analysed as messages of the deplorable state of interracial relationships during the mid-twentieth century. The literal blindness of Mrs Dalton and the blindfolded boys are constructed as metaphors to criticize the reality of that historical movement: whites were incapable of conceiving blacks as equal

beings and blacks could not 'see' farther from their traditional stereotype of servants, submitting to the white oppressive force. The same happens with the symbols: the snow or the 'white' cloths are direct messages of the white's power in the whole world. The language, as has been proved, offers a very interesting depiction of blindness, giving a sense of separation and inequality.

Definitely, the ideas of blindness and invisibility enriched the literature of the fifties and encouraged society to eradicate one of the main problems that had always affected humanity. The most important point of *Native Son* and *Invisible Man* is that they, through blindness and invisibility, illustrated the ways of thinking of blacks and whites, drawing in gold letters the first steps to bring opposite races near and finish with the differences between blacks and whites.

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