

Searching for Identity in Dilemma

— Symbolism in *Native Son* and *Invisible Man*

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Abstract. As the representatives and classics of African American literature in the history of American literature, “*Native Son*” and “*Invisible Man*” portrayed two classic black images in their respective times, with their profound social significance, Bigger, from the Tolerant to violent, and “I” have the low self-esteem, even without the name. It has been questioned for hundreds of years what and how African Americans search for the real identities for themselves. The paper is to know more about the inner world of the African Americans and the potential social background by analyzing the symbolisms in the works respectively.

Introduction

African American literature is the most sensitive one in American literature, which is also the forever issue as long as the different skins exist. Most African American literature reflected the social and cultural background at that time. So we can say African American literature history is somewhat the history of African American. Therefore, we can see their dilemma, their compromises and struggling when facing the slavery and discrimination, and then what on earth is their identity? They are still searching though it is mostly considered a symbol of the myth.

Early African American literature, the black protagonists of novels are tame and obedient like that of Mrs. Stowe. Richard Wright’s *Native Son* changed the image of Negro, who was a brand new Negro full of protests. It is believed in Western critics that only the publishing of *Native Son* means the beginning of African American literature. Then the publication of Ralph Ellison’s *Invisible Man*, which was a story of a no name person searched for his identity in America, gave a rise to African American literature. So we can say that the two books represent the achievement of that before 1960s in African American literature. Well Ralph Ellison, as the student of Richard Wright, separated his work from the tracing of Richard Wright’s for his insisting that Wright’s work is focusing on the form, the protest, but ignores its art approaches.

We do not deny that Richard abandoned some of traditional black culture, but in deed he is advancing a new and more independent black culture, of course, during the searching, he faced the dilemma, as Dubois’s concept of double-consciousness, so in his work, he used a lot of symbolisms to expressing the hero’s dilemma when searching for the true self. And Ellison continued to use the dilemma symbolism for his new and more common significance for blacks and everyone. So symbolism is the way of expressing blacks’ dilemma of double-consciousness when searching for identity in works.

White

As black novelists, Wright and Ellison display great sensitivity to white and the comparison between white and black. The image of white penetrates the first two books of *Native Son* by Wright. At the beginning of the story, the author depicts a “white” game played by Bigger Thomas and his companion. While playing, Bigger and his friend feel “the vast white world that sprawled and towered in the sun before them”. While driving for Mary Dalton, a rich girl, Bigger notices her white tiny hands. Sitting between Mary and Jan, Bigger feels like “sitting between two vast white

looming walls.” In the description of Mrs. Dalton, white is stressed almost every time. Mrs. Dalton is a tall, thin, white woman. She always dresses herself in white. Her face and hair are completely white. Her lips are white, too. Even her gray eyes are almost as white as her face, hair and dress. In Bigger’s eyes, she is a white blur, a floating and terrible white ghost. It is this ghost that frightens Bigger and makes him kill Mary accidentally. The cat, which is following Mrs. Dalton all the time, is white. The white cat’s two green burning pools—pools of accusation and guilt stare at Bigger while he is burning Mary’s dead body. When a group of reporters go to Mr. Dalton’s house and want to find out the truth of the alleged kidnapping, the big white cat leaps upon Bigger’s shoulder and clutched his coat with claws. Bigger feels that all white objects are dangerous, giving him great pressure. The white faces of Mrs. Dalton and Britten become dangerous white skeet in the burning fire in the basement.

The series of images in *Native Son* have obvious symbols. The white snow, the white cat and the white men all together form a vast, forceful, and cruel white society which racial segregation and racial oppression are practiced. It is this terrible white society that is tormenting and oppressing Bigger. It makes Bigger take a risk in desperation. If the snow, the white walls, the white cat, the white faces, the white hands, the white hair and the white bones symbolize the white men’s discrimination and destruction to the blacks, then the fire which is used to burn Mary’s body symbolizes Bigger’s fury and resistance. The burning fire in the furnace under the snow-covered ground has deep meaning. The fire not only burns the innocent white girl but also sends out a message: racial discrimination, racial segregation and racial oppression are sure to cause the black’s violent revolt.

Ellison’s description of white mainly stresses on the comparison of white and black. The white trustee Mr. Norton, a member of the Board of Directors of a college, wears a pair of white shoes trimmed with black. At a snowy night, three white mounted policemen ride three black horses, patrolling on the street. The building of the black college is white. Near this college, there is a roaring black powerhouse. The series of comparison between white and black have multiple meanings: the black are stepped and ridden by the white; they support the white and provide energy for the running of social machines controlled by the white; if they want to revolt, they will be suppressed fiercely.

The most outstanding description about the relationship between black and white in *Invisible Man* is the symbolic description to “Optic white”. “Optic White” is a kind of white paint. The manufacture of this paint needs unique technology. A few drops of this additive are put in the ordinary white paint. Ten drops are enough, no more or no less. Otherwise, the white paint will become gray. Only when the additive diffuses can it make the white paint whiter and brighter. The people working in the laboratory of the paint factory invented such an absurd technology. This experiment is a great success. It can be used to paint a piece of coal. What’s more, you can not prove the coal is not white, clear through unless you crack it open with a sledgehammer. Therefore, the Optic White has a good reputation. People think it as trust-worthy as the U.S. dollars. The government orders it specially and the national monument is to use it to paint. Besides these, almost everything in the future is to use it to paint. The Optic White undertakes a glorious task to keep American pure. All these form a group of images. It’s difficult to have full understanding of all these symbols. However, the main implication can be found out easily, that is: the whites brainwash the blacks, separate them and assimilate them. At the same time, they draw a few “black aristocrats” over to their side to work for them so as to consolidate the white society. Apart from that, if we think it more carefully, more implications can be found. For example, the black additive is used to make white paint whiter; this indicates the protagonist is used as the mouthpiece by the brotherhood, as the tool to let out their lewd desire by the white women. The coal is painted white, it symbolizes the white men have definite control over the blacks. The blacks are required to do what the whites ask them to do. They have to wear masks that won’t be smashed unless they die. They are invisible.

To manufacture Optic White, a certain kind of additive is necessary. But it must be a special additive. When the protagonist puts in another kind of additive, the paint becomes gray. This unfit additive is the protagonist himself. The true additive is Lucius Brockway, the man in charge of the

engine room of the paint factory. This black man has been working hard under the ground for years. However, he has no complaint of the terrible working conditions and poor living conditions. On the contrary, he hates the labor union deeply. He doesn't like the organization whose aim is to win rights for the workers. He is loyal to the boss and madly clings to his dark engine room. He is proud of his contribution to the paint factory. His advertisement for the Optic White "If it's Optic White, It's the Right White" clearly shows that he has changed completely from black to white.

Ellison and Wright are both fond of the use of white to symbolize, but they go in a different way. Wright's symbolism is frequently accompanied by the emotional activities of the people, whereas Ellison's symbolism is more rational, it reveals the author's abstract understanding to the whole society and his deep thought about the fate of the people.

Wright's white symbol is interwoven with Bigger's frightful hatred. The sudden emergence of Mrs. Dalton frightens Bigger and makes him kill Mary in great despair. The scenes of killing can be found in all of Wright's novels. These scenes are one of the plots. The protagonist's emotions change greatly at such moments. Some scenes have deep symbolic meanings. Bigger's manslaughter of Mary is one example and the burning of Mary's dead body is another. They both hint such a viewpoint: the black's violent revolt is caused by the white's discrimination and oppression. The revolt makes them understand themselves and so that they earn a new life. The protagonists' strong feelings are poured into the symbolic scenes by the author. So Wright's symbolism is always concreted with frightful atmosphere.

Ellison's symbolism is not the same case. It usually has no connection with people's feelings. The author depicts it casually. For example, In *Invisible Man* the dancing toy is described many times. It symbolizes the tragic fate of the blacks as well as that of the western people. There are two toys in the briefcase of the protagonist: one is an iron-made bank, the other a dancing toy controlled by a thin wire. That bank is a cast-iron figure of a very black, red-lipped and wide-mouth Negro. The dancing toy is a merry-making tool. Both toys symbolize the poor situation of the black people. They are treated as the merry-making tool of the whites. They can't get rid of the cursed situation. In fact, the two toys symbolize not only the black people but also everyone. All people, no matter powerful or weak, are only toys controlled by an invisible wire—the same case as Clifton's paper toy. No one, even the most powerful one, can resist the material, social, political pressures that oppress him. All these have great control over man. They can't be seen, but they are everywhere. There is no way to get rid of them.

Blindness

Blindness is another symbol which Ellison and Wright are interested in describing. Mrs. Dalton is said to be very interested in black people. But she is a blind woman. She can't see Bigger and any other black people. The blindness compels Bigger to kill Mary accidentally. In fact, it is her blindness that becomes the direct cause of Bigger's tragic fate. Not only is she blind, but also Jan, Mary and Mr. Dalton are blind. In *Native Son* Wright points out the reason for whites' blindness: they are invisible to everything that is unfit for their demand. Racial discrimination of the whites makes it impossible for them to understand the blacks. There is a wide gap between the blacks and the whites. Even Max, the one who understands Bigger better than the others can't find out the motives for Bigger's crime. Finally, when Bigger comes to understand himself and express what he thinks of the murder, Max is astonished and afraid. He can't understand Bigger whom he is trying his best to defend. "Max groped for his hat like a blind man". And he goes away in a hurry. Invisibility is one of the themes of the novel *Invisible Man*. In order to express this theme, Ellison also uses symbol of blindness. "The protagonist is seen as a role (jazz musician or black comedian) or a function (street-sweeper or servant) or as a mask (an agreeable smile which hides anger). But he is not seen as a fully individual person and therefore he is invisible." The whites have poor eyesight. The blindness of Jack, the leader of the brotherhood, symbolizes his attempt to the dignity and individuality of the blacks and all of his subordinates. When the protagonist angers Jack, a glass eye suddenly erupts out of Jack's face. The protagonist suddenly realizes what has happened—"yes, and blindness; he doesn't see me. He doesn't even see me".

Regretfully many blacks are blind too. They blindly ingratiate themselves with the whites. They blindly endure the white's torture to them. Even their revolts are blind—Bigger kills two innocent girls, Mary and Bessie; the blacks in Harlem led by Ras the Exhorter beat, smash and loot a lot of things. Wright points out: such kind of rebels close their eyes, beat blindly, they don't care what or who will fight back. Special attention should be paid to what Bigger says just before execution: "I won't be crying more when they take me to that chair. But I will be- b- be feeling inside of me like I was crying—I will be feeling and thinking that they didn't see me and I didn't see them——"these are the key words to well understand the symbol of blindness.

Flight

The symbol of flight appears making advertisement, Bigger rolls the words slowly from his lips, "God, I'd like to fly up there in that sky." Also Bigger envies a slate-colored pigeon that can fly freely. "That pigeon rose swiftly through the air on wings stretched so taut and sheer that Bigger could see the gold of the sun through their translucent tips." The protagonist in *Invisible Man* runs fast to escape the pursuit of the police after he has made an anti-banishment speech involuntarily. At that time the author describes a group of pigeons. These white birds flutter up and away, flapping their wings violently. The image of boomerang also appears many times in *Invisible Man*. Boomerang, a weapon of the Australian natives has the characteristic of returning to the thrower if it fails to hit something. Ellison uses boomerang to symbolize the tragic fate of the protagonist. The protagonist is still an invisible man although he tries his best to get self-realization. The moving orbit of the boomerang implies the painful roundabout course taken by the American blacks while they are fighting for complete liberation. It also symbolizes the tragic fate of the contemporary western intellectuals. They have the eagerness to get realization, but they never get it.

Conclusion

Many domestic and foreign critics have made comments on Ellison and Wright's different novels. Most of the comments concentrate on the difference between the two novelists. In this article, I pay special attention to the similarities between Ellison and Wright. Through the analysis of their use of symbolism, I should say close relationship exists between the two novelists.

Well the relationship between the two novelists shows that the common sense of all the African American novelist, they could find the truth in the reality only by Symbolism, which is the indication of the dilemma of blacks in America, with pride and anger.

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