

Analysis of the “Hole” in Invisible Man based on Plato’s Cave Allegory

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Abstract. Ralph Ellison’s novel *Invisible Man* mentions a “hole” the nameless black young man lives in. Telling the story of himself, the invisible man showed readers his transition from hibernating in the “hole” to walking out of the “hole”, which reflects his journey of seeking an effective solution for black people to fit into society. Based on Plato’s Cave Allegory, this paper analyzes how four phases in the invisible man’s journey of seeking the “truth” correspond to the phases in the Cave Allegory. Meanwhile, this paper attempts to analyze the “hole” metaphor, the “truth” that repeatedly appears, and different characters in this book to appreciate the author’s unique intention in using the “hole” metaphor.

Keywords: Plato’s Cave Allegory; The Hole; *Invisible Man*; Ralph Waldo Ellison.

1. Introduction

1.1. The “Hole” in Invisible Man

Ralph Waldo Ellison, a renowned African American author in the 20th century, penned the famous novel *Invisible Man*. It tells the story of a young African American man who, in the nineteenth century, lived in a “hole”- a section of the basement that had been shut off and forgotten by the whites. He had a strong conviction that he could fulfill his dream by following the orders of the white people, but eventually, he realized this was only a figment of his imagination. After encountering the betrayal of Dr. Bledsoe, whom he respected, and the manipulation of Brother Jack, he chose to hibernate in the “hole” to escape from reality. Nevertheless, in the epilogue, he realized that for such a long time, he was always living in such a “hole” created by the white, which was seemingly warm and full of artificial light, namely, rife with hallucination, so finally, he geared up all his courage to walk out of the “hole” and began his new life with his own identity. Most importantly, by telling his story, the invisible man tried to help more black men find the truth and walk out of this “hole”.

The invisible man’s escape from the “hole” and search for truth correspond to the journey of the prisoner who is released accidentally and finds the truth of the world in Plato’s Cave Allegory. Therefore, the Cave Allegory can be used as a powerful tool to analyze the “hole” metaphor and connotations of “truth” in *Invisible Man*.

1.2. Plato’s Cave Allegory

In *The Republic*, Plato put forward the well-known Cave Allegory, which is usually applied in educational and political fields but can also be applied in literary analysis. In the Cave Allegory, the prisoners’ transition can be divided into four phases, from being hidden from the truth to seeing and accepting the truth.

Since childhood, the prisoners have been confined to an underground chamber. Chains bound their legs and necks so that they could not move, leaving them unable to perceive anything beyond their confines. And marionette players, in their shadows, portray the puppets and all that can be seen by the captives.

A prisoner, upon being liberated and abruptly compelled to stand and rotate his neck towards the light, experiences sharp pain, unable to recognize the realities of which in his earlier years he had only seen



shadows; this confusion leads him to believe that the shadows he had seen are more accurate than the objects before him.

Grasping the steep and rugged incline, he is held fast until he is forced into the sun's rays, his pain and irritation alleviated. Then, gradually, the prisoner accustoms himself to the higher world. In the final phase, after being exposed to the truth, he will feel eager to save his fellows in the cave, tell them the truth, and discover themselves.

The four phases of a prisoner in a cave, from being chained to being released, from firmly believing in the falsehood to realizing and finally accepting the truth, correspond to the four phases of the invisible man's truth-discovery journey, namely, Confinement without Awareness, Liberty to See the Truth, Recovery and Adaption to the Truth, and Return to Save Others in the Hole.

2. Phase One: Confinement without Awareness

In this phase, the nameless black young man grew up with a firm belief that adhering to the whites could bring a brighter future. He believed that the only way of living a decent life was always being docile, servile, and humble to win the favor of the whites. That was the "truth" he firmly believed in how this world functions.

The invisible man's psychological process and action reflect this firm belief. After hearing his grandfather's last words before death, which told him to undermine the whites with obedience, though being bewildered and frightened that perhaps one day the whites would find out his "betrayal" as his grandfather said, the nameless black man instead felt more afraid to act in the way that the whites disliked. Moreover, in the battle royal, when the invisible man asked his rival- one tough black man- the reason why this man struggled to put him to death, he expected the answer would be the purpose of entertaining the whites, while the real intention of the tough man was to obtain money. Under this belief that being mindlessly servile, the invisible man delivered a speech emphasizing that humility was the secret and essence of success, which catered to the values of the whites and won applause from them.

At the cost of this belief, he chose to ignore the sorrow and pain of being docile, from discovering that the gold pieces he scrambled for were all fake brass pocket tokens to finally getting a chance to deliver his speech but was ignored and interrupted countless times. From the beginning, being mindlessly obedient gave him some benefits, such as scholarship and praise from the whites, which even convinced him that being humble and docile towards the whites were secrets of success. Thereby, he still dreamed of becoming "a potential Booker T. Washington", bridging between the whites and the blacks and making more black people fit into the white society. However, those illusions are just like lights in his "hole", unrealistic and bright enough to cause dizziness. The briefcase rewarded by the superintendent with the official-looking document is merely one of that dizziness, just like the dream the invisible man got, foreshadowing the adversity for the next phases. The prisoners, shackled with legs and necks, unable to move, can only perceive the shadows cast by the puppet performers. The invisible man in his early years failed to see the truth and is tricked by the "shadows", too. But the difference is that the "shadows" for him are even more bright and tempting, like a lure taking advantage of his ambition and dream.

That is the first phase: the invisible man fails to realize his true identity and is manipulated by the whites without awareness. He tried hard to stand out among his black brothers and win the recognition of the whites, while he looked down upon those with rude behaviors and simple minds.

3. Phase Two: Liberty to See the Truth

In this phase, the nameless black youth was liberated and compelled to see "a broader truth" of the world which was told by Dr. Bledsoe, the president of a Negro college. There are three important roles in this phase: representing the prisoner, the helper of the puppet player, and the puppet player, respectively, in the Cave Allegory.

Before this phase, the nameless black youth was always a prisoner shackled tightly. However, after entering a Negro college, he encountered a first failure when behaving according to the white's will, which triggered a clash between him and Dr. Bledsoe, namely, a conflict between the previous truth the man believed in and "a broader truth". Clash gave birth to confusion, just like the prisoner released mistakenly in the Cave Allegory once experienced puzzling moments after being put to see the devastating scene- all shadows were fake. From the man's perspective, he had acted nothing wrong and immoral to take Mr. Norton to where he ordered him to go. He followed the "shadows" - what he had been told and rewarded for years. However, for Dr. Bledsoe, it was a betrayal to uncover the black's worst situation- but reality- to the whites by unthinkingly acting as the whites expected. In this clash, Dr. Bledsoe revealed his "successful" story from a prisoner to a puppet player.

Dr. Bledsoe was also once a prisoner chained and controlled by the whites. Then, after one day, standing up to see the truth behind the wall, however, for the sake of his interests, he chose to become a helper to those puppet players- the white like Mr. Norton. By uttering how he climbed to his current position as a president of this college through "a nasty deal", Dr. Bledsoe revealed the "broader truth" behind the wall, the truth that everything is controlled by the whites and the blacks can do nothing to change it. He also expressed his superiority towards all other black people and cowed the invisible man into total submission and realization that it was impossible to fight against him, namely, to fight against the representative of the white power.

Another role is Mr. Norton, a white benefactor to the Negro college as well as one of the puppet players. The puppet player pretended quite well and disguised himself as a philanthropist. However, according to what he chatted with the invisible man, the reason why Mr. Norton supported this Negro college with financial help was to seek more power by manipulating the black people. Mr. Norton repeatedly said how important the black people were to him by claiming, "I felt, and I still feel, that your people are in some important manner tied to my destiny." [1] While saying destiny, he means "the success of his work", pointing to his desire for more power "of a king, or of a god". The puppet players built such a high and solid wall that even the invisible man, the one who was liberated mistakenly, still failed to understand this "broader truth".

As a whole, in this phase, the invisible man was liberated and compelled to see the "broader truth" mistakenly. However, after standing up to see the "broader truth" and going through a fierce clash with Dr. Bledsoe, he felt his "anguish and anger" and "a numb, violent outrage", along with his inquiry into the truth. [2] That is the beginning of his transition from being chained without awareness to seeking truth with awareness.

4. Phase Three: Recovery and Adaption to the Truth

This process was like the recovery and the adaption of the liberated prisoner in the Cave Allegory. The prisoner must become accustomed to the magnificence of the upper realm, and firstly, the shadows will be his most discernible, the "truth" that once held sway. Then, gradually, he can see the true light and his proper place. He will contemplate him as he is.

4.1. Birth of the New Truth and Crush of the Previous One

In this phase, the black young man went to New York, where his experience accelerated his journey of seeking the truth and walking out of the "hole". The encounter with Mary, a black woman who offered to take good care of him and gave him a place to accommodate, was an important step in the invisible man's recovery and adaptation to realizing the truth in the world. By observing Mary, he found some precious traits like honesty and hostility of the black people from the south where he came from. And that gradually changed the "truth" he previously believed: the white was always superior to the black with more decent behaviors and precious qualities.

Mary once told him, "You got to lead and you got to fight and move us all on up a little higher. And I tell you something else, it's the one's from the South that's got to do it, them what knows the fire and ain't forgot how it burns." [3] Before he knew it, a brand new truth started to emerge, which was

different from what he believed previously and what Dr. Bledsoe told him, the truth that could help more invisible black men like him walk out of the “hole”.

While the new truth was gradually cultivated, the previous one finally came to a total crush. It happened when the nameless young man worked for the Black proletarian organization--the Brotherhood. He eventually realized that he could never achieve his dream of being a true political leader with his excellent speech delivery because he was controlled by Brother Jack, the white boss. As his dream was crushed again and again, and the “truth” of the world he used to believe did not work, he started to believe in the “broader truth” said by Dr. Bledsoe, and chose to hibernate in the “hole”. But since the “broader truth” cannot help him fit into society, this is not the end of the man’s journey of seeking the truth.

4.2. Formation of the New Truth and Rebirth

The formation of the new truth occurred in the invisible man’s reflection of everything that had happened to him after the accumulation of all clashes, sorrows, and failures. Near the end of the epilogue, the black youth proclaimed his departure from the hole, leaving behind his former skin. His hibernation had been too long, and he was ready to start a new life, believing that even an invisible man has a responsibility to the world. Here, the old skin means the previous truth he firmly believed, that adhering to orders of the white and being as obedient as possible to win a better life, namely, to wear a skin of black outside but white inside. By comparison, the new skin refers to the new truth that pretending to be the white fitting in their sets of values could not help escape the “hole” but end up being Dr. Bledsoe, the helper of puppet players. Instead, the new truth of living in this world for the black young man is to discover the black identity and contribute to society in unique but responsible ways.

Therefore, in this phase, the invisible man finally changes from hibernating in the “warm hole” to walking out. Just like the prisoner in the Cave Allegory, who recovered from the dizziness and hibernation, he started to embrace the new truth and mustered up the courage to adapt to society.

5. Phase Four: Return to Save Others in the Hole

Having escaped the cavern, the prisoner in Plato’s Cave Allegory recollected his former abode and the wisdom of the den and his fellow captives, and decided to return and seek to rescue others. However, his fellows failed to understand the truth he talked about as the previous “truth” had been deeply rooted in their minds. The invisible man also tried to tell more black people the new truth he found, but he chose a smart way--he wrote his whole story down and showed people how he had suffered with the belief of the previous “truth”.

Through the voice of the invisible man, the author attained his purpose of saving other black people by writing this novel to offer the blacks a new approach to fitting into society with their cultural identity and integrating with the whites. Once published, the book *Invisible Man* stirred both compliments and criticism in black American literature. On the one hand, Ellison’s escape from the black protest literary tradition and promotion of fusion ideas caused an uproar and even misunderstanding among other African American writers. On the other hand, his fusion ideas influenced the creation of black writers in the second half of the 20th century. Also, they opened up infinite possibilities for black literature and American literature in later generations, inspiring not only the blacks to walk out of the “hole” and achieve their identity rediscovery but also the whites to reconsider their values in American society as they could be invisible at some time and in some fields as well.

6. Conclusion

In the epilogue of the novel *Invisible Man*, Ralph Ellison put forward a new solution to fitting into American society for the black through the nameless black youth’s voice. The epilogue leaving the

“hole” echoes with the prologue hibernating in the “hole”, presenting the invisible man’s change. As a result, he achieved his self-discovery journey and understood his relationship with the world as a black man. Using Plato’s Cave Allegory to analyze the invisible man’s transition phases, we can gain a clearer and more vivid understanding of the “hole” metaphor, the “truth” that repeatedly appears and different characters in this book. Meanwhile, the correspondence also reveals the essence of the Cave Allegory, which is a metaphor for individual cognitive development of themselves and the world.

The “warm hole” not only refers to the warm place the invisible man lives in and hibernates in but also symbolizes an ideal but unrealistic world the black people firmly believe in, which, however, is in effect, fraught with lies and manipulation by the whites. The “truth” the invisible man wants to find is how to discover his identity, how to see this world, and how to live a better life, namely, the truth of being visible. The previous “truth” is a firm belief that the only way of living a decent life for the black is always being docile, servile, and humble to win the favor of the white, which is promoted by the white, the puppet players. Conversely, the new truth encourages black people to accept their cultural identity with pride and integrate into the white rather than conforming to the white. Furthermore, since the four phases of the invisible man’s journey of seeking truth are consistent with the four phases of the prisoners in the Cave Allegory, this can help us grasp the structure of the man’s self-discovery and truth-discovery journey.

References

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