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**MOTIFS AND SYMBOLISM IN RALPH ELLISON'S *INVISIBLE MAN***

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**Abstract:**

*A motif is an idea, object, concept, image, sound, action, or any other figure that repeats itself throughout a text and has a symbolic significance in literary work. Through its repetition, it can help produce other narrative aspects such as theme, and mood. It contributes to the development of a theme or central idea. It gives clues to the central idea or reinforces it to emphasize the author's viewpoints. Motif has a symbolic significance in a narrative. A symbol is also a literary device that contains several meanings. It is a representative of several other aspects, concepts or traits than those that are visible in the literal translation alone. A Symbol can be an object or action that means more than its literal meaning. Symbolism helps to create meaning and emotion in a narrative. It is used in literature to produce an impact, by adding additional meaning to an action, object, or name. In a nutshell, symbolism allows a writer to convey something to their audience in a poetic way instead of saying it outright. A symbol can be repeated once or twice, while a motif is constantly repeated. A symbol can help in the understanding of an idea or thing, while a motif can help indicate what the literary work or piece is all about. The paper aims to highlight motifs and symbolism in Ralph Ellison's novel Invisible Man.*

**Keywords:** Motifs, Symbols, literature, narrative aspects, development of a theme.

A literary element that is used to indicate ideas and qualities with symbolic meanings that are different from their literal sense is called Symbolism. As a part of the symbolist tradition illustrated by Harman Melville and T.S. Eliot, Ellison narrates his novel around a full set of comprehensive symbols. Motifs are recurring structures, contrasts, and literary devices that can help to develop and inform the text's major themes.

Ralph Ellison's novel *Invisible Man*, published in 1952 is considered a masterpiece of modern literature and has been translated into 14 languages around the world. The novel *Invisible Man* is enriched by Ellison's narrative use of motifs and symbols that focus on his major themes.

**Blindness and Invisibility**

Ralph Ellison uses visual symbols of blindness initially and develops them further to describe the protagonist's invisibility and his stumbling quest for identity. The first scene 'Battle royal' introduces the protagonist and narrator as someone who is not listened to, interrupted by many and instructed to know his position in all situations. The boys who fight in the battle royal wear blindfolds, symbolizing their powerlessness to recognize their exploitation at the hands of the white men.

The blindness is repeated allegorically throughout the novel and represents the narrator's search for his individuality. The bronze statue of college Founder at the school symbolizes a blindfold being removed or placed firmly on the eyes of a slave figure. It is echoed many times in the novel and refers to the narrator's sense of losing false impressions but falling back into them.

The title of the novel *Invisible Man* itself is a symbolic representation that whites refuse to treat the

narrator as a person and thus he considers himself as invisible and whites as blind.

The narrator discovers that Brother Jack, leader of the Brotherhood has a glass left eye when Jack enters a violent speech on the aims of the Brotherhood. His literal blindness thus symbolizes how his firm commitment to the Brotherhood's ideology has blinded him metaphorically.

Reverend Homer A. Barbee, a preacher from Chicago delivers a speech admiring the Founder of the college only to reveal later that he is a blind man. This reveals the blemished nature of their visions. Barbee also praises an institution and man that are frauds and Jack supports this cold ideology.

### **Calfskin Briefcase**

Calfskin briefcase symbolizes the psychological baggage of the narrator. It is a symbol of the narrator's immature effort to accept set identities and a symbol of his continuous struggle for advancement. The narrator keeps the briefcase with him until the end of the novel and accumulates objects and documents that symbolize the various false identities he assumes. The two symbols blindness and briefcase are united at the end of the novel when the narrator burns the contents of his briefcase to light his underground hole.

### **Leg Shackle**

Brother Tarp, an elderly black man gives the narrator an old leg shackle which reminds the slave days. Leg shackle is used as a kind of brass knuckles to escape. The old 'slave days' and his grandfather are always with the narrator. They harass him and influence his path and personality. They help to shape who he is and becomes.

### **Sambo Dolls**

Tod Clifton, a black member of the Brotherhood makes and sells Sambo Dolls. The dolls symbolically represent a bad caricature of the black culture. Though the dolls move by themselves, they need the help of strings to prompt their movement. This implies that blacks continue to live under the control of whites, blacks as puppets and whites as the puppeteers.

Throughout the novel, the narrator collects the objects; leg shackle; one of Clifton's Sambo Dolls, and the dark green-tinted glasses he bought to hide his identity and which convinced passersby that he was Rinehart. These are all symbols of identity, of identifying who he is, who his people are, how they are perceived or not perceived.

### **Liberty Paint Factory**

The narrator gets the first job in a highly patriotic paint company which is most famous for its optic white paint colour. There he observes a stream of patriotic symbols through many workers and foggy passages. The liberty sign that reads: "KEEP AMERICA PURE WITH LIBERTY PAINTS" (196).

The authorities of the factory with their slogans emphasize the concepts of whiteness and purity symbolizing the moral superiority of their whiteness. The inclusion of 'Liberty' in the factory's name emphasizes that America, a country is supposedly founded on 'Liberty' and equality but as the name suggests it does not represent any liberty.

"Our white is so white you can paint a lump of chunk coal and you'd have to crack it open with a sledgehammer to prove it wasn't white clear through" (217). The quote demonstrates Ellison's use of liberty paints plants as a metaphor. In the descriptions of the paint mixing process and the relations between blacks and whites in the company, the liberty paints plant emerges as a symbol for the racial dynamics in white society. According to the Brockway, the optic white has the ability to hide blackness, and can even whiten charcoal. It is a symbolic representation of the oppression of black identity. This bias forces black men and women to learn the white culture, mask their true thoughts and feelings to gain acceptance. One of Ellison's primary concerns is the extent to which black culture has been absorbed and ignored by white culture. Two episodes at the paint factory where the narrator works are symbolic of this relationship. "Ten drops of a dead black liquid are to be measured into every single sonofabitching

bucket” 199). To create pure white, first, the narrator is told to add ten black drops of toner into each bucket. The dope vanishes without darkening the white paint, but the paint will not dry properly without the additive. Second, the narrator finds that an old black man who works deep in the factory knows how the boilers work and make the production of paints possible. Ellison weaves similar tight and dark imagery throughout the novel.

### **Cabbage**

The narrator stays with Mary, a serene and motherly black woman after learning that the Brotherhood organisation has banned him. Mary treats him kindly and even lets him stay for free. When Mary is cooking cabbage, the narrator says; “Cabbage is always a depressing reminder of the leaner years of my childhood and I suffered silently whenever she served it” (296). It reminds the narrator of his childhood. He associates it with poverty. When he notices Mary serving it often, he feels bad for not paying room and board fees. It symbolizes confusion and hard times.

### **The Cast-Iron Coin Bank**

... the cast-iron figure of a very black, red-lipped and wide-mouthed Negro ... stared up at me from the floor, his face an enormous grin, his single large black hand held palm up before his chest. It was a bank, a piece of early American, the kind of bank which if a coin is placed in the hand and a lever pressed upon the back, will raise its arm and flip the coin into the grinning mouth. (319)

The above quote describes the coin bank that the narrator finds at Mary's house just before he leaves to join the Brotherhood. Ellison uses the coin bank as a symbol for the harmful racial stereotypes that the narrator has tried to escape but in vain. The coin bank represents the submissive slave amusing white people. Moreover, the bank represents a black man as an object, a decoration, and a petty doll to be played with and used by white people. The narrator finds himself frustratingly unable to get rid of this insulting coin bank even after leaving Mary's house. The bank thus illustrates another aspect of stereotype, its determining stability, and the horrible tendency to follow a person throughout his or her life.

Ellison's novel *Invisible Man* is filled with symbolism, some of which are introduced in the prologue. Invisibility is the recurring one throughout the novel. But there is also the symbolic 'hibernation'; the narrator's life in the hole which represents imprisonment because the narrator feels he is held prisoner by his lack of identity and by the society that refuses to see him. However, at the end of the novel, the narrator has had the time to reflect on his life and believes that he will eventually make it out of hibernation.

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