

Oliver Chen

AP Lang 5

Madia

24 March 2023

### **ADD QUOTES**

#### Individual Dreams vs Responsibility to Community

Ralph Ellison's novel "Invisible Man" explores the clash between chasing individual dreams and responsibility to community. Ellison argues that pursuing self-interests, such as economic and social status, is detrimental to the social progress of the black race while serving the collective community creates more progress.

The Brotherhood clearly values its own power over the benefit of the entire community; this hurts the social progress of the African American community instead of helping it. The narrator receives an anonymous letter after joining the Brotherhood, which reads, "Brother, This is advice from a friend who has been watching you closely. *Do not go too fast*. Keep working for the people but remember that you are one of *us* and do not forget if you get too big they will cut you down. You are from the South and you know that this is a *white man's world*. So take a friendly advice and go easy so that you can keep on helping the colored people. They do not want you to go too fast and will cut you down if you do. Be smart...(325)." It is revealed that this letter is actually sent from Brother Jack, a member of the Brotherhood. He warns the narrator to stop his efforts, in order to promote his own position within the organization. Ironically, one of

the leaders of the Brotherhood acts against the progress of the black community, which is what they supposedly fight for. This illustrates that chasing individual dreams can clash with responsibilities to one's community: Brother Jack values his social status above helping the entire race.

Additionally, the grandfather also pursues self-interests over remaining loyal to the black race. In fact, he even advises the narrator: "overcome 'em with yeses, undermine 'em with grins, agree 'em to death and destruction, let 'em swoller you till they vomit or bust wide open" (21). He views that it is best to remain submissive, and play along with the white agenda than rebel. This shows that the grandfather, similar to Brother Jack, chose to value self-interests instead of keep their responsibility to the general community. On his death bed, however, he admits that he feels like a traitor, and regrets his decision. He realizes the negative progress he has caused to the black race by helping the whites – this illustrates that responsibility to community should be prioritized over self-interests.

Bledsoe serves as the president of the narrator's university (which is responsible for blacks' education). Yet, he only attributes his social status as the president to ignoring social responsibilities, and instead using deceit to promote his self-interests. In this instance, personal dreams and responsibility to community clearly clash, as Bledsoe states, "I's big and black and I say 'Yes, suh' as loudly as any burrhead when it's convenient, but I'm still the king down here. . . The only ones I even pretend to please are big white folk, and even those I control more than they control me. . . . That's my life, telling white folk how to think about the things I know about. . . . It's a nasty deal and I don't always like it myself. . . . But I've made my place in it and I'll have every Negro in the country hanging on tree limbs by morning if it means staying where I

am” (70). He plays into a negative stereotype of the black man by being subservient and ignorant. This lets him control powerful white men, but as a consequence, perpetuates racist ideas into society (especially the university itself). He even claims, “I’ll have every Negro in the country hanging on tree limbs by morning if it means staying where I am,” showing that his personal comfort trumps over any concern for the good of his community. Although he improved his economic and social status by becoming president, the damage caused to the black social movement highlights why responsibility to community is more important.

Tarp, however, chooses to remain loyal to his community instead of chasing individual dreams. When meeting the narrator, he hands him his chains and proclaims, “Nineteen years... Nineteen years!... Nineteen years.” (387) Tarp still keep his chains on from when he was a prisoner as a reminder of black people’s history. Though they hurt him, he does more good by inspiring the narrator to remember his roots. The narrator, once meeting Tarp and seeing the chains, realizes that no amount of freedom by moving to the North will be able to uplift the entire race. Tarp’s message to the narrator illustrates that responsibility to community is more important than individual pursuits. Tod Clifton serves as another example of a man who prioritizes the good of the entire community instead of personal gain. He was originally a member of the Brotherhood, but chose to leave because he realized its futility. Unlike Brother Jack, who sees the Brotherhood as a way to extract status and comfort, Clifton wishes to create actual forward progress for African Americans. He mockingly sells Sambo dolls on the side of the road, to inform others of the Brotherhood’s futility. He sings, “He’ll make you laugh, he’ll make you sigh, si-igh. He’ll make you want to dance, and dance – Here you are, ladies and gentlemen, Sambo, the dancing doll” (703). The doll’s stereotypical black features represent a black man. On the surface, it seems that Tod Clifton has merely sold out and resorted to racist

street shows. However, he uses a mysterious, unseen mechanism to make the doll move and dance, which symbolizes how the black community is controlled by hidden people. The fate of African Americans is usually in the hands of those who chose to chase power and status over helping the community, such as Bledsoe and Brother Jack. These people have extreme social power, and yet they chose to harm the race's progress instead of help it – they realize that, in order to keep their high social standings, they must stick to the white agenda and hurt everyone else. Tarp and Tod Clifton's selfless actions illustrate the positive effect of prioritizing responsibility to community.

The narrator, throughout the novel, is heavily conflicted between these two viewpoints: pursuing individual dreams or helping the good of the African American community. Even at the start of the novel, he faces this challenge because he has great motivations for either side of the spectrum. He wishes to become a famous orator, while also being inspired by black social fighters such as Booker T. Washington. When he meets Sybil, a white woman, he thinks, "She was a leathery old girl with chestnut hair of fine natural wave which was now fanned out over the pillow. She was blushing quite deeply. Was this meant to excite me, or was it an unconscious expression of revulsion?" (503) His affair with Sybil serves as a reminder to prioritize the good of the race, as he is treated as an object, not a person. He realizes that Sybil's interest in him, a black man, is more out of a kink than a genuine love. He is taught that personal pursuits like his affair with Sybil are detrimental to the social progress of his community.

Ellison's novel "Invisible Man" depicts many characters, all of whom lay on a spectrum between pursuing personal goals such as comfort, wealth, and power, and selflessly pushing the African American community toward social justice. Characters such as Brother Jack, the

grandfather, and Bledsoe all value self-interests, while Tarp and Tod Clifton genuinely attempt to help the black race. Ellison uses the consequences of the characters' actions to illustrate that holding responsibilities to one's community is more important than pursuing individual dreams.