
I Am Controlling Your Mind!

Papers and Control in *Invisible Man*

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In Ralph Ellison's book *Invisible Man*, most of the major changes in the Narrator's life are caused or heralded by letters and papers. His scholarship to college, his journey to New York, his assumption of two identities, and his plunge from history all involve papers. This pervasiveness suggests that the papers play some symbolic role. What, then, do they symbolize? They are written by powerful people—the Gentlemen's Club, Bledsoe, factory officials and doctors, and Brother Jack. They change the direction of the Narrator's life (while still keeping him running). They are symbols of power, and exemplified by statements such as Bledsoe's that "These white folks have newspapers, magazines, radios, spokesmen to get their ideas across. If they want to tell the world a lie, they can tell it so well that it becomes the truth," (143).

The first example of letters' power is given after the battle royal. In his new briefcase he finds "an official-looking document . . . a scholarship to the state college for Negroes,"

(32). His opportunity to attend college, then, is given to him in the form of a document.

In the Narrator's dream, the scholarship is replaced by a short letter: "To Whom It May Concern: Keep This Nigger-Boy Running" (33). This substitution is meaningful, as the Narrator indicates by following his account of the dream with the words, "At that time I had no insight into [the dream's] meaning. First I had to attend college," (33). It is therefore meaningful that he dreams that the Gentlemen's Club prescribes a path for him, down which he must always run, and that they do it with a letter.

Similarly, when the Narrator is dismissed from college, he is given letters of introduction by Bledsoe (150). These letters drive him to New York and give and then take away the vain hope that the "men with important names" (150) will pay attention to him. Given the importance of his move to New York, these letters are of great significance to the Narrator, allowing him to be controlled by Bledsoe for some time, over great distances.

After his electroshock therapy at the factory, the Narrator has no idea who he is. One might expect that the doctor in charge would know the Narrator's name, since "a number of specialists had to be called in," (247), and he seems to know a lot about his case. The doctor, though, must read it from "the chart," (245). Only after this paper is consulted does the Narrator remember his past. Figuratively, it could be said that he is nobody without that chart. This is a case where the plot event (reminding the Narrator of his name) could be carried out without a paper, but where Ellison chose to use a paper anyway. These events are especially significant because they suggest that Ellison put thought into his choice of a paper, which lends credibility to paper's significance.

When Brother Jack hears the Narrator speak and later asks him to join the Brotherhood, he writes the phone number that the Narrator should call to contact him on a 'piece of envelope' (293). This fact would seem innocuous except for Brother Jack's confidence that the Narrator will call. "Some day you will look me up on your own accord," he says; "Should you decide tonight, give me a ring about eight," (293). When the Narrator does join the Brotherhood, just as Brother Jack planned, he is given a new name by Jack and Emma. This name is not whispered in his ear, nor stated out loud for all to hear (which would not be a problem, since it is by this name that all of the Brothers call him), but written on a slip of paper, in an envelope (309). This is another case where the plot event could have been carried out without a letter, but Ellison chose to use one.

When the Narrator burns the papers in the darkness, their worth is revealed. "I started [burning] with my high-school diploma, applying one precious match," (567), the Narrator writes. His phrasing implies that the match is more important than the diploma, at least when it's so dark all around. Next, the power of Jack's pen is revealed: the Narrator writes, Brother Jack "named me and set me running with one and the same stroke of the pen," (568). Once his papers are all burned, something tells him, "That's enough, don't kill yourself. You've run enough, you're through with them at last," (568): once the papers are burned, he is free of the influence of those who write them.

If papers are so powerful, what can be said of the book? It is a manifestation of the will of the author, and among the subjects that Ellison wishes us to consider is the power of the pen. It is interesting that this power is used to convey a message about itself. I thought

about that fact as I drank the tea that I bought with some bills, and wrote this paper.