
The Only Way to Please an English Teacher

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The first part of Ralph Ellison's book *Invisible Man* supports the assertion by some of its characters that "the only way to please a white man is to tell him a lie," (139). Several characters make statements in support of this view, and Ellison's plot provides examples both of truthfulness leading to displeasure and of lies leading to success.

The first hint of this idea that the reader gets is the Narrator's grandfather's confession that he has been a traitor and a spy. The Narrator does not understand his grandfather's words, "I want you to 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," (16), but these words imply that grins and yeses are treachery—lies.

One example of the effectiveness of the technique that the Narrator's grandfather espouses is Bledsoe's use of it to gain and keep his position of power: "I had to be strong and purposeful to get where I am. I had to wait and plan and lick around . . . Yes, I had to act the nigger!" (143), and again, "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," (142). He gains his power

by telling the white folks a lie: he says through his actions that he is sincere and has no ambition for power.

Another example is the Narrator's job at the paint factory. He is hired because he lies and says that Mr. Emerson endorses him: "I was worried, since I had used Emerson's name without his permission, but . . . it worked like magic," (196).

Along with success stories for lying, Ellison gives the reader several failures caused by honesty. An important example is when the veteran tells Norton and the Narrator about what Norton really wants. The conversation, of course, shocks Norton (95), but certain details suggest that the vet is telling the truth. When the vet tells Norton that the Narrator is "invisible, a walking personification of the Negative, the most perfect achievement of your dreams, sir! The mechanical man," Norton looks "amazed" (94). Not angry, he does not disagree, he is amazed, suggesting that the vet has struck a note of truth. Norton's bad mood and fainting spell afterward (96-97) suggest that he has not been "pleased" by lies, but displeased by truth.

The astute reader, then, will take the knowledge that manipulation of the truth leads to power, and try to broaden it into a theme. One potential theme is that whites, or perhaps most people regardless of race, don't know what they want. The Narrator, early in his life before he unlearns his "mother-wit," tells us that he "felt a guilt that in some way I was doing something that was really against the wishes of the white folks, that if they had understood they would have desired me to act just the opposite, that I should have been sulky and mean," (17). This support for the theme is a further development of the pleasantness of lies

because it means that the whites are lying *to themselves* by thinking that they want blacks to succeed. They please themselves by not seeing the truth, that they want blacks to stay right where they are in society.

Another example in support of the theme is given when Bledsoe discusses Norton's true wishes for discipline with the Narrator. "Norton is one man and I'm another," he says, "and while he might think he's satisfied, *I* know that he isn't!" (140). Bledsoe's position is that Norton thinks himself a forgiving person, which pleases him, but that Norton in fact wants disciplinary action to be taken against the Narrator.

The reader should be alert for further supports or manipulations of this possible theme as she continues the book. One possible implication is particularly interesting: by reading this book, does a white person think him- or herself to become less racist? Does one, in fact, become more equal-minded by reading the book? There is only one answer: "I like to think so."