



# Black's Survival Strategy: Tricksterism in Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man*

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## Abstract

This paper is intended to investigate tricksterism in Ralph Waldo Ellison's *Invisible Man*. Through analyzing the successful tricksters and the unsuccessful tricksters, this research concludes that tricksterism is a survival strategy in the society of white supremacy, and black people have to wear the mask and trick the white people for the cause of eliminating racial discrimination.

**Keywords:** tricksterism, *Invisible Man*, survival strategy, equality

## 1. Introduction

*Invisible Man* is Ralph Waldo Ellison's first novel. It is about an African American man whose color renders him invisible. The novel has aroused extensive concerns (e.g. Shinn, 2002; Spaulding, 2004; Burke, 2004) since its publication. The focuses of these studies are mostly on the themes of black nationalism, carnival, individuality and personal identity, etc. Although some researchers have touched upon the topic of tricksterism (e.g. O'Connor & Goings, 1990; Lee, 2006) in this novel, their aim is to reveal the living conditions of the black people and to criticize the *status quo* of the white people dominated society through the portrayal of the black tricksters. However, not all tricksters are always successful as are described in this story. In this paper, we will conduct a research on tricksterism as a survival strategy through the contrastive analysis of successful tricksters and unsuccessful tricksters in *Invisible Man*.

## 2. Tricksterism

"We wear the mask that grins and lies.  
It hides our cheeks and shades our eyes.  
This debt we pay to human guile;  
With torn and bleeding hearts we smile,  
And mouth with myriad subtleties."

Paul Laurence Dunbar's (1896) poem "We wear the mask" shows the real life of the black people in the society controlled by the white people. Black people cannot behave as they like. Under the control of the white, the black dare not express their dissatisfactions; otherwise they would be punished, retaliated, or even killed by the white people. Therefore, the black people have to wear the mask to hide their emotions and to lie to the white people in order to free themselves from oppression. Just as Ralph Ellison says, "America is a land of masking jokers. We wear the mask for purposes of aggression as well as for defense; when we are projecting the future and preserving the past" (cited in Ammons, 1994, p. 55).

Tricksters are those who wear masks in order to survive difficult situations and attack their enemies, and "tricksterism can become a survival strategy through which oppressed groups or individuals may attain a certain degree of personal and political autonomy within the restrictions of an oppressive dominant system" (Parks, 1994, p. 3). The root of tricksters is in the African American tales. "The primary trickster figures of animal tales were weak, relatively powerless creatures" (Levine, 1977, p. 103). "Trickster's favorite foils and dupes are Lion, Elephant and Hyena. The victim is always larger and therefore stronger" (Feldmann, 1963, pp. 15-16) and "trickster accomplishes the seemingly impossible by trickery rather than by supernatural aid" (ibid., p. 17). In the real world, similarly, tricksters often "get only private revenge" (Weldon, 1969, p. 187). Their "social sense is sufficiently developed to enable him to manipulate others to his advantage" (Roberts, 1989, p. 21).

Living in a society of white supremacy, black tricksters have to fight for survival through desperate tools that allow them to defeat a large enemy and regain power and proper social status. In a sense, tricksters are "symbols of faith, good, righteousness, and resistance against oppression and corruption" (M'Baye, 2009, p. 16). Therefore, tricksterism

becomes a survival strategy for black people to liberate themselves from domination and achieve equal status in the society of white supremacy.

### 3. Tricksterism in *Invisible Man*

The slavery was overthrown during the American Civil War and the black slaves were set free. It seems that black people and white people are equal in social status, but racial discrimination is still alive. The white people are still the dominant power in society and the black people are still oppressed materially and spiritually. For example, in Ralph Ellison's novel *Invisible Man*, white people control the education, economy and politics. In the field of education, the college president Dr. Bledsoe is a black man but the trustees of the college are white men, such as Mr. Norton. In the economy field, most workers are black and although Brockway is in charge of the workshop at the Liberty Paints plant, the owner is white. In politics, black members are in a majority at Brother Hambro, but the chairman is still white. Therefore, more than 85 years after the abolishment of slavery, racial discrimination is more serious and all black people are oppressed by the white. If black people want to live a free life and to be successful under the circumstances of white supremacy, they cannot resist white people openly and wantonly, or else they will be punished cruelly. They refuse to be manipulated by the white and they choose to revolt by strategy: wearing the mask, or using tricks to win the trust of the white superficially. In reality, they want to strengthen their positions in their respective field and look forward to the day when they can compete with the white and when the power of the white collapses.

In *Invisible Man*, there are two types of black people. The first type consists of those who are skillful of wearing the mask and using tricks. They do live a peaceful life superficially and secretly contribute to the work of eliminating racism, such as the narrator's grandfather, Dr. Bledsoe and Brockway. They are the successful tricksters. The second type includes those who are not good at tricking, such as the narrator and Clifton. The exposure of their real thoughts causes troubles to both themselves and all the black people. They are the unsuccessful tricksters.

#### 3.1 Successful Tricksters

Narrator's grandfather, the college president Dr. Bledsoe and the worker Lucius Brockway are successful tricksters. They wear the mask, use tricks and lie to the white people. Finally, they all live a relatively successful life and make the white people less vigilant. They make contributions to ending racial discrimination.

The first successful trickster is the narrator's grandfather. Grandfather's last words summarize his life of struggle and give advice to his son and grandson:

"Son, after I'm gone I want you to keep up the good fight. I never told you, but our life is a war and I have been a traitor all my born days, a spy in the enemy's country ever since I give up my gun back in the Reconstruction. Live with your head in the lion's mouth. 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." (Ellison, 1995, p. 16)

The narrator's grandfather is the meekest man in others' view although he once has worked in the army. He is a quiet old man, having never made trouble. However, in grandfather's mind, their life is a war against the white people and he secretly fights with the white people. He exposes his strategy to fight with the white people: wearing the mask, saying "yes" to them and agreeing with them without condition. Only in this way can he make white people bust wide open. Grandfather's whole life is the best proof to make this strategy convincing. Or he could not recommend his offspring to do so.

The second successful trickster is the college president Dr. Bledsoe. Dr. Bledsoe is more successful than the narrator's grandfather. He uses tricks both to the white people and to the black people. Tricking white people is a survival strategy but tricking black people is well-intentioned. After the narrator shows the trustee of Mr. Norton around the ramshackle cabins for poor black sharecroppers and a tavern or a brothel for black people, Dr. Bledsoe becomes furious and scolds the narrator, "Haven't you the sense God gave a dog? We take these white folks where we want them to go, we show them what we want them to see. Don't you know that? I thought you had some sense" (Ellison, 1995, p. 102). In front of the narrator, Dr. Bledsoe shows his real attitude toward white people. He dislikes even hates white people. He thinks that every black man is a master of masks and he believes that the narrator can "serve" this wealthy white trustee well. But the narrator does what a black people should not do. The narrator shows the black people's real life. From his words above, it is quite clear that Dr. Bledsoe is worried about the narrator and he fears that the narrator might be cruelly punished by Mr. Norton. Therefore Dr. Bledsoe has to apologize to Mr. Norton who suggests that all is well and the narrator does nothing wrong. After hearing such words from Mr. Norton, Dr. Bledsoe says,

"Don't be kind, sir," "You can't be soft with these people. We mustn't pamper them. An accident to a gust of this college while he is in the charge of a student is without question the student's fault. That's one of our strictest rules!" (ibid., p. 104)

In the presence of Mr. Norton, Dr. Bledsoe indicates that what the narrator does is an accident and he should be blamed and punished. Furthermore, Dr. Bledsoe says to the narrator, "return to your dormitory and remain there until further notice!" (ibid., p. 104). Dr. Bledsoe becomes conciliatory and servile with Mr. Norton and is stricter to the narrator. In this way, Dr. Bledsoe superficially stands by Mr. Norton and therefore Mr. Norton may feel embarrassed and would not punish the narrator. Wearing the mask or tricking in front of Mr. Norton rescues the narrator this time.

Furthermore, Dr. Bledsoe is always behaving humbly and respectfully in the presence of white people. The humble performances guarantee his position. That's why Dr. Bledsoe could hold the post of the president of a college.

On the other hand, it is certain that Dr. Bledsoe cares about his black compatriots. His attitude and actions towards the narrator are the best proof. After this "accident", Dr. Bledsoe scolds the narrator with both love and hate just like a father to a son:

"He ordered you. Dammit, white folk are always giving orders, it's a habit with them. Why didn't you make an excuse? Couldn't you say they had sickness- smallpox- or picked another cabin? Why that Trueblood shack? My God, boy! You're black and living in the South- did you forget how to lie?"

...

"Why, the dumbest black bastard in the cotton patch knows that the only way to please a white man is to tell him a lie!" (ibid., p. 139)

Dr. Bledsoe expresses his anger and regret. What he is worried about is that the narrator cannot trick and wear the mask. It is very dangerous for a black person to show his true feelings in a society of white supremacy. Therefore, Dr. Bledsoe would rather teach the narrator a lesson himself than let the narrator be suppressed by those white folks. Finally, Dr. Bledsoe does not expel the narrator outright and writes seven letters of recommendation for the narrator to help him to work in order to earn money. In fact, these seven letters do not help the narrator; on the contrary, Dr. Bledsoe suggests that the receivers should not give the opportunity to work to the narrator. It seems that Dr. Bledsoe is heartless and cruel and in fact Dr. Bledsoe has good intentions: only you could help yourself, and even your black compatriots cannot. Teaching the narrator a lesson is to rescue the narrator and to some degree to rescue many black students like the narrator. Therefore, Dr. Bledsoe educates the young generation and contributes to the cause of elimination of racial discrimination.

Dr. Bledsoe is a real master of masks. He tricks both the white and the black, and so he could be the president of a college and could make contributions to the liberation of all the black people. He sets an example for the narrator and teaches him that only tricking can help him survive in this world.

The third successful trickster is Lucius Brockway at the Liberty Paints plant. Brockway is skillful in producing paints and he is in the position of engineer. The reason why he could work at this plant and become an important engineer is that he is good at tricking. He tells the narrator the secret why he is so successful. Brockway is ill and the boss of the plant arranges a new worker on Brockway's position and it is said that this new worker will take the place of Brockway. Brockway doesn't resist directly and he uses a trick to save his position. He lies to the boss of the plant that he wants to retire and is pleasant to be replaced by a new worker.

"I been pretty sick, as you well know, and I'm gitting kinder along in my years, as you well know, and I hear that this here Italian fellow you got in my place is doing so good I thought I'd might as well take it easy round the house." (ibid., p. 215)

Brockway tells a lie and in fact he needs this position desperately. He is the only one who knows the secret of producing advanced paints and so the plant needs him. Therefore, he dares to trick the boss and he returns to work soon.

Brockway is not only skillful of producing paints but also tricking. Except the above trick, Brockway ingratiates himself with the boss by bringing up the slogan of the plant "If It's Optic White, It's the Right White" (ibid., p. 217). This slogan is a parody. It not only advertises the paints but pleases the white. There is an old saying in the society of white supremacy, "If you're white, you're right." (ibid., p. 218) Obviously, Brockway's inspiration comes from this saying. The saying emphasizes the advantage of the white to the black. No black is willing to admit and accept the fact, but Brockway has to please the white people in order to guarantee his status in the plant.

This event happening to Brockway tells the narrator that black people have to master skills and become a successful trickster if they want to live a good life in this white people dominated society.

These three successful tricksters have something in common. They are all expertise in their field: the narrator's grandfather is a soldier, Dr. Bledsoe is the president of a college and Brockway is the core figure in his plant. Most importantly, they all wear the mask and trick the white. Their lives or successful experiences show the importance of tricking. Tricking is the strategy of survival in the society of white supremacy.

### 3.2 Unsuccessful Tricksters

Tod Clifton at Brother Hambro and the narrator are unsuccessful tricksters. Clifton at first tricks white people but finally he gives up and sells the Sambo. He is killed by a white policeman. The narrator is exactly the opposite. He is not able to trick white people at first, and when he uses tricks the white have already taken actions to oppress the black.

Clifton is a member of Brother Hambro, a political organization that professes to defend the rights of the socially oppressed. White people are the leaders of Brother Hambro and so Clifton performs well. During his stay at Brother Hambro, he is passionate, articulate and intelligent. Although he is often late, he is entrusted with an important post and is superficially obedient to this organization without condition. For example, he objects strongly to black Ras who represents the black nationalist movement which advocates the violent overthrow of the white supremacy. Both Clifton

and Ras are black and their aims are the same: to fight against the white supremacy. The only difference is that the means they take actions is different. Clifton wants to deal with the problem by means of politics but Ras tends to use force. Therefore, they are on a united front and Clifton's objection to Ras is his trick. When Clifton and Ras are fighting with each other, "Clifton's arms were moving in short, accurate jabs against the head and stomach of Ras the Exhorter, punching swiftly and scientifically, careful not to knock him into the window or strike the glass with his fists, working Ras between rights and lefts jabbed so fast that he rocked like a drunken bull, from side to side" (ibid., pp. 369-70). In Clifton's eyes, Ras is his brother and Clifton cannot bear to hurt his brother. Clifton's behaviors do not correspond with his words. Therefore, Clifton tricks the white and makes them believe that he is strongly against Ras the Exhorter and decides to devote himself to Brother Hambro.

However, Clifton doesn't persist in tricking the white and he parts away with the Brotherhood because he becomes disillusioned with the group. He begins selling Sambo dolls on the street, both perpetrating and mocking the offensive stereotype of the lazy and servile slave that the dolls represent. Clifton gives up tricking and is no longer obedient to the white. Finally, these Sambo dolls lead to his death. He is shot by a white policeman. He cannot continue to make a contribution to the elimination of racial discrimination. If he could stay at Brother Hambro and continue to trick the white, Clifton might have cooperated with Ras to liberate the Harlem district and fought for their great cause.

The narrator is also an unsuccessful trickster. He becomes a trickster and wears the mask after the death of Clifton. When he is very young, his grandfather tells him that he should become a trickster and lie to the white people. But he cannot understand the meaning of these words and so he is not a successful trickster. When he enters into college, the president Dr. Bledsoe teaches him to trick the white and to lie to them. He is still confused about how to make contact with white people. However, the experiences at Brother Hambro make the narrator realize the seriousness of racial discrimination and the importance of tricking white people. The transitional event is the death of Clifton. He witnesses the spot where Clifton is shot by a white policeman. After the death of Clifton, the narrator volunteers to hold funeral for Clifton and deliver a speech. But Brother Jack tells the narrator that "you were not hired to think ... and you were hired to talk" (ibid., p. 469). The imperious white people make the narrator upset and disappointed. Brother Jack is not compassionate or kind and doesn't uphold the rights of the socially oppressed. Jack actually possesses the racist viewpoints and is unable to see people as anything other than tools. The narrator is deceived by Brother Jack and finds that he is used. From that moment on, the narrator is determined to wear the mask. Nevertheless, it is too late. The white people notice that many members are lost and they plan the race riots. They deliberately cede power to Ras and allow Harlem to fall into mass chaos. And the narrator escapes from the chaos to encounter two police officers in the street, who ask to see the contents of his briefcase. The narrator runs and falls through an open manhole into a coal cellar. The police mock him, put the manhole cover back in place, and trap him underground. The narrator not only loses the opportunity of earning money and going to college, but also is unable to rescue Harlem because he lags in response and becomes a trickster too late.

Tod Clifton and the narrator are unsuccessful tricksters because they couldn't trick the white and lie to the white from the beginning to the end. As black people, they cannot save themselves and not mention to make contributions to the cause of elimination of racial discrimination.

#### 4. Conclusion

Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man* is a mirror of the society of white supremacy. Through the contrastive analysis of the successful tricksters and the unsuccessful tricksters in *Invisible Man*, this research comes to a conclusion that tricksterism is the black people's survival strategy to liberate them from oppression and achieve equality in the society of white supremacy. Tricking at least can bring peaceful life for the black people. If black people want to join the cause of elimination of racial discrimination, they have to wear the mask and trick the white people.

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