

Power Struggles

By Travis Hodges - September 05, 2005

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Fredrick Nietzsche, a renowned German philosopher, believed that one of the strongest governing drives that humans possess is their desire for power. This theme is omnipresent in Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man*, Shakespeare's *Othello*, and Sophocles' *Antigone*. In the novel *Invisible Man*, the narrator breaks free from the stereotypes and other oppressions set forth by his society. In *Othello*, Iago escapes his natural role as Othello's standard bearer to avenge himself. In *Antigone*, Antigone separates from the law of mortals to follow divine law. All three of these works illustrate Nietzsche's idea of a will to power, and each break free of their separate constraints to find control.

The narrator of *Invisible Man*, a black southern male living during the Jim Crow era, struggles with the constraints, stereotypical views, and oppressions set forth by his society. However, as he learns, he is able to remove himself from his oppressive society and remain in seclusion until he comes to understand who he is and the direction in which he should proceed when he reemerges into the world (Ellison 7). From the outset, the narrator realizes that he is being oppressed by the white members of society. One of his supervisors pressures him to leave his job at Liberty Paint to find "something easier, quieter" and "something for which [he is] better prepared" (Ellison 246). However, the persecution does not end there; the narrator discovers that blacks are incessantly selling themselves to the white race in exchange for the kind of monetary support that only places them in the position to be discriminated against yet again. As a result, the narrator discovers that he is "invisible" to this world, and does not belong to this tumultuous society (Ellison 3). In his invisibility, the narrator is able to find solace, and he writes this memoir of his life in an effort to break free of the constraints of oppression and discover his true self. The narrator professes, "I'm an invisible man and it placed me in a hole-or showed me the hole I was in, if you will-and I reluctantly accepted the fact" (Ellison 572). This "hole" is where he finds solitude; it provides him with a quiet place in which he can reminisce about his life and determine his plans for the future. By separating himself from his overbearing society, he is finally able to "see the darkness of lightness" and confesses that he "love[s] light" (Ellison 6). It is only in this freedom that the narrator is able to find himself, and, by extension, his place in the universe. After a great deal of soul-searching, the narrator is once again able to resurface in the world and find his role in an uncaring society. He states, "Thus having tried to give pattern to the chaos which lives within the pattern of your certainties, I must come out, I must emerge" (Ellison 580). When he emerges, he is in control of his newly-found self, and has broken free from his obligation to please others and feed into misguided stereotypes. After his return to society, he is able to maintain complete control over at least one aspect of his life: himself.

Shakespeare's character Iago breaks free of his natural order in society because he feels slighted by Othello, who has named Cassio lieutenant over Iago, even though Iago is both senior and superior to Cassio. Iago becomes jealous of Cassio, and plots revenge against both Othello and Cassio in an effort to gain control and manipulate them into misery. Iago's bitterness towards his oppressors is apparent when he refers to Cassio as "a great arithmetician" and a "fellow almost damned in a fair wife" (Shakespeare I, i,16-18). These insults allude to the fact that Iago is hurt and feels the need to rid himself of both Cassio

and Othello in order to gain his rightful position as lieutenant. Throughout the play, Iago successfully manipulates Othello, Cassio, and Roderigo, and is able to spark Othello's jealousy, ultimately creating his tragic downfall. Iago is a master deceiver, and sets his design in motion to create the illusion of Desdemona's infidelity with Cassio. Iago informs Roderigo that Cassio is "a knave very voluble; no further conscionable than in putting on the mere form of civil and humane seeming for the better compass of his salt and most hidden loose affection" (Shakespeare II, i, 237-240). Here, Iago reveals his plan to make Othello believe that Desdemona and Cassio are having an affair, and begins to gain power over the other characters through his manipulations. However, ironically, Iago warns Othello to "beware, my lord, of jealousy! It is the green-eyed monster, which doth mock the meat it feeds on" (Shakespeare III, iii, 165-167). Iago warns Othello not to allow jealousy to cloud his thoughts, while at that very moment basing his scheme on a jealous vengeance. Despite Iago's blind jealousy, he is successful in convincing Othello that Desdemona has been unfaithful and that she must die. Othello ultimately kills his wife, discovers the truth, stabs Iago, and then stabs himself. In the end, Iago is revealed as the one holding the power, for he has manipulated every other character to produce this tragic outcome.

Sophocles writes of Antigone, who breaks the decree given by a mortal to fulfill an obligation to her family's divine rights and obey the law of the gods. After Creon forbids the proper burial of Antigone's brother, Polyneices, Antigone decides to take fate into her own hands and allow her brother to pass naturally into the afterlife. At first, she attempts to secure the help of her sister, Ismene, but when Ismene proves reluctant, Antigone informs her, "He is my brother still, and yours; though you would have it otherwise, but I shall not abandon him" (Sophocles 345). Antigone continues to assert her position on the matter when she warns her sister, "Don't fear for me. Be anxious for yourself" (Sophocles 346). However noble her initial intention, Antigone is still defying the mortal law and is sentenced to death by entombment. As she is being paraded towards her tomb, she asks, "By what law do I assert so much? Just this: A husband dead, another can be found, a child replaced, but once a brother's lost (mother and father dead and buried too) no other brother can be born or grows again" (Sophocles 372). Antigone continues defying human law in favor of divine law by professing that if she is wrong in her thoughts and actions, "and if these things be smiled upon by heaven, why, when I'm dead I'll know I sinned. But if I find the sin was theirs, may justice then mete out no less to them than what injustice now metes out to me-my doom" (Sophocles 372-373). Ultimately, Antigone is proven right not only by the citizens of Thebes, but by the gods themselves. As Antigone is to be released from her tomb, she hangs herself, which causes Creon's son, Haemon to commit suicide, and in turn, Creon's wife, Eurydice kills herself as well. Through divine intervention, Creon is shown the error of his ways, yet it is too late to grant Antigone the power that she died to gain. Antigone broke free of Creon's mortal law to follow divine law, and thus gained power over Creon and weakened his ability to rule and his grandeur in life.

Frederick Nietzsche's theory about the attainment and destruction of power is a ubiquitous theme in *Invisible Man*, *Othello*, and *Antigone*. All three of these works contain at least one major character who breaks free from oppression and attempts to harness his or her own power. Each in their own way, the Invisible Man, Iago, and Antigone fight to rid themselves of an overbearing power, and are thus able to gain their own sense of control. Every human struggles to free themselves of oppression, and every human ultimately needs to hold some form of power in order to feel vital to their societies and themselves.