

Faculty of Arts
Charles University
Department of Anglophone Literatures and Cultures

-Ms. Julia Lessová
-"Masks, Veils, and Invisibility: Racial Passing in Afro-American Literature"
-MA thesis
-Opponent's Report

Brief summary of subject: As the candidate puts it in the Introduction, the thesis explores "the tropes of masks, veils, and invisibility in relation to racial passing in selected mid-twentieth-century African American works of fiction. It discusses *Passing* by Nella Larsen, *Black No More* by George Schuyler and *Invisible Man* by Ralph Waldo Ellison. The main argument of the thesis is that the complicated process of assimilation into hegemonic society contributed to the overall notion of how these African Americans perceived their own identity, which resulted in the aforementioned tropes (5).

Methodology and structure: The 71-pp. thesis contains an Introduction, five principal chapters, a Conclusion, a Bibliography, and an Abstract in Czech and an Abstract in English. It combines historical with literary-cultural analyses with respect to three important works of American literature as above-noted.

Achievements: To be sure, "The thesis demonstrates how one's African American identity has been processed and denied by a colonial power - a hegemonic society - and how this phenomenon is represented in literary works through the notion of racial passing. Moreover, the thesis indicates that racism in the United States emerges from a prolonged history of predominantly "white dominance." This issue, along with others, results in the obliteration or rejection of an individual's repressed identity to such an extent that an entire cultural portrayal is characterized by this" (7).

One of the strongest parts of the thesis concerns this unit of work, which the candidate explains in the following way: "The fifth and last chapter of this thesis focuses on the work *Invisible Man*, written by Ralph Waldo Ellison. The process of passing of the main protagonist is quite different and is analyzed solely based on Lacan's theory. I draw upon the protagonist's experiences, which formed his identity each time he became a member of a new community, and focus on how, each time, he is influenced by the Other. There are various examples of this experience in the book, but my focus is mainly on his situation in the beginning, his speech-giving experience, and when he joins the "Brotherhood." Lieber's mask-wearing is used in connection to two other characters, the grandfather and Mr. Bledsoe" (10).

More precisely: "The novel's striking beginning immediately focuses on the blindness of the hegemonic society. There is not only blindness to the existence of IM but also to the existence of racism as such. The protagonist identifies it as the main problem. This issue has a significant effect on the character's identity as it slowly starts to disappear throughout the book, and IM

wonders about its own being. His nameless status also indicates this” (55). Not only this but as we read in the Conclusion, “The notion of passing came into existence as a result of a long history of racism that African American citizens had to face. From the era of slavery to the first half of the 20th century, racist attitudes developed in line with the passing practices. As analyzed in the thesis, the first occurrences of the notion date all the way back to the era of slavery when the enslaved people used the notion to pass as free. Passing as white developed only later as the people of lighter skin tones used the opportunity to escape discrimination. As time went on, the practice became recognized even in white society, and more restricting laws that were supposed to stop it came into existence. Being a product of racism, the issue started to become a literary theme to present the actual reasons behind it: survival of the individual and the possibility of a better life” (61).

Also, we learn of Lacan’s Aphanisis, or disappearing of the subject, when we read this: “The last book analyzed in the thesis was *Invisible Man* by Ralph Waldo Ellison. Referencing its publishing in the 1950s, the book was a cumulation of the experiences and the problems of identity that haunted the African American community at that time. The main focus of the thesis was its nameless protagonist, Invisible Man. The thesis analyzed his journey as a quest to seek his identity, which resulted in Lacan’s Aphanisis. The Subject was, in his case, substituted by the Other to such a degree that he became invisible. The chapter focused on various instances where there is an evident play between visibility and invisibility” (64). These are cogent points.

Shortcomings: The language at times is a bit awkward, but all in all it is a very readable and sturdy text. Moreover, out and out definitions of forms of passing are sometimes difficult to discern so that the reader needs to construct this matter for themselves.

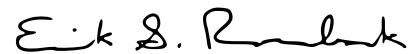
Formal features (e.g., language & style, referencing, bibliography, formatting, abstracts): The language is good, though there are some inelegant moments in the prose style. Other formal features are good.

Questions: We read the following: “Elison’s *Invisible Man* deals with the themes of invisibility and mask-wearing, which existed in African American literature and culture for quite some time when it was published in 1952. The metaphor deals with the struggle of the African American minority to belong and find its place in the white racist society. These themes are presented through not only the nameless protagonist IM but also other characters such as the grandfather and Mr. Bledsoe. While the process of IM’s passing is closer to the notion of Aphanisis, the practices of maskwearing are exemplified by the other two characters. This way, the quest for IM’s identity is captured throughout the book and finished only by his becoming invisible in his hole while he hibernates. The metaphor is used to present the struggle of the race and an individual to fight against the double-conscious existence, as is also explored by W. E. B. Du Bois” (61). I ask here of the economic and spectacle society dimension of this whole dynamic; can the candidate elaborate upon these two aspects with respect to capital and to the image society?

In addition, we read this: “In conclusion, the thesis was able to capture the historical evolution of the notion of passing and include other approaches connected to it, such as mask-wearing and Aphanisis. By studying the notion of racial passing in selected works of fiction, readers may come to understand more the historical background of the problematic process of identification of an individual and the discriminatory practices of a racist society” (65–66). In this light, could the candidate explain succinctly the negative and positive aspects of racial passing for the American community?

Conclusion: I recommend the thesis for defense and propose a preliminary grade of 1.

Seattle, 19 viii 24
doc. Erik S. Roraback,
(D.Phil. Oxon.)

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Erik S. Roraback". The signature is written in a cursive, slightly slanted style.