Abstract

Literary portraits of African Americans’ struggles in the United States for a more equal society have provided valuable insights into the pain and hardship they had to endure for a large portion of the United States’ existence. Ralph Ellison’s famous novel Invisible Man is one of those novels and is the primary source for this study. In this novel the unnamed African American protagonist tries to find a place of his own within a segregated society and has to succumb to the white man’s will to be part of American society. Despite the segregation and subjugation, the protagonist believes that he can progress in American society through education, but his development is constantly thwarted because of his skin colour. Ellison utilizes features from the bildungsroman to highlight how differently education works for African Americans and white people, since the traditional progression of the bildungsroman is not possible for the protagonist despite his trying to follow its traditional pattern. The thwarted progression instead seems to move the plot into another type of progression, namely a spiritual progression. I will therefore conclude that education in Invisible Man creates segregation and subjugation and that the protagonist’s progression is subverted into a spiritual progression. How the protagonist’s journey can be subverted is related to how power structures and discourses influence people’s actions and beliefs. I will use Michel Foucault’s Discipline and Punish and The Archaeology of Knowledge to explain how power structures and discourses enable segregation, subjugation and a spiritual progression. Furthermore, the result will reveal that, because of surrounding power structures and discourses, the protagonist cannot do anything in this American society other than conform to prevailing power structures or hide himself until he knows how to battle these structures.

Keywords: Education; Segregation; Bildungsroman; Michel Foucault; African American.