

Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man*: An Analytical Reading

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Abstract

This paper provides an analytical reading of Ralph Ellison's **Invisible Man**, exploring the novel's central themes of invisibility, identity, race, and social exclusion in mid-twentieth-century America. The study situates Ellison's work within the context of African American literary tradition and modernist aesthetics, highlighting how his background in music and folklore shaped the novel's symbolic structure and narrative style. Through the struggles of an unnamed narrator, Ellison examines the intersections of racism, blindness, and individuality, emphasizing the tension between personal freedom and societal constraints. The analysis underscores how **Invisible Man** remains a seminal text in American literature, not only for its profound social commentary but also for its universal exploration of human identity and the search for visibility within an oppressive society.

Ralph Waldo Ellison was born on March 1, 1914, in Oklahoma City, Oklahoma. His father, Lewis Ellison, was a construction worker and tradesman who died when Ellison was three. His mother, Ida Millsap, worked as a domestic servant but was active in radical politics for many years. Ellison thrived on the discarded magazines and phonograph records she brought home from the white households where she worked (Bloom 11). As a place of birth and childhood, Oklahoma gave mixed messages to the young Ellison. Bloom comments that "Its wide open spaces kept alive the frontier spirit of adventure and self-resourcefulness and tolerated the coexistence of whites, blacks, and American Indians. Jim Crow laws, however, segregated Oklahoma City's facilities, including schools where 'separate' rarely meant 'equal'." (15). He graduated from high school in 1931. He worked for a year and found the money to make a down payment on a trumpet, using it to play with local musicians and to take further music lessons. He learned the soprano saxophone, trumpet, and other instruments, playing both jazz and light classical music (Rampersad 31).

In 1933, Ellison began studying music at the Tuskegee Institute in Alabama. He remained there for three years before going to New York in 1936, where he held several odd jobs while continuing to study music and sculpture. In New York, he met Langston Hughes and Richard Wright, who gave him great encouragement in his writing. Ellison's short stories, essays, and reviews began appearing in the *Antioch Review*, the *New Masses*, and many other magazines and journals in the late 1930s. At this time, his interest in social justice attracted him to the Communist Party, although he would later reject it (Bloom 12). Ellison's journey to become a writer started "soon after his move to New York in 1936" (Washington 3). In two years, Ellison had partly completed a draft of a novel to be entitled *Slick*, a novella called *Tillman and Tackhead*, and four short stories: "Last Day," "Goodnight, Irene," "The Black Ball," and "A Hard Time Keeping Up" (Early 35). Near the beginning of the 1940's, Ellison began to write a novel about an arrested "American pilot in a Nazi prisoner-of-war camp" (Washington 3).

Ellison gained financial security in 1938 when he was hired by the Federal Writers' Project to gather folklore and present it in literary form. The four years he spent at this work enriched his own writing by providing source material that he used in his own fiction. In 1943, wishing to help in the war, Ellison joined the merchant marine. The next year he received a Rosenwald Foundation Fellowship to write a novel; although he created a plot, he failed to finish the work. After the war, he went to a friend's farm in Vermont to recover, and it was here that he conceived the novel that would establish him as a major writer—*Invisible Man*. He worked on the book for five years, and it was finally

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published in 1952. (Bloom 12) He did not have enough experience in novel writing, thus he encountered difficulties in formulating a coherent plot. For him, fiction did not come easily as nonfiction works (Early 37).

In an analysis of Ellison as a representative of the African American literature, Berndt Ostendorf, a German scholar of jazz history and of African American literature, discovers Ellison's endeavor to merge the modernist aesthetics with the African American folklore through his dependence upon Jazz to build his novels' structure. (Bloom 9) Ellison draws upon many aspects of folklore which are strongly associated with blacks, such as music, song, rhymes, rituals, and customs. These aspects are the source of symbolism in his work. (Malinova 5) African American writers such as Ellison united their oral traditions with Western culture to create their rich and powerful discourse. Ellison had a passion for both music and literature. When Ellison failed as a symphony composer, he turned to writing. (Early 7) Thus, because of his musical background, *Invisible Man* is rich in its musicality and is similar to jazz patterns.

Invisible Man attracted a lot of popularity after it was published. Even though Ellison did not publish any other novels, this novel remains as one of the most popular works of the contemporary American novel. Even after over forty years of its publication, *Invisible Man* was chosen to be the best postwar era novel in a 1965 Book Week poll. On January 27, 1953, *Invisible Man* won the Russwurm Award and the National Book Award for fiction. For this remarkable achievement, Ellison was acclaimed as a prominent figure in American literary history. (Corry 98). Bloom comments on his style:

I have argued elsewhere that the late Ralph Waldo Ellison's *Invisible Man* represents the outstanding African American achievement in the arts to date, except for the musical accomplishments of Louis Armstrong, Charlie Parker, and Bud Powell. At once comic and tragic, and alas still prophetic, *Invisible Man* competes with the work of Thomas Pynchon and Philip Roth as the most distinguished American prose fiction since the death of William Faulkner. The imaginative wealth of Ellison's only published novel seems inexhaustible; fresh insights become apparent with each rereading. At once naturalistic, Impressionist-symbolic, and surrealist, the book ends in a mode of irrealism, pioneering a style exploited by Pynchon in *Gravity's Rainbow* (7).

Ellison hoped "to create a novel so rich in its symbolic, allegorical, psychological, social, and historical insight that it would be acclaimed as a masterpiece" (Early 37). Mastering the poetic devices, he incorporates several symbols in his novel, which provide an unusual perspective on the plot and support its dominant themes. (Washington 98) Ellison's style in writing is not a realist nor a naturalist style but rather a modernist one. His style is full of "abstract interior monologues and descriptions, highly symbolic images and allusions, and hallucinatory passages" (Early 39). Despite the novel's big success and influence, Ellison described his book as not a full attempt at a major novel. (*Shadow and Act* 105 – 106). Ellison aimed to re-examine reality to re-examine the past through the nonlinear events and times and his use of an unnamed narrator.

Invisible Man is about a young black man's political and racial self-discovery. Among the main themes of the novel are visibility, or rather invisibility, and ignorance. Ellison's book portrays the consciousness of Africans in the United States during the 1950s. Back' people's condition of being socially invisible and the white people's ignorance are connected. When a person is treated as being invisible, it means others are too blind and ignorant to see them (Miralles 59). *Invisible Man* begins with the narrator's declaration that he is invisible: "I am invisible, understand, simply because people refuse to see me... That invisibility to which I refer occurs because of a peculiar disposition of the eyes of those with whom I come in contact. A matter of the construction of their inner eyes, those eyes with which they look through their physical eyes upon reality" (3). There are many dimensions to the theme and idea of invisibility in the novel. First, invisibility implies people's reluctance to view the individual as a person. The narrator complains of invisibility because people treat him for what they see him, not for what he really is. Second, Invisibility suggests isolation from society. The narrator is invisible because he chooses to stay away and hide himself in his hole. Invisibility also refers to the lack of identity. The narrator is invisible because he has no identity. (Abbott 45)

The other themes of the novel are identity and individuality and racism. Throughout the novel, the narrator is anonymous. Yet, at several points in the novel, he has been offered papers that name and identify him as getting a new role: student, patient, member of the Brotherhood. But none of these names is his true name. The narrator strives to find his true self, a self that is not identified by others. Hence, *Invisible Man* can be read as a story about a black man's

struggle to get along and learn to be himself. (Abbott 46) The novel also discusses racism. Throughout the book, the unnamed narrator constantly faces obstacles because of racism. Whites are always against blacks and show opposition towards everything they do if it is not in their way. Although African Americans do not like the way they are treated, they have nothing to do about it. The narrator is the only one who wants to make a change, but nobody helps him. The narrator wants to feel social equality; however, the other African Americans in the community feel as if they are supposed to live this way. The narrator struggles with different expectations pressed upon him as a black man.. Racism is reflected in his growth process in the South as well as his experience with social life in New York.(Jing and Pengy 52)

People willfully avoid seeing the truth, and this strengthens the theme that racism is an obstacle to individual identity. During the Battle Royal fighters accepted to be blindfolded: “All ten of us climbed under the ropes and allowed ourselves to be blindfolded’ (22). This implies their inability to recognize their exploitation at the hands of the white men who think that they are superior. The fighters, therefore are incapable of creating their own identity since they accept the idea that they are there for white people’s enjoyment. Furthermore, the narrator notes that white people’s inability to “see’ black people has forced him into a life of invisibility. But white people’s prejudice is not the only type of blindness in the novel. Many black characters also refuse to confront the truth about themselves or their communities. Bloom comments that “This invisibility clearly symbolizes the racism indigenous to America in the first half of the century—the speaker says he is unseen not because he is a ‘spook’ but because they avoid seeing the real him and only see their own prejudice’ (22).

At the beginning of the novel, the narrator is portrayed as a successful yet inexperienced student, then he becomes a naive worker at a factory in New York, as the novel develops, the readers see a street radical who advocates for the people of Harlem, and finally becomes disillusioned after a race riot and has no other way out than to flee the community. He realizes there is nowhere that he can escape to that is different, so he ends up escaping to the underground of the city, where he literally becomes invisible. The narrator is resentful because of the poverty, racism, and hypocrisy that he has been experiencing from the beginning. The narrator’s portrayal as a victim, an protestor, a stranger, and a deceiver “ confronts us, in the darkness of which no man can bleach himself, with the question: Who am I?’ (Lane 64) Throughout the novel, he is powerless, receives no respect and left without any roots to hold onto by both white and black people. He is a symbol, and a lot of African Americans can relate to him.

Ellison’s ideas focused on the dilemma of African-Americans’ isolation, but he was aware that focusing solely on that issue would prevent forming one’s own voice. So he demonstrates many issues such as problems within the black community. The passage of Battle Royal is one of the most powerful passages in the novel that sheds light on the African American dilemma. At the beginning of the passage, the narrator’s aim of attending the gathering is to present his farewell speech in front of a crowd constituted of white elites of the town; however, it is too late when he becomes aware of his delusion. The course of action forces him to perform in a racist show blindfolded, where he has to fight with fellow African-Americans, and the result is the simple humiliation of their race. Ellison blindfolds the boys to play with his themes of blindness and invisibility. Both metaphoric and literal folding takes place as the boys “ allowed themselves to be blindfolded with broad bands of white cloth’ (21).

The narrator and the other boys are tricked into thinking that if they fight with each other and win, they will become a part of society by yielding to whites. At that point in the novel, the narrator believes that once he gives his farewell speech, the white townsmen will realize that he is a “ potential Booker T. Washington” and then he will become visible to them (18). They give in to racial stereotypes, and with the blindfolds, they can “ no longer control [their] motions. [They] had no dignity. [They] stumbled about like a baby or a drunken man” (23). They can neither see nor be seen by the whites because of the white piece of cloth placed over their eyes. The inhumane treatment is represented as: “Everyone fought hysterically. It was complete anarchy. Everybody fought everyone else. No group fought together for long. Two, three, four, fought one, then turned to fight each other, and were themselves attacked. Blows landed below the belt and in the kidneys with the gloves open as well as closed’ (24).

The boys are not aware of who they are fighting against. They are not fighting against whites or fellow blacks; they are fighting with their black race. They symbolize how whites treat blacks without actually seeing. With the blindfolds, they only focus on harming each other without knowing each other. At the end of the fight, the white throw money

and coins as their payment. This shows white people's view of African Americans as savages. And the blacks do not seem to mind being treated as such due to their financial difficulty. Ellison claims that it is a blinding, and that the blinding of the black man in the educational system of America has been planned by the white society:

One of the great failures of education for Negroes in the United States is its failure to prepare the Negro student to understand the functioning of the larger American society. This was more or less planned right from the Reconstruction when the colleges were built. One way of dealing with the Negro problem was to prepare Negroes to accept the status quo. This has changed, of course, over the years, but it's still possible for a Negro student to grow up in the United States without having a real feeling of how the society outside of the Negro community operates. (*Shadow and Act* 168)

The language used by the white crowd also presents the racist approach of the whites. Their remarks are very discriminatory and show how superficial their actual thoughts are. During the fighting, the narrator hears the comments of the men, like "I don't like his looks", "[L]et me at those black sonsabitches!", "I want to get that ginger-colored nigger" and "Kill that big boy!" (22). All of this hateful language proves their refusal to see African Americans as real humans. Even after the narrator succeeds at giving his speech, the president of the all-black college congratulates him and says sentences such as "he'll lead his people in the proper paths" and "the destiny of your people" (32). The use of discriminatory language suggests segregation. It shows whites do not see African-Americans as their equal. To them, they can be a part in their white community. James B. Lane explains the psyche of the whites as defining "black men as violence-prone yet childlike, docile yet unpredictable, oppressed yet happy, impulsive yet stoic, primitive yet religious, and super masculine yet impotent in contact with whites" (65). After the humiliation, the white people of town rewarded narrator with a scholarship to a segregated college for blacks. The narrator accepts this scholarship happily and works very hard to prove himself to the president of the college, Dr. Bledsoe, who is himself a servant of the whites.

Even when the narrator looks happy about being rewarded with a scholarship to study, he is in fact sad. His dream the next night exhibits his unconscious mind, in which he sees himself at a circus with his late grandfather, who refuses to laugh at the humorous activities of the circus clowns. This implies that the boy feels that his grandfather is not happy with his action, as his action is like that of the clown. He feels that he is being humiliated by the white person. He feels the loss of identity but does not rebel yet, as he has to find himself first through study. The message "Keep This Nigger-Boy Running" in a dream suggests his unconscious awareness about being humiliated by white people. He finds that he is invisible because the world is full of blind people who cannot see his real self. The narrator's days in college further deepen his experience of white racism. Mr. Norton, one of the white founders and a trustee of the Negro college, appears to be sympathetic to the Negroes but in reality, he is a white racist and he takes advantage of the poor black women. He tells the narrator, "Your people were somehow closely connected with my destiny. That what happened to you was connected with what happened to me" (41). He looks kind to the narrator, but he is two-faced. He employs black women for work but does not pay them.

He comes to know by experience that he has been a victim, as other black folks, represented by Dr. Herbert Bledsoe and Ras. Both groups of people are a deterrent to the free progress of the black. He thinks about his identity and realizes that he is playing a game like a clown to amuse the white people, and he knows he has to find himself to be free: "I could no more escape than I could think of my identity. Perhaps, I thought, two things are involved with each other. When I discover who I am, I'll be free" (235). He knows he can live a free life only by proving himself. On the Contrary to his graduation day speech and that of the following day delivered before the white folks, the narrator protests against white domination in the streets of New York in favour of a black couple to let them pray inside the church house and delivers a lecture. Here he makes the crowd come to action and works on his own to help the poor black of Harlem as a member of the Brotherhood. But after Tod Clifton's murder, he comes to realize the worthlessness of the organization, which is manipulative and misguided.

He realizes that Brother Jack has used him as a tool to achieve his own purpose. He first continues to work under the Brotherhood without believing in what they say. Then he completely refuses to work for them and decides to work on his own. He wants to come out of his invisible state and force others to see him:

I must come out, I must emerge I'm shaking off the old skin and I'll leave it here in the hole. I'm coming out, no less invisible without it, but coming out nevertheless.... Even hibernations can be overdone, come to think of it. Perhaps that's my greatest social crime, I've overstayed my hibernation, since there's a possibility that even an Invisible Man has a socially responsible role to play (557).

Now he understands his grandfather's advice better. He knows he has been ignorant of many issues in society and what causes his invisibility. He also understands the ways to come out of it. He feels that he has committed a crime by not realizing these things for so long and that he can find himself by helping people or doing his social responsibility. He has to come out of the state of invisibility. He decides not to follow the path of others but will try to define himself.

He doesn't want to be manipulated by any group until he is no longer an individual. He rejects each ideal and rule that does not conform to his own idea of identity. Richard Lehan has stated:

The narrator rejects Jack and the Brotherhood because he realizes that to Jack, he is only an economic pawn, to be thought of in terms of a dialectical process of history. He rejects Ras the Exhorter, a black nationalist, whose belief in Negro racial superiority fires Ras to violence. He rejects Mary, the prototype mother, who wants him to be careful, to conform, to succeed in the white man's world. He rejects Lucius Brockway, a Negro who wants to see other Negroes kept in their place so they will be no threat to him (40)

By the end of the story, the narrator has a better idea of who he is: "I'm invisible, not blind" (553). He is also more aware of how to achieve freedom. Freedom exists for black people just like everyone else, but it needs to be individually won. In "Black Boys and Native Sons," Irving Howe states that "freedom can be fought for, but it cannot be willed or asserted into existence" (102). Ellison agrees: "Negro writers [have the task] of defining Negro humanity... this can no more be accomplished by others than freedom, which must be won again and again each day, can be conferred upon another" (*Shadow and Act* 33-34). Freedom is an individual act, and Ellison believes that simply to take down a barrier doesn't make a man free. He can only free himself, and as he learns how to work within the broader society. The narrator is on his way to learn how to operate within American society and knows that there are three possibilities alongside limitations (Powers 44). He gains self-knowledge and asserts his identity in the face of American society. Ellison says that African Americans might be able to turn away from white rules because they are not allowed to participate in the society, however it is also important to learn how to be part of the society and add diversity to it: "there is much of great value, of richness, which, because it has been secreted by living and has made their lives more meaningful, Negroes will not willingly disregard... In Negro culture there is much of value for America as a whole. What is needed are Negroes to take it and create it-- the uncreated consciousness of their race" (*Shadow and Act* 316-17).

The narrator feels it is time for him to come out of his hiding because "even an Invisible Man has a socially responsible role to play" (*Shadow and Act* 557). The novel shows that America needs to learn that diversity is important for everyone involved. Ellison says that when the black man wins a struggle to assert his freedom, each of African Americans' victories increases the area of freedom for all Americans regardless of color (Powers 45). The writer demonstrates that African Americans have a beauty and universality of culture to add to the American heritage, and when they are treated as invisible, it means the rest of the society is blind and needs to open its eyes.

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