Ralph Ellison was originally from Oklahoma City, Oklahoma and was born to parents descended from slaves in 1914. Growing up Ellison was involved in both white and black culture, and, even at that young age, saw the importance of being able to unite the two. Eventually Ellison was given scholarship to Tuskegee University in Alabama where he discovered literature. Ellison’s own work would be inspired by reading works from Hemingway, Fitzgerald, Mark Twain, and at the same time music from Jazz and Blues musicians. He eventually had to leave the school for New York due to financial reasons. He worked odd jobs in and around Harlem until he became involved with several authors and was able to start publishing his own work. During his career he wrote essays, short stories, and novels. Ellison’s most notable works include Invisible Man, Shadow and Act, and Going to the Territory. Ralph Ellison died of cancer in 1994, and, after his death, his works Flying Home: And Other Stories and Juneteenth were finalized and published. Ellison’s work helped inspire discussion on social change and civil rights, as well as providing a new understanding and insights into race and its role in society.


Invisible Man defined as a picaresque novel. The novel prominently features a wayward adventurer in the IM. The novel uses the lens of the IM to satirize and comment on racism within America in an episodic manner. The novel can also be classified as bildungsroman because it depicts the psychological and moral growth of the main character. A bildungsroman is a coming-of-age tale where the protagonist emerges at the end having grown in some way and gained new knowledge.


### Title: Invisible Man

**Author:** Ralph Ellison

**Date of Publication:** 1952

**Genre:** Picaresque/ bildungsroman

#### Historical Information about the period of publication

In the 1950s segregation was still very apparent and the civil rights movement was not yet in full swing. African Americans had more opportunities than they had previously, but they were still subject to external and internal oppression. They did gain more rights like being able to attend college and compete in larger sanctioned athletic events. A steady stream of laws and court decisions led to somewhat improved conditions and, in far greater numbers, further restrictions and more requirements for blacks. Ellison depicts both the rampant discrimination in the south as well as the slightly more accepting and reasonable north in his novel. Another minority group that started to develop and grow in the early 1950s was the Communists. Communism gained many supporters, particularly minorities, and also began to meet strong opposition in what some would come to refer to as the communist “witch hunt.” This time period also saw massive booms in population which fostered a sense of being “lost in the crowd,” for many Americans.


#### Plot Summary

Ralph Ellison opens his novel, Invisible Man, with the narrator (the IM) revealing that he is “invisible” and is hibernating underground in his “hole.” Starting in chapter one, the IM returns to the beginning of his story, 20 years earlier. He begins just after high school and jumps to when he was going to give an important speech to the town’s leading white figures. He is made to watch a white stripper dance, forced into a battle royal, and shocked by an electrified shock therapy, and gets fired from the company. In his sickly state, he stumbles upon an eviction taking place in Harlem; he realizes while running that he is bound and determined to follow his grandmother’s advice to death. He tries to solicit information from the wife of a_committee worker. IM is informed of Clifton’s disappearance and how the community is losing interest in the Brotherhood. Without much thought and moved down to the basement with Lucius Brockway, the narrator (IM) reveals in white paint and sends him to the company hospital. They did gain some rights, but the Author

#### Biographical Information about the Author

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#### Characteristics of the Genre

Invisible Man defined as a picaresque novel. The novel prominently features a wayward adventurer in the IM. The novel uses the lens of the IM to satirize and comment on racism within America in an episodic manner. The novel can also be classified as bildungsroman because it depicts the psychological and moral growth of the main character. A bildungsroman is a coming-of-age tale where the protagonist emerges at the end having grown in some way and gained new knowledge.

**Describe the author’s style**

Ralph Ellison writes the novel *Invisible Man* in an existential manner from the IM’s point of view to show the internal conflict of the IM and the isolation that the IM feels. The plot of the book follows the IM’s journey and is not as cohesive as a traditional novel. Ellison tells the story in an episodic manner where each episode reveals a new facet of the oppressive world the IM lives in.

**Chapters 1-9** in the novel are written in naturalistic and realistic style. Naturalism in literature means that a character’s surroundings have a major role in shaping their character. In Chapters 10-19 Ellison employs an expressionist style where many objects represent something bigger than they seem to on the surface.

**Chapters 20 through the end of the book** shift to a surrealistic style where the main action of the book is taking place within the mind of the narrator and fantastic imagery and incongruous juxtaposition are used.

**An example that demonstrates that style**

“Here within this quiet greenness I possessed the only identity I had ever know, and I was losing it” (p699). While at college the IM bases his identity solely off of the opinions of Mr. Norton and Dr. Bledsoe. These two people impose their ideal of a subservient, compliant black stereotype onto the IM. He embraces this role and upon realizing that he is being expelled he feels lost. Through the IM’s commentary in these chapters it is clear that he has no substantial identity except that which is forced onto him by characters such as Bledsoe and Norton. People refuse to see him as an individual because he is nothing more than his race, a black man.

“‘The idea is to open each bucket and put in ten drops of this stuff,’” he said. “‘Then you stir ‘til it disappears’ (p 200). This encounter represents a larger, systematic cultural oppression of African-Americans within the United States. Kimbro specifically requests that ten drops of black “dope,” are added to the dull grey paint in order to make it the correct shade of bright white. The white’s dominant social hierarchy can only exist with the oppression of the few blacks that are part of the population, and who allow the oppression to occur.

“‘The crowd was working in and out of the stores like ants around spilled sugar. From time to time there came the crash of glass, shots; fire trucks in distant streets’ (p538). During the riot in Harlem the novel descends into utter chaos. As the IM solidifies his identity internally his world around him crumbles. The lens that the IM originally viewed the world through has been shattered and his perception of reality is changing drastically. In these chapters the IM examines society and comes to profound conclusions, which he is only able to do after establishing a solid personal identity.

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### Memorable Quotes

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Quotation</th>
<th>Significance</th>
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<td>“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.” (The IM says this in the Prologue to the reader p3)</td>
<td>Invisibility plagues the IM throughout the novel, his peers do not see him as an individual. They view him a black person, and nothing more. What the IM is stating here is that many people are incapable of recognizing the personality or identity that dwells beneath one’s skin color. A person’s inner eye is the preconceived notions that they have about a certain race or minority. Instead of an individual they see black skin and immediately associate all stereotypes having to do with African-Americans. This happens throughout the book to the IM. For example, two women at different points in the novel attempt to act out their fantasies of having an animalistic and violent black male ravage their bodies sexually. In these examples the IM is not an individual, he is reduced solely to his race.</td>
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<td>“But I’ve made my place in it and I’ll have every Negro in the country hanging on tree limbs by morning if it means staying where I am.” (Dr. Bledsoe says this to the IM p143).</td>
<td>Bledsoe feels that he has a position of power in society as a head of the Negro College. Bledsoe gains this position of power by catering to every need of the white majority. Bledsoe acts completely subservient to people such as Norton in order to keep his place at the top of black society, but the absolute bottom of white society. The truth of the matter is, however important Bledsoe may think he is, he’s still oppressed by the white majority as he is kept in a position of obedience and little real influence. Bledsoe’s mind is consumed with white, oppressive ideals and he transfers oppression onto other members of his race. Bledsoe is blind to the fact that the only way he will gain real power is if he embraces his fellow African-American brothers and gain equality for all. By perpetuating stereotypes against his fellow blacks, he is perpetuating stereotypes against himself, and will never gain true equality.</td>
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<td>“For a second I stopped, feeling hate charging within me, then dashed over and grabbed it, suddenly as enraged by the tolerance or lack of discrimination, or whatever, that allowed Mary to keep such a self-mocking image around, as by the knocking” (The IM has this outburst after seeing the coin bank at Mary’s p319).</td>
<td>The IM is struggling to define his internal identity at this point in the novel. He has gone through his symbolic “rebirth” but he is still struggling with reconciling his race with his own identity. The IM is so angry about the piggy bank because he feels that it is discriminatory and racist with its representation of a “red-lipped and wide-mouthed Negro” (p319). As a black man he is reminded of the decades of oppression his forefathers endured and is disgusted by this stereotypical image. However the IM will never be able to truly create his own personal identity if he does not accept his heritage. As the descendant of slaves he must not be ashamed of this past but understand that his ancestors were disrated against and were the victims of harsh, often violent actions of a white majority. By being enraged over the bank he is giving power to the hateful image. The IM must not passively accept the oppression of his ancestors but rather understand that atrocities occurred and move on, free from this painful past. It is only then that the IM will be able to create his own identity free from this oppression.</td>
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<td>“Well, I was and yet I was invisible, that was the fundamental contradiction. I was and yet I was unseen. It was frightening and as I sat there I sensed another frightening world of possibilities.” (The IM to himself after wearing the hat and glasses as he is leaving Hambro’s house p507)</td>
<td>At this point in the book, the IM is now aware of his invisibility and the role he has played to others in his life. This quote is the IM realizing the potential he has with his invisibility. He is present in others’ endeavors but he truly has little impact on their journey. The new world he obtains is the opportunities he has been unseen. This is a critical turning point in the book when the IM becomes self-aware and aware of his surroundings.</td>
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<td>“But still whirling on in the blackness, knocking against the rough walls of a narrow passage, banging my head and cursing, I stumbled down and plunged against some kind of partition and sailed headlong, coughing and sneezing, into another dimensionless room, where I continued to roll about the floor in my outrage… Then, finally, when I could barely move, something seemed to say, ‘That’s enough, don’t kill yourself. You’ve run enough, you’re through with them at last.’” (The IM thinking to himself after falling down the manhole p568)</td>
<td>The IM continues to resist his past and current situation. He attempts to change it, as he has attempted to change his heritage and culture throughout the novel. It is apparent that the only time he can get through his hardships is when he succumbs to his surroundings and accepts it. When the IM can accept his past and heritage he can progress forward and succeed for himself rather than give into other’s expectations. He now can understand and accept his culture and is aware of his invisibility which will allow him to create a strong sense of self.</td>
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Invisible Man

The IM begins as a black high school student, and through his speechmaking, earns a scholarship to his local Negro College. After being expelled, he is sent to New York without money or prospects. He eventually finds work as a dancer and cook, but he is a very wealthy man with a creamy white and two Cadillac, but he always acts subservient around white trustees. Bledsoe becomes angry with the IM after he chauffeurs Mr. Norton. Although the IM was following Norton’s instructions, Bledsoe still expels the IM and sends him penniless to New York.

The IM goes through the entire book not accepting his heritage; he always wanted to be more sophisticated and “white” so he would be respected. In high school he strives to impress the Rich whites and then sells the Sambo dolls, flouting the white trustees. Bledsoe becomes a careful and elderly man who only wanted to help others, fulfilling his social responsibility to know who he wants to be.

Power-hungry, hypocritical

Burnside

A black doctor put in the insane asylum from trying to practice medicine. He helped treat Norton’s fainting and then disrespected Norton at the Golden Day. Burnside later met with the IM on his way to New York, and gave him some fatherly advice for the IM’s new life in the dream city.

Burnside has been viewed as a crazy black male in society because he wanted to be a doctor in a white society. He saw the racism and the unfairness and still defined himself a man who only wanted to help others, fulfilling his social responsibility to know who he wants to be.

Insane, enlightened

Dr. Bledsoe

Leader of the local Negro College, he started from the bottom as a pig slopper and groveled his way to the top. He is a very wealthy man with a creamy white and two Cadillacs, but he always acts subservient around white trustees. Bledsoe becomes angry with the IM after he chauffeurs Mr. Norton. Although the IM was following Norton’s instructions, Bledsoe still expels the IM and sends him penniless to New York.

Bledsoe began low and rose to the top in a reluctant way. He spoke of the “tiger” and acting like a “tiger” using the word with full malicious intent, as if he was better than every other African American because of his position) to gain his power. He was willing to oppress and bleed out every member of his race so he could keep his power, making him look deplorable.

Power-hungry, hypocritical

Brother Jack

Brother Jack is the head of the Brotherhood in Harlem and is a white male with red hair and a glass eye, who is quick to anger but slow to act without reason. He spots the IM giving a speech at an eviction and invites the IM to join his organization. He offers the IM money for his debts, a place to sleep, and a consistent well-paying job. Brother Jack and the organization use the IM as a tool to manipulate Harlem.

Jack himself is part of a minority communist group in a capitalist world. He looks upon the black people of Harlem and uses that minority as violent propaganda to make the Brotherhood look better in the eyes of the world. He set them up to fail, so he could gain more influence around the world, but ruined their reputation in the eyes of the men and women in Harlem and those who knew what he was doing.

Emotional, plotter

Tod Clifton

Tod is in charge of guarding the speech makers and attracting young members to the Brotherhood. After the IM is relocated downtown, Tod leaves the Brotherhood and begins selling paper dolls on the sidewalk. The IM finds him, but Tod gets in a fight with a police man and is shot. The IM later holds a funeral for Clifton in an effort to bolster the Brotherhood.

Tod is seen by the Brotherhood as another black resource to be used which makes Tod leave the Brotherhood. He defied what the Brotherhood thought he was, and realized that he had to leave and redefine himself. This recognition was shown in his selling of the Sambo dolls, also showing that he knew he was used. He defined himself on his terms before he dies.

Striking, confident

Ras the Exhorter/Destroyer

Ras is a black man who preaches black nationalism and separation from whites. The IM first saw him speaking when he arrived in New York, and then again when a gang attacked him at a public rally. Later, Ras became Ras the Destroyer and led a mob against the police. He gets hit in the mouth by a spear from a white man.

Ras’s minority group cannot gain power from the whites, so he tried to anger the blacks in Harlem and start a riot. He fought with other black and whites alike stating that African Americans did not belong in America, and that the whites were only oppressors. Ras used the people’s violence to fight against the power that held them down.

Angry, stubborn

Rinehart

This is a man who the IM unintentionally impersonated. It can be assumed by the IM’s encounters with Rinehart’s friends that he is a pimp, bribes the cops, gambles, is the person to go to for a job, possibly peddles drugs, is a lover of possibly many women, and serves as a reverend at a successful church.

As a black man in Harlem Rinehart has no real power outside his streets. Because of this greater oppression, he takes advantage of many people by holding all these positions to broaden his influence and make money. In reality Rinehart is a two faced and uncaring man with a desire for money.

Two-faced, clever

Trueblood

Trueblood is a poor black man living in the quarters surrounding the Negro College with his wife and many kids. He had incestuous relations with his daughter, and is ashamed but extremely open about it. Trueblood told Mr. Norton and the IM of his incest when they are driving near Trueblood’s home.

Despite his shameful action Trueblood still maintains his identity. Everyone wanted him to leave his family, but Trueblood wants to support his family and is willing to accept his sin. By truly accepting his identity and his past actions, Trueblood embodies the ideas the IM reaches in the end.

Determined, open

Lucius Brockway

Brockway is a careful and elderly black man who works in the third sub-basement of the paint plant making the base of the paint. He was angry when the Workers Union, and fights him the IM. Lucious lost, but blew up a tank of white paint, sending the IM to the factory hospital.

Brockway, much like Bledsoe, had gained a small amount of power and planned to keep it. The moment Brockway felt threatened of gaining the IM, he got rid of him. Lucious was willing to oppress, and hurt the IM, a fellow minority, to keep what power he had making him seem selfish and childlike.

Vengeful, cautious

IM's Grandfather

The IM’s Grandfather spoke on his deathbed about “yessing” the whites to death. This statement confuses the IM, but he eventually realizes that the grandfather really only wanted him to become his own person who isn’t defined by others.

The grandfather knew who he was and took advantage of the stereotypical ideas others had about him. His sense of self was solid because he knew where he came from and acted the part knowing that he was his own person.
Setting

The Invisible Man takes place in the early 1900’s during the height of racism in the south. Racial segregation was supported by Jim Crow laws in the south so long as African Americans were “separate but equal.” These laws begin in 1876 and didn’t end until about 1965. Blacks were separated, but conditions were far from equal. Black bathrooms, water fountains, and all other public places were significantly worse for those of whites in the south. The IM began his life in Alabama in what was most likely a farming community with little industrial development, and was well controlled by wealthy white men. The IM’s scholarship alluded to the Tuskegee University created by Booker T. Washington that was also in Alabama at the time. The University was surrounded by farmland, very old log houses referred to as the “Quarters” where down trodden African Americans live, a local pub called the Golden Day, and an insane asylum. The IM later moved to Harlem in the late 1920’s where he worked for a paint manufacturer and then the Brotherhood or the communist party. At the time New York was experiencing the Harlem renaissance, and a new pride for African American culture, music, and creativity bloomed only in Harlem, which historically began around 1919, and ended in the 1930’s.

Symbols

Piggy bank: The piggy bank shows that man’s desire for money will only create a false happiness. The bank is painted in a way that mocks the black man. It has an unnatural smile and money up to the top which is choking it. This symbolically shows that man’s desire for money, and thus equality, is only an empty promise. In the end they will only find that the money will choke them, killing who they were for this new money based man. Money will never make a man better; they have to accept who they are to truly advance themselves.

Paper Doll: The paper Sambo doll represents how Clifton felt when he was in the Brotherhood, just a cheap one time toy to be sold out in a flash. The Brotherhood saw him as a tool and used Clifton until he left. The paper doll was dancing for everyone in the crowd, showing how Clifton’s past actions were just a meaningless dance to entertain the Brotherhood and have no real value. Clifton selling the doll was an ironic self recognition for what he had done unwittingly for the Brotherhood.

Glass eye: The glass eye represents Brother Jack’s fake perception of reality and the rawness that he sees underneath it all. His leadership in the Brotherhood was not always scientific and agreed upon with the committee, showing his raw and emotional side that sometimes takes charge. Jack is unwilling to commit to Harlem and instead will use them as an example for the Brotherhood. The IM, Clifton, and the people of Harlem were only raw materials to be used for his success. This skewed and unreal idea of morality is fully represented by his fake eye and the rawness left in his eye socket.

Paint plant: “If its Optic White, it’s the right white!” Literally means if you look white you’re right. There is a bit of black dope that goes into the white paint that goes unseen. The drops of dope come to symbolize the small percentage of blacks that were in the American population at the time in the 1930’s. Unlike the black citizens, whites choose not to see it as shown by Kimbro not noticing the grey streak in the white paint.

Possible Themes

If an individual lacks a strong internal identity then he may fall victim to society’s stereotypical expectations for them

Because it is virtually impossible for a minority to gain meaningful social power without the consent of an influential majority group, that minority often fights amongst itself and oppresses individuals within the group giving the oppressors the illusion of power when in reality they are damaging their own character.

Because the true identity of individuals is often overlooked in place of stereotypical representations, these people are afforded an opportunity to reflect and decide whether or not to redefine themselves from within and fulfill their social responsibility.

In order to cement one's sense of self it is essential to understand and accept one's heritage and culture, however painful or oppressed that heritage may have been.

Significance of opening scene

As the prologue of the novel begins, the beginning is literally and metaphorically the end. The Invisible Man sets the stage as he tells the audience of his invisibility and his living arrangements underground in his lighted (suggesting enlightenment) “hole.” He doesn’t find this place, chronologically speaking, until very late in the book, but he is setting himself up to recount the story while also giving some insight up front. He continues to foreshadow the events that will occur throughout the novel. On several occasions the IM mentions Jack, the Brotherhood, and other characters he will eventually meet, and he even hints at those being bad relationships and calls his time with them a “lost period.” At the beginning, he talks about how he saw his invisibility as a burden and how he attempted to change his situation but alludes to the fact that he eventually realized the true nature and corresponding benefits of his invisibility. The IM also stresses that he is “hibernating” only to prepare for a more serious course of action.

Significance of ending/closing scene

The Invisible Man is once again underground in the basement of a white only apartment. After telling his story of events that brought him to his current situation, he is aware of his invisibility and the benefits that come with it. He realizes his past and his heritage, but instead of attempting to change it, the IM accepts it, which allows him to move forward and grow. He had humble beginnings but they are still a part of him and define who he is. The IM concludes that this is what his grandfather was trying to communicate all along by suggesting that he needs to “yes” the whites in the form of acknowledgement. By acknowledging the oppression that has developed in society the IM, along with everyone else who does this, will get an opportunity to reflect and move on and work to improve it. Both the IM and his Grandfather realized that simply submitting or ignoring the oppression will leave the situation unchanged. According to the IM “diversity is the word,” and people like Jack and Ras who reject it (and the other fundamental ideas the IM presents) will only destroy themselves and hinder their own progress in the end. He ends with telling the audience he is only hibernating in his hole as he feels he will be called to action soon and he is prepared for it. He knows that his true “social responsibility” is to live his life and define himself through his actions in an existential manner.

Old AP Questions