Invisible Man

See Me For Who I Am, Not What I Am

Invisible Man is the fictional memoir of an unnamed black narrator’s journey of self-discovery. Society sees the narrator as a “black man”—a label rife with racist expectations. He must fight against the black man stereotype, learn to control emotions, and define his individuality.

MAIN CHARACTERS

Narrator
Character’s central struggle is to be seen as a complex individual, outside of racial expectations for a “black man.”

Ted Clifton
Leader of Brotherhood; believes black men are tools for his own success.

Brother Jack
Leader of Brotherhood; believes black men are tools for his own success.

Ras the Exhorter
Violent separatist; believes black men should fight against whites.

Mr. Norton
Narcissistic philanthropist; believes black men are charity cases to be civilized.

Dr. Bledsoe
College dean; believes black men should remain submissive.

Excellent orator; struggles to find his unique identity.

Tod Clifton
Idealistic orator; believes in a hopeful future for black youth but is driven to despair.

Ras the Exhorter
Violent separatist; believes black men should fight against whites.

Mary
Generous mother figure; believes in the dignity of black women and men.

Ambition

The novel’s characters desire power, but black characters must navigate societal expectation in their pursuit—which often ends in disillusionment.

Social Roles

Characters alter their behaviors to meet expectations.

Colors

Colors symbolize everything from emotions to music and money.

Individuality

The narrator’s central struggle is to be seen as a complex individual, outside of racist expectations for a “black man.”

Isaac Asimov

Author of the Foundation series.

Symbols

Mary’s Bank

Symbolizes racial expectations that black men must “perform” for white charity.

Optic White Paint

Symbolizes society’s demand for people to hide their “blackness” to achieve success.

Briefcase

Like the narrator, Ellison was haunted by his grandparents’ slave history, attended a prestigious black college, and eventually settled in Harlem. Inspired by the individualism of jazz, Ellison used fellowship money to pen the richly symbolic *Invisible Man*, which won the National Book Award in 1953.

RALPH ELLISON

1914–94

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Themes

Ambition

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Sources:

Famous Authors, History Channel, Library of Congress, National Book Foundation, New York Times

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