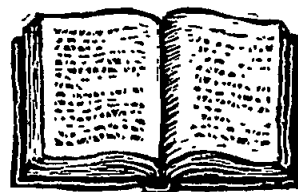


Invisible Man

Ralph Ellison

1952

At its appearance in 1952, *Invisible Man* was immediately hailed as a masterpiece. A work both epic and richly comic, it won the National Book Award for its author, Ralph Ellison. *Invisible Man* has been translated into fourteen languages and has never been out of print. A 1965 Book Week poll of two hundred writers and critics selected it as the most distinguished novel of the previous twenty years. Written in the style of a *bildungsroman*, or novel of education, the book chronicles the sometimes absurd adventures of a young black man whose successful search for identity ends with the realization that he is invisible to the white world. *Invisible Man* is structurally complex and densely symbolic; some critics, in fact, faulted it for what they saw as literary excess. A major controversy centered on the book's intended audience: some black critics argued that it was or should have been a "race" novel, while white critics were relieved that it was not. It also aroused the ire of black nationalists for sacrificing the broader concerns of black nationhood in the defense of a narrow individualism. This contentiousness dissipated over time, however, and the novel's enduring qualities are now undisputed. *Invisible Man* deals with themes of individuality, identity, history, and responsibility. The protagonist is repeatedly exhorted to look beneath the surface of things. Although Ellison freely acknowledged his debt to both European and African American literary traditions, he used an astonishing range of African American folk forms in constructing his protagonist's universe.



Critics agree that the influence of *Invisible Man* on American literature in general, and its role in bringing the blues and folklore into the mainstream of black experience in particular, is incalculable.

Author Biography

As a boy, Ralph Waldo Ellison announced that his ambition was to become a Renaissance man. "I was taken very early," he would write, "with a passion to link together all I loved within the Negro community and all those things I felt in the world which lay beyond." Ellison was born on March 1, 1914, in Oklahoma City, Oklahoma, to Ida Millsap and Lewis Ellison, who died when Ralph was three. Ellison's mother worked tirelessly to provide a stimulating environment for Ralph and his brother, and her influence on the writer was profound.

In 1933, at the age of nineteen, Ellison hopped a freight train to Tuskegee Institute in Macon County, Alabama, where he majored in music. In the summer of 1935 he traveled north to New York City to earn money for his last year in college; he never returned to Tuskegee. Instead, he stayed in New York and worked for a year as a freelance photographer, file clerk, and builder and seller of hi-fi systems, still intending a career in music. But then Richard Wright, the noted author of *Black Boy* and *Native Son*, invited him to write a book review for the 1937 issue of *New Challenge*, and Ellison's career was decided.

In 1938 Ellison joined the Federal Writers Project, which gave him opportunities to do research and to write, and helped to build his appreciation of folklore. Like other black intellectuals in the 1930s, he found the Communist party's active anti-racist stance appealing, but Ellison was also a fervent individualist, and he never became a party member. During 1942 Ellison was managing editor of the *Negro Quarterly*, but thereafter he turned to writing stories. Two of his most acclaimed stories before the publication of *Invisible Man* were "Flying Home" (1944) and "King of the Bingo Game" (1944); both dealt with questions of identity. Ellison met Fanny McConnell in 1944, and the couple married in 1946.

During World War II Ellison served as a cook in the merchant marines. He returned to the United States in 1945 and began *Invisible Man*. The novel appeared in 1952 and was a commercial and critical success, winning the National Book Award in



Ralph Ellison

1953, although some black nationalists felt the novel was not political enough. Ellison continued to write short stories, and in 1964 he published *Shadow and Act*, a collection of essays and interviews about the meaning of experience. Many awards and lecture and teaching engagements followed, both at home and abroad, and Ellison became regarded as an expert on African American culture and folklore, American studies, and creative writing.

The major question of Ellison's later life was whether and when he would publish another novel. He had reportedly been working on a book since 1955, but his progress was slow, and in 1967 a fire at Ellison's home destroyed about 350 pages of the manuscript. The novel was left unfinished at his death, although eight excerpts from it have been published in literary journals. In 1986 Ellison published *Going to the Territory*, a collection of previously published speeches, reviews, and essays. He died of pancreatic cancer on April 16, 1994.

Plot Summary

Prologue

Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man* chronicles the life of an unnamed, first-person narrator from his

youth in the segregated American South of the 1920s to a temporary "hibernation," twenty years later, in a "border area" of Harlem. From his "hole in the ground," this "invisible man" responds to his "compulsion to put invisibility down in black and white" by telling his story. He begins by attempting to explain his own invisibility: "I am invisible, understand, simply because people refuse to see me." The tendency of others to distort what they see or to see "everything and anything" except him leads the narrator to question his own existence. As a result, he feels resentment toward those who refuse to acknowledge his reality. When he bumps into one such person on the street, the narrator responds to the man's slurs with swift violence. He is kept from killing him only by the unnerving realization that his victim did not, in fact, see him as another human being but rather as a "phantom" or a mirage. The narrator notes one curious advantage of invisibility, a "slightly different sense of time" that allows one to "see around corners." After accidentally smoking a "reefer" and experiencing a hallucinogenic journey back through history to slave times, the narrator recognizes that his awareness of invisibility alone gives him a more useful sense of sight. He has, as he puts it, "illuminated the blackness of my invisibility," and it remains for him to explain, in the rest of the novel, what has brought him to this newfound understanding of his own identity and of his role in American society.

Chapters 1-6

The narrator begins his story with his memories of youth and adolescence in a small southern town. He recalls first, as the most baffling but powerful memory of his childhood, the final instructions of his dying grandfather that he must live as a "traitor" and "a spy in the enemy's territory." These words become "like a curse" to the narrator as he grows older, for he finds reward in living a life of outward humility and he doesn't understand how such a life might be called "treachery." Asked by the leading white citizens of the town to repeat his graduation speech extolling submissiveness, the narrator finds himself required to participate in a battle royal, a blindfolded boxing match with nine of his schoolmates. Bloodied from the fight and humiliated by the racist jeers of the white men, the narrator still delivers his speech about "social responsibility" and receives, as a "badge of office," a brief case and a college scholarship.

The narrator's education at the "state college for Negroes" comes to an abrupt end during his ju-

nior year, when he shows a wealthy white benefactor of the college, Mr. Norton, parts of the South that the college wishes to hide from its Northern visitors. Mr. Norton is horrified by what he hears from Jim Trueblood (a black sharecropper who has impregnated his own daughter) and by what he sees in the Golden Day (a "slave-quarter" brothel). Because he has thus embarrassed the school and threatened its reputation, the narrator is temporarily expelled by the president of the college, Dr Bledsoe. After listening to an impassioned speech about the school's mission by Homer A. Barbee, the narrator is advised by Bledsoe to go to New York to earn his fees for the following year. Provided with sealed letters to several of the school's "friends" in the North, the narrator boards a bus, optimistic that he will soon return to complete his education.

Chapters 7-14

The narrator's confidence soon wavers, when a veteran from the Golden Day heading North on the same bus urges him to "come out of the fog" and "learn to look beneath the surface" of his life. Once in New York the narrator feels alternately confident and frightened, more free than in the South but more confused. His doubts increase after his first six letters yield no job opportunities. With his seventh letter the narrator meets Young Emerson, the disillusioned son of one of the college's wealthy benefactors, from whom he learns that Bledsoe's letters of introduction in fact bar him from ever returning to the school. Stunned by this discovery, the narrator abandons his loyalty and submission to the college and knows that he will "never be the same."

Finding work at the Liberty Paint factory, the narrator is branded a "fink" by the unionized workers, then moments later is accused of being a unionizer by Lucius Brockway. Before the end of the day he contributes to a boiler-room explosion that leaves him seriously injured and unconscious. He awakes in the factory hospital, where, in order to assure that "society will suffer no traumata on his account," doctors attempt to "cure" him with an electric-shock lobotomy. After his release from the hospital, the narrator is unsure of who he is, feeling disconnected from both his mind and his body. Drifting back to Harlem, he is taken in by Mary Rambo, an elderly black woman he meets coming out of the Lenox Avenue subway. Here his search for identity becomes an "obsession," and he roams the city without purpose until he comes across an eviction in progress. Speaking to the angry crowd



Unemployed men in a Harlem neighborhood, Lenox Avenue, 1935.

in defense of the elderly black couple, the narrator comes to the attention of a member of the politically radical Brotherhood. Recruited as a spokesperson for their cause, the narrator accepts a new name and a "new identity" and resolves once again to "leave the old behind."

Chapters 15-25

After parting from Mary and moving into an apartment provided by the Brotherhood, the narrator delivers his first speech at a political rally. Encouraged by his own performance and the emotional reaction of the crowd, he resolves to find a meaningful identity in the Brotherhood that is "not limited by black and white." After the narrator meets Tod Clifton, another young black man active in the Brotherhood, the two are involved in a street fight with the black nationalist Ras the Exhorter. Although denounced by Ras for working side by side with white men, the narrator is "dominated by the all-embracing idea of Brotherhood" and convinced that he plays a "vital role" in the work of the organization. His confidence is momentarily shaken by an anonymous warning that he not "get too big," but he is reminded of what he is working for by Brother Tarp's gift of a leg link that he had filed open to escape from a southern chain gang.

The narrator begins to question the aims of the Brotherhood after he is denounced by Brother Wrestrum and is transferred out of Harlem to lecture downtown on "the Woman Question." When he returns to Harlem after Tod Clifton's disappearance, he finds the movement weakened and disorganized and discovers Clifton on the street hawking paper Sambo dolls. Moments later, the narrator watches as Clifton is gunned down by a police officer. With his eyes opened to aspects of Harlem and of the Brotherhood that he had never seen before, the narrator leads a funeral march for Clifton at which he abandons "scientific" political arguments for honest emotional expression. Roaming the streets of Harlem after again being denounced by the Brotherhood, the narrator discovers a world of contradiction and "possibility" that causes him to see his past experiences in a new light:

... leaning against that stone wall in the sweltering night, I began to accept my past and, as I accepted it, I felt memories welling up within me. It was as though I'd learned suddenly to look around corners; images of past humiliations flickered through my head and I saw that they were more than separate experiences. They were me; they defined me. I was my experiences and my experiences were me, and no blind men, no matter how powerful they became, even if they conquered the world, could take that, or change one single itch, taunt, laugh, cry, scar, ache,

rage or pain of it. They were blind, bat blind, moving only by the echoed sounds of their own voices . . . They were very much the same, each attempting to force his picture of reality upon me and neither giving a hoot in hell for how things looked to me. I was simply a material, a natural resource to be used. I had switched from the arrogant absurdity of Norton and Emerson to that of Jack and the Brotherhood, and it all came out the same—except I now recognized my invisibility.

After this powerful recognition, the narrator resolves to undermine the Brotherhood. But before he can discover their plans for him and for Harlem, he is swept up in a riot initiated by Ras, now called "the Destroyer." Narrowly escaping death at the hands of Ras and his henchmen, the narrator falls into an open manhole where he sleeps, dreams, and eventually decides to "take up residence."

Epilogue

From his "hole in the ground," the narrator ends his story by reflecting on his painful past, his present uncertainty and anger, and the possibility that he may yet emerge from his "hibernation" and—though still an invisible man in American society—find "a socially responsible role to play."

Characters

The Reverend Homer A. Barbee

A blind preacher from Chicago of substantial rhetorical skill who gives the Founder's Day speech at the college.

Dr. A. Herbert Bledsoe

Dr. Bledsoe is the president of the college attended by the invisible man. Called "Old Bucket-head" by the students, he is a shrewd survivor who has spent his career humoring the white trustees in the hopes of retaining his position. A person of considerable affectation, he can manage even in striped trousers and a swallow-tail coat topped by an ascot tie to make himself look humble. He is aghast when the invisible man tells him that he took Mr. Norton to see Jim Trueblood because that's what the trustee wanted to do: "My God, boy! You're black and living in the South—did you forget how to lie?" His recipe for success is to attain power and influence by making the right contacts and "then stay in the dark and use it!" His self-interest makes him capable of betrayal, as when he lets the invisible man head off for New York City think-

Media Adaptations



- *Invisible Man* was recorded by Dr. Marion J. Smith for Golden Voice Production, 1993.

ing that the letters he is carrying addressed to various trustees are letters of recommendation.

Lucius Brockway

The invisible man's irascible second supervisor at Liberty Paints. "Lucius Brockway not only intends to protect himself, he *knows how* to do it! Everybody knows I been here ever since there's been a here." His one worry is that the union will do him out of a job.

Brother Tod Clifton

Young and handsome, Clifton is the leader of the Brotherhood youth "a hipster, a zoot suiter, a sharpie." He has run-ins with Ras the Exhorter over their philosophical differences. He is friendly and helpful to the invisible man, despite the hero's being made his superior. "I saw no signs of resentment," says the invisible man in admiration, "but a complete absorption in the strategy of the meeting. . . I had no doubt that he knew his business." Brother Clifton has put his full faith in the brotherhood, and when he is abandoned by it, his despair is total. He plunges "outside of history," becoming a street peddler selling paper black sambo dolls, and is murdered by the police. His death is a defining moment for the invisible man.

Emma

One of the first members of the Brotherhood the invisible man meets. The hero is skeptical of the Brotherhood's motives when he hears Emma ask, "But don't you think he should be a little blacker?"

Grandfather

The invisible man's grandfather, whom the protagonist had always thought of as a model of desirable conduct. He is dead when the novel be-

gins, but his influence on the invisible man is powerful. His dying words were, "Son, ... I never told you, but our life is a war and I have been a traitor all my born days, a spy in the enemy's country ever since I give up my gun back in the Reconstruction. Live with your head in the lion's mouth. I want you to overcome 'em with yeses, undermine 'em with grins, agree 'em to death and destruction, let 'em swoller you till they vomit or bust wide open.... Learn it to the younguns." These words prick the invisible man's complacency, and he remembers them as a curse that haunts him throughout his journey, a reminder that all is not right in the world.

Halley

The spirited manager at The Golden Day.

Brother Hambro

Hambro takes the invisible man through a four-month period of intense study and indoctrination after his arena speech to the Brotherhood to correct his "unscientific" tendencies. "A tall, friendly man, a lawyer, and the Brotherhood's chief theoretician," he tells the invisible man that "it's impossible *not* to take advantage of the people.... The trick is to take advantage of them in their own best interest."

Invisible Man

The unnamed protagonist of the novel. In explaining to the reader what he has done to be so "black and blue," the hero says, "I was looking for myself and asking everyone except myself questions which I, and only I, could answer." By the end of his adventures, he will conclude "that I am nobody but myself. But first I had to discover that I am an invisible man!" The invisible man starts his tale as an innocent, one who believes that "humility was the secret, indeed, the very essence of progress." His greatest aspiration is to be an assistant to Dr. Bledsoe, the president of his college, who kowtows to whites in an attempt to hold on to his position. The invisible man believes, consciously or unconsciously, "the great false wisdom ... that white is right" and that it is "advantageous to flatter rich white folks." He grudgingly admires other blacks who do not share his scruples; for instance, he is both humiliated and fascinated by the sharecropper Jim Trueblood's self-confessed tale of incest, and he is similarly impressed by the vet at The Golden Day: "I wanted to tell Mr. Norton that the man was crazy and yet I received a fearful satisfaction from hearing him talk as he had to a white man."

Although he has the "queer feeling that I was playing a part in some scheme which I did not understand," he ignores his instincts, as when, for instance, he personally delivers to prospective employers in New York City what he foolishly believes to be positive letters of recommendation from Dr. Bledsoe "like a hand of high trump cards." For every two steps forward, he takes one back. His experience in the factory hospital, for example, is a kind of awakening, and he develops an "obsession with my identity" that causes him to "put into words feelings which I had hitherto suppressed." But though he is skeptical of the Brotherhood's motives in recruiting him—"What am I, a man or a natural resource?"—and their obvious emphasis on the "we," the invisible man sets aside his misgivings and embraces the organization; "it was a different, bigger 'we,'" he tells himself. He is kind, joining the Brotherhood partly out of desire to pay Mary Rambo the rent money he owes her, and loyal to people like Brother Tarp and Brother Clifton in whom he senses a fundamental goodness. But he is forever second-guessing himself, and it takes the raw injustice of Brother Clifton's murder to spark the invisible man into consciousness: "Outside the Brotherhood we were outside history; but inside of it they didn't see us.... Now I recognized my invisibility." At first defiant—"But to whom can I be responsible, and why should I be, when you refuse to see me?"—by the end of the novel the invisible man is ready to come out, "since there's a possibility that even an invisible man has a socially responsible role to play."

Brother Jack

The Brotherhood's district leader for Harlem, he befriends the invisible man after hearing him address a crowd gathered to witness the eviction of an elderly black couple, and sets about recruiting him to the Brotherhood. That his motives might be suspect is evident from the beginning, when he asks the invisible man, "How would you like to be the new Booker T. Washington?" (Washington was viewed negatively as an accommodationist by many blacks) and warns him, "You mustn't waste your emotions on individuals, they don't count." Brother Jack turns out to be the author of an anonymous threat mailed to the invisible man.

Mr. Kimbro

The invisible man's first supervisor at Liberty Paints.

Mr. Norton

A white philanthropist and trustee of the college attended by the invisible man, Mr. Norton describes himself as "a trustee of consciousness" and believes that the students of the college are his "fate." He calls his "real life's work ... my first-hand organizing of human life." A romantic about race, he insists on being taken to the old slave quarters, where he expects to hear a lively folktale but instead is treated to a matter-of-fact account of incest by Jim Trueblood. Norton is the cause of the invisible man's expulsion from the school.

Old Bucket-head

See Dr. A. Herbert Bledsoe

Mary Rambo

Mary Rambo runs a rooming house and takes the invisible man in after finding him ill in the street following his stay in the factory hospital. The only person to treat him with genuine affection, Mary is cynical about the big city, and puts her faith in the newcomers from the south: "I'm in New York, but New York ain't in me." The invisible man does not think of Mary as a "friend"; she was something more—a force, a stable, familiar force like something out of my past which kept me from whirling off into some unknown which I dared not face."

Ras the Exhorter

Modeled on Marcus Garvey, though not a caricature of him Ras is a flamboyant West African nationalist who preaches black pride, a return to Mother Africa, and a willingness to die for one's principles. Ras and the Brotherhood are engaged in a perpetual turf war, and Ras repeatedly exhorts the black members of the Brotherhood to remember their history. He says to Brother Tod Clifton: "You my brother, mahn Brothers are the same color; how the hell you call these white men *brother*? ... Brothers the same color. We sons of Mama Africa, you done forgot? You black, BLACK! ... You African AFRICAN!"

Rinehart

A mysterious figure who signs himself a "Spiritual Technologist" The reader never meets Rinehart, but the invisible man is mistaken for him by so many different people that he ends up putting together a fascinating though confusing composite: "Still, could he be all of them: Rine the runner and Rine the gambler and Rine the briber and Rine the lover and Rinehart the Reverend? Could he himself be both rind and heart? What is real anyway?

.. Perhaps the truth was always a lie" It is in trying to figure out Rinehart that the invisible man begins to see both how complex reality is and that it is possible to live with contradictions.

Sybil

Wife of a member of the Brotherhood with whom the invisible man has a brief liaison in the hope of gaining inside information on the organization.

Brother Tarp

An old but ideologically vigorous member of the Brotherhood "He can be depended upon in the most precarious circumstance," Brother Jack tells the invisible man. Brother Tarp hangs on the invisible man's office wall a picture of Frederick Douglass, which reminds him of his grandfather. Unlike the invisible man, who left the south more or less voluntarily, Brother Tarp was forced to escape to the north after spending nineteen years on a chain gang because "I said no to a man who wanted to take something from me." He gives the invisible man a link from his ankle iron as a keepsake.

Jim Trueblood

Once respected as a hard worker and a lively storyteller, Jim Trueblood is a black sharecropper who has since shamed the black community and who shocks Mr. Norton with his matter-of-fact account of incest with his daughter. Despite the awfulness of his crime, Trueblood's refusal to stint on the details or to make excuses for himself reveals a basic integrity that is reflected in his name, and the invisible man listens to him with a mixture of horror and admiration.

Veteran at the Golden Day

A skilled doctor who served in France and on his return to the States is run out of town and ends up in the local mental hospital He attends to Mr. Norton after his heart attack at the Golden Day. The invisible man is impressed with the bold way the vet talks to the white trustee. The vet is the first person to grasp the invisible man's dilemma: "You cannot see or hear or smell the truth of what you see."

Peter Wheatstraw

A kindly rubbish man the invisible man meets in the streets of Harlem singing the blues and who makes him think nostalgically of home.

Brother Wrestrum

A troublemaker, jealous of the invisible man. He makes a false accusation that indirectly results in the protagonist's being taken out of Harlem and sent downtown.

Themes

Identity

In *Invisible Man*, an unnamed protagonist sets out on a journey of self-discovery that takes him from the rural south to Harlem. Learning who he is means realizing that he is invisible to the white world, but by the end of his journey the hero has the moral fiber to live with such contradictions. The overwhelming theme of the novel is that of identity. While the novel has to do with questions of race and prejudice, most critics agree that these ideas are subsumed under the broader questions of who we think we are, and the relationship between identity and personal responsibility. The invisible man's moment of self-recognition occurs almost simultaneously with his realization that the white world does not see him, but Ellison seems to be saying, "Well, don't worry about that." Until the invisible man can see himself, he can only be passive, "outside of history." At the beginning of the novel, even Jim Trueblood has a stronger sense of himself than does the hero: "and while I'm singen' them blues I makes up my mind that I ain't nobody but myself and ain't nothin' I can do but let whatever is gonna happen, happen." In fact, everybody but the invisible man seems to be aware of his problem. The vet at The Golden Day sees it, remarking to Mr. Norton: "Already he is—well, bless my soul! Behold! a walking zombie! Already he's learned to repress not only his emotions but his humanity. He's invisible, a walking personification of the Negative, the most perfect achievement of your dreams, sir! The mechanical man!" And Mr. Bledsoe, the college president, tells the hero, "You're nobody, son. You don't exist—can't you see that?" Ironically, when the invisible man offers to prove his identity to the son of Mr. Emerson, a white trustee, the son answers him in the careless manner of someone for whom identity has never been a question, "Identity! My God! Who has any identity any more anyway?" When the invisible man joins the Brotherhood, Brother Jack gives him a "new identity."

Though he constantly stumbles, every misstep seems to bring the hero a little closer to solving the

puzzle of who he is. For example, after the operation at the hospital, when a doctor holds up a sign that reads "WHO WAS BUCKEYE THE RABBIT?", the invisible man begins thinking about his identity. And in the wake of Brother Clifton's murder, he remembers past humiliations and sees that they have defined him.

Individualism

Another theme that pervades the novel is that of individuality. Although he may be uncertain of his identity, the invisible man has never quite lost the sense that he is an individual. One of the superficial arguments he uses for leaving Mary Rambo without saying goodbye to her is that people like her "usually think in terms of 'we' while I have always tended to think in terms of 'me'—and that has caused some friction, even with my own family." He rationalizes the Brotherhood's emphasis on the group by deluding himself into thinking that it is a "bigger 'we.'" But though he tries, the invisible man cannot fully suppress his individuality, which continues to intrude on his consciousness. After his first official speech to the Brotherhood, he remembers unaccountably the words of Woodridge, a lecturer at the college, who told his students that their task was "that of making ourselves individuals. . . We create the race by creating ourselves." At the funeral for Brother Tod Clifton, whose murder is one of several epiphanies, or moments of illumination, in the novel, the invisible man looks out over the people present and sees "not a crowd but the set faces of individual men and women."

Duty and Responsibility

The theme of responsibility has to do with making choices and accepting the consequences of our actions. The invisible man uses the term at several reprises, but it is only toward the end of his adventures that he is able to match the word with its true meaning. In the course of the "battle royal," he uses the words "social responsibility" to impress the Board of Education, because "whenever I uttered a word of three or more syllables a group of voices would yell for me to repeat it." When he cannot get Dr. Bledsoe to see that what has happened to Dr. Norton is not his fault, the hero believes that by taking "responsibility" for the mishap he will be able to get on with his career. But what he means by taking responsibility is smoothing things over, and he cannot control the result. As he moves from one troubling experience to another, however, a growing maturity is evident, and peo-

ple come to depend on him. When Brother Jack asks him by what authority he organized the rally for the people following Brother Tod Clifton's funeral, the invisible man tells him it was on his "personal responsibility," and offers a coolly reasoned defense. At the end of the novel, when he is about to leave his hole, he talks about the "possibility of action" and explains that even an "invisible man has a socially responsible role to play," echoing with mild irony the phrase he once used without thinking.

Blindness

Blindness as a kind of moral and personal failing is a recurring motif, or theme, in the novel. Whether inflicted by others, as in the "battle royal," where the young men are forcibly blindfolded, or as evidence of confusion, as when the invisible man describes stumbling "in a game of blindman's buff," the idea of blindness is used to multiple effect. The Reverend Homer A. Barbee is literally blind, Brother Jack has a glass eye, white people cannot see the invisible man, and the hero cannot see himself. A variation on the theme is the idea of looking but not seeing, of not *trying* to see, which comes back to the theme of responsibility. Various characters impress on the invisible man the importance of not accepting things as they are. "For God's sake," the vet from The Golden Day tells him, "learn to look beneath the surface. Come out of the fog, young man." And the son of the white trustee Emerson asks him, "Aren't you curious about what lies behind the face of things?"

History and Folklore

In *Invisible Man* history and identity are inextricably bound: we are the sum of our history and our experience. This message is brought home in the novel both overtly—"What is your past and where are you going?" Ras the Exhorter asks an uncomfortable Brother Tod Clifton—and indirectly, as in Mary Rambo's advice to the invisible man that it is the young who will make changes but "something's else, it's the ones from the South that's got to do it, them what knows the fire and ain't forgot how it burns. Up here too many for-gits." That is, you are your history, but only if you remember it. An inventory of the sad belongings of the couple the hero finds on the Harlem sidewalk reads like a synopsis of the story of blacks in America, and the power of the associations the objects evoke inspires the invisible man to address a crowd for the first time. Closely related to the theme of history is the motif of folklore as a link

Topics for Further Study



- Research some of the major demographic shifts occurring in the world today, and compare the reasons for them with those that motivated the Great Migration North of 1910–1970 in the United States
- Explore current policies in medical ethics and informed consent and explain how these would affect the circumstances of the kind of operation performed on the invisible man in Ellison's novel
- Investigate current housing laws regarding the elderly, and explain how the couple who are evicted from their apartment in winter in the novel would be affected by them, and what their options for alternative living arrangements might be

to the past, particularly folktales, jazz, and the blues. The simple folk who appear in the book all seem rooted in a way the invisible man and others are not, and have a sureness about them that is reflected in their names: Jim Trueblood, Mary Rambo, Peter Wheatstraw, even Ras the Exhorter. Likewise, the hero's grandfather has a "stolid black peasant's face." The vet at The Golden Day, who is a mental patient but does not appear to be completely insane, tells Mr. Norton that he had made a mistake in forgetting certain "fundamentals.... Things about life. Such things as most peasants and folk peoples almost always know through experience, though seldom through conscious thought."

Style

Point of View

At the outset of *Invisible Man*, the unnamed hero is in transition. He has discovered that he is invisible and has retreated from the world in defiance; but the reader senses that all is not resolved.

In the adventure that the invisible man proceeds to relate in the first person ("I"), his voice changes over time from that of a naive young man, to someone who is clearly more responsible though still confused, to a person willing to deal with the world whatever the risks. The novel is framed by a Prologue and Epilogue. The story opens in the present, switches to flashback, and then returns to the present, but a step forward from the Prologue. Writing down the story has helped the hero to make up his mind about things. Leonard J. Deutsch attributes the complexity of the novel in part to this juxtaposition of perspectives of the "I" of the naive boy and the "I" of the older, wiser narrator. Anthony West, on the other hand, writing in *The New Yorker*, called the Prologue and the Epilogue "intolerably arty ... the two worst pieces of writing in the work."

Setting

Invisible Man is set in an indeterminate time frame sometime between the 1930s and 1950s. The protagonist's adventures take him from an unnamed southern town to New York City, mirroring the migration during the period of the novel of over a quarter of a million African Americans from the rural south to the urban north in search of jobs. The novel opens on the campus of a southern black college whose buildings and environs are repeatedly described in honeyed terms. Nevertheless, in retrospect the hero remembers it also as a flower-studded wasteland maintained by the money of white philanthropists blind to the surrounding poverty. The action then moves to Harlem, a part of New York City associated with several political and cultural elements of importance in the novel: the active recruiting of black intellectuals by the Communist party in the United States, the rise of black nationalism, and the golden age of jazz.

Symbol

Invisible Man is rich with symbols that have given critics fertile ground for interpretation. For example, the "battle royal" that opens the book represents the novel in a nutshell and serves as a microcosmic portrayal of race relations in a socially segregated society. The narrator will clutch to him the briefcase the Board of Education awards him throughout his adventures, though he will burn its contents—which symbolize his middle-class aspirations—at the end. Ellison gives his characters names that often suggest something about their personalities, for example, Dr. Bledsoe, Jim Trueblood, Brother Wrestrum, or equally significant, as in the case of the protagonist, he does not name

them at all. Songs figure significantly in the novel. In the prologue, for instance, the hero remembers the words to a Louis Armstrong song, "What did I do / To be so black / And blue?" and at the end of the catastrophic visit to the slave quarters, which will result in the hero's expulsion from college, the children are singing "London Bridge Is Falling Down." The lobotomy-like operation undertaken to make the hero more amiable backfires and instead brings him somewhat to himself, constituting a symbolic rebirth.

Literary Styles

The many stylistic elements used in *Invisible Man* are part of what make it such a literary tour de force. Warren French, for example, has described the formal organization of the narrative as "a series of nested boxes that an individual, trapped in the constricting center, seeks to escape." Several critics cite the use of varied literary styles, from the naturalism of the events at the college campus, to the expressionism, or subjective emotions, of the hero's time with the Brotherhood, to the surrealism that characterizes the riot at the end of the novel. *Invisible Man* can be classed as a *bildungsroman*, or novel of education, similar to Voltaire's *Candide*, in which the hero moves from innocence to experience. It has also been called picaresque because of the episodic nature of the hero's adventures, but this term implies a shallowness that the invisible man is finally able to overcome. Comedy and irony are used to good effect in both the episode with Jim Trueblood and the scene at The Golden Day. But most important, Ellison drew on the knowledge of African American folklore he acquired in his days with the Federal Writers Project, and the influence of that tradition, particularly jazz and the blues, is inextricably woven into the thought and speech of the characters. The Reverend Homer A. Barbee's address, for example, is alive with gospel rhythms: "'But she knew, she knew! She knew the fire! She knew the fire! She knew the fire that burned without consuming! My God, yes!'"

Historical Context

The Great Migration

The civil rights movement of the 1950s and 1960s had its genesis in the Great Migration, the move north of 6.5 million black Americans from

Compare & Contrast

- **1930s:** Following an active policy of inclusion, the Communist party recruits many black leaders and thinkers.

1952: A "witch-hunt" for communists begun by U.S. Senator Joseph McCarthy continues through the early 1950s and ruins many careers.

Today: The 1980s see the collapse of communism in Eastern Europe. In America, politics is increasingly middle-of-the-road. American communists are a small fringe group.

- **1930s:** The U.S. labor movement gains support under the New Deal, but prejudice against African Americans is widespread.

1952: Union membership peaks in 1945 at 35.5% of the non-agricultural workforce and is still strong in the 1950s.

Today: Unions are fully integrated. But membership is at an all-time low, and unions are forced to compromise on wages and benefits to preserve jobs.

- **1930s:** Brain surgery to correct the behavior of mentally ill patients, or lobotomy, is widely practiced between 1936 and 1956.

1952: Lobotomy is largely abandoned in favor of alternative treatments including tranquilizers and psychotherapy.

Today: Psychoactive drugs have become the first line of treatment for mental illness, and a de-emphasis of institutional care and the closing of mental hospitals have produced increased homelessness.

- **1930s:** Big bands in the swing era give way to bebop, the basis for modern jazz, which arises in Kansas City and Harlem. Major influences are Charlie Parker, Dizzy Gillespie, and Thelonius Monk.

1952: Progressive, or cool, jazz, with less convoluted melodic lines, begins in New York City in the late 1940s and early 1950s. Lester Young and Miles Davis are major figures in the movement, which is better received critically than bebop.

Today: After a period of several decades of experimentation, including a style called fusion, jazz settles into a revivalist phase. Popular artists include Wynton and Branford Marsalis, David Murray, and John Carter.

the rural South. This created large black communities like New York's Harlem and Chicago's South Side. In the early 1900s, black migration increased dramatically with the beginning of World War I in 1914, in response to the demand for factory workers in the north. While the move did not bring social justice to blacks, it did provide some social, financial, and political benefits, and it established the issue of race in the national consciousness. Both Ralph Ellison and his protagonist, like so many before them, made the journey north. When the invisible man tells the vet from The Golden Day that he's going to New York, the vet answers, "New York! That's not a place, it's a dream. When I was your age it was Chicago. Now all the little black boys run away to New York."

Northern black factory workers could expect to make two to ten times as much as their south-

ern counterparts, and thus newly arrived blacks from the south had an uneasy relationship with organized white labor. Their reluctance to jeopardize their access to the industrial job market by taking part in labor agitation was exploited by their employers to frustrate unions who hired black laborers to replace strikers. It was already clear by the 1930s that America's labor movement could only survive through integration, and between 1935 and the end of World War II, 500,000 blacks joined the Congress of Industrial Organizations (CIO). But white opposition to bringing blacks into the unions persisted up to the time Ellison wrote *Invisible Man*. At Liberty Paints an office boy tells the invisible man, "The wise guys firing the regular guys and putting on you colored college boys. Pretty smart. That way they don't have to pay union wages." And when Lucius Brockway mistakenly



Police arresting a man during the 1943 Harlem riots.

thinks the invisible man has gone to a labor meeting, he fairly explodes. "That damn union," he cried, almost in tears. "That damn union! They after my job! For one of us to join one of them damn unions is like we was to bite the hand of the man who taught us to bathe in the bathtub!"

American communists strongly advocated racial tolerance, thereby winning the support of black leaders and intellectuals, particularly during the Depression. Like Richard Wright, Ellison leaned on the party for financial support and because it offered him a way of getting published. Nevertheless, Ellison objected to what he considered to be a kind of thought control, and he never became a party member. During World War II, when the party advised against pushing issues of racial segregation in the U.S. armed forces, Ellison became disillusioned. In *Invisible Man*, the hero returns from an absence only to discover that "there had been, to my surprise, a switch in emphasis from local issues to those more national and international in scope, and it was felt for the moment the interests of Harlem were not of first importance."

Nationhood and Civil Rights

In 1916, Marcus Garvey came to the United States from Jamaica and founded the Universal Negro Improvement Association (UNIA). Like Ras

the Exhorter in *Invisible Man*, Garvey was an ardent and flamboyant nationalist, and he electrified Harlem with his message of black pride and self-determination through the recolonization of Africa. But Garvey's arguments for racial separation were at odds with the integrationist efforts of communists, and the schism between the two groups would outlast Garvey's political demise in 1921. Another significant black nationalist figure of the 1930s was Sufi Abdul Mohammed; elements of his colorful personality turn up in *Invisible Man* in both Ras the Exhorter and Rinehart, the mysterious numbers runner and preacher.

Some 400,000 black soldiers served in World War I, but they found that their devotion did not translate into respect abroad during the war or at home after it. Once overseas, blacks were relegated to menial tasks, were passed over for combat duty, and were subjected to continual harassment by whites. The society to which they returned was even more conservative on issues of race than the one they had left. The black press, particular W. E. B. Du Bois's influential magazine *The Crisis*, was loud in its condemnation of reports of discriminatory treatment made by returning black soldiers. The outrage felt by black veterans is described in an incident in *Invisible Man*, where a group of black World War I veterans cause a disturbance at a whorehouse and bar called The Golden Day. One veteran describes how he had served as a surgeon in France under the Army Medical Corps but was chased out of town on his return to America.

The prospect of a new draft in the wake of the eruption of conflict in Europe again in 1939 led to civil rights protests in the early 1940s and violent racial incidents between white southerners and black northerners at military bases across the United States. The issue was responsible for the Harlem riot of 1943. The climax of *Invisible Man* is a riot in Harlem allegedly instigated by the Brotherhood; the event is based in part on a riot that occurred there in 1935, which some commentators blamed on communist agitators.

Critical Overview

Invisible Man was published to instant acclaim, though its complexity did not necessarily make it an easy read. Writing in *Commentary* in 1952, Saul Bellow called it "a book of the very first order, a superb book," praising in particular the episode in which Jim Trueblood tells his tale of in-

cest to Mr. Norton. "One is accustomed to expect excellent novels about boys, but a modern novel about men is exceedingly rare." Anthony West wrote in *The New Yorker* that *Invisible Man* was "an exceptionally good book and in parts an extremely funny one" and praised its "robust courage," though he recommended skipping the Prologue and Epilogue and "certain expressionist passages conveniently printed in italics." Like Bellow, West congratulated Ellison on having written a book "about being colored in a white society [that] yet manages not to be a grievance book" and noted Ellison's "real satirical gift for handling ideas at the level of low comedy." In his study *Native Sons*, Edward Margolies noted the importance of jazz and the blues to the narrative and commented that what Ellison "seems to be saying [is] that if men recognize first that existence is purposeless, they may then be able to perceive the possibility of shaping their existence in some kind of viable form—in much the same manner as the blues artist gives form to his senseless pain and suffering." However, Margolies bemoaned the thematic weakness of the novel, which is that "Ellison's hero simply has nowhere to go once he tells us he is invisible." In a 1963 article in *Dissent*, Irving Howe called the novel a brilliant though flawed achievement. "No white man could have written it, since no white man could know with such intimacy the life of the Negroes from the inside; yet Ellison writes with an ease and humor which are now and again simply miraculous."

The style of the novel has occasionally been criticized as excessive—Howe found Ellison "literary to a fault"—but even the novel's critics found much to praise in the symbolism, style, and narrative structure. Opinion was divided over the section dealing with the Brotherhood. West called it "perhaps the best description of rank-and-file Communist Party activity that has yet appeared in an American novel," but Bellow found it less than convincing, and Howe wrote that "Ellison makes his Stalinist figures so vicious and stupid that one cannot understand how they could ever have attracted him or any other Negro."

The biggest controversy over the book has always had to do with whether or not it was intended for a universal audience. Bellow praised Ellison for not having "adopted a minority tone. If he had done so, he would have failed to establish a true middle-of-consciousness for everyone." Howe felt rather that "even Ellison cannot help being caught up with the idea of the Negro, . . . for plight and protest are inseparable from that experience," though he did

not say whether this was good or bad. Warren French asserts in *Reference Guide to American Fiction* that the book has frequently been misread: it is neither unique to the black experience nor "picaresque," but both broader and more sophisticated. David Littlejohn straddled the debate, called *Invisible Man* "essentially a Negro's novel . . . written entirely out of a Negro's experience, . . . [b]ut it is not a 'Negro novel.' . . . It is his story, really, not the race's, not the war's, except insofar as he is of the race and in the war." Black nationalists argued that Ellison was not stringent enough, and John Oliver Killens and Amiri Baraka were particularly vocal critics. Ellison's defense was that he had never been a propagandist.

In 1953 *Invisible Man* was awarded the National Book Award for fiction. But controversy over what it meant and to whom continued. In his preface to the 1981 commemorative edition of the novel, Charles Johnson, whose *Middle Passage* won the National Book Award in 1990, remembers a time in the 1960s when "both Ellison and poet Robert Hayden were snubbed by those under the spell of black cultural nationalism, and when so many black critics denied the idea of 'universality' in literature and life." This attitude was largely reversed during the 1970s when white critics tired of waiting for Ellison's hypothetical second novel and black readers began to be more appreciative of the book's portrayal of black experience. Whatever the nature of the critical debate, *Invisible Man* has proved its staying power. Leonard Deutsch wrote that for all its brutal realism and cynicism, *Invisible Man* "is basically a comic and celebratory work, for the hero is ultimately better off at the end: he has become the shaping artist of his tale."

Criticism

Anthony M. Dykema-VanderArk

In the following essay, Dykema-VanderArk, a doctoral candidate at Michigan State University, examines how the individual journey of the "Invisible Man" can represent the larger American experience. He asserts that Ellison's novel concludes that "living as a true American requires faith—faith in equality and democracy when they are most out of reach, in the possibility of coming together when segregation predominates, in human complexity when society is obsessed with stereotypes."

What Do I Read Next?



- *Notes of a Native Son* (1955) is the first volume of James Baldwin's eloquent and influential essays about being black in America and abroad.
- *Middle Passage* (1990) is Charles Johnson's National Book Award-winning tale of freedman Rutherford Calhoun's voyage to Africa as a stowaway aboard the slave ship *Republic*.
- Nobel prize-winner Toni Morrison's novel *Jazz* (1992) captures the rhythms and mood of African American life in Harlem in the 1920s.
- *Native Son* (1940) by Richard Wright tells the story of Bigger Thomas's losing battle to escape the traps of race and class in Chicago in the 1930s after the job he takes working for a wealthy white family goes tragically awry.
- Ellison's *Shadow and Act* (1964) is a collection of essays and interviews in which the author explores the meaning of existence and experience.

From his earliest published writings in the late 1930s until his death in 1994, Ralph Ellison remained an outspoken commentator on American literature, culture, race, and identity, but his reputation has always rested most solidly on his one published novel, *Invisible Man*. Since its publication in 1952, *Invisible Man* has consistently been singled out as one of the most compelling and important novels of this century. Praised for both its artistic originality and its thematic richness, the novel continues to find new readers not least because of the reading experience it provides—at once inspiring and unsettling, lucid and complex, approachable and profoundly challenging. From the powerful first line of the novel ("I am an invisible man"), readers are engaged in the life of the narrator, this "invisible man," as he tries to tell his story and "put invisibility down in black and white." Moreover, the novel urges its readers to undertake a similar quest along with the narrator: to

examine the painful realities of American history and culture and, in the end, to seek the ways in which they, too, may have "a socially responsible role to play."

Like the familiar opening of *Moby-Dick* ("Call me Ishmael"), *Invisible Man* begins with a prologue by the novel's first-person narrator, but in this case the introduction comes without a name: "I am an invisible man." The narrator's name remains hidden to the reader throughout the novel, but the importance of names and the act of naming becomes clear as his story unfolds. The narrator is "named" by nearly every person he encounters in the novel: He is, for example, a "boy" and a "nigger" to the "leading white citizens" of his town; just the same (to his surprise) to Dr. Bledsoe; a "cog" in the machine of Mr. Norton's "fate"; little more than a laboratory animal to the doctors in the factory hospital; a race-traitor to Ras the Exhorter; and a "natural resource" to the Brotherhood. Each person or group that the narrator encounters tries to identify him, to impose an identity upon him, while ignoring or denying his own emotional and psychological sense of self. As he reflects on his experiences from his "hole in the ground," he understands that this misnaming is the real source of his identity crisis. He is "invisible" not from any lack of physicality or intelligence but because of a willed action of those around him, "simply because people refuse to see me." But this blindness, this desire to call him by any name but his own, initially affects even the narrator himself. It takes him, as he acknowledges, "a long time and much painful boomeranging of my expectations to achieve a realization everyone else appears to have been born with: That I am nobody but myself."

Achieving that "realization" requires the narrator to come to terms with his personal history and with his place in the larger history of America. The first words of the narrator's story in the first chapter of the book—"It goes a long way back ..."—establish immediately the importance of history and memory to his quest, and his narrative itself constitutes both memory and history "in black and white." Much of the tension of the story, however, results from the narrator's conflicted understanding of history and his desire to stifle his memories, to disconnect himself from his past. As he recollects his experiences at the college, for example, the narrator struggles to determine "what was real, what solid, what more than a pleasant, time-killing dream?" After rejecting the identity that he possessed at the college, the narrator is left with "the problem of forgetting it," of quieting "all the con-

tradictory voices shouting" inside his head. The narrator's difficulty in leaving his past behind resonates throughout his story, from the recurring voice and image of his grandfather to the physical reminders of his past that he carries with him throughout the novel.

Two physical objects in particular—Primus Provo's "FREE PAPERS" and Brother Tarp's chain link—act as vivid emblems of the painful realities of America's past. The narrator wants to believe that the legacy of slavery and southern chain-gangs belong to the distant past: When he reads the "fragile paper" that once released a man from slavery, he tells himself, "*It has been longer than that, further removed in time*" But, as he begins to perceive in the factory hospital, the narrator's quest for his own "freedom" and identity can only be fulfilled when he recovers that history, when he understands its continuing relevance as part of his own past. He recognizes this connection fully only after rejecting the Brotherhood's "scientific" language in favor of a more personal sense of history: "I began to accept my past and, as I accepted it, I felt memories welling up within me.... Images of past humiliations flickered through my head and I saw that they were more than separate experiences. They were me; they defined me." Only after seeing this composite picture of his past does the narrator recognize not only his invisibility but also the "great potentialities" and "possibilities" that exist in spite of that invisibility.

Of course, "potentialities" and "possibilities" are just what the narrator finds—for a time—in the grand missions of the Founder's college and the Brotherhood. At the college, the narrator identifies himself with Mr. Norton and with Dr. Bledsoe and feels that he is "sharing in a great work"; likewise, in the Brotherhood, he believes that he has found "a way to have a part in making the big decisions, of seeing through the mystery of how the country, the world, really operated." What attracts the narrator to both groups is, in part, versions of history and visions of the future that are full of meaning, purpose, and direction. But both groups, he eventually learns, maintain a strict control over all "possibilities," conceal all "contradictions," and, as the vet at the Golden Day prophesied, finally see the narrator as "a thing and not a man." These groups give him a "role" to play, but only as an "automaton," a "child," a "black amorphous thing."

When the narrator ends his story, then, by wondering if "even an invisible man has a socially responsible role to play," it is clear that the answer

to his question rests on the entirety of his narrative and has no simple solution. "Social responsibility," first of all, is precisely what the racist "leading white citizens" of his southern town desired from him, the responsibility of keeping himself in a submissive and segregated "place." In contrast, the responsible role that the narrator seeks for the future will go hand in hand with a belief—even if it is his alone—in the "social equality" that he inadvertently pronounced to the horror of the white men. Such a role will also rest on "personal responsibility" and emotional integrity of the sort that Jack and the Brotherhood denied to him. The narrator desires a role that neither engulfs his identity, his humanity, and his memory, nor requires, in his words, "Rinehartism-cynicism." For his "mind," his self, to be satisfied, he can neither "take advantage of the people" nor take no responsibility at all: He "must come out" to play a meaningful part in society, whether or not he remains invisible to the people he encounters there. In the end, the narrator finds the key to his identity in a healthy contradiction, both "denouncing" and "defending" his society, saying "yes" and saying "no," affirming a world whose "definition is possibility" at the same time he refuses to be blind to negations of that promise.

A sense of "contradiction" and "possibility" may also, finally, be the key to the artistic power and continuing relevance of Ellison's *Invisible Man*. Just as his narrator offers "no phony forgiveness," no unambiguous moral to his story, so Ellison leaves many of the tensions and competing elements unresolved. Ellison implies that the truth of American society cannot be encompassed in absolutes such as hope or despair, idealism or cynicism, even love or hate, but rather requires a willingness on the part of each citizen to see both extremes and hold them in balance. As Ellison envisions it, living as a true American requires faith—faith in equality and democracy when they are most out of reach, in the possibility of coming together when segregation predominates, in human complexity when society is obsessed with stereotypes. That the novel continues to move readers almost half a century after it was written testifies not only to the power of Ellison's storytelling but also to the continuing relevance of these themes. Ellison's success in reaching new readers each year affirms, it seems, the narrator's final, unanswered question: "Who knows but that, on the lower frequencies, I speak for you?"

Source: Anthony M. Dykema-VanderArk, in an essay for *Novels for Students*, Gale, 1997.

Stewart Lillard

In the following excerpt, Lillard places Invisible Man within the epic tradition and calls the novel "a most successful attempt ... to produce the great American Negro epic."

[In *Invisible Man*], Ellison attempted to portray the theme of Negro endurance and cultural continuity by devising a plot which would include a maximum of experiences common to the American Negroes, but which could be employed by a wandering hero in an episodic manner. For this plot he relied heavily on the social migration theme that promised equality to the Southern Negro but shattered his hopes in an economic jungle which ended with a dispossession in Harlem....

In the novel one unnamed youth progresses from a high school setting in Greenwood to the Southern college for Negroes and from there to Harlem. He does not remain in Harlem but seeks employment in the white neighborhoods of New York City and expresses interest in a scientific Brotherhood before returning to Harlem. In the final riot scene he flees from Harlem and discovers an underground cellar near Harlem situated in a white community bordering the Negro ghetto. His motivation for leaving Greenwood was the scholarship presented him by the white community of the town. At the college, the hero again felt an external motivating force which this time catapulted him from the Southern college to New York supposedly under the same expectations that faced Eddie, Harry, and Marvin (of earning his college expenses for the next school year); but he soon felt the true motivating impulse of expulsion.... [Although] the hero in *Invisible Man* has achieved no recognition of his identity, he has developed a workable solution and method of continued searching.

Within the episodic migration theme, Ellison developed a central character ... [who] is nameless and achieves an enlarged symbolic position. As he confronts the idiosyncrasies and overt violence of his environment and the white man's world that closes its doors to him, he is able to portray the frustrations and victories common to every man ("Who knows but that, on the lower frequencies, I speak for you?"); thereby, he achieves universal magnitude equivalent to the requirements for an epic hero.

Robert Bone, in his attempt [in "Ralph Ellison and the Use of Imagination," *Anger and Beyond* 1966], to classify *Invisible Man* as a picaresque novel, recognizes the heroic qualities in the un-

named character's confrontations with reality: "His [Ellison's] heroes are not victims but adventurers. They journey toward the possible in all ignorance of accepted limits. In the course of their travels, they shed their illusions and come to terms with reality." The internal evidence from the novel further substantiates the heroic qualities of the hero, who alone must contend frequently with the machinations of the white mind.

During the high school address before the drunken audience at the smoker in Chapter 1, the speaker illustrates his speech with the account of "a ship lost at sea" whose sailors ask for fresh water from the first friendly vessel they meet. The reply stresses self-reliance: "Cast down your bucket where you are." Like the captain of the distressed vessel, the Negro youth has been taught to seek help where it can be obtained. He must seek and strive for his own identity within society.

The encounter with Mr. Norton following the ill-fated Golden Day episode again resounds with an emphasis on self-reliance, for Mr. Norton explains that "'Self-reliance is a most worthy virtue. I shall look forward with the greatest of interest to learning your contribution to my fate.'" Do not Dr. Bledsoe's letters manipulate the hero into a position of being rejected by Mr. Emerson in New York City, a rejection that forces the hero to rely on his own skills rather than the reputation of his Southern alma mater ("... that though the wide universe is full of good, no kernel of nourishing corn can come to him but through his toil bestowed on that plot of ground which is given to him to till")?

Following the youth's symbolic second birth from the prefrontal lobotomy machine, he collides with the street crowds of New York without a protective shield (his college ties that opened doors for him, or a strong body that enabled him to work in non-union plants and remain temporarily outside his Harlem environment); and he soon struggles for a new identity, although his "tail feathers" have been "picked clean" like Poor Robin's. It is his encounter with a "yam" seller in Harlem that reverses his bewilderment and enables him to regain an identity:

This is all very wild and childish, I thought, but to hell with being ashamed of what you liked. No more of that for me. I am what I am! I wolfed down the yam and ran back to the old man . . .

Although this discovery and the search for identity has begun, it remains a disheveled stream of arabesqueness at the conclusion of the novel. Ellison's hero apparently has yet a host of worlds to vanquish.

In his struggle the hero cannot act independently of all external forces. Ellison's central hero is governed by his paternal grandfather's deathbed command to act the part of an intelligencer toward the white society and "overcome 'em with yeses." The hero, moreover, is also controlled by a naturalistic fate that is almost as important as the classical Olympian interference. Beneath this fate, the hero is allowed some degree of independence whereby he may become self-reliant. But this self-reliance is restricted to the Negro world; regardless of his solutions for establishing his identity, the society in which the hero lives and must find work is a segregated society that limits his opportunities. Unlike the racial injustice portrayed in Ellison's vignette, "The Birthmark" (*New Masses*, July 2, 1940), when Matt and Clara are repulsed by the brutality and barbarism of a lynching, the segregated social conditions in *Invisible Man* manipulate the hero as though they were an amoral fate in which the hero finds himself. Within his limitations, the hero refuses to retreat from his heroic search for his identity. In the *Epilogue* he realizes his need to return to the streets of Harlem rather than live continually in complacent seclusion. (The only men worthy of praise of the gods during the heroic age were those who accomplished noble deeds.) And so the hero reasons, "Life is to be lived, not controlled; and humanity is won by continuing to play in face of certain defeat"—a restatement of the conflict that plagued men for centuries.

Along with his grandfather's deathbed command, which haunts the hero throughout the novel as Anchises' predictions in the underworld influenced Aeneas' struggle in Italy or as Achilles' potential return to his father would have eliminated his chances for universal fame, a limited number of additional epic similarities appear in Ellison's novel: the hero's Dantesque descent in the *Prologue*, Sybil's Circean attempts to detain the hero from his mission, examples of gory combat, and one mock epic battle.

In the *Prologue* the Negro youth's descent into a cave that appears in a "reefer" dream is similar to Dante's progress into *Inferno* following his night of wandering in a lonely woods. During the Brotherhood portion of the novel the hero has been denounced by the party leaders, but before he can effect his separation from the organization he is transferred to the downtown section of New York and assigned to lecture on the position of women in the United States. The women of the Brotherhood and Sybil in Chapter 24 are unable to seduce the hero. Their attempt to sap his stoic will has

failed, and they are unable to preclude his search for identity.

The battle scenes and physical flights from death echo of primitive combat. Near the end of the Harlem Riot, the hero "ran expecting death between the shoulder blades or through the back of my head, and as I ran I was trying to get to Mary's." In the *Epilogue* his description of his personal feelings upon recognition of his fated position in society reeks of gory details:

That is the real soul-sickness, the spear in the side, the drag by the neck through the mob-angry town, the Grand Inquisition, the embrace of the Maiden, the rip in the belly with the guts spilling out, the trip to the chamber with the deadly gas that ends in the oven so hygienically clean—only it's worse because you continue stupidly to live

But Ellison, the Ellison of subtle humor, does not neglect at least one mock epic battle as Ras the Exhorter fights the uniformed New York policemen: "'Hell, yes, man, he had him a big black hoss and a fur cap and some kind of old lion skin or something over his shoulders and he was raising hell. Goddam if he wasn't a *sight*, riding up and down on this ole hoss, you know, one of the kind that pulls vegetable wagons, and he got him a cowboy saddle and some big spurs.'" The unnamed hero from a nebulously defined town of Greenwood and the college for Negroes in the South has migrated to Harlem where he witnesses mock-chivalry and chaos but has yet failed to achieve his own identity

Although the central character in *Invisible Man* is fictitious and nameless, the chaos that swirls about him in the final chapters presents a scene similar to the Harlem Riot of 1943. Ellison's clever meshing of fiction with historical fact and his structural development in the novel tend to produce a surface adventure with historical significance.

Intertwining through the episodes is Ellison's use of lyrics, which often are effective digressions and possess ironic overtones that suggest an atmosphere of defeat or of victory. Moreover, the spirituals and hymns, blues and jazz, recall slavery work songs and catastrophes that weld the centuries of the American Negroes' experiences into a collective event of suffering and expectation....

As a novelist, Ellison seems to have engaged his literary talents in a conscious effort of recording a century of Negro culture in *Invisible Man*. He records speech habits and musical lyrics of an oral tradition before they are lost to future ages. But his greater achievement is that he couches the lyrics and sermons within a framework of Negro expres-

sions and history. His novel becomes no mere anthology of unrelated selections, but a unified presentation of the American Negroes' culture and heritage. The lyrics, moreover, reflect glimpses of the white culture that dominated the slavery and reconstruction eras of the South and was modified by Negro choirs. Spirituals and anthems left behind by the hero on the Southern college campus reappear in a pejorative form of insult ("Go Down Moses") voiced by the intoxicated members of the scientifically oriented Brotherhood. Conversely, the spiritual theme of "Swing Low Sweet Chariot" resounded throughout sections of Dvořák's *New World Symphony*.

In the hospital scene following the paint factory explosion, the hero is reminded of a work song as he struggles to free himself from the machine and as he attempts to recall his past identity. Mary Rambo's use of the "Backwater Blues" and Trueblood's singing of primitive blues laments are two characteristic examples of Ellison's heavy reliance on the blues form. Trueblood's children and those of Brother Hambro, in New York, sing nursery and game songs, but the songs are those borrowed from the Anglo-Scottish community. Ellison's use of animal lyrics ("Poor Robin"), the jazz of the musical bars in New York, and the Harlem jive of Peter Wheatstraw ("She's got feet like a monkey / Legs like a frog—Lawd, Lawd!") together form a composite, along with his other musical types, of the American Negroes' culture and the experiences to which the invisible hero was subjected.

The musical references and lyrics parallel the geographic settings used in the structure of the novel and provide evidence of a cultural heritage that existed long before the events in the novel occurred. They are the remains of a primitive oral tradition among the American Negroes that Ellison sought to record in their authentic context before they were lost or obscured in fragmentated passages in printed anthologies. The scope of the novelist was ambitious enough, and the once oral musical tradition has become literature.

Ralph Ellison's "love" for the American scene somehow inspired him to capture the American Negroes' culture in an artistic form, and his *Invisible Man* is Ellison's attempt—a most successful attempt—to produce the great American Negro epic. For the reader aware of the American Negroes' culture, it is an Odyssey in disguise.

Source: Stewart Lillard, "Ellison's Ambitious Scope in *Invisible Man*," in *English Journal*, Vol. 58, No. 6, September, 1969, pp. 833-39.

William J. Schafer

In the following excerpt, Schafer explores how Ellison's "invisible man" can be seen as an anti-hero in search of an identity.

The anti-hero of *Invisible Man*, though we come to know him intimately, remains nameless. He is no-man and everyman on a modern epic quest, driven by the message his grandfather reveals in a dream: "To Whom It May Concern ... Keep This Nigger-Boy Running." His primary search is for a name—or for the self it symbolizes. During his search he is given another name by the Brotherhood, but it is no help. When he becomes a "brother," he finds that brotherhood does not clarify his inner mysteries.

In creating his anti-hero, Ellison builds on epic and mythic conventions. The nameless voyager passes through a series of ordeals or trials to demonstrate his stature. First, he passes through the initiation-rites of our society—the battle royal (exposing the sadistic sexuality of the white southern world) and speechmaking that sends him to college are parts of this rite of passage, and he is tormented into the adult world. He passes this test by demonstrating his servility and naively interpreting his grandfather's dictum: "Live with your head in the lion's mouth. I want you to overcome 'em with yeses, undermine 'em with grins, agree 'em to death and destruction, let 'em swoller you till they vomit or bust wide open." This is the first outlook of the invisible man—the paranoia fostered by "them," the white oppressors; the boy here is Buckeye the Rabbit, the swift clever animal living by its wits beneath the jaws of the killer.

When he arrives at college, he is confronted by the deceit and duplicity of Negroes who have capitulated to a white world; he is broken by the powerful coalition of Bledsoe the Negro president and Norton the white trustee. His second trial shows him that the struggle is not a simple one of black against white, that "they" are more complex than his first experiences showed. He finds that both black and white can be turned against him.

The second phase of his career commences in the trip to New York, an exile from "paradise"; in the city, he finds Bledsoe's seven magic passports to success in the white world, the letters of recommendation, are actually betrayals, variations of the dream-letter: "Keep This Nigger-Boy Running." Thus, his primary illusions are shattered, but there are many more layers to the cocoon in which he sleeps.

For he is first of all a dreamer, a somnambulist, and sleep and dreams figure significantly in his image of himself. As he reassesses himself, his metaphor for new discoveries is the same: "...it was as though I had been suddenly awakened from a deep sleep." Yet each sleep and each awakening (little deaths and births) prove to be interlocked layers of his existence, a set of never-ending Chinese boxes. One climactic section of the novel details his second crucial awakening—the "descent into the underworld" which occurs in chapters 10 and 11.

Like the hero of myth and ritual, Ellison's invisible man finally descends from life on the mortal plane into an underworld of death. This is the substance of the entire New York section of the novel. On arriving in the city, he recalls the plucked robin of the old song and imagines himself the victim of a fantasy-letter: "My dear Mr Emerson ... The Robin bearing this letter is a former student. Please hope him to death, and keep him running." Then he takes the job at Liberty Paints, keeping white paint white by adding drops of pure black, under the ironic slogan, "If It's Optic White, It's The Right White", which (like "If you're white, all right, if you're black, stay back") has been invented by a Negro, the ancient and malevolent Lucius Brockway. The anti-hero becomes a machine within the machines, and he finds that Brockway, an illiterate "janitor" is the heart of the whole industry. In the boiler room, an inferno, he is betrayed again by a Negro and "killed" through his treachery. But the death is the ritual death of the hero's career—a death which leads to resurrection and a new identity.

After the explosion, the anti-hero awakens in a hospital, where he is resurrected by white doctors using an electroshock machine. Chapter 11 opens with a monstrous image of the demons of this underworld: "I was sitting in a cold, white rigid chair and a man was looking at me out of a bright third eye that glowed from the center of his forehead." The doctors revive him ("We're trying to get you started again. Now shut up!" to the accompaniment of fantastic effects—Beethoven motifs and a trumpet playing "The Holy City" and dreamlike dialogue from the surgeons:

"I think I prefer surgery. And in this case especially, with this, uh ... background I'm not so sure that I don't believe in the effectiveness of simple prayer"

"The machine will produce the results of a prefrontal lobotomy without the negative effects of the knife."
"Why not a castration, doctor?"

Then, as he is revived, the doctors construct an heroic identity for him, recapitulating his existence as a Negro, starting with the first folkmyth guises of the clever Negro—Buckeye the Rabbit and Brer Rabbit: "... they were one and the same: 'Buckeye' when you were very young and hid yourself behind wide innocent eyes; 'Brer' when you were older." The electrotherapy machine is an emblem of the mechanical society imprisoning the anti-hero: "I could no more escape than I could think of my identity. Perhaps, I thought, the two things are involved with each other. When I discover who I am, I'll be free." This lesson of the resurrection is carried through the rest of the anti-hero's journey.

The apparatus which resurrects the invisible man is a mechanical womb, complete with umbilical cord attached to his stomach which is finally cut by the doctors; he is delivered of the machine, and the doctors pronounce his new name—yet he remains nameless. The doctors, who follow a "policy of enlightened humanitarianism" declare that this New Adam will remain a social and economic victim of the machine: "You just aren't prepared for work under our industrial conditions. Later, perhaps, but not now."

The anti-hero sallies forth after his revival in the underworld "overcome by a sense of alienation and hostility" when he revisits the scene of the middleclass Negro arrivals in New York. He is now painfully aware of the hostility of his world, and he reacts not passively ("in the lion's mouth") but aggressively. In a symbolic gesture, he dumps a spittoon on a stranger whom he mistakes for his first nemesis, Bledsoe. The act is that of a crazed messiah: "You really baptized ole Rev!" Then he goes forth for a harrowing of hell.

He joins the Brotherhood, an infernal organization which meets at the Chthonian club. In the Brotherhood, he rises to authority, becomes a respected leader and demagogue and is finally again betrayed by the wielders of power, whites who manipulate Negro stooges for their own ends. But at the end of this episode, the penultimate phase of the hero's career, he meets two important emblematic figures: Ras the Destroyer and Rinehart the fox. Ras, the black nationalist leader, is his crazed counterpart, and he harasses the invisible man until the night of the riots, when he attempts to hang and spear the anti-hero as a scapegoat for the mob—a dying god to appease the violence Ras releases. A contrast is Rinehart, who like Renyard is a master of deception and multiple identities:

"Rine the runner and Rine the gambler and Rine the briber and Rine the lover and Rine the reverend." He is a tempter, and the invisible man nearly succumbs to his temptation to freedom without responsibility; he strolls through Harlem disguised as Rinehart, the visible-invisible man who passes undetected through many identities. Ras offers the assurance of one undivided black identity and Rinehart the assurance of many shifting amoral identities—the faces of stability and flux. But the anti-hero avoids both traps, turning Ras's spear on him and shucking the dark glasses and wide hat of Rinehart, then finally dropping literally out of sight underground at the climax of the riot. Ellison has said [in *Writers at Work*, 1965] that he took Rinehart's name from the "suggestion of inner and outer," seeming and being, and that he is an emblem of chaos—"He has lived so long with chaos that he knows how to manipulate it." So Rinehart and Ras both represent chaos, two versions of disorder.

Loss of identity, sleeping and blindness are the figures that express the invisible man's confusion and despair as his world disintegrates. Then, after the cultural malaise climaxes in the riot, the final phase of the anti-hero's progress begins, a descent into the tomb—the netherworld across the Styx where heroes rest: "It's a kind of death without hanging, I thought, a death alive.... I moved off over the black water, floating, sighing... sleeping invisibly." So he remains immortal and waiting, like the heroes of myth who disappear and are believed to wait should the world require them—like King Arthur and Finn MacCool, sleeping giants blended into the landscape. The invisible man, now grown into Jack-the-Bear, turns to New York's sewer system, a black and labyrinthine underground—a fitting anti-hero's mausoleum.

In this black crypt he destroys his old selves one by one as he searches for light, erasing his past—burning his high school diploma, a doll which is a bitter totem of Tod Clifton's demise, the name given him by the Brotherhood, a poison-pen note, all the tokens of his identity. Then he dreams of castration and sees that the retreat has been his crucifixion—he has been cut off from the world of possibility. "Until some gang succeeds in putting the world in a strait jacket, its definition is possibility. Step outside the narrow borders of what men call reality and you step into chaos—ask Rinehart, he's a master of it—or imagination." Imagination in the end redeems the anti-hero and makes his flight from battle a victory, for it gives us his story. In his tomb he is not dead but hibernating, prepar-

ing for a spring of the heart, a return which may be either death or resurrection:

There's a stench in the air, which, from this distance underground, might be the smell either of death or of spring—I hope of spring. But don't let me trick you, there is a death in the smell of spring and in the smell of thee as in the smell of me

The Easter of the spirit may be the emergence of the new man—no longer an anti-hero, invisible, nameless and dispossessed, but a true hero—or it may be the death of our culture.

The resurrection motif ties the story in the frame of prologue and epilogue, in the voice from underground:

... don't jump to the conclusion that because I call my home a "hole" it is damp and cold like a grave, there are cold holes and warm holes. Mine is a warm hole. And remember, a bear retires to his hole for the winter and lives until spring, then he comes strolling out like the Easter chick breaking from its shell. I say all this to assure you that it is incorrect to assume that, because I'm invisible and live in a hole, I am dead. I am neither dead nor in a state of suspended animation. Call me Jack-the-Bear, for I am in a state of hibernation.

Buckeye the Rabbit has grown into the formidable Jack-the-Bear (recalling the Bear's Son of the sagas) as the anti-hero has passed his trials and journeyed on his downward path, reliving the recent history of the Negro. He lies in wait beneath the inferno, under the underworld, listening for the hero's call.

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