



Invisible Man

Author
Ralph Ellison

Year Published
1952

Original Language
English

MAIN CHARACTERS

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 expectation. His true self is invisible, to both the outside world and himself. He must confront racism, exploitation, and abuse to define his individuality.

Dr. Bledsoe

College dean; believes black men should remain submissive

Narrator

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

Brother Jack

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

Mr. Norton

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

Mary

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



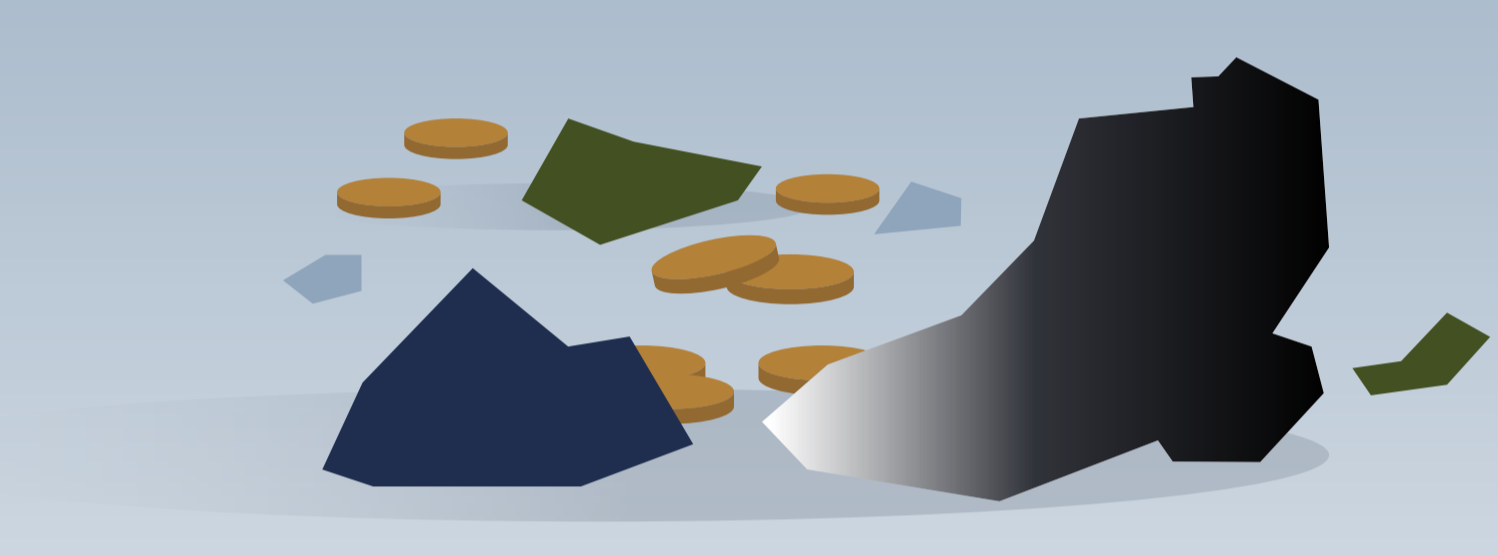
Author

Symbols



RALPH ELLISON
1914–94

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.



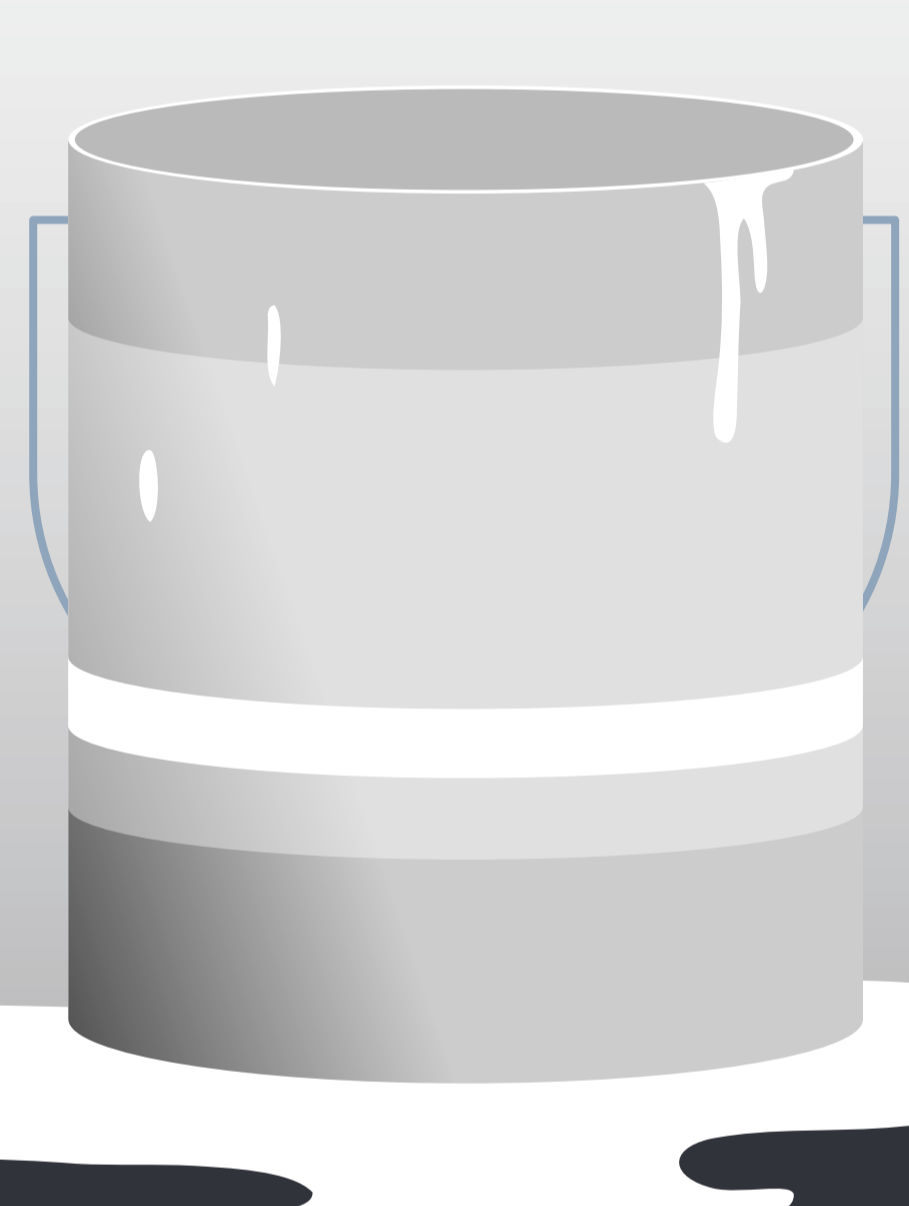
Mary's Bank

Symbolizes racial expectations that black men must "perform" for white charity



Briefcase

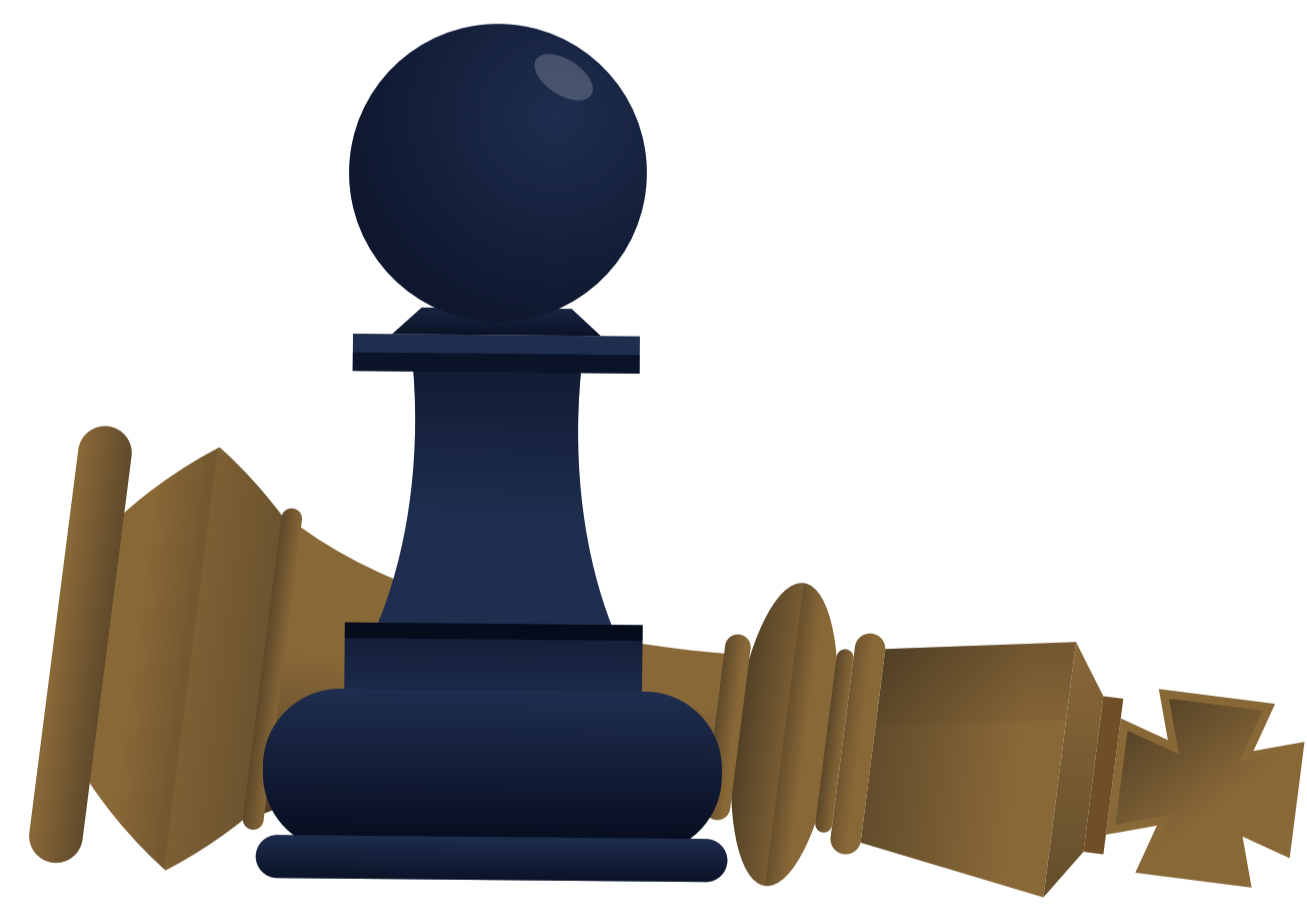
Symbolizes slavery's "baggage" on modern African Americans



Optic White Paint

Symbolizes society's demand for people to hide their "blackness" to achieve success

Themes



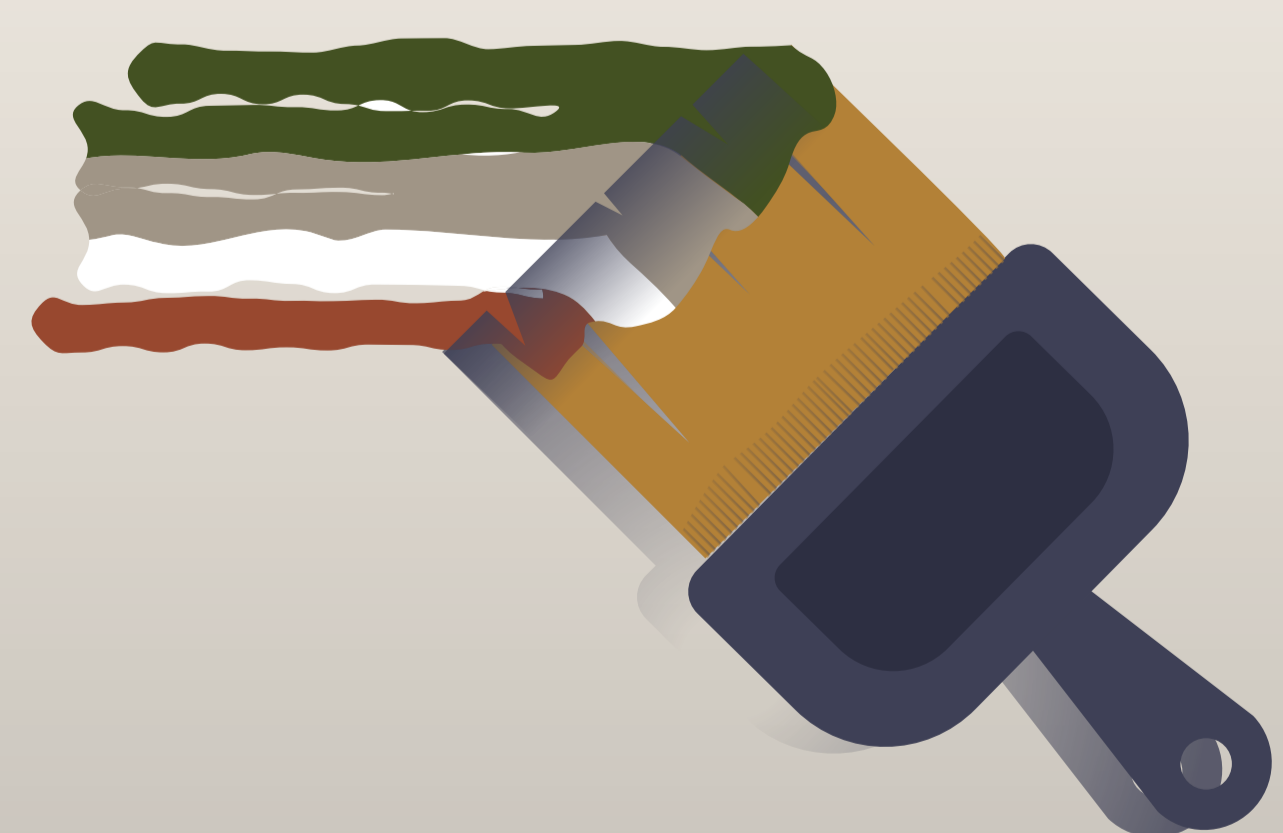
Ambition

All the novel's characters desire power, but black characters must navigate white supremacy in their pursuit—which often ends in disillusionment.



Social Roles

Characters alter their behaviors to meet expectations.



Colors

Different colors represent everything from emotions to music and money.



Individuality

The narrator's central struggle is to be seen as a complex individual, outside of racial expectations for a "black man."

Invisible Man by the Numbers

1

Novels Ellison published in his lifetime

3

Weeks *Invisible Man* was on the best-seller list

1,369

Lightbulbs the narrator in *Invisible Man* burns in his room

I am invisible, understand, simply because people refuse to see me.

Narrator, Prologue