1952

RALPH ELLISON’S

THE INVISIBLE MAN

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Ellison, Ralph (1914- ) - American novelist and essayist whose renown rests almost entirely on his first book, Invisible Man.

Invisible Man (1952) - The story of a nameless black man’s search for his own identity. This first person narrative realistically depicts the plight of the black man in America and goes beyond the black vs. white theme to portray everyman’s struggle to find himself. Considered one of the most important American novels ever written, it won the 1953 National Book Award.
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THE AUTHOR AND HIS TIMES

In 1952 a first novel by a virtually unknown black American named Ralph Waldo Ellison was published. Reviews of the novel were ecstatic, and in 1953 Ellison’s Invisible Man won a prestigious National Book Award for Fiction. Suddenly the author was in great demand for interviews and lectures, and he found himself being compared not only with black writers like Richard Wright, but also with Herman Melville and Mark Twain, Ernest Hemingway and William Faulkner. Invisible Man was a phenomenon. In 1965 the phenomenon took on even greater proportions when a group of some 200 authors, critics, and editors named Invisible Man the most distinguished American novel of the previous twenty years.

The passage of time from 1965 to the mid-1980s did little to change the high regard for this remarkable novel. If a similar vote were taken in the mid-1980s, Invisible Man would likely be near the top of any list of the best American novels written since the end of World War II in 1945.

Who was the man who wrote this novel? What were his roots, his influences? What was his preparation for writing a book that has had such impact?

He was born on March 1, 1914, in Oklahoma City, the son of Lewis Ellison from Abbeyville, South Carolina and Ida Milsap Ellison from White Oak, Georgia. They had left the South and moved to Oklahoma to avoid the persecution of blacks, and to find the freedom of the frontier. Times were hard
and the Ellisons were poor, but they were proud and ambitious for their children. Lewis Ellison, always a great reader, named his son for Ralph Waldo Emerson, the influential nineteenth century apostle of equality, self-reliance, and individualism. The son would eventually live up to his name. Ida Ellison brought back books, magazines, and newspapers from the white homes where she worked. She was a woman who spent her life fighting against economic and social injustice. “When I was in college,” Ellison said, “my mother broke a segregated-housing ordinance in Oklahoma City, and they were throwing her in jail, and the NAACP would get her out.... She had that kind of forthrightness, and I like to think that that was much more valuable than anything literary that she gave me.”

As Ralph Ellison grew up, he assimilated the liberal social and political ideals of his parents, but his first love was music. In high school he learned music theory and mastered the trumpet. There was much music in Oklahoma City, but especially there was jazz. Ellison heard the major jazz musicians of the age and became friends with a number of them. In 1933, when he entered Tuskegee Institute in Alabama as a scholarship student, he could already play and write both jazz and classical music and had also been involved with traditional black church music. It was a heritage that would have important influence on his writing.

Tuskegee Institute was Ellison’s home for three years, and it is clearly the model for the college in Invisible Man. Not only do the buildings and
environment in the novel strongly resemble Tuskegee, but the portrait of the Founder bears striking resemblance to the image of Tuskegee’s founder, Booker T. Washington, about whom Ellison was clearly ambivalent. (For further analysis of the relationship between the Founder and Washington, read the discussion of Chapter 5 in The Story section.)

The conservative southern environment of Tuskegee was a shock to Ellison, but his intellectual development during his years at the college more than made up for the social disadvantages. The music faculty was excellent, as was the English department. He read the major works of the Harlem Renaissance, a sudden outburst of creativity by black writers that had begun in the 1920s, and dreamed of being a part of that movement himself. But the writer who excited him most was the famous poet T. S. Eliot. Ellison was stunned by the freshness and originality of Eliot’s The Waste Land. “I was intrigued by its power to move me while eluding my understanding,” he said later; and themes, symbols, images, and jazz rhythms of Eliot’s great poem can be found in Invisible Man.

At the end of his junior year at Tuskegee, Ellison boarded a train and headed north to New York. He didn’t have enough money to pay for his senior year at college and so set out for the place where gifted young blacks went to begin their careers- Harlem. Harlem meant black culture. It meant such jazz musicians as Duke Ellington and Teddy Wilson. It meant the Apollo Theater and the Savoy Ballroom, the Lafayette Theater and WPA Negro Theater Company. It meant a reunion with Ellison’s old friend from Oklahoma City, the blues singer Jimmy
Rushing; and it meant a new friendship with a leading poet of the Harlem Renaissance, Langston Hughes.

It also meant poverty and loneliness and a struggle to stay alive. Finally, and most important, it meant becoming friends with the most significant influence on his early writing, the novelist Richard Wright. Wright’s collection of four stories, Uncle Tom’s Children (1938), and his novel, Native Son (1940), made him the best known black writer in the United States during Ellison’s period of apprenticeship in New York. In many ways, Wright was Ellison’s first mentor. An active member of the U.S. Communist Party, Wright encouraged Ellison to write from a leftist point of view, because he believed at the time that the Communists had the best interests of blacks at heart. Under the influence of Wright and other Marxist thinkers, Ellison wrote more than twenty book reviews from 1937 to 1944 for a variety of leftist periodicals, especially New Masses. He praised writers dealing with social issues, such as Wright and John Steinbeck, and attacked writers who failed to give adequate attention to blacks’ social, economic, and political problems.

But Ellison was never a Communist party member, and he never believed in communism. The limits that the party placed on individual expression were far too strong for him. As early as 1937, when he traveled to Dayton, Ohio, for his mother’s funeral, Ellison had begun seeing himself as part of a larger literary tradition. He read not only writers of the Harlem Renaissance but also Ernest
Hemingway, James Joyce, Gertrude Stein, and Fyodor Dostoevsky. Dostoevsky’s Notes from Underground became one of the models for Invisible Man.

Ellison’s preference for literature over politics led him to question the Communist party, and the Communist attitude toward blacks during World War II caused a final rupture between the party in the United States and most of the black writers who had supported it during the 1930s. The Brotherhood section of Invisible Man strongly echoes the feelings of Ellison and other black writers that the party had been using blacks for its own ends.

In 1943, during World War II, Ellison joined the U.S. Merchant Marine because he wanted to make a contribution to the war effort in a service that was not segregated by race. He served for two years, and during that time he began to write fiction in earnest. Among his writings of the time were two of his best short stories, “Flying Home” and “King of the Bingo Game,” both published in 1944. In these stories Ellison began to find a voice and an identity as a writer, and it is no accident that in the next year he started to write Invisible Man.

The novel, which began with the words “I am an invisible man” scribbled on a piece of paper in a friend’s house in Vermont, took seven years to complete.

In writing Invisible Man Ellison drew on a wide range of experience, but his novel is not purely autobiographical. Ellison should not be identified with his unnamed narrator. But Ellison uses his personal experience imaginatively to create a remarkably inventive piece of fiction. He draws on his experience at Tuskegee to write the college chapters and his knowledge of the Communist party
to write the Brotherhood chapters. He uses his rich and varied experience in Harlem as the basis for his description of street life in New York. Other sources for Ellison were his reading and the rich folk heritage of blacks. He uses the blues and jazz rhythms, folktales and jive talk, and characters drawn from frontier literature, as well as the tales he heard in the streets of Oklahoma City while growing up. The novel begins and ends with references to jazz musician Louis Armstrong singing, “What did I do / To be so black / And blue?”

One of the unusual things about Invisible Man is that it was immediately popular with both whites and blacks. Ellison has the rare ability in this novel to present a hero with whom people of diverse backgrounds can identify. Not only did the unnamed hero stand for the black man searching for his identity in a white world, but he seemed to represent to white college students any young man going through a crisis of values on his way to discovering himself. Readers on both sides of the Atlantic viewed Invisible Man as a work to be read alongside the popular plays and novels of Jean-Paul Sartre and Albert Camus.

During the 1960s the popularity of Invisible Man decreased, not so much with whites as with blacks. Many young black writers resented Invisible Man’s having been named the most distinguished novel of the past twenty years. They did not think that Ellison spoke for them because he was too much of an “Uncle Tom,” a black who served the white man’s interests. A generation accustomed to outspoken black leaders such as Malcolm X and Stokely Carmichael wanted its literature more radical. In the 1970s, many black poets and novelists emphasized
the uniqueness of black life. Ellison refused to go in that direction. For him the
core of America lay in the genuine integration of white and black.

“I don’t recognize any white culture,” he said to his friend, the black writer
James Alan McPherson. “I recognize no American culture which is not the partial
creation of black people. I recognize no American style in literature, in dance, in
music, even in assembly-line processes, which does not bear the mark of the
American Negro.”

Ellison became a member of the American literary establishment. He taught at
Bard College, Rutgers, the University of Chicago, and New York University. He
served as a trustee of Bennington College. He became a member of the American
Academy of Arts and Sciences and the National Institute of Arts and Letters. In
1964, he published a second book, Shadow and Act, a collection of essays about
his personal life, as well as about literature, music, and the black experience in
America. He worked on a second novel, about a black evangelist and a white
orphan boy whom he has adopted. Parts of the novel were published as stories,
but the complete novel had not been published by the mid-1980s.

And so Ralph Waldo Ellison remained a paradox. He had survived the
criticism of the 1960s and 70s to become one of the most admired black
American writers of the 1980s. At the same time he remained a one-novel man,
and his admirers and critics alike wondered whether that second novel would ever
be published.
Well, you could say, it may be all right being a one-novel man if the novel is as good as Invisible Man.
THE NOVEL

THE PLOT

Invisible Man opens with a Prologue. The unnamed narrator tells you that he is an invisible man living in a hole under the streets of New York somewhere near Harlem. His hole is warm and bright. He has come here to hibernate, to think out the meaning of life, after the events he is about to narrate. What drove him to this state of hibernation? He begins to tell you.

The story starts when the narrator graduates from high school in a southern town. The leading white citizens invite him to give his graduation speech at a “smoker” in the ballroom of the local hotel. He arrives to find himself part of a “battle royal” in which local black boys are forced to fight one another blindfolded for the entertainment of the drunken whites. After the battle, the blacks are further humiliated by having to crawl on an electrified carpet to pick up coins. Finally, the hero is allowed to give his speech and is rewarded with a leather briefcase and a scholarship to the state college for blacks.

The narrator is a good student at college and is sufficiently well thought of to be allowed to drive distinguished white visitors around the campus and community. Near the end of his junior year he drives one of the trustees, a Mr. Norton, out into the country. They arrive by accident at the cabin of a black sharecropper named Jim Trueblood, who has caused a terrible scandal by
committing incest with his daughter. Trueblood tells his story to Norton who is so overwhelmed that he nearly faints. In order to revive Norton, the narrator takes him for a drink to a nearby bar and house of prostitution called the Golden Day. A group of veterans who are patients at the local mental hospital arrive at the same time, and a wild brawl ensues during which Mr. Norton passes out. He is carried upstairs to one of the prostitute’s rooms and revived by a veteran who was once a physician.

The horrified narrator finally returns Norton to the college, but the damage has been done. The young man is called into the president’s office and dismissed from school. The president, Dr. Bledsoe, gives him letters of introduction to a number of the school’s trustees in New York, and the narrator boards a bus the following day, hoping that the letters will help him succeed in the white world.

To his surprise the letters do not seem to help when he arrives in Harlem. No one offers him a job. Finally, young Mr. Emerson, the son of one of the trustees, explains why: The letters were not letters of recommendation at all but instructions not to help the boy, to keep him away from any further association with the college. The stunned narrator now has nowhere to turn, and so takes a job at the Liberty Paint Company at the recommendation of young Mr. Emerson. The experience is a bizarre one. He is sent to work with an old black man named Lucius Brockway. Brockway, a black man, is the real creator of the Optic White paint that Liberty is so proud of, but the naive young narrator doesn’t understand the irony of the situation.
Later, when he fails to pay attention to Brockway’s instructions, he is knocked out in an explosion. When he wakes up, he finds himself in a large glass and metal box in the factory hospital. He seems to be the object of some sort of psychological experiment. He is subjected to electric shock treatment, questioned, given a new name by a man in a white coat, and released. Dazed, he returns to Harlem like a newborn infant, unable to care for himself.

The confused protagonist is taken in by a compassionate black woman named Mary Rambo, who nurses him back to health. But what is he to do? Winter is coming and the money given him in compensation by the factory has all but run out. The narrator goes out into the icy streets and has the most important experience of his life. He sees an old black couple being evicted and spontaneously gets up before the gathered crowd and stirs the people to action. He has found a new identity- as a spokesman for blacks- but the police arrive and he is forced to flee across the rooftops, followed by a white man who introduces himself as Brother Jack. Brother Jack would like the narrator to work for his organization, the Brotherhood, as a speaker for the Harlem district. The narrator hesitates, then accepts the offer. He is given a new name and is moved from Harlem to a new location, where he will study the literature of the Brotherhood.

The next evening the narrator is taken to Harlem to begin his career as a speaker for the Brotherhood. He and several others sit on a platform in a large arena, and he is the last to speak. When he speaks, he electrifies the audience with his emotional power, but the Brotherhood is not pleased. They consider his style
primitive and backward, and so he is barred from further speeches until he has been trained by Brother Hambro in the methods and teachings of the Brotherhood.

Four months later the narrator is made chief spokesman of the Harlem district. His committee, which includes Brother Tobitt, Brother Tarp, and the narrator’s favorite, Brother Tod Clifton, is concerned about regaining the support of the community from Ras the Exhorter, a wild black-nationalist rabble-rouser who has drawn black people into a war with whites. The narrator and his new friend Clifton engage in a street fight with Ras, a fight that foreshadows the final battle in the novel between the Brotherhood and supporters of the black nationalist. Nothing is concluded, but at the same time Ras is unable to stop the Brotherhood, under the narrator’s leadership, from making great progress in Harlem.

Brother Tarp, as a token of his support for the narrator’s leadership, gives him a link of leg chain. But there are many in the Brotherhood who do not like the narrator. He is too successful and moving too fast. At a meeting of the committee, the narrator is removed from a leadership role in Harlem and ordered to lecture downtown on the Woman Question. He is stunned, but he obeys the Brotherhood and gives the lecture as ordered, whereupon a white woman, more interested in his sexuality as a black man than in the Woman Question, seduces him in her apartment after the lecture. His lectures downtown continue until he is suddenly and surprisingly returned to Harlem after the unexpected disappearance of Brother Tod Clifton.
The narrator returns to Harlem, hoping to reorganize the neighborhood, but things have deteriorated since he was sent downtown. He searches for Tod Clifton and finds him, pathetically selling Black Sambo dolls near the New York Public Library. A police officer nabs Clifton for illegal peddling and shoots him when he resists arrest. Suddenly the narrator, who has witnessed this, finds himself plunged into an historical event. A huge funeral is arranged for Clifton in Harlem, and the narrator speaks at the occasion, but his speech is very different from his earlier speeches. He can no longer rouse the crowd to action. He returns to Brotherhood headquarters and is severely criticized by Brother Jack for having acted without authority.

The angry narrator is frustrated at his inability to accomplish anything constructive. He puts on a pair of sunglasses to disguise himself and suddenly finds that he has taken on another new identity, that of Rinehart, a swindler. Not even Ras the Exhorter, now Ras the Destroyer, seems to recognize the narrator in this disguise. Concerned about the growing strength of Ras and his men, the narrator goes for advice to Brother Hambro’s. Here he is told that international policies have temporarily changed directives. Harlem is no longer a priority for the Brotherhood. The narrator is astonished. Again he has been betrayed by an organization he trusted. He finally begins to see what a fool he has been and understands that he has, to white people, been invisible. He follows his grandfather’s advice and starts “yessing them to death,” meanwhile secretly planning his own strategy.
As a part of his revenge he spends a drunken evening with Sybil, the wife of one of the Brotherhood members, hoping to obtain useful information from her. But she is more interested in his body than in politics. A telephone call interrupts them. There is a huge riot in the district, and the narrator is needed. He hurries back to Harlem to find total chaos. Looters are everywhere, and Ras and his troops are out in force. Ras, on a black horse and dressed as an Ethiopian chieftain, is armed with spear and shield. The narrator narrowly escapes being killed by Ras. He dives into a manhole to avoid being mugged by a group of white thugs, and falls asleep.

He wakes up to find himself in a dark, underground passage from which he can’t escape, and decides to stay. Here he will try to understand what has happened to him and then write his story. The novel ends with an Epilogue in which the narrator decides it is time to come out of his hole. He is ready to rejoin society, because he knows and understands himself now “The hibernation is over. I must shake off the old skin and come up for breath,” he says. The novel ends as he makes a new beginning.