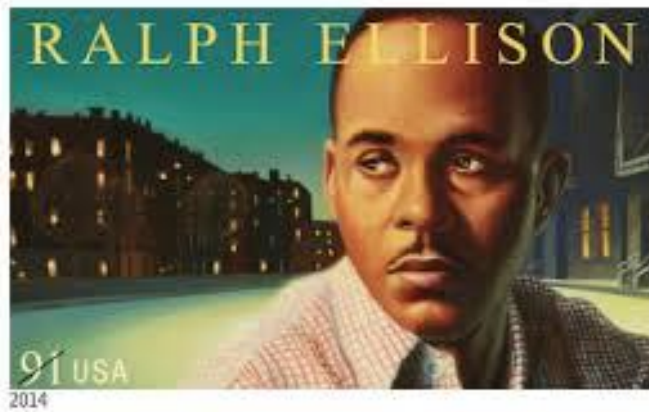


Visibility of Racism in Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man*

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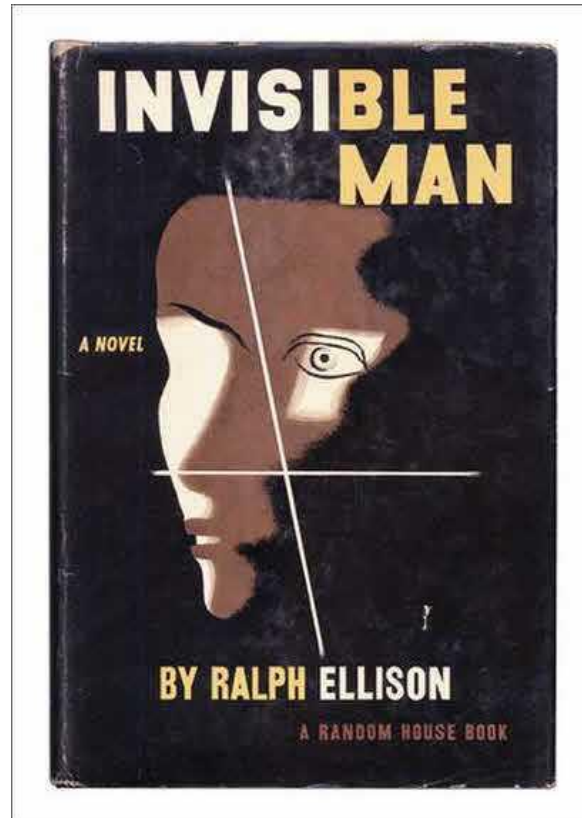
Abstract

Martin Luther King, Jr. once said “I have a dream that my four little children will one day live in a nation where they will not be judged by the colour of the skin, but by the content of their character”. Has his dream gotten fulfillment? Has his vision been accomplished? Yes, partly it has been accomplished. Racism still exists in the minds of some whites and is still visible in their actions. The Invisible Man is the nameless protagonist who is the victim of racism in the novel *Invisible Man* written by Ralph Ellison. The novel reveals the cruelty of racism which prevailed in American society.

The novel *Invisible Man* is the story which represents the life of a black-skinned person. The narrator is constantly trying to be someone else, other than himself because others refused to see him as he is. This creates a complete loss of his identity and thus he becomes a human being without soul.

This paper explores the visibility of racism in *Invisible Man* by Ralph Ellison. The main aim is to throw light on invisibility, inequality on the basis of skin colour and the hurdles faced by a black-skinned person in the society.

Keywords: *Invisible Man*, inequality, racism and stereotypical mindset, invisibility, Ralph Ellison



Courtesy: <https://13thfloorgrowingold.wordpress.com/2011/03/05/ralph-ellison-invisible-man-prologue-excerpt/>

Racism in USA

Racism was a major issue in the United States and it was largely spread from the southern states, in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries with a large number of slaves from Africa being brought in slave ships, to be purchased and put to work on plantations owned by rich southern landowners. The African slaves were the most miserable and

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unlucky of communities affected by racist feelings. They were ill-treated by landowning whites and they suffered from inequality on the basis of skin colour. Racism is a discrimination and prejudice towards people based on their race or ethnicity. Here the narrator gives an introduction about the central theme of the novel from the very first sentence, describing himself as an 'invisible man' who has a body and who takes physical space, but still invisible to others because they 'refuse to see him'.

Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man*

Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man*, explores the concept of racism excellently. The nameless narrator is caught in an underground hole and he is narrating the incidents that happened in his past. He says according to science he is physically visible but in the minds of people he is always invisible, because people refuse to see him due to his dark complexion.

That invisibility to which I refer occurs because of a peculiar disposition of the eyes of those with whom I come in contact. A matter of construction of their inner eyes, those eyes with which they look through their physical eyes upon reality. (*Invisible Man* 3)

Invisibility

The black young man narrates how people refused to see him and how he became aware of his invisibility. The narrator struggles with white people's prejudice and he introduces himself in the prologue: "I am invisible; understand, simply because people refuse to see me". (*Invisible Man* 3) His invisibility or people refusing to see him is because of stereotypical mindset towards the black race. The narrator's incident, which made him understand about his invisibility in people's eyes which is mentioned in the prologue, when he accidentally bumped into a white man, and all of a sudden the narrator became visible" because of the near darkness he saw me and called me an insulting name". (*Invisible Man* 4) Next day, the narrator saw his photo in the Daily News, which had published an article about the accident which was an invisible man biting a white

man. In fact the narrator, the invisible man has not bitten the white man, but whites always have stereotypical thoughts about blacks that are born of fear and intolerance of someone who looks different.

A Complex Character

Here invisible man has developed not just a simple character, but a serious or a complex character from his life experiences. Through his experiences within both the black and white communities, the protagonist discovers his identity. He understands that various identities have helped him to discover his real African American identity. “He gradually assumes a mask of invisibility in order to rebel against this limitation”. (*Invisible Man* 13) From this quotation it is clear that the protagonist tries to find a refuge in the mask that makes him invisible in this community. After the narrator’s psychological growth, he realizes to what extent the social roles hinder him from discovering his individual identity. Finally, the narrator becomes more responsible; he decides to come out and face the whole world.

Strong Irony

Ellison uses strong irony that makes the reader to understand things that the narrator misses. The first flash back of the novel in the first chapter in South America is about the narrator’s high school and college days; he attends a southern black college, he was forced to participate and fight in a ‘battle royal’ in which he is pitted against other young black men in order to obtain scholarship. The narrator is punished by the college president, Dr. Bledsoe who gave him seven letters of recommendation addressed to the college’s white trustees in New York City, and sends him there in search of a job. He moves to Harlem and delivers the letters. But later he finds out that those letters were not recommendation, but rather advisements against hiring him. The seventh person, Mr. Emerson who received the letter gave him a job in a paint factory but he didn’t do the work properly. Thus he got his dismissal from there also.

Racist Mindset

Another significant event that happened in the narrator's life is when he woke upon the Liberty Pains hospital; he had temporarily lost his memory and ability to speak. He was admitted for treating his injuries which were caused by that accident. "the people were so remote, the pain was so immediate" (*Invisible Man* 233), he found himself in a white cold chair, the doctor asked him many question, about his identity like his name, his mother's name and about Buckeye The Rabbit, but the narrator was unable to tell anything about himself, he had completely forgotten everything about his identity.

The narrator's experiences in the hospital reveal the stereotypical mindset of racists towards blacks even in public places. Narrator says that "I was sitting in cold white reject chair, a man was looking at me out of a bright third eye" (*Invisible Man* 231) - this refers to the white men who are cruel creatures like the doctor who gave the narrator an electric shock treatment; he enjoyed it and said that the blacks had a dancing rhythm in their bodies. The doctor questions the narrator about his identity and asks the narrator to reveal his name. Then he again asks the narrator about the rabbit song which is related to his origin and ancient African culture. By asking about his origin the doctor's intention was to remind him about his African origin and slavery.

The narrator says that he might even be said to possess a mind. Here the major feature of racism is figured; that is the idea that black people are less intelligent than white people, or that racism encourages white people not to understand black brains (intelligence) and minds.

Brotherhood

The Brotherhood experience is one of the most prominent events that reflect the reality of the American society. This organization focuses on social activism, banding together to fight for people who have been 'dispossessed of their heritage'. In joining the Brotherhood the narrator's position within the organization provides him with the opportunity to do public speaking and thus he becomes the Brotherhood orator. The narrator later realizes that the organization does not care about individuals, but only about

its benefits. Brotherhood uses the invisible man as a property to achieve its goals. The Brotherhood considers the narrator not as an individual human being, but rather as an abstract symbol of his race.

African American Struggle

Ellison's invisible man experiences and memorizes the behavior of racist Whites with the powerful social and political forces that conspire to keep Black Americans in their place. African Americans during that period of struggles within the American society were like dementia praecox or a schizophrenic person who exhibits multiple personality; it is actually a mental illness in which a person's mind changes frequently. That person is the one who holds opinions about anything that seem to be binary opposites. Similarly, in the protagonist's identity, his experiences have strongly influenced the improvement of his identity standard which modifies with every new identity. From underground to manhood; the invisible man makes his identity from native person to a very mature one. The invisible man's adventure in the racist American society helps him to discover his real African American identity.

Regeneration and Second Childhood, Vital Role for Dreams

After the narrator's regeneration in Chapter Eleven, his relationship with Mary portrays his second childhood which rebuilds his identity. Mary is like his mother; she helps and prepares the narrator for reclaiming his Southern inheritance to face the society. After living with Mary for couple of weeks, the narrator embraces his inheritance with the eating of baked yams which symbolize Southern (American) black culture (African culture found among black slaves). In contrast, the Brotherhood tries to break his past and create a new identity for him.

In Ellison's *Invisible Man* dreams play a vital role. According to Freud's theories the narrator fulfils his wishes through his dreams, his hope is like all the African Americans, wanting to live in an equal society without any restrains of racist laws in

which the Americans accepted their European origins as superior. In Chapter 1, the protagonist has a dream that involves his grandfather:

That night I dreamed I was at a circus with him and that he refused to laugh at the clowns no matter what they did. And I did and in it I found an engraved document containing a short message in letters of gold. 'Read it,' my grandfather said. 'Out loud! 'To Whom It May Concern,' I intoned. 'Keep This Nigger-Boy Running'. (*Invisible Man* 354)

This reveals in the narrator's dream a reference to his grandfather's thoughts and beliefs. This dream symbolizes the narrator's grandfather believed in which the clowns represent the whites, who are trying to make him laugh and with his reaction clearly shows that he does not do anything which whites wishes him to do or he is not ready to act according to white's intentions. Thus narrator's grandfather decides not to laugh. The letter tells the whites to keep the narrator running away. From this dream arrogance and grudge of narrator is also represented as his dream. For narrator or for whole black race community whites are like clowns but whatever they does blacks are not ready to laugh or do anything according to their wish. This dream also gives some information about his future, when the narrator handed the letter in an envelope that says to keep him running, the letter represents the narrator's situation with white society that he actually conforms to them, the letter's envelope refers to the white standards which he believes in them.

In Chapter Sixteen, narrator has a dream of molding himself into an important person in the society and in the 'Brotherhood'. He believes that his dream could be transformed into reality when he works hard with high determination, "It was no dream, the possibility existed". (*Invisible Man* 344) Through this dream, Ellison motivates people, giving energy through his words to protest for getting their rights to reach the best positions in their lives.

A Reference Book

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Ellison's *Invisible Man* has made an effort to define the meaning of experience in the narrator. He succeeds in defining his own identity without any interference from others. From these experiences the protagonist's naivety is transformed into maturity which helps him to rediscover the values of his African American heritage which is reflected in his personality; it gives him the power to face the whole world.

Indeed, Ralph Ellison speaks out to all the people and against all those who try to place restrictive ideologies and identities over others. Ellison's effort of creating *Invisible Man* is really appreciable. His novel is like a reference book to know about racism which prevailed in the American society of the old days. Ellison's improvisational performance in his novel *Invisible Man* draws to the conclusion that the universal human struggle of finding one's identity while living one's life in a world built upon socially constructed stereotypical ideologies through his *Invisible Man*, reveals that the only way to liberate or free oneself from any role is by turning "invisible," destroying the socially constructed self to allow for the nothingness needed for the creation of the true, complex and ever-changing self.

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