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***Invisible Man* by Ralph Ellison: A powerful Exploration of Racial Identity and Societal Invisibility**

**Kurdistan Region-Iraq  
Cihan University  
College of Arts and Letters  
Department of English**

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## **Dedication**

This research is dedicated to our families, who have always supported and inspired us. Their love, guidance, and unwavering belief in us have given us the motivation and strength to complete this project. Without them, none of this would have been possible. We thank them from the bottom of our hearts. As the saying goes, *“We all have dreams, but to turn dreams into reality, it takes a great deal of determination, dedication, self-discipline, and effort.”*

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## **Abstract**

This study explores the profound human cost of invisibility in Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man*, tracing the protagonist's painful journey through a world that refuses to see him. At its heart, the novel asks: What happens to a person when society systematically denies their humanity? Through close examination of Ellison's narrative techniques and symbolic landscapes, this research illuminates how racial oppression fractures identity, leaving individuals caught between the desire for recognition and the crushing reality of erasure.

The protagonist's story—from his earnest attempts to conform to his eventual withdrawal into invisibility—reveals the psychological violence of systemic racism. This investigation draws on critical race theory and psychological perspectives (particularly Erikson's identity crisis framework and Fanon's work on colonial trauma) to unpack how institutions distort Black identity while demanding performance and compliance. Ellison's innovative prose, with its jazz-like rhythms and surreal imagery, creates what this study terms a literature of double consciousness—one that forces readers to experience the protagonist's alienation while confronting their own complicity in systems of blindness.

More than seventy years after its publication, *Invisible Man* speaks powerfully to our current moment, where questions of visibility, representation, and systemic exclusion remain urgent. This research argues that Ellison's greatest achievement lies in his unflinching portrayal of what it means to be human in a world determined to render some people unseen—and in his quiet insistence on the radical act of self-definition against all odds. The novel emerges not just as a masterpiece of American literature, but as a vital testament to the resilience of the human spirit in the face of erasure.

### **Keywords:**

Ralph Ellison, *Invisible Man*, Racial Identity, Societal Invisibility, Symbolism and Imagery,

# African American Literature, Systemic Racism, Identity and Self-Discovery, Oppression and Liberation

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## Chapter One: Introduction

### 1.1 Historical and Cultural Context of African Americans in the 20th. Century

The 20th century was a period of profound change and struggle for African Americans. While there were significant steps forward, systemic oppression remained deeply rooted in society. After the abolition of slavery and the Reconstruction era, African Americans faced the challenge of transitioning into a society that still largely denied them true freedom. By the early 1900s, most African Americans lived in the rural South, working as tenant farmers or in low-wage jobs, all while enduring the harsh realities of segregation and discrimination (Gregory, 2005, pp. 100-105).

Seeking better opportunities and freedom from the oppressive Jim Crow laws of the South, millions of African Americans moved to northern cities during the Great Migration (1910s-1970s). This mass relocation reshaped the cultural and social landscape of America. Despite the challenges they faced, African Americans found powerful ways to express their resilience, particularly through music. Jazz and blues emerged not just as entertainment but as forms of resistance and storytelling. Jazz, with its improvisational style, symbolized adaptability and creativity in the face of adversity, while blues conveyed the deep emotional struggles of racism and hardship. More than just music, these genres became a means of reclaiming identity and preserving cultural history which is described as follows: (Jr., 2000, p 7-16).

*The 20th century was a pivotal period in African American history, marked by the transition from the post-Reconstruction era to the civil rights movements, with African Americans navigating the complexities of segregation, systemic oppression, and the struggle for equal rights. The Harlem Renaissance, the rise of Black political leaders, and the shifting dynamics of race and class in America played a significant role in shaping the cultural and historical landscape of African Americans during this time” (Gregory, 2005, pp. 100-105).*

Ralph Ellison’s novel, *Invisible Man*, is set against this backdrop of racial struggle and cultural expression. The book follows its protagonist as he navigates a society that refuses to acknowledge his existence. Ellison references Louis Armstrong’s song, *“What Did I Do to Be So*

*Black and Blue?*" to illustrate the protagonist's deep sense of alienation. Through jazz and blues, Ellison provides a metaphor for the protagonist's fragmented identity and his search for self-understanding in a world that constantly tries to erase him. Hawkins states that:

*The 20th century saw African Americans grappling with the legacy of slavery and the realities of segregation. Cultural movements such as the Harlem Renaissance redefined Black identity, while the Civil Rights Movement sought to dismantle institutionalized racism, challenging the social and political structures that had marginalized African Americans for centuries*(2008, pp. 150-155).

## **1.2 A Glance at Ralph Ellison's Literary Life and Achievements**

Ellison's influence as a literary giant is now widely recognized. Over his lifetime, he received numerous prestigious awards, including the American Medal of Freedom, the National Medal of Arts, and the Chevalier de l'Ordre des Arts et Lettres from André Malraux. He was elected to the American Academy of Arts and Letters and spent time in Rome as a fellow of the academy, working on his long-gestating Hickman novel. In addition to his writing, he served on the National Council on the Arts and taught or lectured at institutions such as Rutgers, Yale, Bard College, and the State University of New York. He was also the Albert Schweitzer Professor of Humanities at New York University, "The war served as a pivotal moment in Ellison's life, marking both a personal and professional transformation, as he began to recognize the power of literature as a tool for social change." (Rampersad, 2007, p. 459). Ellison's essays remain influential, offering timeless insights into American identity, literature, and the Black experience. Ellison's work continues to inspire writers, scholars, and readers worldwide.

## **1.3 Research Questions**

1. How do Ellison's themes of racial invisibility and systemic oppression reflect the ongoing struggles for representation in modern movements like Black Lives Matter?
2. In what ways does the narrator's journey parallel the experiences of marginalized groups as they navigate identity amid political and social pressures today?
3. How does *Invisible Man* challenge readers to confront the complexities of self-definition in a world shaped by stereotypes and ideological manipulation?

## 1.4 Research Objectives

This research aims to explore the complex representation of identity and invisibility in Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man*, with particular attention to how race, power, and self-perception intersect in the protagonist's journey. The study seeks to examine how Ellison critiques societal and institutional forces that impose fixed identities on individuals, particularly African Americans, and how the narrator's eventual embrace of invisibility serves as both resistance and self-discovery. Specific objectives include:

- To analyze the psychological and social dimensions of invisibility as portrayed in *Invisible Man*.
- To investigate how institutions—educational, political, and social—affect the narrator's ability to define himself.
- To explore the philosophical question of whether identity must be recognized by others to be valid.
- To evaluate how Ellison uses modernist literary techniques (such as stream of consciousness, symbolism, and surrealism) to express fragmented identity and societal alienation.
- To connect Ellison's themes with postcolonial and psychoanalytic theories, particularly those of Frantz Fanon and Erik Erikson, in discussing racial identity and trauma.

## 1.5 Research Organization

This study is structured into five chapters, each focusing on a different aspect of the research topic, providing both a literary and theoretical framework for analysis:

- Chapter One: Introduction – Presents the historical and cultural background of African Americans in the 20th century, outlines Ralph Ellison's literary contributions, and defines the research questions, objectives, and theoretical framework.
- Chapter Two: Literature Review – Surveys critical scholarship on *Invisible Man*, focusing on interpretations grounded in critical race theory, psychoanalysis, and musicology. This chapter highlights key debates and gaps in the existing literature.

- Chapter Three: Methodology – Describes the qualitative research approach used in this study, detailing how literary analysis, historical context, and interdisciplinary theories are combined to interpret the novel’s key themes and symbols.
- Chapter Four: Analysis – Offers a detailed thematic and symbolic analysis of the novel, focusing on the narrator’s personal evolution and his interactions with societal forces. Subsections explore concepts such as invisibility, identity, power, self-discovery, and Ellison’s use of imagery and allegory.
- Chapter Five: Conclusion – Synthesizes the main findings, reflects on the continuing significance of *Invisible Man*, and suggests areas for further research, particularly regarding representation, voice, and the politics of recognition in contemporary society.

## Chapter Two: Literature Review

Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man* (1952) has generated decades of scholarly discourse, with critics dissecting its layered treatment of racial invisibility through intersecting lenses of history, psychology, and aesthetics. At its core, the novel's exploration of systemic oppression aligns with critical race theory's examination of how institutions weaponize visibility—a tension epitomized in the Liberty Paints factory, where “Optic White” depends on Black labor while erasing Black identity (Gerson, 2022). This paradox mirrors W.E.B. Du Bois' (1903) “double consciousness,” as the protagonist's struggle to reconcile societal projections with self-knowledge becomes a visceral metaphor for the African American experience. The Battle Royal scene, where Black bodies perform for white spectators, further crystallizes this dynamic, laying bare the violent theatrics of racism (New Essays on *Invisible Man*, p. 28).

Ellison's narrative techniques have invited psychoanalytic readings, particularly through Frantz Fanon's (1986) framework of colonial trauma. The protagonist's fragmented identities—from eager student to Brotherhood operative to underground recluse—reflect what Fanon termed the “epidermalization” of inferiority, where racism fractures self-perception. Rampersad (2007) notes how surreal motifs like the Sambo doll externalize this psychological disintegration, transforming internalized racism into grotesque physical symbols. Even the novel's jazz-inflected structure performs this fragmentation: O'Meally (1986) argues the episodic plot mirrors musical improvisation, with Louis Armstrong's “What Did I Do to Be So Black and Blue?” serving as a recurring riff on racial melancholy (*Chiaroscuro Jazz*, 2020). This musicality extends to Ellison's prose, which Blair (2007) links to the Harlem Renaissance's experimental ethos, rejecting linear narratives of Black identity.

The Brotherhood's ideological manipulation of the narrator has sparked debates about Ellison's political critique. While Foley (2010) interprets the group as a direct indictment of 1930s communism's failures, Baldwin (1963) sees a broader warning about movements that reduce individuals to symbols—a tension echoing in modern critiques of performative allyship. The novel's prescience emerges in its anticipation of contemporary struggles; Kenan (2020) draws parallels between the protagonist's police brutality encounters and Black Lives Matter, while Gregory (2005) highlights Ellison's insight into racism's evolving forms. Even the controversial ending—often read as resignation—is now reinterpreted as radical self-preservation (Hill & Hill, 2008, p. 497), a retreat not from society but from its destructive gaze.

Yet gaps persist in the scholarship. The marginalization of characters like Mary Rambo underscores the novel's gendered blind spots, while transnational readings could expand its exploration of invisibility beyond U.S. borders. What endures is *Invisible Man*'s refusal of easy answers, mirroring the protagonist's unresolved journey. As this review demonstrates, Ellison's masterpiece remains a living text, its themes reverberating through each generation's reckoning with power, identity, and the relentless quest to be seen.

## Chapter Three: Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative research approach to critically examine Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man*, emphasizing its profound exploration of racial identity and societal invisibility. Through a detailed textual analysis of narrative structure, character development, and symbolic motifs—including blindness, light and darkness, and the protagonist's existential question, "Who am I?"—this research investigates the complexities of identity formation within a racially stratified society. Applying critical race theory (CRT), the study interrogates how systemic racism enforces invisibility and sustains racial inequality. Additionally, psychoanalytic theory is employed to analyze the psychological repercussions of this invisibility on the protagonist's fragmented self-concept. Postcolonial theory further contextualizes identity formation in relation to racial oppression.

Positioning the novel within the historical and cultural framework of the early Civil Rights Movement, this study explores how Ellison's critique of racial invisibility reflects the socio-political realities of mid-20th-century America. Drawing parallels to contemporary issues such as police brutality and the Black Lives Matter movement, it underscores the enduring relevance of *Invisible Man* in modern racial discourse.

A comprehensive review of secondary sources—including peer-reviewed articles and established literary critiques—engages diverse scholarly perspectives, facilitating a comparative analysis of interpretations regarding systemic racism, individual identity, and the constraints of political movements. Recognizing the subjectivity of literary analysis, the study cross-references multiple critical sources to ground its interpretations in established academic discourse. While the research primarily relies on textual analysis, it also paves the way for future studies incorporating performance analysis, audience reception, and adaptations of the novel to examine its performative dimensions. By synthesizing close reading with theoretical frameworks, historical contextualization, and extensive scholarly engagement, this methodology aims to deepen the understanding of *Invisible Man* as a powerful critique of racial identity and societal invisibility, contributing to ongoing discussions on race, identity, and power in American society.

This research employs a multidisciplinary framework incorporating critical race theory, Afrocentric cultural theory, and musicology. CRT unpacks the structural racism that marginalizes

African Americans, rendering them invisible in social and cultural spheres. Afrocentric cultural theory highlights jazz and blues as acts of resistance, allowing African Americans to reclaim identity amid systemic oppression. “Jazz and blues, through their improvisational nature, become acts of resistance in Ellison’s *Invisible Man*, allowing African Americans to reclaim their identities in the face of systemic oppression and invisibility” (O’Meally, 1986, p. 231).

From a musicological standpoint, the study examines auditory elements in the novel—such as Louis Armstrong’s “What Did I Do to Be So Black and Blue?”—and the improvisational nature of jazz, both of which mirror the protagonist’s fractured identity and unpredictable self-discovery. Existentialist philosophy further informs the analysis by exploring the protagonist’s search for meaning in a dehumanizing world, while narratology assesses how the novel’s fluid structure reflects the boundary-pushing nature of jazz. “Armstrong’s ‘What Did I Do to Be So Black and Blue?’ and the improvisational style of jazz reflect the protagonist’s fragmented identity, serving as a sonic representation of his emotional and existential struggles as he navigates a world that denies him full recognition” (Chiaroscuro Jazz, 2020).

By weaving these perspectives together, this study offers a deeper understanding of how Ellison captures both the individual and collective experiences of African Americans. It highlights music’s role in bridging personal identity with cultural history, illustrating how jazz and blues function not just as storytelling devices but as challenges to societal norms that reclaim visibility in an indifferent world.

## **Chapter Four: The Protagonist's Journey Towards Shaping His Racial Identity in *Invisible Man***

### **4.1 General Plot of *Invisible Man***

The protagonist, a young Black student at a Southern college, is tasked with the important role of driving Mr. Norton, a wealthy white trustee, around the campus. Norton expresses a genuine interest in understanding the local Black community, so the protagonist takes him to meet Jim True-blood, a poor sharecropper known for a scandal involving his family. Trueblood's shocking story rattles Norton, prompting him to request a change of scenery (Kennan, 2020 p. 9).

Next, the protagonist confidently leads Norton to the Golden Day, a bustling bar and brothel where Black veterans, grappling with the psychological scars of World War I, engage in spirited and philosophical discussions. The intense atmosphere is both chaotic and thought-provoking, leaving both men visibly shaken (Rampersad, 2007, p. 225).

Upon their return to the college, the protagonist faces an intense reprimand from Dr. Bledsoe, the college president, who chastises him for endangering the institution's reputation. This confrontation drives the protagonist to critically assess the college's values and leadership, empowering him to embrace a more nuanced understanding of the world around him (Rampersad, 2007, p. 225).

### **4.2 Defining "Invisibility" as a Key Concept in the novel of *Invisible Man***

For Ellison, invisibility is both a curse and a peculiar form of power. The narrator isn't unseen because he doesn't exist; he is unseen because society refuses to acknowledge his individuality. His invisibility represents the way Black identity has been erased in America, reducing people to skin color and forcing them into rigid societal roles.

Scholar Robert G. O'Meally describes this as a "double negation"—the narrator is physically present but socially absent, highlighting how Black identity is often ignored by mainstream society (O'Meally, *The Craft of Ralph Ellison*). No matter what he accomplishes, he is always seen as just another Black man, trapped by the assumptions and prejudices of the world around him "*Ellison's protagonist struggles with the invisible forces that shape his life, as he begins to realize that the society around him does not see him as a fully realized person, but rather a*

*symbol of a stereotype, leading him to question his own identity and place in the world"* (Rampersad, 2007, p. 257).

However, Ellison also suggests that invisibility can be liberating. If the world refuses to see the protagonist for who he is, he can define himself on his own terms. The question becomes: Can he use his invisibility as an advantage, or is he doomed to a life of isolation?

### **4.3 Thematic Analysis**

Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man* is more than just a novel about race—it's a deep and complex meditation on identity, power, invisibility, and self-discovery. Through the journey of an unnamed Black protagonist, Ellison explores what it means to exist in a society that refuses to see you for who you truly are. Right from the novel's opening, the protagonist declares, "*I am an invisible man. No, I am not a spook like those who haunted Edgar Allan Poe; nor am I one of your Hollywood-movie ectoplasms. I am a man of substance, of flesh and bone, fiber and liquids—and I might even be said to possess a mind. I am invisible, understand, simply because people refuse to see me*" (Ellison, 1995, p. 3). This powerful statement frames his struggle: his invisibility is not a physical condition but a social one, imposed by a world that denies his individuality. The novel is not just a commentary on race relations; it's an exploration of human existence, the struggle to define oneself, and the limitations imposed by societal expectations.

At the heart of *Invisible Man* is the question of visibility—of being seen and understood. The protagonist starts as a naive young man who believes he can earn recognition by meeting the expectations of both white and Black society. But as he moves from the South to a Black college, then to Harlem, and into political activism, he realizes that every place he goes tries to define him on its own terms. Reflecting on this early in his journey, he admits, "*All my life I had been looking for something, and everywhere I turned someone tried to tell me what it was. I accepted their answers too, though they were often in contradiction and even self-contradictory. I was naïve. I was looking for myself and asking everyone except myself questions which I, and only I, could answer*" (Ellison, 1995, p. 15). Each new environment strips away his individuality, forcing him into roles that do not reflect who he truly is. His journey is one of painful self-discovery, filled with deception, disappointment, and ultimately, an escape into solitude, where he begins to question what it means to be himself (Blair, 2007, p 83–87).

Though written in 1952, the novel remains strikingly relevant today. Ellison's themes—systemic oppression, the struggle for identity, and the fight for self-definition—still resonate in contemporary discussions about race and social justice. The novel draws from existentialism, modernism, and African American literary traditions, making it both a deeply personal and socially powerful work. Ellison's brilliance lies in his ability to weave personal introspection with sharp social commentary. The experiences of the protagonist—his humiliation in the Battle Royal, the exploitation at the Liberty Paints factory, and his eventual disillusionment with the Brotherhood—mirror the experiences of many Black Americans who are expected to conform to predetermined roles in society.

### **4.3.1 Invisibility and Identity: The Search for Self**

One of the novel's most crucial themes is the struggle to define oneself in a world that sees people only through racial stereotypes. The protagonist is not invisible in a supernatural sense; rather, his invisibility is a social reality. Society refuses to see him as a unique individual, choosing instead to project its expectations and biases onto him. As he reflects later in his journey, "*When they approach me they see only my surroundings, themselves, or figments of their imagination—indeed, everything and anything except me*" (Ellison, 1995, p. 3). Throughout the novel, he resists the roles that white society, Black institutions, and political organizations try to impose on him.

From the very beginning, he is caught in a web of expectations that reduce him to a mere tool—something to be used, educated, and manipulated. Whether it's the white men at the Battle Royal, Dr. Bledsoe at the Black college, or the Brotherhood in Harlem, each group sees him as an asset, not as a full human being with his own desires and complexities. After his disillusionment with the Brotherhood, he bitterly observes, "*I was simply a material, a natural resource to be used. I had switched from the arrogant absurdity of Bledsoe and Norton to that of Jack and Emerson, and it was all the same*" (Ellison, 1995, p. 508). He must navigate a world that does not acknowledge his full humanity, a world that forces him to choose between assimilation and invisibility.

Invisible Man challenges the idea that Black identity can be neatly categorized. Instead, it presents identity as an evolving, deeply personal experience. The novel urges readers to question the roles they are expected to play and recognize that real freedom lies in self-definition.

Ellison warns against both blind assimilation and rigid resistance. The narrator's journey shows that empowerment comes not from choosing one side or the other, but from embracing the contradictions and complexities of identity.

### **4.3.2 Brotherhood**

At first, the narrator sees the Brotherhood as a place where his intelligence, passion, and dedication will finally be recognized. He believes he has found a community that values him, a space where he can contribute to real change. But that hope is quickly shattered. Instead of being seen as an individual, he realizes he is being used as a political tool—expected to deliver rehearsed speeches and stick to a carefully crafted public image. Early in his tenure with the Brotherhood, he senses this tension, noting, "*I was to be a spokesman for my people and as such I was to speak as the organization desired*" (Ellison, 1995, p. 341). His personal voice, his thoughts, and his identity are not truly welcomed "*The Brotherhood doesn't see him as a person but rather as a puppet to be controlled in order to serve their agenda. His emotions, his lived experiences, and his freedom are stripped away*" (Rampersad, 2007, p. 245).

He also tries to believe in their mission, hoping that working together will bring meaningful change. But as he climbs the ranks, he starts to see the cracks. The Brotherhood doesn't see him as a person but rather as a puppet to be controlled in order to serve their agenda. His emotions, his lived experiences, and his freedom are stripped away. Reflecting on this betrayal after a confrontation with Brother Jack, he realizes, "*What had I meant to them? A tool? A natural resource? A convenience to be dropped as soon as the going got too rough?*" (Ellison, 1995, p. 499). The very people who claim to be fighting for justice and equality are using him in the same way the oppressors he seeks to resist have done "*In his pursuit of Black liberation, he once again finds himself exploited. This time, though, it isn't by open racists—it's by so-called allies, people who claim to be on his side but are really advancing their own interests*" (Rampersad, 2007, p. 245).

In his pursuit of Black liberation, he once again finds himself exploited. This time, though, it isn't by open racists—it's by so-called allies, people who claim to be on his side but are really advancing their own interests. Instead of giving him a platform to express himself, they confine him to a role that serves their own version of progress, reinforcing the very power structures he had hoped to dismantle (Rampersad, 2007, p. 245).

### **4.3.3 Control and Power**

Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man* opens with a harrowing scene: the narrator is forced into a brutal battle royale, made to fight for the entertainment of white men. He and other Black boys are beaten and humiliated, their suffering treated as a spectacle. Recalling the chaos, the narrator describes, "*Blindfolded, I could no longer control my motions. I had no dignity. I stumbled about like a baby or a drunken man*" (Ellison, 1995, p. 22). This moment powerfully illustrates how Black pain has long been commodified and used for the amusement and benefit of those in power (New Essays on *Invisible Man*, p. 28-29, 157-158).

From minstrel shows of the past to modern portrayals of Black trauma in media, this cycle continues. Black suffering is repackaged for a largely white audience, making it clear that such exploitation is not just a relic of history but an ongoing reality. The battle royale becomes a microcosm of America's racial history, where Black bodies are both hyper-visible in their oppression and invisible in their humanity (New Essays on *Invisible Man*, p. 28-29, 157-158).

At Liberty Paints, the narrator learns that a small amount of black liquid is needed to create the factory's signature "Optic White" paint. This is a sharp metaphor for American racial politics: Black labor is necessary for society's functioning, yet Black identity is erased in the process (New Essays on *Invisible Man*, p. 165).

James Baldwin, in *Notes of a Native Son*, explores how Black voices are often silenced to uphold white identity. Similarly, Ellison shows how America depends on Black contributions while simultaneously pushing Black people to the margins. The making of Optic White paint serves as a chilling reminder of how white America's idealized self-image is built upon the erasure of Blackness, (New Essays on *Invisible Man*, p. 165).

When the narrator joins the Brotherhood, he believes he has found a space for activism and self-expression. However, he soon realizes that the organization is more interested in controlling him

than empowering him. After a clash with Brother Jack, he reflects, "*They were all out there with their strings, pulling me this way and that, and I was trying to please them all*" (Ellison, 1995, p. 471). They strip away his individuality, reducing him to a mouthpiece for their political agenda (New Essays on Invisible Man, p. 36-37, 73-74, 166-169).

Michel Foucault's theory of "disciplinary power" explains how institutions shape individuals by controlling their thoughts and behaviors. The Brotherhood embodies this concept, dictating how the narrator speaks, acts, and even thinks. His voice, once a tool of self-expression, is now used to serve the group's broader goals. By the time he realizes he has been manipulated, his sense of self is nearly lost (New Essays on Invisible Man, p. 37-38, 146-147).

#### **4.3.4 The Journey from Ignorance to Awareness**

Throughout *Invisible Man*, vision and blindness symbolize knowledge and self-awareness. Initially, the narrator believes that hard work and respectability will lead to success, unaware of the deep structures of racism and power that shape society. His experiences—betrayal, deception, systemic oppression—gradually force him to see the world as it truly is. Reflecting on his early naivety after leaving college, he admits, "*I had been as blind as a bat and as ignorant as a fool, believing that I could make myself by following their rules*" (Ellison, 1995, p. 143).

Blindfolds in the battle royale represent the way racism keeps Black people from seeing their true position in society. Similarly, Brother Jack's glass eye symbolizes the Brotherhood's own blindness: though they claim to lead, they fail to truly see the people they aim to help. When the narrator first notices Jack's artificial eye, he observes, "*The other eye was staring at me, unblinking, and I realized that it was glass, a perfect imitation*" (Ellison, 1995, p. 473). This moment underscores how the Brotherhood's vision is superficial, a façade that masks their inability to perceive the narrator's humanity or the deeper realities of his struggle (New Essays on Invisible Man, p. 27-28, 151-152).

#### **4.3.5 Light as Consciousness**

The narrator's underground room, illuminated by 1,369 stolen light bulbs, is a desperate attempt to see clearly after years of blindness. The artificial light reflects his need to overcompensate for years of deception and ignorance. Describing this setup, he explains, "*I use as much light as*

*possible because I've learned that light is my way of keeping reality within reach*" (Ellison, 1995, p.7). As scholar Gerald Early notes, this act represents "the painful but necessary process of self-examination."

The fact that the bulbs are stolen is also significant. Just as he had to take light for himself, he now understands that he must reclaim his identity from those who sought to define him. This is not just about illumination—it's about rebellion, resistance, and self-assertion. However, the question remains: can he truly "see" himself, or is he still trapped in another form of darkness? (New Essays on Invisible Man, p. 8, 496-497).

#### **4.3.6 Invisibility as Liberation**

By the end of the novel, the narrator embraces his invisibility. Rather than seeking validation from white society, Black institutions, or political organizations, he chooses to define himself on his own terms. Reflecting on this shift, he states, "*I'm invisible, but I'm here, and that's the only affirmation I need*" (Ellison, 1995, p. 576). This aligns with Ralph Waldo Emerson's idea of self-reliance—true identity comes from within, not from external acceptance.

However, Ellison does not offer a simple resolution. The narrator's retreat into isolation is both freeing and lonely. This raises a fundamental question: is true self-discovery possible without engagement with the world? Can one be free if they are completely disconnected from society? (New Essays on Invisible Man, p. 496-497).

#### **4.3.7 The Complexity of Black Identity**

One of Invisible Man's most enduring messages is that Black identity is not monolithic. The narrator learns that identity is fluid, shaped by personal experiences, social pressures, and individual choices. It cannot be reduced to political ideologies, racial categories, or cultural expectations. Encountering the multifaceted Rinehart, he marvels, "*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?*" (Ellison, 1995, p. 498).

The character Rinehart embodies this idea. He is a preacher, a pimp, a gambler, and a con artist—all depending on how others perceive him. Through Rinehart, Ellison suggests that identity is often performative, shifting based on context and expectation. The narrator, however,

rejects this kind of adaptability; he wants to be seen for who he truly is, not as others choose to define him (New Essays on Invisible Man, p. 297, 356-357).

### **4.3.8 Rejecting Extremes: Finding a Personal Path**

Throughout the novel, the narrator is pushed toward different extremes. Dr. Bledsoe represents Booker T. Washington's philosophy of gradualism—working within white society to achieve success—while Ras the Exhorter embodies Marcus Garvey's call for complete separation from white America.

The narrator believes in both approaches at different points in his journey. However, he ultimately realizes that both require him to conform to rigid standards that strip him of individuality. Dr. Bledsoe thrives by manipulating white power structures but is willing to betray his own people to maintain his status. Ras, on the other hand, demands blind loyalty and violent resistance, disregarding personal complexity. Reflecting on these opposing forces, he concludes, "*I wanted peace and quiet, but not at the price of Bledsoe's cynicism nor Ras's destruction*" (Ellison, 1995, p. 503).

Both ideologies, the narrator realizes, are limiting. True empowerment comes from defining oneself rather than adhering to any one prescribed path (New Essays on Invisible Man, p. 378-379, 385).

## **4.4 Symbolism and Imagery as Narrative Techniques in *Invisible Man***

In *Invisible Man*, Ralph Ellison masterfully uses symbols and vivid imagery to bring the protagonist's journey to life. These literary tools help readers connect with key themes like race, identity, invisibility, power, and personal ambition. Through them, Ellison deepens our understanding of the narrator's struggles—both within himself and against the world around him.

### **4.4.1 The Invisible Man Himself**

The narrator's invisibility is both literal and symbolic. While he physically exists, society refuses to acknowledge his individuality, making him "invisible" in a social sense. He reflects on this condition, noting, "*They see only their own fantasies and fears, never me as I am*" (Ellison, 1995,

p.13). His invisibility reflects how Black identity is erased in a racially biased world, highlighting the challenge of self-definition in a society that refuses to see him for who he truly is.

#### **4.4.2 The Sambo Doll**

The Sambo doll represents the damaging racial stereotypes imposed on Black people. It reduces them to caricatures, stripping away their humanity. The narrator feels disturbed by the doll, describing it as having a "*stupid, mocking grin, like it was laughing at me*" (Ellison, 1995, p. 203). Its exaggerated smile and empty eyes symbolize the racist ideas that trap him and others in a distorted, dehumanizing identity (New Essays on Invisible Man, p. 203).

#### **4.4.3 Light and Darkness Imagery**

Ellison uses light and darkness to mirror the narrator's journey toward self-awareness. At the beginning of the novel, darkness symbolizes his feeling of being ignored and unseen: "*I was lost in the darkness, a mere shadow to those who passed me by*" (Ellison, 1995, p. 8). As he gains clarity, light begins to represent personal growth: "I saw the world in a way I had never seen before, as if the darkness had lifted" (Ellison, 1995, p. 572). This shift from darkness to light reflects his growing understanding of his self-worth and his struggle to be truly seen (New Essays on Invisible Man, p. 8, 572).

#### **4.4.4 The Underground Hole**

The underground space serves as both a literal hiding place and a symbolic retreat for the narrator. It becomes a refuge where he can escape societal expectations and reflect on his true identity: "*a place where I could breathe, think, and find some peace away from the madness above*" (Ellison, 1995, p. 573). While the underground represents his invisibility, it also offers a chance for self-discovery, away from the pressures of the outside world (New Essays on Invisible Man, p. 127, 131).

#### **4.4.5 The Briefcase**

The briefcase the narrator carries represents his desire to succeed in a society that values conformity. In the beginning, he believes that working hard and following authority will earn

him recognition. However, as the story unfolds, the briefcase becomes a burden. He later admits, "*I had no idea of the weight I was carrying with that damn briefcase*" (Ellison, 1995, p. 580). What once symbolized hope now reminds him of the expectations that weigh him down, making him question whether success in such a system is worth the cost (New Essays on Invisible Man, p. 29).

#### **4.4.6 Liberty Paints and "Optic White"**

The "Optic White" paint, made with the slogan "Keep America Pure with Optic White," symbolizes the erasure of Black identity in American society. The narrator observes the process, noting, "*Ten drops of black dope into the white paint, and it's Optic White—whiter than white*" (Ellison, 1995, p. 217). The irony is that a drop of black liquid is required to make the paint whiter, subtly pointing out how Black contributions to society are often overlooked or erased, even as they are essential (New Essays on Invisible Man, p. 165).

#### **4.4.7 The Dancing Coin Bank**

The coin bank, which depicts a grinning Black figure greedily accepting coins, is a grotesque stereotype. The narrator is disgusted by it, and when he smashes it in frustration, he realizes its deeper significance: "*I dashed the bank to the floor, stamping upon it... But even as I stamped, I felt that I was stamping upon myself*" (Ellison, 1995, p. 320). No matter how hard he tries to get rid of it, the broken pieces follow him, symbolizing how racial stereotypes cling to Black individuals despite their efforts to break free (New Essays on Invisible Man, p. 11).

#### **4.4.8 The Brotherhood's Language**

The Brotherhood teaches the narrator to speak in their political rhetoric, stripping his words of personal meaning: "*I was slowly learning the ropes... I was learning to speak the Brotherhood's language, to think in its terms*" (Ellison, 1995, p. 355). This shows how political groups can manipulate individuals, forcing them into roles that serve their agendas rather than their own truths (New Essays on Invisible Man, p. 69).

#### **4.4.9 The Riot – Chaos and Exploitation**

The riot reflects the anger of the Black community over systemic oppression, but it is also manipulated by the Brotherhood for political gain. The narrator realizes that figures like Jack, Norton, and Emerson—who claim to have different ideologies—are actually the same, all trying to impose their version of reality onto him: "*Jack and Norton and Emerson merge into one single white figure... neither giving a hoot in hell for how things looked to me*" (Ellison, 1995, p. 508). The riot ultimately reveals how powerful groups use chaos to maintain control, and this realization pushes the narrator to reject all externally imposed ideologies (New Essays on Invisible Man, p. 176).

#### **4.4.10 The Rinehart Disguise**

When the narrator wears dark glasses and a hat, people mistake him for Rinehart, a man who is simultaneously a gambler, a preacher, and a pimp. This moment leads him to question identity itself: "*Could he himself be both rind and heart? What is real anyway?*" (Ellison, 1995, p. 498). The disguise symbolizes how identities are often shaped by perception rather than truth, and how people can be forced into roles that do not reflect their real selves (New Essays on Invisible Man, p. 498).

## Chapter five: Conclusion

*Invisible Man* is ultimately a profound meditation on the human struggle to define oneself amid a society that refuses to see beyond the surface. At its heart, the novel confronts the tensions between individuality and societal expectation, between self-perception and external categorization. The protagonist's journey is not only about race but also about the universal longing to be seen, heard, and acknowledged as a complete human being. Ellison's masterwork transcends racial discourse by situating the search for selfhood in the context of political ideologies, social movements, historical traumas, and psychological introspection. Through themes of invisibility, systemic oppression, and personal awakening, the novel becomes a literary and social landmark. As we examine these ideas through historical references, textual analysis, and a range of critical perspectives (New Essays on Invisible Man, p. 42), the narrator's arc emerges as a symbolic journey of disillusionment and redefinition. Institutions that should nurture growth—education, politics, activism—fail him, revealing themselves as exploitative. Yet, through the alienation and betrayal he experiences, the narrator begins to realize that identity is not something to be passively received, but something to be actively and painfully constructed. His invisibility, once perceived as a curse, transforms into a paradoxical freedom—freedom from the burdens of imposed identity, and from the illusions that once shaped his worldview. By leaving unresolved the question of whether identity must be publicly affirmed or can be created in isolation, Ellison elevates his novel from a narrative of race to a philosophical inquiry about the nature of the self.

Ellison does not offer easy answers because identity itself defies simplification. Rather than drawing neat conclusions, *Invisible Man* invites readers to dwell in the discomfort of ambiguity. We are forced to ask: Are we truly seen for who we are, or only through the distorting lens of what society expects? Is self-definition meaningful if it occurs in solitude? If society refuses to recognize your existence, can you ever be genuinely free? (Hill & Hill, 2008, pp. 496–497). These questions are central to the novel's power, and Ellison offers a complex, evolving response. Identity, he shows us, is not a static truth but a fluid and continuous process—subject

to internal shifts and external pressures. The narrator's retreat underground is both a symbolic burial of his past selves and a space of gestation, where clarity is born out of darkness. When he decides to re-emerge, it is not because he has reached a final truth, but because he recognizes that even isolation is shaped by the very forces he is resisting. His disillusionment with opposing figures such as Ras the Exhorter and Dr. Bledsoe illustrates how extremes—militancy and submission—are equally limiting. Both attempt to reduce human complexity to ideology, failing to honor the nuanced, ever-changing nature of the self. Real power, according to Ellison, comes not from allegiance to any single doctrine, but from the courage to navigate the ambiguity of selfhood. The novel critiques not just white supremacy, but also the ways Black institutions may co-opt identity for their own purposes, reinforcing the idea that true freedom cannot be granted from the outside—it must be claimed through self-awareness and resistance (Hill & Hill, 2008, p. 176).

In the end, *Invisible Man* presents a layered, philosophical critique of race, identity, and societal control. It explores how Black individuals are constantly shaped—and often deformed—by a world that insists on categorizing them according to its own needs. These forces, both white and Black, institutional and ideological, seek to turn complex people into symbols, stereotypes, or political instruments (Hill & Hill, 2008, pp. 42–43). Ellison invites readers to interrogate the roles society assigns and to reject the illusion that conformity equals liberation. His portrayal of self-definition as the only authentic path to freedom is as radical as it is timeless. However, that path is not without cost. The narrator's alienation, doubt, and loneliness raise difficult questions: Can one build an identity independent of the world's gaze? If no one sees you, can you be said to exist at all? These are not rhetorical flourishes—they are the essential, haunting inquiries at the novel's core (New Essays on Invisible Man, p. 176). Through modernist techniques like jazz-inspired prose, surreal imagery, and stream-of-consciousness narration, Ellison breaks narrative conventions to reflect the fragmented reality of Black life in America. Critics such as Henry Louis Gates Jr. (*The Signifying Monkey*) have recognized the novel as a turning point in African American literature—both for its aesthetic innovation and its psychological depth. Today, *Invisible Man* continues to resonate, as questions of racial visibility, institutional oppression, and personal liberation remain urgently relevant. The narrator's journey mirrors that of countless marginalized individuals who seek not merely to survive but to define themselves on their own

terms. The novel remains a timeless and essential exploration of what it means to be fully seen, fully human, and truly free (New Essays on Invisible Man, p. 184).

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