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## Ralph Ellison: Invisible Man

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## The Literary Encyclopedia

# Invisible Man

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**Ellison, Ralph**  
(1952)

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Genre: Bildungsroman, Novel. Country: United States.

Ralph Waldo Ellison took a circuitous path to novel writing. At the height of the Cold War and during the nascent stages of the successfully organized Civil Rights Movement of the 1950s and 1960s Ellison finally arrived as a novelist with the publication in 1952 of *Invisible Man*. His debut novel, and ultimately his only completed novel during his lifetime, made a lasting impact on the literature of the United States. In this novel, Ralph Ellison collects the particularities of African American culture while telling a story

that speaks beyond the borders of his central character's specific cultural inheritance. Ellison situates universal ideas in events and characters that operate in the novel within the firm context of the folklore, music, idiom, and politics of African American culture and that culture's location in modernity.

Ralph Ellison's early professional ambitions were as a musician. By 1937, however, Ellison's first serious piece of writing – a review essay – was published in Dorothy West and Richard Wright's literary magazine *New Challenge*. And in 1945 the idea for his novel *Invisible Man* was forming in Ellison's mind while he was working on another novel (his second novel manuscript), under contract with Reynal and Hitchcock since 1943, though never completed. This unfinished novel manuscript is titled “In a Strange Country” and tells the story of a black pilot who was held in a German concentration camp while serving in the segregated United States military during the war in the 1940s. Ellison, during the war years, had avoided service in the segregated United States military by joining the Merchant Marines.

By 1945 when Ralph Ellison began to think

about his third novel project, he had already published a section from his first projected novel, “Slick”, several essays and reviews, as well as short stories, including “Flying Home”. Ellison’s “Flying Home” was published in *Cross Section* and is the story he was initially expanding into his second novel, “In a Strange Country”, before the intriguing words “I am an invisible man” happened through his mind while he was living briefly at the farm of a friend in Waitsfield, Vermont. These evocative words became the opening sentence of Ralph Ellison's award winning novel *Invisible Man*.

Seven years in the making, Ellison's novel *Invisible Man* took literature in the United States as well as African American fiction in a new direction. Through his portrayal of a young black man living in a segregated nation that is emerging as an internationally recognized power, Ellison addresses the ways in which the shifting social and political foundations of the burgeoning modern world in the 1940s make an impact on the formation of individual identity. While such concerns in literature were not new when Ellison began writing *Invisible Man*, his addition of dimensions of richly textured aspects of African American culture, along with

his critique of the prevalent views on ways to effect political and social change in the nation's racial script (ill-conceived revolution, accommodation, uplift, unequal brotherhood), shifted the literary narrative on identity formation among black people in the United States. This shift moved Ellison's narrative away from representations of lock-step struggles against racialized social policies and toward his representation of a radical blues-existentialism. This is a perspective that Ellison developed from his reading in philosophical existentialism and his familiarity with the blues as well as with blues lifestyles in the United States. For Ellison in *Invisible Man*, this blues-existential philosophical space is inhabited finally by the novel's first-person narrator who has become Ellison's "thinker tinker".

Upon receipt of a Rosenwald Fellowship in August of 1945, Ralph Ellison put aside "In a Strange Country" and started working full-time on his new book project, which had begun taking shape a few weeks earlier. In October 1947, Ralph Ellison's first published effort toward his novel appeared under the title "Invisible Man" in the inaugural edition of the British magazine *Horizon*. This short story was

published in the United States the next year in *48: Magazine of the Year*. As a result of international copyright restrictions, the republished version of Ellison's novel excerpt included a new title, "Battle Royal" along with illustrations and a few changes that did not make it into the original story. Ralph Ellison's short story "Battle Royal" became the first chapter of his novel *Invisible Man* and is the best known of his several pieces of short fiction.

In January of 1952, prior to the official release by Random House of his novel later that year, Ralph Ellison published the novel's innovative prologue in *Partisan Review* under the title "Invisible Man: Prologue to a Novel". Ralph Ellison's structural breakthrough in his debut novel is based on his familiarity with the musical techniques of jazz and on his reading of the modernist writers, particularly T.S. Eliot whose poetic structures reminded Ellison of jazz and whose perspective on the concept of beginnings and endings in the poem "Four Quartets" is echoed in the concluding words of the main body of *Invisible Man* : "The end was in the beginning". Ellison opens *Invisible Man* with a prologue in which he presents the end of the novel; and he ends the novel with an

epilogue that recapitulates the blues-existential concepts in which the novel is based. The epilogue also takes readers beyond the story of the shaping of his narrator's blues-existential identity that has been told in the previous chapters, and re-positions *Invisible Man* firmly within a reshaped identity, in which social responsibility and social equality operate together. These crucial opening and closing sections of *Invisible Man* bracket the story that made the beginning and the pivotal end of Ellison's novel possible.

By his use of a naïve narrator, blues existentialist concepts, modernist techniques, and elements from the picaresque and *bildungsroman*, Ralph Ellison takes readers through several years, approximately 1939-1943, in the life of his youthful and nameless narrator, who in 1950 writes the story of his journey toward an understanding of the social, political, and cultural narratives and events that have constructed him as an invisible man. Throughout twenty-five chapters and over four hundred pages, Ralph Ellison depicts four crucial, identity-shaping episodes in the life of his main character: his preparation for as well as his experiences while attending a black college in Alabama; his

search for employment in New York; his political activity in the Brotherhood; and the riot scene which begins Invisible Man's initial formulation of a blues existential philosophy.

In Ralph Ellison's first chapter of *Invisible Man*, he presents all of the major themes that he will expand and repeat throughout his surrealistic novel. The most prevalent themes in *Invisible Man* include anxiety in relation to issues of blindness or diminished vision, concern with the social narratives that delimit black-white relations, investigation of the complexities of black manhood in the United States, exploration of the dissimulation involved in the social narratives on black male and white female relations, and the impact of history and culture on shaping identity. Through a process of iteration and development, Ellison ultimately shows his main character's growth from profound naïveté toward a clearer understanding of the world and toward an understanding of the way he finally will construct himself within it.

The first chapter of the novel, opens at the deathbed of Invisible Man's grandfather. Ellison's youthful narrator receives what he believes to be a curse from his grandfather



when he overhears him saying the following words to Invisible Man's father: "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 [...] I want you to overcome 'em with yeses, undermine 'em with grins, agree 'em to death and destruction". Soon after his grandfather's death, Ellison's young narrator gives a speech on humility at his graduation ceremony. Following his graduation, Invisible Man is invited to present his speech to the power brokers in the town. After arriving at the best hotel in town where the men have gathered to hear his speech, Invisible Man is compelled to participate in an initiatory battle royal. Before the actual boxing match, the powerful men at the gathering parade in front of the young men a naked white woman who has a tattoo of the flag of the United States on her stomach. Several of the white men insist that the black youths look at the woman while several other men insist that the youths refuse to look. After this situation creates havoc among the white men as well as the black youths, the battle royal begins. Ellison's Invisible Man along with nine other black youths from the town are blindfolded and set upon each other. Following the fight, the young men scramble to retrieve money, including

gold coins, from an electrified rug. They subsequently find that the gold coins that they all vigorously tried to obtain are only gilded tokens advertising a local business. Invisible Man, while swallowing blood and sweating from the battle, successfully presents his speech. He is admonished only once after he inadvertently mentions social equality instead of social responsibility. The powerful white men reward the black youth's performance by presenting him with a scholarship to the segregated state college for black students. For these men, Invisible Man has demonstrated that he recognizes his assigned, subordinate, social position.

In college Ellison's Invisible Man is exposed to hard lessons that will later help him understand that his simple notions of power and privilege do not hold up under the weight of daily realities. Invisible Man is expelled from school by Dr. Bledsoe – the black president of the college whose name suggests that he, too, knows about fighting battle royals – after the credulous student obeys the request of a white benefactor who wants to see where the black farmers and labourers live. Invisible Man leaves school and goes to New York, believing that Dr. Bledsoe has written letters for him that

will help in his job search. He subsequently finds that he has been betrayed by his school's president.

In New York, Invisible Man is separated from the communal identity of his southern life, yet reconnects to it through a brief period in which he lives as a roomer in the house of Mary Rambo, a woman who has retained her southern folk identity while living in a rapidly modernizing northern city. Ellison's Invisible Man eventually joins the Brotherhood, a leftist group that he initially believes will provide him with an opportunity to become a leader who will make changes in the lives of black people. He is soon disillusioned. After Invisible Man's disappointment with the Brotherhood, he witnesses a riot in Harlem. This upheaval, which Ellison bases on an actual riot that occurred in Harlem during August of 1943, presses Ellison's narrator to re-evaluate his perspective and to go underground in order to reconstruct his identity before emerging again in the novel's prologue.

Ralph Ellison's novel *Invisible Man* was well received when it was published in 1952. Contemporary reviews of Ellison's novel in the *New York Times*, *The Nation*, *American*

*Mercury*, *Commentary*, *Kenyon Review*, *Hudson Review*, and *Phylon* all are favourable. A review by Lloyd Brown in *Masses and Mainstream* is a clear exception to the general praise of *Invisible Man*. Ellison's novel was re-assessed during the Black Arts Aesthetics Movement of the late 1960s and the 1970s. The Black Aesthetics critics rejected Ellison's novel as too alienated from the lived reality of black people. By 1970, however, some of the Black Aesthetics critics – most notably Larry Neal – were beginning to reverse their positions on Ellison's novel as their literary criticism and politics were developing a more nuanced and complex perspective.

Ralph Ellison's first novel has withstood the test of time and is positioned among the best American novels. *Invisible Man* was awarded the prestigious National Book Award as well as the Russwurm Award and a Certificate of Award from the *Chicago Defender*.

- [A Yemisi Jimoh \(University of Massachusetts Amherst\)](#)

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