Invisible Man

Novel (1952) by US writer Ralph Ellison about an unnamed hero who discovers that because of his blackness he lacks all social identity in post-war US society.

Summary Article: INVISIBLE MAN

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Published in 1952, Ralph Ellison's novel Invisible Man chronicles the trials of a young, Black man making his way from Oklahoma to an all-Black college in the South, and finally settling in New York City. The work made Ellison a leading spokesperson on race relations in the United States because he criticized institutionalized racism and indicted White philanthropy, which often supported segregation and racial biases. The novel also drew attention to economic and social inequalities caused by centuries of racism. Ellison's targets included White philanthropists and members of the Communist Party of the United States (CPUSA) as well as some Black leaders who competed for White patronage. Consequently, both Black and White critics accused the novelist of anticommunism, militancy, and self-hate. This entry summarizes the work, its relation to Ellison's experiences, and its impact.

Section I: Education

Generally, scholars laud the first section of the novel for exposing the tenacity of racism and the fragile nature of race relations during the mid-20th century. The main character, the Narrator, receives a college scholarship from a local fraternal organization. At the award ceremony, he learns that the town's White civic and business leaders expect what Ellison terms a "Battle Royal." The Narrator and several young Black men must box until one man is left standing. Throughout the match, the White men yell racial epithets at the fighters. The interest of White philanthropists in racial progress contrasts with their vulgar language and confuses the young man. He is reminded of his grandfather's deathbed advice to resist racism and defy racists at every opportunity.

Although not autobiographical, the novel relates experiences similar to those of Ellison and his friends. Ellison spent his youth in Oklahoma City, aware of racial tensions throughout the state. When Ellison was seven, one of the deadliest attacks on a Black community occurred: the Tulsa Race Riot of 1921. His interactions with Whites and observations of racism stayed with him as he matured. In 1933, Ellison left his hometown for the Tuskegee Institute in Alabama. In the novel, the Narrator attends a southern, all-Black technical school, much like Tuskegee, established by "the Founder," a Black educator, and supported by White philanthropy. Ellison exposes the dichotomy of a segregated institute, created for and by Blacks and financially dependent on White money. Ellison uses the characters of Mr. Norton, a northern White philanthropist, and Dr. Bledsoe, the school's Black president, to indict this paternalistic system.

At school, the Narrator becomes aware of the dysfunctional relationship between Black leaders and White philanthropists. While escorting Mr. Norton around campus, the Narrator inadvertently allows the
benefactor to meet the seamier population living near the school. Consequently, the young man is expelled. The school’s president explains that running the university is a game in which he must appease Whites to keep the school funded. Dr. Bledsoe warns the Narrator never to tell Whites the truth or let them know what he is thinking.

**Section 2: Life in the City**

Forced to leave school, the Narrator moves to New York City, where he encounters more ambiguities in relationships between White and Black social activists and reformers. This section of the novel created controversy among some scholars who saw it as an attack on communism and Black leaders. After learning that Dr. Bledsoe sabotaged his attempts to find employment, the Narrator becomes an unwilling participant in a medical experiment and an unwitting strikebreaker, and he witnesses racism in a labor union. Unemployed and out of options, he joins the Brotherhood, a thinly veiled cover for the CPUSA. The Narrator is invited to be a spokesman for his race. He learns that the Brotherhood hopes to end racial and class inequality. However, the young man encounters racial chauvinism, prejudice, and ignorance among the White membership. Additionally, Black members who willingly sacrifice each other for recognition by their White comrades mortify him. Ultimately, members of the Brotherhood undermine him for his popularity and he leaves.

Some critics believe that Ellison depicted the Brotherhood negatively to insulate himself from the anticommunist hysteria of the Second Red Scare. Although he never officially joined the party, like the Narrator, Ellison left Tuskegee in 1936 and moved to New York City where he spent time among members of the CPUSA, including Langston Hughes, Louise Thompson, and Richard Wright. Although some critics accused Ellison of fabricating overt racism within the party, many of the Narrator’s experiences in this section of the novel mimic those of the novelist and his friends during the 1930s. In truth, Ellison and many other Black Americans abandoned the party by the end of World War II because the communists misunderstood the connection between racial and economic inequality.

Upon leaving the Brotherhood, the Narrator becomes involved in a race riot and reassesses his role as a political activist. When he encounters Mr. Norton, who fails to recognize the young man, the Narrator imposes self-exile and vows to follow his grandfather’s advice and use his writing to expose the ambiguities found in relationships between the races. Like the Narrator, Ellison’s writing asks some difficult questions, for example: At what point does the Black beneficiary become equal to the White benefactor?

*Invisible Man* exposed many harsh realities concerning the place of Black Americans in the mid-20th century United States. It is a work of social protest, chastising White paternalism and chauvinism and calling attention to the marginalization of social and economic classes in society. At the time of its publication in 1952, it awoke many to consider the nature of race relations and contributed to a growing interest in Black Nationalism and independence from Whites in civil rights organizations. Today, its significance lies in its usefulness in understanding the extent of the frustration among Black intellectuals and leaders in White-dominated society.

**See also**

- Black Intellectuals;
- Black Nationalism;
- Discrimination;
- Double Consciousness;
- Labor Unions;
- Marginalization;
- Marxism and Racism;
- Medical Experimentation

**Further Readings**

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