

Gideon French

Ms. Stevens

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Invisible Man: An Era of Chaos, Confusion, and Schisms

The first quarter of the twentieth century was an era of conflicting identity for America, especially for African Americans. America's economy was rich and booming until suddenly, it wasn't, and the nation was plunged into one of the worst economic downturns in history. For black Southerners, already mired in poverty, the Great Depression made a bad situation worse. The Great Migration brought African-Americans from rural black Southern poverty and the degrading, slavery-like conditions of sharecropping. It carried them from the segregated world of black higher education and its dependence on Northern white patrons, as based on Booker T. Washington's Tuskegee model, to the urban North with an emphasis on manufacturing and industry, and to previously all-white communities like Harlem. The rise of Harlem as a great black cultural center birthed several early civil rights groups that clashed over how to approach the issue of race, class, and cultural identity.

This evolution in African American identity as it struggled to establish itself in the early twentieth-century is explored in Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man* through the eyes of the nameless narrator as he follows its path chronologically. Born in Oklahoma in 1914, the grandson of slaves, Ellison wrote many of his own experiences into the novel. He attended the Tuskegee Institute, an historically black college founded by Booker T. Washington, moved to New York City in 1936, and embarked on a writing career that peaked with the publication of his critically acclaimed novel in 1952.

Like Ellison and many African Americans of his time, the unnamed narrator starts his journey in the South. In history, this would represent the time before the Great Migration but after emancipation. The narrator lives submissively under segregation, yet feels a twinge of guilt remembering his grandfather's dying words: "I have been a traitor all my born days... ever since I give up my gun back in Reconstruction" (Ellison 16). By the turn of the century, young black men had been taught to know their place. At his high school graduation, the narrator gives a speech preaching humility as "the very essence of progress" (Ellison 17), and is invited to deliver it again in front of the leading white citizens of the town. Instead of the formal affair he was expecting, he is given boxing gloves and placed in a "battle royal" with other black classmates. A naked blonde woman with an American flag painted on her stomach dances sensually, smiling yet with "terror and disgust in her eyes" (Ellison 20), as men reach out to touch her. The woman represents America, which is greedily groped by the white southern leaders who have distorted its meaning, much to America's disgust. The boys were made to look, to watch this perverse manipulation of America's ideals, then were blindfolded and told to beat each other up. Instead of celebrating the narrator's academic achievement, they group him together with his black classmates not as humans, but as entertainment. After the chaotic fight, the boys are led to a rug covered in coins of all types. They scramble to get as much as they can but discover that the carpet is electrified. They contort and grapple for the money and are pushed back onto the rug by the onlooking men. They are enticed by the dangling illusion of opportunity, as proposed by Booker T. Washington, who once famously said in his Atlanta Compromise speech, "No race can prosper till it learns that there is as much dignity in tilling a field as in writing a poem" (Washington). This idea is echoed when the narrator is asked to give his speech and takes most of his speech directly from Booker T. Washington's Atlanta Compromise. He is subsequently

ignored as the men go on talking and laughing, suggesting that the Atlanta Compromise is only popular bilaterally because it gives African Americans the feeling of freedom without any real manifestation, which benefits the white elite. He is asked to repeat the words “social responsibility” and accidentally says “social equality,” angering the men who have a vested interest in preserving a stratified society. At the conclusion of the speech, he is given a scholarship to a “state college for Negroes” (Ellison 32) and is so happy that he doesn’t mind that the coins he had were useless tokens. Later, he has a dream where his grandfather gives him a briefcase containing a document that reads, “To Whom It May Concern... Keep This N[...]r Boy Running” (Ellison 33). The dream reveals that deep down, the narrator knows that he will be kept running for his equality but will never reach it. Ellison uses this disturbing scene to represent how the power dynamic from slavery never truly went away but continued in “compromises” like Washington’s, which were twisted to harm those they were supposed to benefit.

The next segment takes place in the college, loosely based on Ellison’s own experiences as a student at Tuskegee. The narrator describes the college as beautiful and peaceful, watched over by the “bronze statue of the college Founder... cold... his hands outstretched... lifting a veil... [from] the face of a kneeling slave... unable to decide whether the veil is really being lifted, or lowered more firmly in place” (Ellison 36). The statue is in direct reference to a statue of Booker T. Washington in the same pose at Tuskegee Institute. The criticism of Washington’s methods continues, here saying that the symbolic act of lifting a veil of a slave, representative of the receiving of knowledge and supposed freedom, may actually be placing the veil down even harder, blinding blacks with the illusion of equality while actually halting progress. However here, Washington is replaced with the enigmatic and nameless Founder, only further suggesting

that his ideas have lost even association with the original person. At the end of his junior year, millionaires “descended from the North on Founder’s Day,” (Ellison 37) and he is given a job chauffeuring white multi-millionaire Mr. Norton, who represents the typical white donor to a college such as Tuskegee. Mr. Norton describes his late daughter’s beauty and her purity on the drive with almost reverence. The narrator, by request, takes Mr. Norton to an area unfamiliar to him, and Mr. Norton grows interested in a decaying log cabin that was “built during slavery times” (Ellison 47). The narrator soon regrets driving there, as he has to explain that Jim Trueblood, a poor black sharecropper, has impregnated his own daughter. Mr. Norton speaks with Trueblood, who says he gets more money from white folks now than ever, and Mr. Norton, shocked, gives Trueblood a hundred-dollar bill to buy toys for his children. Mr. Norton isn’t concerned with Trueblood as a person--rather, he gives him one hundred dollars both because Trueblood’s incestuous relationship resonates with Mr. Norton’s thoughts of his own late daughter, and because donating affirms Norton's sense of white superiority and elicits a kind of condescending pity. Ellison criticizes supposedly well-meaning Northern whites as contributing to the suppression of African Americans, albeit through a different system, by dividing the black community into those who live unchanged from the era of slavery and those who are fooled into thinking they aren’t. The college, similar to the blindfolds of the first chapter, blinds and divides African Americans, with the black students and faculty blinded by pride, looking down at the sharecroppers who live where their grandfathers did just a few generations ago. Afterwards, Mr. Norton is dazed and asks the narrator to drive him to a place with whiskey. The narrator drives Mr. Norton to the local tavern, the Golden Day. Mr. Norton is unconscious when they arrive, and veterans from a nearby insane asylum carry him inside and pour whiskey down his throat. Mr. Norton wakes up and is carried upstairs to a veteran doctor who graduated from the college. The

veteran berates Mr. Norton and the narrator, calling the narrator “invisible... the most perfect achievement of [Mr. Norton’s] dreams... The mechanical man!” (Ellison 94). The doctor questions Mr. Norton’s motives, accusing Mr. Norton of considering the narrator simply “a mark on the scorecard of achievement... a black amorphous thing” (Ellison 95). The doctor reveals how the college is a blindfold to all involved: to Mr. Norton and the white men, it is a humanitarian effort that brings society forward; to the narrator and the black students, it is a false chance because the man exposed the essential truth about the college: it is a barrier to black progress invented to satisfy both parties without making any significant changes. The narrator drives Mr. Norton back to the college in silence. After they return to the college, Mr. Norton returns to his room, and Dr. Bledsoe, the head of the college, is furious at the narrator for not “tak[ing] these white folks where we want them to go, [to] show them what we want them to see” (Ellison 102). They walk to Mr. Norton’s room, where Bledsoe fervently apologizes to Mr. Norton and orders the narrator to leave. In a later meeting, Bledsoe says to the narrator, “You’re black and living in the South--did you forget how to lie?” (Ellison 139). He reaches for a slave leg shackle on his desk and declares that the narrator has to be disciplined. Bledsoe displays the shackle as a symbol of progress while it really represents the persistence of slavery through the blinding effect of the college. The narrator threatens to expose Bledsoe’s lies, to which Bledsoe responds, “I’s big and black and I say ‘Yes, suh’ as loudly as any burrhead when it’s convenient, but I’m still the king down here” (Ellison 143). Bledsoe uses the narrator’s grandfather’s methods not to gain power for his people but to gain power for himself. He acts as a meek and servile slave in the presence of the wealthy white donors and upholds the illusion of freedom and progress in the presence of the black students. Bledsoe is, like the grandfather considers himself, a traitor to progress, who only contributes to the continued suppression of African Americans.

He ends up sending the narrator to New York to work for his tuition instead of expelling him and gives him seven sealed letters to give to white folk in the city for work. Later that night, the Reverend Homer A. Barbee speaks of the Founder's story to an emotional student crowd, and stumbling back to his chair, drops his dark glasses off of sightless eyes. The blind preacher Homer (based on the Greek Homer, who was also blind) has blind faith to the nameless and invisible Founder, whose ideas have been distorted to be unrecognizable by those who cannot see the original meaning.

The journey from the rural South to the metropolitan North and to Harlem, which would come to be a vital cultural and political hub for African Americans, is shown through the point of view of the narrator. He takes the long bus ride to New York, effectively exiled from his homeland. The narrator leaves the bus onto a crowded city street and is amazed at the apparent equality of black people in Harlem, stopping in astonishment to look at a black police officer directing traffic. He comes upon a black man rallying a crowd against whites and nervously walks past to his housing, feeling the tension in the moment. The narrator is confused and made uncomfortable by the alien nature of the protesters' anti-white cries in his naivete, yet is also uncomfortable with his former black Southern identity, seeking to flee any reminder of his home. The rural and segregated life of the South is contrasted with the bustling and intermixed life of the North, a feeling many of those partaking in the Great Migration most likely shared. Over the next couple days, he delivers six of the letters that he received from Dr. Bledsoe, but each recipient declines to answer, and the narrator is turned away by their secretaries. Exhausted and broke, doubt grows in his head, and he suspects Bledsoe and Mr. Norton of setting him up. The narrator, so saturated in Dr. Bledsoe and the powerful system he controlled, believes that Bledsoe's long-reaching fingers stretch a thousand miles northward to puppet the narrator even now; this fear is not

unfounded. On his way to deliver the seventh and final letter, he meets a man who calls Harlem “nothing but a bear’s den” (Ellison 174) in reference to Brer Rabbit, a folk tale from the South. The narrator is confused and both wants to stay with the man and leave him. The narrator continues on to the final recipient, Mr. Emerson. When he gets there, he meets Mr. Emerson’s son, who takes the letter and is vaguely concerned. He gives the letter back, and the narrator reads it for the first time: in it, Bledsoe has written that the narrator is “expelled for a most serious defection” (Ellison, 190) and should be led on for as long as possible to prevent him from returning to the college. The son says that he is sympathetic, even if his father is not, and offers the narrator a job at Liberty Paints. The narrator leaves, angry and confused, imagining Bledsoe saying, “Hope the bearer of this letter to death and keep him running. Your most humble and obedient servant, A. H. Bledsoe” (Ellison 194).

The Great Migration spurred a period of formative years for a new urban African American identity, distinct from the South. The Harlem Renaissance was an explosion of culture centered on 1920s Harlem. Black literature grew in popularity and distribution, black politics grew in scope and resources, and jazz music entered the mainstream. The Harlem Renaissance produced a number of political movements to advance the social and economic position of African Americans. The new urban cultural capital of black America gave political movements more reach. Black activists had different methods of approaching issue such as race and culture, as reflected in *Invisible Man*. African Americans fled the South during the Great Migration to gain freedom and individuality. To keep this freedom and to further issue important to them they joined groups to exercise strength in numbers, such as black nationalists, represented by the Exhorter, or communists, represented by the Brotherhood. Yet this strength took away some of their individuality, treating them as an abstract bunch that would be used to political ends.

Communist organizations at the time, of which Ellison was briefly a member, recruited a broad range of people, unaffected by race. Although racial equality was an issue communist organizations like the Brotherhood fought for, it was far from their focus. Instead, communist organizations' main concern was class struggles. As a result, African American activists sometimes felt betrayed by these groups. The narrator, after gaining power within the Brotherhood, is checked by a fellow Brother who accuses the narrator of "want[ing] to be a dictator" (Ellison 401). The narrator is moved downtown, away from Harlem, to work on "The Woman Question" for the Brotherhood. An activist for African Americans and a charismatic one at that, he is moved away from his area of jurisdiction due to petty politics, greatly harming the Brotherhood movement in Harlem. When the narrator returns to Harlem, people seem uninterested in the Brotherhood. Many important members have left the movement, and the Brotherhood has apparently moved on from issues in Harlem in favor of a more national focus. The Brotherhood does not think of Harlem as a collection of people, but as a mass entity, a political force to be used for advancement. This is in sharp contrast with Ras the Exhorter, whose black nationalist attitude, although violent in nature, always centers on Harlem and its black residents. Ras's ideology is highlighted at the climax, where he starts a riot and, in traditional chieftain garb, rides a horse and wields a spear. This is a reference to Marcus Garvey, a black nationalist who dressed in ornate garb. Ras orders his men to hang the narrator for being a traitor to his race. Ras does not recognize the American identity of the narrator and other African Americans, and orders them dead when they don't conform to his standards. The narrator must choose between the cold and indifferent Brotherhood and the angry and militant Ras. Between these two options, the narrator instead runs away and falls into a manhole. He chooses to stay underground, away from social movements, and self-reflect. The early twentieth century was a

confused era for civil rights groups with widely varying methods and messages; Ellison argues here that it may be more valuable to look at oneself and consider one's personal place rather than as a part of a mass of people. The "invisible man" is not invisible by himself, he is indistinguishable from a larger crowd, reduced to a movement, a culture, a race.

Invisibility in itself is not always a bad thing in *Invisible Man*. Recognizing one's invisibility can give meaning. "Without light I am not only invisible, but formless as well; and to be unaware of one's form is to live a death. I myself, after existing some twenty years, did not become alive until I discovered my invisibility" (Ellison 7). Blanketed in darkness in the rooms underneath the manhole, the narrator burns all of the belongings he had in his briefcase for light, including his high school diploma and various Brotherhood documents, effectively severing his connection with the past. But with the light made from his past he can better see his own form, and his own identity is reaffirmed.

Invisible Man is a statement on how African Americans should approach identity in the twentieth century and beyond. They should discard the distorted self-images provided by Southern black accommodationists (like Dr. Bledsoe from the college), the Northern white donors (like Mr. Norton), black nationalists (like Ras), or cold communist mega-organizations (like the Brotherhood.) Instead, they should look inward, to a more personal sense of identity, divorced from outside prejudices and expectations. It uses major events in African American history such as the Great Migration and Harlem Renaissance, through the lens of the narrator, to comment on the route African Americans should take going forward.

Works Cited

Ellison, Ralph. *Invisible Man*. New York, NY, Random House, 1952.