INVISIBLE MAN SUMMARY AND ANALYSIS

_Invisible Man_ is a novel by Ralph Ellison about an African American man whose color renders him invisible, published by Random House in 1952. It addresses many of the social and intellectual issues facing African-Americans early in the twentieth century, including black nationalism, the relationship between black identity and Marxism, and the reformist racial policies of Booker T. Washington, as well as issues of individuality and personal identity.

THE CONTEXT OF THE BOOK

The grandson of slaves, Ralph Ellison was born in 1914 in Oklahoma City, Oklahoma, and was raised largely in Tulsa, Oklahoma. His father was a construction worker, and his mother was a domestic servant who also volunteered for the local Socialist Party. As a young man, Ellison developed an abiding interest in jazz music; he befriended a group of musicians who played in a regional band called Walter Page’s Blue Devils, many of whom later played with Count Basie’s legendary big band in the late 1930s. Ellison himself studied the cornet and trumpet, and planned a career as a jazz musician. In 1933, he left Oklahoma to begin a study of music at the Tuskegee Institute in Tuskegee, Alabama. The Institute, which is now called Tuskegee University, was founded in 1881 by Booker T. Washington, one of the foremost black educators in American history, and became one of the nation’s most important black colleges. It later served as the model for the black college attended by the narrator in _Invisible Man_.

Ellison left the Tuskegee Institute in 1936 and moved to New York City, where he settled in Harlem. As an employee of the Federal Writers’ Project, Ellison befriended many of the most important African-American writers of the era, including Langston Hughes and Richard Wright. Ellison also befriended the eminent jazz writer and sociologist Albert Murray, with whom he carried on a lengthy and important literary correspondence, later collected in the book _Trading Twelves_. After a year editing the Negro Quarterly, Ellison left for the Merchant Marines, in which he served during World War II. After the war, Ellison won a Rosenwald Fellowship, which he used to write _Invisible Man_. The first chapter appeared in America in the 1948 volume of _Magazine of the Year_, and the novel was published in its entirety in 1952. Employing a shifting, improvisational style directly based on Ellison’s experience of jazz performance, _Invisible Man_ ranges in tone from realism to extreme surrealism, from tragedy to vicious satire to near-slapstick comedy. Rich in symbolism and metaphor, virtuosic in its use of multiple styles and tones, and steeped in the black experience in America and the human struggle for individuality, the novel spent sixteen weeks on the best-seller list and won the National Book Award in 1953. Achieving one of the most sensational debuts of any novel in American history, _Invisible Man_ was hailed by writers such as Saul Bellow and critics such as Irving Howe as a landmark publication; some critics claimed that it was the most important American novel to appear after World War II.

_Invisible Man_ was heavily influenced by the work of a number of twentieth-century French writers known as the existentialists. Existentialism, whose foremost proponents included
Albert Camus and Jean-Paul Sartre, explored the question of individuality and the nature of meaning in a seemingly meaningless universe. Ellison adapted the existentialists’ universal themes to the black experience of oppression and prejudice in America. He also engaged powerfully with the tradition of African-American social debate. In the character of Dr. Bledsoe, the novel offers a vehement rejection of the philosophy of Booker T. Washington, which advocated that blacks should work toward economic success as a means of achieving racial equality. It also critiques, through the character of Ras the Exhorter, Marcus Garvey’s philosophy of Black Nationalism.

Despite—or possibly because of—the overwhelming success of Invisible Man, Ellison never published another novel in his lifetime. Though he published two books of essays—Shadow Act in the 1960s and Going to the Territory in the 1980s—Ellison spent his later decades laboring on a vast novel, which he never finished. Upon his death in 1994, Ellison left behind more than 2,000 pages of unedited, incomplete manuscript. In heavily abridged and edited form, this manuscript was published five years after his death under the title Juneteenth, to generally unfavorable reviews.

An unnamed narrator speaks, telling his reader that he is an “invisible man.” The narrator explains that he is invisible simply because others refuse to see him. He goes on to say that he lives underground, siphoning electricity away from Monopolated Light & Power Company by lining his apartment with light bulbs. The narrator listens to jazz, and recounts a vision he had while he listened to Louis Armstrong, traveling back into the history of slavery.

The narrator flashes back to his own youth, remembering his naïveté. The narrator is a talented young man, and is invited to give his high school graduation speech in front of a group of prominent white local leaders. At the meeting, the narrator is asked to join a humiliating boxing match, a battle royal, with some other black students. Next, the boys are forced to grab for their payment on an electrified carpet. Afterward, the narrator gives his speech while swallowing blood. The local leaders reward the narrator with a brief case and a scholarship to the state’s black college.

Later, the narrator is a student at the unnamed black college. The narrator has been given the honor of chauffeuring for one of the school’s trustees, a northern white man named Mr. Norton. While driving, the narrator takes Mr. Norton into an unfamiliar area near the campus. Mr. Norton demands that the narrator stop the car, and Mr. Norton gets out to talk to a local sharecropper named Jim Trueblood. Trueblood has brought disgrace upon himself by impregnating his daughter, and he recounts the incident to Mr. Norton in a long, dreamlike story. Mr. Norton is both horrified and titillated, and tells the narrator that he needs a “stimulant” to recover himself. The narrator, worried that Mr. Norton will fall ill, takes him to the Golden Day, a black bar and whorehouse. When they arrive, the Golden Day is occupied by a group of mental patients. The narrator tries to carry out a drink but is eventually forced to bring Mr. Norton into the bar, where pandemonium breaks loose. The narrator meets a patient who is an ex-doctor. The ex-doctor helps Mr. Norton recover from his fainting spell, but insults Mr. Norton with his boldness.
Shaken, Mr. Norton returns to campus and speaks with Dr. Bledsoe, the president of the black college. Dr. Bledsoe is furious with the narrator. In chapel, the narrator listens to a sermon preached by the Reverend Barbee, who praises the Founder of the black college. The speech makes the narrator feel even guiltier for his mistake. Afterward, Dr. Bledsoe reprimands the narrator, deciding to exile him to New York City. In New York, the narrator will work through the summer to earn his next year’s tuition. Dr. Bledsoe tells the narrator that he will prepare him letters of recommendation. The narrator leaves for New York the next day.

On the bus to New York, the narrator runs into the ex-doctor again, who gives the narrator some life advice that the narrator does not understand. The narrator arrives in New York, excited to live in Harlem’s black community. However, his job hunt proves unsuccessful, as Dr. Bledsoe’s letters do little good. Eventually, the narrator meets young Emerson, the son of the Mr. Emerson to which he supposed to be introduced. Young Emerson lets the narrator read Dr. Bledsoe’s letter, which he discovers were not meant to help him at all, but instead to give him a sense of false hope. The narrator leaves dejected, but young Emerson tells him of a potential job at the factory of Liberty Paints.

The narrator reports to Liberty Paints and is given a job assisting Lucius Brockway, an old black man who controls the factory’s boiler room and basement. Lucius is suspicious of his protégé, and when the narrator accidentally stumbles into a union meeting, Brockway believes that he is collaborating with the union and attacks him. The narrator bests the old Brockway in a fight, but Brockway gets the last laugh by causing an explosion in the basement, severely wounding the narrator. The narrator is taken to the factory’s hospital, where he is strapped into a glass and metal box. The factor’s doctors treat the narrator with severe electric shocks, and the narrator soon forgets his own name. The narrator’s sense of identity is only rekindled through his anger at the doctors’ racist behavior. Without explanation, the narrator is discharged from the hospital and fired from his job at the factory.

When the narrator returns to Harlem, he nearly collapses from weakness. A kind woman named Mary Rambo takes the narrator in, and soon the narrator begins renting a room in her house. The narrator begins practicing his speechmaking abilities. One day, the narrator stumbles across an elderly black couple that is being evicted from their apartment. The narrator uses his rhetorical skill to rouse the crowd watching the dispossession and causes a public disturbance. A man named Brother Jack follows the narrator after he escapes from the police. Brother Jack tells the narrator that he wishes to offer him a job making speeches for his organization, the Brotherhood. The narrator is initially skeptical and turns him down, but later accepts the offer.

The narrator is taken to the Brotherhood’s headquarters, where he is given a new name and is told that he must move away from Mary. The narrator agrees to the conditions. Soon after, the narrator gives a rousing speech to a crowded arena. He is embraced as a hero, although some of the Brotherhood leaders disagree with the speech. The narrator is sent to a man named Brother Hambro to be “indoctrinated” into the theory of the Brotherhood. Four months later, the narrator meets Brother Jack, who tells the narrator he will be appointed chief spokesperson of the Brotherhood’s Harlem District.
In Harlem, the narrator is tasked with increasing support for the Brotherhood. He meets Tod Clifton, an intelligent and skillful member of the Brotherhood. Clifton and the narrator soon find themselves fighting against Ras the Exhorter, a black nationalist who believes that blacks should not cooperate with whites. The narrator soon starts to become famous as a speaker. However, complications set in. The narrator receives an anonymous note telling him that he is rising too quickly. Even worse, another Brotherhood member named Wrestrum accuses the narrator of using the Brotherhood for his own personal gain. The Brotherhood’s committee suspends the narrator until the charges are cleared, and reassigns him to lecture downtown on the “Woman Question.” Downtown, the narrator meets a woman who convinces him to come back to her apartment. They sleep together, and the narrator becomes afraid that the tryst will be discovered.

The narrator is summoned to an emergency meeting, in which the committee informs him that Tod Clifton has gone missing. The narrator is reassigned to Harlem. When he returns, he discovers that things have changed, and that the Brotherhood has lost much of its previous popularity. The narrator soon after discovers Clifton on the street, selling Sambo dolls. Before the narrator can understand Clifton’s betrayal, Clifton is shot dead by a police officer for resisting arrest. Unable to get in touch with the party leaders, the narrator organizes a public funeral for Clifton. The funeral is a success, and the people of Harlem are energized by the narrator’s speech. However, the narrator is called again to face the party committee, where he is chastised for not following their orders. The narrator confronts Brother Jack, whose glass eye pops out of its socket.

Leaving the committee, the narrator is nearly beat up by Ras the Exhorter’s men. Sensing his new unpopularity in Harlem, the narrator buys a pair of dark-lensed glasses. As soon as he puts on the glasses, several people mistake the narrator for a man named Rinehart, who is apparently a gambler, pimp, and preacher. The narrator goes to see Brother Hambro for an explanation of the Brotherhood’s dictates. Hambro tells the narrator that Harlem must be “sacrificed” for the best interests of the entire Brotherhood, an answer the narrator finds deeply unsatisfying.

The narrator, disillusioned by Hambro’s words, remembers his grandfather’s advice to undermine white power through cooperation. The narrator plans to sabotage the Brotherhood by telling the committee whatever it wants to hear, regardless of the reality. He also plans to infiltrate the party’s hierarchy by sleeping with the wife of a high-ranking member of the Brotherhood. The narrator meets Sybil, a woman who fits the bill, at a Brotherhood party. However, Sybil knows nothing, preferring to use the narrator to play out her fantasy of being raped by a black man. While Sybil is in his apartment, the narrator gets a call that a riot is going on in Harlem.

The narrator rushes uptown to find that Harlem is in chaos. The narrator falls in with a group of looters. The looters soon escalate their violence, burning down their own tenement building to protest the poor living conditions. The narrator runs into Ras the Exhorter again, now dressed as an Abyssinian chieftain. Ras sends his men to try to hang the narrator. The narrator barely escapes from Ras’ men, only to meet three white men who ask him what he has in his briefcase. When the narrator turns to run, he falls into a manhole. The white men
seal the narrator underground, where the narrator is forced to burn his past possessions to see in the dark.

The narrator returns to the present, remarking that he has remained underground since that time. The narrator reflects on history and the words of his grandfather, and says that his mind won’t let him rest. Last, the narrator says that he feels ready to end his hibernation and emerge above ground.

Race and Racism: Theme Analysis

In *Invisible Man*, race is a constant subject of inquiry. As a young black man in the middle of 20th century America, the narrator most often confronts the idea of race through experiencing the racism of others – from the degradation he experiences in the battle royal to his realization of his token role in the Brotherhood. However, the novel also explores the question of whether race might be an authentic marker of individual identity, outside the context of racism and other narratives imposed by others. The narrator quickly realizes that his blackness is highly significant, but cannot easily decipher what it should mean to him.

At the novel’s beginning, a younger narrator’s take on race is relatively simple. In his graduation speech, he is happy to repeat Booker T. Washington’s words, explaining that blacks should cheerfully cooperate with the whites that are in power. As the narrator travels through the world of the novel, he meets an array of characters shaped by the complex history of race, and his views grow more complex. The most important of these figures are black, though also included are overtly or unintentionally racist whites, like the pompous Mr. Norton. Characters like Dr. Bledsoe and Lucius Brockway are characters that control their small domains within the white system but are either cynical or unaware of their compromised positions.

Many of the experiences of the novel revolve around the narrator’s acceptance of one notion of race, only to discover that there exceptions and difficulties in the ideas he encounters. For example, Ras the Exhorter offers the inflammatory message of rejecting whites wholesale. This has a seductive appeal for the narrator, despite being irrational and dangerous. Near the novel’s end, the narrator attempts to enact his grandfather’s strategy of “yessing them to death,” but his plan backfires during his fling with Sybil, the wife of a powerful Brotherhood member.

Ellison offers no solution to the complicated legacies of race. Although the narrator withdraws into his hole at the novel’s end, he still boldly states, “I couldn’t be still even in hibernation. Because, damn it, there’s the mind...It wouldn’t let me rest.” Ellison hints that the only way to find an authentic relationship with race is to puzzle it out for oneself, and only an active, individual mind can locate his own relationship with history.
Identity and Invisibility

*Invisible Man* is the story of a young man searching for his identity, unsure about where to turn to define himself. As the narrator states at the novel’s beginning, “All my life I had been looking for something, and everywhere I turned somebody tried to tell me what it was.” It is undoubtedly clear that the narrator’s blackness comprises a large part of his identity, although this isn’t something he has necessarily chosen. For others in the novel, it is simply convenient to define the narrator through his blackness.

Ellison’s narrator explains that the outcome of this is a phenomenon he calls “invisibility”—the idea that he is simply “not seen” by his oppressors. Ellison implies that if racists really saw their victims, they would not act the way they do. The narrator recognizes his invisibility slowly—in moments like the hospital machine, when he realizes he is being asked to respond to the question of who he is in terms of his blackness. Ultimately, the narrator is forced to retreat to his hole, siphoning off the light from the white-owned power company, itself a symbol of an underground resistance that may go unacknowledged for a long time.

However, invisibility doesn’t come from racism alone. Just as poisonous for the narrator are other generalized ways of thinking about identity—ideas that envision him as a cog in a machine instead of a unique individual. This is true for the narrator both at the unnamed black university and at Liberty Paints. However, it is the Brotherhood, a thinly veiled take on the Communist Party, that proves to be most disillusioning for the narrator. The Brotherhood provides a systematic way of thinking about the world that claims to be the solution to racism and inequality.

When the narrator first meets Brother Jack, Jack says, “You mustn’t waste your emotions on individuals, they don’t count.” At first, the narrator embraces this ideology of the Brotherhood and structures his identity around it. However, he comes to discover that the Brotherhood is perfectly willing to sacrifice him for its own potentially flawed ends. Thus the novel can be read not only as a story about a black man’s struggle against racism, but a black man’s struggle to grow up and learn to be himself, against the backdrop of intense social pressures, racism among others.
Lloyd C. Douglas, Magnificent Obsession

Introduction

Opening Passage:

*It had lately become common chatter at Brightwood Hospital -- better known from three hundred miles around Detroit as Hudson's Clinic -- that the chief was all but dead on his feet. The whole place buzzed with it.*

**Summary:** The highly successful neurosurgeon, Dr. Hudson, is overworking himself, but this seems likely to change because he is marrying a young woman, Helen, and going on his honeymoon. Unfortunately, not very long after the marriage a terrible accident happens and Dr. Hudson dies. What is worse, he could have lived, but the machine that would have saved him was being used at that moment to save someone across the lake: rich and largely useless playboy, Robert Merrick.

Merrick, however, is affected by the fact that his life has come at the cost of a man who did, and would have continued to do, extraordinary good to others, and, making friends with a nurse at Brightwood, Nancy Ashford, he sets out to make the sacrifice worth it and learn about Dr. Hudson. With Nancy's encouragement, he sets out to get a degree in medicine, and with her help he decodes Dr. Hudson's secret journal, in which the surgeon claims to record a secret of extraordinary power. In the meantime, he meets Helen Hudson and falls in love with her; a relationship that is more than slightly complicated by the fact that Bobby is the reason Helen's husband is dead, as well as by the fact that Joyce, Dr. Hudson's daughter and Helen's stepdaughter (but only a few years younger than Helen), is in love with Bobby.

This is a gimmick book. That is, one's interest in the plot is kept up in part by the fact that it is organized around a gimmick. Gimmicks can be handled extremely well -- Umberto Eco writes gimmick books, for instance, and good mystery novels are very often built on gimmicks -- or much more weakly -- *The Da Vinci Code* is an example of story that is moved along almost entirely by gimmicks. The trick to a gimmick is that you want it to be something that the reader can puzzle over but also could in principle solve (whether they ever actually do or not), without making it obvious that the author is dumping down a story to the reader's level. I would say that the two-level gimmick is used here is somewhere in the middle: there is a reasonably clever cipher for the journal, not difficult but not obvious, and the deciphered journal provides clues for Dr. Hudson's secret. The clues basically amount to veil and incomplete allusions to a particular page in a Bible, and fully understanding what is going on requires being able to tell what the alluded-to passage is. Since the Bible is one of those books that is both very familiar and very unfamiliar, this is a balancing act: readers who know the Bible well could find the allusions obvious and repetitive, while readers who don't know it very well need to be able to find it. The novel reduces the danger of the former problem by making its main characters exactly the sort of people who are not going to be familiar with the Bible and by repeatedly stating theological claims in terms very different from what you would expect, as if they were being translated into a different language. The
latter, on the other hand, are certainly given enough clues to figure it out, although we have to keep in mind that as this book was written in 1929, its original readers would not have had a search engine and would have had actually to take a Bible off the shelf and flip through it to try to find out Dr. Hudson's secret -- which, of course, would have been part of the point. I'm not sure it ends up being wholly successful, but it's a clever enough attempt that, with everything else going on in the book, it doesn't need to be wholly successful, just enough to keep things moving along.

This is also a spiritual secret book. Most spiritual secret books (*The Celestine Prophecy*, for instance) sacrifice story to message. I don't think that this is the case here. You can hardly miss the message, but arguably it sacrifices the clarity of the message to the story; it involves no spoilers to say that the secret has something to do with voluntary giving, but much of the story makes the voluntary giving seem quite selfishly motivated. This is not the full story, but a great deal of the problem arises from what would perhaps have recommended it to its original readers -- it's a religious story in which religion is deliberately played down and into which anything obviously religious makes only occasional and minimal entrance. This makes the spiritual secret come across more like a kind of attempt to manipulate things by magic, de-sacralized religion precisely coming across as a kind of magic. Again, this would recommend it to a lot of readers, in the same sense that there are plenty of people who are allergic to discussions of prayer who will nonetheless eat up books like *The Secret*, which substitutes something pseudo-naturalistic to do loosely similar things. Douglas does a few things to prevent religion from becoming only a kind of magic -- like most modern fiction, 'science' is the word the book actually uses for 'magic' -- but the book doesn't really avoid it, or even try very hard, in part because its characters are not the sort of people who could make that distinction very well in the first place. The story leads the message, which overall makes it a better novel than most spiritual secret books.

The romantic side of the story I found somewhat wearing, but it's not awful. Part of this is that the characters have their plausible weaknesses and strengths, even though it is sometimes difficult to find oneself fully sympathizing with Bobby and Helen as the structure of the romance really requires. Possibly the books is doing too much to develop the romance plot entirely as it should have been.

In addition to the book, I also listened to two radio versions -- the one by Lux Radio Theater with Irene Dunn and Robert Taylor and the other by Screen Guild Theater with Myrna Loy and Don Ameche. As I suspected, there is heavy movie-influence here, and the romantic story is played up. I liked how it was played up in the Lux Radio Theater version more than in the other, although I think the psychology of the characters was in some ways more plausibly expressed in the other. The cipher, of course, doesn't carry over, so the secret itself is played down in both cases. One strength I think the radio versions had over the book is that romantic love is a more obvious -- and less potentially problematic -- proxy for religious love of neighbor than science is. That is because we have actually adapted to romantic love to be religious in tone. People joke about Christian pop music being Jesus-Is-My-Girlfriend music, which is occasionally funny because true; but they often fail to grasp the fact that the reason
it sounds this way is because there is a long tradition by now of poets and singers talking
about their girlfriends as if they were Jesus. Indeed, you can trace this very easily, since it has
often been done deliberately. Golden Age Hollywood, TV, and Radio are especially guilty of
this. But because the religious tone of romantic love has become such a staple, the radio
program's focus on romantic love rather than science and technology makes the story seem
considerably more religious in character, despite the fact that the religious elements play even
less of a role in the story.

**Characters**

**Dr. Wayne Hudson**
Dr. Wayne Hudson, an eminent brain surgeon who dies from drowning when the inhalator
that might have saved his life is used to resuscitate a wealthy playboy. Somewhat of a mystic,
the doctor is a generous philanthropist, but he hides his good deeds; he thinks his great ability
as a surgeon is a gift that comes from doing unknown good for other people.

**Joyce Hudson**
Joyce Hudson, the doctor’s daughter.

**Helen Brent Hudson**
Helen Brent Hudson, Joyce Hudson’s school friend who becomes Dr. Hudson’s second wife.
After she is a widow, Robert Merrick makes her the recipient of some of his philanthropy
and then falls in love with her. In Rome, her life is saved after a train wreck by Dr. Merrick, who
keeps his identity a secret. She discovers at last that she loves Merrick, and the two are to be
married.

**Nancy Ashford**
Nancy Ashford, superintendent of the Hudson Clinic. She has been in love with Dr. Hudson.
She tells Robert Merrick he ought to try to take Dr. Hudson’s place.

**Robert Merrick**
Robert Merrick, a rich playboy who becomes a doctor in order to take the place of Dr.
Hudson, a famous brain surgeon whose life is lost when an inhalator is used for young
Merrick. Merrick tries the doctor’s theory of philanthropy, deriving power from hidden good
deeds. He finds that it is indeed a secret to a successful life, and thus Merrick succeeds in
becoming a famous brain surgeon himself. He marries Dr. Hudson’s widow.

**Dawson**
Dawson, a fellow medical student aided financially by Merrick so that the young man can
finish medical school. This philanthropic act inspires Merrick and convinces him that he can
follow in Dr. Hudson’s footsteps.