

# The Destructive Impact of Racism on African Americans in Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man*

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<p>Received on: 01 Oct 2024</p> <p>Revised on: 03 Nov 2024</p> <p>Accepted on: 12 Nov 2024</p> <p>©2024 The Author(s). Published by International Journal of English Language, Education and Literature Studies (IJEEL). This is an open access article under the CC BY license (<a href="https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/">https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/</a>).</p> <p><b>Keywords – Racism, African Americans, Identity, Solidarity, and Invisibility.</b></p>	<p><i>Ralph Ellison's Invisible Man offers a deep and insightful look at the unfairness and racial injustices that African Americans suffered in the middle of the twentieth century. It has the power to make the reader uncomfortable. It serves up a potent and inescapable critique of the systemic racism that saturates our society. It painfully illustrates the many and varied ways that this racism impinges on the lives of individuals in both psychological and social spheres. The destructive influence of racism on African Americans is the focus of this paper. Ellison's work serves as the basis for understanding and exploring this influence. The journey of the work's protagonist allows for a close look at the nearly overwhelming oppression of African Americans throughout our nation's history. Indeed, the forces of racism – the nearly unassailable barriers to African American identity, agency, and community – form the heart of the novel's narrative and the center of its pervasive theme. The next sections of this paper will discuss African Americans' invisibility as a metaphor for their marginalization. It will illustrate through Ellison's narrative how increasingly important it is for society to understand and recognize the characters' humanity, especially given how racially divided our society has become.</i></p>

## I. INTRODUCTION

Published in 1952, Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man* is an essential work of American literature that engages with the deeply intricate issues of race, identity, and societal invisibility. The protagonist is an unnamed African American man who attempts to navigate through a world that denies him any recognition outside of his racial identity. His journey takes him through several harrowing situations. He encounters the Inter-Community Brotherhood for the Blind, and in a surprise twist, he ends the novel by living underground. Ellison's use of the tunnel as a

narrative device allows him to comment on the psychological effects of racism that are both personal and systemic. In the end, what is destructive – what makes one "invisible" – is the racist society in which one is forced to live.

The motif of invisibility runs through the very fabric of the text, seen and felt at every layer and level of the story. Initially, we come across the protagonist's profound yearning for visibility, our profound comprehension of how this yearning for humanity afflicts numerous individuals in a society where skin color plays a significant role, and our unspoken

perception that this yearning inevitably evokes a pathos typically associated with the tragic. Then, we uncover the author's not-so-hidden contempt for a society so deeply biased in a devilishly unfair way that it renders a significant part of the populace invisible in a multitude of life situations across the lifespan.

## II. THE PSYCHOLOGICAL TOLL OF RACISM

Individuals and communities pay a huge mental toll because of racism, which shatters identities and plunges people into a darkness where they feel unseen. In *Invisible Man*, Ralph Ellison tells the story of a man's angst-based journey to identity. This protagonist lives in a society that not only systematically shoves him down but also denies him the number of lives his character is capable of leading. Ellison's novel explores the impact of societal prejudice on an individual's mind and spirit.

The novel's most affecting moment comes when the protagonist must confront the college's white benefactors. These people expect him to deliver a degrading performance to them at a gala. Ellison comments on how the white audience's entertainment frequently seems to be the sole factor that matters, and how the characters and people performing for them resemble those in 19th-century minstrel shows, where achieving success equates to conforming to a stereotype. He asserts, "I am invisible, understand, simply because people refuse to see me" (Ellison 3). This statement summarizes the main character's situation and the psychological effects of racial invisibility for us all. It's a weighty burden that remains unseen, causing crises not only in the main character's identity but also in the perceived values of our society. It makes one re-evaluate what it means to be a man, a citizen, and a person of value in this society.

Moreover, the main character's path crosses with different factions that want to use his identity to further their own ends. Everyone, from the Brotherhood to those involved in racially tinged riots, appears to be interested in him and what he stands for. But, of course, what they really want is to use him as a pawn in their sociopolitical games.

Ellison's term 'invisible' has been characterized by critics as a metaphor for the wider societal forces that make African Americans utterly without power. Critics have noted that "Ellison's use of the term 'invisible' is a metaphor for the broader societal forces that render African Americans powerless" (Smith 87). Being invisible strips the protagonist of his power. It also drives him deeper into the already painful path of racism—exacerbating the psychological condition aspect, creating an almost unbearable burden to carry, and, in far too many cases, leading to thoughts of suicide.

## III. THE IMPACT ON AGENCY AND IDENTITY

Racism is more than just baseless hatred; it is hate with a purpose. That purpose is to make a class of people think of themselves in a certain way and to make everyone around them think of them in that certain way. Race shatters dreams and makes people settle for less than they could be. Racism stems from and thrives on erroneous stereotypes, encompassing not only blackface stereotypes but also simplistic beliefs about the abilities and limitations of certain individuals. A onetime popular idea about African Americans held that they were mostly adept at entertaining people, especially when humor was involved.

The critical instance in the novel arises when the protagonist endeavors to locate his identity within the Brotherhood, a group that first seems to provide him an avenue toward meaningful existence and camaraderie. However, he quickly realizes that the organization only sees him as a tool to achieve its own goals, akin to the way a group of white men exploited his grandfather. Ellison encapsulates this sentiment when the protagonist contemplates his challenges, stating, "I was looking for a voice of my own, but they wanted me to be their voice" (Ellison 204). This truth underscores the limitations faced by African Americans, who often find themselves trapped by uncontrollable forces, evoking echoes of the Jim Crow era.

The hero's fight to gain control of his life comes to a head in a set of showdowns that go beyond mere physical confrontations. They cut to the true heart of the matter: the protagonist's deep disillusionment

with the promise of democracy. The story also probes the theme of identity by exploring the hero's interactions with different communities of people, each representative of a different facet of the African American experience. Critics argue that "Ellison's portrayal of the Brotherhood highlights the complex dynamics of race and power, illustrating how African Americans can be both allies and adversaries in the fight against racism" (Johnson 112). The complexity of this situation highlights the different ways that people of different races understand their own racial identities as they figure out how to navigate their social worlds in the various contexts that they inhabit.

#### IV. THE ROLE OF INVISIBILITY IN RACIAL IDENTITY

The novel *Invisible Man's* central idea is invisibility. It serves as the basis for the marginalization and degradation that many African Americans have experienced when trying to assert their humanity. Ellison's metaphor of invisibility and the narrative journey of the novel's protagonist give us a powerful statement about racism and the denial of human identity.

The novel's main character experiences multiple forms of invisibility, not only from the surrounding white world but also within his community. This duality of invisibility speaks to the internal and external battlegrounds of recognition and understanding that African Americans must traverse. Ellison asserts, "I am invisible because I am not seen" (Ellison 7). This potent statement sums up the main character's wish for recognition and his discontent with a world that will not accept him as a whole person.

Moreover, the main character's encounters bring to light the various individual and systemic forms of racism. The protagonist's illness is not just a private matter; it embodies the larger social forces that render African Americans as if they were not there. Critics note that "Ellison's use of invisibility as a motif serves to expose the deep-seated racism that permeates American society" (Williams 145). Ellison—a product of a largely unacknowledged artistic tradition—stresses the absolute necessity for the appearance of forms of societal recognition and

understanding through this metaphor, which could provide some sort of semblance to the order desperately needed in American life to counter the wretched consequences of racism.

The protagonist's expedition eventually brings him to a profound comprehension of his own identity and the intricate nature of his invisibility. He understands that recognition demands more than just acknowledgment from others; it necessitates a sense of self-assurance that the journey may force him to develop. This realization is highlighted when he asserts, "I must find my own way, my own voice" (Ellison 440). This strong statement emphasizes self-identity's role in countering systemic racism and emphasizes the importance of claiming one's narrative.

#### V. THE INTERSECTION OF RACE AND CLASS

Class and economic issues inextricably link to the pernicious effect of racism. In the protagonist's and author's lives, Ellison shows how these intersecting identities and their complex interactions shape African American life. Ellison's novel reveals that racism extends beyond skin color, encompassing deep-rooted economic and social injustices that significantly impact those it targets.

The main character's experiences in *The Brotherhood* demonstrate how class dynamics impact racial equality. *The Brotherhood* gives the impression of being a progressive kind of organization. But as the story reveals, it is really complicated and somewhat unflattering in terms of its class privilege. Critics have observed that "Ellison critiques the ways in which class can complicate racial solidarity, revealing the tensions that exist within movements for social justice" (Thompson 202). This illustrates the complex relationship between racism and economic inequality. We cannot fight the two separately; the justice of one is dependent on the justice of the other.

The character Ras the Exhorter presents the protagonist with a vision of a more militant and separatist African American identity. In dealing with the character of Ras, the protagonist of the story must confront the class realities of the African American community and the kinds of identities that are being lived and imagined within it. Ellison emotionally

encapsulates this tension when the protagonist contemplates his own position within the class structure, noting that he frequently feels "trapped between expectations and reality" (Ellison 325). This statement embodies the interplay of the intersectional and often very complex struggles that African Americans undertake regarding race and class.

## VI. THE ROLE OF COMMUNITY AND SOLIDARITY

Invisible Man's essential message is the value of solidarity and the importance of community in the fight against systemic racism. While racism seeks to divide and isolate, Ellison's protagonist learns that the power of coming together and collective action can foster resilience and sow the seeds of resistance. From the first pages to the last, the work's hero articulates and embodies the message that the vital role of community is central to confronting oppression and reclaiming identity.

The importance of group allegiances in the life of the African American is something that Ellison makes plain, especially in the protagonist's dealings with different contingents. For instance, Bledsoe's character is a striking example of the kind of figure one finds in "the life that is not worth living." Bledsoe embodies the monstrous strengths and ruthless weaknesses of a character who navigates the treacherous racial and class dynamics of the African American community. Critics argue that "Bledsoe represents the internalized racism that can emerge within oppressed communities, revealing the detrimental effects of systemic oppression on individual agency" (Harris 89). This representation highlights the importance of togetherness and assistance from one to another as people deal with the fallout from racism.

The main character finally understands the value of community when the story reaches a turning point. After experiencing disappointment and deceit, he begins to understand that gaining genuine recognition and recognition for his identity requires collaboration with others—not just anyone—in a community that has chosen him for a leadership position. As he reflects on his experiences, he acknowledges, "It is only through others that we find

ourselves" (Ellison 480). The acknowledgment of this situation underscores how desperately we need to unite as a community to confront the powers of racism and recover our sense of agency.

## VII. THE LEGACY OF RACISM AND THE PATH FORWARD

The inheritance of racism is a constant presence in Invisible Man, showing how the night of systemic oppression can stretch for generations within individuals and communities. Ellison examines not only the external, social, and economic effects of racism, but also the internal, psychological toll it takes on the protagonist's identity and, by extension, on all those in the shadow of the oppressor. Ellison's examination of the protagonist's journey emphasizes the necessity of confronting and dismantling these ingrained structures of racism in order to establish a path for African Americans' freedom.

Critics have noted that "Ellison's work serves as a testament to the enduring impact of racism on the African American psyche, highlighting the necessity of addressing these wounds in the quest for justice" (Kendrick 54). The main character's journey mirrors the overall fight of African Americans to take back their stories and reclaim their humanity in a society that has long sought to dehumanize and marginalize them.

Furthermore, Ellison's depiction of the main character's development underscores the necessity of self-discovery and the ability to bounce back from adversity for a successful life. The pathway leading from invisibility to visibility is a journey both undertaken by individuals and made collectively—by those who insist on shared humanity—that also confronts, head-on, the country's enduring practice of racism. As the protagonist asserts, "Invisibility is a burden, but it can also be a source of strength" (Ellison 299). This statement invites individuals and communities to unite in solidarity. It encourages them to come together, overthrow what is not working, and take back their stories.

In the novel's conclusion, Ellison provides readers with a sense of hope and urgency. To progress, we must examine both the individual and the community to diminish and ultimately eradicate the 400-year-old racist legacy. Critics argue that



“Ellison’s emphasis on community underscores the necessity of solidarity in the fight for social justice, as individuals work together to dismantle the systems of oppression that have historically marginalized them” (Baker 76).

## 8. Conclusion

Ralph Ellison’s *Invisible Man* offers an incisive look at the many ways racism harms African Americans. The protagonist’s journey allows the author to reveal not only the psychological impact on black men like him, but also the existential and social costs incurred due to systemic racism, a force as potent today as it was during the book’s initial publication in 1952. The African American experience in a society divided by race is complex. This narrative illuminates that complexity and sheds light on the themes of invisibility, identity, agency, and community that run through the experience of not just the characters in this novel but also the lives of many African Americans.

Racism has a harmful effect. This effect appears clearly in the main character’s pursuit of a simple thing: recognition. Throughout history, many African Americans have endured the unfortunate condition of being unseen and, more importantly, misunderstood. Ellison’s use of invisibility as a motif highlights Black Americans’ marginalization and serves as a wake-up call to a nation that has turned a blind eye to the urgent need for societal change. Ultimately, Ellison’s work, *Invisible Man*, demands that people recognize the author’s humanity and, more broadly, the humanity of all individuals. It is a call to confront the racism that still perpetuates unfair treatment and division among us. In the end, *Invisible Man* is a declaration that we should acknowledge the essential humanity of every person – not just the ones we feel comfortable with – and that we should see and value the worth of all kinds of different people living in this country. It calls us to be unseeing and unyielding in the face of racism and all the insidious forms it takes.

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