

Extended Essay

English B HL

Theme of identity through the protagonist's journey across the socio-political landscape of America in the 20th century

How does Ralph Ellison's novel "Invisible Man" delve into the theme of identity through the protagonist's journey across the socio-political landscape of America in the 20th century?

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Introduction	3
Education, Respectability, and the Politics of Assimilation	4
Capitalism, Industrial Labor, and the Fragmentation of Identity	5
Politics, Ideology & Collective Identity	6
Withdrawal, Hibernation, and the Metaphor of Invisibility	8
Conclusion	9
Bibliography	10

Introduction:

Ralph Ellison's novel **The Invisible Man** (1952) stands out as a rising success in twentieth-century American literature. The novel explores how themes such as identity, race, and inequality are complexly addressed under the pressure of power in the modern social world. Set against the backdrop of the evolving socio-political environment of the United States, the novel follows an unnamed African-American narrator as he navigates a journey of self-discovery and self-definition, constantly altered and distorted by power or authority. The narrator's inner self is shaped in various ways throughout the novel by concepts such as economy, race, and ideology. The novel also suggests that the narrator's self is a constantly negotiated entity within larger social structures.

Understanding the historical context is also crucial to understanding *The Invisible Man*, as it allows us to comprehend his approach to identity. Knowledge of the Jim Crow segregation prevalent in the South in the early 20th century, the Great Migration of African Americans to industrial cities in the North, and the emergence of political movements aimed at redefining the social and economic status of Black Americans is a vital starting point for understanding *The Invisible Man*.

These changes led to competing identity models: one was based on relevance and dignity, the other was based on labor and consumer modernity, and the other was based on collectivist activism. Ellison's novel shows how socio-political environments present identity as a form of social stratification, not as a personal property, by placing the narrator in the bond of these forces. The central metaphor, "invisibility", does not literally express absence, but rather reflects American society's refusal to accept the narrator's individuality beyond racial stereotypes or political function. As the narrator claims, his invisibility is due to the refusal of others to accept it. This invisibility embodies a strategic retreat against a system that rejects both the state of unrecognition and individuality. The underground retreat of the novel suggests that instead of resolving the identity crisis through integration or rebellion, identity remains conditioned and unresolved within the structures of twentieth-century America. This article argues that the *Invisible Man* portrays identity as a socio-political structure shaped by the pressures of education, capitalism and political ideology. Through the narrator's encounters with institutions trying to define it for their own purposes, Ellison illuminates how identity is transformed into a field of manipulation, performance and resistance. The novel suggests that the self cannot be consistently constructed within systems based on racial invisibility.

Education, Respectability, and the Politics of Assimilation

Ellison positions the first phase of the narrator's identity formation within the South Black education system, which promotes a pattern of progress centered around respectability and

assimilation. At the beginning of the novel, the narrator believes that it will guarantee recognition of academic success and polite obedience. He describes this strategy as an attempt to "submit them to death and destruction" and claims that identity can only be obtained through external verification. Through this dynamic, Ellison shows how racist power structures force African Americans to adopt identities that fit their white expectations to gain visibility. Emphasizing university, vocational training and conflict-free progress, Booker T. It contains an upward model that is closely compatible with the historical program advocated by the Washington and Tuskegee Institutes. Academics acknowledge that such institutions have developed a specific "respectable" identity designed to conform to white sensibilities rather than challenge them. Ellison's narrator internalizes this ideology, assuming that the self depends on institutional verification. However, this reveals that the basis of the narrator's identity lies in conformity, not in autonomy, and how socio-political pressures shape an individual's self-definition processes.

The episode "Battle Royal" challenges the narrator's idealistic view of education and longing. Invited to give an honorable graduation speech on humility and success, the narrator is instead forced into a derogatory show for the entertainment of white men. Ellison, describing children as "blinded" and stumbling in chaos, emphasizes the real and symbolic blindness that penetrates the novel. "Battle Royal" reveals how the search for visibility through dignity is structurally compromised, showing that access to education and opportunity depends on humiliation. University rector Dr. Bledsoe embodies the internalization and manipulation of the politics of respectability. Initially, the narrator sees it as a model of success, but Bledsoe reveals the cynical basis of his authority by saying, "We take these white people where we want to go, we show them what we want to see." Bledsoe's dismissal of the narrator from school shows that the institution prioritizes student development in its own reputation and that visibility is selectively provided in such systems. Therefore, the college's upward mobility ideology functions as a social control mechanism rather than a self-definition tool.

Academics consistently interpret the university section as a criticism of corporate identity. Barbara Foley argues that Ellison's search for recognition shows how the narrator is constantly directed to roles that "reinforce rather than disrupt the existing social order". Similarly, Arnold Rampersad states that Ellison understands education as an arena where the ideals of racial promotion conflict with the contradictions of American democracy. The narrator's failure within the university system reveals the limits of dignity as a basis for identity formation and the extent to which socio-political institutions shape the individual through performance rather than self-authorship.

Another important layer of the hero's early identity formation lies in how education works simultaneously as both a promise and a means of racial restraint. Ellison builds education not only as schooling, but also as a broader ideological discipline in which Black dignity is regulated by white social expectations. In this fiction, the narrator's identity is not built through intellectual self-realization, but through the capacity of obedience and restraint. As literary critic Barbara Foley claims, the novel "dramatizes how the American education system has become an arena where the 'self' is exchanged for fitness" (Foley, Ralph Ellison, and The Politics of the Novel). For the narrator, academic work represents both an opportunity and a warning: success depends on remaining invisible within a white-coded standard of civilization. Ellison reinforces this theme through the Dr. figure. Bledsoe, which embodies the internalization of the same control system. Bledsoe's function in the text is especially important in terms of identity: it represents the logical end point of the prestige policy - visibility is achieved only through assimilation. When the narrator is expelled from the university after accidentally uncovering the hypocrisy of Bledsoe's meticulously prepared image, Bledsoe presents a harsh revelation about the dynamics of racial power with these words: "*You are insignificant, son. You're absent—don't you understand that?*" (Vintage, 1995, p. 143). In this line, the first and most prominent example of both real and figurative "invisibility" in the narrator's social interactions is summarized.

Bledsoe and Ellison revealed that the formation of Black identity in twentieth-century America was influenced not only by white institutions, but also by racial class politics. Bledsoe's authority is based on protecting institutional prestige and protecting white philanthropists from disturbing truths. This situation reflects criticisms of African-American political thought, such as Du Bois's concerns about the conflict between the "talented tenth" and broader racial liberation. Ellison, on the other hand, places his narrator outside this hierarchical framework. The narrator's lack of social capital requires him to acquire his identity through experience instead of inheriting through class positioning. As a result, the narrator's departure from the university marks a very important moment - a definite break from the categories of identity imposed from the outside. It also marks the beginning of the Bildungsroman structure. Ellison deliberately shifts the narrative from the ideal of Southern education to the Northern industrial environment, expanding the socio-political landscape in which identity is negotiated. In this sense, the result of the first stage leaves the narrator hanging between two worlds: he is aware that identity is not defined by obedience, but he is not aware of the ideological mechanisms that will continue to shape him.

Capitalism, Industrial Labor, and the Fragmentation of Identity

The second important stage in the narrator's development unfolds in the capitalist-industrial environment of New York, where Ellison explores how labor, consumerism and mechanization redefined the boundaries of identity. In the twentieth century, African Americans migrated north in search of social and economic freedom. However, as historians such as Isabel Wilkerson pointed out, the North introduced not only discrimination, but also new forms of racial stratification linked to labour. Ellison places his hero at the center of this transformation, showing how capitalism is redefining visibility in terms of productivity and value for change. The narrator's time in Liberty Paints serves as an important interpretation of the commodification of his Black identity. The company's infamous "Optical White" paint, perfected by the addition of a dark component - "a few drops of black do the job" (Vintage, 1995, p. 201) - serves as a technical metaphor for racial erasure. This dye symbolizes a necessary but not accepted national ideology of Black labor based on whiteness. Ellison clearly shows this parallel by sending the narrator to both the engine room and the subconscious-like factory basement. His identity is intertwined with labor. Critics such as Houston Baker argue that Liberty Paints embodies a criticism of Fordist modernity, in which the individual is subject to efficiency and mass production. The narrator's accident in the paint factory further emphasizes this fragmentation. When he wakes up in the hospital and receives shock treatment, Ellison stages a symbolic destruction of his old identity. Doctors "Who are you?" His inability to answer the question (Vintage, 1995, p. 239) underlines how industrial modernity destabilizes the self. Here, invisibility becomes a racial category as well as a medical, scientific and bureaucratic category. The industrial environment in the novel also serves as a basis for Ellison's criticism of consumer capitalism. After leaving the hospital, the narrator encounters advertisements, showcases and commercial signs depicting individuals not with their individuality, but with their purchasing power. Their identities are trapped between producer and consumer roles and reduce complex subjectivity for economic participation. Scholar Lawrence Jackson argues that Ellison used this stage of the novel to show the smooth intertwining of racial modernity and economic modernity, thus reshaping how Black identity can be expressed in public.

Finally, the urban landscape intensifies anonymity, turning the city into a place where the narrator can only be seen as a genre - a worker, a customer, a passerby. This change in identity moves from the field of moral character (in the university department) to the economic function, reflecting the broader twentieth-century socio-political dynamics in America. Ellison also uses New York as a space where identity is reshaped, not only through labor, but also through the show. In the highly public but non-personal environment of Harlem and Midtown, the narrator's body becomes visible only with performance. This is evident when he makes his first public speech for the Brotherhood, when he feels a sudden sense of strengthening from being seen and heard. Ellison writes: "I felt

your eyes... I was a new person, I was no longer ashamed" (Vintage, 1995, p. 351). However, this moment of visibility depends on complying with a political agenda that he does not fully understand. Here, identity emerges as a mutual exchange that is recognition in exchange for ideological conformity. Academics such as Michele Wallace argue that this reflects a broader twentieth-century phenomenon in African-American history: visibility in white-dominated institutions is only possible when it is politically advantageous. Visibility does not mean autonomy; it is conditional. Ellison depicts the narrator's evolving self, not as self-produced, but as constantly reshaped by industrial, political, educational external systems, all of which function as identity machines. At the end of this stage, Ellison reveals the natural contradiction of the formation of capitalist identity: while capitalism promises individuality, it actually reduces the subject to function, output and utility. The narrator acquires a temporary sense of belonging within the Brotherhood, but becomes increasingly invisible as a person. This thriller allows Ellison to move from socio-economic identity to political identity, which structures the next important chapter of the novel.

Politics, Ideology & Collective Identity

The political field, the third stage of Ellison's identity research, sees the narrator join the Brotherhood, an organization inspired by twentieth-century radical political movements, such as the Communist Party of the United States of America and related leftist groups. For many African Americans in the 1930s and 1940s, these movements offered paths to collective racial empowerment. However, Ellison complicates this idea. Through brotherhood, Ellison shows how political ideologies can replace racial essentialism with doctrinal essentialism and subject individual identity to the needs of the collective. In the beginning, the narrator experiences a sense of pride and belonging and finds a new sense of purpose: "For the first time, I was someone else... I was part of something bigger" (Vintage, 1995, p. 355). However, Ellison ironically builds this moment because the Brotherhood's Freedom Discourse hides its own mechanisms of control. The leadership of the Brotherhood, which constantly emphasizes the ideological discipline, forces the narrator to prioritize experience related to political theory. Brother Jack sums up this dynamic. When criticized for not understanding the concerns of the black community, Jack replies, "We are scientists, we are not emotional" (Vintage, 1995, p. 408). This statement reveals the distinction between human identity and political identity. For brotherhood, the individual is secondary to political experience. What matters to them is not the story of the narrator, but the narrative they want to impose on Harlem. As scholars such as John Callahan have observed, Ellison uses the Brotherhood to criticize how twentieth-century political movements exploit racial struggles for ideological gain. Claiming to speak on behalf of the people, Brotherhood silences the voices that conflict with the party strategy. When the narrator tries to address the death of Tod Clifton, a charismatic Black member who is disappointed with the intrigues of the Brotherhood, the organization scolds him.

Clifton's symbolic death refers to the failure of political identity as a means of salvation. As Clifton withdraws from the movement, the narrator becomes more and more involved in it. The fraternity stage further shows how political identity can turn into another form of demonstration. The narrator's speeches are celebrated not for their content, but for their impact – their ability to mobilize a crowd. In a sense, he becomes an artist who reflects the previous stages of visibility under capitalism. However, political performance is different from economic performance because it requires not only physical presence, but also ideological visibility. Ellison intensifies this tension by placing much of the political action in Harlem, a historically important area associated with Black cultural production, intellectualism and community action. Harlem functions as a socio-political microcosm where national debates about race, class, and identity are localized. The

brotherhood's failure to understand Harlem reflects the broader failure of universalizing political ideologies to acknowledge the reality of Black experience. This contradiction is evident in the sudden change in priorities of the Brotherhood and leaving Harlem when it is no longer in line with the party agenda. The narrator bitterly said, "They used us and then threw us aside" (Vintage, 1995, p. 439). Ellison shows how the definition of collective identity imposed from above, rather than being fed within the community, ultimately maintains invisibility. Brotherhood promises visibility but offers abstraction, leaving the individual invisible. The culmination of the brotherhood stage takes place during the Harlem uprisings, where political discourse collides with the lived reality. The abstract theories of the Brotherhood fail to address the urgent problems facing Harlem residents, such as poverty, police brutality, and systemic neglect. Ellison compares the ideological separation of the Brotherhood to the urgent need for representation of society. He challenges the predetermined political identity of the Brotherhood when the narrator begins to speak spontaneously to the crowd after Clifton's death. His discourse is not based on doctrine, but on grief: "His name was Clifton, he was black and he was a man... and they shot him in the heart" (Vintage, 1995, p. 450). This moment refers to the re-claim of individual identity against political abstraction. Clifton's death makes him visible in a way that he is not alive.

However, the Brotherhood interprets this emotional originality as disobedience. Scolding the narrator, Brother Jack claims that Clifton's death "is not politically important" (Vintage, 1995, p. 455). The erasure of Clifton's humanity reflects the earlier erasure of individuality in the narrator's university and factory environments. Ellison thus shows that political collectivism, similar to capitalism and education, can consume it instead of developing identity. The narrator's decision to challenge the Brotherhood signals the collapse of its political identity. The ensuing Harlem riots represent the culmination of the Brotherhood's failures. While the uprising of the underrepresented community seems like a significant step, the rebellion fails to achieve its goal of becoming an organized political action and instead transforms into a chaotic spectacle. By blurring the line between rebellion, performance and reality, it reveals the limitations of political action within a system that has already defined its subjects. At the end of this chapter, the narrator realizes that every institution he participates in - educational, industrial and political - promises visibility but ultimately produces invisibility. Political experience does not result in empowerment, but instead leads to a return to deletion. This awareness paves the way for the final stage, where identity can no longer be expressed with institutional frameworks and must instead be rebuilt internally.

Withdrawal, Hibernation, and the Metaphor of Invisibility

The final stage of the novel completely abandons corporate identity models and goes into introspection. After fleeing the rebellion, the narrator withdraws into an underground basement, adopting the role of a hermit or "waiting". This physical and symbolic withdrawal refers to withdrawing from social identity to re-conceptualize the self beyond imposed categories. Ellison defines the basement as an area lit by 1369 light bulbs powered by electricity from surrounding buildings (Vintage, 1995, p. 7). This image reverses the previous relationship between visibility and social recognition, suggesting that the hero is most visible when not socially recognized. Invisibility becomes a philosophical stance rather than a social situation. As he explains, "Realize that I am invisible because people refuse to see me" (Vintage, 1995, p. 3). This central claim, which is present at the beginning of the novel but is fully understood only at the end, reframes it not as something whose identity has been denied, but as something that has been recovered. The narrator concludes that invisibility offers a paradoxical form of freedom: dignity is no longer restricted by expectations of productivity or ideological purity. Academic James Seaton argues that Ellison positions invisibility as "an existential identity... a tool for restructuring the agency under conditions of restriction". Withdrawal also means a political rejection. The narrator's decision not to participate in the rebellion according to the terms of the Brotherhood undermines the assumption that

empowerment should be collective. Instead, Ellison suggests that the self may require going beyond collective actions when it copies structures that these actions claim to oppose.

Conclusion

In Ralph Ellison's novel "The Invisible Man," the issue of racism is addressed through numerous themes. These themes include inequality, discrimination, the supremacy of power, and a devalued self-concept, and the novel repeatedly refers to these themes, both explicitly and implicitly, while conveying the global problem of racism to the reader. Ellison tries to convey his experience to us by using the invisible man. The perspective on who the invisible man is changes throughout the book as he discovers his new aspects, and the reader experiences this change with him. What we've really discovered is the new ways in which society burns it with the hope of freedom and equality. However, the invisible man is a symbolic being seen not for who he is, but for what he brings to the collective. This situation raises the discussion about the collective and the individual about whether a person should rebel against collective social ideals for social harmony or to adopt his own identity. However, this question also reveals that identity is not isolated from society. There is no identity without society. We are a collective of society's experiences. This brings with it two different interpretations. The invisible man goes underground to list these thoughts and create his own meaning within his own framework. The lights symbolize that he finds its meaning by regaining his agency. Or he gives up, goes underground as a means of resignation and tries to be as abusive as everyone else by leaking power from the lights. While light is a symbol of hope, the ambiguity of the end shows that he wants us to participate in the same exercise through Ellison's book.

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ChatGPT (OpenAI, 2026) was used to assist with phrasing scientific explanations and improving clarity of written sections. All biological analysis, data collection, and interpretation were conducted independently by the author.

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