

# Invisibility of the invisible man

[Literature](#), [Novel](#)



Invisibility of the Invisible Man Living in the city, one sees many homeless people. After a while, each person loses any individuality and only becomes "another homeless person." Without a name or source of identification, every person would look the same. Ignoring that man sitting on the sidewalk and acting as if we had not seen him is the same as pretending that he did not exist. "Invisibility" is what the main character/narrator of Ralph Ellison's Invisible Man called it when others would not recognize or acknowledge him as a person. The narrator describes his invisibility by saying, "I am invisible ... simply because people refuse to see me." Throughout the Prologue, the narrator likens his invisibility to such things as "the bodiless heads you see sometimes in circus sideshows." He later explains that he is "neither dead nor in a state of suspended animation," but rather is "in a state of hibernation" (Ellison 6). This invisibility is something that the narrator has come to accept and even embrace, saying that he "did not become alive until [he] discovered [his] invisibility" (Ellison 7). However, as we read on in the story, it is apparent that the invisibility that the narrator experiences, goes much further than just white people unwilling to acknowledge him for who he is. While searching for his true identity, the narrator frequently encounters different people who each see him differently. "Who the hell am I?" is the question that sticks with him as he realizes that nobody, not even he, understands who he really is. At some points in his life, identities are given to him, even as he is still trying to find himself. While in the Brotherhood, he was given a "new identity" which was "written on a slip of paper." (Ellison 309) He was told to "[start] thinking of [himself] by that name ... so that even if [he were] called in the middle of the night [he] would

respond" (Ellison 309). In a similar sense, the narrator was given an identity while working at the Liberty Paint factory. Upon first meeting Lucius Brockway, another worker, Lucius only thought of the narrator as a threat to his Lucius' job. Despite the narrator's constant explanation of merely being sent to assist Lucius, Brockway repeatedly questioned the narrator on what his purpose was in being there. During Brockway's questioning, not once did he ask what the narrator's name was. To Brockway, the only thing that was important was that the narrator was nothing more than a threat. Identity is only in the reflection of the immediate surrounding that viewers can relate. In this particular case, the narrator's identity is derived from Brockway's perception of the narrator being a threat. A person's identity is never the same, in comparison to the many people that view that person. This is something that the narrator recognizes but does not fully understand. While at the University, the narrator was only a petty "black educated fool" in the eyes of Dr. Bledsoe. At the same time, Mr. Norton, a white trustee of the university, saw the narrator as being an object, who along with his "people, were somehow closely connected with [his (Mr. Norton's)] destiny" (Ellison 41). To the members of the Brotherhood, the narrator is only what they have designed him to be: someone who was not hired to think, but to speak only when ordered to do so by the committee who "makes [his] decisions" (Ellison 472). By joining the Brotherhood, the narrator was given an opportunity to re-invent himself as a leader and as someone to be honored. As he gained fame and notoriety for his inspiring speeches, the narrator begins to take this new identity that has been given to him and make something of it. However, he soon realizes that what he is being recognized

for and what people are expecting of him, is not truly for him—but rather for his false identity that was given to him. His new identity has placed him in the center of thousands of people's attention, yet he is unseen; in the brotherhood of thousands of brothers, "that sense ... of being apart," was still with him. Upon discovering that he is invisible to his surroundings, the narrator believes himself to have found his true identity. However, invisibility is only his way of avoiding the bold face of reality. It's not that others refuse to see him, but rather, that they refuse to see who he is. His invisibility lies in the lack of understanding that others have for him as a person. Instead of people looking at him and seeing him as the person that he is, they see him as a stereotype of their belief. During his fight with a white man that was recounted in the prologue, the narrator remembers his invisibility and suddenly realizes that he is fighting a person that "had not seen" him. However, that white man does see him except as an inferior black man who does not deserve an apology for being run into on a dark street. Explaining that he was "unnerved ... disgusted and ashamed," the narrator convinces himself that he is only "a phantom" and that "something in this man's thick head had sprung out and beaten him" (Ellison 5). The narrator is mistaken in believing that after so many experiences, he has finally found his identity as the invisible man. The truth is that every one of the identities that he took on was real. He is the same person, only seen through different eyes, which proves that the narrator's invisibility is only the perception he has of himself. Each person who sees him holds a unique perception of him, even if that is not what he believes to be the truth. This perception is a unique identity which is held by each person who views him, and it is real simply because it

exists. There is a saying which comes to mind: " The truth is in the eye of the beholder." Without people around, a person would not have an identity to live by. That is why the narrator has become invisible: because " after years of trying to adopt the opinions of others [he] finally rebelled. [He is the] invisible man" (Ellison 573). Works Cited Ellison, Ralph. Invisible Man. New York: Vintage Books, 1980.