Chapter III
RALPH ELLISON'S QUEST FOR IDENTITY

Ralph Waldo Ellison, born in Oklahoma City, had his education in Oklahoma City’s segregated school system and graduated from Doughlass High School. Deeply moved by T.S. Eliot’s *The Waste Land* Ellison states, “Eliot said something to my sensibilities that I couldn’t find in Negro poets who wrote of experiences I myself have gone through”.

Ellison’s meeting of Richard Wright, through Langston Hughes in New York encouraged his creative thinking and critical abilities. By 1938, Ellison had developed a deep friendship with Wright who realised that young Ellison had been terribly curious about the meaning of experience, especially Negro experience.

III. 1. Ellison’s literary relationship to Wright:

Ellison’s literary relationship to Wright cannot be stated in isolation, for both Wright and Ellison have been trained in the school of American literary naturalism. Environment being a natural factor, plays a deterministic role and in spite of their training in American naturalism, Wright and Ellison differ in their literary approach. There is a tinge of defeatism in Wright’s early work, though some of Wright’s oppressed African-Americans derive a certain hope through collective action; Ellison reveals a deeper interest in African-American folklore and tradition and unlike Wright, Ellison reveals a non-defeatist attitude.
III. 1.1. Ellison considers himself different from Wright:

Though Ellison is influenced by Wright, he is his own in his literary explorations. Having known Wright since 1937, by 1940, Ellison mentions that he no longer shows Wright any of his writings and states, “because by that time I understood that our sensibilities were quite different; and, what I was hoping to achieve in fiction was something quite different from what he wanted to achieve”. Hence, eventhough Ellison acknowledges his debt to Wright’s *The Man Who Lived Underground*, it is obvious that Ellison’s *Invisible Man* is different from Wright’s work. In the words of Lynch:

*Invisible Man* shows the individual’s need for creative rebellion in order to choose and define himself over against dehumanizing social structures and organizations. Ellison strikes a more optimistic chord than Wright does generally, seeing the limits of one’s self-assertion as an invitation to meaningful social connection. (7)

III. 1.2. Ellison’s *Invisible Man* is different from Notes from Underground:

As Ellison is indebted to Wright’s *The Man Who Lived Underground*, he is indebted to Dostoevsky’s *Notes from Underground*. But as with Wright, Ellison transcends Dostoevsky also. Though Ellison realises the parallels between the Russian and the African-American experience, his *Invisible Man* is different in that it reveals the African-American experience as a quest for identity amidst exploitation. During this process, it reveals the organisation of Brotherhood – an organisation
similar to The Communist Party organisation – is no exception in exploiting the oppressed African-American. By openly exposing an organisation, similar to The Communist Party organisation and revealing that even such organisations are keen only in maintaining their hold over the oppressed, but not on voicing or solving their problems, Ellison’s Invisible Man, differs from Notes from Underground. Ellison’s statement, “that my fiction be judged as art; if it fails, it fails aesthetically, not because I did or did not fight some ideological battle”, also enlightens the fact that his Invisible Man differs from Notes from Underground.

III. 1.3. Invisible Man, The Man Who Lived Underground and Notes from Underground:

Like Dostoevsky’s Dmitry and Wright’s Fred Daniel, Invisible Man also experiences the need for revolt in his effort to discover freedom and identity. The Invisible Man rebels against his manipulators and asserts himself by his actions, which he regards as his freedom. Ellison’s Invisible Man opposes philosophical materialism, collectivism and naturalism while evolving his awareness of responsibility and his deepening sense of freedom as Dmitry and Daniel do. Ellison’s opening: “I am an invisible man” sounds similar to “I’m a sick man... a mean man”, the words of Dmitry.

The similarities end here for “‘Invisible Man’ transcends the protest novel’s limitations with its spiritual view of suffering and its insistence on celebration as the heart of life and art” (169) as mentioned by Lynch. Invisible Man never kills nor does he force himself to kill. Leonard Deutsch while summerising the redemptive power of
Invisible Man, states, "His (Invisible Man's) suffering does not lead him to despair but to freedom. His suffering, in other words, spiritualizes him" (67).

III.2. Ralph Ellison's Invisible Man:

Ellison felt that the task of the novelist is to achieve "for himself and his readers some new insight into the human predicament, some new facet of human possibility". The novel being a form of communication, tries to present a particular experience, and this particular experience for Ellison becomes the subject matter of his novel, the subject matter being the life of African-Americans. Kerry Mc Sweeney states that a central part of Ellison's creative intention was to depict something of the sweep and variety of what he calls the Negro-American experience. The black milieu so richly depicted in Invisible Man is not simply décor; it is the novel’s macrosubject and the essential sociocultural for the exploration of its moral and thematic interests. This is why the form of the book is episodic, allowing for the depiction of the varied character and varied types of black American experience. (3)

III. 2. 1. Some of the thematic concerns found in Invisible Man:

The depiction of the varied characters and varied types of African-American experience leads to the themes of identity, freedom, the mystery of personality and the role the political organisations play in the lives of African-Americans.
While writing about Ellison’s theme in *Invisible Man*, Mc Sweeney mentions, “Ellison had got hold of “a theme as big as America itself” – identity” (16). *Invisible Man* also presents a persistent and generalising insight into the hero’s plight as a universal plight. Robert Bone mentions in this connection, “The color line exists not between the covers of a book but outside, in the real world; its obliteration is a political, not a literary task” (246).

In his *Shadow and Act*, Ellison views protest as an element of all art and states,

… it does not necessarily take the form of speaking for a social or political program. It might appear in a novel as a technical assault against the styles which have gone before, or as a protest of human condition... The protest is there, not because I was helpless before my racial condition, but because I put it there.

This reveals that Ellison consciously and deliberately makes use of the theme of protest in his *Invisible Man*. It is to be realised that Ellison focussed his novel on issues affecting African-Americans, and their lingering problems such as discovering an able African-American leadership. Ellison tries to establish through his novel that this lack of an able African-American leadership has made the group’s own needs and wishes, desires and dreams ambiguous and unfulfilled. Perhaps it is true that this nondevelopment of a truly African-American leadership is also one of the byproducts of the oppressor-oppressed relationship.
Ellison has revealed another dimension also of his art. He makes use of the traditional African-American humour and jokes as an effective tool of subtle protest while revealing the oppressor-oppressed relationship in his novel. Lucius Brockway’s motto for one of liberty paints’ products reading, “If It’s Optic White, It’s the Right White”, echoes the ironic African-American folk rhyme:

If you’re white, you’re right.
If you’re brown, step around.
If you’re black, get back! (1-23)

as mentioned by Robert O’Meally.

III. 3. The oppressor-oppressed relationship in Invisible Man

A study of the oppressor-oppressed relationship in Invisible Man, takes one through various dimensions and facets of the relationship. Ellison reveals the oppressor-oppressed relationship in his Invisible Man, involving African-American men with the other African-American men and women, and African-American men with the whites. The invisibility created by this relationship is revealed in a way giving it a deeply personal tone, though the narrator remains invisible throughout the novel, in the sense that his identity is not revealed. The novel symbolically reveals the invisibility forced upon the African-American by the oppressive society and the resultant crisis of identity caused by such oppression. The invisibility is also caused by the blindness of the individuals. Sometimes, the invisibility is a conscientious choice by deliberately erasing and subverting one’s identity, as mentioned in the advice of Invisible Man’s grand father.
The ‘Prologue’ of Ralph Ellison’s *Invisible Man* begins as follows:

I am an invisible man. No, I am not a spook like those who haunted Edgar Allan Poe; nor am I one of your Hollywood-movie ectoplasms. I am a man of substance, of flesh and bone, fiber and liquids — and I might even be said to possess a mind. I am invisible, understand, simply because people refuse to see me...

Ralph Ellison has made his narrator’s intentions clear. His Invisible Man has become invisible not by choice, but “simply because people refuse to see”. Ralph Ellison has said that the prologue of his novel “was written afterwards… I wanted to throw the reader off balance — make him accept certain non-naturalistic effects…”.

Invisible Man, casually mentions that most of the time, he is “not so overtly violent”. On *Invisible Man*’s ‘Prologue’ and its function Mc Sweeney has the following statement:

The principal foreshadowings in the prologue that help focus the reader’s subsequent perception of the text are thematic: the leitmotifs of invisibility, sight and insight, identity, alienation, freedom, boomeranging, and the spiral of history are all first sounded in the novel’s overture. (30)

The prologue reveals Invisible Man’s displeasure for the whites while he relates about his dwelling place. Having gone through once, the routine process of buying service and paying their “outrageous” rates, now, aware of his invisibility,
he lives, "rent-free in a building rented strictly to whites, in a section of the basement that was shut off and forgotten during the nineteenth century". The term "rent-free" in a building rented strictly to whites, becomes significant and the expression "shut off and forgotten during the nineteenth century" reverberates with the suggestion that the invisibility forced on the African-American has become insignificant and the oppressor has conveniently shut off and forgotten his crime of oppressing a people.

Invisible Man’s desire “to hear five recordings of Louis Armstrong playing and singing “What Did I Do To Be so Black and Blue” – all at the same time” is also significant in that it echoes the hurt feelings of not only Louis Armstrong and Invisible Man, but those of the entire African-American community.

Invisible Man accepts that he is in hibernation, “a covert preparation for a more overt action”. He also agrees to disagree by stating:

I am one of the most irresponsible beings that ever lived. Irresponsibility is part of my invisibility; any way you face it, it is a denial. But to whom can I be responsible, and why should I be, when you refuse to see me?... Responsibility rests upon recognition, and recognition is a form of agreement.

In other words, Invisible Man rightly and squarely throws the blame on the oppressor, who has refused to see and recognise him. One cannot expect, any kind of responsibility from an invisible man, and expecting Invisible Man to owe responsibility to the one who has made him invisible becomes ironic. There is neither recognition nor responsibility and hence there is no agreement for responsibility.
At the beginning of the first chapter of the novel Invisible Man makes a statement: “All my life I had been looking for something, and everywhere I turned someone tried to tell me what it was”. The entire gamut of Invisible Man’s experience may be said to revolve round his “looking for something” and how everywhere “someone” tried to direct him, “tell him” what it was. His “looking for something” may be his process of learning and his process of evolution. His first lesson is the one taught by his grandfather on his deathbed, who confesses that he had been a traitor and a spy in the enemy’s country and his advice:

(to) keep up the good fight... Live with your head in the lion’s mouth. I want you to overcome ’em with yeses, undermine ’em with grins, agree ’em to death and destruction, let ’em swoller you till they vomit or burst wide open.

Though the old man at his deathbed is considered to have gone out of his mind, the words echo in the mind of Invisible Man at various junctures of his life, “like a curse”.

The process of learning through the experience of taking practical lessons in the day-to-day life commences for Invisible Man. Invisible Man learns that the African-American as a race is meant for the pleasure and entertainment of the white master and oppressor. He realises that “there was nothing to do but what we were told”. Observing the reaction of the African-American boys on seeing the dance of a semi-nude blond, making them fight each other blindfolded in a specially erected boxing ring, making them pick up the pseudo-gold coins from an electrified rug, are all for the entertainment of the white master and an African-American can have no say
against his oppressors. These are happening not during the days of slavery, but after emancipation and after that Declaration of Independence, where everyone is declared equal before law in the United States of America. All these ideas that occur in the mind of the oppressed in a seemingly "free" country are revealed by Invisible Man's statement:

It seemed a century would pass before I would roll free, a century in which I was seared through the deepest levels of my body to the fearful breath within me and the breath seared and heated to the point of explosion.

The oppressor cannot tolerate an African-American mentioning "social... equality -", even by mistake. The oppressors make sure that his talk of 'equality' "was a mistake?" and make it surer that the African-American must understand and know his place: "Well, you had better speak more slowly so we can understand. We mean to do right by you, but you've got to know your place at all times...". This stern instruction, given in no uncertain terms has a lingering effect on Invisible Man.

He meets his grandfather, in a dream, that night, who urges him to open "an official envelope stamped with the state seal"; After endlessly opening various covers one after the other, Invisible Man is made to read the message, "Out loud!"

"To Whom It May Concern,... Keep This Nigger-Boy Running". This keeps ringing with the old man's laughter in Invisible Man's ears. He is to understand soon that as an oppressed African-American, he will be kept running for ever, from pillar to post. The words of Valerie Smith,
The grandson of emancipated slaves, the invisible man enjoys privileges unavailable to his ancestors in bondage. His ostensible freedom notwithstanding, he is subject to subtler, more pernicious forms of injustice and oppression... (25-53).

are worth mentioning here.

On this message, given to Invisible Man, in a dream, by his grandfather, Mc Sweeney makes certain interesting observations:

... To Whom It May Concern: Keep this Nigger-Boy Running.

The sociohistorical root of this dream is the cruel practical joke that has its antecedents in the days of slavery, when illiterate blacks needed a note signed by the white master in order to travel from plantation to plantation. A Negro greenhorn looking for work is told by a prospective white employer to try at another white business and is given a sealed letter to carry to the next prospective employer. But the same scenario follows again and again until it is realized that each letter contains the same terse message: Keep This Nigger-Boy Running. (44)

The message given in the dream is only the beginning. Soon Invisible Man is to realise that one of his own, will play the role of an oppressor, donning the mantle of a white surrogate.
III. 3.1. Oppression of the African-American by another African-American:

Chapters two to six of Invisible Man portray the events of a single day of Invisible Man’s life during the third year of his studies at the college, the events culminating in the expulsion of Invisible Man from the college.

Invisible Man is awarded the honour of driving the car of Mr. Norton, one of the founders of the college. Mr. Norton has a feeling that Invisible Man’s people, the African-Americans, are somehow connected with his destiny, and what happened to them connected with what would happen to him. But as it happens with most of the whites, “certainly one senses an underlying selfishness, an egotistical gratification, in Mr. Norton’s paternalistic attitude toward the Negro College” (47), states McSweeney. Perhaps even the benevolence of the white is used as a means of psychological exploitation of the African-Americans, constantly reminding them of their dependence on the whites.

On their way, Mr. Norton notices two African-Americans, a mother and daughter, both pregnant, their pregnancy caused by the same man. The father has fathered his daughter’s baby as well. Mr. Norton meets Trueblood, who had committed incest. Mr. Norton “clambered out and almost ran across the road to the yard, as though compelled by some pressing urgency” which Invisible Man “could not understand”.

Trueblood’s incest provides a converging point to various oppressors: for the landowning southern whites, Trueblood’s “unnatural act” of incest is a cause for celebration; for the rich northerners like Mr. Norton, Trueblood’s sexual misfortune,
becomes a scapegoat for a nasty exhibition of their philanthropy; for the African-Americans like Bledsoe, surrogating the white, Trueblood becomes a hated man, pulling them down. While referring to Trueblood's incestuous act, John S. Wright states,

... as Trueblood's perverse mishap confirms the power of the southerners to reenslave him, it confirms the impotence, conversely of northern liberalism to free him. For the first fruit Mr. Norton will see of his investments in the Founder's effort to transform "barren clay to fertile soil" is Trueblood's harvest of sexual sin. (157-186)

But all these are beyond the comprehension of Trueblood as revealed by his statement:

But what I don't understand is how I done the worse thing a man can do in his own family and 'stead of things gittin' bad, they got better. The nigguhs up at school don't like me, but the white folks treats me fine.

Trueblood cannot understand how his own people, the African-Americans, hate him nor can he realise that the whites' 'fine' treatment of him is only for their own devilish amusement. Again it is beyond Trueblood's comprehension why the white man in the car, gave him a hundred dollar bill. Mc Sweeney remarks on Norton's behaviour,

... Norton's obsessive interest in Trueblood's story is rooted in his own forbidden sexual feelings for his daughter, which have
been vicariously satisfied through his intense participation in Trueblood’s incestuous coupling – the illiterate and uncivilized black having acted out the white man’s repressed sexual desires.

(53)

explain to a certain extent the unexpected philanthropy of Norton and his subsequent yearning “to have a stimulant... A little whisky”, which in turn paves the way for Invisible Man’s dismissal from the college.

Invisible Man’s experiences at the Golden Day as he accompanies Norton to the place may be his experience in Inferno, prior to his being condemned to Hell. Golden Day, is a place visited by mentally deranged war veterans, for quenching their thirst of liquor and women. But even in their deranged condition, they cannot forget the oppression they have undergone as a race. The bartender Halley, tells Invisible Man, regarding Norton’s admissibility: “He (Norton) too good to come in? Tell him we don’t Jimcrow nobody”. Halley’s words indicate that the wounds of oppression cannot be healed even after they have become scars. They have become scars, but they remain ever painful.

One of the veterans, who had once been an expert physician, who “performed a few brain surgeries” that won him “small attention”, feels the pain of racist oppression. His extraordinary work has endowed him with no dignity.

“I returned to save life and I was refused”, he said. “Ten men in masks drove me out from the city at midnight and beat me with whips for saving a human life. And I was forced to the utmost
degradation because I possessed skilled hands and the belief that my knowledge could bring me dignity – not wealth, only dignity – and other men health!”

His words reveal the bitter truth that an African-American, however skilled and knowledgeable, will not be tolerated and the oppressor will force the utmost degradation on the African-American to deny him not only wealth but dignity as well. As a physician, the veteran has analysed the fact that both Norton and Invisible Man are blind:

“Poor stumblers, neither of you can see the other. To you he is a mark on the score-card of your achievement, a thing and not a man; a child, or even less – a black amorphous thing. And you, for all your power, are not a man to him, but a God, a force…”

Back at the college, the real trouble awaits Invisible Man. Dr. Bledsoe is visibly angry and upset:

“Haven’t you the sense God gave a dog? We take these white folks where we want them to go, we show them what we want them to see. Don’t you know that? I thought you had some sense”.

Bledsoe turns an oppressor on another fellow African-American. He induces Norton not to be kind and tells him, “you can’t be soft with these people…”.

As mentioned by Mc Sweeney, Bledsoe
has the trick of making himself seem smaller than his white guests even though he is physically larger. What all of these details suggest is that Bledsoe, as he himself says in chapter 6, knows how "to act the nigger". (64)

Before his appointment with Bledsoe at the Rabb Hail, and after his meeting with Norton, Invisible Man feels "somewhat reassured, but not completely". His wandering thoughts remind him of his predicament, his thoughts being a fine study of the oppressor-oppressed relationship:

... I remember too, how we confronted those others, those who had set me here in this Eden, whom we knew though we didn’t know, who were unfamiliar in their familiarity, who trailed their words to us through blood and violence and ridicule and condescension with drawling smiles, and who exhorted and threatened, intimidated with innocent words as they described to us the limitations of our lives and the vast boldness of our aspirations, the staggering folly of our impatience to rise even higher; ... This was our world, they said as they described it to us, this our horizon and its earth, its seasons and its climate, its spring and its summer, and its fall and harvest some unknown millennium ahead; and these its floods and cyclones and they themselves our thunder and lightning; and this we must accept and love and accept even if we did not love...
These thoughts followed by Invisible Man's observations of Bledsoe's behaviour in the presence of the whites and contrasting his own experiences with those of Bledsoe, present an interesting reading. Invisible Man feels, “I too had touched a white man today and I felt that it had been disastrous...”.

Barbee’s histrionic lecture ends with “Great deeds are yet to be performed. For we are a young, though a fast-rising, people. Legends are still to be created...”. The sudden and unexpected fall of Barbee, on floundering upon Bledsoe’s legs, reveals the blinking of sightless eyes and that “Homer A. Barbee was blind”. This symbolic revelation exposes the blindness of people like Dr. Bledsoe on the one hand and people like Mr. Norton on the other. They are blind to the sufferings as well as the yearnings of their oppressed brethren.

Invisible Man is administered further doses of shock by Bledsoe, as he admonishes Invisible Man. Bledsoe’s admonitions, “…the dumbest black bastard in the cotton patch knows that the only way to please a white man is to tell him a lie!…” and “Nigger, this isn’t the time to lie. I’m no white man. Tell me the truth!” and the reaction created by these words on Invisible Man is instantaneous: “It was as though he’d struck me. I stared across the desk thinking, He called me that…”

Being called a Nigger by another African-American, Bledsoe, is one of the worst shocks and the most unkindest cut received by Invisible Man. He realises that one of his own is his present oppressor and Invisible Man is “torn between anger and fascination”, hating himself for obeying people like Bledsoe. He listens to Bledsoe’s words, which are half-truths and half-confessions:
The only ones I even pretend to please are big white folk, and even those I control more than they control me. This is a power set-up, son, and I'm at the controls... when you buck against me, you're bucking against power, rich white power, the nation's power – which means government power!.

Bledsoe's ability to surrogate the whites has the power to suppress truth and Invisible Man listens to Bledsoe's words realising his helplessness: "You're nobody son. You don't exist – can't you see that?..." and Bledsoe will "have every Negro in the country hanging on tree limbs by morning if it meant staying where he'' is. According to Mc Sweeney, "what the college really is, Bledsoe says in effect, is an institutionalization of the deathbed advice of IM's grandfather" (65). Invisible Man, starts his journey to New York, with letters of introduction from Bledsoe, which he hardly realises at that moment will keep him, the "Nigger Boy Running". The consequence of violating the code by an African-American is also revealed as Invisible Man states: "somehow, I convinced myself, I had violated the code and thus would have to submit to punishment". Invisible Man has no choice except submission and even a person like Bledsoe can appreciate it in his own way:

"... I can see that you're beginning to learn. That's good. Two things our people must do is accept responsibility for their acts and avoid becoming bitter...". "if you don't become bitter, nothing can stop you from success. Remember that".
Bledsoe will accept the African-Americans as “our people” only when they submit themselves to his dictats.

III. 3.2. Invisible Man’s journey North:

Invisible Man meets one of the veterans, a doctor turned patient, in the bus and Invisible Man wonders silently, “how had Dr. Bledsoe worked that fast?” in packing off the veteran from the Golden Day, from the vicinity of the college. The veteran advises Invisible Man to “learn to look beneath the surface”. As a war-veteran he also reveals one of the greatest secrets:

You’re hidden right out in the open – that is, you would be if you only realized it. They wouldn’t see you because they don’t expect you to know anything, since they believe they’ve taken care of that...

In other words, the war veteran, advises Invisible Man to exploit his enemy’s weakness, his enemy’s blindness to his own advantage and become invisible. Invisible Man can operate hidden from the line of sight of his enemy, his oppressor and exploit his weakness. The veteran also gives a bit of parting advice:

Be your father, young man... the world is possibility if only you’ll discover it. Last of all, leave the Mr. Nortons alone, and if you don’t know what I mean, think about it.

By his journey north, Invisible Man also gets “the most important demographic fact of black American experience in the twentieth century” (67) as mentioned by McSweeney.
Like any other Southerner, migrating to North, Invisible Man is highly apprehensive and plans to organise his every move including keeping his "armpits well deodorized", since he cannot afford to "allow them to think" that all the African-Americans "smelled bad". On reaching New York, he decides that he "would have to take Harlem a little at a time".

Having registered at Men's House, having been allotted a clean, little room, Invisible Man in New York, tries to get a job. He scrupulously reaches the addressees with Bledsoe's letters of introduction, though he is unable to meet any one of those addressees in person. He delivers the letters and waits hopefully to hear from them.

He takes the last letter he has with him, addressed to Mr. Emerson, to his office. He hands over the letter to an employee there. His listless waiting is ended by a blond young man, who incidentally asks Invisible Man, whether he had read the letter he brought to Mr. Emerson, and finally reveals the actual letter itself, whose contents have the effect of a bomb shell. Mr. Bledsoe has requested that the bearer of the letter may be allowed to "continue undisturbed" in "vain hopes while remaining as far as possible" from their midst. The letter begs of Mr. Emerson, "to help him continue in the direction of that promise which, like the horizon, recedes ever brightly and distantly beyond the hopeful traveler". The young man, a son of Mr. Emerson, says that he really wants to help Invisible Man and advises him to try at Liberty Paints for a possible job. Invisible Man learns one more lesson in the oppressor-oppressed relationship. He realises that being let down – being mercilessly cheated to remain hopeful while secretly sowing the seeds for killing all hopes and all these done – by
an educated, powerful man Dr. Bledsoe, an African-American is more painful and damaging than the oppression let loose by the whites.

The impact makes Invisible Man “shaking with anger”. He has an impulsive feeling “to go back and kill Bledsoe” and he feels that he owes it to the race and to himself.

The “boldness of the idea and the anger behind it”, makes Invisible Man “move with decision”. He must have a job. He feels that “they wouldn’t catch him again. He has made the move this time and he “could hardly get to sleep for dreaming of revenge”.

III. 3.3. Invisible Man at Liberty Paints:

As Invisible Man approaches Liberty Paints, a huge sign announcing its message:

KEEP AMERICA PURE

WITH

LIBERTY PAINTS

accosts him. One can immediately realise the significance of words “Keep America Pure”, “Liberty” and “Paints”, and their message. America has to be kept “pure” at the cost of Painting “Liberty”, and keeping the African-American oppressed. Invisible Man is to realise soon that this paint factory looking like a “small city” represents America, and more particularly white American society, with its tendencies of oppression.
Invisible Man’s boss is ‘colonel’ Kimbro, who wants to get going and wants Invisible Man to get his “orders the first time and get them right!” Invisible Man is instructed to mix ten drops, “no more than ten, and no less”. He must just do what he is told and he should not “try to think about it”. Minute, but absolutely exact quantity of black must be mixed with white, so that one gets not just whiter, but “the purest white that can be found”. Mc Sweeney remarks, “...the black drops could also be thought to suggest those Negroes who have been... manipulated into playing a role in the maintenance and intensification of the whiteness of white society” (75) in this context.

Not being properly instructed to draw the black liquid from the particular tank, Invisible Man commits the blunder of mixing the wrong drops to buckets of white paint and gets fired from the department. He is sent to Lucius Brockway, at the basement. “It was not just an engine room”, but “something too filthy and dangerous for white men to be willing to do even for money”. Right from the outset, Invisible Man is made to feel an unwelcome intruder by Brockway. He ill treats Invisible Man, which leads to a bloody brawl, in which Brockway gets badly beaten. Brockway schemes in such a way that involves Invisible Man in a terrible accident. For a second time, Invisible Man has been ill-treated, let down and punished by an African-American. This part of the novel also reveals the fact: “In principle, American unions were opposed to racial prejudice; but in practice, like the union group in the locker room, they were far from color-blind” (77) as mentioned by Mc Sweeney.
III. 3.4. Invisible Man at the hospital:

After that terrible explosion at the basement of the paint factory involving Invisible Man in a terrible accident, he is hospitalised. He realises that he is treated more like an object for experiment, a guinea-pig, than like a human being, with feelings and emotions. He is connected to electrodes and given shock treatment and when he yells in pain, the doctors tell Invisible Man that they are trying to get him "started again". While referring to the experiences of Invisible Man at the hospital, Jonathan Baumbach states:

The shock treatments surrealistically rendered recall the electrification from the rug, however magnified in intensity. Like most of the episodes in the novel, it is on the surface a comic scene, though in its implications (lobotomy and castration) it is a singularly unpleasant nightmare. ... Like the charged rug, though considerably more cruel, the shock treatments are intended to neutralize him, in effect to castrate him. (13-27)

Invisible Man is not at all treated like a human being, and with the patient fully conscious, the doctors talk of conducting "a prefrontal lobotomy", by applying "pressure in the proper degrees to the major centres of nerve control", resulting in a "complete change of personality". The patient’s psychology is "Absolutely of no importance!" and the "society will suffer no traumata on his account".
Then Invisible Man hears, "Why not castration, doctor?", causing him "to start, a pain tearing through" him. Invisible Man realises that he has been incapacitated beyond anger:

Something had been disconnected. For though I had seldom used my capacities for anger and indignation, I had no doubt that I possessed them; and like a man who knows that he must fight, whether angry or not, when called a son of a bitch, I tried to imagine myself angry – only to discover a deeper sense of remoteness. I was beyond anger. I was only bewildered.

Invisible Man suffers amnesia and he has totally lost his identity. He feels like short-circuiting the machine to which he remains connected. But he gives up the idea for he does not want to destroy himself, he wants “freedom, not destruction”. He also unfolds the most important truth: “When I discover who I am, I’ll be free”.

Invisible Man’s treatment and his experiences at the hospital suggest, the northern white position toward the Negro, as opposed to the butcher-surgeon who represents the more overtly violent southern position. The ends of both, however, are approximately the same – emasculation; the difference is essentially one of means. (13-27)

according to Baumbach.

Invisible Man is reborn, when he is taken off the machine. He is asked to meet the Director, and Invisible Man is expected to sign "an affidavit releasing the
company of responsibility”. After his “palaver is finished” with the Director, Invisible Man feels: “I was no longer afraid. Not of important men, not of trustees and such; for knowing now that there was nothing which I could expect from them, there was no reason to be afraid”. The explosion at the paint factory, resulting in Invisible Man’s being admitted in the hospital and his experiences at the hospital and his post-hospital experiences, have all contributed in teaching one more lesson for him on the oppressor-oppressed relationship. In Mc Sweeney’s opinion:

Chapter II (of Invisible Man) attempts to convey in one expressive image both a sense of IM’s psychological turmoil and an epitome of what happens to blacks in white America, more particularly, of what happens to black identity in the industrialized North. (82)

III. 3.5. Invisible Man at Harlem and his initiation to Brotherhood:

Soon Invisible Man finds his way into Harlem. A swooning Invisible Man is rescued, taken home and nursed by Mary, an African-American. She tells Invisible Man that young ones like him, must lead the oppressed in their fight and take them “all on up a little higher... it’s the one’s from the South that’s got to do it, them what knows the fire and ain’t forgot how it burns”. She also forewarns Invisible Man not to be trapped by forgetfulness for “the ones at the bottom”, when he finds a place for himself at a higher level.

Invisible Man gets “suddenly overcome by an intense feeling of freedom”, simply because he is eating while walking along the street. He finds pleasure in
seeing himself advancing upon Bledsoe and exposing his false humility. He realises
“I am what I am!”

Quite unexpectedly, Invisible Man witnesses the forced eviction of an old
African-American couple. The situation gets hotter and hotter with the possibility of
the authorities threatening to shoot the agitated African-Americans.

Invisible Man feels “both afraid and angry, repelled and fascinated”. He
feels “outraged and angered” and the feelings “yet surged with fear”.

He finds that the mantle of leadership has fallen on him. He addresses the
gathered mass: “We’re angry, but let us be wise... Let’s follow a leader, let’s
organize, organize”.

Invisible Man possesses the knack of making an excited mass listen to him.
He makes use of the term “dispossessed” effectively, and he turns the tables on the
policeman who warns that he would shoot if he had to. Invisible Man calls the angry
crowd: “... You heard him, he’s the law. He says he’ll shoot us down because we’re a
law-abiding people”. He continues his exhortation:

Yes, these old folks had a dream book, but the pages went blank
and it failed to give them the number. It was called the Seeing
Eye, The Great Constitutional Dream Book, The Secrets of
Africa, The Wisdom of Egypt – but the eye was blind, it lost its
luster. All we have is the Bible and this Law here rules that
out...
Invisible Man incites people by referring to their blindness and their loss of identity; by stating how their ancestry and wisdom have failed them and how the great American Constitution declaring Equality for all, remains only a dream for the poor, oppressed African-American. He even goes to the extent of urging people to defy law, by being law-abiding citizens, by clearing the street of the debris!

Invisible Man’s prowess in inciting a people to action is observed by the organisation of Brotherhood and one of its members advises Invisible Man to disappear, to vanish, to become invisible, to remain “unknown” to be “effective”.

His curiosity is soon answered by another member of the organisation, who informs Invisible Man that his talents are natural. Invisible Man says that he was simply angry, for which the other man answers: “Then your anger was skilfully controlled. It had eloquence”.

Invisible Man is repeatedly told that he is “not like them” and that history has been born in his brain, though Invisible Man insists that he had been simply “angry”. Then the new-comer induces Invisible Man using different terms that will serve his purpose: “You appeared to be a man who knew his duty toward the people and performed it well... you were spokesman for your people...” and “But you were indignant. And sometimes the difference between individual and organized indignation is the difference between criminal and political action”. The new-comer hints that Invisible Man’s anger is the result of his righteous indignation. Though Invisible Man feels reluctant initially, he is soon introduced to the Brotherhood.
III. 3.6. Invisible Man and the Brotherhood:

Invisible Man is introduced to the Brotherhood during a party. Emma, one of the powerful members of the organisation feels that Invisible Man “should be a little blacker”. Even at this first meeting of the organisation, Invisible Man senses that he will be exploited by the organisation, as revealed by his thought: “May be she wants to see me sweat coal tar, ink, shoe polish, graphite. What was I, a man of natural resource?” and soon he feels: “With these people I’ll have to be careful. Always careful. With all people I’ll have to be careful…”.

Invisible Man is told by the Brotherhood that he “shall be the new Booker T. Washington, but even greater than he”, at a starting salary of sixty dollars a week. He is given a new name, written on a slip of paper, and instructed to start thinking of himself by that name from that moment.

With all his earlier bitter experiences and with this drilling of the idea that he will be the new Booker T. Washington, Invisible Man is firm in his concept of what he will do: “I will do the work but I would be no one except myself – whoever I was”. His initial contact with the Brotherhood makes Invisible Man have a proper assessment of his relationship with the organisation. Invisible Man has a guarded feeling:

... white folks seemed always to expect you to know those things which they’d done everything they could think of to prevent you from knowing. The thing to do was to be prepared – as my grandfather had been when it was demanded that he
quote the entire United States Constitution as a test of his fitness to vote. He had confounded them all by passing the test, although they still refused him the ballot...

This guarded reaction makes Invisible Man remain prepared, but simultaneously it gives one the premonition, that like his grandfather, Invisible Man also will be refused the rights that he desires to have. The oppressed is made to realise the truth the hard way, however much he may be prepared, and even confound the oppressor by the thoroughness of his preparation, ultimately it will end in the denial of rights.

Invisible Man’s apprehensions are answered when, his maiden speech delivered to an excited audience is considered “backward and reactionary”. All the discussions, analysis, encouragement and discouragement help Invisible Man to remember the words, though at the moment he cannot remember who said those words:

The conscience of a race is the gift of its individuals who see, evaluate, record... We create the race by creating ourselves and then to our great astonishment we will have created something far more important: We will have created a culture.

His experience of observing the discussions of the Brotherhood, strangely enough induces optimistic thinking in Invisible Man:

For the first time, lying there in the dark, I could glimpse the possibility of being more than a member of a race. It was no
dream, the possibility existed. I had only to work and learn and
survive in order to go to the top.

III. 3.7. Invisible Man and Ras the Exhorter:

Invisible Man’s approach to the African-American problem differs from that of Ras the Exhorter. Invisible Man remembers the advice of Brother Jack “to strike a medium between ideology and inspiration”; to “say what people want to hear” in such a way that they will do what the Organisation wishes them to do. But the way of Ras differs. Ras the Exhorter, does not want to have anything to do with the whites. He wants an all African-American movement rising and striking as one man. He cannot digest the idea of people like Invisible Man and Clifton working with the whites. Ras says:

... you my brother, mahn. Brothers are the same color; how the hell you call these white men brother?... They say you stink! They hate you, mahn. You African. AFRICAN! Why you with them?... They sell you out... They enslave us – you forget that? How can they mean a black mahn any good? How they going to be your brother?

Ras reveals his anger for people like Invisible Man and Brother Clifton:

What you trying to deny by betraying the black people? Why you fight against us? You young fellows. You young black men with plenty education; I been hearing your rabble rousing?
Why you go over to the enslaver? What kind of black mahn is that who betray his own mama?

On hearing Invisible Man calling him crazy, Ras strikes his thighs with fists:

Me crazy, mahm? You call me crazy? Look at you two and look at me – is this sanity? Standing here in three shades of blackness! Three black men fighting in the street because of the white enslaver? Is that sanity? Is that consciousness, scientific understanding? Is that the modern black man of the twentieth century! Hell, mahm! Is it self-respect – black against black?

What they give you to betray – their women? You fall for that?

Ras sees nothing extraordinary in Invisible Man, but in Brother Clifton, he sees an African-American chief, a black king. Ras says further:

Women? Godahm, mahm! Is that equality? Is that black man’s freedom. A pat on the back and a piece of cunt with no passion? Maggots!... you know the high-class white mahn hates a black mahn, that’s simple... They betray you and you betray the black people... We organize – organization is good – but we organize black! BLACK! To hell with that son of a bitch!... he take all the power and the capital and don’t leave the black mahn not’ing. The good white women he tell the black mahn is a rapist and keep them locked up and ignorant while he makes the black mahn a race of bahstards.
One can find that Ras echoes the repressed anger of the oppressed African-Americans. Ras realises the stupidity of Invisible Man and Brother Clifton:

Don’t be stupid, mahn. They *white*, they don’t have to be allies with no black people. They get what they wahnt, they turn against you. Where’s your black intelligence?

... Ras is not ignorant, nor is Ras afraid. No! Ras, he be here black and fighting for the liberty of black people when the white folks have got what they wahnt and done gone off laughing in your face and you stinking and choked up with *white* maggots.

John S. Wright’s comments on Ras’ abilities as an African-American leader deserve to be quoted here:

Ras is better able than Clifton or the narrator to penetrate the fog of Brotherhood ideology and to identify his natural enemies and allies. But his atavistic impulses distance him from the hypermodern world of zoot-suiters and keep him from mastering the pragmatic techniques of empowerment. (157-186)

Equally worth quoting are the words of O’Meally: “... Ras is an odd twin of Invisible Man himself, confusedly struggling to figure out who he is and to take his stand against Harlem’s badman” (1-23).

Soon a disgruntled Clifton ditches the brotherhood, because he realises that “he has been manipulated for its own purposes by the white leadership of the organization”(102) as mentioned by Mc Sweeney. Clifton’s literally cold-blooded
murder by being shot by a white policeman also proves the words of Ras that the oppressed African-American is always sold out by the white oppressor. In the words of Mc Sweeney:

Clifton does, however, recover a certain degree of dignity in death... Clifton, we may infer, has made a final desperate attempt to recover some dignity through symbolic defiance of white oppression. The result is his death; (102)

Invisible Man realises that the Brotherhood have not relished the funeral march organised by him to honour Clifton. Invisible Man has realised that “the cop would be Clifton’s historian, his judge, his witness, and his executioner”, with Invisible Man the only brother in the watching crowd. He realises that the Brotherhood have not approved of Invisible Man’s organising the anger of the oppressed. He has the boldness to tell the Brotherhood:

The Brotherhood isn’t the Negro people; no organization is. All you see in Clifton’s death is that it might harm the prestige of the Brotherhood. You see him only as a traitor. But Harlem doesn’t react that way.

Invisible Man realises that the Brotherhood is a highly self-centred, power-brokering organisation of martinets. His decision at Rinehartism, to pretend that he is Rhinehart, fails, misfires and boomerangs. He cannot move without being moved. The unsigned note Invisible Man has received goes on constantly throbbing in his mind:
Brother,

This is advice from a friend who has been watching you closely. *Do not go too fast.* Keep working for the people, but remember that you are one of *us* and do not forget if you get too big they will cut you down. You are from the South and you know that this is a *white man's world.* So take a friendly advice and go easy so that you can keep on helping the colored people. They do not want you to go too fast and cut you down if you do.

Be smart...

Invisible Man also remembers the advice of Brother Tarp: “Down there you really learn how to wait. I waited nineteen years and then one morning when the river was flooding I left”.

With the shock of witnessing Todd’s murder Invisible Man has reached a point of no return:

What we want is not tears but anger. We must remember now that we are fighters, and in such incidents we must see the meaning of our struggle. We must strike back... we’ve got to make our reply.

Invisible Man can see that the “people were stirred and angry”. When asked to explain his actions to the Brotherhood, Invisible Man speaks with conviction and gives no room for any ambiguity:
You’ll learn that a lot of people are angry because we failed to lead them in action. I’ll stand on that as I stand on what I see and feel and on what I’ve heard, and what I know.

Invisible Man also makes the Brotherhood understand that in their perception the meaning of discipline is not sacrifice as he thought, but “blindness”. Invisible Man has realised the true colours of the Brotherhood as mentioned by Mc Sweeney:

“Use a nigger to catch a nigger” would be the gist of the Brotherhood’s successful manipulation, as a result of which inadequate or absurdly armed blacks (Scofield’s nickel-plated pistol, Ras’s shield and spear) challenge heavily armed white authority. “It was suicide”, reflects IM; “without guns it was suicide... It was not suicide, but murder”. (114-115)

With all the irrepairable damage done to him, with his being exploited everywhere and by everyone Invisible Man is led to the natural conclusion:

... now I looked around a corner of my mind and saw Jack and Norton and Emerson merge into one single white figure. They were very much the same, each attempting to force his picture of reality upon me and neither giving a hoot in hell for how things looked to me. I was simply a material, a natural resource to be used. I had switched from the arrogant absurdity of Norton and Emerson to that of Jack and the Brotherhood, and it
all came out the same – except I now recognized my invisibility.

Invisible Man, having been made to recognise his invisibility is now much more determined, echoing his grandfather’s advice:

I’d overcome them with yeses, undermine them with grins, I’d agree them to death and destruction. Yes, and I’ll let them swoller me until they vomited or burst wide open. Let them gag on what they refused to see... I would hide my anger and lull them to sleep, assure them that the community was in full agreement with their program... If I couldn’t help them to see the reality of our lives I would help them to ignore it until it exploded in their faces.

But all this fails, with Harlem in riots. His words, “I am no longer their brother... They want a race riot and I am against it. The more of us who are killed, the better they like -” fall on the deaf ears of Ras. His insistence:

They want you guilty of your own murder, your own sacrifice! 

... They want this to happen. ... They planned it. They want the mobs to come uptown with machine guns and rifles. They want the streets to flow with blood; your blood, black blood and white blood, so that they can turn your death and sorrow and defeat into propaganda... they used me to catch you and they’re
using Ras to do away with me and to prepare your sacrifice.

Don’t you see it? Isn’t it clear...?

has been equally ineffective.

To escape Ras and his mob, he removes a manhole cover and plunges down, down, a long drop ending upon a load of coal. Invisible Man lies in “the black dark upon the black coal no longer running, hiding or concerned...”.

In the Epilogue, Invisible Man informs “I was never more hated than when I tried to be honest... So after years of trying to adopt opinions of others I finally rebelled. I am an invisible man”. He confesses his inability:

There seems to be no escape. Here I’ve set out to throw my anger into the world’s face, but now that I’ve tried to put it all down the old fascination with playing a role returns, and I’m drawn upward again. So that even before I finish I’ve failed (may be my anger is too heavy; ...) But I’ve failed. The very act of trying to put it all down has confused me and negated some of the anger and some of the bitterness ...

I am desperate man – but too much of your life will be lost, its meaning lost, unless you approach it as much through love as through hate. So I approach it through division. So I denounce and I defend and I hate and I love.
III. 4. Oppressor-oppressed relationship in Invisible Man: A Summing up:

From the discussions and analysis of Ralph Ellison’s *Invisible Man*, one can visualise the oppressor-oppressed relationship in its various dimensions exposed in the novel. The most striking feature of such a relationship is the loss of identity of the oppressed, and his struggle for an identity. The loss of identity may be caused by the blindness. The blindness may be the physical blindness of the individual or it may be obstinacy and arrogance. In Barbee one finds the example for physical blindness: Brother Jack is partially blind and he is totally blind to the needs of the oppressed African-American community. People like Bledsoe are blind to everything except to their own selfish power and advancement. People like Mr. Norton blind themselves by their arrogance. Invisible Man is blind in his own way that he is always on the run and in search of his identity. Wright while referring to the inadequacy of Invisible Man states: “... Ellison’s rising hero *misleads himself* repeatedly not to rule but to be ruled. A rabble-rouser, not a warrior, he makes speeches instead of making war;” (157-186). His remarks on the aspect of blindness to be found in the novel are worth mentioning: “In Bledsoe, Barbee, Norton, Emerson, Jr., Brockaway, Ras and Jack, vision and impaired vision coexist, as do reality and unreality, plausible pragmatism and the perversely irrational” (157-186).

The lack of good leadership is another problem. Ellison’s novel reveals that people like Bledsoe, though they themselves are African-Americans are no true leaders. They have a knack of belittling themselves in the presence of the whites, and
worse, they surrogate the white oppressor by oppressing their own people. On the leadership issue affecting the oppressed African-Americans O’Meally states:

Ellison focussed his novel on issues affecting black Americans, on the lingering problem, for example, of finding black leadership that was effectively responsive to the black group’s own needs and wishes. (1-23)

The novel reveals how the oppressive society exploits the oppressed, toys with him, subjugates him, treats him like an object, a lifeless doll ultimately to be thrown out. Sibyl treats Invisible Man, as a play thing:

“But I need it”, she said, uncrossing her thighs and sitting up eagerly. “you can do it, it’ll be easy for you, beautiful. Threaten to kill me if I don’t give in. You know, talk rough to me, beautiful. A friend of mine said the fellow said, ‘Drop your drawers’ ... and”.

She exploits Invisible Man because he is an African-American, all the while talking about “repression” of women by men. On the other hand for people like Brother Jack, Invisible Man belongs to the category of “expendable”. In other words Invisible Man is treated as an object to be used and dispensed with, as if he has no feelings, as if he were no human being at all. Such exploitation and oppression also give rise to a certain positive attitude: “humanity is won by continuing to play in the face of certain defeat”.

May be it is pertinent to conclude this chapter by quoting Wright:
If Richard Wright like Malraux and Hemingway, cleaved to a secular vision of heroic, or antiheroic, martyrdom in Native Son, Ellison in Invisible Man found it possible, indeed necessary, both to reject the cult of death and to affirm the hope of spiritual rebirth by recording symbolically his group’s true pan-generational transcendence of material defeat through the agencies of art... Rather than proposing any substitutional or merely compensating role of art, Invisible Man makes artistic transcendence the one unsuppressive means through which human freedom is imagined and achieved and human beings made whole... It is a cathartic release of anger and angst that, through the power of words, converts what begins as an act of war into what he finally knows has become an act of disarmament. And it is, on the terms its author proposes, an act of conscious leadership in which one man’s will to selfhood brings to comic and tragic clarity his and his reader-followers’ common property in the buggy, jiving blue-black rites of man. (157-186)