Chapter – 4

_Invisible Man: From Invisibility to Visibility_

There is a brilliant exploration of truths of American experience in Ralph Ellison’s _Invisible Man_. His way of dealing with the protagonist in _Invisible Man_ is mesmerizing. _Invisible Man_ (1952) since its publication has been considered as one of the most important piece of fiction by a writer of African American origin. Besides it is also one of the masterpieces written since World War II. It has won a number of awards and has been never out of print till date. To quote Steven Marx:

As a classic of modern American literature, widely studied in schools and Universities, it has raised black consciousness and generated support for black political claims among whites. As a contribution to the heritage of Afro-American culture,. especially the traditional tale of liberation and empowerment through the power of the pen, it has enriched black intellectual/artistic pride and stimulated the growth of Afro-American scholarship.(704-5)

_Invisible Man_ is a prismatic expression through which the rays of enormous themes and techniques emerge. It is the work craftily handled with great imagination and control. One gets shaken up when one reads _Invisible Man_. Enriched with a wide variety of themes it holds the reader’s breath. John Callahan, the literary executor of Ralph Ellison in his Introduction to the 2001 edition of _Invisible Man_ exclaims:

Once seized and held fast by _Invisible Man_, readers are likely to return again and again as if, whatever the lag between readings, the narrator is an old friend and the book, though familiar, a new, yet to be discovered work of art. (xiv)
*Invisible Man* is a novel woven on the fabric of American culture and it revolves around the relationships between black and white. Threaded on the first person narrative, it is a story of an unnamed African American Southern protagonist who encounters various attacks, usually for bad reasons. After being humiliated in Battle Royal, he is awarded a scholarship to the university. The narrator who goes there full of hope is again expelled from the college in disgrace and is forced to move to New York in search of a job. The narrator is handed over sealed letters of reference from Doctor Bledsoe, President of his former university. The letters are later revealed to contain character defamations. The narrator nonetheless obtains employment with Liberty Paints, a company that creates white paint to be used in the bleaching of national monuments. As the narrator mixes into the paint a little other dope that looks and smells the same, the paint turns gray. As a result he is sent to another department under Lucious Brockway who thinks himself as an indispensable man in the Liberty Paints. The narrator under Brockway is treated shoddily and is held responsible for mistakes he has not committed. Eventually an accident is caused and the narrator is hospitalized where he receives a form of electric shock therapy intended to reproduce the effects of a lobotomy. Although desensitized, he vividly recalls the folklore of his Southern boyhood. He emerges with a new sense of racial pride, while the superficiality of his previous experience is erased. For the first time he is unashamed of his background. He asserts his disdain for servile blacks by dumping a spittoon on a man whom he mistakes for Doctor Bledsoe.

While passing through the streets, the narrator happens to see that an elderly couple has been evicted from their home. He, on impulse, delivers an impromptu speech which attracts the attention of the Brotherhood, an organization that works for the welfare of the African American people. The narrator after briefly embracing the Brotherhood’s false ideals discovers that the Brotherhood merely feigns interest in civil rights while
actually working to repress African Americans and deny their individuality. The chaos that ensues in the African American community following the frenzied exhortations of a fanatic, develops into a hallucinatory treatment of the Harlem race riots of the 1940s and culminates in the narrator’s final rejection of false identities.

The novel’s main theme centers on the quest by the protagonist for an appropriate identity. Throughout his life he encounters figures of authority - Norton, Bledsoe, the Brotherhood - who impose false names or unsuitable identities upon him. His experiences teach him that the act of naming is linked inextricably to issues of power and control. When he attempts to live according to the dictates of others, he loses his autonomy and suffers repeated betrayals. He discovers the true meaning of his life only after he assumes responsibility for naming himself by telling his own story.

Another thematic concern in the novel is the narrator’s gradual realization about how power functions in a society, and how this works to keep African Americans at a certain level. For instance, the award of his scholarship takes place during a ritual of humiliation designed to reinforce deference. Similarly, the college that he attends appears to assist African Americans to rise in society but actually functions to maintain a low social status for him. The Brotherhood seems to provide an outlet for anger but in fact is sponsored by those who wish to keep dissent in check. Eventually the protagonist seeks reconciliation between his nostalgic desire for an identity formed from within and the modern realization that this is an illusion and that a series of identities are already given to him, by his past, by different communities, by racial mythology and by the broader American society.

_Invisible Man_ has a kaleidoscopic vision of myriad number of themes ranging from search for identity, alienation, betrayal, struggle, racial issues, protest, violence, reality and others. All varied themes encompassed in a single novel need great artistic
handling and Ellison has successfully shown it in his monumental piece. The novel is literally set in the American society in the contemporary South and then in modern New York City.

Invisible Man is an immensely rich novel in its way of delineating the characters, the motifs and the attitudes. The narrator’s journey begins with the award of scholarship in the south, at the battle royal, and so on to his bitter experiences with humiliation, suffering and betrayal. An important scene in the novel commences with the initiation rite in which the narrator as a young boy and other African American boys are forced to see a naked blonde dancer. The treatment by the whites is paradoxical. They are ordered to watch the dancer and when they do so they are shouted at. If they do not stare at the blonde, again they are shouted at. Whatever they do, they are termed wrong. The whites behave like animals at their peak. The narrator describes the scene of this horrid experience, and it was as if these whites were not human beings, but beasts who leered at the blonde wildly:

I noticed a certain merchant who followed her hungrily; his lips loose and drooling. He was a large man who wore diamonds studs in a shirtfront which swelled with the ample paunch underneath, and each time the blonde swayed her undulating hips he ran his hand through the thin hair of his bald head and, with his arms upheld, his posture clumsy like that of an intoxicated panda, wound his belly in a slow and obscene grind (20).

Almost all the whites acted beastly and ‘they ran laughing and howling after her’ like the hungry wolves wanting the meat. The narrator also observes the blonde’s response to their behavior through her expressions, “above her red, fixed-smiling lips, I saw the terror and disgust in her eyes, almost like my own terror and that which I saw in some of the other boys… her legs flung wildly as she spun” (20). The girl is objectified
as sex pleasure and not as a human being. Her fully bruised red lips symbolize her anger and disgust towards the men; while the fixed smile indicates her static nature bearing a false happiness.

After she flees away, the ten boys including the narrator are made to participate in a ‘battle royal’ while still blindfolded tightly. The narrator is hit with blows from all sides by his fellow boys. He is injured both physically and mentally and is filled with humiliation:

Blindfolded, I could no longer control my motion. I had no dignity. I stumbled about like a baby or a drunken man. The smoke had become thicker and with each new blow it seemed to sear and further restrict my lungs. My saliva became like hot bitter glue. A glove connected with my head, filling my mouth with warm blood. It was everywhere. I could not tell if the moisture I felt upon my body was sweat or blood (22).

The narrator pities himself as if he were a baby, an innocent and a very young and helpless creature. He has lost motion and control over himself like a drunken man unconscious, unable to think right and one who knows no self respect or identity. Physically, he swings uncontrolled and directionless. The narrator is both physically and morally stabbed and is unable to move ahead. In his article “Literary Analysis in Invisible Man by Ralph Ellison”, Hamlet Pericles terms this scene full of humiliation, animalization, passivity and dehumanization caused out of the action of the whites. Pericles details:

Metaphorically, the boys’ blindfolding in the ring supports their real-life blindness; they are unable to see through the true intentions of the white men as they force the boys to conform to the racial stereotype of the black man as a violent and savage creature. As the men watch the boys in the
boxing battle royal, they look at them not as equals or humans, but as inferior beings – as wild animals (18).

The narrator’s grandfather had warned his family about the whites violent treatment and given valuable advice, “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 bust wide open.” (16). Thus the grandfather had advised his family to play a dual role: outwardly to act as a good, obedient and humble slave, but actually to bear a bitter hatred and resentment on their cruel treatment and false ego. In a nutshell, he should pretend to be docile and keep servile attitude before the whites. Pericles views that the narrator fails to do so, “Although the grandfather provides knowledge to his family, it is fruitless to the narrator, because it doesn’t fully register in his head.”

The narrator being blind with his desire to become a good orator does not understand the venomous intentions of the whites and crawls into the ropes of the ring for the next step of the rite and describes the fight scene:

Everyone fought hysterically. It was complete anarchy. Everybody fought everybody else. No group fought together for long. Two, three, four, fought one, then turned to fight each other, were, themselves attacked. Blows landed belloved the belt and in the kidney, with the gloves open as well as closed, and my eyes partly opened now there was not so much terror. I moved carefully, avoiding blows, although not too many to attract attention, fighting from group to group (23).

Even in the midst of this brutal fight, the narrator worries about the delivery of his speech. The narrator then notices that there was only boy left. He was Tatlock, the largest of the gang. Their blindfolds are removed and then they ordered to finish the fight. Tatlock and the narrator, besides being forced to fight by the whites, keep the
hostile attitude towards each other. The narrator with a wish to deliver a speech whispers in Tatlock’s ears, “Fake like I knocked you out, you can have the prize” (24). But Tatlock declines and says, “Give it to your ma,” (24), the seven dollars. Thus the boys fight like wild animals without any sense.

The degradation continues even at the higher level when the boys are called upon to gather the gold coins and crumpled bills scattered on the rug. When the narrator ‘lunged for a yellow coin lying on the blue design of the carpet’ (27), he feels “A hot, violent force tore through my body, shaking me like a wet rat” (27). The rug is an electrified one. The boys have to pass through the electric shock pain before collecting the so-called gold coins. The event symbolizes humiliation at a peak, and mocks at the poverty of the African Americans.

After facing many phases of embarrassment, finally the narrator gets the long awaited opportunity to deliver his speech. In spite of his mouth full of blood and saliva, and physical pain, he ventures to give the speech. Accidentally he utters ‘social equality’ instead of ‘social responsibility’, and a scene is created, though the narrator is ultimately excused.

At the end of the initiation rite the narrator is given a brief case containing a prize by the school superintendent. The narrator is overjoyed to receive it and does not bother that the gold coins were actually only brass pocket tokens. At this final part of the ceremony, the grandfather’s memory comes to him in order to safeguard him from the illusions of the whites. On the same night the narrator dreams that he is at a circus with his grandfather and is instructed to open the brief case. When he opens the brief case, he finds a document inscribed with the golden letters, “‘To Whom It May Concern… Keep This Nigger-Boy Running’(33).” Even at this juncture the narrator takes this dream as dream, not as a signal to be alert of the whites’ tricks and of the various layers of mean
intentions hidden beneath their outward looks. The grandfather’s appearance in the novel in the form of a dream and the narrator’s memory is the rhetoric of one’s inner voice or conscience which always directs one to take the right path. The introduction of the grandfather also brings in the picture and history of the past, the humiliation of slavery.

Ellison whose ambition was to be a symphony composer was born and brought up in an atmosphere of music. The varied influences of Oklahoma City, with its jazz and blues musicians such as Charlie Christian and Jimmy Rushing developed young Ellison’s knowledge and polished his art. Ellison bases his works blending music and writing. When one works on his novel *Invisible Man*, he finds a major illustration of how Ellison uses folk material to create a distinctly national expression, rather than only a racial or regional one.

In *Invisible Man*, Ellison employs a "jazz" style in which an improvisation of rhetorical forms is played against a central theme. Letters, speeches, sermons, songs, nursery rhymes, and dreams are used throughout the novel, and the novel's style adjusts itself to match the changing consciousness and circumstances of the protagonist. In the early chapters, Ellison employs a direct, didactic style similar to that of the social realist protest novels of the 1930's and 1940's. In the middle portions of the novel, after the narrator moves to New York City, Ellison's prose becomes more expressionistic, reflecting the narrator’s introspection. In the last section of the novel, as the narrator moves toward the apocalyptic race riot in Harlem with which the novel concludes, the prose becomes surreal, emphasizing the darkly comic absurdities of the African Americans existence. All sections of the book are enriched by Ellison's versatile use of symbols that focus attention on his major themes while underscoring the ambiguous nature of experience.
Ellison’s basic sense of artistic form is musical and his approach to writing is through *sound*. A change of mood and mode comes to him in terms of sound. A musician-turned-writer Ralph Ellison has embedded the folk material of African American tradition throughout the novel. Art according to Ellison is not only a form of creation but also a realm of liberation; but also redemption through innovation in art. Ellison explains, “When I listen to a folk story, I’m looking for what it conceals as well as what it states.” Ellison convinces us through his work that African American folk tradition is more than the claptrap that jazz is usually taken to be. He proves the richness of folk diction through several scenes in *Invisible Man*. After the narrator arrives in New York, he encounters a junk man one morning singing blues as he pushes his cart along:

*She’s got feet like a monkey
Legs like a frog-Lawd, lawd!
But when she starts to loving me
I holler whoooooo, God-dog!
Cause I loves my baabay,
Better than I do myself.* (173)

The junk man asks the narrator if he’s “got the dog,” and the narrator pretends that he does not understand the reference:

I laughed nervously and stepped back. He watched me out of shrewd eyes.

“Oh goddog, daddy- O,” he said with a sudden bluster, “Who got the damn dog? Now I know you from home, how come you trying to ack like you never heard that before! Hell, ain’t nobody out here this morning but us colored- why you trying to deny me? (173)

The narrator is uncomfortable in the face of this attempt to make him acknowledge his country background, but he cannot resist the junk man’s spiel and his
relish for language. “All it takes to get along in this here man’s town is a little shit, grit, and motherwit. And man, I was bawn with all three.” (176)

Ellison’s nameless narrator is prodded by the junk man to acknowledge his roots as a Southern Negro and though he has been trained to look down his nose at the country people and their culture, he has nevertheless intimations that there is something rich and valuable in their expression.

When asked in an interview with Robert G. O’Meally, in 1976, whether Ellison had used folk material consciously in his work, he had replied:

I worked out of a sense of this folk material and what it means. No, there was very little direct use… But someone else mentioned Peter Wheatstraw as the man who took the name of a blues singer; but Peter Wheatstraw is a mythological figure that many people are named because they possess certain qualities. There’s been a lot of confusion about this, which is so interesting, because there again you find discontinuity (282, Living with Music).

The combination of blues and folk speech appears in several other sequences where the same point is made. The Jim Trueblood episode, which is one of the best drawn scenes, moves along similar line. Trueblood literally meaning true to one’s blood is a stereotype of African American “blood” as beastly. He has nothing but the blues, who being a good tenor singer was brought up along with members of a county to sing what the officials called ‘their primitive spirituals’. But Trueblood’s crime of incest, linked through his dream with transgressions of racial as well as family taboo, threatens to undermine his family, and to spread chaos at the root of the community.

Ellison’s handling of the situation reveals how well he can utilize the materials of folk tradition to expose the full range of their ideological and technical meaning. To
begin with, it gives him a chance to undercut the conventional image of the Negro folk character whose major reference for most readers is the kindly Uncle Remus. Ellison inherits this artistic implication of folklore from writers such as Eliot and Joyce:

I use folklore in my work not because I am a Negro, but because writers like Eliot and Joyce made me conscious of the literary value of my folk inheritance. My cultural background, like that of most Americans is dual. (my middle name, sadly enough, is Waldo). (Collected Essays, 112)

A technique characteristic of the novel is the recurrent use of background music. This background music forms the basis of Ellison’s technique of expressing the deep-seated thoughts of a character. Music depicts the atmosphere more clearly. In chapter 9, a man on a bus is overheard whistling the lugubrious jazz tune:

\[
O \text{ well they picked poor Robin clean} \\
O \text{ well they picked poor Robin clean} \\
\text{Well they tied poor Robin to a stump} \\
\text{Lawd, they picked all the feathers round} \\
\text{From Robin’s rump} \\
\text{Well they picked poor Robin clean.} \quad (193)
\]

The sound track as Kerry McSweeney observes is the irony of the narrator’s state ‘who has just realized that he has been cruelly duped (by Bledsoe, Emerson and Norton).’ (30) Likewise there is factory hospital scene in which the narrator finds himself a pawn in the hands of high-powered medical technocrats, the opening bars of Beethoven’s Fifth Symphony keep running through his head.

They were holding me firm and it was fiery above it all I kept hearing the opening motif of Beethoven’s Fifth—three short and one long buzz, repeated again and again in varying volume, and I was struggling and
breaking through, rising up, to find myself lying on my back with two
pink-faced men laughing down. (232)

Sweeny further adds that there is “the blues, another distinctively Afro-American
response to the same plight, is the dominant musical form on the novel’s sound track, and
the most tellingly deployed”. (31) In the Prologue, the narrator sits brooding as he listens
to the recordings of Louis Armstrong playing and singing “Black and Blue,” the first of
several songs heard in the novel. About the emergence of the blues, Steven C. Tracy in
his “The Blues Novel” explains:

The blues musical as a musical genre, though it has its roots in African
modalities that are centuries old, first emerged in America during the
period following Reconstruction in the late nineteenth century. The term
was applied to the songs of itinerant and frequently illiterate singers whose
work was noted and transcribed by the folklorists and commentators from
outside the tradition in which they were generated until the first blues were
recorded in 1920. The blues are traditionally pithy, oral lyric works using
a variety of loosely fixed structures into which are poured the subject
matter of an individual experience that reflects communal interests. (122)

In the Trueblood story, Trueblood expresses his feeling in song. It is creative act
which Ellison accurately relates to an African American folk tradition, the blues. As
much as the spiritual, the blues is susceptible to ideological interpretation. Ellison
observes about the blues in his review ‘Richard Wright’s Black Boy’:

Their attraction lies in this, that they at once express both agony of life
and possibility of conquering it through sheer toughness of spirit. They
fall short of tragedy only in that they provide no solution, offer no
scapegoat but the self. Nowhere in America today is there social or
political action based upon the solid realities of Negro life depicted in

Black Boy. (Collected Essays, 143-144)

As a form, the “blues is an autobiographical chronicle of personal catastrophe expressed lyrically.” Ellison pointedly emphasizes that the blues do not skirt the painful facts of human experiences, but works through them to an artistic transcendence. This is precisely what Trueblood accomplishes with his ideas:

I goes up a dark tunnel, up near where the machinery is making all that noise and heat. It’s like the power plant they got up to the school. It’s burnin’ hot as iff’en the house was caught on fire, and I starts to runnin’, tryin’ to git out…. it’s like flyin’ and I’m flyin’ and sailin’ and floatin’ right up over the town. Only I’m still in tunnel. (58-59)

Trueblood’s dream converges with his activity involved by incest. He describes it in a rhythmic tone. During his dream, his consciousness wakes him up to alert him that he is wrong:

I wakes up intendin’ to tell the ole lady ‘bout my crazy dream. Morning done come, and it’s getting’ almost light. And there I am, lookin’ straight in Matty Lou’s face and she’s beatin me and scrathin’ and tremblin’ and shakin’ and cryin’ all at the same time like she’s havin’ a fit. I’m too surprised to move. She’s cryin’, Daddy, Daddy, oh Daddy,’ jut like that. And all at once I remember the ole lady. She’s right beside us snoring’.

(59)

One of the most impressive accomplishments of Ellison is the use of jazz as a literary technique. The opening lines of the Prologue directly hit the readers where the narrator grumbles:
That invisibility to which I refer occurs because of a peculiar disposition of the eyes of those with whom I come in contact. A matter of construction of their *inner* eyes, those eyes with which they look through their physical eyes upon reality. (3)

The narrator refers to *inner eyes* to comment on their thoughts on race. Since the narrator is a black-skinned man, he feels he is overlooked. People just see through him and neglect him as he is an African American. He complains that the Whites are also blind to spiritual truths. The narrator expresses his desire of listening to Armstrong’s music:

I’d like 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…. Perhaps I like Louis because he’s made poetry out of being invisible. I think it must be because he’s unaware that he *is* invisible. And my own grasp of invisibility aids me understand his music. (8)

The narrator, after listening to the song, feels that the words fit his life where he had encountered various problems when he was not given the self respect and value he deserved. He feels as if he did not exist at all. In his essay ‘The Blues as a Literary Theme’ Gene Bluestein points out:

Jazz provides one with a new sense of time…there is always the offbeat, or offbeats, which are characteristics of jazz style… [Jazz] demands an awareness of nodes, those moments within the heart of pulsation which are static or which provide the occasion for a leap to another level of rhythmic awareness. This is an effective description of those essential qualities of jazz syncopation which are difficult to notate but which we recognize as fundamental to the jazz performance (CLA, 114).
Thus Bluestein argues that Ellison’s concern with awareness also provides an analogy to the recognition of spiritual truths, the opening of the inner eye. The musician slips into the breaks and looks around; he enters into the center of meaning and creates his own statement, which is precisely what the jazz soloist must do.

Throughout the novel the stress is on words, incidents and characters that suggest the clarity, distortion, obstruction or absence of the double vision of African American characters. For example, as the narrator reflects on the past, he sees the bronze statue of the college Founder in his mind’s eye:

As I gaze, there is a rustle of wings and I see a flock of starlings fighting before me and, when I look again the bronze face, whose empty eyes look upon a world I have never seen, runs with liquid chalk-creating another ambiguity to puzzle my groping mind: why is a bird soiled statue more commanding than that which is clean? (36)

Here Ellison continues to weave the two major structural devices or signs of the text- legend or subtext of Washington and the symbol of sight or vision – into an intricate pattern, foregrounding the various kinds and degrees of blindness to spiritual and social truths. Ellison uses the motif of invisibility as a method of subject formation, one that both upholds and creates stereotypes and imposes identities upon the powerless. What produces invisibility is not blindness, but distorted vision, and this distortion systematically formulates the identities of the oppressed as manifestations of the fantasies and preconceived prejudices of the viewers.

Linking sight to control, Ellison implies that the power rests with those who possess vision, or more accurately, those whose vision is considered accurate and therefore a representation of reality. Eliminating or dismissing vision destroys the ability to define oneself, and therefore strips away one’s dignity and significance.
The leaders who present themselves to the hero as beacons of light and bearers of the American tradition are blind. In the chapel, the Reverend Homer Barbee intones a moving sermon on the epic deeds of the founder and of Bledsoe. Ironically, after invoking his vision of “the history of the race” and exhorting the black college students to follow in the footsteps of their leaders, Barbee, a blind person, trips over Bledsoe’s legs and falls.

In New York, as Brother Jack bitterly tells the narrator that he must be loyal to the Brotherhood and accept the views of the Party leadership, one of his eyes erupts out of his face and is put into the glass:

I stared at the glass, seeing how the light shone through, throwing a transparent, precisely fluted shadow against the dark grain of the table, and there on the bottom of the glass lay an eye. A glass eye. A buttermilk white eye distorted by the light rays. An eye staring fixedly at me from the dark waters of a well (474).

The narrator feels a disgusting surprise to see Brother Jack’s left eye collapse and “others had known it all along. They aren’t even surprised (474).” What Ellison emphasizes here is that the Brotherhood is blind and has a materialistic point of view of life. They do not see human beings and their ideas but see men only “as the new instrument of the committee’s authority…” (363)

Thus throughout the novel *Invisible Man*, Ralph Ellison works with many different images of blindness and impaired vision and how it relates to perception. These images prove to be fascinating pieces of symbolism that enhance the themes of false misleading impressions, suppression and vision within the novel. From the beginning of the novel when the narrator is blindfolded during the battle royal to the end where Brother Jack’s false eye pops out, images of sight and blindness add to the meaning of many
scenes and characters. In many of these situations the characters inability to see outwardly often directly parallels their inability to perceive inwardly what is going on in the world around them.

In nearly all the important events of worth in the novel sight imagery is the most crucial. To quote Alice Bloch from her essay, ‘Sight Imagery in Invisible Man’.

By presenting characters in the novel as physically unable to see, the author conveys the idea that what people are really unable to see is the harsh reality which lurks behind the platitudes they spout. The reactions of the characters who actually perceive reality emphasize the harshness of it. Mr. Norton falls in a faint; Dr. Bledsoe becomes harsh and cynical, the narrator has a fit of madness. Unlike the others, however, the narrator becomes accustomed to the darkness of reality and tries to fill it with light

(A Casebook on Ralph Ellison’s Invisible Man, 269).

Invisible Man, structured on the theme of the rural South and the urban North life shows the ironic treatment of its characters. When the protagonist is invited to speak before the whites after the battle royal, ironically the protagonist makes a mistake in his speech on humility by mentioning social equality. He continues only after apologizing for his error.

Another ironic treatment is given to Dr. Bledsoe, the ruthless President of the narrator’s college. The narrator’s experience begins after he gets a scholarship to the college. He wishes to become a good leader. He tries to identify with and mould himself on the role of Dr. Bledsoe. The narrator wonders as to what makes Bledsoe such a powerful and prestigious person in both the societies, white and African American:

To us he was more than just a president of a college. He was a leader, a “statesman” who carried out our problems to those above us, even unto the
White House; and in days past he had conducted the President himself about the campus. He was our leader and our magic, who kept the endowment high, the funds for scholarships plentiful and publicity moving through the channels of the press. He was our coal-black daddy of whom we were afraid. (116)

The narrator doubly blunders in escorting Mr. Norton to Trueblood’s quarter and then to Golden Day which consequently brings in hazardous effects. He is condemned by Bledsoe who draws out “something beneath a pile of papers, an old leg shackle from slavery which he proudly called a “symbol of our progress” (141). Ironically it shows that Bledsoe lingers on the attitude of slavery and is depended on whites. He butters the whites by keeping a servile attitude towards them, but rebukes the narrator on not being a liar like the other Negro boys. By showing the darker and taboo side of what ought to be hidden about their community, the narrator had brought a great damage to the college and thus he is expelled from the college. Dr. Bledsoe hands over some letters to the narrator.

The impressive image of Bledsoe which the narrator had built in his mind wanes immediately after the narrator learns of the deceptive nature of Bledsoe. When he sees the true contents of Bledsoe’s damaging letters of recommendation, he is so raged that [he] would go back and kill Bledsoe (194). Broadly speaking, his is the rage of many young men against their own impotence and blindness. In the end, it is the rage of virtually every young man against his reluctance to grow up, to become “as the crazy war veteran advises the narrator in the bus in New York, his own “father” (156).

The picture of America is depicted in *Invisible Man* through various symbols. Ellison successfully brings before us the traumatic phase of the African American’s agony and rage in American society. The symbols involved in the different scenes like the narrator being given a calf skin brief case, Mary Rambo’s iron bank, eviction scene,
Trueblood’s dream, Paint Factory event, Brotherhood Organization and others capaciously speak of the African American’s treatment in American society. Most importantly the novel is woven on the symbol of the eye in many forms to give thematic resonance to the tension between visibility and invisibility. The novel opens in the context of sight, with the use of the first person pronoun where the protagonist emphasizes the significance of personal consciousness in harmonizing one’s achieved and ascribed identities. He sees himself within a mindset formed of past history and self-realization.

The eviction scene at Harlem portrays a complete picture of an elderly couple’s trauma, at all their belongings being thrown out. A card inscribed with the words “God bless our home”, and the greeting with “Granma, I love you” and their portrait at a young age, all indicate that the family is a dispossessed one and wishes for togetherness. Such signs show that it is the whites who are responsible for the family being scattered. The old lady screams “It’s all the white folk, not just one, they all against us: Every stinking low-down one of them.” (70)

In ‘Ralph Ellison’s Invisible Man: A Critical Reevaluation’, Yvonne Fonteneau observes the image of black women as “circumcisers” rather than castrators. Kate symbolically circumcises Trueblood when she fells him with an axe. Reproaching him committing incest, she scolds: “You ain’t no man. No man’d do what you did.” (66) Although it has been several months since Kate has axed Trueblood, gnats swarm at the “raw and moist scar”. (50) Trueblood’s wound is a reminder to him that, as a sexual being, man has a responsibility to exercise self-control. He acquires a “circumcised” controlled voice, which gives his rehearsed rendering of the incest tale its depth and artistry.
Fonteneau calls Mary Rambo also a “circumciser” as she helps the narrator ask himself the right question.

She was something more – a force, a stable, familiar force like something out of my past which kept me from whirling off into some unknown which I dared not face. It was a most painful position, for at the same time, Mary reminded me constantly that something was expected of me, some act of leadership, some newsworthy achievement; and I was torn between resenting her for it and loving her for the nebulous hope she kept alive.

(258)

The journey northwards is also symbolically represented where the narrator discovers that Bledsoe too has deluded him with false promises, but the narrator does find a job at the factory. When he enters the Liberty Paints factory, he finds its trademark as ‘a screaming eagle’ (198) labeled on the buckets and drums’. The ‘screaming eagle’ denotes the attacking, preying nature of the capitalists over the poor, labor class. The African Americans, who have always been stacked at the lower and mean level, fall prey to the bourgeois and the capitalists. They are always deprived of the better jobs such as civil services, higher rank offices and jobs that require intellect, skill and intelligence. The African Americans are shown as clowns, jugglers and entertainers. Ellison’s sarcastic description of Liberty Paint and the Optic White formula is symbolic of the superiority of the white race. “If It’s Optic White, It’s the Right White” (218).

The narrator is assigned work under Mr. Kimbro, a gruff man, in charge of mixing the right dopes in the paint. The narrator watches Mr. Kimbro who opens one of the buckets ‘stirring a milky brown substance’ (199) which produced a nauseating stench. The narrator is bewildered to see that ‘it became glossy white’ (199) after it was
vigorously stirred by Kimbro and the result is the product called ‘Optic White’ which is
used in repainting national monuments.

Ellison makes an allegory of the relationship between whites and African
Americans. He holds that white America cannot remain white and glossy with its values
unless the blacks are introduced there. It is the blacks whose strengths, tolerance and
caliber enhance the social, political and economic advancement of America. If America
is to be kept pure with Liberty paints, the African Americans must get credit for the same.

When Mr. Kimbro moves away without guiding the narrator on which dope he
should infuse in the buckets, the narrator selects the tank that smelled most like the dope
used by Mr. Kimbro. It resulted in a paint that was ‘not as white and glossy as before; it
had a gray tinge’ (203). Symbolically, Ellison conveys here that the narrator is not the
right dope as he is very innocent and cannot act as manipulative as Mr. Kimbro. Thus, he
cannot quite meet the precarious propriety established within the industrial norms and
social norms between African Americans and whites.

The narrator is next assigned to work at a furnace in the basement, three levels
underground, with a strange little Negro foreman named Lucius Brockway. The narrator
finds himself again as the object of suspicion and hostility. It is such that Brockway, who
has charge of all the immensely complicated machinery below ground level- boilers,
furnaces, cables, pipes, wires, and so on, is indispensable in running the plant. Efforts to
displace him with the white engineer have resulted in a total breakdown of production.
Ellison here again presents a subtle kind of symbolism. Somewhere beyond the narrative
level, he is saying that America has depended from the start on the unacknowledged skills
and sacrifices of the African American labour.

The narrator feels a strange experience even with the Brotherhood organization.
When he decides to be inducted in the Brotherhood organization and joins them at Lenox
Avenue address, he finds that Brother Jack and others were sunk in deep thought. The narrator was puzzled and dared not ask them about where they were heading. He sensed some threat:

> It was as though we had plunged suddenly into mid-country peace, yet I knew that here, somewhere close by in the night, there was a zoo with its dangerous animals. The lions and tigers in heated cages, the bears asleep, the snakes coiled tightly underground. And there was also the reservoir of dark water, all covered by snow and by night, by snow-fall and night-fall, buried beneath black and white, gray mist and gray silence (299).

Ellison indirectly refers to the zoo the narrator is about to face in the Brotherhood organization. Ellison mentions the animals which are dangerous and vicious to life. Brother Jack as the name implies uses the narrator only to bully and attack and tells him, “you were not hired to think” (469). The organization is analogous to a zoo where the animals endanger one’s life. The narrator, being naïve, does not understand their ill intention and thereby falls a prey to the false lure of becoming a good speaker. He does not know then that there are Brother Wrestrum and Brother Tobitt who would attack him later on.

Throughout the novel, there is a substantial use of symbolism. The nude dancer’s motions which arouse both desire and guilt; Mr. Norton, the white philanthropist and trustee’s views about his daughter; the iron bank that the narrator carries: young Emerson’s museum like office with the description of an iron pot, an ancient bell, a set of ankle-irons and links of chain and others: Tod Clifton’s Sambo Doll and all such vivid descriptions reflect the true picture of American history and reality. Ellison’s technique echoes the agony of the human experience.
*Invisible Man* begins with what appears to be a material and social definition of identity: “I am a man of substance, of flesh and bone,” invisible only “because people refuse to see me” (3), but if we go deep into its understanding, the word *substance* alludes to more than a material. The narrator wants to say that he deserves value and importance and need to be given an identity and recognition. Though *Invisible Man* is set against the background of a nameless black protagonist’s life, Ellison undertakes the effort to make it a common ground for man. The way things are exposed in *Invisible Man* may be called realistic for its attempts to offer expressions adequate to the experience of people. Ellison uses the technique of image presentation and the idea of the mask. In the views of Thomas Schaub in “Ellison’s Masks and the Novel of Reality” in *New Essays on Invisible Man*:

Images of the mask cluster about the intimation of political and sexual power, and, like words themselves, are a source of ambiguity, revealing much about their interpreter as about the realities they appear to conceal (136).

Thomas Schaub discusses that when the narrator remembers himself standing before the statue of the college founder, whose hands are “outstretched in the breathtaking gesture of lifting a veil,” (36) he cannot “decide whether the veil is really being lifted or lowered more firmly into place; whether [he is] witnessing a revelation or a more efficient blinding (36).” Further Schaub argues that the ambiguous gesture is fatal (“breathtaking”) as well as awe-inspiring for Ellison’s use of the “veil” alludes to DuBois’s attack on Booker T. Washington.

In another event when the African American vet advises the narrator “for God’s sake, learn to look beneath the surface” (153), it is the advice of a realist who has experienced the torturous and harsh realities of life under the whites. The vet understands
the manners of the society that both enslaves and excludes him. He is well aware of the vicious tricks and manipulative attitudes of the whites and warns the narrator not “to be a complete fool in order to succeed. Play the game, but don’t believe in it” (153). Thus the vet tries to check him before the narrator is allured into the hands of the whites. The narrator, who struggles for his true identity, finds that there are two worlds, as Schaub explains:

One that portrays a social world in which he wishes to play a part and one that renders the depth of that social world as mere surface in which no action short of charlatanism seems possible. In both ideas, however, reality remains merely external (129).

It is the superficiality of the society which the narrator repudiates and consequently he is thrown out of the society. Yet Ellison suggests that the narrator can fit himself into that social reality by accepting the chaotic fluidity of existence itself.

One of the most powerful artistic devices Ellison uses to express some deep seated ideas is surrealism. Trueblood, as his name implies lives by his zeal and tells his own story: for his dream images graphically depict the displaced and incestuous Eros implicit in Norton’s adulation of his daughter:

At first I couldn’t git the door open, it had some kinda crinkly stuff like steel wool on the facing. But I gits it open and gits inside and it’s hot and dark in there. I goes up a dark tunnel, up near where the machinery is making all these noise and heat. It’s like the power plant they got up to the school. (58)

Trueblood is willing to take responsibility for the incest in which this culminates. “I makes up my mind that I ain’t nobody but myself” and returns to face his wife and daughter.
The nightmare and hallucinations of the narrator in the Prologue also has a surrealistic touch. The people bump into the narrator and evoke him to his existence and to his reality that he is too black to be seen. Similarly the night of the Harlem riots is full of the mysteries of the order, revealed and unrevealed, as they fall to the lot of the narrator. The evening of the Harlem riots is handled by Ellison with authority and macabre humor. Ellison describes the undermining forces with such detachment that it is justified that in the processes of mastering his rage, Ellison has also mastered his art.

*Invisible Man* which won the National Book Award in 1952 is acclaimed as one of the best American novels published during the last sixty years. Characterized by its original idiom, satirical temper and surrealistic tone, it is one of the most powerful novels of this age. It treats the racial milieu on the symbolic level, giving it a mythic character and a universal meaning. It is a novel of the Negro myth and man, both submerged in invisibility. Its main concern is with the identity and humanity of a black individual, who suffers a painful alienation and loss of individuality.

*Invisible Man* is taken as one of the classic American novels and a great work of art. It is a sort of a cultural document having permanent value. Like most great works of art it has opened up a number of interpretive frameworks. It encompasses powerful vivid themes and is modeled on impressive and modern techniques. Robert Bone in ‘Introduction’ to the series of *New Essays on Invisible Man* quotes R. W. B. Lewis:

*Invisible Man* makes specific reference to the beginnings of the novel as a literary form; to Cervantes, Fielding, Defoe and, more significantly, to works by great nineteenth century novelists, Twain, James, Dostoyevsky, and specially Melville, who provides one of the book’s epigraphs (2).

Robert Bone further compares it with Herman Melville’s great novel *Moby Dick*:
Like Melville’s *Moby Dick*, *Invisible Man* is a capacious novel, one tries many things: both are rhetorical tours de force containing letters, sermons, fights, songs, political speeches, dreams and descriptions of private homes, meeting halls, offices, brothel, bars and churches (2).

In *Invisible Man* there is transcendence through the use of jazz and liberation through folklore. For Ellison, jazz is not only a symbolic action but a true idiom of modernism. Besides, *Invisible Man* is also a surrealistic work challenging its reader to fit together its baffling dream pieces. Beyond all these, *invisibility* in *Invisible Man* is a metaphor termed as a key metaphor for the era.

The *Invisible Man* magically starts with the first person pronoun and ends with the second person pronoun. After facing the twists and turns in the existing society, the protagonist finds his way in a dark hole illuminated with 1369 bulbs which he says he has stolen from the electricity board. The making of light is the rhetoric of liberation and confirms reality. He has come out of ignorance to knowledge and his hibernation will further enhance his understanding the world. The protagonist feels “A hibernation is a covert preparation for a more overt action” (13). The protagonist will come out to the world in terms of own identity unlike the previous titles imposed on him by others during his invisible days. Living in the hole also denotes his invisibility literally but his experiences have taught him and geared them with the sense of dignity and self esteem. “Who knows but that, on the lower frequencies, I speak for you?” (581) is the protagonist’s directive to the common readers.

His experiences are universal and appeal for transcendence from the shackles of racism, betrayal, chaos and complexity of society. Ellison seems to express the popular dictum that man is born free, but everywhere he is in chains. His voice rises above the narrow confines of colour segregation, and expresses the dilemma of man everywhere.
Marginalised, suppressed, exploited sections of society exist in every age and place. On a deep frequency, Ellison’s invisible man speaks for all mankind.

When Ellison died in 1994, he left behind a manuscript he had been working on since 1950. John Callahan, Ellison’s literary executor introduces this long-awaited edition and explores Ellison's life and the history of this second novel cataloguing such disasters as the near finished manuscript being destroyed in a fire in 1967. The novel turns out to have survived the many obstacles to its birth, for after a rather windy beginning, Ellison writes beautifully, in the grand, layered Southern tradition. The narrative begins in 1950s Washington, D.C., with Adam Sunraider, a race-baiting senator who is gunned down on the Senate floor while a man named Hickman watches in the gallery. Rushed to the hospital, Sunraider requests Hickman's presence, and the story of the two men's agonized relationship is told in flashbacks as Hickman attends the dying senator. Decades before, Alonzo Hickman was an ex-trombone player turned circuit preacher raising a young boy of indeterminate race named Bliss. The boy assists Hickman in his revivals, rising out of a white coffin at a certain moment in the sermon. Bliss grows up to change his name to Adam Sunraider and, having passed for white, has gone from being a flimflam artist and movie maker to the U. S. Senate Always, however, he is in flight from Hickman. These flashbacks showcase Ellison's stylized set pieces, among the best scenes he has written, especially as his incandescent images chart the mysteries and legacies of slavery. Bliss remembers his courtship of a black woman in a piercingly sweet reverie, and he revisits a revival meeting on ‘Juneteenth’ the nineteenth day of June, the date in 1865 on which slaves in Texas were finally informed of the Emancipation Proclamation. The sermon in this section is perhaps the highlight of the novel, sure to achieve classic status on its own merits. The revival meeting is interrupted by a white woman who claims Bliss is her son, after which Bliss begins his odyssey for an identity that takes him, by degrees, away from
the black culture of his youth. Gradually, we learn of the collusion of lies and violence that brought Bliss to Hickman in the first place.

In *Juneteenth* also Ellison draws from his musical background to stylistically frame the story. In his National Book Award acceptance speech, Ellison noted his dream of creating a novel that incorporated “the rich babel of idiomatic expression around me, a language full of imagery and rhetorical canniness.” He implements sermons, folk tales, the blues, and the rapidity of jazz music to reveal the flawed notions that the protagonist has about his identity. Charles Johnson in preface to *Juneteenth* remarks:

> Unlike Ellison’s masterpiece, *Invisible Man*, a barn-burning *bildungsroman* that explodes forward from one chapter to the next, *Juneteenth* spirals downward ever deeper through layers of memory, history, philosophical reflection, and culture – and in doing so it delivers the most dazzling, breathtakingly seductive writing we have witnessed since Ellison’s first novel in 1952.

John Callahan tells the difficult process of editing Ellison's unfinished novel and of arranging the massive body of work into the unwieldy yet cohesive story Ellison wanted to tell. Nonetheless, this volume is a visionary tour de force, a lyrical, necessary contribution to America's perennial racial dialogue it is a novel powerfully reinforcing Ellison's place in literary history.