



## [Invisible Man](#), by Ralph Ellison

### **In A Nutshell**

Published by Ralph Ellison in 1952 to immediate acclaim, *Invisible Man* is the story of a man in New York City who, after his experiences growing up and living as a model black citizen, now lives in an underground hole and believes he is invisible to American society.

*Invisible Man* is unique not only in the literature world for its improvisational jazz-inspired style, but also in the political world for adding a new voice to the discussion about blacks in America. Ellison depicts several ideologies in the novel that line up with the ideologies of Booker T. Washington, Marcus Garvey, and communism. To *equate* the ideologies would be a mistake, because the characters portrayed in the novel are only caricatures of their real-life inspirations (in the same way that Pete in *Family Guy* is not an accurate representation of a middle-class father). But the novel's *rejection* of ideology in general is a central theme, which explains why *Invisible Man* wasn't exactly a hit among influential black thinkers from the civil rights movement in the 1960s to this day.

Ellison drew heavy fire for being, in their view, politically disengaged and removed from the collective plight of black America. *Invisible Man*, in its efforts to transcend the confines of racial labeling, was criticized by those who wanted to keep those labels in place and use them as the impetus for political action.

But then there are lots of artsy literature types who would respond along the lines of,

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"Yoohoo! This is a novel!" Putting politics aside, *Invisible Man* is significant for its incredibly daring style. (It's equivalent to the Gwen Stefani of the literary world.) Ellison stated in his National Book Award acceptance speech that he viewed *Invisible Man* as exceptional for its experimental attitude. A lifelong lover of jazz, Ellison sought to create its literary equivalent. *Invisible Man* follows the stylistic foundations of jazz by using discordant rhythms, drawing on other literary works, and synthesizing prior traditions into a new art form. But more on that later, under Style.

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## Big Picture Study Questions

- 1 What's the effect of having two epigraphs? Are both necessary?
- 2 Are there similarities in the way that the narrator is treated at the battle royal and in the way that Mr. Norton is treated in the Golden Day? What are the differences between the two situations?
- 3 Why is the narrator such a threat to Dr. Bledsoe?

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