

40 CRITICS DISCUSS

Invisible Man (1952)

Ralph Ellison

(1914-1994)

“Many Negro writers of real distinction have emerged in our century.... But none of them, except, sometimes, Richard Wright has been able to transcend the bitter way of life they are still (though diminishingly) condemned to, or to master patiently the intricacies of craftsmanship so that they become the peers of the best white writers of our day. Mr. Ellison has achieved this difficult transcendence. *Invisible Man* is not a great Negro novel; it is a work of art any contemporary writer could point to with pride.”

Harvey Curtis Webster
Saturday Review
(12 April 1952) 23

“The reader who is familiar with the traumatic phase of the black man’s rage in America, will find something more in Mr. Ellison’s report. He will find the long anguished step toward its mastery. The author sells no phony forgiveness. He asks none himself. It is a resolutely honest, tormented, profoundly American book.... With this book the author maps a course from the underground world into the light. *Invisible Man* belongs on the shelf with the classical efforts man has made to chart the river Lethe from its mouth to its source.”

Wright Morris
New York Times
(13 April 1952) 5

“Ellison has an abundance of that primary talent without which neither craft nor intelligence can save a novelist; he is richly, wildly inventive; his scenes rise and dip with tension, his people bleed, his language stings. No other writer has captured so much of the confusion and agony, the hidden gloom and surface gaiety of Negro life. His ear for Negro speech is magnificent.... The rhythm of the prose is harsh and tensed, like a beat of harried alertness. The observation is expert.... For all his self-involvement, he is capable of extending himself toward his people, of accepting them as they are, in their blindness and hope.”

Irving Howe
Nation
(10 May 1952) 454

“Unquestionably, Ellison’s book is a work of extraordinary intensity—powerfully imagined and written with a savage, wryly humorous gusto. It contains many scenes which are brought off with great brio and a striking felicity of detail. To my mind, however, it has faults which cannot simply be shrugged off—occasional overwriting, stretches of fuzzy thinking, and a tendency to waver, confusingly, between realism and surrealism.”

Charles Rolo
Atlantic Monthly
(July 1952) 84

“Ralph Ellison’s *Invisible Man* is a basically comic work in the picaresque tradition, influenced by the novels of Louis-Ferdinand Celine. The hero of *Invisible Man* just happens to be a Negro, and everything he is and does includes ultimately the experience of all modern men. But this is not accomplished by abstraction; Mr. Ellison has managed to realize the fact of his hero’s being a Negro in exactly the same way as nineteenth-century novelists realized their characters being French or Russian or middle-class: by making it the chief fact of their lives, something they take for granted and would not think of denying. Mr.

Ellison displays an unapologetic relish for the concrete richness of Negro living—the tremendous variety of its speech, its music, its food, even its perversities.”

Steven Marcus
Commentary
(November 1953) 458

“Many may find that *Invisible Man*, complex in its novelistic structure, many-sided in its interpretation of the race problem, is not fully satisfying either as narrative or as ideology. Unlike the novel which depends for its appeal chiefly on the staple elements of love or sex, suspense and the dynamics of action, *Invisible Man* dispenses with the individualized hero and his erotic involvements, the working out of his personal destiny. Here we have, subtly and sensitively presented, what amounts to an allegory of the pilgrimage of a people.... By means of the revealing master symbol of vision, Ralph Ellison has presented an aesthetically distanced and memorably vivid image of the life of the American Negro.”

Charles I. Glicksberg
Southwest Review
(Summer 1954) 264-65

“Along with the new Southern writers, new Negro writers appeared upon the scene, commanding the attention that Richard Wright had attracted before them. Ralph Ellison won the National Book Award in 1952 for *Invisible Man*, his first novel. As the narrator traces through the labyrinths of his life, from his expulsion from a small Southern Negro college to his nightmarish experiences trying to survive in New York, he tries to find the pattern that will yield meaning and revelation for himself. But the incidents of his life remain stubbornly enigmatic, his own identity a mystery to the last. Yet in telling his tale he achieves a kind of purge that will ultimately enable him to emerge from his Dostoyevskian underground to undertake a new role, a new definition of self.”

Theodore Hornberger
The Literature of the United States 2, 3rd edition
(Scott, Foresman 1953-66) 1357

“Sometimes the language of violence fits. Ralph Ellison’s *Invisible Man* is a series of episodes, but the screaming crescendo on which the book opens—the hero in his Harlem cellar, all the stolen lights ablaze, collaring the reader and forcing him to notice and to hear—is an unforgettably powerful expression, at the extreme of racial experience, of the absurdity, the feeling of millions that the world is always just out of their reach.... I cannot begin to enumerate all the novels of recent years, from Ralph Ellison’s *Invisible Man* to Vance Bourjaily’s recent *Confessions of a Spent Youth*, which describe American social customs, from college up, as fulfilling the prescription of tribal rites laid down by the anthropologists.... An angry and powerful novelist, as Ellison is in *Invisible Man*...will aim at the strongest possible image of Negro suffering and confusion in a hostile society.”

Alfred Kazin
Contemporaries
(1959;1961; Little, Brown/Atlantic Monthly 1962) 212, 388

“*Invisible Man*, as Ellison has needlessly insisted in rebuttal to those critics who would treat the novel as fictionalized sociology or as a dramatization of archetypal images, is an artist’s attempt to create a *form*. And fortunately Ellison has been quite explicit in describing what he means by *form*; in specific reference to the improvisation of the jazz-musician he suggests that form represents ‘a definition of his identity: as an individual, as member of the collectivity, and as a link in the chain of tradition’....

The Prologue introduces the narrator in his underground hibernation musing upon the events of his life, eating vanilla ice-cream and sloe gin, listening to Louie Armstrong’s recording, ‘What Did I Do to Be So Black and Blue?’ and trying to wrest out of the confusions of his experiences some pattern of meaning and/or resilient core of identity. The next twenty-five chapters are a first-person narrative flashback which covers some twenty years of the protagonist’s life ending with the beginning, the hero’s descent into the underground hole. The concluding Epilogue picks up the tonal patterns of the Prologue, implies that both meaning and identity have been discovered, and dramatically forces a direct identification between the

narrator and the reader. Ostensibly this is another novel of the initiation of a boy into manhood—a *Bildungsroman* in the episodic picaresque tradition...the total significance of the whole form...pivots on the ironic fulcrum of the blues theme introduced in the Prologue and given resolution in the Epilogue. As in all seriously comic works the reader is left not with an answer, but with a challenging question—a question which soars beyond the novel on the unanswered notes of Armstrong's trumpet: 'What Did I Do to Be So Black and Blue?'

After the narrator's fall into the coalpit he discovers that his arrogantly naïve construction of personality is nothing more than the accumulated fragments in his briefcase: the high-school diploma, Bledsoe's letter, Clifton's dancing doll, Mary's bank, Brother Tarp's iron. And most ironically, even these meager artifacts—the fragments he has shored against his ruin—represent not him, but the world's variegated projections of him. The narrator learns then that his educational romance is a farcical melodrama of the most garish variety; the successive births and rebirths of his life (his Caesarian delivery from college, his birth by electronics at the factory hospital, the christening by the Brotherhood) were not the organic gestations of personality that he idealized so much as they were the cold manipulations of artificial insemination....

The protagonist has successfully rebelled against the imposition of social masks whether externally (like Clifton's) or internally (like Brother Tarp's) bestowed; his is not a surrender of personality so much as a descent to a deeper level of personality where the accent is heavier on possibilities than on limitations. The 1,369 glowing light bulbs in his cellar retreat attest to the increased power and enlightenment which are positive gains from his experience, as well as to the strategic advantages of his recourse to invisibility.... In accepting himself as the Invisible Man he assumes the historic role which Emerson unerringly assigned to the American poet; he becomes 'the world's eyes'—something through which one sees, even though it cannot itself be seen....

Daddy Hickman, a Negro preacher ('Better known as GOD'S TROMBONE'), is vividly characterized as a wise and shrewd virtuoso of the evangelical circuit who might not unfairly be taken as a modern-day Emerson, preaching eloquently the gospel of humanity. These facts may be significant when we remember that Emerson's work is given short shrift as rhetorical nonsense in *Invisible Man* and his name is bestowed upon a character whose minor function in the novel is to be a self-righteous hypocrite. This shift in attitude may indicate that Ellison has come to realize that there are some major affinities binding him to his famous namesake....

Although it is probably true as some critics have pointed out that the dominating metaphor of the novel—the 'underground man' theme—was suggested by Dostoevsky and Richard Wright, it is for our purposes more interesting to note a similar metaphor in Hart Crane's poem, 'Black Tambourine'.... The answer which *Invisible Man* gives to the unanswerable demands which life imposes on the human being...defines the human distance between the tambourine and the carcass and it accepts with wonder and dignity the immeasurable gift of life. The black man in the cellar transforms his isolation into elevation without denying the brute facts of existence and without losing his ironic grip on the transiency of the moment. The amorphous ambiguity of the mid-kingdom is for a timeless instant conquered and made fit for habitation."

Earl H. Rovit

"Ralph Ellison and the American Comic Tradition
Wisconsin Studies in Contemporary Literature I
(Fall 1960) 34-42

"The nameless black narrator living in an underground 'hole' in New York City, brilliantly lit by electricity he taps from Monopolated Light and Power, is invisible because people with whom he comes in contact 'see only my surroundings, themselves, or figments of their imagination.' Such vision is illustrated by his reminiscences of the Kafkaesque pilgrimage he has made from his beginnings in the South. As a bright high-school student he is invited by his town's most important men to deliver an oration to them on the virtues of humility. Before he is allowed to speak he must watch ribald entertainment and is forced to join other 'niggers' in a blindfold fistfight. When he finally delivers his speech he mistakenly speaks of 'social equality' instead of 'social responsibility' and has to apologize abjectly so as to retain his prize of a scholarship to a college for blacks.

At the college he finds the head to be a tyrannical hypocrite in his treatment of the students and fawningly humble to the white community. Expelled from the college, he goes to New York and soon falls in with the ruthless Brother Jack, leader of the Communist Brotherhood, more concerned with party politics and an authoritarian platform than with true aid to blacks. He is equally disillusioned by Ras the Exhorter, a West Indian rabble-rousing street leader, basically a self-promoter, and the Rev. B. P. Rinehart, 'spiritual technologist' and preacher and a petty criminal as well. His experiences are climaxed by a surrealistic view of a Harlem race riot and its arson and looting. From this he retreats to his hideaway hole, reflecting upon the dehumanization visited not only on blacks but on all modern men."

James D. Hart
The Oxford Companion to American Literature, 5th edition
(Oxford 1941-83) 366

"His first novel, *Invisible Man* (1952), was hailed as an impressive work and an outstanding novel on the Negro in America. Its hero progresses from youthful affirmation to total rejection... His loss of social identity...gives him a point of view often compared with that of the hero of Dostoevsky's *Notes from the Underground*. Both men finally view society from an external position, despite their desire to function within it. The unnamed hero at first has a rather unrealistic trust in the motives of others. He is dismissed from a southern Negro college for disillusioning one of the founders by showing him the world in which the southern Negroes really live. In New York City, he distinguishes himself by rousing a crowd at an eviction, and is picked by Communist leaders for a political role.

Ultimately, he realizes that the Communists are merely using him as a symbol of the Negro, as a person he is as invisible to them as to anyone else. During a surrealistic Harlem riot (treated with humor and authority that prove Ellison's writing skill), the hero realizes that he must contend with both the white people and the leaders of his own race. The book is powerful and honest, despite some fuzziness and overwriting. With no trace of forgiveness or even hope for the future, he merely records what happened, concluding with the hero's frightening sense that he speaks for others as well as himself, that he is not the only invisible man."

Max J. Herzberg & staff
The Reader's Encyclopedia of American Literature
(Crowell 1962) 306, 518

"Some of the new figures we do remember are J. D. Salinger's troubled adolescent in a world where every adult is a phony, and Ralph Ellison's angry symbol of the American Negro as the *Invisible Man*, and Norman Mailer's hipster or 'White Negro,' and Saul Bellow's portrait, in *The Adventures of Augie March*, of a Jewish boy leaving the Chicago slums and wandering over three continents, not to win a fortune, but to find the answer to a simple question: 'Who am I?' That question echoes through many other novels and helps to convey the puzzled spirit of the times."

Malcolm Cowley
The Portable Malcolm Cowley
ed. Donald W. Faulkner
(1962; Viking Penguin 1990) 384

"A new raw, roguish quality, inherited from the picaresque, appeared in the novels of Saul Bellow, Norman Mailer, William Styron, and Ralph Ellison... Bellow's *Augie March*, a self-styled Columbus of the near-at-hand, guarded his freedom jealously; Ellison's *Invisible Man* ended his bruising career in a coal cellar... Ralph Ellison, like Salinger, rested his high reputation on a single novel, *Invisible Man* (1952). It was a seething and original book, one of the earliest in the postwar period to fuse realism and surrealism, slapstick and grim comedy, in the fluid form of the picaresque. The novel also exhibited an energy of mind, a passionate apprehension of ideology and of social fact, that was comparable only to Bellow's. The question of identity which Ellison's Negro hero faced was the crucial question of the times, and the shifting perspective in which he revealed the Negro enlarged our conception of white and black alike. In Ellison's novel, anger and pain were finally subdued by compassion, the kind of understanding implicit in the Blues."

Ihab Hassan
Literary History of the United States, 3rd edition

“Ellison is a writer of the first magnitude—one of those original talents who has created a personal idiom to convey his personal vision. It is an idiom compounded of fantasy, distortion, and burlesque, highly imaginative and generally surrealistic in effect. It possesses at bottom a certain mythic quality, to which Ellison alludes in his acceptance speech. He was striving, he recounts, for a prose medium ‘with all the bright magic of the fairy tale’....

Closer at hand is his debt to Faulkner and Eliot. To the extent that Ellison’s style is directly imitative, it is Faulknerian. The lengthy sentences, the rapid flow of consciousness conveyed by a string of participles, the series of abstract nouns joined together by an overworked conjunction—these are familiar trademarks. From Faulkner, too, comes a sense of the grotesque, the monstrous, the outrageous in Southern life. The incest scene in *Invisible Man*, for example, is unimaginable without the precedent of Popeye [*Sanctuary*]. On the whole, it is more the symbolist of *The Sound and the Fury* than the local colorist of *The Hamlet* to whom Ellison pays the supreme compliment, but both elements are present in his style to a degree....

There are direct echoes of Eliot, too, in *Invisible Man*, and one of the epigraphs (the other is from Melville’s *Benito Cereno*) is from *Family Reunion*. But Ellison’s real debt stems from Eliot’s insistence upon the importance of tradition. It was this reassurance from a major contemporary that fortified him in his determination to anchor his fiction firmly in his Negro heritage. It was Eliot who taught him to value a past which was both painful and precious and, flinching neither from slavery nor incest nor prostitution nor chaos itself, to assimilate even his negative heritage, conquering it, transforming it into an asset, a weapon... But if one were to pinpoint the influence of a particular literary work on this novel, it would be Dostoevsky’s *Notes from Underground*. This book, as a matter of fact, stirred the imaginations of both Ellison and Wright, inspiring not only *Invisible Man* but a powerful short story of Wright’s called ‘The Man Who Lived Underground’....

Though not in the narrow sense a political novel, *Invisible Man* is based on a cultivated political understanding of the modern world. The first half of the novel portrays the disillusionment of the protagonist with the shibboleths of American capitalism—a social system which he apprehends through the institutional structure of the Southern Negro college. The latter half treats of his disillusionment with Stalinism [Communism], which he encounters through a revolutionary organization known as the Brotherhood. By means of this carefully controlled parallel development, Ellison penetrates to the heart of the two great illusions of his time.... For in this instance the revolt against protest was extended to include a revolt against the Naturalistic novel....

In repudiating naturalism, Ellison turns to the broad tradition established by Joyce, Kafka, and Faulkner [Modernism]. Like them, he finds the shattered forms of postimpressionism [Expressionism] most effective in portraying the chaos of the modern world. But Ellison apprehends this chaos through a particular cultural screen. It is precisely his vision of the possibilities of Negro life that has burst the bonds of the naturalistic novel. His style, like that of any good writer, flows from his view of reality, but this in turn flows from his experience as a Negro. His unique experience, Ellison insists, requires unique literary forms, and these he tries to provide from the raw material of Negro culture. It is a major contribution to the evolution of the Negro novel.

What stylistic resources can a folk culture offer the creative writer? To begin with, there is the rhetorical skill of the American Negro, whose verbal expression, under slavery, was necessarily oral. The revival meeting, the funeral sermon, the graduation address, the political speech are used to good account in *Invisible Man*. Then there are the sonorous biblical phrases which season the dialogue, along with the spicier ingredients of jive. To freshen up a jaded diction, a whole new vocabulary is available—terms evocative of the numbers racket, of voodoo charms, of racing sheets, of spiritualist cure-alls, of the jazz world, the boxing ring, the ball park, the barroom—in a word, of Harlem....

Jazz and the blues form an important part of Ellison’s consciousness (he has played jazz trumpet since high school) and consequently of his style. The tone of the novel, for example, is established in the prologue by Louis Armstrong’s not-so-innocent question: ‘What did I do / To be so black / And blue?’ The

blue note is sustained by occasional snatches of blues lyrics, and by such passages as this: 'I strode along, hearing the cartman's song become a lonesome, broad-toned whistle now that flowered at the end of each phrase into a tremulous, blue-toned chord. And in its flutter and swoop I heard the sound of a railroad train highballing it, lonely across the lonely night.' Jazz forms have also influenced what might be called the composition of the novel.... He writes a 'melody' (thematic line) and then orchestrates it....

The basic image of the novel—withdrawal from humanity into an underground den... Its basic strategy: the presentation of an abstract spiritual state (invisibility), followed by a flashback (the main body of the novel) which provides the concrete experience from which the psychic state evolved. The two protagonists [*Notes from Underground* and *Invisible Man*] have much in common: both are anonymous victims (nonheroes), and both address the reader in the first person with a certain ironic familiarity. Both are dealers in paradox and ambiguity, and both have known a shame so intense that in recalling it their venom turns to jest.... Ellison's private truth is that his color threatens constantly to deprive him of individuality; the public truth to which this corresponds is that all men have been deprived of individuality in the machine age. Invisibility is Ellison's symbol for this loss of self. *Invisible Man*, then, is a stubborn affirmation of the worth and dignity of the individual in the face of forces which conspire to render him invisible....

Assigned as a driver to one of the visiting white trustees, he commits the unpardonable sin of taking him away from the 'whitewashed' campus into the back country. Through the lines that run from North to South,' converging on the Southern Negro college. He is a banker, a Bostonian, a bearer of the white man's burden, who feels that the destiny of the Negro people is somehow bound up with his own. Viewed historically, he is emblematic of those enlightened Northern capitalists who, looking ahead to the industrialization of the South, joined with the Southern gentry and the conservative Negro leaders in founding such centers of technical training as Tuskegee Institute....

Trueblood...is the full-blooded, half-assimilated African in whom historic circumstances of the past three centuries have neither encouraged nor indeed permitted the civilized amenities to develop. His story, which is rendered with an altogether convincing combination of humor, delicacy, and horror, is a narrative tour de force. The crucial point is that, far from becoming a pariah, Trueblood is treated by his white neighbors as something of a local celebrity. They lavish upon his infamy material benefits which they have always denied to his industry. Norton, moreover, whose Oedipal attachment to his own daughter has been subtly touched upon, acknowledges his kinship with chaos by a gift of a hundred dollars.

Severely shaken, Mr. Norton requests a stimulant, and the youth reluctantly drives him to the nearest source of supply—a colored roadhouse called the Golden Day. Unfortunately, it is the day when the inmates of a nearby veterans' hospital pay their weekly visit to the local prostitutes. Once more Mr. Norton encounters chaos. The theme of this episode is repression: the hospital attendant Suerpcargo (Superego) is responsible for maintaining order, and double order with white folks present. But Supercargo is symbolically drunk upstairs, and 'when he was upstairs they had absolutely no inhibitions.' A wild brawl ensues, with the attendant the main target of its fury. He represents the internalization of white values (order as against chaos), and it is no accident that the helpless veterans whom he supervises have been doctors, lawyers, and teachers in civilian life. They are emblematic of the repressed Negro middle class; their spokesman is a former surgeon who was dragged from his home and beaten with whips for saving a human life. It is thus (Trueblood in reverse) that the white South rewards genuine accomplishment.

In the light—or perhaps one should say the darkness—of Trueblood and the Golden Day, the irony of the Southern Negro college, the irony of its very existence, is revealed. Its function is not to educate but to indoctrinate with a myth. This is why the vet calls Norton 'a trustee of consciousness,' 'a lyncher of souls.' Yet Ellison presents the myth in all its splendor in the Chapel address of the Reverend Homer Barbee, not wishing to minimize the power of the system to provide dreams. It is 'the black rite of Horatio Alger' which is enacted from the podium, and its slogan is 'We are a humble, but a fast-rising people.' To the hope which the speaker holds out to the race, if only they will adopt the white man's success formula, the protagonist responds with a desperate conviction, for the alternative of bitterness, of revenge, of racial conflict seems hopelessly destructive. It is only toward the end of this magnificent speech that he realizes that Homer Barbee is blind.

In taking Norton behind the scenes, the protagonist has betrayed the myth, and the president of the college swiftly administers discipline. Dr. Bledsoe is a harsh but essentially accurate portrait of the Southern Negro educator—a pragmatist who holds his own in a ruthless power struggle by hard and cynical methods. He possesses power without dignity, though the trappings of dignity are in ample evidence. It is the only kind of power available to the black man in the Deep South. Bledsoe suspends the youth but endorses his proposal that he seek employment in the North, in hopes of being reinstated in the fall. As a gesture of reconciliation he furnishes the youth with letters of introduction to several wealthy patrons of the school.... The contents of the Bledsoe letters are revealed, and the youth discovers that he has been not suspended but expelled. The letters contain instructions, in effect, to 'keep this nigger-boy running.' Two densely symbolic chapters follow, which conclude Ellison's portrait of the status quo....

The youth is put to work on a batch of paint which is headed for a national monument, and his task is a puzzling one. He is asked to measure ten drops of dead black liquid into each bucket of 'Optic White,' and stir until the black liquid becomes invisible. It is a famous national formula, of which the company is justly proud: 'That's paint that'll cover just about anything!' his foreman remarks. Unfortunately, the youth takes his refill from the wrong tank and dopes the paint with concentrated remover. By rendering visible that which is black (compare the Norton episode), he unwittingly sabotages the national whitewash. On another level, this chapter recapitulates the Negro's historic experience in American industry. The youth is hired in the first place so that the company will not have to pay regular union wages. He goes to work for a 'slave driver' named Kimbro...

Shortly he is sent to the basement to work for a colored foreman named Lucius Brockway, who represents the skilled stratum of Negro labor which has been entrenched in American industry from the beginning—the black base on which our industrial pyramid is reared. Brockway has made himself indispensable, for it is he who mixes the base of the paint, and yet he lives in constant dread of being replaced by skilled whites. For this reason he is an Uncle Tom, a loyal worker who is fanatically anti-union. The bewildered protagonist is caught in a crossfire between Brockway and the union, for each party suspects him of harboring sympathies for the enemy. His first act of rebellion against the system occurs...and he strikes out at the Negro underling.... An explosion occurs...and the youth finds himself in the factory hospital, a part of his personality blasted away.

The hospital scene is primarily symbolic of the protagonist's rebirth; it is a transitional chapter which prepares us for his new life in the Brotherhood. At the same time, the machine age begins to emerge as his true antagonist. Only half conscious, he is strapped into a strange machine and subjected to a painful shock therapy, whose purpose is 'to produce the results of a prefrontal lobotomy'... The atmosphere of antiseptic efficiency, of coldness and impersonality, of helplessness and passivity which one associates with a modern hospital is brilliantly evoked as a symbol of contemporary life. The diction, which is abstract and scientific throughout, contributes powerfully to this effect. The identity theme is sounded as he is asked to think of his name, and of his mother. When he fails to remember, thus relinquishing all claims to individuality, he is pronounced cured. The machine is opened, the electric cord to the stomach node is cut, and he is born again.

Part II of *Invisible Man* is at bottom a projection of the author's involvement with the Communist party. Ellison, more than most writers who have felt the party's branding iron, has survived the experience and mastered it artistically.... He succeeds in drawing a pointed parallel between the protagonist's new life and his former existence as a victim of capitalist society. To their victims, after all, the two power systems look remarkably alike.... The protagonist's personal fate in the Brotherhood is representative of a whole generation of Negro intellectuals. Deeply wounded by society, he becomes aware of 'a painful, contradictory, inner voice' which calls insistently for revenge.... The protagonist now faces a dilemma well known to the captives of Stalinist [Communist] ideology: to remain historically relevant, he must betray the Negro masses; to retain his integrity, he must break with the Brotherhood and consign himself to political limbo.

In the end he rejects the Brotherhood more on philosophical than racial or political grounds. Brother Jack's glass eye (he is half blind) cannot penetrate the dark waters of Harlem. His peculiar brand of unreality ignores the unpredictable element at the core of our humanity which transcends politics and

science and history and is at once more fundamental and mysterious than these. In an organization which is proud of its willingness to sacrifice the individual on the altar of history, the protagonist remains as invisible as ever.... Eventually he realizes that behind the façade of party discipline Brother Jack has been 'running' him no less cynically than Norton or Bledsoe. It is then that he takes to the cellar, in order to renew his sense of self. His sense of self has in fact been threatened all along, by the ambiguous position of the Negro in the Communist movement. On the one hand, he is constantly reminded of his Negro heritage and encouraged to embrace it; on the other, he is warned against the dangers of black chauvinism and offered all the inducements of universal brotherhood.

This conflict between assimilationism and Negro nationalism is not new to the protagonist: he has passed through a phase of 'white' (bourgeois) assimilationism... He now enters a period of 'red' (revolutionary) assimilationism, in which his racial ties are subtly weakened through identification with a broader cause. This phase is symbolized by his abandonment of Mary, his landlady-mother, and his acceptance of new 'living quarters' provided by the Brotherhood. But he cannot shed his old skin so easily. The grinning statuette which he tries unsuccessfully to discard and the leg chain presented to him by Brother Tarp are symbolic links to his racial past.

The inner doubts and reservations of the colored Brothers are strikingly projected in the magnificent figure of Ras the Destroyer. Ras (race) is a black nationalist, a West Indian agitator modeled upon Marcus Garvey, who would ban the sale of chicken breasts in Harlem if he could. In an attempt to drive the Brotherhood out of Harlem, he engages the protagonist and his chief lieutenant Tod Clifton, in a savage street fight. Winning the upper hand over Clifton, Ras is unable to kill him because they are blood brothers... Ras' strength lies in the fact that he is not far from the mark in his appraisal of the white race, and not least of the Brotherhood. It is his all-important margin of error, his black vengeance and unrelenting hatred, which makes him a Destroyer.

Tod Clifton now comes to the fore as Ellison's symbol of a tragically divided personality. When, as Ras predicted, the Brotherhood betrays the Negro struggle, Clifton cracks under the strain and takes 'the plunge outside of history.' The protagonist discovers him on a downtown sidewalk, peddling an obscene, self-mocking image called 'Sambo the Dancing Doll.' This spiritual death (Tod) is quickly objectified when Clifton is brutally shot down by a policeman while resisting arrest for a minor misdemeanor. Stunned by the murder, the protagonist stumbles into a subway station, where he notices two nuns, one colored and the other white. The rhyme which spins through his dazed consciousness expresses his final attitude toward even the most sincere of his white allies: 'Bread and Wine / Bread and Wine / Your cross ain't nearly so/ Heavy as mine.'

Like Clifton, the protagonist is threatened by destruction from his own nationalist impulses; but in running from them, he discovers invisibility... The dark glasses provide a point of departure for his speculations. Through their murky green, the world appears as a merging fluidity of forms... This fluid conception of reality, the protagonist now perceives, is far more accurate than the rigid categories of the Brotherhood. Here, he reflects, is the crux of his quarrel with the Communists. In a fluid universe nothing is impossible; freedom is the recognition not only of necessity but of possibility.

The final chapter of *Invisible Man* is a freely distorted version of the Harlem riot of August 1943. Against a surrealistic background of looting and shooting, the major conflicts of the novel are resolved. Rinehartism, to begin with, is discarded for a less manipulative form of invisibility. For a time the protagonist has toyed with the idea of sabotaging the Brotherhood from within, but during the riot, when he discovers the full extent of their perfidy, he abandons any attempt to beat power at its own game. Authentically enough, he withdraws not merely from Stalinist politics but from politics as such. His retreat from politics, however, is somewhat mitigated by the episode of the tenement fire. When a well-organized group of tenants deliberately burns down the filthy tenement in which they have lived and suffered, his faith in the masses, if not their self-appointed leaders, is restored.

Meanwhile, Ras appears astride a great black horse, dressed in the costume of an Abyssinian warrior, complete with shield and spear. He is out to spear him a white cop, as one of the bystanders observes, and to convert the riot into a race war. In a symbolic encounter the protagonist effectively silences his inner

Ras, but in fleeing the scene he meets a gang of white hoodlums armed with baseball bats. Running for his life, he plunges through an open manhole into a coal cellar, where he can at last enjoy the safety of invisibility. He falls asleep and dreams of being surrounded by his enemies—all those who in one way or another have run his life. When he announces grimly that he is through running, they reply collectively, 'Not quite.' They advance upon him with a knife, and at last they leave him in command of his own destiny—castrated, but free of illusion.

In the end, Ellison succeeds brilliantly in rendering blackness visible. By far the best novel yet written by an American Negro, *Invisible Man* is quite possibly the best American novel since World War II. In any event, Ellison has set a high standard for contemporary Negro fiction. There was a period in the history of the Negro novel when a simple literacy was to be marveled at. Now, a century after Brown's *Clotel*, historical relativity is no longer a valid attitude. With the appearance of such novels as *Cane*, *Native Son*, and *Invisible Man*, the reading public has a right to expect no less than the best from the serious Negro artist."

Robert A. Bone
The Negro Novel in America
(1958; Yale 1965) 196-212

"The novel is a furious picaresque which plunges the hero forward through a series of violences. Moreover, it is *all* an initiation rite. The hero moves from childhood to the age of manhood, and from the South to the North, and he is one of those heroes who move from the provinces to the capital, to the center of power, from innocence to experience. He moves, moreover, through what seems at all points a linear exploration of the 'Negro problem,' through ideologies by which it might be approached, and beyond that, through what one of the symbolic structures of the novel suggests is an exploration of some one hundred years of American history. But for all the multiplicity of parallel actions, the novel has no real progress except that at each state it clarifies and reinforces the hero's dilemma....

All the novel's purpose is reiterated constantly...as its basic metaphor is elaborated: the hero is invisible because no one sees him, and it is the function of every episode to confirm the fact that this black man is condemned to a hopeless struggle to be seen.... And the issue of each of these adventures is a race riot of one dimension or another, and that is the point of them all. An earnest, yea-saying young man reluctant to be a saboteur explores the typical relationships between Negroes and whites and finds them charged with incipient violence, needing but the slightest accident to set them off. The hero moves from one episode to another because in every one an accident happens. The accident is always a slight and unavoidable lapse from the propriety he struggles to maintain.... [He is] expelled from college because, so the college president tells him, he has actually obeyed the wishes of a white man and not merely seemed to....

In Mr. Norton he meets postwar Northern liberalism itself...he has degenerated into patricianism.... He finds his significant ancestry in Ralph Waldo Emerson, but his Emersonianism has evaporated into fleecy liberal platitudes.... The descent by Mr. Norton on Trueblood is the equivalent of a visit to antiquity, to slavery. Trueblood, a remote peasant, lives in a cabin built during slavery times, and Norton finds it astonishing that it has endured.... And when Norton uses Trueblood as the scapegoat of his own guilts, all unconsciously, he is as unconsciously finding his way back to the historical source of his philanthropy, and thereby saying something about post-bellum Boston liberalism. His philanthropy contains, much as did slavery, a profound and hidden economics of exploitation.

Mr. Norton hopefully enters the saloon called the Golden Day, and he is shocked. The episode condenses numbers of bitter ironies. *The Golden Day*, Lewis Mumford's book describing the efflorescence of American culture in the years 1830-1860, stands at once for the inspiration of Mr. Norton's liberalism and its end, and it is another irony that the period described by Mumford's phrase is that as well of the efflorescence of slavery. The golden day is filled with the spirit of Abolition, and the clients of the Golden Day saloon are men risen beyond slavery. They are teachers, scientists, lawyers, physicians, the end products of the progressive liberalism that set them free, and they are all crazy....

His reconstruction in the South having failed, having in fact collapsed into riot, the hero participates next in that next epochal event of his racial history, the Great Migration—a migration from the South to the

North, the traditional road of freedom, from the country to the city, from agrarianism to industry. The Great Migration is to be another promise of progress in freedom which is not redeemed. Its end, too, is chaos bared, because it is just the same promise as that which was implicit in the liberalism of the golden day. Now that liberalism is even more distant from its source, and it has been progressively emasculated.... Come to industry, he discovers that the promise in the Great Migration was just a device of industrial capitalism, that he is an unwitting and certainly an unwilling weapon wielded against labor unionism....

He becomes a laborer in a paint factory called Liberty Paints whose pride is its Optic White, a paint that will cover just about anything. The paint is so very white, he discovers, because it is made with a dash of black dope.... The plant has typically been hiring Negroes in order to undersell its union labor, and so the hero is caught in a contest between labor and capital which has become another contest between white and black. The conflict in this episode is between the local union and the plant's representative Uncle Tom, the right dope. The hero is an innocent who in his innocence will choose neither side. He is therefore a traitor to both sides, and so he brings about an explosion....

The Brotherhood is not brotherly at all. It uses the hero in order to manipulate Negroes to its own ends of sabotage and disruption. It should be said that the Brotherhood Ellison invents is just as mysteriously malignant as the Communist Party that was being invented in the late 1940s.... Whatever else the Brotherhood is, it is secretive, un-American, and it is grotesque.... As he joins the Brotherhood, the hero glimpses for the first time 'the possibility of being more than a member of a race.' But the joke is on him. It is precisely a Negro that the Brotherhood wants him to be. It fixes his place. Brother Jack, in their first meeting, objects that 'you fellows always talk in terms of race!' but another member feels it would be better if the hero were a little blacker.... And so, all Brotherhood doctrine would seem to say, the race war is subsumed by and solved by the class war....

To wage the class war instead is not only the way toward freedom, but it is freedom itself. Like other Negro intellectuals during the Great Depression, the hero accepts this unique promise provided by the Great Depression. There is an alternative only in the futile nationalism of Marcus Garvey, for whom in the novel, Ras the Exhorter-Destroyer stands. But then the Communist Party did not secure its promise, and so neither does the Brotherhood. It abruptly withdraws its concerns for Harlem—and the hero comes on the fact that the race and the class wars are not identical....

At a Brotherhood party he is asked to sing a spiritual—'all colored people sing.' He is made to lecture on the Woman Question—the Brotherhood in effect offers him white women—and his first convert tells him that he is 'so—so primitive!'... The wife of a Brotherhood leader calls him a 'buck' and begs him to rape her. He is the house Dionysus. What the Brotherhood would have him be is presented to him in the crazy, bitter self-destruction of another Negro brother, Tod Clifton... selling tissue-and-cardboard dancing Black Sambo dolls... It is a darky entertainer, a cardboard satyr on an invisible string, and though the hero doesn't know it, it is presented to him by Tod as a portrait of the hero as the Brotherhood's Negro....

He attends the Brotherhood's social events at an apartment house named the Chthonian. He attempts to secure secret information about the Brotherhood from a girl named Sybil—as Aeneas consulted the sibyl before he entered the underworld. From the beginning his grandfather had spoken to him from the grave. The technically accommodated Negro of the paint plant had been an underground man. The Brotherhood itself is a secret, underground organization. The hero's progress all along has been a descent....

The Negro in the movement who is the most successful brother is an opportunistic Uncle Tom, Brother Wrestrum, who in a passion to deny Negro-ness becomes the white man's Negro, does the Brotherhood's dirty work, and becomes its rest room. The Brotherhood's chief theoretician is white Brother Hambro who would be a brother to Ham, the ancestor of Negroes, but he equably tells the hero that the Negro members will have to be sacrificed to a higher plan. 'Brother Jack,' the hero comes to know, is the equivalent of 'Marse Jack'... He resolves, precisely, to yes the movement to death—but not before it has made him the unwitting instrument of a riot in Harlem that is the battle royal all over again. Brother Tod is shot on Forty-Second Street by a white policeman...and Tod precedes him into the underworld....

The speeches of Ras are, it happens, far more eloquent than any made by the hero. It is clear that Ellison found it easier to be eloquent on Ras's behalf.... Negro life contains the necessity for hiding, duplicity, treachery, for adopting shifting roles while the real reality goes on beneath. And the perfect metaphor for all the advice he has received is invisibility. Invisibility is the lesson in his penultimate fall into the Harlem underworld, into, as it were, the heart of darkness. Pursued, ironically, by Ras's black legions, the hero puts on a pair of dark glasses and a wide-brimmed hat, and in that disguise he makes a discovery of identity....

The significant thing about Rinehart is that he has no positive identity, only a shifting appearance.... As a runner he would seem to be a nigger boy who has kept running but who has made a function of it, who somehow has come to own the track. As a minister, he is a priest precisely of the Invisible....he is, someone says, a 'confidencing sonofabitch'—with clear antecedence in Melville's *Confidence Man*. He is a master of disguises and a master of chaos. It is Rinehart who finally teaches the hero his new metaphysics of irrationality. When the hero puts on Rinehart's dark glasses, he is struck by the fluidity of the forms he sees through the lenses.... Rinehart is the incarnation of the invisible. Rinehart is the culmination, too, of the historical process the hero has been in all his adventures tracing. Rinehart is the underground, the secret of Harlem, the complicated city. He is a master of the latest inventions....

There is a paradox in the fact that the hero's place in the world is underneath the ground, out of the world, but then the paradox is twisted again when the hero converts his hole in the ground into a home. His coal cellar, Ellison has himself pointed out, is not a sewer, but a source of heat and light and power. The hero converts all his losses to assertion. In fact he has found his politics and his person, and he has made sense out of his history, and so in his fall there is finally an ascension."

Marcus Klein
After Alienation: American Novels in Mid-Century
(World/Meridian 1962) 107-42

"Nothing has been more striking in post-war American fiction than the shifting emphasis in the novel as written by Negroes. The seminal novel, as seminal for its time as Wright's *Native Son* was, is Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man* (1952).... Reading this first chapter of *Invisible Man* without knowledge of what is to follow, one would, I think, almost automatically assume that it was naturalistic; though the pace is, in fact, much swifter than one normally associates with naturalism, and it is impossible to ignore in the prose itself a note of subdued and controlled hysteria. Very soon it is evident that, whatever else it may be, *Invisible Man* is not a piece of naturalism. It is a symbolic novel rendered in terms of the picaresque.

The boy, whose name we never know, is expelled from college through no fault of his own. He goes North and finds a job in a white paint factory on Long Island, where he is injured through the malice of another Negro. He becomes the subject of experiments in the factory hospital. In Harlem, he is taken by the Communist Party, which betrays him. The line has changed and the Party is now supporting a group of race-fanatics not unlike the Rastafarians of Jamaica.

By the end of the novel we have almost forgotten the hero is a Negro; certainly as a symbol of any specific Negro problem he has disappeared altogether. That his is intentional is plain from the incidental symbolism, as, for example, in the factory scenes of Negroes working underground to make a black liquid which, brought into the sunlight, turns paint white. Indeed, the hero is any man and every man... And presumably the hero is nameless for the same reason as the central character in Kafka's *The Trial* is known only as K: to reinforce the suggestion not only of invisibility—an invisible man has no use for a name—but also impersonality and universality. The nameless man contains, as it were, all men.

It is from Kafka that the novel in part derives. While the individual scenes that compose the book bear the immediate impression of actuality, they have the surrealistic vividness, the unnatural clarity as well as the convincing illogic, of dream rather than of real life, or, if of real life, then of life surrounded, to use Ellison's words, by mirrors of hard, distorting glass... Kafka is not the only source of the novel. There is also Melville's *The Confidence Man* [and *Benito Cereno*]."

Walter Allen
The Modern Novel in Britain and the United States

“Ellison has more in common as a novelist with Joyce, Melville, Camus, Kafka, West, and Faulkner than he does with other serious Negro writers like James Baldwin and Richard Wright. To concentrate on the idiom of a serious novel, no matter how distinctive its peculiarities, is to depreciate it, to minimize the universality of its implications. Though the protagonist of *Invisible Man* is a southern Negro, he is, in Ellison’s rendering, profoundly all of us....

Ellison’s novel chronicles a series of initiatory experiences through which its naïve hero learns, to his disillusion and horror, the way of the world. However, unlike these other novels of passage, *Invisible Man* takes place, for the most part, in the uncharted spaces between the conscious and the unconscious, in the semilit darkness where nightmare verges on reality and the external world has all the aspects of a disturbing dream.... In each of the various analogous episodes, the hero is torn between his implicit commitment to his grandfather’s position—subversive acquiescence—and his will to identity—the primal instinct of self-assertion.... In taking on a succession of identities, the invisible hero undergoes an increasingly intense succession of disillusioning experiences, each one paralleling and anticipating the one following it. The hero’s final loss of illusion forces him underground into the coffin (and womb) of the earth to be either finally buried or finally reborn.... Though at the time he understands his grandfather’s ambiguous creed only imperfectly, the hero recognizes that it is somehow his heritage.... Consequently, the hero suffers a sense of guilt...for failing somehow to effect his grandfather’s ends...

In magnification, Harlem is the prize ring where the Negroes, blindfolded this time by demagoguery, flail at each other with misdirected violence. The context has changed from South to North, from white citizens to the Brotherhood, from a hired ballroom to all of Harlem, but the implication remains the same: the Negro is victimized by having his potency turned against himself by his impotent persecutor.... He is, on the rug as in the boxing ring, degraded by self-interest.... The rug becomes electrified, the gold coins turn out to be brass—a means, like the bout, of mocking the Negro’s envied potency. That the fight and electrification follow in sequence the naked belly dancer in the course of an evening of stag entertainment for tired white businessmen indicates the obscene prurience behind the white citizen’s hatred of the Negro. By debasing and manipulating the Negro’s potency, the white mutes its threat and at the same time experiences it vicariously... The white man’s fascination with the Negro as a source of power (potency) is another of the thematic threads that holds together what might otherwise be a picaresque succession of disparate episodes....

The president of the Negro college, Dr. Bledsoe (all of Ellison’s names characterize their bearers), entrusts the hero, up to then a model student, with the responsibility of chauffeuring a philanthropic white trustee, Mr. Norton, on a tour of the manicured country surrounding the campus.... Jim Trueblood, the area’s black sheep, an ‘unenlightened’ Negro whose sharecropper existence (and incestuous, child producing, accident with his daughter) is a source of continued embarrassment to the ‘progressive’ community of the college. The hero would like to leave, but Norton, curiously fascinated by the fact that Trueblood has committed incest (and survived), insists on talking with the sharecropper. At Norton’s prodding, Trueblood tells his story, an extended and graphically detailed account of how he was induced by a dream into having physical relations with his daughter.... As Trueblood finishes his story, we discover in a moment of ironic revelation that the bloodless Norton is a kind of euphemistic alter ego—a secret sharer—of the atavistic Trueblood....

Trueblood, then, has committed the very sin that Norton has, in the dark places of his spirit, impotently coveted. Upon hearing Trueblood’s story, Norton participates vicariously in his experience, has his own quiescent desires fulfilled while exempted, since Trueblood has acted for him, from the stigma of the act. Underlying Norton’s recurrent platitude that ‘the Negro is my fate’ (he means that they are his potency) is the same prurience that motivates the sadism of the white citizens in the preceding scene. However, in an ironic way, Trueblood is Norton’s fate. When Trueblood finishes his story, Norton feels compelled to pay him, as the white citizens reward the Negro boxers, in exchange for, in a double sense, having performed for him. When Norton (who exists here really as an idea rather than a character) leaves Trueblood’s farm, he is exhausted and colorless, as if he had in fact just committed incest with his own daughter....

Bledsoe's act of victimization (the beating of Negro by Negro) is analogous to the punishment the hero received in the prize ring at the hands of the largest of the other Negro boys. Bledsoe's deceit, like its analog, is motivated by the desire to ingratiate himself with the white society which dispenses rewards—which provides, or so he believes, the source of his power. As one episode parallels another, each vignette in itself has allegorical extensions.... The mixing of the black into the white is, of course, symbolic: the ten drops are analogous to the ten boys in the prize ring, and in each case the white becomes whiter by absorbing the Negro's virility, by using the black to increase the strength of the white.... That the paint passes for white in Kimbro's eyes suggests that the black with which it was mixed was, like the hero's existence, to all intents and purposes, invisible....

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.... The clinical attitude of the psychologist ('society will suffer no traumata on his account') suggests 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—emasculatation; the difference is essentially one of means. The narrator is, in this scene, almost visibly invisible, discussed impersonally in his presence as if he were not there.... In describing his birth from the machine, Ellison suggests through evocation that it is also a kind of castration. Insofar as it leaves the hero without the potency of self...

In following the dictates of the Brotherhood, the hero has hurt, he discovers to his pain, the very people he has intended to help. Without the benefit of glasses and hat, he has been a Rinehart in disguise all the time. He has been, paradoxically, an unwitting cynic. Duped by his self-conscious, romantic ambitions to be another Booker T. Washington, the hero has let the Brotherhood use him for their cynical 'historic' purposes. As a Brotherhood agent, he demagogically incites the Harlem Negroes to potential action only to leave them prey to the misdirected violence of Ras, their violence ultimately turned, like that of the boys in the prize ring, against themselves. With awareness comes responsibility, and the hero recognizes that he alone must bear the guilt for the Brotherhood's betrayal of the Negro. The ramifications of his awful responsibility are manifested generally in the hellish Harlem riot at the end of the novel and particularly in the disillusion and death of the most admirable of the Brotherhood, Tod Clifton...whose career prophecies and parallels that of the hero....

Ras, after sparing Tod's life, has exhorted his adversary to leave the Brotherhood and join his racist movement (a fictionalized version of the Black Muslims). Their confrontation, an objectification of the hero's interior struggle, anticipates Tod's defection from the Brotherhood.... In this eloquent scene, Clifton finally rejects Ras, but he is undeniably moved by his enemy's crude exhortation. Ras—the name suggests an amalgam of race and rash—is a fanatic, but given his basic premise, that the white man is the Negro's natural enemy, his arguments are not easily refutable. Unable to answer Ras, Clifton, out of a sense of shame or guilt, knocks the Exhorter down, committing an act of Rasian violence.... Clifton is sympathetic to Ras's motives, but he is nevertheless too civilized to accept his methods....

Entrapped by the Brotherhood through the commitment imposed by his integrity, Clifton becomes, even more than the narrator, a victim of the Brotherhood's betrayal.... In giving himself up to be murdered, Clifton takes on the whole responsibility for the Brotherhood's betrayal of the Negro.... If the various characters with whom the 'invisible' hero is confronted represent possible states of being, Clifton symbolizes the nearest thing to an ideal. Clifton's death, because it permits the hero to organize the Negroes around a common cause (the narrator's funeral oration is a magnificent parody of Antony's [in Shakespeare]) is potentially an agency of good, for Clifton can be considered in a meaningful sense a sacrifice. However, even that is denied him. At the last minute the Brotherhood withdraws its support from the hero, and, left to their own devices and the exhortation of Ras, the aroused Negroes perform arbitrary acts of plunder and violence. That Clifton's death initiates the Harlem riots, which serve the Brotherhood's new purpose of pacifying the Negro by exhausting his hate-charged energies in meaningless self-conflict, is a last mockery of his decent intentions....

Clifton was an essentially gentle man racked by rage—he became a heckler of the Brotherhood, of the Negro, of the white man” treatment of the Negro, of himself, of the universe. Though he is one of the few noble characters in Ellison” world, his destruction is less than tragic. A man of tragic stature, Clifton is a captive participant in an absurd world which derogates him and mocks the significance of his death as it did his life. Clifton’s sacrificial act, its intention perverted, is mostly invisible. The others of the Brotherhood—Westrum (rest room), Tobitt (two bit), Jack (money, masturbation)—who in their commitment to ‘science’ have become as dehumanized and corrupt as those they oppose, survive the shift in tactical policy. When the hero discovers that it is through him that the Brotherhood has betrayed Clifton, he feels responsible for his friend’s death.

Earlier, in outrage he spat at one of Clifton’s dancing puppets, knocking it ‘lifeless,’ performing symbolically what the policeman does actually—the murder of Clifton. When the hero knocks over the doll, an onlooker laughs at what he thinks is the likeness between the spitter and the spat-on doll. Just as Clifton in selling the obscene doll has been mocking himself, the hero in spitting at the doll has been mocking himself as well as Clifton, though without benefit of awareness. Only after his showdown with the Brotherhood, and even then incompletely, does the hero become aware that he has been performing all along as if he were, in life size, the dancing puppet doll....

Aware of the futility of all his past acts and, in implication, all acts in the absurd context of his world, the hero commits an act of meaningless violence. Entrapped by a situation for which he is at least partly responsible, with his neck quite literally at stake (Ras wants to hang him), he impales the demonic innocent, Ras, through the jaw with his own spear. That Jack, the leader of the Brotherhood, has one eye (as earlier the euphemistic preacher Barbee is revealed as blind) is symbolic of the distorted perspective of the Brotherhood’s ‘scientifically objective view” of society, in which the human being is a casual puppet in the service of the ‘historic’ strings that manipulate him. Clifton makes only paper Negroes dance; it is Jack and Tobitt who treat flesh-and-blood Negroes as if they were puppet Sambo dolls. (By having Clifton charge a ‘brotherly two bits’ for the puppet dolls, Ellison, through suggestion, transfers the onus of traitor to Tobitt and in extension to the Brotherhood itself.) When the hero discovers that the Brotherhood has betrayed him, he consciously resolves to impersonate the puppet doll he has so long mimicked unwittingly—to, as his grandfather advised, ‘overcome ‘em with yeses....

The flaming buildings and streets, the burnt tar stench, the black figures moving shadowlike through the eerily illumined night become an evocation of Hell, a mirror for the hero’s raging interior guilt. At the center of the riot—at the very seat of Hell—he experiences the deaths of his various corrupted identities, shedding the false skins to get at the pure invisibility underneath. As Ras approaches, the hero searches for his ‘Rineharts,’ his dark glasses, only to ‘see the crushed lenses fall to the street....as if he had just witnessed Rinehart himself—his Rinehart self—collapse in death before him. To propitiate Ras and stop the riots, the hero disavows allegiance to the Brotherhood, killing in effect his Brotherhood self. But as he is invisible, he is unheard.... The hero, faced with death, decides that it is ‘better to live out one’s own absurdity than to die for that of others, whether for Ras’s or Jack’s.’ When in self-protection he impales Ras, who is in a sense the deepest of his identities, he experiences the illusion of death and rebirth: ‘It was as though for a moment I had surrendered my life and begun to live again’....

Newly baptized by an exploded water main, like the birth from the machine, a somewhat illusory (and comic) resurrection, the hero seeks to return to Mary, his exlandlady, who has become a symbolic mother to him. But as he is unable to imitate Christ, he is unable to reach Mary. Instead, chased by two white looters, he falls through an open manhole...having returned at last to the womb of the earth. It is, as he puts it, a ‘death alive,’ from which emergence will be rebirth, his victimization transcended, his guilt perhaps purged, his soul if possible redeemed....an invisible man by choice, the hero continues to live in his private cellar, which he has illumined by 1,369 lights (a symbolic attempt at transcending his invisibility—at seeing himself)... As the whites had mocked his potency and used it for their own ends, he is now paying them back in kind. Though he is protected from the pain of disillusion while isolated from the brutal, absurd world he hates and, in spite of himself, loves, the hero plans some day to emerge into the outside world because...he is willing to believe that ‘even the invisible victim is responsible for the fate of all’...

One is compelled to admire the range and resourcefulness of Ellison's imaginative constructions—but because they are all extensions of the same externally imposed idea; they all *mean* approximately the same thing.... For all that, Ellison has written a major novel, perhaps one of the three or four most considerable American novels of the past two decades.... His excesses are also his strength; like Faulkner before him, Ellison is a writer of amazing verbal energy and at his best he creates experiences that touch our deepest selves, that haunt us with the suffocating wisdom of nightmare.”

Jonathan Baumbach

The Landscape of Nightmare: Studies in the Contemporary American Novel
(1965; NYU 1967) 68-86

“Unlike Wright and other notable black writers, Ellison is the spokesman for the ‘infinite possibilities’ that he feels is inherent in the condition of being an artist rather than a Negro artist. He repeatedly states in his essays that his primary concern is not the social but rather the aesthetic responsibilities of the writer.... Influenced by T. S. Eliot whom he calls his literary ancestor, Ellison combines the literary past and the memory and culture of the individual with the present, thus placing the contemporary writer alongside the other men who have written in the English language.... His comment on *Native Son* was that ‘Bigger Thomas had none of the fine qualities of Richard Wright, none of the imagination, none of the sense of poetry, the sense of gaiety,’ and Ellison summarily preferred Wright to Bigger Thomas. The younger writer always thought of himself as an artist taken up with the magical quality of writing and the poetry of it, while Richard Wright, he felt, was overcommitted to ideology....

The name Ralph Waldo indeed had magic for it enabled Ellison to see the power of the myth and to envision the role that myth could play in achieving his aim.... As Ralph Waldo Emerson could merge the myths and attitudes of New England into his philosophy of Transcendentalism, Ralph Waldo Ellison would merge that essential element, the nature of blacklore and life style, into American literature—and myth could be the carrier.... By 1945, Ellison had devised a plan for a book which would incorporate the myth and literature of the Western world into the experience of the American black man. This book would reveal the travelings of the mind as it escaped from the darkness of illusion into the light of reality....

In addition to the belief that he could be a Renaissance man, Ellison wanted to be a great musician. His youth and dreams were obsessed by his love of music both in the classical field which he studied at school and in the blues and jazz that he heard in the black community around him. The sense of timing, the flow of lyricism developed through this first love comes to fruition in *Invisible Man* and is one of the most beautiful aspects of the book....

Like Joyce's *Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, a book which has greatly influenced Ellison's work, *Invisible Man* has been called the story of a young man's search for his identity. Both heroes must escape from the illusions and limitations of their environments in order to find themselves. Joyce's Stephen has to confront his Irish, Catholic, and family traditions. Ellison's hero has to penetrate the illusions built around the fact that he is black, not only in others, but more importantly in himself. As he moves from darkness to light, a basic motif in the book, the hero must encounter variations of deception which attempt to blind him to his image, that as a black man in America, he does not in relation to the rest of his world really exist. This is the substance of the book but actually the hero has found his identity before the book opens....

The narrator's grandfather had simply accepted the fact that Negroes survived by lying to white people and he suggests that the lie is not only the tool for survival but a means of victory as well. But the narrator does not want to believe this and it is precisely by telling the truth, accidentally sometimes, as in the speech he makes at the Battle Royale, that he continues to get into trouble. His grandfather's warnings, though, held another meaning—that a person, a race, a people must not fool itself into believing its own lies.... But in spite of his resistance to the truth, his grandfather's swan song is harsh enough to unsettle him for the rest of his life.... The college is the narrator's religion, its ceremonies, his act of worship. Presiding over this universe, untouchable and benevolent, are the great white fathers, like Mr. Norton who had created this world through the mediation of the Christ-like Negro teacher and leader of his people. Barbee, the blind minister, gives us the full impact of the Founder who could effectively mediate between the gods and the people, since he was brother racially to the people and understood mentally the wishes of the gods.... In exchange for creating this dream-world, Mr. Norton expects, kindly it is true, adoration and power....

Jim Trueblood...commits the unforgivable sin and lives, despite the pronouncement of the gods, while the vet deliberately attacks the supremacy and benevolence of the gods who had supposedly given him so much. During Norton's talk with Trueblood and the vet, the narrator shows signs of increasing disturbance and fear, for these men were talking to white men as if they were simply other men, not gods. These men were speaking the truth. The vet, protected by his status as an insane man, says ironically: 'You don't have to be a complete fool to succeed. Play the game but don't believe in it.'

Bledsoe, president of the college, tells the narrator the whole truth, puts his finger exactly on what was wrong with the Golden-Day episode, why it was actual treason, and why the hero must be expelled from the college: 'You're dangerous, boy, why the dumbest black bastard in the cotton patch knows that the only way to please a white man is to tell him a lie'... So much for the American Dream. The dream-world college is built on a lie, Bledsoe knows it, he assumes every Negro does; but our narrator naively believes that he is telling the truth when in fact he has not even found it. Bledsoe lives in the doctrine of the grandfather. He is the first of the long line of yes-ers in the book, of people who are used by and use white people and who know exactly where it's at. He represents for the invisible man his first concrete glimpse into the real world and the narrator never forgives him for it.

The trip North, archetypal for the black man in this country, precipitates the hero's search for work and then for his own identity. Cast out from the dream-world college, both physically and spiritually, he descends into Mister Brockway's underground hole where Optic White paint is made. The irony of this scene is hilarious as Ellison juxtaposes the supreme lie of the Negro 'white is right' with the slogan of the company, 'If it's Optic White, it's the right white.' Why not whitewash everything? Just as Negroes had conveniently told whites that they were right when in fact they knew they weren't, Lucius Brockway improves on the saying by turning it into a slogan which gives him prestige in the eyes of the man upstairs. The whole gives him prestige in the eyes of the man upstairs.

The whole nightmarish experience, underlined by the hero's first attempt at violence and by the serious injury he receives, his first literal blow on the head, is a preparation for one of Ellison's most impressive pieces, the surrealistic hospital dream of castration and loss of identity that the narrator suffers. Dreams had been used before in the book. 'Keep that nigger running,' the dream caused by his grandfather's words, is a father to the horrifying dream sequence that the hero now experiences. Music, too, plays an essential part in dramatizing the trauma of the nightmare. Beethoven's Fifth becomes unbearable and is pitted against the hero's childhood songs now magnified in horrifying proportions in his dream. Although the Invisible Man knows who Brer Rabbit is, he hasn't learned what this cunning fellow, essential to Negro folklore, really represents. Brer Rabbit, the symbol of the yes-er who destroys through yessing, knows when he is conning and when he is not. The hero is still trapped by his wish to believe that in fact he can survive by deceiving himself.

The nightmare with all its grotesque images of the hero's past indicates that he does know unconsciously the truth but that the mind with its affinity for rationality cannot stand for the absurdity that is implied in the truth. How can his mind grasp the fact that he does not really exist?... At this point in the story, the intensity of the action subsides; the narrator becomes 'cool' as he withdraws from society for the first time. This time it is not into the hole but into the warm generous arms of Mary, Mary Rambo, whom he does not think of as a friend but as a force, familiar and stabilizing. And during this hibernation with Mary, we see the hero wrestle with his benefactor. Mary belongs to his past for she insists that he do something, that he be one of those men who will save his people. But he becomes more and more convinced that anything he could do would only be futile.

This time the feeling of futility lasts only for a little while. The voice of the past wins out. The hero returns to society as he is reminded by those hot juicy yams as to who he is and that he had tried to suppress his past in his dream-world college. It is no accident, I think, that Ellison follows up the eating of yams with the eviction scene in which the hero speaks his mind. But this time he speaks an accepted lie, 'We are a law-abiding people,' in order to provoke and arouse the crowd to action. For the first time in the book he feels potent and alive. Just as Bigger Thomas becomes aware of his own life through the murder he had unintentionally committed, so too Ellison's hero comes to life as he destroys the false myth that Negroes can and will suffer anything.

But another obstacle is placed in the hero's path before he can see it like it is. Intrigued by the power and stability which the brotherhood represents, he becomes a part of their group. Again, he feels, as he had at college, that he is engaged in discovering and promoting the truth, that he has gained recognition, that he is living a significant life. However, just as Barbee, the blind minister, has perpetuated the myth of the great Christlike Founder, so Jack, the one-eyed leader of the Brotherhood, worships the myth of history. As patronizing as Norton, Jack leads the hero into another deception, that in history, there is salvation and that salvation can be attained through subordinating the individual to a cause bigger than himself. Thus, in dealing with Christianity and Communism, and in relating them to each other, Ellison presents two important paths by which black people have tried to find themselves. [This implicitly equates Barbee with Jesus Christ, and Christianity with Communism, as equally untrustworthy—ironic falsehoods for a critic named Christian.]

That Ellison calls his organization the Brotherhood rather than the Communist Party, which it obviously is, is significant, I believe. For what he might be suggesting is that the essence of any such *ism* is an abstraction such as 'history saves.' And that when push comes to shove, this abstraction rules and controls the living entities within it. Harlem is only a political entity to Jack.... History, as Jack sees it, is a means of imposing order on chaos. It is not the reality itself; it is an ideal which is imposed on the real. Thus, the problem of scientific objectivity, the ritual of this organization, is the first obstacle that the hero now turned orator faces when he joins the Brotherhood. Many brothers protest that although his speeches are effective, they are not scientific. And when the narrator, angered by the fact that the organization will not avenge the death of Tod Clifton, accuses Brother Hambro of being mechanical, communication between him and the organization falls apart. The organization called for the sacrifice of Harlem, but then narrator sees that 'for them it was simple, but hell, I was both sacrificer and victim. *That was reality.* They did not have to put the knives to their own throats.'

Enraged by the brotherhood's betrayal, the hero looks for another alternative. Ras and Rinehart, the two powerful figures who dominate the rest of the book, represent other means of existence. The narrator's introduction to Ras is worth looking at closely since Ras represents a complete departure from the other characters in the book. He is definitely visible (perhaps the only completely visible person in the book) in the most dangerous fashion imaginable. Tod Clifton acknowledges after his street brawl with Ras: 'But it's on the inside that Ras is strong. On the inside he's dangerous.' The narrator misreads Clifton's comment as he believes the inside that Tod is talking about to be the inside of the Brotherhood. Tod's tragic end itself, though, is a testimony to the truth of Ras' philosophy. The narrator, helpless, looks on as Tod, months later, goes nuts, peddling Sambo dolls on Times Square, and is finally gunned down by the police.... And Ras is nuts to those who do not understand his logic, his existence, his visibility. The narrator obviously does not understand that the militant Ras is an alternative to his present existence, as can be seen in their encounter during the riots.

Rinehart, however, is an alternative to our nameless hero—Rinehart, numbers runner, preacher, lover, conman, whose invisibility gives him the potential to live more than one life at the same time—who indulges in the infinite possibilities of life. Rinehart is an urban Brer Rabbit; he yesses everybody. This multiple personality knows that the people around him recognize him only by his outer trappings, that the people are blind and that he can take advantage of their blindness. Rinehart is a boldface liar, but he has flair and is effective precisely because he knows that he does not really exist. The hero's one night transformation into Rinehart brings him to the realization that 'the people who define him are blind, but blind, hearing only the echoes of their own voices. And because they were blind, they would destroy themselves and he would help them.' In a Rinehart fashion, the hero sees that 'it was a joke, an absurd joke.' Once the narrator's mind accepts the absurdity of his world [Existentialism], he is able to see himself as he really is.... Now he knows he is invisible, what should he do? Well, he could be a Rinehart, 'he could overcome them with yesses, undermine them with grins, he could agree them to death and destruction....

But it is too late to become Brer Rabbit. The truth will out and it bursts out violently in the riots, a scene which is packed full of the swift American idiom that Ellison delights in. Rinehartism eventually is bound to fail for the acrobatics that one has to perform to keep it up tries the nerves.... Alas it is seldom successful. The hero, buried alive in his hole at the end of the riots, is most painfully aware of that fact.

The horror of that realization calls up the maddening, powerful, and torturous dream that keeps him in this hole. Accosted by the grotesque figures of Jack, Norton, Bledsoe, and the rest, tortured by their question: 'How does it feel to be free of illusions?' ...

Just as hibernation could not work for Dostoevsky's hero in his underground, so it cannot work for Ellison's hero. It is impossible for both of these intellectuals to protest their situation silently (hibernation is nothing less than passive protest) because of the nature of their minds... It is the mind that puts these heroes in hell and it is the pain of consciousness that forces them to murder an old self and create a new one.... If Ellison's novel had ended with that dream [at the end of the novel], it would fall into the well-known category of the absurd along with the French existentialists of the '40s and the American playwrights of today. But that mind won't leave the hero be. He has progressed from being blind to being invisible.... As the invisible man prepares (perhaps) to leave his hole, he gives us a more credible reason for doing so. Could it be that we're all invisible men? That white men could blind themselves to their own invisibility, but black men could not?"

Barbara Christian

"Ralph Ellison: A Critical Study"

Black Expression: Essays by and About Black Americans in the Creative Arts

ed. Addison Gayle, Jr.

(Weybright & Talley 1969)

"The hero of *Invisible Man*, in the course of a journey from the deep South to Harlem, assumes a variety of poses, most of which he believes in at the time, to fit the white man's definition of a Negro. But each of these roles fails him, and a kind of chaos ensues (barroom brawls, factory, explosions, street fights, race riots and the like), for no one of them takes into account the fluidity and complexity of his individual being.... *Invisible Man* is tragic in the sense that it celebrates the hero's capacity to endure, comic in the sense that he avers the fecundity of life, the wealth of the possibilities he may choose (and he often chooses wrongly) amidst the abundance of chaos....

Each episode serves almost as an extended blues verse, and the narrator becomes the singer. The epilogue brings us back to the present; the reader is returned to the basement room, and the hero tells us that despite his psychic wounds (he has dreamed that he has been castrated), he has not yet given up on life. Hence the novel ends as it had begun, just as the last verse of a blues is frequently the same as the first.... Besides being a kind of symbolic recapitulation of Negro history, the blues structure of the novel suggests a philosophy of history as well—something outside racial determinism, progress, or various ideologies, something indefinably human, unexpected and perhaps nonrational....

As the novel develops, the hero takes on the role of a Negro Everyman, whose adventures and cries of woe and laughter become the history of a people. As a high-school boy in the South, he is a 'Tom'—little better than a darky entertainer; in college, a Booker T. Washington accommodationist. When he moves North, he works as a nonunion laborer and then flirts for a while with Communism. Finally, he becomes a Rinehart, Ellison's word for the unattached, alienated, urban Negro who deliberately endeavors to manipulate the fantasies of whites and Negroes to his own advantage...

The hero, as he sits in his basement room listening to his Louis Armstrong record, passes in illusion into his slave past. In his dream an old slave woman tells him she has poisoned her beloved white master because he reneged on his promise to free her. Her master has sired her two sons who have always hated him. Thus is established the love-hate relationship of whites and Negroes.... The novel then proceeds to record the hero's various initiation rites into invisibility wherein the white man accords him several identities—none of them human. Ultimately his is a journey into self-recognition. He recognizes first that he is invisible—and second, that he is a man....

The college had been endowed in large part by Northern liberals who, since Reconstruction, have endorsed Booker T. Washington's twin principles of equality and caste submission—not only a logical contradiction, but, again, a kind of blindness to reality. But here Ellison is suggesting as well that the Northern white liberal philanthropist demands the invisibility of the Negro no less than his Southern racist counterpart, in order to conceal from himself his ancestors' complicity in Negro slavery....

Trueblood has acted out Norton's own unconscious longings for his daughter. He has thus served the same psychological purposes for Norton (and other whites) as the half-naked struggling boys at the smoker.... Here Ellison suggests the results of a hundred years of white liberal patrimony of the Negro. Large financial donations may afford the givers some illusion of having fulfilled their moral obligations, but failure to recognize the Negro's humanity has produced only a worsening of pain.... Ellison married elements of the Negro's invisible past to the Negro's invisible present: slavery (Trueblood), Reconstruction (the college campus), philanthropy (Norton), and World War I (the veterans)—all resulting in a chaos called The Golden Day....

Bledsoe is the living illustration of the hero's grandfather's dying words. He has 'overcome 'em with yeses.' He informs the hero that he would not have achieved his exalted position had he not played along with the white man's Negro fantasies and cleverly manipulated these psychoses to acquire power for himself.... Thus Bledsoe, despite his abject and humble exterior, is one of the most powerful men in the South, who sustains a vested interest in keeping the Negro invisible....

The hero now strides through the streets of Harlem somehow reassured by the swarming black life about him. He eschews the black middle class that hopelessly and ludicrously models itself on the white bourgeoisie—his first place of residence, Men's House, is a haven for such persons—and lives in a boardinghouse run by Aunt Mary, a formidable mother-earth figure.... But if urban life awakens the hero to emotions of a specific Negro historical identity, as opposed to what Ellison once described as Southern rural 'pre-individualistic attitudes' (that is, an almost total absence of selfhood, a passive attitude toward oneself as being part of an amorphous black mass), the Depression expands these feelings to include an active sense of social responsibility the hero now shares with many other city Negroes....

Black nationalism...is represented in the figure of Ras the Exhorter, an exotic West Indian extremist.... Ras works on the 'inside'; that is, he articulates the frustration, suspicion and anger the Negro has suppressed about his American experience.... Ras, who suggests something of the colorful Marcus Garvey, preaches a doctrine of complete black virtue coupled with an utter distrust of the white man.... Ellison perhaps devotes too much space proportionally to the Communist wooing of the Negro, but these are experiences he knew, after all, firsthand, and the Marxist emphasis on Negro history as being part of a larger dialectical process must have appealed to Ellison's ingrained aesthetic sense.... Here then is the blues theme as applied to history. The accidental, the unplanned, the unforeseen variables of history are symbolized by the presence of the Negro, who...may, on some future occasion, transform events overnight.... Because human beings are involved, history, like blues, records only the possibilities of existence....

At one time or another, the briefcase has contained a small antique cast-iron bank for coins molded in the figure of a red-lipped, minstrel Negro (economic exploitation), a leg shackle (peonage), his high-school diploma (his Jim Crow education), Clifton's Sambo doll (his minstrel role), a letter from Jack identifying him as a Brother, and his dark Rinehart glasses. In jettisoning these, as it were, the hero can come to a true recognition of himself.... Ellison himself has said of his novel that it moves stylistically from naturalism to expressionism to surrealism."

Edward Margolies

Native Sons: A Critical Study of Twentieth-Century Negro American Authors
(Lippincott 1969) 127-48

"*Invisible Man* was *par excellence* the literary extension of the blues. It was as if Ellison had taken an everyday twelve bar blues tune (by a man from down South sitting in a manhole up North in New York singing and signifying about how he got there) and scored it for full orchestra."

Albert Murray

The Omni-Americans: New Perspectives on Black Experience and American Culture
(1970; Avon 1971) 239-40

"Ellison has adapted French existential ideas of freedom, historical necessity, and individual positioning to accommodate the Harlem scene. These are, also, jazz components: group improvisation, individual performance, standing outside while inside.... One can remain in an underground hole as an alternative to

life above, or one can gain strength in the hole for further excursions outside. The latter alternative is often neglected, and black activists who attack Ellison forget: 'Please, a definition: A hibernation is a covert preparation for a more overt action.' Yet even if his protagonist forgoes action, he can choose anti-life, anti-participation, and still live richly. 'I have stayed in my hole, because up above there's an increasing passion to make men conform to a pattern.' The hole brings intensity; outside, enervation....

His line of development is a 1950s reflection of the *Bildungsroman* [novel of education] tradition, in this instance of the simpleton or fool who grows up into a realization of what the world really is, and then, as a result of setbacks, becomes capable of acting on his own condition. Since the narrator is black, his journey becomes a black man's journey, but his experience is not solely a black one. Salinger's Holden in a miniature way parallels Ellison's narrator; the upper-middle-class private school white boy playing the fool, trying to be wise, attempting to grow up in a world of counterfeiters, offering honesty... Ellison's novel does prepare us for the activism of the 1960s: his underground protagonist will emerge as one of the angry young persons of that decade....

The novel rests between end pieces: a Prologue and Epilogue, Dostoyevskian at one end, Kafkaesque at the other; with the main body of the narrative spiked by spatial and temporal openness, intensely American in these respects. The form is basically linear, the experienced life of the novel progressive.... The novel plays off American linear modes against European subterraneanism, American spatiality against Heideggerian notions of Being. The counterpoint or fugal movement derives, in large part, from 'color strategies.' Ellison hangs the novel on a string attached between black and white, in which permutations of extreme color schemes—Optic White, blackness, invisibility, visibility, black man on white Upper East Side, white man in Harlem—create a spectroscopic vision. Ellison's use of color is phenomenological. Since it extends into every aspect of his narrator's existence, color and its variations form a dimension that has little to do with action, progress, even direct relationships between the races. Color becomes, like Melville's use of shadows in *Benito Cereno*—upon which Ellison draws for an epigraph—a metaphysical state, a labyrinthine existence of 'privileged moments,' which exist outside time and space.

I am claiming for the novel something akin to the disordering effects of synesthesia. The color frame of reference carries beyond Realism and empirical data, beyond any realistic-naturalistic narrative; into those dimensions of experience which critics who want protest fiction can never quite get right.... Ellison's protagonist...will rise like the phoenix, as prototypical invisible men do.... The narrative is itself a progression of three unfoldings, what Ellison characterized in the narrator as moving from 'purpose to passion to perception.' I would prefer to see the narrator as passing through various sets of unfoldings in which counterfeit ideas and events give him a slowly increasing perception of himself; so that, finally, as he comes to understand how men and systems work, he is armed....

Bledsoe may be in charge of the Southern black college that the narrator attends, and he may even tell the narrator about the nature of power. But Bledsoe, who thinks that the power given to him is really his, has bled so to achieve this power that he is hollowed, innocent of true comprehension, simply another husk. Similarly, Homer A. Barbee, the spellbinding preacher who pulls out all the rhetorical stops in his chapel address, is, literally, blind. But his blindness confers not wisdom, as it had on the poet Homer, but a condition in which things are invisible, so that he approaches a state not unlike the narrator's. Even the letters Bledsoe gives the narrator—'Keep this nigger boy running'—are elements of blindness. For they are sealed, handed over as top secrets to secretaries; they penetrate into offices set deep within other offices, are perused behind barred doors of power. They are, in their deception, in their counterfeit sentiments, most of all in their physical imagery, the way the country works. As long as the narrator is under their influence—as long as he expects help from external sources—he cannot emerge...

The Epilogue...brings the narrator back into action; it justifies mind now that body is in stasis, and it informs us that he must write about his experience, the narrative itself. In a way, the Epilogue corrects the attitudes of the Prologue. It creates a dialectic of paralysis-activity, both intensifying invisibility and preparing for a greater shining forth.... Ellison needed a counterthrusting of elements, and he achieved this tension by way of three ongoing segments: Prologue, main body of the novel, Epilogue. Each has not only a different time sequencing, but a distinctive modulation of feeling, pacing, progress. The three parts seem interwoven elements of a large-scale symphony or concerto; and this observation would return us to

Ellison's first love, for before he wrote in the language of words, he wrote in that of music. Orchestration, fugal counterpoint, tensions, harmonies are never distant from what I characterize as 'unfolding' of paralysis set against energy; all edged by counterfeit, deception, flummery. For a novel in which whites fail to see blacks, make them invisible, and in which blacks cannot make whites see them, and thus cannot achieve visibility, musical elements are perfect vehicles of expression....

Part of the unfolding of Ellison's novel comes in that expert use of contrast: each stage of consciousness on the narrator's part accompanied by a new stage of manipulation by others. Yet in the process, whose working out is the novel, the narrator gains a greater sense of himself. He escapes from the eviction scene by walking along rooftops, a momentary freedom, a dizziness that derives from accomplishment. But the rooftop walk is followed quickly by a plunge downward, into a subway, where he drops 'through the roar, giddy and vacuum-minded, sucked under and out into late afternoon Harlem.' These spatial conflicts, between heights and depths, are the equivalent throughout of black and white, darkness and whiteness: structural concepts as states of mind....

Every scene is slightly off key, surrealistic, as if the visual and verbal equivalent of a jazz rumination. Those early scenes at the college are deep pastoral marred by terrible divisiveness: pastoral on the surface, where systems function, dispossession beneath. Scenes that follow have an unreal texture, reinforced by folk idioms and songs, rhythms from slave life, broad comedy: eating of yams, offers of help on the street, bizarre characters met. Like the narrator, the reader is kept off balance, as Ellison manipulates a potentially realistic scene to create something eccentric; like scenes in *Benito Cereno*, which seem normal on the surface, but seethe beneath with alternative experiences....

As Ellison presents the choices, the most revolutionary act is not the Brotherhood (or Communist infiltration), not Ras (or African separatism), not Rinehart (the way of crime), but pursuit of self... Clifton is loyal to the Brotherhood at first, fights Ras the Exhorter, and later, the Destroyer, with all his strength; and then drops away.... He must have broken with the Brotherhood ideologically, been tempted by Ras's exhortations for racial separatism, and found himself without an anchor, adrift socially, politically, personally. He foreruns Malcolm X. Clifton, then, is a true black tragic figure: fallen from grace in the Brotherhood and unable to find a position, a man sacrificed to ideology, race, and political expedience....

That the narrator still has no answers is connected to his invisibility. To evade invisibility he must both lose his blackness and become blacker. His choice now is to hibernate and to write it all down. This desire to pass on his experience turns the typical quest novel into an art novel. End and beginning follow, touch, and the result is past effaced in favor of presentness of the mind. Out of chaos will come consciousness, and that insists he must come forth.... Invisibility as a physical element has not been changed; but the man is visible to himself."

Frederick R. Karl
American Fictions 1940-1980
(Harper & Row 1983) 191-96

"Ellison's reputation as one of the major writers of the mid-twentieth century clearly rests on *Invisible Man*. The winner of several prizes when it was published, including the National Book Award for 1953, *Invisible Man* has been widely praised. In a poll of two hundred authors, critics, and editors conducted by *Book Week*, it was selected as the 'most distinguished work' published in the United States between 1945 and 1965.... Ellison's political concerns derived in part from the example of his mother, who had been an ardent supporter of Eugene Debs's Socialist party, and they were intensified by his mother's death in 1937. By the time he began writing *Invisible Man* in 1945, however, most organized forms of radical politics had begun to seem to him too restrictive. More and more he was convinced that literature, like music, could capture the revolutionary implications of black life only by discovering techniques commensurate with the complexities of that life.

With this emerging conviction came a new mode of fiction that combined elements of 'social realism' with elements of 'surrealism.' In addition to music, which continued strongly to influence his writing, Ellison began to infuse his fiction with black folklore out of a conviction that black folklore captured and conveyed the sense of black experience 'with a complexity of vision that seldom gets into our writing.' As

he labored to write his way through these interrelated shifts, Ellison also began to move away from short fiction toward the novel as his appropriate form. The novel, he says, 'is a form which attempts to deal with the contradictions of life and ambivalence and ambiguities of values.' On a personal level, the novel seemed to him to provide a means of discovering some deeper, 'more universal meaning' in his own experience—in 'remembered conversations' and 'local customs.' Beyond that, on broader social and political levels, the novel seemed to him to provide a way of discovering 'the heroic component' of the experience of black people in America."

David Minter
The Harper American Literature 2
(Harper & Row 1987) 1840-41

"Ralph Waldo Ellison's *Invisible Man* has a prominent place in the American literary canon. Indeed, some critics have argued that Ellison has written the great American novel. When *Invisible Man* first appeared, it was hailed as a masterful depiction of black life in America, and Ellison was received as the first black writer to join the distinguished company of William Faulkner and Ernest Hemingway. At the same time, a Naturalistic strain was noted in his fiction, which allied him with such writers as Theodore Dreiser and Richard Wright. Ellison has enjoyed a unique position among black writers. In the 1960's, he was attacked by certain black nationalists and pan-Africanists for not being black enough, for assimilating fiction into the conventions of white, Western European literature, but he stood his ground, absorbing influences from everywhere and adamantly refusing to shape his ideas of literature to a political program. Ellison has always been his own man, breaking with his mentor Wright when Ellison wanted to go beyond the Naturalism of *Native Son* (1940)....

Invisible Man is about a man's freedom to be himself. The novel's black narrator is not even named—a telling point, for it allows his voice, his way of telling things, and not his identity, to predominate. The narrator has retreated from society after a series of defeats—failures in his education, in politics, and in the friendships he has formed. A Naturalistically conceived character might have been crushed by these disasters, but the narrator rescues his battered self by retreating to a cellar in New York City, where he has managed to tap into the power of the light company. In every way, the narrator is a subversive. He is underground, a marginal figure in society, whose narrative of his life is also a means of regrouping, of finding a way to emerge from the 'hole' he has made out of his career. Ellison's depiction of society is sometimes surreal, sometimes realistically detailed. He re-creates the oppressive atmosphere of the South, where the narrator gets caught up in the rivalries of both religious and political cults, each claiming to have the key to human salvation. Although he does not quite say so, it is implicit in the narrator's account of things that the only true liberation is the liberation of the mind. No political program, religious movement, or organization can deliver human beings from tyranny.

In spite of the painful nature of his experience the 'invisible man'—invisible because whites have never really acknowledged, never actually seen, blacks as full-fledged human beings—reveals considerable humor about his predicament. He has been naïve, even stupid, in not learning more quickly about the murderous elements in his society. His self-critical stance sets him apart from the smug, authoritarian dissenters and establishment figures in the novel. *Invisible Man* is an urbane work that draws upon European models. Dostoevski's...[1864] *Notes from the Underground*, 1918...in particular, seems to have influenced Ellison's existential view of human nature; that is, the invisible man's character is the result of his response to existence, and it is his responsibility to say what he has become rather than blaming society for his stunted development.

By the end of the novel, the narrator hints that he is about ready to leave his hole. Implicit in his narrative has been his feeling that his story is every human being's story—in the sense that each individual must somehow come to terms with society yet preserve his or her own integrity. The narrator's integrity has been violated over and over again—by whites and blacks, by medical experiments, and by all kinds of institutions and individuals. Yet through his ability to imagine the scenes of his degradation, he has managed to overcome his humiliation, for he has identified his plight as everyone's; or as he puts it...: 'Who knows but that on the lower frequencies I speak for you?'

For more than thirty years, Ellison has been writing his second novel. Parts of it have appeared in various periodicals, but the complete text has yet to be published in book form. His influence on American literature is almost exclusively the result of *Invisible Man* and his brilliant collection of essays, *Shadow and Act*, in which he explores the subjects of race, the artist, and society.”

Carl Rollyson
Cyclopedia of World Authors II, Vol. 2
ed. Frank N. Magill
(Salem 1989) 492-93

“As we considered the best way to shape this volume, we repeatedly asked ourselves whether *Invisible Man* should be valued primarily as a work with universal implications, as an example of the best that the American literary tradition offers, or as a representative of black American fiction.... Should the novel be judged in aesthetic terms or in sociopolitical ones?.... Teacher after teacher reported that they approach the novel eclectically, dealing with it thematically, structurally, symbolically historically, politically. They teach the novel in courses on American literature, Afro-American literature, literary ‘masterpieces,’ and ethnic literature, as well as interdisciplinary, sociology, political science, and history courses. They teach it at introductory, advanced, and graduate levels....

The novel can be read as an account of the various options available to a young black man in America from the time after Reconstruction to the present of the novel. For example, at various moments in the novel the invisible man either encounters or tries to emulate blacks who with varying motives, sometimes self-serving, play the role of a so-called Uncle Tom. At other moments he aspires to be like Frederick Douglass, Booker T. Washington, and Marcus Garvey. He also comes for a time to believe that the solution to racial injustice is with the American Communist party (the Brotherhood), and he is momentarily attracted to violence. He also sees as an option the fictional Rinehart, who, concerned only with his own profit, entertains no thoughts of social and political revolutions but instead is a runner, a gambler, a briber, a lover, and a preacher. At the same time, however, Ellison deliberately universalizes the invisible man’s experience through literary allusions, the novel’s structure, and direct statements.

Young Emerson tells the invisible man, ‘With us it’s still Jim and Huck Finn,’ invites him to the Club Calamus, and keeps a copy of *Totem and Taboo* on his coffee table, all references that invite the reader to think about the novel in terms of Emerson, Whitman, Twain, and Freud. The presence of the blind Homer Barbee reinforces the sense that the invisible man is embarked on an odyssey of his own toward sight and insight. The frequent references to snakes that appear as the invisible man is being expelled from or choosing to leave what he falsely believed to be Edenic situations, his opening a Bible to *Genesis* but failing to read it, and his encounter on the subway with a blonde girl eating a red Delicious apple—all underscore the novel’s concern with losing innocence and gaining the knowledge of good and evil.

Further universalizing the novel are the scene with Supercargo, based on a series of puns grounded in Freud’s notion of the id, the ego, and the superego; the recurrent oedipal motifs (both Freudian and Sophoclean versions) that are manifest in the invisible man’s search for a rejection of various false father figures, and the direct references to Joyce’s *Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness*, Dostoevsky’s *Notes from Underground*, Wright’s ‘Man Who Lived Underground,’ Eliot’s ‘Waste Land,’ the Marxist notion of history, Dvorak’s *New World Symphony*, and a host of other works. And, of course, the novel’s last line, ‘Who knows but that, on the lower frequencies, I speak for you?’ overtly asserts Ellison’s use of the black American experience as a metaphor for the human condition....

In 1963 Irving Howe criticized Ellison (and James Baldwin) for not emulating Richard Wright’s *Native Son* and writing protest novels. In 1971 Addison Gayle, Jr., articulating his concept of the ‘Black Aesthetic,’ insisted that *Invisible Man* was flawed because it was ‘wedded to the concept of assimilation at a time when such a concept has ceased to be the preoccupation of the black writer.’ Robert O’Meally, in contrast, concluded that Ellison’s importance lay ‘in his unsinkable optimism concerning his race, his nation, man’s fate’ and ‘in his insistence on literary craft under the pressure of inspiration as the best means of transforming everyday experience, talk and lore into literature’.”

Susan Resneck Parr
Approaches to Teaching Ellison’s Invisible Man

“In a traditional course *Invisible Man* exists in a context that includes such canonized works as Franklin’s *Autobiography*, *Leaves of Grass*, and *The Great Gatsby*; in an ethnic literature course Ellison’s book is part of a self-defining (and in its own way self-contained and exclusive) context of reading by other black writers and by writers of other ethnic backgrounds....

The prologue introduces some key terms and concepts for the course as a whole: the invisibility metaphor, as it applies to the ethnic’s self-image as well as to way’s of ‘seeing’ by the controlling culture; the ethnic’s *insight-identity-responsibility* imperative; the condition of internal exile so characteristic of ethnic protagonists, whether that exile is physical (withdrawal to the illuminated basement), psychological (the hibernating consciousness), or both; and the highly rhetorical cast of the ethnic’s quest for identity and recognition, the interrogatory urgency of such questions as ‘What did I do to be so black and blue?’...

He does not see that education on the white man’s terms is simply indoctrination for subordination—and a rejection of ethnic community and personal integrity.... I try to point out the ways in which Ellison sustains the various themes introduced in chapter 1 and ask students to be particularly attentive to four themes pervasive in ethnic literature—the themes of shame and guilt, language and identity, stories and storytelling, and the dilemma of (re)entry....

Ellison’s epilogue, written well before *Brown v. Board of Education* and the efflorescence of the civil rights movement, is prophetic. In his illuminated hole, the invisible man is developing strength and absorbing energy—physical power and intellectual light—and is on the verge of a new identity. Like Huck Finn he has had enough of ‘civilization’ and its discontents, but unlike Huck Finn he has discovered in exile a viable alternative to ‘Tomfoolery’ and sterile compromise: personal and cultural truths that enable him to believe that ‘[o]ur fate [as a nation] is to become one, and yet many,’ that may yet enable him to become part of a newer, larger whole.”

Neil Nakadate
“*Invisible Man* in an Ethnic Studies Course”
Approaches (1989) 107, 109-111

“Mount Union College, located in a small residential town, is somewhat isolated and predominantly white. Black students make up less than five percent of the student population.... When Afro-American literature is offered, during alternate years, there generally is a fair representation of minority students in the class. Only once has the class enrollment been entirely white....

Rarely have black students selected *Invisible Man* as their favorite work. In their comments on the novel during class discussions, in fact, black students have often expressed feelings of bafflement and outrage at the novel.... The realization that minority students in my classes invariably favor works by Richard Wright, Langston Hughes, Malcolm X, and others—while blithely dismissing Ellison’s—is no longer startling to me.... Looking for the coherent statement and nurturing nascent feelings of racial pride and solidarity, many students sense an elementary betrayal in *Invisible Man* for its unflattering portrayal of the nameless hero’s various encounters with Trueblood, Bledsoe, the Brotherhood, and Ras the Destroyer. Worse yet, in the students’ view, the novel ends on a note of uncertainty and ambiguity, leaving unresolved many of the critical social and political issues it has so dramatically raised....

The eloquence and the fury of Frederick Douglass, the charisma and power of Malcolm become preeminent in the minds of my students. It is little wonder that up against such a perceived standard some of the implications of Ellison’s novel appear discordant at best.... Many black students, for very understandable reasons, want to view a literary piece by a major black artist as a means of consciousness-raising. Using gentle Socratic tactics and occasionally assuming the role of devil’s advocate, I work to make them see that Ralph Ellison, like all other artists, needs the freedom simply to develop his art—without making the obligatory ‘dues-paying’ statement.... To deny Ralph Ellison this same unlimited freedom [as white writers] is to hold Ralph Ellison, as an artist, in a form of artistic and literary bondage.”

James E. Walton
"The Use of Culture and Artistic Freedom:
The Right of a Minority Writer"
Approaches (1989) 26-28

"He defined the essence of his novel as an experimental attempt 'to return to the mood of personal moral responsibility for democracy which typified the best of our nineteenth-century fiction' (*Shadow* 102)... His sharp and independent observations on the race problem have often been out of step with fashionable political tendencies. In 1968, for example, a *Negro Digest* poll of forty black writers elected Richard Wright to first place and relegated Ellison to fourth. Donald B. Gibson reflected such a view when he described Ellison as a 'personal and subjective' writer 'who denies his relation to the group of black people' by an individualism that gives up on the racial problem and asserts that 'the best that can be done' is to 'withdraw into the inner recesses of our own psyches.' But Larry Neal, who had once led the attack on Ellison and then reversed himself, celebrated *Invisible Man* as one of 'the world's most successful "political novels"'. ...

His novel is a kind of psychohistory, but it is staged within the political framework of the democratic drama.... The narrating 'I' is a nameless vernacular voice, representing a career that symbolizes the major stages of the black experience in America.... The narrator of *Invisible Man* is always guided by his slave grandfather's advice, 'Agree 'em to death and destruction.' Yet he comes to understand his grandfather's political meaning only in the epilogue, only after he has suffered a long experience of misinterpreting the advice. Indeed, throughout the body of the novel, instead of asserting his own independent judgment, he internalizes the expectations of others. This theme recurs with variations, like a jazz riff played on Ellison's trumpet, as a form of the blues, emanating from an underground man, whose position echoes Ellison's reading of Dostoevsky and Richard Wright. The narrator's retrospective story moves from slavery to Reconstruction by focusing on one of Reconstruction's institutions, a black college, run on paternalistic lines, not unlike Tuskegee Institute. Such colleges were inspired by Booker T. Washington's conservative doctrine of separate-but-equal development, a position ratified by the Supreme Court in *Plessy v. Ferguson* (1896) when it sanctioned racial segregation on railroads....

Elements of Ellison's past do orient the book's perspective: the memory of his grandfather, who confronted a mob that had formed to lynch a friend; his education as a music major at Tuskegee Institute in segregated Alabama; his role as reviewer for the *New Masses* (1937-40) and as managing editor for the *Negro Quarterly* (1942); his collecting of folklore for the Federal Writers Project (1938-42); his report of a Harlem riot for the *New York Post* (2 Aug. 1943); and his joining of the Merchant Marine in World War II as a protest against a Jim Crow army.... The novel moves the narrator north to the Harlem of the depression of the 1930s, where Ellison himself had moved in 1936. As editor of the *Negro Quarterly* [he was] irritated by the patronizing paternalism of leftists.... As the Communist party in the 1930s had done for many Harlem Negroes, the Brotherhood has first offered the invisible man 'the possibility of being more than a member of a race'....

The brothers 'want the streets to flow with blood' so that they can turn 'death and sorrow and defeat into propaganda.' Bitter at the Brotherhood's resentment of his independent efforts to arouse the masses, recognizing the blindness of Marxist class categories to his ethnicity, and smarting from Marxist disdain for his 'old agrarian self,' the narrator concludes that the Brotherhood's dream of bringing 'both science and history under control' is a rationalistic delusion.... This disillusionment with the Brotherhood parallels the experience of many Harlem intellectuals with the Communist party.... The party later supported segregated armed forces, and it subordinated black reform to the Soviets' Popular Front strategy in the war. This expediency is reflected in the novel's portrait of the riot.... Ras is an anachronistic warrior with a spear.... Rinehart's shrewd sense of role changing effectively transforms the Marxist idea of freedom as 'the recognition of necessity' into the pluralist idea of freedom as 'the recognition of possibility.' It is in this sense that Rinehart's glasses are 'a political instrument' for the narrator, teaching him what he cannot learn from either Marxism or black nationalism.... The invisible man's grandfather did not need the Marxist Brotherhood to become human....

The great migration northward cut the black man off from his 'peasant cynicism,' his sense of being 'at home in the world,' his 'authoritative religion which gives his life a semblance of metaphysical wholeness,' a stable family structure, and 'a body of folklore—tested in life-and-death terms against his daily experience with nature and the Southern white man—that serves him as a guide to action. In the factory hospital scene, Ellison condenses this idea of culture shock.... In the end, the narrator realizes that he cannot go home again, not to Mary's, the campus, or the Brotherhood.... [Ellison's] complex position was never congenial to black nationalists of the 1960s, who envisioned an autonomous black culture and a future black nation. From their perspective Ellison, by making art transcendent, has 'constructed for himself a refuge from the demands of black liberation,' as Houston A. Baker, Jr., put it....

In the epilogue a circle is completed—like the throw of a boomerang—when Mr. Norton, the white trustee of the black college, symbolically and actually fails to recognize the narrator, the former student he had once known. Only in the nation's political response to the civil rights movement of the 1960s did public awareness of the newly visible blacks lead to some social agreement on liberty and equality, those principles the narrator's grandfather had represented as the only sure basis for black identity.... The invisible man not only foreshadows the future; in the civil rights movement of the 1960s he had one."

Cushing Strout
"An American Negro Idiom': *Invisible Man* and the Politics of Culture"
Approaches (1989) 79-85

"What he does is engage in an existential search for his identity, and how he does it is through his recognition of the importance of his folk past, especially the blues. Throughout the novel, the narrator is visited by a series of folks-blues people who attempt to help him understand how to live in the world.... The examples they present go unheeded....

Richard Wright presents for Ellison the same problems as Sartre does because Wright's Marxism and later existentialism are imposed rather than dramatized in his fiction, resulting in what Henri Peyre refers to, introducing a Sartre novel, as 'a sociology of literature.' For Albert Camus, there is no transcendence. Mersault of *The Stranger* is similar to Bigger Thomas in that they both seem to lack sufficient consciousness of their lives; and both *The Stranger* and *Native Son* seem to fit the description of the naturalistic novel of 'final and unrelieved despair' (Ellison, *Shadow* 105) that Ellison is consciously rejecting. Thus, Ellison's version of existentialism rejects the totally negative vision of the world, the lack of consciousness, transcendence, or social responsibility. At the same time, he also rejects transcendence through a specific hierarchy or limited theory, whether politics or religion. What Ellison accepts is the world of possibility, consciousness, and struggle, the world of ambiguity over the world of cold, predictable logic; in other words, the world of art....

Just before the narrator's first blues encounter with Louis Armstrong amid his 1,369 light bulbs (1,369 being the square of 37, Ellison's age when he finished his novel in 1951), he tells us to call him 'Jack-the-Bear,' because he is 'in a state of hibernation.' While Jack-the-Bear is an allusion to his underground hibernation from which he must emerge, the name of a heroic character from Afro-American folklore ('Out of the Hospital' 247,263,277), and the title of a Duke Ellington composition, more important is that Jack-the-Bear was also the nickname of a blues-playing Harlem stride pianist of the 1920s. The narrator is thus clearly identifying himself and his tale as blues-inspired.... In a sense, Louis Armstrong is the hero of the novel.... The way that Armstrong 'bends that military instrument into a beam of lyrical sound' and makes 'poetry out of being invisible' serves as a model for the same task that must be undertaken and completed by the narrator.... '(What Did I Do to Be So) Black and Blue' [was] written by Fats Waller for the 1929 musical revue *Connie's Hot Chocolates*....

It is this blueslike pattern, a lack of complete understanding and retreat, that marks the narrator's encounters with folk-blues characters throughout the novel. It is precisely this pattern that answers the question he asks at the conclusion of the prologue, 'But what did I do to be so blue?' But until he has sung his own blues song and turned his pain into art, thereby gaining a sense of identity, he will remain in the dark.... Because he believes in the straight line of progress into the future and his grandfather represents the slave past, the narrator blindly goes off to college....

I stress the link between Trueblood and the grandfather. Both are peasants who have knowledge of and an intimate connection to their folk past, and both are rejected by the narrator.... Trueblood is an existential hero who takes control of his life and decides his own fate and destiny.... Trueblood discovers and reaffirms his identity and gains the strength to go on with his life by facing up to his past mistakes and future responsibilities.... Trueblood bends the negativity of his life into a form of artistic affirmation as Armstrong bent the notes of his trumpet into the beauty of the blues. Unlike the narrator at the battle royal, who also performs for whites and gets paid, Trueblood is in control of what happens because he is in touch with his folk past and therefore knows who he is. He is nobody but himself, while the narrator is nobody but what others have created.... The narrator encounters those who know who they are, who are in touch with their traditions, and who attempt to give him good advice. He consistently rejects, doesn't understand, or fails to follow through on the examples presented. Rather, he heeds the advice of those who are blind to their traditions or who want the narrator to follow in their footsteps instead of creating his own....

While pushing a shopping cart full of blueprints, Peter Wheatstraw (named for blues singer Peetie Wheatstraw [1902-41], who, like the character in the novel, was known as the 'Devil's Son-in-Law') sings a verse from the Count Basie and Jimmy Rushing blues 'Boogie Woogie'.... Wheatstraw is here linked with Trueblood, as representing a living folks-blues sensibility that the college has attempted to stamp out.... The narrator, rather than Wheatstraw, is the believer in plans, blueprints, and organized, logical, 'scientific' thought. Wheatstraw's cart full of unused plans should be a sign to the narrator that this is not the way the world works. The narrator's final comment, 'God damn...they're a hell of a people!', indicates his distance from and lack of identification with the folk past represented by Wheatstraw (as well as by the slave woman, his grandfather, Trueblood, the vet, and Susie Gresham), and connects him to the school officials who referred to the blacks' 'primitive spirituals'....

Mary is clearly another positive folk-blues character... Her comment 'I'm in New York but New York ain't in me' not only echoes Peter Wheatstraw's contradictory comments on Harlem's being both a bear's den and the best place to be, but is also a direct quote from a railroad porter Ellison interviewed in 1939 for the Federal Writers Project.... Like Wheatstraw and Mary, the yam man reminds the narrator of a part of his past he has forgotten.... When he walks down the street and encounters Primus Provo and his wife, the narrator feels drawn to them and experiences 'strange memories awakening.' Their evicted possessions, including old blues records, represent both their personal history and a kind of collective history of Afro-Americans that causes the narrator to identify with them, think of his mother, and finally make a speech on their behalf. His identification is short-lived, however, when he accepts Brother Jack's 'scientific' assessment that the Provos are 'agrarian types' and 'individuals' who 'don't count' and agrees to his suggestion that the narrator forget his past, cease communicating with his family, and leave Mary's to seek a new name and identity....

Tarp is also important because his gift of the portrait of Frederick Douglass is in contrast to Brother Jack's desire to make the narrator 'the new Booker T. Washington, but even greater than he'.... We discuss Tarp's story of his life on the chain gang, his gift of the link to the narrator, the contrast between this link and the one on Bledsoe's desk, and Tarp's final desertion from the Brotherhood (and his removal of the Douglass portrait) when it changes tactics.... Tod Clifton...leaves the Brotherhood at the same time and for the same reason that Tarp does, because the Brotherhood has shelved the 'old techniques of agitation' that were Douglass's trademark. The difference between Tarp and Clifton is that Tarp still has his sense of personal and racial history and identity to fall back on as a source of strength. Clifton had given up everything for the Brotherhood. When it fails him, he has nothing left and ends up on the street corner selling Sambo dolls....

The narrator...remains with the Brotherhood even though they reduce Clifton to a type—'Brutus,' 'traitor'—just as they had similarly reduced Primus Provo and his wife. He even stays after he discovers Jack's blindness, which connects Jack with Barbee, Bledsoe, the Founder, and Norton.... Instead, he decides 'to do a Rinehart' in order to subvert the Brotherhood, thinking that he has finally understood and is following his grandfather's deathbed advice. But Rinehart (named after a nineteenth-century Harvard undergraduate sung about by Jimmy Rushing in 'Harvard Blues,' by Count Basie) is not the right model to follow; he is 'an opportunist' and 'the personification of chaos.' Although he knows who he is, he is an anarchist with no social responsibility. The narrator's dehumanizing affair with Sybil and his responsibility

for the riot are proof of this. And finally, the actions of Dupre during the riot reveal that the Brotherhood has nothing to offer and that the narrator has been misinterpreting events and following the wrong advice his entire life....

Only in the epilogue, after the narrator has told his story to himself and to us, his readers, and spent a sufficient amount of time in hibernation, does he understand his grandfather's advice...which he realizes he has got all wrong. What it comes down to is seeing the inherent contradictions in American life and understanding that contradiction is the way of the world. Furthermore, he recognizes that he, as an individual, must take personal responsibility for the principles of American democracy. Only when he...gives birth to himself as a conscious individual, uses his imagination to create art rather than to remain in the chaos of a Rinehart or the rootlessness of a Tod Clifton, and continues 'to play in face of certain defeat,' can he hope to be succeed."

Pancho Savery

"'Not like an arrow, but a boomerang': Ellison's Existential Blues"
Approaches (1989) 65-73

"Ellison's *Invisible Man*...portrays the nameless title character in a series of disillusioning episodes wherein the identity he thought he was constructing is repeatedly stripped from him, leaving him not only naked but 'invisible'.... The invisible man is always at his best, always his truest self, on those few occasions when he suddenly starts improvising before a crowd—asserting himself 'within and against the group,' as Ellison said the early jazz musicians did in defining their identities in every solo performance....

Invisible Man falls into two distinct parts corresponding roughly to the title character's experience in the rural South and urban North, each part dramatizing a fundamentally different approach to the task of self-definition. In the first part, which extends well into the northern chapters while the hero continues to dream about returning to the southern black college that he has been forced to leave, the invisible man tries to form an identity by modeling himself after another man, his identity ideal. Dr. Bledsoe, the college's leader and latter-day incarnation of Booker T. Washington. In the second part, which begins in chapter 13 (the middle chapter of the book) when he comes under the eye of Brother Jack while giving an impromptu speech at a Harlem eviction site, the invisible man tries to 'define' himself, as he says, by serving an organization, the powerful Brotherhood, Ellison's disguised version of the Communist party....

Broadly speaking, his is the rage of many young men against the repressive power of the 'father' and conversely 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 invisible man on the bus to New York—his own 'father'.... [See] chapter 3 of *The Souls of Black Folk*, W. E. B. DuBois's historically important attack on Washington's policy of 'accommodationism.' It is this policy, in a slicker, more current form, that Bledsoe incarnates....

Do not confuse Bledsoe, a caricature of Booker T. Washington, with the famous leader himself, a man of greater complexity and much greater good will.... Ellison, siding with DuBois in the debate over the nation's racial policy, strongly objected to the posture advocated by Washington (and still accepted in much of America when Ellison was writing his novel) when the black leader agreed to sacrifice what Ellison has Bledsoe call the personal 'pride and dignity' of his people, and their civil rights and political power as well, in exchange for concessions from white America for black people's vocational training and economic development.... It should be stressed, however, that Ellison is more concerned to condemn the practice of imitating Booker T. Washington or of holding him up as an example to others than he is to condemn the man or his policy.... Ellison probably had Wright's experience in mind while composing the second half of his novel....

Ironically, at the very moment the invisible man is congratulating himself on his unprecedented sense of accomplishment, the odious Brother Wrestrum—soon to charge him with the crime of being a 'petty individualist'—is mounting the attack on him that will lead to his falling-out with the Brotherhood.... What it sees, when it looks at him, is simply a faceless machine to be manipulated for its own ends, the twentieth-century equivalent of a slave.

In four major scenes—the men’s smoker in the opening chapter, the Harlem eviction episode, the narrator’s first Brotherhood rally, and the street funeral for Tod Clifton—the inevitable man is shown on stage, momentarily finding himself while fumbling for words before a crowd, speaking out, if only at last, what is in his heart...they show a progressive development in then narrator’s inner self and a growing mastery of his jazzlike idiom.... As the book’s several platform scenes suggest, Ellison regarded the making of one’s true identity as an art of improvisation comparable to the performance of jazz.”

Christopher Sten
“Losing It ‘even as he finds it’: The Invisible Man’s Search for Identity”
Approaches (1989) 86-90, 92-94

“As Ellison stated in his 1953 National Book Award address, *Invisible Man* is characterized by ‘its experimental attitude, and its attempt to return to the mood of personal moral responsibility’.... It has been Ellison’s fate to find his novel become one of those ‘doubtlessly overtaught’ today.... We teachers can trace the interlocking patterns of dreams, letters, speeches, power sources, and boxing matches. We can chart the invisible man’s progress through his recurrent deaths and rebirths, trips between upper and lower worlds, and confrontation of his oedipal conflict. We can point out lots of gardens and apples, symbolic briefcase contents, and bullfight pictures. Or we can explain historical contexts from grandfather clauses to Garvey; literary references to *Huckleberry Finn*, *A Portrait of the Artist*, the Calamus poems, and *Julius Caesar*; and stylistic variations only adumbrated by Ellison’s own division into the naturalistic, expressionistic, and realistic.... The mythic-allusive aspects of the battle royal, Trueblood’s story, the Golden Day, and Barbee’s speech pose the most difficulty to readers new to the novel...

The central role of naming in Ellison’s world is clear, from his preoccupation with his namesake, Ralph Waldo Emerson, and his youthful nicknaming of his brother Huck Finn to his assertion that in the ‘arduous task’ of becoming an American ‘the difficulty begins with the name’.... Many of the names virtually call for attention (Trueblood, Bledsoe), are explained in the text (Westrum, restroom; Tobbit, two bits), or are highlighted by their profusion (the names given Norton at the Golden Day) or discussion (Optic White).... Names, like B. P. Rinehart, are full of possibilities. The variety of interpretations of his name—*rind* plus *heart*; *pure* (from the German) plus *heart*... Sybil and the Brotherhood in the Chthonian retreat know nothing of underground mysteries; the constellation of names focusing on Brotherhood are misleading, as with Hambro (one who ‘hams,’ or acts like a brother), or ironic, as with Kimbro (only one letter away from falsely promising to be a brother twice over: *kin* plus *bro*); the Golden Day offers the golden age as apocalypse...Primus Provo (‘first provoked’)... Tod Clifton (a man who dies by ‘plunging outside history,’ as from a cliff) or Mr. Broadnax in Trueblood’s dream (a name suggesting that close relations with forbidden ‘broads’ will lead to an assault with an ax)....

Brother Jack, whose foreign extraction implies an adopted name, becomes identified not with the proletariat as he intends but with monied interests (*jack* is slang for cash) or emasculation (‘ball the jack,’ as the invisible man observes near the close).... The vet is a veteran of life’s hardest knocks and a healer, a suitable doctor (a veterinarian) for the animalistic world Norton’s visit to the Golden Day evokes. Brother Tarp has also earned his name, an anagram of *trap*, as the contrast of his shackle with Bledsoe’s emphasizes... As the designations given Norton by those at the Golden Day indicate so clearly, the novel’s world is one where conferring power or demanding subservience begins with names. To the inmates, Norton is first General Pershing, John D. Rockefeller, and the Messiah; but as his status declines, he becomes Mister Eddy, ‘a trustee of consciousness,’ ‘an ole baby,’ and finally one of those white men ‘with monkey glands and billy goat balls.’”

John Cooke
“Understanding the Lower Frequencies: Names and the Novel”
Approaches (1989) 113, 115-17

“Ellison wanted to master all relevant cultural traditions: classical music as well as jazz, classical literature as well as the vernacular—in short, the best of whatever was available.... Although Ellison has made a distinction between his literary ‘relatives’ whom he cannot choose (e.g., Wright) and his ‘ancestors,’ whom he deliberately seeks out and studies (e.g., Eliot, Malraux, Dostoevsky, and Faulkner), it is not necessary and many not be possible for the student to distinguish between writers who were seminal

influences on Ellison and those who provide adventitious parallels or who are cursorily alluded to. What is important is that these links place Ellison within a broad and great literary tradition.... Ellison suggests that on the lower frequencies, the invisible man speaks for us. His alienation, for example, shared by Kafka's and Dostoevsky's characters, is not the exclusive property of the black race. His search for identity, to mention another example, is an archetypically American preoccupation....

The invisible man's odyssey is not to find a place (such as Ulysses's Ithaca) or to reestablish harmony at home but to discover a self that is, if not in harmony with the world, at least in equilibrium with itself. In the process of searching for himself, he encounters a Polyphemus figure when one-eyed Brother Jack stares at him with 'Cyclopean irritation' and expects black people to behave like sheep; a Proteus figure in Rinehart, the tricky shapeshifter; a Homeric blind creator of mythic tales in Reverend Barbee; and a Circe or two. He participates in various battles, and he makes a number of descents into the netherworld (the Brotherhood's headquarters, the 'Chthonian,' which translates from the Greek as 'underground').... The archetypal motif of descent followed by renewal or rebirth recurs significantly throughout the novel.... The invisible man is so entranced by the campus that, like Odysseus in the land of the Lotus Eaters, he is loath to leave it; the Scylla and Charybdis he must steer clear of are the union and Lucius Brockway, who, appropriately enough, dwells in a deep hole where cauldrons of bubbling paint are brewed; Elpenor finds his parallel in Tod Clifton, another young innocent who dies an untimely death; and the similarity between Antinoos, one of Penelope's suitors, who is shot through the throat by an arrow, and Ras, who is speared through his jaws, are also noteworthy....

Biblical verses fuse most perceptibly with folk elements in the spirituals, and Ellison weaves refrains from black religious music into *Invisible Man*, but he also sprinkles other biblical allusions throughout the novel. In turn, the invisible man is identified with Adam, Jonah, Judas, and, ultimately, Christ. When he falls from grace and is expelled from the Edenic campus by the wrathful Bledsoe, the hero is forced to find and affirm the transcendent godlike power he contains within himself. The vet at the Golden Day mockingly proclaims, 'A little child shall lead them' and by the time Mary becomes his surrogate mother in Harlem, the invisible man does discover 'I yam what I am' when he glories in the vendor's yams. This epiphany of self-acceptance echoes God's response to Moses, 'I am that I am,' when the deity is asked to identify himself. Later, during the riot, the invisible man's passage over the Harlem streets where shattered glass 'glittered...like the water of a flooded river' suggests Christ's reputed ability to walk on water. In the epilogue, the invisible man characterizes his painful experiences as the 'spear in the side,' while the prologue contains the resurrective image of the Easter chick breaking from its shell'....

In ironically describing the campus as 'the best of all possible worlds,' a phrase from Voltaire's *Candide*, Ellison suggests the relation between the two works: that they chart the journey from naivete to the loss of innocence, concluding with a commitment in both to cultivate one's own garden.... As with the oracular sibyls of old, the invisible man consults [Sybil], but instead of providing information she turns the tables and attempts to use him. Discussion of Aeneas might also inspire some remarks about the Dantesque elements in *Invisible Man*, for the narrator not only 'entered the music' he plays in his underground hole 'but descended, like Dante, into its depths.' Most students have read Shakespeare's *Julius Caesar* and readily recognize that the invisible man's funeral oration for Tod Clifton is modeled after Antony's eulogy for the dead Caesar. Like Antony, the invisible man professes, more or less, that he has come to bury Clifton, not praise him.... Antony cries: 'My heart is in the coffin there with Caesar,' which is perfectly paralleled by the invisible man's lament: 'He's in the box and we're in there with him'.... An obvious analogue that exists between the Russian author's *Notes from Underground* and the frame of *Invisible Man* is that both memoirs are penned by narrators who have retreated underground....

There is also no question of Ellison's debt to Andre Malraux. '[T]wo days after arriving in New York,' Ellison says, 'I was to read Malraux's *Man's Fate* and *The Days of Wrath*, and after these how could I be impressed by Wright as an ideological novelist.' Malraux, he feels, more effectively assimilates revolutionary content into aesthetic form.... In addition, Ellison—like Malraux—explores the betrayal of political movements and dramatizes an apocalyptic, surreal moment when madness and violence predominate. Against the backdrop of the modern world in a state of chaos, both writers also explore the conflict between destiny and free will, fate and individual volition. Both speculate about values in an absurd universe and about achieving meaning and dignity in life. But perhaps the most significant

connection between Ellison and Malraux is their view that ‘the organized significance of art...alone enables man to conquer chaos and to master destiny.’ Other French writers with whom Ellison appears to have a literary relationship include Sartre, Camus, and Celine.... [Also] Reading proletarian propaganda from the 1930s will allow them to see that Ellison is parodying Marxist rhetoric and attacking the Marxist notion of a deterministic historical dialectic....

Any standard analysis of Freudian dream symbolism will elucidate the double entendres of Trueblood’s incestuous dream with its riotous tumult of doors, grandfather clocks, tunnels... Freud’s concept of the id and the superego will shed some light on Supercargo’s name and function.... Young Emerson owns a copy of Freud’s *Totem and Taboo*. Ellison directly quotes Joseph Conrad.... Joycean references occur when the invisible man is ‘exiled’ from the college.... And Ellison has confirmed that *Invisible Man* is ‘the portrait of the artist as a rabble-rouser’ (*Shadow* 179).”

Leonard Deutsch
“*Invisible Man* and the European Tradition”
Approaches (1989) 96-101

“Much of the unity and continuity of the novel depends on Ellison’s imagery of vision: seeing and blindness and all gradations between, foresight, hindsight, insight, the relations between sight and awareness...and, of course, visibility and invisibility. Therefore, students must make sense of the definition of invisibility and the illustration Ellison establishes on the opening page of the prologue. The key phrase is ‘inner eyes,’ by which Ellison means that what people see is a function of their picture of reality. Everything seen is a projection of the inner eyes, and that which the inner eyes refuse to see is indeed invisible. Ellison illustrates the concept in the prologue’s first scene.

The man whom the invisible man bumps into, who curses him and who won’t apologize, had seen the invisible man not as a human being, a person, but as a phantom in his own mind. This vignette of seeing the preconceived and of refusing to see what the inner eyes picture of reality cannot accommodate will be repeated dozens of times in the narrative. Closely related to vision imagery and also introduced in that opening scene is a cluster of images concerning sleeping, dreaming, sleepwalking, and awakening, being in a state of awareness. The invisible man has learned that most people are ‘zombie[s]’ who sleepwalk and dream their way through life, never awakening to reality, like the man on the street whom the narrator characterizes as ‘lost in a dream world’ that nearly kills him.... Every time the invisible man grows more conscious of reality in the narrative, he speaks in terms of waking up....

The narrator has learned that the nature of reality is contradictory and circular instead of rational and linear, that life is fluid, not fixed, that flexibility is necessary for survival.... Ellison’s prologue plunges us into confusion—which no one likes, students least of all—in an attempt to alter the way we look at life. Style itself is one way he achieves this effect. For example, the hallucinatory sequence in the prologue prepares us for the surreal style of many of the chapters....

Several of the characters mentioned in the prologue dramatize the idea that each person’s living defines his or her picture of reality.... Ras, Rinehart, and Brother Jack...believe that the world is controllable. Such a notion has been ‘boomeranged’ out of the invisible man’s head, and he sees that all plans and visions are tentative, revisable, and most important, relative. The novel details the boomeranging process and the epilogue summarizes the invisible man’s learning experiences and underscores their significance for him and for us.... Like the ending of *The Great Gatsby*, the epilogue is expansive, reaching out to include us all today...For Ellison, the health, strength, and beauty of American life lies in its heterogeneity: ‘America is woven of many strands; I would recognize them and let it so remain’....

I treat the epilogue as Ellison’s reaffirmation of Emersonian self-reliance. The very sentences of the epilogue echo the famous essay. For example, ‘Whence all this passion toward conformity anyway?’.... The epilogue celebrates tolerance, spontaneity, and community, while condemning manipulation, conformity, homogenization, and coercion.... The invisible man only began legitimate self-making after he fell into the hole. Before, others were making him—Bledsoe, Norton, the Brotherhood—as he tried first to be an Alger hero, a black variant thereof, then a hero of collectivist politics. Now, disabused of models, he

is puzzling out who he is and what he is to do by himself.... The invisible man may end up in a hole, but he has been cured of his tunnel vision.”

David L. Vanderwerken
“Focusing on the Prologue and the Epilogue”
Approaches (1989) 119-23

“The surreal style and imagery of its narration erase distinctions between interior and exterior reality, merging them into one, just as the pot-induced vision related by the narrator blends time and space into a single dimension.... I cite the famous passage on double-consciousness from W. E. B. DuBois’s *Souls of Black Folk*. Ellison knows the ‘sense of always looking at one’s self through the eyes of others,’ and through the provision of the persons in the prologue, he permits us to know it governs the career of the youthful invisible man.... The pass, which Douglass and other slaves forged, provided the slave liberty to travel. In comically ironic reversal, the persona of *Invisible Man* accumulates all sorts of written documents (diplomas, letters of recommendation, etc.) that he believes identify him and grant him the liberty due a free-born American. The double-edged joke... ‘is that none of these “protections” are worth more than the paper they are written on’....

The essays in *Shadow and Act* embodying concepts that might be considered the source for *Invisible Man* include ‘Twentieth-Century Fiction and the Black Mask of Humanity,’ which recalls the epistemological themes of the novel in its discussion of racial stereotypes in the ‘struggle over the nature of reality.’ ‘Hidden Name and Complex Fate,’ which presents black culture as the exemplification of living in a zone of undiscovered possibility; and the reviews of Gunnar Myrdal’s *American Dilemma* and LeRoi Jones’s (Amiri Baraka’s) *Blues People*, in which, by denying a view of blacks as victims to be defined entirely in relation to white society, Ellison suggests a way out of the dilemma of double consciousness posed by DuBois.”

John M. Reilly
“Discovering an Art of the Self in History: A Principle of Afro-American Life”
Approaches (1989) 38-39, 41

“Ellison portrays an Emersonian affirmation of self and life not only as feasible in our twentieth-century context but also as necessary for them.... After establishing this direction in the smoker episode, we can discuss his experience at college as a twentieth-century counterpart to the educational scene Emerson so roundly condemns in ‘The American Scholar’.... The twentieth-century businessman named Emerson also tends to be confusing for students, but that confusion clears up when we look at him and his son as products of America’s refusal to hear the nineteenth-century challenge of self-reliance except in terms of economic gain. Nor does Rinehart seem quite so enigmatic once students recognize him as the individual who in Emersonian terms has so thoroughly violated the integrity of his being that he assumes the contours of his situation, which means that he epitomizes the concept of invisibility.... Ellison’s novel works exactly as the Emerson essay does, setting against a condemnation of existing conditions the hope that they can and will improve through action of the sort contemplated by the narrator.”

Eleanor Lyons
“Ellison’s Narrator as Emersonian Scholar”
Approaches (1989) 75-77

“The traditions of comedy and humor offer students open access to the complexities of Ralph Ellison’s *Invisible Man*, often ranked among the ten great novels of the twentieth century.... After the open frontal attack on American racism practiced by writers such as Frederick Douglass, W. E. B. DuBois, and Amiri Baraka, students seem to appreciate the comic indirection of Langston Hughes, Ralph Ellison, and Ernest Gaines.... The hero triumphs through his failures. He loses each of the battles of the novel: against the provincial community, Norton’s college, Emerson’s paint company, and Brother Jack’s pseudo-Brotherhood, but he wins the war. As the long tradition of comic heroes paraded before us by Robert Torrance, the hero loses repeatedly in the short run, precisely so he can win the longer race....

Topic areas... (1) the treatment of sources, both serious and humorous, particularly Richard Wright’s story ‘The Man Who Lived Underground’; (2) the use of blues music as a thematic and structural source for the novel (the blues are essentially a comic form, beginning, to use Dante’s terms, in adversity and

ending in felicity); (3) Ellison's Menippean delivery, mingling styles in a polyphonic, surrealistic fashion; (4) the novel's picaresque, episodic structure, maneuvering a hero from 'blackness to light...from ignorance to enlightenment' (Ellison, *Shadow* 193); (5) the chameleonic character of the novel's trickster hero and the inflexible antagonists he faces off; (6) the hilarious encounters with white women who take advantage of the hero as they contribute to his understanding of the world; (7) the use of colloquial 'manners' and folk motif; (8) the local focus of the individual segments and the encyclopedic range of the world; (9) the slapstick effects of narrative acceleration and stylized violence; (10) the 'improvised,' spontaneous appeal of the narrative; (11) the paradoxical use of pun and other humorous verbal effects; (12) the novel's indubitably comic themes of rebellion and accommodation, death and rebirth, survival and triumph."

James R. Andreas
"Invisible Man and the Comic Tradition"
Approaches (1989) 102-03, 105-06

"What most governs the tone of the book is a kind of torment—the kind that comes from looking at yourself as unsparingly and honestly as you can, from recognizing that you haven't solved the crucial problems you are examining, from knowing that you are still terribly enmeshed with what you have undergone, and from refusing to accept phony answers or resolutions...."

It is true...that the young man does learn not to be ashamed of Mary Rambo and that he comes to see her as 'a force, a stable, familiar force' like something from his past that prevented him 'from whirling off into some unknown which [he] dared not face.' And he gains a wonderful sense of freedom when he unashamedly eats yams on the street, a sense of freedom associated with the ability to laugh and perhaps with the power he is able to exert at the eviction of the old black couple.... Realizing that he can't live simply at the yam level, he finds the end of the yam unpleasant, 'frost-bitten'.... He can listen to Ras the Exhorter with a degree of sympathy and understanding but sees him finally as absurd and irrelevant, dangerous and sad.... His grandfather's cryptic message—Uncle Tom them to destruction—gives no positive guidance.... The invisible man's ultimate dilemma is that the doll is a part of his heritage but one he can neither deny nor accept....

What I think about is the incredible extent to which people do not look at one another, do not do so in most communities and especially on my own campus; the extent to which we—professors and students alike—act as though we do not see one another and are not seen, act in such a way as to make ourselves and others invisible."

Walter Slatoff
"Making Invisible Man Matter"
Approaches (1989) 32-36

"I was stunned by the power of both novel and novelist, by the contrapuntal craft of the book and the white heat of its author's urgent voice. I saw the narrative as aesthetically contained, coiled tensely yet deliberately between prologue and epilogue, ready in having found its angle of repose. By contrast, I felt the narrator's presence as filled with unresolved tension, furious both with determination and despair, the pressure of his speaking voice threatening at every moment the composition of the written words, the human issues somehow inimical to those of art...."

How was one to present this novel at Harvard or Berkeley in the late sixties or early seventies, when the immediate problem seemed to be persuading many students that the recurrent use of the word *nigger* by Huckleberry Finn did not necessarily make of Mark Twain a racist or of his book a racial affront?... *Invisible Man* serves not just to chart the racial tributary entering the mainstream, not just as an individual masterpiece equal to any, but also as a superconductor charged almost to overload with the energy of American imagination, past, present, and future."

Gordon O. Taylor
"Learning to Listen to Lower Frequencies"
Approaches (1989) 44-45, 48-49

“From the Edenic world of the school, the invisible man has fallen initially into the wasteland of experience. Here he has seen how human kind can be nearly overwhelmed by aspects of modern American life—by the machine in the boiler division of the Liberty Paint factory as well as by the political mechanism of the Brotherhood at the end of the book. Now covering his figurative scars from a fiery initiation into political reality during the ‘spring’ of his life, he lives on. But by the end he has learned to smell the ‘stench’ of death. His linear movement toward the North, and toward a personal search for self-meaning, parallels that of the reader toward the close of the novel.”

R. Baxter Miller

“A Deeper Literacy: Teaching *Invisible Man* from Aboriginal Ground”
Approaches (1989) 52-53

“Ellison himself has pointed out many [major patterns]: the pattern of constraint and constriction played out on historical, social, and philosophical grounds; the mythic quest for identity involving rhythms of death and rebirth; the uses of folk materials including the blues and the sermon tradition as backdrop and accompaniment; the design of the picaresque; the network of metaphors such as visibility and invisibility, illusion and reality, nightmare and daydream, surrogate fathers, and symbolic naming....

Nowhere in *Invisible Man* is there a woman not characterized as automaton—prostitute or mother. From the blond woman in the opening scene, through the innocent and nameless black girls who dream of romantic love and marriage, to Sybil, subsumed by fantasies of rape, to Mary, the ‘good’ mother, who sustains as well as destroys, the women are one-dimensional figures playing roles in a drama written by men. Nevertheless, there is some hidden knowledge concerning women that hovers just below the level of the invisible man’s consciousness. From the prologue where in the deepest levels of the reefer hallucination the invisible man finds first an old woman singing a spiritual and then a beautiful girl pleading in a voice similar to that of his mother for control of her own naked body to the end of the novel where he sees the hanging of seven mannequins, a reader today must be aware of the invisibility and impotence of women in society....

Although there are some women in the Brotherhood, they all, with the possible exception of Emma, seem to be wives, secretaries, girlfriends, or hangers-on of men. Emma, Jack’s mistress, acts as hostess, dispensing drinks and occasionally money. The party that takes place is clearly taking place in her richly furnished dwelling. The only woman who asks an intelligent question at a meeting of the Brotherhood is a ‘plain woman.’ The invisible man’s assignment to the ‘Woman Question’ is a demotion that he understands as an outrageous joke. When he speaks to a female audience, the women respond stereotypically, with a sense of sexual excitement. The white woman who invites him to her apartment and seduces him uses all the clichés, including words like ‘you convey the great throbbing vitality of the movement.’ Most of the action in the novel concerning Sybil is taken up with her attempt to get the invisible man to play the role of a brute and to pretend that he is raping her....

The only woman acting with any semblance of real power is Trueblood’s wife, who takes on herself the roles of judge, jury, and executioner but who is finally unable to carry out her sentence. Later she is corrupted when she accepts items of material value offered her by false fathers. It is, of course, possible that Ellison presents through the invisible man’s narration stereotypes of women in an effort to call attention to the stereotypes.” [If the true *man* is invisible, is not the true *woman* also invisible?]

Mary Rohrberger

“‘Ball the jack’: Surreality, Sexuality, and the Role of Women in *Invisible Man*”
Approaches (1989) 125, 130-32

“*Invisible Man* continues to be taught, read, and praised. It embodies the essence of a person’s quest for identity, self, being, in a world that cares even less than it attempts to understand that search. Embedded in its richly textured structure are a number of African-Americans, American, and African elements woven into a smooth and easily comprehended story. The art of Ellison’s prose is as understated as are his allusions and his knowledge. Ellison has described the book’s structure as that of a jazz composition, complete with a central theme and harmonic variations on it, those variations caught in separate virtuoso performances. The text is known for its dramatic and memorable episodes... Both oral and written

traditions come together in this most American of fictions... Rather than being considered a black writer's important novel, *Invisible Man* is considered one of the most important modern American novels. It speaks for all readers, and reflects the contradictions and complications of American life in its very complex structure."

Linda Wagner-Martin
The Heath Anthology of American Literature 2
(D.C. Heath 1990) 1844

"Overnight Ralph Ellison had unwittingly replaced Richard Wright in the public's eye as America's premier black writer of fiction, a position he held throughout much of his long life. Ironically, neither man ever again published a major work of fiction. *Invisible Man* has often invited comparison with *Native Son*, principally, one may suppose, because both reflect in realistic detail circumstances that their respective authors encountered while growing up black in a segregated South.

Wright's Bigger Thomas, however, like Wright himself, has grown up in Mississippi, where the shadow of slavery has persisted, and the traumas forced upon him in youth have rendered him permanently angry at being denied the dignity that he instinctively knows is rightfully his. Sadly the adulthood that Bigger's author allows him is too brief to permit more than a gesture toward control of the resentment that has dominated his life. By contrast, the nameless hero of *Invisible Man*, although repeatedly advised by whites and blacks alike that his place in society is somewhat lower than that of his Anglo-Saxon counterparts, has grown up with parents who encouraged him to taste the bounty of a European culture that he is intelligent enough to appreciate—done so, moreover, in a society that seemingly has no great interest in denying him access to it. In addition, from the fierce words of a dying grandfather he has derived the insight that his life as a black must be one in perpetual conflict with both white arrogance and black complaisance. Briefly, the substantive difference between the heroes of the two novels is that Wright's engages the enemy with outright hostility; Ellison's with dogged but passive resistance. For Bigger Thomas the consequence of his engagement is destruction; for Ellison's nameless hero, protracted invisibility in a context of willful white misunderstanding and misguided black activism.

Formally, the difference between the two novels is even greater. Wright, not only in *Native Son* but consistently in all his narratives including *Black Boy*, made use of a naturalistic style reminiscent of those American authors he most admired, Theodore Dreiser, Sherwood Anderson, and Sinclair Lewis. Ellison used the same mode in *Invisible Man* but only in the beginning. Thereafter he shifted to a picaresque formula and in a succession of symbolic incidents, replete with folkloric materials, dream sequences, and passages of stream of consciousness, presented a black bildungsroman in which the central figure advances from an innocent anonymity to an awareness both of his identity and his invisibility and the realization that many others less aware than he, white as well as black, share his ambiguous situation. Wright's *Native Son* had both predecessors and successors, but Ellison's novel stands alone, though as a serious examination of the predicament of blacks in America it anticipated the writing he himself would do throughout the rest of his life."

J. A. Bryant, Jr.
Twentieth-Century Southern Literature
(U Kentucky 1997) 159-60

Michael Hollister (2014)