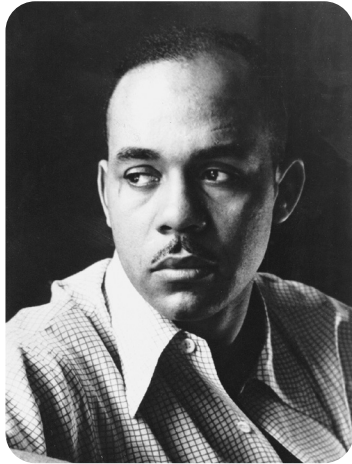


Ralph Waldo Ellison • *Invisible Man*

THE AUTHOR

RALPH WALDO ELLISON

The African-American writer Ralph Waldo Ellison was born in Oklahoma City in 1914. His father, a coal and ice **deliverer**, died from a work-related accident when Ralph was only three years old. His mother, who worked for white families as a cleaning lady, **raised** him and his younger brother. In his hometown, Ellison started studying music before moving to New York to earn money to complete his music studies, however the advent of The Great Depression • and then the **outbreak** of World War II changed his plans. Soon after the war, Ellison started working on his first and most **praised** novel, *Invisible Man*: it took him five years to write it and



The Great Depression was a worldwide economic crisis that started in the USA in 1929 (with the crash of Wall Street) and went on for about a decade.

when it was published in 1952, it was awarded the National Book Award and became a **milestone** in American literature. After achieving success as a writer, Ellison was appointed to many honorary positions and had the opportunity to travel throughout Europe: he also lived in Rome for two years. He died from cancer in 1994.

THE WORK

INVISIBLE MAN

Invisible Man is the story of an African American man from the South (the southern United States) who goes to college and experiences how and to what extent he and his fellow African Americans are discriminated against by white people: they make him feel “invisible”, because they can only see themselves and their own interests. Hoping for a new start, the protagonist leaves the racist South and moves to Harlem, New York, where he becomes involved in the protests against racism. To avoid arrest, he takes refuge in a **cellar**, which he furnishes and makes his home and it is here that he decides to write his story in the hope of making his invisibility, visible.

cellar: *cantina*

deliverer: *colui che fa consegna*

milestone: *pietra miliare*

outbreak: *scoppio*

to praise: *elogiare*

to raise: *crescere*

THE TEXT

The excerpt is from the Prologue, which opens the novel.

..... I have been carrying on a fight with Monopolated Light & Power for some time now. I use their service and pay them nothing at all, and they don't know it. Oh, they suspect that power is being drained off, but they don't know where. All they know is that according to the master meter back there in their power station a hell of a lot of free current is disappearing somewhere into the jungle of Harlem. The joke, of course, is that I don't live in Harlem but in a border area. Several years ago (before I discovered the advantage of being invisible) I went through the routine process of buying service and paying their outrageous rates. But no more. I gave up all that, along with my apartment, and my old way of life: that way based upon the fallacious assumption that I, like other men, was visible. Now, aware of my invisibility, I live rent-free in a building rented strictly to whites, in a section of the basement that was shut off and forgotten during the nineteenth century [.....]. The point now is that I found a home -- or a hole in the ground, as you will. Now don't jump to the conclusion that because I call my home a "hole" it is damp and cold like a grave; there are cold holes and warm holes. Mine is a warm hole. [.....]. My hole is warm and full of light. Yes, full of light. I doubt if there is a brighter spot in all New York than this hole of mine, and I do not exclude Broadway. Or the Empire State Building on a photographer's dream night. But that is taking advantage of you. Those two spots are among the darkest of our whole civilization -- pardon me, our whole culture (an important distinction, I've heard) -- which might sound like a hoax, or a contradiction, but that (by contradiction, I mean) is how the world moves: Not like an arrow, but a boomerang. (Beware of those who speak of the spiral of history; they are preparing a boomerang. Keep a steel helmet handy.) I know; I have been boomeranged across my head so much that I now can see the darkness of lightness. And I love light. Perhaps you'll think it strange that an invisible man should need light, desire light, love light. But maybe it is exactly because I am invisible. Light confirms my reality, gives birth to my form. [.....]. Without light I am not only invisible, but formless as well; and to be unaware of one's form is to live a death. I myself, after existing some twenty years, did not become alive until I discovered my invisibility. That is why I fight my battle with Monopolated Light & Power. The deeper reason, I mean: It allows me to feel my vital aliveness. I also fight them for taking so much of my money before I learned to protect myself. In my hole in the basement there are exactly 1,369 lights. I've wired the entire ceiling, every inch of it. And not with fluorescent bulbs, but with the older, more-expensive-to-operate kind, the filament type. An act of sabotage, you know. I've already begun to wire the wall. A junk man I know, a man of vision, has supplied me with wire and sockets. Nothing, storm or flood, must get in the way of our need for light and ever more and brighter light. The truth is the light and light is the truth. When I finish all four walls, then I'll start on the floor. Just how that will go, I don't know. Yet when you have lived invisible as long as I have you develop a certain ingenuity. I'll solve the problem. And maybe I'll invent a gadget to place my coffeepot on the fire while I lie in bed, and even invent a gadget to warm my bed -- like the fellow I saw in one of the picture magazines who made himself a gadget to warm his shoes! Though invisible, I am in the great American tradition of tinkers. That makes me kin to Ford ♦♦, Edison and Franklin. Call me, since I have a theory and a concept, a "thinker-tinker."

arrow: *freccia*

assembly line: *catena di montaggio*

ceiling: *soffitto*

to drain off: *sottrarre, prosciugare*

to give up: *rinunciare a*

handy: *a portata di mano*

hoax: *beffa*

junk man: *rigattiere*

kin: *parente, affine*

outrageous rate: *bolletta esagerata*

tinker: *stagnino ambulante, riparatore*

unaware: *ignaro*

Henry Ford (1893-1947) was the founder of the Ford Motor company: he revolutionised factory production by developing the assembly line technique.


COMPREHENSION

1  Identify the following objects in the text.

1. A thin piece of metal for conducting current:
2. A receptacle for a plug:
3. A device managed by a utility company to check their users' consumption:
4. A glass container which glows with light when electricity passes through its components:
5. A conductor that is heated and shines when electric current passes through it:
6. A form of energy:


2  Answer the questions.

1. Where does the narrator of the story live?
2. Does anyone else live in the same building?
3. Does he have to pay rent to live there?
4. What is Monopolated Light & Power?
5. Which of their services does he use?
6. Why did he start to fight against them?
7. What does he need so much light for?

3  Mark the statements as True, False or Doesn't say. Correct the false statements.

- | | T | F | DS |
|--|--------------------------|--------------------------|--------------------------|
| 1. The place the narrator lives in does not have any furniture. | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| 2. The utility company is unaware that someone is taking electricity without paying. | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| 3. The narrator thinks his "hole" has more lights than the Empire State Building. | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| 4. The basement is lit by 1,369 fluorescent bulbs. | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| 5. The narrator found wires and sockets in a rubbish bin. | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| 6. To install all those lights, all the walls have been wired, even the floor. | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| 7. The narrator wishes he could invent a special machine that makes his coffee while he is still in bed. | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |

ANALYSIS

4  Read these interpretations of the real meaning of the narrator’s words and find them in the text you have read.

1	Like all people, he had thought that everybody could really see and understand him, but he was wrong.	Line
2	He doesn’t want people to think that he lives in a kind of tomb.	Line
3	He doesn’t regard New York City as a civilized place.	Line
4	The narrator has finally understood that white people discriminate against non-whites: even though their skin (their surface) is white (bright), their soul (their inner part) is black (dark).	Line
5	He needs so much light because he wants to be visible and he wants to feel he is alive.	Line
6	Even though other people do not recognise him as an individual, he feels as clever as the main representatives of white America.	Line

5  **CLASS WORK** Identify the themes of the novel choosing from those below and discuss them with your class.

- Race
- Isolation
- The search for identity
- Reality and illusion
- Scientific progress
- Alienation
- Unemployment
- Revenge

DISCUSSION

6  **CLASS WORK** Take it in turns to talk to a partner and tell him/her about a moment in your life when you felt “invisible”.