



AMERICAN SOCIETY IN RALPH ALLISON'S NOVEL "INVISIBLE MAN"

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Annotation

The article provides a brief overview of the biography and work of R. Ellison , in particular his main work, the novel *The Invisible Man*: briefly characterizes the themes and problems of the novel, features of its poetics, discusses the phenomenon of his success and its influence on Ellison 's literary reputation and status as one of the classics of American and world literature of the twentieth century.

Keywords: Ralph Ellison , *The Invisible Man*, Ellison studies , Afro-American studies , history of American literature of the 20th century.

Introduction

The fate of books even in the 20th century is sometimes surprising and unpredictable - despite today's omnipotence of the laws of the book market, advertising, mechanisms of "promotion" and "promotion of products" that prevail in our time, true art is still not subject to the laws of commerce. Moreover, it does not fit into the framework set by common sense, destroys the inertia of thinking, overturns any stereotypes. The appearance of this work is a mystery. How, by violating all the rules that guarantee popularity, it gains recognition from the public is perhaps even more of a mystery .

The Invisible Man is a striking example of such an inexplicable “zigzag of luck” that invariably baffles sociologists and marketers who wonder: “How did Ellison become a genius?”, “How did an almost obscure aspiring author manage to create the “great American novel overnight? ” Indeed, when *The Invisible Man* was first printed on April 14, 1952, by Random House in New York , the author had just turned 39 and had only a few published stories, essays, and reviews to his credit . he was not among the writers, for those around him he was not so much a writer as a budding newcomer who moved around literary circles and managed to work in several editorial offices and writers' organizations.

The first responses to the novel appeared immediately, and all of them, as Ellison 's biographer Arnold Rampersed writes , "were like the first vibrations of the ground underfoot, foreshadowing the coming earthquake." Literally a week later, the press was flooded with a wave of laudatory reviews. By the end of the month, six thousand copies of the book had been sold, and ten days later, on May 11, *The Invisible Man*





was in tenth place on the New York Times Book Review bestseller list . In January 1953, the novel won the National Book Award, one of America's most prestigious literary awards. Together with Ellison 's novel, E. Hemingway's novel "The Old Man and the Sea" and J. Steinbeck's novel "East of Paradise" were nominated for the award, but the jury preferred "The Invisible Man". Most of all, this decision surprised the laureate himself: he did not even think about winning, moreover, he did not imagine that he could seriously compete with the living classics, especially with Hemingway, whom he considered one of his teachers in literature. But from that moment on, Ellison 's life changed once and for all. He was recognized as a Writer with a capital letter, he became a celebrity. Flattering invitations poured in - to speak on the radio, to give an interview to an eminent magazine, to give a course of lectures on modern prose at the university. European fame also quickly came - a year later he was called to Salzburg, Paris, Rome. Until his death, he received awards both at home and abroad, was a member of several societies, academies, and an honorary professor at leading universities. This high-profile fame brought him a single novel, with which Ellison entered the history of literature of the twentieth century.

There are writers who realized their vocation early, who from childhood were fond of literature. Ralph Ellison was not one of them. The idea to seriously engage in writing came to him rather late. Until the age of twenty-five, he connected his future exclusively with music.

Ellison was born and raised in the western United States, in Oklahoma, where the spirit of the American Frontier , the spirit of pioneers, hunters and settlers, was preserved in the 1910s and 1920s , the spirit that Ellison considered the quintessential American national character. Ellison was proud that not only Negro and Anglo-Saxon, but also Indian blood flows in his veins. His father, Lewis Ellison , could have easily crossed the "line of color" and passed himself off as white, but instead chose to remain colored and married a black Ida Watkins . From this marriage two sons were born. Ralph went to his mother, and the youngest, Herbert, who was nicknamed Huck Finn in the family, turned out to be blue-eyed and red-haired, although his facial features betrayed his Negro origin. A predilection for literary names generally distinguished Lewis Ellison , an educated and well-read man. He named his eldest son Ralph Waldo Ellison in honor of the great American thinker and romantic writer Ralph Waldo Emerson . Ralph was born on March 1, 1913, and in 1916 his father died in an accident. After the death of the breadwinner, the family was forced to fight for existence. Ida Allison did not shy away from any work, she was a laundress, a concierge, and a cleaning lady. While still at school, Ralph knew how to get money: he worked as a janitor, an elevator operator, washed dishes, and cleaned shoes on the street. The





ambitious teenager already then dreamed of success and worldwide fame - he saw himself as a great composer, author of symphonies and cantatas, or at least a famous performer. During the day he took classical music lessons, and in the evenings he listened to the sounds of jazz that came from clubs and theaters. In the 1920s, stars such as blues singer Jimmy Rushing and guitarist Charlie Christian lived and performed in Oklahoma. Ellison would later write articles about them: "Golden Age, Old Time", "Remembering Jimmy", "The Charlie Christian Story", "Life with Music". In 1933, twenty-year-old Ralph applied to study at Tuskegee University and learned a few months later that he had been given a scholarship. He did not have money for a ticket to Alabama, and he decided to go "hare" in freight trains. He spent several days on the road in the company of vagabonds - hobos, got acquainted with their dangerous and romantic way of life and, finally, arrived safely on far South, to the oldest Negro university, where he was to study music for two years in the trumpet class and perform with the university orchestra.

Tuskegee's impressions are given a lot of space. The action of the first part takes place in the South. The young hero of the novel, having taken part in a humiliating "battle" played out for the amusement of city aces, speaks, barely moving his bloodied lips, in front of a "high assembly" a speech about social responsibility and new opportunities that have opened up for blacks. The "fathers of the city" honor him with scholarships, and he goes to study at a Negro college. The second chapter describes college life: a blooming campus with flowerbeds and paths, a chapel, a boiler room, student residences, a monument to Booker T. Washington removing the "veil of ignorance" from the head of a kneeling slave, a veterans hospital near the university campus - all these details of the real Tuskegee Ellison kept in the novel, almost unchanged. The young hero still recklessly believes in the path to success outlined by the Founder. At first, the rector Dr. Bledsoe considers him "promising" and entrusts him with the responsible task of accompanying the wealthy college trustee Mr. Norton, who has arrived on a short visit from Boston. Such visits of "white friends" - trustees and philanthropists - were in Tuskegee in the order of things.

As you know, the idea of the novel came from Ellison after in 1945 he and his wife Fanny spent several weeks in Vermont, where, having joined the spirit of New England and got acquainted with the culture of its "golden days" (as the well-known critic Lewis Mumford called the time, when New England was in its heyday, when Emerson and Thoreau lived and worked there), admired the lofty moral ideals of the Transcendentalists, who preserved the best of the Puritan heritage. The episode of the acquaintance of the hero - a modest black student - with Mr. Norton, a wealthy Bostonian and college trustee, was written by Ellison at the very beginning of work on





the novel. The image of Mr. Norton carries a special semantic load, conveying Ellison's conviction that the spirit of abolitionism, so strong in the 19th century, was degenerated into a beautiful-hearted and short-sighted philanthropism. It is no coincidence that Norton is ridiculed and humiliated by war veterans of color in the den with the telling name "Golden Days". Mr. Norton is a puppet in the hands of the cunning black trickster Principal Bledsoe. It is not surprising that he and his henchmen immediately expel the naive hero of the novel from college as a "dangerous element": obeying the guest's desire, he ingenuously showed the white philanthropist not a "Potemkin village", but a piece of real, unvarnished, black life in the South.

Although Ellison was not expelled from Tuskegee, he, like the Invisible Man, left the university without completing his studies. In the summer of 1935 he went to New York and never returned to Tuskegee. All his further life turned out to be connected with New York - having arrived there as a twenty-two-year-old youth, he remained there forever. Ellison was very lucky - he immediately met with the famous poet, one of the luminaries of the Harlem Renaissance, Langston Hughes. Through Hughes, Ellison made his first contacts in the literary world, including with the rising star of African-American prose, Richard Wright. Under the influence of Hughes and Wright, Ellison became interested in Marxism and socialism. He spends a lot of time at the Daily Worker, follows publications in The New Masses, attends meetings of radicals in Greenwich Village, reads through John Strachey's Literature and Dialectical Materialism. The first attempts at writing belong to the same time: at the request and with the support of Wright, Ellison begins to publish reviews and tries to compose stories. He emulates Hemingway's "tough style" and Wright's naturalism. The influence of the "protest novel" is especially noticeable in his early stories: "Heim's Bull", "Tilman and Tackhead", "The Black Ball" - and the outlines of the never-written novel "Slick". Its heroes are workers, hobo vagrants, ghetto dwellers whose fates are typical of the Great Depression era. Like Richard Wright, Ellison draws pictures of poverty and squalor, uses the Negro dialect, strives for the accuracy and reliability of the fact.

The aspiring writer is forced to earn his daily bread: he works in a paint factory, then gets a job as a secretary to the psychoanalyst doctor Dr. Sullivan - these and other impressions subsequently entered his novel. After being expelled from college, the nameless hero of The Invisible Man arrives in New York, tries for a long time and in vain to find a job, and finally gets a job at a paint factory, where he is instructed to turn black paint into white by adding a special reagent. At the factory, due to his naivety and inexperience, he is involuntarily drawn into strife between trade union activists and the labor aristocracy, and then becomes a victim of a production accident





and ends up in the hospital. Experience with Dr. Sullivan was very useful to Ellison for a surreal description of the experiments that doctors put on the Invisible Man. Doctors' vivisectional techniques, the image of the clinic as a dehumanizing machine - all this anticipates Ken Kesey's famous novel "One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest", which describes the visions of Chief Bromden, "Combine", ECT and lobotomy.

Interest in Marxism, communist sympathies and experience of cooperation with the left movement formed the autobiographical basis of the last, third part of the novel. The hero joins the ranks of the "Brotherhood" - a political organization that unites whites and coloreds. At first, it seems to him that the "Brotherhood" has managed to overcome the racial barrier, to destroy the "line of color - the line of division." He likes the scientific approach, party discipline, the common goal for which black and white "brothers" work together. He is inspired by the feeling of belonging to the History that is being made before his eyes. However, he soon encounters the flip side of the Brotherhood's ideology. He is being persecuted for "opportunism, individualism, dictatorial inclinations", being worked on for "inadmissible initiative" and demanded blind obedience to the decisions of the Committee, which "thinks for everyone". Behind the easily recognizable communist dogmas lies a disregard for the individual; Moreover, the leaders of the Brotherhood despise the very working masses for whose benefit the organization is called upon to fight: when Invisible Man tries to talk about the mood in Harlem, he is sharply rebuked: "Our business is not to listen to what the ignorant masses on the street think, but to dictate, what should they think!" The committee decides to "sacrifice" Harlem for the sake of "agreeing with other political forces" and expanding its influence. A bloody, destructive riot in a Negro area of New York plays into the hands of the Brotherhood, which believes that sacrifices in the name of a "great common goal" are inevitable.

Living, real people for History are only puppets, obediently dancing Sambo dolls, like those sold on the streets of Harlem by former youth leader Tod, disillusioned with the "Brotherhood" Clifton. Following Clifton, the hero discovers a terrible truth for himself: politics, economics, history, ideology, in a word, all public and social life is an area of false, untrue, an area of pseudo-being, where every person is invisible, because it turns into an object of manipulation, a scheme, a mask, a function leading to the loss of his "I". Thus, the fate of the nameless Invisible Hero is the "Negro version" of the lot of the human as such. This is a parable about the loneliness of a person in modern society, about what his "existence" is, and about the fact that he is doomed to a ghostly, inauthentic existence.

This view of history and society brings Ellison closer to the existentialists. The difference, however, is that the writer does not consider this state of affairs hopeless.





In his essays of the 1950s and 1960s (“American literature of the 20th century and humanism under a black mask”, “Hidden Name, Difficult Destiny” and others), he sees the reason for this state of affairs in the violation of the principles of democracy, in the inconsistency of ideology with practice. In America, as if on George Orwell's fur farm, universal equality is proclaimed, but in reality it turns out that some members of society (primarily ethnic minorities) are “less equal” than everyone else. Ellison is convinced that this is precisely the root of evil: if it can be uprooted, each person will be returned to his true human essence. We are talking not only about blacks, who at the dawn of the exploration of the New World “were exploited mercilessly and immorally, as if the body of a black man is a natural resource”, but also about whites, who, finding themselves in the role of oppressors and executioners, also latently experience moral suffering. In Ellison's view, the great American literature of the 19th century awakened the conscience of the nation by speaking out against the practice of double standards and the power of stereotypes to justify such a state of affairs in society.

With the advent of the twentieth century, according to Ellison, this moral pathos was almost lost, which led to the degradation of literature: writers were carried away by a formal experiment, improving the technique, forgetting that literary technique is not an end in itself and the mission of literature is to contribute to the spiritual elevation of man and society .

In her novel, Ellison demonstrates a whole palette of techniques and styles - all three parts are written differently. The change of styles reflects the changes taking place with the hero, both external (he moves from the patriarchal South to the North, to New York) and internal. The hero gradually begins to realize that all efforts to realize himself in the public arena condemn him to the position of invisible: the true "I", the deep human essence remains unclaimed, "invisible" to others. In order to understand this, the hero must know himself, separate his personality from the “husk” that society imposes on him.

The stages of this “path to oneself” are marked by the appearance of folklore images in the novel. The first of them is Trueblood , on the path of a naive hero, he appears as a mystery man, he is marked by the seal of some frightening and repulsive secret. This black Oedipus, who committed incest, despised and hated by the entire Negro community, turns out to be a man of integrity and full of inner strength. The simple, ignorant peasant Trueblood has many talents: he is a real storyteller whose stories fascinate listeners, he can bring blues and spirituals melodies “with wild perfection” . Thanks to these talents, he managed to rise above his terrible and bitter fate, to recognize and overcome the sin he had committed, to rise above his lot. In the essay





"Richard Wright's Blues" (1945), Ellison defines the blues as an existentialist art that allows one to cope with everyday disasters and hardships, to distance themselves from them with the help of irony. Later, already in New York, being in the hospital at the mercy of vivisectors in white coats, the hero shows ingenuity and the will to live and turns from a guinea pig into a cheerful and elusive trickster Brer Rabbit. Characters of Negro animal tales reappear in the hero's mind when he encounters the "Brotherhood": Brother Jack, Brother Restrum, Brother Tobbit are associated with Brother Fox, Brother Bear, Brother Possum and other folklore heroes. Once underground, the Invisible Man listens to the music of Louis Armstrong; his visions are described with the help of folklore forms - this is both a tale, and spirituals, and a "black sermon".

Even in his youth, dreaming of becoming a composer, Ralph Ellison wanted to compose a symphony based on Negro folk songs, blues and spirituals. His novel became such a kind of symphony. Ellison never tires of repeating in her essays and interviews: folklore and myths contain the "protostructure of the humane", and only through identifying oneself with these eternal archetypes can each person touch the secret of his own destiny, feel his self and finally come out of the darkness into the light, become visible - both for others and for yourself. "I shed the old skin, leave it here below. I'm going upstairs... Who knows, maybe at these low frequencies I'm speaking on your behalf," says the Invisible Man in the epilogue, preparing to leave his "underground".

To come to himself, Invisible had to go a long way, consisting of losses and disappointments, discoveries and acquisitions. For Ellison, work on the novel also became a real odyssey, which lasted for a long seven years. After the release of *The Invisible Man*, Ellison remained true to himself: he never became a prolific author and still wrote little, preferring small forms.

The novel suffered the fate of an "invisible book": almost sixty years have passed since its publication, it has long been translated into many languages, and the Russian reader still has at his disposal only the translation of a single chapter made by V. Golyshev back in 1985, yes various references to the "great but unknown" novel in books and articles about 20th-century US literature. It remains to be hoped that this mysterious and inexplicable gap in our understanding of the history of American literature will nevertheless be filled in the very near future.





Literature

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