The Invisible Man: A Blind Clown

Susan K. Kasten

Cataracts of splendiferousness coat the lenses of the runaways who help to populate circuses. They search for dramatic spectacle; they chase imperishable fantasy; they seek perpetual youth. However, when the cataracts are removed and the dreams are readjusted, fact and fiction become incompatible. The formerly utopian extravaganza of beauty, form, and color eventually exposes massive grotesqueries. In juxtaposition with brilliance is dinginess; comedy intertwines with horror; the meretricious associates with the genuine; mediocrity cohabits the canvas with sublimity. And nothing is what it appears to be. Immediate miracles are farces, strategy is inappropriately labeled bravery, and the intrigue of the unfamiliar is simply an exaggeration of the familiar. Yet, the circus is enticing. It is a transitory guest that comes in the night from nowhere and that goes just as mysteriously. It offers an interlude in which the unreal becomes real, the difficult commonplace, the accustomed novelty. In its perpetual paradox, it expresses a hope for what man might want to be and a condemnation for the absurdity that man has already become.

Ralph Ellison’s invisible man lives under the big top labeled, “Black Man Without an Identity”; thus, most of his life is spent performing within his rings. He performs as a grandson, as a college student, as a blue-collar worker, and as a political party member. From his rings, he is able to observe the rest of the circus, and, like the audience, he laughs. However his laughter is not generated from delight but from inanity. His involvement with the circus, as his grandfather had predicted, kept “that nigger-boy running.”

The invisible man’s farewell performance bills him as Jack-the-Bear, an invisible man who hibernates in a warm hole with “bodiless heads you see sometimes in circus sideshows, it is as though I have been surrounded by mirrors of hard distorting glass. When they approach me they only see my surroundings, themselves, or figments of their imagination—indeed, everything and anything except me” (p. 3). His “winter season” hints of a death in the smell of spring, of the absurdity of life, and of the proximity between reality and chaos. Prior to his get away day, however, the invisible man could not distinguish death or life, absurdity or significance, reality or chaos. As a virtuoso fool, he lives the blues (Blues in circus lingo refers to cheap seats, reserved for general admission, usually around the ends of the big top.)

As the man who never quite fits in or joins in, the invisible man dons the role of the clown, or fool, as he painfully tries to equilibrate farce and seriousness, only to find out that any combination of those two ingredients blend tragedy. For example, the serious intent of his graduation oration was sabotaged by a stark-naked blond dancer
whose yellow hair was like that of a circus kewpie doll, by a large old man whose clumsiness was like that of an intoxicated panda, and by a situation whose intent it was to cage young boys and let them fight until they glistened with sweat like circus seals (pp. 15–22). Yet, the invisible man performed thoroughly—he fought, he danced, he laughed, he spoke, and he bled for his audience. Not until later, after he was expelled from college, did he receive the advice: “Come out of your fog, young man. And remember you don’t have to be a complete fool in order to succeed. Play the game, but don’t believe in it—that much you owe yourself” (p. 118).

Yet, this advice does not penetrate his fur until he performs as Jack-the-Bear. In the Optic White Paint Ring, the old fool (Lucius Brockway) and the young fool (the invisible man) stage a comic confrontation. During the fray, the old fool bites the young fool, losing his teeth in the process. The teeth are mistaken for a knife, and the fight grows fierce. Once that conflict is resolved, the farce ends and the seriousness begins:

‘Turn it! Turn it!’
‘Which one?’ I yelled reaching.
‘The white one, fool, the white one.’
I jumped catching it and pulling down with all my weight, feeling it give. But this only increased the noise and I seemed to hear Brockway laugh as I looked around to see him scrambling for the stairs, his hands clasping the back of his head, and his neck pulled in close, like a small boy who has thrown a brick into the air (p. 174).

That particular brick cost the invisible man his past. When he is recovering from the subsequent brain surgery, the seriousness of the situation is again nullified by game playing: “Who am I? It was no good. I felt like a clown” (p. 184).

The fool continues to synchronize his entanglement with the polar extremes of comedy and horror as he engages in a scientifically political organization. When prompted by a situation, the invisible man gives a seriously stirring speech to a crowd watching an eviction. His efforts become merely farcical when he finds out that the elderly couple “are already dead, defunct. . . . They’re dead, you see, because they are incapable of rising to the necessity of the historical situation” (p. 221). The farce becomes one through a serious matter—accountability, social responsibility, and individuality are sacrificed to history. Strangely enough, the invisible man entertains the thought of rising to the necessity as his value system and memory bank are triggered into action by the smell of his landlady’s cooked cabbage: “He had mentioned an organization. What was it? I hadn’t inquired. What a fool” (p. 226).

The fool continues to emerge and to perform. The invisible man witnesses what appears to be himself bounding across a room to pound a pipe with his shoe heel. He shouts to himself: “Stop it, you ignorant fool!” (p. 241). The invisible man is cast in the role of the black-face comedian by his supervisor’s wife (p. 230), and he later
conduits the starring role in a bedroom scene with another superior's wife who expects him to entertain her: "I was expected either to sing 'Old Man River' and just keep rolling along, or to do fancy tricks with my muscles" (p. 390). Brother Westrum even indicates that the invisible man's foolishness might malign the Brotherhood as evidenced by his declaration: "This brother is going to make a fool out of the Brotherhood" (p. 301). The invisible man listens, wondering why the Brotherhood allows the "clown" to continue (p. 304).

Moreover, the invisible man's training as a fool has demanded that he accept the foolishness of other men, even when their attitudes and antics mark them as clowns (p. 171). Most of the characters become circus personnel. Dr. Bledsoe seems to be appropriately dressed in a ringmaster's uniform as he leads the college services with an invisible baton. "He wore striped trousers and a swallow-tail coat with black-braided lapels topped by a rich ascot tie" (p. 89). While to be complete, he needs a whistle and top hat, his magic and powerful touch seem a sufficient substitute. Brother Jack assumes the same kind of ringmaster position as "he stood up front beside a microphone, his feet planted solidly on the dirty canvas-covered platform, looking from side to side; his posture dignified and benign, like a bemused father listening to the performance of his adoring children" (p. 257). Brother Clifton becomes the puppeteer whose grinning doll, Sambo, promises to kill depression by dancing and laughing (p. 326). The invisible man defines Sybil as a lioness as she practices becoming a "good" nymphomaniac (p. 396). While Trueblood is labeled the dog (p. 152), Res the Destroyer is tagged as the monkey-chaser (p. 409). Yet, the tragic aspect in the invisible man's troupe is his failure to recognize the real fools. He says of Brother Jack: "He must be a powerful man, I thought, not a clown at all" (p. 236). The invisible man only sees Brother Jack clad in his public tinsel, becomes blinded by it and is unable to analytically assess Jack's character. Likewise, the invisible man hears Ras assert that he is not a fool: "I am no black educated fool" (p. 284). and he fails to recognize that power in might serves as the basis for much of the world's absurd condition.

The invisible man lives the life of the circus fool while surrounded by his circus colleagues. He is transient at best. He leaves his college womb and enters Harlem without fanfare. When he is ready to perform, his circuit includes the Men's House, various business buildings, a paint factory, the Chthonian, and a warm, well-lighted hole. Each engagement begins abruptly as he arrives from nowhere and leaves to nowhere. Each experience begins as a novelty and recurs as nostalgia. The nostalgia is inconsistent and sometimes unpleasant, but nevertheless evidenced. For example, his desire to return to Mary's cradle indicates his desire to recapture portions of a relatively secure past. But as with all circus peasantry, he cannot replay a stand because he knows that the fantasy is perishable.

Unable to stop playing the game because he is blinded by its promises, the invisible man shadowboxes his way to an identity. He has "to act the nigger" (p. 110). Because he fails to come to terms with his grandfather, with Bledsoe, with Norton, or
with himself, he is forced to play numerous grind shows on his way to his idea of the center ring. Once there, the lights, the audience, and the cages unnerve him, but he takes his position and performs: “I went toward the microphone where Brother Jack himself waited, entering the spot of light that surrounded me like a seamless cage of stainless steel” (p. 258). He entertains and his audience reciprocates with deafening applause. In the interim, the invisible man is blinded, indicating that the center ring will not be the elucidation of the self.

While in the center ring, he organizes a parade complete with the People’s Hot Foot Squad. “Then came the flags and banners and the cards bearing slogans; and the squad of drum majorettes, the best looking girls we could find, who pranced and twirled and just plain girlèd the enthusiastic interest of the Brotherhood” (p. 287). Another, even more enthusiastic parade ultimately generates from the invisible man; this one sounds more like the Fourth of July. Screams of laughter, flashing lights, and uproarious singing and dancing spark exaltation throughout the crowd. The circus fat lady executes her milk and beer pageantry (p. 411), which is followed by the invisible man’s troupe up a burning staircase (p. 414). The headliner, Ras the Destroyer, dressed as an Abyssian chieftain, cavorts the arena on a great black horse, while the rest of his staff carry sticks, shoot guns, and fraternize horror with humor. Still another gala is organized by the invisible man. Brother Tobitt labels it a “side show of a funeral” (p. 352). The spectacle following Clifton’s death (“their [the Harlem residents] entertainment had been his death” [p. 337]) featured military marches; flags, banners, and shining horns; horses; hot dog wagons; Good Humor carts; peanut vendors; and a crowd that expected a magic act—perhaps one which included the raising of the dead (p. 340–343). The cumulative result of the festivities makes the invisible man’s head whirl as though he were riding a supersonic merry-go-round (p. 357), finally feeling relieved when his part in the revolutionary agony is lost in the “riotous lights of roller coasters” (p. 403).

As the horrors of life become more visible and as the humor of life becomes more deplorable, the invisible man needs to reinforce his role as the fool in the center ring by wearing a costume. He recognizes that everyone else dresses for the show: “I was painfully aware of other men dressed like the boys, and of girls in dark exotic-colored stockings, their costumes surreal variations of downtown styles” (p. 335). So he too feels the necessity of masquerading for his audience. The invisible man becomes more invisible as his costume enables him to assume the form of the real Rinehart (“Simply becoming aware of his existence ... is enough to convince me that Rinehart is real” [p. 376]).

Yet, in his circus situation, few things resemble reality. From the outset of his circus career, his grandfather announced his fate through a dream (p. 26). He, indeed, ran—ran to college, ran to expulsion, ran to New York, ran to work. His encounter with his supervisor began as “he [Brockway] started towards me as in a dream” (p. 171). His contact with Emma fuzzied itself into “some recurrent but deeply buried dream” (p. 247). Brother Wrestrum’s accusations and the ensuing hearing “no longer
seemed real” (p. 303). The affair with the white party member caught him in “a dream interval” (p. 314). When the invisible man hears Rinehart speak, the sermon is a “dreamlike recital” (p. 375). The riot in Harlem radiates “sparks that lit up the block like a blue dream” (p. 104). The clown wavers with his illusions and dreams, but he finally asks himself: “What is real anyway?.... His [Rinehart’s] world was possibility and he knew it. He was years ahead of me and I was a fool. I must have been crazy and blind” (p. 376). The dream comes to an end as the invisible man drops into his finale: “I could only lie on the floor, reliving the dream. All their faces were so vivid that they seemed to stand before me beneath a spotlight. They were all up there somewhere, making a mess of the world. Well, let them. I was through and, in spite of the dream, I was whole” (p. 431).

Having his cataracts removed and having readjusted his dreams, the invisible man can divorce himself from the circus and begin to define himself. Seeing and understanding that acting the clown’s part for fools is futile enables him to believe in possibility instead of control, to endorse love instead of bitterness, and to seek light instead of darkness.

Notes

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   September 10, 1981

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Summary

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Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man* is a novel about discovery and escape. The invisible man fluctuates between white and black, between now and then, between here and there. It is a novel about seeing and not seeing, about knowing and not knowing, about being and not being. And the reader is truly taxed to determine if the characters (or himself) can distinguish the differences. It is a novel on-the-run, frantic with a desire to find a sense of peace. However, that peace proves more illusive than time, history, or reality.

The *Invisible Man* is also a novel subtly filled with circus imagery. The characters become performers in a cosmic yet comic pageant. They dance and sing, wear black face, wave banners, manipulate puppets, and parade with a host of mangled personalities. Lights flash, majorettes march, pandas play, great horses promenade, hot dog vendors push their wagons through the mobs, and the music plays on and on and on. The performing characters wear clothes appropriate for the circus sideshow. They masquerade and distort reality in an effort to entertain.

As is so often the case, entertainers are not entertained. The invisible man is blinded by shadows, dreams, and myths. He runs from reality into chaos, endorsing the circus and becoming a fool surrounded by fools. In his blindness he searches for light, eventually finding it in a coal cellar. There he realizes that all men are invisible, that social injustice is an insult to everyone, and that the world is, indeed, mad.