

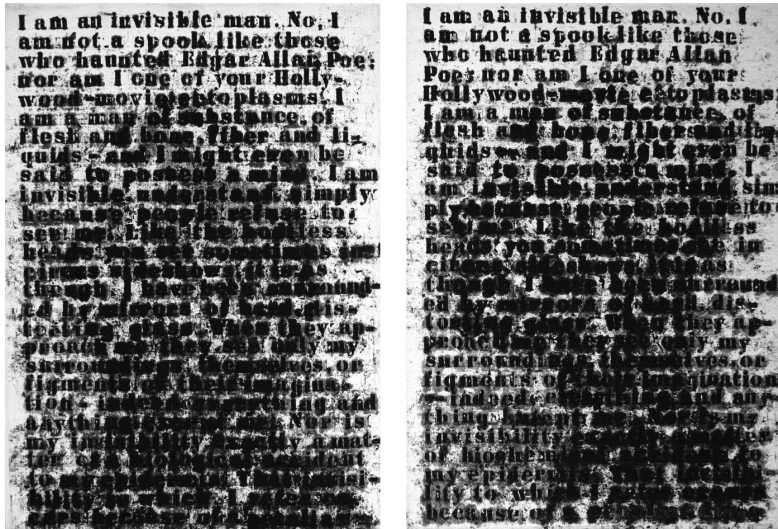
# CURRIER MUSEUM of ART Online Book Club

Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man* & Glenn Ligon's *Invisible Man (Two Views)*

## About the Online Book Club

This online book club is designed to be a resource for existing book clubs to link works of literature to art on view at the museum. Use the information and discussion questions on the following pages to facilitate your book club's conversation. **Then call 603.669.6144 x 113 to request our special book club tour** designed for groups who have used these materials. Tours feature Glenn Ligon's *Invisible Man (Two Views)* and other works in the collection that connect with themes relevant to the painting and novel.

## About the Painting



Glenn Ligon (born Bronx, New York, 1960)  
*Invisible Man (Two Views)*, 1991  
Oil and gesso on canvas  
28 x 20 in.

The two canvases of Glenn Ligon's 1991 work *Invisible Man (Two Views)* duplicate the opening passage from Ralph Ellison's novel of the same name, bringing Ellison's voice of the past to life in the present. This work explores issues of language, individuality, self-representation, race and African American history.

Letter-by-letter, Ligon used a plastic stencil and heavy black oil stick to paint the text—building texture and giving language a physical form. When Ligon moved the stencil, the thick pigment smudged. Viewed from a distance, the smudges visually combine to create silhouettes of the artist within the field of text. Viewed up-close, the portraits dissolve into letters, suggesting that seeing and being seen is tenuous. Toward the bottom of each canvas, the text is almost illegible, alluding to the difficulty and subjectivity of interpreting language.

## About the Artist

Glenn Ligon was born on April 20th, 1960 in the Bronx, New York. He attended the Rhode Island School of Design for two years beginning in 1980, and went on to earn a B.A. degree from Wesleyan University in 1982. In 1985, he participated in the Whitney Museum of American Art's Independent Study Program and his work has since been added to their collection as well as those of museums throughout the U.S. and Europe. At the Whitney, Ligon combined his life-long interest in literature with his painting, using text to give them layers of content. Since the early '90s, Ligon has had several solo exhibitions at museums such as the Whitney Museum of American Art, the Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden, and the San Francisco Museum of Art among others.

In addition to painting, Ligon's work includes photography, video, printmaking, and neon, and is greatly informed by his experiences as a Black and gay man living in the United States. But the content of his work extends beyond these categories and deals with human experience on a broader scope. Ligon is most known for his text-based works of art that probe such hefty issues as race, sexuality, identity, representation, and language. He often incorporates passages of literature, non-fiction, and vernacular texts such as those by James Baldwin, Zora Neal Hurston, Ralph Ellison, Richard Dryer, and Richard Pryor.

## About the Book

Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man* opens with the title line from Louis Armstrong's "(What Did I Do, to Be So) Black And Blue?" Like the classic tales from literary history, *Invisible Man* sets out to answer this epic question or argument with an ensuing narrative that is, in many ways, larger than life. The story of *Invisible Man* follows the patterns of classic stories like *The Iliad*, in which superhuman characters are featured in speeches and battles of profound importance. The action takes us to places we've never imagined, including surreal and grotesque underworlds. Ultimately, the reader grows to realize that the narrator's harrowing journey, which is both geographical and psychological, is undertaken in the name of America's soul and sanity.

Dedicated readers of *Invisible Man* will do well to brush up on their literary history, to listen to Louis Armstrong carefully, and to revisit key figures from America's battle for racial equality: figures like Booker T. Washington, Frederick Douglass, Marcus Garvey, and Malcolm X are models for characters and ideas that run fast and deep through *Invisible Man*. Ultimately, in Ellison's vision, the condition of being black in America and the country's complicated and shameful history of racism strike at a core national identity and wound, the festering of which could mean the tragic downfall of America's national heritage and the remarkable promise of E pluribus unum.

Today, *Invisible Man* remains at once an epic tale to rival the classics, a visionary political manifesto, a parable, a national portrait, and of course, a great story.

## About the Author

Ralph Ellison was born in Oklahoma and trained as a musician at Tuskegee Institute from 1933 to 1936, at which time a visit to New York and a meeting with Richard Wright led to his first attempts at fiction. His reviews, short stories, articles, and criticism appeared in many national magazines and anthologies. *Invisible Man* won the National Book Award and the Russwurm Award. From 1955 to 1957 Ellison was a fellow of the American Academy in Rome. He subsequently taught at Bard College and in 1961 served as an Alexander White Visiting Professor at the University of Chicago. During 1964 he delivered the Gertrude Clark Whittall Lecture at the Library of Congress and the Ewing Lectures at the University of California. He was appointed to the American Academy of Arts and Letters in 1964. From 1970 to 1980 he was Albert Schweitzer Professor of Humanities at New York University. He was a charter member of the National Council on the Arts and Humanities, a member of the Carnegie Commission on public television, a trustee of the John F. Kennedy Center for the Performing Arts, and a trustee of the Colonial Williamsburg Foundation. He was also the author of two collections of essays, *Shadow and Act* and *Going to the Territory*. Ralph Ellison died in 1994.

— The preceding information about the author was taken from the following source:

Ellison, Ralph. 1996. *Invisible man*. New York: Vintage International.

## Discussion Questions

1) **To get started, allow each member of the discussion group to share one thought or reflection on the book.**

### 2) Chapters 1-3

The "battle royal" in chapter 1 asserts several themes that are based in racial stereotypes: blindness, emasculation, performance or minstrelsy, black on black violence, and subservience to white power. **Discuss instances in which these stereotypes play out in the interactions between white and black men.**

Please feel free to use these questions for follow up as needed:

- Please explain why the "important" white men of the narrator's town force the young black men to battle each other blindfolded.
- Why do the white men threaten the black teens with an icon of white female sexuality?
- What is the significance of the electrified mat and its false promise of wealth in the battle royal?
- Discuss the presence of prurience and sadism in some forms of "watching" or viewing that we find in Ellison's battle royal.

*Question for use at the museum:*

- *Does Ligon reveal or conceal himself in his Invisible Man (Two Views)? What aspects of himself does he choose to emphasize?*

### 3) Chapters 4-6

Early in the novel, the reader is introduced to the treachery of white characters, but chapter 4 indicates that even black leaders are not what they seem. **Discuss this turn of events.**

Please feel free to use these questions for follow up as needed:

- How do Reverend Homer Barbee and Dr. Bledsoe complicate the narrator's difficulty of knowing what *is* from what *seems to be*?
- Discuss other incidents that interrogate the theme of seeming versus being in *Invisible Man*.

*Question for use at the museum:*

- *In what ways does Glenn Ligon's Invisible Man (Two Views) interrogate the disjunction between seeming and being?*

### 4) Chapters 7-9

Chapter seven of *Invisible Man* witnesses one of the narrator's many metamorphoses. For example, as the narrator leaves the college bound for employment in New York, he imagines himself becoming someone new:

I would put on my best manner. I would speak softly...smile agreeably and be most polite.... My shoes would be polished and my suit pressed, my hair dressed (not too much grease) and parted on the right side; my nails would be clean and my armpits well deodorized—you had to watch the last item. You couldn't allow them to think all of us smelled bad. (Ellison 157)

In this passage (among others) Ellison's narrator illustrates W.E.B. Dubois's theory of double consciousness--a kind of pathological insight by which people of color are bound to see themselves through the eyes of their oppressors. In his *The Souls of Black Folk*, Dubois describes his idea of double consciousness, thus:

[T]he Negro is...born with a veil, and gifted with second-sight in this American world, -- a world which yields him no true self-consciousness, but only lets him see himself through the revelation of the other world. It is a peculiar sensation, this double-consciousness, this sense of always looking at one's self through the eyes of others, of measuring one's soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity. One ever feels his twoness,--an American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body...." (DuBois 215)

- **Discuss Dubois's theory of double consciousness in light of your own experiences. Have you ever had to imagine how you are "seen" by someone with power over you? What was the impact of this experience on you?**
- **Discuss Dubois's theory of double consciousness in light of other passages in the novel. Does the narrator offer other illustrations or insights into what Dubois calls "twoness"?**

Please feel free to use this question for follow up as needed:

- Throughout the novel, we find Ellison alluding to Dubois's image of the "Negro" being "born with a veil." Discuss these allusions and their significance.

*Question for use at the museum:*

- *Discuss whether Ligon's Invisible Man (Two Views) comments on W.E.B. Dubois theory of double consciousness.*

### 5) Chapters 10-12

The novel offers many scenes in which the protagonist's development or sense of *becoming* is conveyed, paradoxically, through a negation of self or by way of *un-becoming*. In chapter 11, for instance, the protagonist's identity is brutally broken down through his "accident" with "Optic White" paint at the "Liberty Paint Factory." Following the incident at the factory and during his "treatment" at the factory hospital, the narrator suggests that he is becoming somebody new through a process of negation or erasure:

I lay experiencing the vague processes of my body.... Where did my body end and the crystal and white world begin? Thoughts evaded me, hiding in the vast stretch of clinical whiteness.... I listened intensely, aware of the form and movement of sentences.... But still their meaning were lost in the vast whiteness in which I myself was lost. (Ellison 238)

After the narrator is released from the factory hospital he says, “going out into the paint-fuming air I had the feeling that I...was in the grip of some alien personality lodged deep within me.” (Ellison 249).

**Discuss the narrator’s transformation as a result of his accident at the Liberty Paint Factory.**

Please feel free to use these questions for follow up as needed:

- How would you describe the new voice and insight that the narrator acquires as a result of his time at the factory hospital?
- Speculate on the content and significance of the special ingredient in Optic White.

*Questions for use at the museum:*

- *Look at the painted surface of Ligon’s piece. Discuss whether we might argue that Ligon’s Invisible Man (Two Views) references Ellison’s Optic White paint, either literally or metaphorically?*
- *Do you think that Ligon’s piece shares the Invisible Man’s theme of burgeoning identity through erasure or negation?*

## **6) Chapters 13-15**

In chapter 13, the narrator is introduced to the “Brotherhood.” Along with a new name and role, the Brotherhood offers the narrator the idea that “History has been born” in his brain. (Ellison 291) Brother Jack tells the narrator that, “Whenever they hear the imperious cries of the people in a crisis, the dead respond. Right now in this country...all the old heroes are being called back to life—Jefferson, Jackson, Pulaski, Garibaldi, Booker T. Washington...and countless others are being asked to step once again upon the stage of history.” (Ellison 307)

**What do you think of Jack’s suggestion that the narrator could be the next Booker T. Washington? Is this suggestion honorific or problematic?**

*Question for use at the museum:*

- *Invoking Brother Jack’s reference to history, discuss whether we might argue that Ralph Ellison is reborn in Ligon’s “brain” through his self-portrait, Invisible Man (Two Views).*

## **7) Chapters 16-18**

In chapter 17, the narrator recalls one of his college English professor’s lectures on James Joyce. In the remembered lecture, Professor Woodridge discourses on Stephen Dedalus from Joyce’s *Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, with the following insights and injunction: “Stephen’s problem, like ours, was not actually one of creating the uncreated conscience of his race, but of creating the uncreated features of his face. Our task is that of making ourselves individuals.” (Ellison 354).

**Do you agree with Woodridge that people should privilege their individual growth over the growth of their race?**

*Questions for use at the museum:*

- *Does politicized art (in this case, art with a racial conscience) risk undermining the goal of self-definition as defined by Woodridge?*
- *As a piece of “identity” art, does Ligon’s self-portrait compromise other “tasks” of identity or art making?*

## **8) Chapters 19-21**

In chapter 20, Brother Clifton “plunges outside” history and becomes the disillusioned (yet exalted) street salesman of racist dancing dolls. **Try to chronicle all of the things that the narrator gathers and keeps in his pockets and briefcase throughout the novel. To what extent are these things burdens? To what extent is the narrator defined by the things that he carries?**

Please feel free to use this question for follow up if needed:

- What is the significance of the narrator’s pocketing of Clifton’s “Sambo” doll?

*Question for use at the museum:*

- *In what ways does Glenn Ligon’s Invisible Man (Two Views) concern itself with the things he “carries”? Discuss their influences, both positive and negative.*

## 9) Chapters 22-24

In chapter 22, the narrator confronts the treacherous, glass-eyed Brother Jack, saying, “ ‘maybe you’ll recommend me to your occultist...then I may not-see myself as others see-me-not.’ ” (Ellison 477)

### Why does the narrator use double negatives to speak to Brother Jack in this scene?

Please feel free to use these questions for follow up as needed:

- Discuss whether the narrator’s peculiar double-speak and changing voice in this scene signal another one of his transformations.
- Why is it significant that Brother Jack is blind? Discuss the significance of other images of blindness throughout the novel. How does Jack’s blindness fit within these many other examples?

*Questions for use at the museum:*

- *Discuss whether Ligon’s Invisible Man (Two Views) converses in a visual form of double-speak, such as we find from the narrator in Ellison’s novel?*
- *Traditionally, discussions of paintings involve analyses of positive and negative space. Does Ligon’s piece lend itself to this kind of formal analysis? Why or why not?*

## 10) Chapters 25-Epilogue

In chapter 25, the narrator engages in a final, epic battle. **Discuss the ways in which the narrative arc of the novel mirrors the shape of other classic literary genres, including the classic epic, the medieval morality play, and the coming of age story.**

Please feel free to use this question for follow up if needed:

- Discuss the narrator’s key “weapons” and “shields” in this final battle. Why are they significant?

*Question for use at the museum:*

- *In what ways does Ligon’s Invisible Man (Two Views) reference or reify western literary history?*
- *Consider Ligon’s use of stencil, layering, and duplication to discuss his interrogation of texts, printing, culture, and literary history.*

*Questions for Final Reflections and Summary at the museum:*

- *In the prologue to Invisible Man, the narrator presents himself as a political radical undertaking an act of sabotage against “Monopolated Light & Power.” In a metaphorical sense, the narrator’s battle with “Monopolated Light & Power” represents his fight against the white power structure. If we allow that traditional art museums are, among other things, power centers of patronage and commerce, do you think that Glenn Ligon’s artistic statement of identity in Invisible Man (Two Views) is ratified or compromised by its “home” in a traditional art museum?*
- *In the epilogue to Invisible Man, the narrator’s final words attempt to dissolve divisions between himself and his readers. He says, “Who knows but that, on the lower frequencies, I speak for you?” Discuss whether Ligon’s Invisible Man (Two Views) “speaks” to viewers with a divisive or ultimately unifying voice.*

## In Gratitude

The Currier Museum of Art would like to sincerely thank Rane Hall, Chairperson of the Liberal Arts department at the New Hampshire Institute of Art, for preparing the information about the novel in this document and the discussion questions that follow.

All references to page numbers of *Invisible Man* refer to the following edition:  
Ellison, Ralph. 1996. *Invisible man*. New York: Vintage International.