

Advanced Placement in  
English Literature and Composition

Individual Learning Packet

Teaching Unit

**Invisible Man**

by Ralph Ellison

Written by Peter Boysen

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# Invisible Man

## Objectives

By the end of this Unit, the student will be able to:

1. discuss the significance of the title as it relates to the main theme of the novel.
2. analyze the use of rhetorical devices—especially sound devices—on the tone and meaning of the novel.
3. point out examples of puns and sarcasm.
4. recognize how the author's choice of names for characters and places contributes to the reader's understanding of their personalities and function in the book.
5. cite examples of parable and legend.
6. explore how the ideology of the Brotherhood is similar to communist philosophy.
7. examine the author's use of metaphor.
8. trace the growth of the narrator in the following areas:
  - release of emotions
  - acceptance of heritage
  - awareness of self
9. explore the author's use of blindness and light as symbols.
10. analyze the author's attempts at satire.
11. identify the social, economic, and racial character types represented by some of the characters.
12. respond to writing prompts similar to those that will appear on the Advanced Placement English Literature and Composition Exam.
13. respond to multiple-choice questions similar to those that will appear on the Advanced Placement English Literature and Composition Exam.
14. offer a close reading of *Invisible Man* and support all assertions and interpretations with direct evidence from the text, authoritative critical knowledge of the genre, or authoritative criticism of the novel.

# Invisible Man

## Lecture Notes

### NOTES ON ELLISON'S STYLE, SETTING AND THEMES

Ellison's style echoes that of other African-American writers, particularly those involved in the Harlem Renaissance. His writing teems with sound devices—particularly alliteration—and utilizes anaphora to highlight some of his most poignant points.

Ellison's focus is the alienation of the African-American in an ostensibly free society. He analyzes the ways in which race is used as a mechanism of power—not only by whites over blacks, but by some blacks (such as Dr. Bledsoe) over other blacks. This alienation becomes apparent through the frenzied tone (driven by syntax) of much of the book.

The central question of the novel is: “How can one person make a difference when all of the avenues to power are occupied by the duplicitous?” No matter where the narrator tries to pursue success and autonomy in an authentic manner, he finds the road ahead of him blocked by those who have decided to collude against those below. His initial solution, to hide in a basement and steal power from the electric company, fails to solve the problem, so he ultimately decides to come forth and pursue change.

While Ellison employs an impressive vocabulary, his style is not formal. It is almost lyric with its considerable use of sound devices. The reader feels like he or she is riding down a river, rather than sitting on a chair.

Similes and metaphors, particularly in the “battle royal,” the Golden Day, and the Liberty Paints scenes, extend the effect of the sound devices as far as emphasizing particular thematic points.

### SETTING: HARLEM DURING THE 1930'S

Details of the period are accurate, including descriptions of apartment housing, public transportation, and working conditions.

The descriptions of the college that the narrator attended, as well as the trip around the city and the Golden Day, accurately reflect conditions and expectations placed on black students in the South.

# Invisible Man

## Questions for Essay and Discussion

1. How does the way in which Liberty Paints operates reflect racism in society?
2. When the narrator is in the Brotherhood, what are some ways that his race comes to replace his actual identity?
3. Compare and contrast the ideologies of Booker T. Washington and Ras the Exhorter when it comes to relationships between black and white people.
4. Compare and contrast the narrator's self-concept at the beginning with his self-concept at the end of the novel.
5. How do the various ideologies presented in the novel all turn out to be ineffective or insufficient?
6. When the narrator encounters other African-Americans in the story, what ideas do they have about the path to success that actually keep them from reaching true success and true equality?
7. Compare and contrast the ideas of the narrator's grandfather and the ideas of Dr. Bledsoe as far as the proper way that blacks should conduct themselves so as to maximize their success?
8. How are the following used as motifs or symbols in the novel?
  - blindness
  - invisibility
  - the Liberty Paints plant
  - the Sambo doll
  - the coin bank
  - the taboo of interracial relationships
9. What is ironic about the way that Optic White paint is made in the Liberty Paints plant?
10. Explain Ellison's view on the nature of mob behavior.
11. How does the Brotherhood mishandle the mood of Harlem after the death of Tod Clifton?
12. How does Harlem show the extremes of primitive and civilized behavior in the novel?

# Invisible Man

## Prologue

1. How would you describe the tone of the first two paragraphs?

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2. What is ironic about the narrator's encounter with the blond man?

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3. What does it mean when the narrator says that the blond man "had not *seen* [him]"?

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4. Who are the "sleeping ones"?

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## Chapter One

1. How is allusion used in the second paragraph?

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2. Explain the advice that the narrator's grandfather gives him: "Let 'em swoller you till they vomit or bust wide open."

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3. What is the significance of the narrator's viewing himself as a "potential Booker T. Washington"?

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4. Explain the ambivalence the narrator feels toward the naked blonde.

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5. What is the effect of the images of the white men in Chapter One?

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6. How is the imagery describing the Battle Royal ironic?

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7. How does this chapter show the limits of assimilation?

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## Chapter Five

1. What is the rhetorical argument behind the comparison of the moon to a “white man’s bloodshot eye”?

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2. What is the tone of the two paragraphs that begins “Into the doors and into the soft lights...”

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3. What is the rhetorical effect of the long italicized passage?

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4. What phrase does the narrator use to describe Dr. Bledsoe’s position relative to the trustees around him? Why is this significant?

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5. How is allusion used during Rev. Barbee’s sermon?

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## Chapter Ten

1. Explain the extended metaphor of Liberty Paints.

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2. How are Lucius Brockway and Dr. Bledsoe similar?

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## Chapter Eleven

1. What literary devices contribute to the narrator's sense of disorientation?

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2. What is the rhetorical purpose of the conversation that the narrator overhears?

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3. How is the narrator different after he leaves the hospital?

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## Chapter Fifteen

1. Why does the narrator get so angry when he notices the cast-iron bank in the shape of a caricature of a black man?

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2. What is the metaphorical value of the fact that the clock in Mary's kitchen is slower than the narrator's?

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3. Explain the following quotation:

“Some folks just live in filth,” she said disgustedly. “Just let a little knocking start and here it comes crawling out. All you have to do is shake things up a bit.”

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4. What is ironic about the narrator's attempt to get rid of the coin bank?

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## Chapter Twenty

1. Why is there so much resentment toward the narrator in the Jolly Dollar?

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2. How did Clifton choose to make his escape from history?

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3. How does the author use irony to show how far Clifton had fallen?

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4. Explain the significance of this sentence:

They were outside the groove of history, and it was my job to get them in, all of them.

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5. What happens right before the end of the chapter to make the narrator realize the significance of his leadership?

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