

Individual Learning Packet

Teaching Unit

Invisible Man

by Ralph Ellison

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ISBN 978-1-60389-818-8
Reorder No. 201021

Notes

Ralph Waldo Ellison was born in 1914 in Oklahoma City, Oklahoma. As a young man, he developed an interest in jazz music, eventually receiving a scholarship to study music at the Tuskegee Institute in Alabama, a black college founded in 1881 by Booker T. Washington, one of the country's most influential black leaders at the time. Ellison would later use the college as the model for the school that the narrator attends in *Invisible Man* and would base the Founder of that school on Washington himself.

In 1936, after three years at the Tuskegee Institute, Ellison moved to New York City to study sculpture and photography. However, while living in Harlem, he soon befriended many prominent African American writers, including Langston Hughes and Richard Wright, who would eventually encourage him to write. He began writing reviews and short stories for the *New Challenge*, a literary magazine edited by Wright at the time. He also found work with the Federal Writers' Project, a government organization created to fund and support American writers during the Great Depression. During this time period, he contributed numerous stories, essays, and reviews to a number of magazines and literary journals. In 1942, Ellison became editor of the *Negro Quarterly* and worked on the magazine for a year before joining the Merchant Marines to serve in World War II.

After his return from the service, Ellison received a fellowship to fund his writing career and soon began work on the story that would become *Invisible Man*. The first chapter was published in 1947 in the English magazine *Horizon* and was then published in America the following year in *Magazine of the Year*. Ellison continued working on the novel for the next four years, and published the completed work in 1952. A groundbreaking novel, *Invisible Man* tells the story of a Southern black man's search for his identity in a pre- and post-World War II white world, utilizing a complex narrative rich in theme, language, and symbolism. The novel spent sixteen weeks on the bestseller list upon its debut and won the National Book Award the following year.

Invisible Man is Ellison's most popular and critically acclaimed work. In his introduction to the 1981 publication of the novel, Ellison explained his goal in writing it:

“...that a novel could be fashioned as a raft of hope, perception and entertainment that might help keep us afloat as we tried to negotiate the snags and whirlpools that mark our nation's vacillating course toward and away from the democratic ideal.”

Note to Teacher: Adult language and themes are evident throughout the novel. These include: racial epithets, street violence, drug use, and sexual encounters of rape and incest. Therefore, the maturity level of the class should be taken into consideration.

Note: All references come from the Vintage International edition of *Invisible Man*, copyright 1995.

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 (the inability of society to view a black man as an individual) and comment on how this theme also contributes to the narrator's lack of self-awareness or identity and his alienation from society.
2. write an essay explaining how *Invisible Man* is a Bildungsroman; trace the narrator's journey from youth and innocence to maturity and knowledge, and link this journey to his search for identity.
3. explain how the author's choice of names for characters and places contributes to the reader's understanding of their personalities or function, including the following:
 - Trueblood
 - Chthonian
 - Bledsoe
 - Rinehart
4. cite examples of parable in the novel.
5. compare the narrator's level of freedom in the South to his level of freedom in New York, considering his ability to publicly enjoy what he likes to eat and his physical contact with whites.
6. assess the importance of the blues and food to the narrator's past and to his discovery of self.
7. comment on the use of water as a symbol for rebirth, considering:
 - when the narrator is encased in the machine at the paint factory hospital.
 - when the water main breaks, soaking the narrator before he enters the basement.
8. define Communism and point out how the ideology of the Brotherhood is similar to communistic philosophy, considering the following:
 - the needs of the individual versus the needs of the whole
 - the scientific method and the use of logical persuasion versus emotional arousal
 - the sacrifice that is necessary for the good of the larger group
9. discuss the narrator's opinion of the following historical people:
 - Booker T. Washington
 - Frederick Douglass
 - Ralph Waldo Emerson
 - Louis Armstrong

Questions for Essay and Discussion

1. Reread the Prologue, and explain what the narrator is saying in the following passage:

“All dreamers and sleepwalkers must pay the price, and even the invisible victim is responsible for the fate of all.”

2. Discuss the significance of light and blindness in the following incidents from the novel:
- the blindfolds put on the young men in the battle royal
 - the 1,369 light bulbs the narrator has in his basement
 - the blind speaker at the school
 - Jack’s glass eye
3. Define parable. Support or refute the idea that the battle royal is a parable for race relations in the South during the time in which the novel is set.
4. Briefly research the biographies of Louis Armstrong, Ralph Waldo Emerson, Frederick Douglass, and Booker T. Washington. Which of these men does the narrator admire and why?
5. Some people believe this novel can be broken into four parts. If the narrator’s time in the basement is one part, which incidents in the novel do you think mark the beginning of each of the other three parts?
6. Compare the legend of the Founder’s life with that of young Dr. Bledsoe. In what ways does Bledsoe exploit the idealistic goals of the Founder for his own personal gain? Explain how both Bledsoe and the Founder can be seen as metaphorically blind.
7. What are Mr. Norton’s motivations for helping the narrator’s school? What does Norton mean when he tells the narrator, “you are my fate”? In your opinion, is Norton’s support of the school an altruistic act or a selfish one? Provide examples from the text to support your answer.
8. How does Homer A. Barbee embody the concept of “blind faith”? In what ways is the Founder like a god or an icon to him? Explain the symbolic nature of Barbee’s stumbling over Bledsoe’s legs as he crosses the stage after his speech.
9. How does Dr. Bledsoe betray the narrator, and why? What are Bledsoe’s greatest priorities? Identify a quote from Chapter Six proving that Bledsoe is willing to sacrifice other blacks in order to keep his own powerful position within the white world.
10. Keeping in mind the time period, discuss race relations in the South as compared with those of the North. In what ways does the narrator experience more freedom in the North? In what ways does racism still exist in the North, albeit more covertly than in the South?

Invisible Man

Prologue

VOCABULARY

bilious – like bile
ectoplasms – ghost-like forms
epidermis – the outer layer of skin
flamenco – a rhythmic gypsy dance
hibernation – a period of seclusion or extended sleep
ingenuity – inventiveness; cleverness
reefer – a slang term for a marijuana cigarette
yokel – a slang term (usually negative) for a naïve country person

1. Why does the narrator believe he is an “invisible man”? Provide quotes from the text to support your answer.

2. Who are the “sleeping ones” to which the narrator refers? Why is the narrator careful not to awaken them?

3. Where is the narrator living? How does he carry on a fight against Monopolated Light & Power?

Chapter Three

VOCABULARY

amorphous – shapeless, without character or nature

autonomous – independent

catharsis – the purging of emotions

coccyx – the tailbone

endocrinology – the study of hormone glands and their functions

mulatto – the term for a person who is half white and half black

nostalgia – a feeling of longing or fondness for the past; wistfulness

pragmatist – a person who solves issues matter-of-factly

thalamic – relating to the area of the brain that deals with sensory information

1. Why does the narrator plan to “rush in and get the whiskey and leave” the Golden Day as quickly as possible?

2. How does the narrator feel about the patrons of the Golden Day?

4. What advice about surviving in the white world is Dr. Bledsoe giving the narrator in the following passage? In what way can the phrase “stay in the dark and use it” have a double meaning?

“You let the white folk worry about pride and dignity—you learn where you are and get yourself power, influence, contacts with powerful and influential people—then stay in the dark and use it!”

5. How is Bledsoe’s advice in the above quote similar to the advice that the narrator’s grandfather gave on his deathbed? Despite the similarities, in what crucial way is Bledsoe different from the narrator’s grandfather?

6. Why does the narrator decide to accept the responsibility for what happened and submit to punishment?

Chapter Fourteen

VOCABULARY

divan – a long, backless sofa
missionary – an advocate of religious causes
taffeta – a silky, rustling material
uncanny – oddly coincidental

1. Why does the narrator change his mind and decide to accept Brother Jack's job offer?

2. Define "Chthonian." Why do you think Ellison decided to use this word to name the building where the Brotherhood meets?

3. List two things Emma says that may suggest to the reader that the narrator is soon to become a tool of the Brotherhood.

4. What is the Brotherhood's mission, according to Brother Jack? What seems hypocritical about its mission statement?
