

Reflections:

*A Student Response Journal for...*

# *Invisible Man*

*by Ralph Ellison*

written by Sara Goodrich

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*Invisible Man*

**Title**

1. Reflect on the title—*Invisible Man*. Have you ever been in a situation where you felt invisible? Write an email to the people responsible, explaining how this situation made you feel. Include why you think you felt invisible in this situation. Was it because other people were blatantly ignoring you, or was it your own discomfort that made you unable to participate in the situation? Tell these people specifically what they could have done to make you feel more comfortable.

## **Introduction**

2. Ellison begins the Introduction with “What, if anything, is there that a novelist can say about his work that wouldn’t be better left to critics?” What do you think about this statement? Should novelists explain their work to those who don’t understand it or defend it from those who dislike it, or should they just let their work stand on its own? Imagine you have written a novel that you feel some people have misunderstood. An editor of a magazine has just asked to write an explanatory piece about your novel. Write a letter to the editor accepting the offer or declining it, and explain why you have made your choice.
  
3. “High visibility,” “benign neglect,” and “reverse discrimination” are phrases Ralph Ellison hates because he feels they obscure and excuse the reality of racism. In practice, the phrase “high visibility” means, “You look different so I can treat you differently” and “benign neglect” means “Your equality is not *my* responsibility.” Following this pattern, explain what you think “reverse discrimination” really means. Then think of three more phrases that excuse discrimination and small mindedness (they do not necessarily need to be in the area of race) and translate them as well.
  
4. In the Introduction, Ellison defines a “lie” as an African-American folk term for an improvised story. Write one of these “lies.” Make it a few paragraphs long and imagine you are telling it to entertain a friend on the walk home from school.
  
5. The Introduction is full of historical events, historical figures, and literary references. Pick one of these references, research it briefly, and write a paragraph explaining to a classmate why you think Ellison found this incident, person, or book a powerful symbol of black and white relations in the United States.

## **Prologue**

6. In the prologue, Ellison says, “I am invisible, understand, simply because people refuse to see me.” Other disadvantaged groups, such as the poor, have often been referred to as invisible in American society. What do you think is meant by this comment? Do you feel that middle-class Americans don’t see those people who are less fortunate or that they choose to ignore them?

Imagine you are the leader of a non-profit organization seeking to help the less fortunate. Pick a problem that is prevalent in your area such as poverty, homelessness, racism, etc., that is not being addressed currently. How would you increase community response in regard to the problem? What would you do to focus your campaign about the problem as you see it? Explain your solution in a paragraph or two, after explaining the problem fully.

## **Chapter 1**

7. When he looks back on his past, the narrator says, “I was looking for myself and asking everyone except myself questions which I, and only I, could answer.” Can you identify with this statement? Have you ever asked someone a question which only you could answer? Write down one of these questions and then write the answer to it yourself.
  
8. In Chapter One, both the young black men in the battle royal and the young woman dancing are treated as entertainment for the white male audience without any respect for their dignity as people. Have you seen a movie or a TV show recently where a woman or a minority was depicted as an entertaining object rather than as a human? Write a letter to a friend in which you describe the scene. Speculate on what it is about the scene that objectifies the entertaining person. Lastly, tell your friend what you think about scenes like this. Should they happen?
  
9. After the battle royal and at the end of the narrator’s speech, the superintendent comments, “Someday he’ll lead his people in the proper paths.” Given the events that just happened, what kind of “proper paths” do you think these are? Imagine you are in the audience, and you shout a warning to our gullible young narrator. Start with, “Hey you! Don’t trust these men! I know what paths they want you to lead your people down...” Be sure to give our narrator some alternate paths that would be good for him and his people.

## Chapter 2

10. Chapter 2 begins with a beautiful and vivid description of a walk through the narrator's college campus. Is there a favorite walk you like to take when you want to be alone or that you find particularly beautiful? Write a descriptive paragraph about what you see and experience on this walk. Try to make it as detailed as possible.
  
11. While Jim Trueblood is talking, the narrator is mortified and thinks, "How can he tell this to white men ... When he knows they'll say that all Negroes do such things?" Have you ever been a victim of such guilt by association in which the bad behavior of one member of the group is used to condemn everyone else? Write a letter to the person or people who judged you in this way. Tell this person how this made you feel and explain why their judgment was misguided.
  
12. Throughout Chapter 2, we hear a lot of Jim Trueblood's side of the story, but none of the perspective of Matty Lou or Kate. It doesn't sound like any of the white men who interviewed Jim bothered to ask them what they thought either. Imagine that Mr. Norton and the narrator went into the cabin to hear what the women had to say. Pick one of the women and give her a paragraph to speak her mind. What does she think of Jim's explanations for his actions? Does she still want him living there? What do you think her hopes for the future are? How do you think she feels about Jim being given all this money instead of it being given to her?