Summary

Overview

Summary of the Novel

_Invisible Man_ is a first-person novel. It concerns an unnamed narrator, whom the reader meets in the Prologue. In the Epilogue, the narrator seems to “rejoin” the reader once again.

Other than his memories of his grandfather’s death, the narrator reveals nothing about his childhood. After the humiliating battle royal (a chaotic boxing match, along with sundry torments, in which high school boys competed), he goes to college, where he has an experience in betrayal that changes his life.

Having inadvertently taken an important visitor to the wrong places, the narrator is left exposed to the harsh judgment of Dr. Bledsoe, the president of the college. The narrator is emotionally scarred by what has happened.

Forced to leave the college that he loved, the narrator takes a bus to New York City to find work. There he tries to use letters of recommendation, but to no avail. He eventually takes a job in a paint factory. Another unpleasant lesson ensues there, for the narrator is untrained for the work. He is placed under the thumb of a bitter and distrusting man, who maneuvers the narrator into an industrial accident.

The narrator is once again torn loose from his moorings. After the accident, the narrator endured a bizarre experience, in which medical personnel tortured him. Mary, a stranger, finds the narrator in the street, and offers him a home. Soon afterward, a protest of the eviction of an old couple leads the narrator to join a political group called the Brotherhood.

The narrator seems to advance in the organization, but the petty politics and machinations of those around him ensure the narrator’s instability. Eventually, the narrator is betrayed by the Brotherhood. Not long after one of the members is killed by a policeman, a riot begins. In the growing confusion, the narrator takes to the underground.

The Life and Work of Ralph Waldo Ellison

Ralph Waldo Ellison was born on March 1, 1914, in Oklahoma City, Oklahoma. He died on April 16, 1994, in Harlem, New York. He was named after Ralph Waldo Emerson, a great nineteenth-century writer. When Lewis Ellison thought of the future, he saw his son, the poet.

The narrator of _Invisible Man_ shows an interest in Ralph Waldo Emerson. The young Ralph Ellison felt a burden attached to this great name, a pressure to become great himself, and it made him uncomfortable.

Ralph Ellison did not grow up in the Deep South, as his parents had, and this made an important difference in his life. Oklahoma was a new territory, offering a chance for a better life than in the former slave states, despite the Jim Crow laws that white settlers brought with them.
Ellison went to Douglass High School (named after Frederick Douglass), and then to Tuskegee Institute, a well-known historically black college in Alabama, in June 1933. He was unhappy at Tuskegee, and his impressions of that college are reflected in the narrator’s experiences with Dr. Bledsoe in *Invisible Man*. Ellison never finished his degree. Instead, he left for New York in the spring of 1936. The great promise of Harlem was calling his name.

Once he arrived, Ellison took odd jobs and met the leading black artists and intellectuals of his day. The atmosphere was vibrant, and Ellison, whose artistic abilities included music, sculpture, writing, and photography, participated in what was later called the Harlem Renaissance. Soon, through the encouragement of black American writer Richard Wright author of *Native Son*, Ellison was publishing book reviews and short stories.

Ellison worked on *Invisible Man* for five years. It was published in 1952 and won the National Book Award for fiction. Ellison’s only novel, it established his literary reputation. He also published two collections of essays: *Shadow and Act* in 1964 and *Going into the Territory* in 1986.

Ellison died in Harlem, New York, which had been his home for twenty years, and which he immortalized in his masterpiece, *Invisible Man*.

**Estimated Reading Time**

The average silent-reading rate for a secondary student is 250 to 300 words per minute, making the total reading time for this novel about 19 hours.

*Invisible Man* can be a challenging novel. Teachers will no doubt be sensitive to Ellison’s subject matter and technique, and divide their assignments accordingly. Allow plenty of time to enjoy this great work. Reading the book according to the natural chapter breaks is the best approach, although most of the longer chapters have their own divisions.
Summary (Society and Self, Critical Representations in Literature)

Frequently discussed as a novel addressing racial identity in modern, urban America, *Invisible Man* is also discussed regarding the larger issue of personal identity, especially self-assertion and personal expression in a metaphorically blind world. In the novel, the unnamed young black narrator is invisible within the larger culture because of his race. Race itself, in turn, is a metaphor for the individual’s anonymity in modern life. The novel is scathing, angry, and humorous, incorporating a wide range of African American experiences and using a variety of styles, settings, characters, and images. Ralph Ellison uses jazz as a metaphor, especially that of the role of a soloist who is bound within the traditions and forms of a group performance.

The novel describes a series of incidents that show how racism has warped the American psyche. As a boy, the nameless narrator hears his grandfather say: “Undermine ‘em with grins, agree ‘em to death and destruction.” Later, the youth sees a social function degenerate into a surrealistic and barbarous paroxysm of racism. Next, the narrator is expelled from a black college and heads north. After a job in a paint factory ends in shock treatment, the narrator heads to the big city and falls in with the Brotherhood, a group of political radicals. After realizing that the Brotherhood is just as power-hungry and manipulative as the other organizations and institutions that have victimized him, the narrator leaves the Brotherhood. He comes to understand that racism denies personal identity: As long as he is seen by others as a sample of a group rather than as an individual, he is invisible. The narrator finally becomes an urban hermit, living anonymously in a cellar and using pirated electricity.

The novel’s narrator is typically viewed as representing a generation of intelligent African Americans born and raised in the rural South before World War II who moved to large cities such as New York to widen their opportunities. Such historical context aside, readers also see him as a black Everyman, whose story symbolically recapitulates black history. Attending a Southern black college, the narrator’s idealism is built on black educator Booker T. Washington’s teaching that racial uplift will occur by way of humility, accommodation, and hard work. The narrator’s ideals erode, however, in a series of encounters with white and black leaders. The narrator learns of hypocrisy, blindness, and the need to play roles even when each pose leads to violence. The larger, white culture does not accept the narrator’s independent nature. Accidents, and betrayals by educators, Communists, and fellow African Americans, among others, show him that life is largely chaotic, with no clear pattern of order to follow. The narrator’s complexity shatters white culture’s predetermined, stereotyped notions of what role he should play. He finds himself obliged as a result to move from role to role, providing the reader a wide spectrum of personalities that reflect the range of the black community.

In the end the narrator rejects cynicism and hatred and advocates a philosophy of hope, a rejection mirroring Ellison’s desire to write a novel that transcended protest novels, emphasizing rage and hopelessness, of the period. The narrator decides to look within himself for self-definition, and the act of telling his story provides meaning to his existence, an affirmation and celebration preceding his return to the world. He has learned first of his invisibility, second of his manhood.

In his later years, Ellison realized that his novel expands the meaning of the word “invisible.” He observed that invisibility “touches anyone who lives in a big metropolis.” A winner of numerous awards, including the National Book Award in 1953, *Invisible Man* has continually been regarded as one of the most important novels in twentieth century American literature.
Summary (Critical Survey of Literature for Students)

The narrator and protagonist in the novel is nameless. An innocent teenager, he was born and grew up in the South of the United States. He is used to the social patterns of the region. With maturity, the narrator gradually recognizes the chaotic understructure of “orderly” society. The demarcation line between the “two” societies is blurred in his mind for the first time when he hears his grandfather’s deathbed instruction to his father. Although the old man seemed to be “obedient” and “obsequious” all his life, he tells his son and grandchildren that he was “a traitor all his born days, a spy in the enemy’s country” and advises them to overcome their enemies “with yeses, undermine ’em with grins, agree ’em to death and destruction, let ’em swoller you till they vomit or bust wide open.”

Later the narrator witnesses a formal social function that is attended by all “big shots” of the town. The party degenerates into a nightmare of barbarity, vulgarity, and bestial desire. At the battle royal, black students are asked to fight each other for white people’s entertainment. The black students are forced to watch a naked white woman dance; they are also urged by the audience to pick up coins on electrified rugs (the coins later turn out to be advertisement souvenirs). As a reward for his Booker-T.-Washington kind of valedictory speech, the narrator receives a calfskin briefcase. That night, the narrator dreams of meeting his grandfather, who tells him to read a note in the briefcase. The note says: “To Whom It May Concern: Keep This Nigger-Boy Running.”

As part of the prize for his speech, the narrator also receives a scholarship to go to college. What he learns there, however, only further confuses him: A white philanthropist and a black sharecropper share the same kind of incestuous desire for their daughters. A black minister who gives a wonderful speech about the importance of education turns out to be blind. The president of the college confesses that he used both black and white people to advance his own career. It is also from Dr. Bledsoe, the president of the all-black college, that the narrator hears for the first time in his life that he is a “nobody,” someone who, in a sense, does not exist at all. The narrator is finally expelled from the college for showing Mr. Norton, the white trustee of the college, the “seamy” side of the campus.

Equipped with Dr. Bledsoe’s recommendation letter, which the narrator later learns is full of insulting remarks about him, he moves to the North. The road to the North, in a traditional sense, means freedom to African Americans. What the narrator finds there is alienation and disillusionment. While working in a paint factory, whose slogan is Keep America Pure with Liberty Paints, he is caught in the conflict between a skilled black worker and white unionists. After a boiler room accident, the narrator is sent to the factory hospital, where he receives electric shock treatment. After the doctors make sure he forgets his name and family background, the narrator is declared cured and released from the hospital.

Then one day, as he is helping people who are being evicted from an apartment building in New York City, the narrator’s oratorical talent is discovered by the Brotherhood, a group meant to represent the poor and downtrodden. Brother Jack, the leader of the Brotherhood, asks the narrator to join the group. Inside the Brotherhood, the narrator not only is confronted again with the paradox of organization and disorder but also completely loses his personal identity: He is given a new name and place to live, expected to become the next Booker T. Washington, and told he is “hired to talk” but not “to think.” The narrator’s association with the Brotherhood, nevertheless, introduces him to all kinds of people: the white men who, for their own political gains, unscrupulously use blacks; a young black idealist who is killed for his idealism; Rinehart, the man who has multiple identities; and Ras, the Destroyer, a black radical who lashes out indiscriminately and ends up in utter isolation.

The narrator finally realizes that the Brotherhood is just as chaotic, manipulative, and power-hungry as all the other groups of people he meets in both the South and the North. He leaves the Brotherhood feeling
thoroughly disillusioned. Walking away from the Brotherhood, he chances upon a riot, where he is mistaken for another person. Suddenly the narrator sees the truth: When a person is associated with either an ethnic group or a social organization, he becomes a person with no identity and, therefore, invisible. He starts to understand the significance of his grandfather’s last words. At the end of the novel, the narrator creeps into a dark empty cellar to indulge in his reflections.
Summary (Masterpieces of American Literature)

Ellison’s *Invisible Man* is framed by a prologue and an epilogue that are set at a time after the completion of the novel’s central action. The novel’s picaresque story of a young black man’s misadventures is presented as a memoir written by an older, more experienced embodiment of the protagonist. The narrator of the prologue and epilogue has withdrawn into a state he calls “hibernation” after surviving the multiple deceptions and betrayals that he recounts in his memoir. As he says, “the end is the beginning and lies far ahead.”

The prologue foreshadows the novel’s action. It prepares the reader for the narrator’s final condition; focuses the reader’s attention on the major themes of truth, responsibility, and freedom; and introduces the reader to the double consciousness that operates in the book. Throughout the novel, the naïve assumptions of the youthful protagonist are counterbalanced by the cynical judgments of his more mature self, creating an ironic double perspective.

The broken narrator to whom the reader is introduced in the prologue is hiding in an underground room, stealing power from the Monopolated Power Company to light the thousands of bulbs he has strung up. An angry and damaged man, he explains his frustration at his “invisibility,” a quality that prevents others from seeing anything but “surroundings, themselves, or figments of their imagination.” The narrator experiences a desperate need to convince himself that he does “exist in the real world.” As he listens to Louis Armstrong’s recording of “What Did I Do to Be So Black and Blue?” he dreams and then recounts his experiences.

The first episode, which goes back to his graduation from a black high school in the South, is a representative anecdote, a story that sets the pattern and themes of subsequent misadventures. Throughout *Invisible Man*, the young hero builds illusory expectations based on the deceitful promises of people who set themselves up as his mentors. In each cycle, he is eventually disillusioned by a dramatic revelation of deceit and sent spiraling toward his final confrontation with himself.

In the initial episode, he is invited to repeat his valedictory speech before the white leaders of the town. These men, however, humiliate him and some other black youths by forcing them to engage in a “battle royal,” a blindfolded fistfight in which the last standing participant is victorious. They also tempt the black youths to fight for counterfeit coins tossed on an electrified rug, and they rudely disregard the protagonist’s remarks when he is finally allowed to speak.

The episode demonstrates how racist leaders disempower African Americans by encouraging them to direct their anger at one another while rewarding the more acceptable submissive behavior, such as the protagonist’s speech about “social responsibility.” Although the corrupt and even bestial nature of these men is clear to the reader, the protagonist is blinded by his eagerness to succeed, and he gratefully accepts the briefcase he is given after his speech.

Ellison develops the ocular symbols of blindness/sight, darkness/light in this episode that are used in the novel to describe the protagonist’s invisibility and his stumbling quest for truth. It also introduces the briefcase, a symbol of his naïve effort to accept prescribed identities. The briefcase stays with him until the end of the novel, accumulating objects and documents to represent the false identities he assumes. These two symbols are united at the end of the novel when he burns the contents of his briefcase in order to see in his underground hideout.

At the black college that the protagonist attends, he is introduced to the misuse of black power. Dr. Bledsoe, the ruthless college president (whose name implies his deracinated disregard for other African Americans), is blindly idolized by the protagonist, for whom the college is a paradise of reason and culture. The protagonist
says that “within the quiet greenness I possessed the only identity I had ever known.”

When he mishandles a visiting white trustee named Norton, however, by allowing him to hear Jim Trueblood’s shocking tale of incest and taking him to a brothel where they are beset by a group of World War I veterans, Dr. Bledsoe banishes the protagonist from the collegiate Eden. It is only later, after fruitless efforts to find employment in New York City, that the protagonist discovers that Bledsoe’s supposed letters of recommendation have betrayed him.

The revelation of Dr. Bledsoe’s perfidy destroys the narrator’s dream of returning to college. Determined to make his own way, he accepts a job with Liberty Paints. The factory, which is a microcosm of capitalist America, produces Optic White, “the purest white that can be found.” Optic White will “cover just about anything” and is purchased in large amounts by the government, but the secret ingredient is a small amount of black base that is produced in a boiler room by an aging African American named Lucius Brockaway. The protagonist is assigned to Brockaway, but the veteran employee’s paranoid suspicion that his new helper is a company spy and the protagonist’s resentment at being assigned to an African American supervisor results in a fight. As the two quarrel, pressure builds until the boilers explode.

The protagonist awakes in the factory’s infirmary, where masked doctors discuss ways to make him pliable. Half-conscious, the narrator is dimly aware of the doctors’ efforts at behavior modification, but their bizarre treatment only succeeds at stripping away layers of superficial personality and revealing a changed man who looks at the world with “wild infant’s eyes.” In this reborn state, the dazed hero is adopted by Mary Rambo, the maternal owner of a boardinghouse in Harlem. Mary’s nurturing restores the protagonist and awakens his sensitivity to injustice. When he comes across an elderly couple being evicted from their apartment, he speaks up on their behalf, stirring a gathering crowd to resist the eviction.

The protagonist’s effective oratory is overheard by Jack, a leader of the Brotherhood, an organization that closely resembles the Communist Party. Jack recruits the protagonist and makes him the party’s new spokesman in Harlem. Armed with a new name supplied by the Brotherhood, the protagonist eagerly takes on his organizational duties, dreaming that he will become a modern Frederick Douglass. He successfully builds Brotherhood membership in Harlem and effectively competes with rival organizations such as that led by Ras the Destroyer, an African American nationalist who is reminiscent of the historical Marcus Garvey. Instead of being rewarded, the protagonist is suddenly reassigned to a downtown position. The protagonist’s protests result in a climactic showdown where Jack plucks out his glass eye, demonstrating at once the organization’s demand of personal sacrifice and his own blindness.

Eventually, the protagonist realizes that he is being used by Jack, that the Brotherhood is willing to sacrifice the progress made in Harlem for the larger ends of the party, and that his dream of becoming another Frederick Douglass is a sham. With another prescribed identity deflated, he suddenly finds that he is being mistaken for the protean character Rinehart, a mysterious con man who is at once a minister and a pimp, a man whose name suggests the ambiguous relation of inner and outer realities. The protagonist considers adopting the cynicism of Rinehart, a decision that would end the search for a true identity, but he concludes that he cannot abandon his own conscience.

As the book nears its conclusion, the protagonist runs through a race riot that the Brotherhood has encouraged. Pursued by armed men, he finds sanctuary underground, where he is forced to burn the symbolic contents of his briefcase in order to see. He thus destroys the prescribed identities that others have supplied for him in order to prepare for the “hibernation” during which he hopes to discover himself.

_Invisible Man_’s epilogue completes the frame begun in the novel’s prologue, returning the reader to the subterranean narrator of the memoir, who says that although the world outside is as deceitful and dangerous as ever, the process of telling his story has made him “better understand my relation to it and it to me.” He has
come to accept the responsibility of determining his own identity and rejects formulaic responses to injustice. He advises his reader that “too much of your life will be lost, its meaning lost unless you approach it as much through love as through hate,” and he now sees his own life as “one of infinite possibilities.” Thus, at the novel’s conclusion, the narrator is preparing to reenter the world. As Ellison put it, his narrator “comes up from underground because the act of writing and thinking necessitated it.”
Summary (Literary Essentials: African American Literature)

Having spoken in the prologue of his need to come out into the light, to surface from a building that has been “rented strictly to whites” and “shut off and forgotten during the nineteenth century,” the narrator gives immediate notice that he is telling not a single but a typological, or multiple, story. Everything that has happened to him bears the shadow of prior African American history. He vows, however, that all past “hibernation,” all past “invisibility,” must now end. It falls to him to “illuminate”—that is, literally and figuratively to write into being—the history that has at once made both him and black America at large so “black and blue” but that has also represented a triumph of human survival and art.

To that end, he steps back into Dixie and into a “Battle Royal,” a brawl in which a group of blindfolded black boys fight for the entertainment of whites. The scene gives a crucial point of departure for the novel. In fighting “blind,” the boys illustrate an ancestral divide-and-rule tactic of the white South; the boys’ reward is money from an electrified rug. Equally, when a sumptuous white stripper dances before the townsmen, an American flag tattooed between her thighs, the ultimate taboo looms temptingly yet impossibly before the black boys. Literally with blood in his throat, the narrator thanks his patrons and leaves, having received a scholarship to a Tuskegee-style college. He thinks, too, of his grandfather’s advice, that of a slavery-time veteran of black mimicry, who tells him to “overcome ’em with yeses, undermine ’em with grins, agree ’em to death and destruction”—the words of the trickster as seeming “coon” or “good nigra” whose every act of servility in fact derides his white oppressors. Nor can the narrator be unmindful of a dream in which mountains of paper contain a single, recurrent message: “Keep this Nigger Boy Running.”

At the college, he believes himself to be in a black version of an ideal Dixie. His life, however, undergoes a major reversal when he shows Norton, a white philanthropist, the incestuous “fieldnigger” family of the Truebloods, thus reawakening Norton’s own sexual hankerings after his recently deceased daughter. In order to find medical help for the overcome Norton, the pair moves on to The Golden Day, a black brothel for Army vets, and there, to his greatest discomfort, the narrator recognizes in the patients caricatures of the self-same black bourgeoisie he most aspires to join—doctors, teachers, lawyers, and businessmen. His resulting expulsion from the college, even so, produces more paper promises, in the form of supposed letters of recommendation to likely employers in New York.

These letters, too, prove false, Bledsoe’s revenge on a disciple who has strayed from the appointed path. The son of the aptly named Mr. Emerson reveals the deception and guides the narrator to the Liberty Paints factory. Put to work making “Optic White,” he inadvertently adds “concentrated remover,” as if to insist upon his own blackness within the all-white grid of America. Moved on, he begins work in the factory’s paint-process section. The machinery explodes, however, and in the factory hospital he overhears himself being talked about as a likely candidate for lobotomy.

Signing a release, he heads back to Harlem, taking part almost by chance in a spontaneous outcry at an eviction. Immediately, The Brotherhood draws him into its ranks, making him their Harlem spokesman and using him to organize black Manhattan into a political wedge against the ruling order. However, he also finds himself mythified into a sexual stud by one of the white “sisters.” Increasingly, too, he comes up against Ras’s fervid Black Nationalism. Most of all, he is held responsible for the disappearance of Tod Clifton, another activist; the narrator later sees Clifton on a street selling Sambo dolls and witnesses his death at the hands of the police. The narrator’s trial by The Brotherhood for conspiracy and “petty individualism” follows immediately, a species of witchhunt and “black comedy” culminating in the spectacle of Brother Jack’s eye falling out of its socket.

The narrator takes to wearing dark glasses, with the result that a variety of Harlemites mistakenly think him to be Bliss Proteus Rinehart, a numbers man, lover, clergyman, and politician. However, the impersonation,
which he comes to relish, proves inadequate when Harlem erupts. In the melee, he encounters a band of
looters who plan to burn their tenement slum building; he then meets Ras himself, in the garb of a black Don
Quixote, and finally runs into a pillaging, panic-driven crowd that chases him underground into a nearby
manhole. There, he burns all his past “papers,” a briefcase full of false promises and impedimenta, prime
among them his high school diploma, one of Clifton’s dolls, and the slip that contains his Brotherhood name.

So “freed,” he endures a massive castration fantasy, and he resolves to abandon his assumed hibernation and
to speak—to write down—this “nightmare.” If, indeed, his has been the one story, his own, it has throughout
also been that of the African American community itself. He even suggests still wider human implications,
and in such a spirit, “torturing myself to put it down,” he bows out by asking in the epilogue: “Who knows
but that, on the lower frequencies, I speak for you?”
Summary

Although Ellison has expressed doubts about *Invisible Man*'s enduring worth, critics have been almost unanimous in ranking it among the best post- World War II American novels. By universalizing the experience of American blacks, Ellison is often credited with having transcended more political works of social protest. The "invisibility" referred to in the title is the end result of an existential search for identity. The unnamed narrator slowly realizes that people see only what they wish to see in others and are themselves defined by concepts imposed upon them. Ellison is often quoted for having said, "I wasn't and am not primarily concerned with injustice, but with art," a statement that paradoxically implies that *Invisible Man* be read as a philosophical or aesthetic statement rather than a statement about racial intolerance. His position has inevitably invited attacks that he "copped out" and embraced an unjust establishment by not focusing his book strongly enough on the problems of racial injustice.

Prologue

Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man* chronicles the life of an unnamed, first-person narrator from his youth in the segregated American South of the 1920s to a temporary "hibernation," twenty years later, in a "border area" of Harlem. From his "hole in the ground," this invisible man responds to his "compulsion to put invisibility down in black and white" by telling his story. He begins by attempting to explain his own invisibility: "I am invisible, understand, simply because people refuse to see me." The tendency of others to distort what they see or to see "everything and anything" except him leads the narrator to question his own existence. As a result, he feels resentment toward those who refuse to acknowledge his reality. When he bumps into one such person on the street, the narrator responds to the man's slurs with swift violence. He is kept from killing him only by the unnerving realization that his victim did not, in fact, see him as another human being but rather as a "phantom" or a mirage. The narrator notes one curious advantage of invisibility, a "slightly different sense of time" that allows one to "see around corners." After accidentally smoking a "reefer" and experiencing a hallucinogenic journey back through history to slave times, the narrator recognizes that his awareness of invisibility alone gives him a more useful sense of sight. He has, as he puts it, "illuminated the blackness of my invisibility," and it remains for him to explain, in the rest of the novel, what has brought him to this newfound understanding of his own identity and of his role in American society.

Chapters 1-6

The narrator begins his story with his memories of youth and adolescence in a small southern town. He recalls first, as the most baffling but powerful memory of his childhood, the final instructions of his dying grandfather that he must live as a "traitor" and "a spy in the enemy's territory." These words become "like a curse" to the narrator as he grows older, for he finds reward in living a life of outward humility and doesn't understand how such a life might be called "treachery." Asked by the leading white citizens of the town to repeat his graduation speech extolling submissiveness, the narrator finds himself required to participate in a battle royal, a blindfolded boxing match with one of his schoolmates. Bloodied from the fight and humiliated by the racist jeers of the white men, the narrator still delivers his speech about "social responsibility" and receives, as a "badge of office," a brief case and a college scholarship.

The narrator's education at the "state college for Negroes" comes to an abrupt end during his junior year, when he shows a wealthy white benefactor of the college, Mr. Norton, parts of the South that the college wishes to hide from its northern visitors. Mr. Norton is horrified by what he hears from Jim Trueblood (a black sharecropper who has impregnated his own daughter) and by what he sees in the Golden Day (a "slave-quarter" brothel). Because he has thus embarrassed the school and threatened its reputation, the narrator is temporarily expelled by the president of the college, Dr. Bledsoe. After listening to an impassioned speech about the school's mission by Homer A. Barbee, the narrator is advised by Bledsoe to go to New York to earn his fees for the following year. Provided with sealed letters to several of the school's "friends" in
the North, the narrator boards a bus, optimistic that he will soon return to complete his education.

**Chapters 7-14**

The narrator’s confidence soon wavers, when a veteran from the Golden Day heading north on the same bus urges him to “come out of the fog” and “learn to look beneath the surface” of his life. Once in New York, the narrator feels alternately confident and frightened, more free than in the South but more confused. His doubts increase after his first six letters yield no job opportunities. With his seventh letter, the narrator meets Young Emerson, the disillusioned son of one of the college’s wealthy benefactors, from whom he learns that Bledsoe’s letters of introduction in fact bar him from ever returning to the school. Stunned by this discovery, the narrator abandons his loyalty and submission to the college and knows that he will “never be the same.”

Finding work at the Liberty Paint factory, the narrator is branded a “fink” by the unionized workers, then moments later is accused of being a unionizer by Lucius Brockway. Before the end of the day he contributes to a boiler-room explosion that leaves him seriously injured and unconscious. He awakes in the factory hospital, where, in order to assure that “society will suffer no traumata on his account,” doctors attempt to “cure” him with an electric-shock lobotomy. After his release from the hospital, the narrator is unsure of who he is, feeling disconnected from both his mind and his body. Drifting back to Harlem, he is taken in by Mary Rambo, an elderly black woman he meets coming out of the Lenox Avenue subway. Here his search for identity becomes an “obsession,” and he roams the city without purpose until he comes across an eviction in progress. Speaking to the angry crowd in defense of the elderly black couple, the narrator comes to the attention of a member of the politically radical Brotherhood. Recruited as a spokesperson for their cause, the narrator accepts a new name and a “new identity” and resolves once again to “leave the old behind.”

**Chapters 15-25**

After parting from Mary and moving into an apartment provided by the Brotherhood, the narrator delivers his first speech at a political rally. Encouraged by his own performance and the emotional reaction of the crowd, he resolves to find a meaningful identity in the Brotherhood that is “not limited by black and white.” After the narrator meets Tod Clifton, another young black man active in the Brotherhood, the two are involved in a street fight with the black nationalist Ras the Exhorter. Although denounced by Ras for working side by side with white men, the narrator is “dominated by the all-embracing idea of Brotherhood” and convinced that he plays a “vital role” in the work of the organization. His confidence is momentarily shaken by an anonymous warning that he not “get too big,” but he is reminded of what he is working for by Brother Tarp’s gift of a leg link that he had filed open to escape from a southern chain gang.

The narrator begins to question the aims of the Brotherhood after he is denounced by Brother Wrestrum and is transferred out of Harlem to lecture downtown on “the Woman Question.” When he returns to Harlem after Tod Clifton’s disappearance, he finds the movement weakened and disorganized and discovers Clifton on the street hawking paper Sambo dolls. Moments later, the narrator watches as Clifton is gunned down by a police officer. With his eyes opened to aspects of Harlem and of the Brotherhood that he had never seen before, the narrator leads a funeral march for Clifton at which he abandons “scientific” political arguments for honest emotional expression. Roaming the streets of Harlem after again being denounced by the Brotherhood, the narrator discovers a world of contradiction and “possibility” that causes him to see his past experiences in a new light:

> … leaning against that stone wall in the sweltering night, I began to accept my past and, as I accepted it, I felt memories welling up within me. It was as though I’d learned suddenly to look around corners; images of past humiliations flickered through my head and I saw that they were more than separate experiences. They were me; they defined me. I was my experiences and my experiences were me, and no blind men, no matter how powerful they became, even if they conquered the world, could take that, or change one single itch, taunt,
laugh, cry, scar, ache, rage or pain of it. They were blind, bat blind, moving only by the echoed sounds of their own voices…. They were very much the same, each attempting to force his picture of reality upon me and neither giving a hoot in hell for how things looked to me. I was simply a material, a natural resource to be used. I had switched from the arrogant absurdity of Norton and Emerson to that of Jack and the Brotherhood, and it all came out the same—except I now recognized my invisibility.

After this powerful recognition, the narrator resolves to undermine the Brotherhood. But before he can discover their plans for him and for Harlem, he is swept up in a riot initiated by Ras, now called “the Destroyer.” Narrowly escaping death at the hands of Ras and his henchmen, the narrator falls into an open manhole where he sleeps, dreams, and eventually decides to “take up residence.”

**Epilogue**

From his “hole in the ground,” the narrator ends his story by reflecting on his painful past, his present uncertainty and anger, and the possibility that he may yet emerge from his “hibernation” and—though still an invisible man in American society—find “a socially responsible role to play.”
Chapter Summary and Analysis

Prologue Summary and Analysis

**New Character**
The narrator: tells the story of his life, but remains unnamed

**Summary**
The Prologue introduces the narrator with a monologue set inside the narrator’s head. After having many adventures, which the reader will discover more about in the chapters to come, the narrator is resting and isolated. He uses the word “hibernation” to describe his status.

The Prologue begins with the narrator announcing that he is an invisible man. But he is also a man of substance—“flesh and bone, fiber and liquids”—not a creation of books or movies. In making clear that he is not literally invisible, the narrator proceeds to discuss what his invisibility is like, and how he has come to understand it.

The narrator describes his life, and the ways he interacts with others. One night, when the narrator feels that a man has refused to recognize his existence, he uses violence to force the man to admit that the narrator is there. Irrational as this scene may seem, it has its own logic. The narrator is convinced that the man never really saw him. The next day’s newspaper seems to confirm his view. It calls the incident a mugging, even though the narrator hadn’t tried to rob the man.

The narrator observes that there are also certain advantages to being ignored by white people. He lives in the basement of a whites-only building and diverts free electricity for the many (1,369) lightbulbs he has plugged in.

At the same time, the narrator is aware of his aloneness, and no amount of irony and cynicism will conceal his loneliness. He talks about “re-entering” society. He makes no distinction between white society and black society, having proved to himself that his invisibility is equally effective in both.

The narrator mentions characters such as Brother Jack, Ras, and Rinehart, whom the reader will meet later in the novel.

**Analysis**
The Prologue introduces a sharp mind that has suffered a great deal. The reader may think that the narrator is not sane, considering he attacks a man for not noticing him. However it is too early to tell, and we must judge him by his words, actions, and past.

The narrator tends to express himself indirectly. His fantastic imagination provides a crucial clue to his unhappiness. At one point, he says that his feelings of ambivalence are the cause of his being where he is.

The narrator’s estrangement from society has made him an observer rather than a participant. He views people from a distance, from his alienated vantage point, often seeing in human behavior what other people do not notice. Unfortunately, learning about people in this way does not seem to help the narrator find what he spends the novel searching for. The humor that the narrator uses is dark and cynical.

Chapter 1 Summary and Analysis

**New Characters**

**Grandfather:** not an actual character, although his dying words greatly disturb the narrator
Jackson: a particularly sadistic member of the audience at the battle royal

Tatlock: a large and vicious boy whom the narrator is forced to fight during the battle royal

Summary
A brief anecdote about the narrator’s grandfather begins the chapter. Through his childhood and early adulthood, the narrator is confused by his grandfather’s “deathbed curse.” After the narrator gives his high school graduation speech on humility, he is invited to give his speech before a special audience. At this event, the narrator realizes that young men from the local black high school have been brought together for the sadistic amusement of white men.

First, a naked white woman dances in front of the high school students. The strong emotions generated by such a forbidden sight are channelled into a free-for-all boxing match. The narrator faces Tatlock, who is filled with rage. The distribution of prize money provides more torture.

Finally, the narrator makes his speech. The audience, at first not really listening, changes when the narrator says “social equality” instead of “social responsibility.” Despite this difficulty, the narrator finishes with applause and a prize. The superintendent presents him with a new briefcase, containing a scholarship to an all-black state college.

Analysis
The story of the narrator’s grandfather frames the narrator’s central struggle: the line between honesty and insanity. The adults react to the grandfather’s “deathbed curse,” as the narrator sometimes calls it, by saying that the grandfather was crazy. This is hardly the only possibility. The question of whether or not many of the characters are crazy runs through the entire novel.

The fact that the whole of the narrator’s life before college is reduced to one evening suggests that the story of that evening, which he calls the battle royal, can serve as an indication of something greater. Although the characters in the first chapter do not reappear in the novel, the battle royal provides the reader with crucial insights. Similarly, though Jackson and Tatlock are flat characters, they embody important facets of home to the narrator.

The whites look at their victims as entertainment, not individuals. Tatlock represents the distortions of relationships between blacks in the presence of whites. Why does Tatlock fight so hard? Most likely because his situation with the whites makes him angry, and the narrator is the only person on whom Tatlock can vent his rage.

An intense atmosphere of malice and instability pervades the battle royal. Ellison effectively blends comedy and fantastical imagery with drama and pathos. For example, the description of the blond dancer suggests a fragile, magical being, instead of the sordid pawn that torments them. At the same time, many of the details of the battle royal are highly realistic.

Chapter 2 Summary and Analysis
New Characters
Mr. Norton: the rich, white, northern benefactor whom the narrator chauffeurs in a college-owned car

Jim Trueblood: the poor sharecropper who tells Mr. Norton a story

Summary
The narrator drives Mr. Norton along the quiet roadways of the campus where the narrator attends college. The nervous narrator is reassured by Mr. Norton’s confidence and curiosity about the narrator’s future. Mr.
Norton and the narrator also talk about Mr. Norton’s daughter, who died suddenly and mysteriously.

After a few chance turns, they reach an area of old cabins. The narrator repeats what is told about Jim Trueblood, owner of one of the cabins—that he had had a child with his own daughter. Despite the narrator’s reluctance, Mr. Norton insists on talking with Jim Trueblood.

Jim Trueblood tells them the story, saying that he never meant to sleep with his daughter, Matty Lou. As he fell asleep in their single bed, he had been thinking about a woman he’d known years before. This, combined with his strange and erotic dream, made him lose control of himself. When his wife saw the “accident” taking place, she tried to kill him for his sin.

The narrator is repulsed and disgusted by the story. Mr. Norton is transfixed, and so dangerously upset that the wondering narrator must suddenly fear for Mr. Norton’s health.

**Analysis**
This chapter’s opening paragraphs focus on the quiet beauty of the campus, communicating a sense of loss. The reader cannot be sure that the narrator was successful there.

Even at this black college, indebtedness to whites is present. One of the benefactors of the college, Mr. Norton, is there for Founder’s Day; ironically, the whiteness or blackness of the Founder is never disclosed.

Assigned to chauffeur Mr. Norton, the narrator, despite his awe of Mr. Norton, allows a truth-related catastrophe to occur. The fact that Mr. Norton hears, and is deeply upset by, Jim Trueblood’s story is sure to have its consequences for the narrator.

**Chapter 3 Summary and Analysis**

**New Characters**
- Big Halley: a bartender at the Golden Day
- Sylvester: a mental patient and a patron of the Golden Day
- Supercargo: the attendant/warden at the Golden Day
- The vet: a strange little man who tends to Mr. Norton’s condition upstairs; the talk that the two of them have puts the vet in a vulnerable position
- Edna: a prostitute at the Golden Day; she shows great interest in spending more time with Mr. Norton

**Summary**
The car arrives at the Golden Day, a bar and whorehouse. Mr. Norton requires “a stimulant,” in the form of alcohol, to overcome the shock of Jim Trueblood’s story. Mr. Norton’s condition is unknown, but his aristocratic constitution implies a certain delicacy.

The stumbling men in front of the car are the veterans and mental incompetents that make the Golden Day a rowdy place. The narrator knows that this was not a good place to bring Mr. Norton, but going to town would have taken too long.

The narrator tries to get Halley, the bartender, to give him a drink for Mr. Norton. When Halley refuses, the narrator goes out to the car and finds that Mr. Norton has fainted. Sylvester and another man help bring Mr. Norton inside. Someone slaps Mr. Norton across the face to revive him, and a drink is administered.
Just after Mr. Norton awakens, Supercargo enters the scene. Being the attendant in charge of these men, he is accustomed to being in command. Now, however, everyone is affected by alcohol, and Supercargo’s threatening presence so angers the men that they attack him.

Supercargo is overcome and severely beaten. It is soon clear that Mr. Norton would be safer upstairs. Once there, the vet continues treating Mr. Norton, and the three of them engage in a long conversation, which continues until the narrator’s and Mr. Norton’s angry departure.

**Analysis**

Whether or not he intends to, the narrator continues to do what he did in the previous chapter—to confront Mr. Norton with the day-to-day realities of black life in the South. He has brought Mr. Norton to two places that those in the college react to with embarrassment and anger.

While the chaos in this chapter is as intense as the battle royal in Chapter One, the reasons behind it are different. The Golden Day has its own strange sense of logic; the men do not have to deal with white people, and their “craziness” keeps them out of trouble. The situation with Supercargo, however, angers them. They say they cannot speak freely when he is present, which means that he treats them the way a white man would. They make him pay dearly for that crime. They are not afraid of Mr. Norton, but they have no desire to hurt him; that would mean real trouble.

The vet’s short speeches may seem confusing. Some of what he says is indirectly stated, as the narrator himself has done in the Prologue. The vet says that he had forgotten things he never should have forgotten; the whites might have said that the Vet “forgot his place.” In learning medicine and healing, the vet neglected to keep in mind the realities of American racism. Other statements the vet makes sound completely crazy, but, as usual, this is not necessarily the case.

**Chapter 4 Summary and Analysis**

**New Character**

Dr. Bledsoe: the president of the college

**Summary**

Upon returning to campus, the narrator drops Mr. Norton off and goes to see Dr. Bledsoe, the president of the college. Feeling certain that he will be blamed for having subjected Mr. Norton to both Jim Trueblood’s story and the events at the Golden Day, the narrator is in an agony of nervousness.

Dr. Bledsoe is greatly disconcerted by the course of events and, despite Mr. Norton’s words to the contrary, does indeed blame the narrator. The narrator is ordered to see Dr. Bledsoe later that evening, after attending a campus church service. Both on the way to his room, and once having arrived there, the narrator is accosted by fellow students, whose blithe chatter further strains the narrator’s nerves.

**Analysis**

In this chapter, the narrator becomes aware of the danger he faces. Having broken unwritten rules, he expects a severe penalty for what he has done, although this is unconfirmed. The narrator does not realize that his not having done anything will not make any difference.

Ellison makes good use of suspense. Although the character telling the story has already lived through it and knows what happened, the resolution of the narrator’s fears are withheld from the reader, who is kept in suspense along with the young man in the memory.

This is far more effective than if the narrator had told us what happened, and then explained how that conclusion came into being. The chronology of the day’s events (remember that this day started in Chapter
Two and is not yet over) is meticulously followed.

There is little large-scale drama here, as we saw at the Golden Day. Instead, more subtle clues tell the reader about the characters. For example, the narrator notices the extent to which Dr. Bledsoe changes when he is with Mr. Norton. The reader has an opportunity to see how Dr. Bledsoe acts toward the narrator.

Chapter 5 Summary and Analysis

New Character

The Reverend Homer A. Barbee: the man who gives the sermon the narrator hears in this chapter; Barbee provides a perspective of hollow pride and rhetoric

Summary

As ordered by Dr. Bledsoe, the narrator goes to the college chapel. Before the evening’s guest speaker begins his sermon, the narrator meditates upon his own precarious status. He then recalls the times that he spoke publicly at the college.

He returns to the present scene, describing the people there, including Dr. Bledsoe. There is a choir solo and the sermon begins, praising the lives and visions of those who built the college.

The sermon is delivered by Reverend Homer A. Barbee, of Chicago. Its topic is the great work of making the college, accomplished by the godlike yet entirely humble personalities of the Founder and Dr. Bledsoe. Barbee works the crowd and uses techniques of oratory to make the story into an epic saga of heroism. The narrator, moved and demoralized, is left feeling like a traitor. He dreads all the more his imminent talk with Dr. Bledsoe.

Analysis

This is a difficult chapter because little actually happens. Instead, the first half of the chapter takes place entirely inside the narrator’s head. Moreover, the narrator is doing two things at once: he is reliving the evening, as well as remembering the evening from the perspective of a grown man.

The narrator sits in the college chapel, waiting for both the guest speaker to deliver his sermon and, more importantly, for an answer from Dr. Bledsoe about the consequences of the day’s unfortunate events.

While waiting for the sermon, the narrator examines his situation, savoring all its exquisite details of beauty and anguish. The meditation on his life in college, which he looks upon as lost, leads him to recall moments when he too stood upon the church-stage and spoke oratorically. This is the section printed in italic type, where the narrator throws words around in a sort of celebration of their uselessness.

One might say that there are three sermons in the chapter. The narrator gives two personal sermons before the official one commences.

The chapter begins with descriptions of nature and landscape in which all the senses are invoked. It is reminiscent of the start of the second chapter; the narrator is holding onto details in a loving fashion.

Also, the beginning of the chapter contains a shift in tense, from past to present. This shift, in the second sentence of the chapter, makes the narrator’s perceptions more immediate and dramatic. It indicates that these perceptions are frozen in time; the narrator we met in the Prologue is reliving the event.

Chapter 6 Summary and Analysis

Summary

After some last-minute panic and forestalling, the narrator has his interview with Dr. Bledsoe. Though the
conversation begins pleasantly, it changes suddenly when the college president heaps abuse upon the narrator. Then Dr. Bledsoe tells the narrator his decision. The narrator is dismissed from college.

The narrator’s first response is outrage and anger. This shocks and then amuses Dr. Bledsoe, who says the narrator is powerless. When it comes right down to it, the narrator does not really exist, because he does not matter. The college president tells the narrator about how a person gets power, and what it means to have it.

Dr. Bledsoe tells the narrator that he will give him some letters to help him find work, and that the narrator has a short period of time to end his affairs.

The narrator leaves the office and vomits. He thinks about going back home, and the reactions he would face from those still there. He decides that Dr. Bledsoe’s decision was correct, and that he must accept his fate. He gets ready to leave.

Dr. Bledsoe is displeased to see the narrator the next morning, until the narrator says that he would like to get going and asks for the letters that Dr. Bledsoe had mentioned the night before. After collecting them, the narrator catches a bus.

**Analysis**

The reader has long been anticipating the confrontation between the narrator and Dr. Bledsoe. It is very dramatic, but not highly surprising. The narrator was expecting to be expelled.

Ellison is very skilled at capturing the tension of this meeting. The narrator receives a lesson on how power involves deception. The reader is getting a similar lesson on the forces that made the narrator into the invisible man who introduced himself in the Prologue.

The narrator feels powerless in front of Dr. Bledsoe. He does not leave the office immediately, as he had been ready to do. Instead, he stays and listens, angry at himself for doing so, and filled with an agony of hate and confused fear.

One of the issues in this chapter is honesty. Dr. Bledsoe accuses the narrator of lying to him, and castigates the narrator for not lying to Mr. Norton. At the same time, Dr. Bledsoe tells the narrator not to treat him like a white man, even while calling the narrator a “nigger.” This puts the narrator in a sort of double bind, for Dr. Bledsoe is exerting power over the narrator just as a white man would do, even while telling the narrator that he has pulled the race down into the mud.

Chapter 7 Summary and Analysis

**New Characters**

Crenshaw: the man in charge of getting the vet to his new home

Ras (later known as “Ras the Exhorter”): the leader of a political group in Harlem

**Summary**

The narrator takes a bus from campus, beginning the next part of his life. He carries letters of introduction from Dr. Bledsoe. Two other men are traveling that day—the Vet (the inmate from the Golden Day that provided medical aid to Mr. Norton) and Crenshaw (the Vet’s attendant).

Before the two transfer to another bus, the Vet again comments on the narrator’s situation. Once in New York, the narrator sees the very different lives that blacks can lead in a big northern city.
Analysis
Once again, the reader comes to the question of whether or not the Vet is crazy. Actually, he seems quite lucid and makes a lot of sense. Then why is he going off to a mental institution?

Although the narrator has just recently been torn away from the life he knew and loved, he is no longer depressed by the end of the chapter. We have the feeling that everything is new for the narrator. His confusion holds far more excitement than fear.

The reader is introduced to a new stage of the narrator’s life and may well feel a similar kind of excitement. The introduction of Ras is important to this chapter. He illustrates a new response to the white America portrayed in the novel and a new kind of politics.

Chapter 8 Summary and Analysis
Summary
The narrator starts to get to know the city, and begins his search for a job, using the letters. He is plagued by his expectations and fears, but is still fascinated by this new world.

In the first of the huge offices where he delivers his letters, the narrator talks with a receptionist. The narrator wonders whether the reactions he is getting are racially motivated, but decides that they are not. Alone and worried, the narrator hopes for a change.

Analysis
The narrator’s energies, which were high when he first arrived in New York, are flagging. His feelings of isolation and persecution are increased by his poor prospects for a job.

He dreams about his bright future and the ways that he will conduct himself as a successful man. The narrator has done this before—retreat into a fantasy world when he is in doubt—in the Prologue.

The day dreams, and the movies to which he goes to keep himself cheerful, do not work. He begins to feel that there is something about him that people notice. He says that his clothes feel ill-fitting.

Chapter 9 Summary and Analysis
New Character
Mr. Emerson’s Son: the man with whom the narrator has an unsuccessful interview

Summary
On his way to an important interview, the narrator meets with people who shake his sense of identity. At Mr. Emerson’s office, the narrator delivers his letter and is asked to wait. After a pause, the narrator converses with the man who took the narrator’s letter.

The conversation begins amicably, but deteriorates as the narrator grows uneasy. After much confusion, the man shows the narrator the letter from Dr. Bledsoe. Stating that the narrator was an embarrassment to the college, the letter asks Mr. Emerson to please shun the narrator and his request for employment.

The narrator is devastated, but maintains his composure. The man’s offers of employment are politely declined, and the narrator leaves.

Soon after, the narrator finds his anger. After considering that young Emerson might have been lying somehow, he broods on the subject of Dr. Bledsoe. His emotions run between laughter and blind rage.
Analysis
Although the narrator’s encounters with the blueprint man and the counterman are only momentary, they nonetheless signify a great deal. Both men show their feelings that the narrator might be acting to conceal what they consider his “true self.”

The narrator acknowledges this possibility, and senses that to deny his heritage would be dishonest. Yet this is a gray area, in which no one is right or wrong. After all, are the men right to have these expectations? Is the narrator obligated to have certain preferences, or to behave in a certain way, because of where and how he grew up? The narrator may or may not be stifling who he is. Questions regarding the honest expressions of identity remain unanswered.

In the narrator’s conversation with Mr. Emerson’s son, the reader sees the potential for dialogue between the races. Both the narrator’s mistrust and the young Emerson’s inner conflictedness prevent any real communication.

Chapter 10 Summary and Analysis

New Characters
Mr. MacDuffy: an inconsequential little man who sends the narrator to work for Mr. Kimbro

Mr. Kimbro: a demanding boss who tells the narrator what to do with the paint

Lucius Brockway: the man in charge of the boilers; an old black man, Brockway is wise in the workings of both the people and machinery of the paint factory

Summary
The narrator goes to a paint factory in Long Island. He uses Emerson’s name to get the job, and he is nervous about it. The narrator is sent to Mr. Kimbro, who gives him directions for adding an ingredient to the paint. This begins well, until the narrator draws his mixing material from the wrong tank. This taints the buckets, and incurs Kimbro’s wrath. The narrator seems to get another chance, but this only forestalls the inevitable.

The narrator is ready to leave the factory. Instead, he is sent to the boiler room, as a new assistant to Lucius Brockway. The narrator sees that Brockway is an unpleasant boss. Distrustful, sarcastic, and abusive, Brockway does not wish to share his realm or his power. Yet he allows the narrator to stay.

The narrator learns that Brockway is the unofficial chief engineer of the entire factory, manufacturing the foundation of the paint, and is intimately familiar with all of the physical plant.

What the narrator is not aware of, but finds out, is that association with Brockway is dangerous. The young blacks active in the unions condemn Brockway’s isolationist position, while Brockway himself is put in a rage to hear that the narrator has had anything to do with the union men.

The fight that the narrator and Brockway have over this subject is based on a misunderstanding, yet its violence escalates. Brockway escapes just before the huge explosion that ends the chapter. The narrator is not so fortunate.

Analysis
The narrator begins work feeling that he has made a move of his own to improve his life. Yet he finds that he has taken someone else’s job, and benefited from a misunderstanding about his having been to college.

After his initial problems, his move to the boiler room proves to be a small improvement. The relationship between Brockway and the other black laborers at the factory provides the narrator with yet another lesson in
the politics of race and power.

What Brockway shows the narrator, and the reader, is how he has kept his position and his power. Brockway’s career and survival are remarkable. He is perfectly aware of this, as we see in the anecdote about Mr. Sparland, the rich owner, who visited Brockway in person to convince him not to retire.

What has allowed Brockway to succeed, especially in his later years, is a complete conviction in what he does. He has no time to be, or interest in being, ambivalent. This has kept him focused on living his life, which involves a lot of responsibility and self-satisfaction.

Everyone who comes into Brockway’s world represents a potential threat, including the narrator. At first, Brockway decides that the narrator is harmless. When that perception changes, then Brockway must act to protect himself, which he does.

Some of the conversation between Brockway and the narrator recalls what the Vet had said in Chapter Three. Both of the men have spent far more time around white people than the narrator has at that point in his life, and they have learned the truths to which the narrator alluded in the Prologue.

Twice in this chapter, the narrator’s name is spoken. It represents the first confirmation that he has a name, but does not shed light on why that name is never shared with the reader.

Chapter 11 Summary and Analysis

Summary
This chapter is reminiscent of Chapter Five, in that not much happens. The scene is static, and the action is internal. We gather that the narrator is receiving medical treatment from doctors, as a result of the explosion in the boiler room. Yet what begins as compassion turns first to ambiguousness and then swiftly to frightening malice. The doctors are actually torturing him, and his agony is more than simply physical; the questions they ask him, or he asks himself, concern his origins and identity.

At the end of the “medical treatment,” the narrator is not completely lucid. After more conversation, during which he asks nonsense questions, he leaves. He shows little awareness of his surroundings.

Analysis
If any one part of the novel suggests the possibility that the narrator is not mentally sound, it is this chapter. The questions of the “doctors,” and the thoughts that those questions provoke, clearly show the deep confusion inside the narrator. This confusion manifests itself toward the end of the chapter, in both the questions he asks and the descriptions of the world around him.

One possibility to consider is that, in addition to his recent accident at the factory, the narrator is probably very tired. The incident at Jim Trueblood’s cabin took place not many months before, and in that time the narrator has had a lot of exhausting adventures.

Chapter 12 Summary and Analysis

New Character
Mary (Mary Rambo) (Miss Mary): the woman who finds the narrator on the street and brings him to her home

Summary
Having left the place where he spent Chapter Eleven, the narrator is very disoriented. After fainting in the street, he is found by Mary Rambo, who insists that he comes home with her to recuperate from his troubles. After a long sleep, he feels better. Although reluctant at first, the narrator decides to accept Mary’s offer of low rent, especially once he realizes that the Men’s House is not a home.
Believing that he sees Bledsoe, the narrator commits a serious faux pas by dumping something (probably a spitoon) on the head of a Baptist preacher.

As he settles into his new home, the narrator is aware of new feelings of intense anger inside him.

**Analysis**
This chapter contains the first act of kindness in the novel, and the first period of rest for the narrator. Though the narrator regains the equilibrium he lost in the previous chapter, he feels that he has lost his direction. At the same time, he discovers new feelings deep inside himself; we can tell that he is still learning about himself. This is an important time for the narrator.

The narrator’s comprehensive description of the residents of the Men’s House contains many observations he had not made earlier, and highlights his growing ability to notice.

**Chapter 13 Summary and Analysis**

**New Character**
Brother Jack: the first member of the Brotherhood, a group the narrator becomes involved with.

**Summary**
While walking the streets, the narrator finds a man selling yams (sweet potatoes) from a cart. The moment the narrator bites into one, he feels homesick. Yet he also feels far better than he had before, and he returns to buy two more yams. Immediately afterward, the narrator becomes involved in a dispute when he sees the eviction of an old black couple. To avoid violence, the narrator gives an impromptu speech, which has a great impact on the crowd. When many police arrive, and a riot looks imminent, the narrator escapes with the help of a white girl.

Soon afterward, a man approaches the narrator and suggests that they talk. Although quite suspicious, the narrator meets with Brother Jack, as the man calls himself. The narrator learns that the movement is interested in universal brotherhood, yet the narrator himself is not at all sure that he shares this point of view—his loyalties are determined by race.

The narrator is left to consider his options.

**Analysis**
The narrator shows more emotion, especially positive emotion, in this chapter. Having endured many misfortunes, he is learning more and more about himself. He feels a new vitality when he pursues what he cares about—foods that he enjoys eating, and public speaking, a subject with which the narrator has had several important experiences.

The narrator spoke to avoid violence, and was able to speak movingly because he cared deeply about his subject. The narrator’s success in public speaking reaches back to the first chapter; it is the one subject where his natural talent has been recognized by others. The fact that his talent in this area was immediately recognized opens new doors for the narrator.

**Chapter 14 Summary and Analysis**

**New Character**
Emma: an attractive woman involved in the Brotherhood; she lives well and hosts Brother Jack and others for a combination business-meeting/party.

**Summary**
Despite some reluctance, the narrator decides to call Brother Jack, who asks the narrator to join him.
immediately. The narrator meets other members of the Brotherhood, including Emma, the affluent hostess of that evening’s meeting.

The narrator is still suspicious and apprehensive, and the reactions from the party members do not relieve these feelings. They talk in a grand manner, and at first almost seem to disregard the narrator’s presence. They discuss making him into a great speaker, like Booker T. Washington. They have plans to change his life—a new place to live, new clothes, and even a new name, which Emma gives to the narrator for him to memorize.

Before the narrator can get used to such a barrage of information, he is introduced to a crowd having gathered for a party. There are many important people there, all of whom are eager to talk. Also at the party is a drunk man, who loudly asks that the narrator sing a song. This provokes an angry reaction from Brother Jack, and the drunk man is thrown out. The narrator is amused, yet his reactions are conflicting. After staying at the party for a while longer, the narrator goes home to Mary, wondering about the changes ahead of him.

Analysis
Just as the narrator has shown signs of living a settled life, he becomes involved in a new “adventure.” His speech at the eviction led directly to the Brotherhood, and now he has a new job, around white people who are specifically interested in him and what he can do.

The tense moment regarding the narrator’s singing touches on a major theme in this novel: the difficulty of being true to one’s self when all those around one make assumptions about one’s identity. While it may not be right to assume that all black people enjoy singing, it is also not right to avoid singing merely because people will expect it.

The narrator is frequently worried by the expectations of others. This confuses him and makes him feel ambivalence. The dynamics of the situation with the drunk man are echoed in the narrator’s thoughts, in Chapter Thirteen, about eating fried sweet potato pies. He realizes that it is a waste of time to be concerned with what other people expect him to do or say, yet escaping from these feelings is difficult for him.

Chapter 15 Summary and Analysis
Summary
The narrator wakes up on his last morning in Mary’s place. It is a cold morning, and the heat has gone out. Other tenants of the building protest by banging on the pipes, and this enrages the narrator. He grabs a ceramic “piggy bank” shaped like a caricatured black man and smashes it against the pipes. It shatters, and the narrator feels guilty. He resolves to take the mess away with him and throw it out, regardless of the money.

The narrator joins Mary for a brief breakfast. He gives her a hundred-dollar bill, which she nervously accepts. A horde of roaches comes out of the floor, and Mary and the narrator smash them with their feet and a broom. Once on the street, the narrator drops the package in a garbage can, but is instantly commanded to take it back. The woman of the house lectures him on bad manners and will not listen to his reasonable appeals. He soils his arm in retrieving the package. Next he leaves it on the sidewalk, yet a man follows him for two blocks to give it back to him, amid ludicrous accusations that the narrator was trying to plant incriminating evidence of some kind.

The narrator’s mood turns as he buys the clothes that Brother Jack demanded. The narrator sees an article on the eviction protest, which refers to him in passing. After selecting his new clothes, the narrator finds his new address.
**Analysis**
This chapter is filled with symbols of the narrator’s change, from Mary’s friend to whatever role the Brotherhood has in store for him. The little home he had with Mary turns from cosy to grimy on his last morning. Not only does everything go wrong, but much of what happens is full of significance.

First of all, the narrator smashes a representation of the old black man, an object he had lived with but never noticed. Next, in the midst of his guilt about abandoning the life he had at Mary’s, the roaches make their appearance.

Upon leaving Mary’s apartment, the narrator has great difficulty in discarding the package of coins and smashed ceramic. Local black people remind him of his burden and refuse to let him hide it from view, as would be convenient for him.

Having made a real life for himself with Mary, the narrator is trying to change into something else. The world sends its little comments on this day, much like certain catastrophes are interpreted as signs of a god’s displeasure. While this may seem an overly dramatic reading, consider all of the odd details of the chapter, in which the narrator is faced with yet another shift in identity.

**Chapter 16 Summary and Analysis**

**New Character**
Brother Wrestrum: the chief speaker of the Brothers present when the narrator gives his speech

**Summary**
The narrator accompanies Brother Jack and other Brotherhood members to the rally mentioned at the end of the previous chapter. When they arrive, the narrator is instructed to pay close attention to the other speakers, as the narrator himself will be speaking last.

The rally takes place in a sports arena, and the narrator notices the picture of a well-known boxer. The narrator is reminded of the stories about this boxer, whose career ended in a scandalous fight that left him blind. The narrator then begins to think about the person he is becoming, in his new suit and new name. He ponders whether or not he knows this new person.

One set of thoughts leads to the next, until the Brotherhood group finally enters the arena. The narrator stumbles while walking, but then regains his balance. The speeches blend into each other, without making much impression on the narrator, until it is his turn to speak.

Although the narrator feels he started off badly, his ability to move a crowd comes to him, and he finishes amid the roars of the audience. Moments after the congratulations of the crowd, some members of the Brotherhood severely criticize the narrator’s performance, using forms of disapproval from “unsatisfactory” to “hysterical.” Although there is division on whether or not the speech was damaging, it is decided that the narrator will study with Brother Hambro and be trained to “speak scientifically.”

The narrator goes home and broods on the evening. Memories of his grandfather recur, as do memories of Woodbridge, an English professor from college. This thought leads to Bledsoe and Norton, and the harm that they did to the narrator. The narrator resolves to learn from Hambro and then be done with him, the better to do his own work.

**Analysis**
Despite the catty remarks in Emma’s apartment, this chapter holds the first real indications of reversals and instability that the narrator faces in the Brotherhood. After a seemingly powerful and certainly successful speech, the narrator is confronted with disgust and disdain from certain members of the organization.
Added to this is the narrator’s recurrent questions about identity. While waiting to go into the arena, he asks himself about the person he is becoming. After the speech, when the narrator has time to reflect on both the speech itself and on the different receptions it received, he again wonders about what is real, in his life and within his personality. This vulnerability will not serve him well in surroundings that are already unpredictable.

Notice that one image early in the chapter is significant—that of the boxer who was beaten into blindness. Moreover, references to blindness show up in the narrator’s speech. The question of sightlessness is linked to invisibility, since boxers generally fight for the profit and entertainment of others and are less likely to be perceived as true individuals. Also, it is hard to avoid invisibility when one cannot even see both one’s self or the people around one.

Chapter 17 Summary and Analysis

New Characters
Brother Tarp: an older man who works at the Harlem Brotherhood office

Brother Tod Clifton: another member of the Brotherhood’s Harlem office, a charismatic young man

Summary
Four months have passed, during which the narrator has studied rigorously with Brother Hambro. The narrator and Brother Jack go to a bar in Harlem, where the narrator learns that he is the new chief spokesman for the Brotherhood’s Harlem office. Brother Jack cautions the narrator about the uses and misuses of what he has learned. Then the two go to the Harlem office, where they meet Brother Tarp. An old, physically disabled man, he shows the narrator his new office.

The next morning, Brother Jack calls a meeting in the Harlem office. Brother Tod Clifton is late; his entrance is understated and somewhat dramatic. The narrator describes him as very black and handsome, with a curiously Anglo-Saxon face.

Brother Clifton tells Brother Jack he was late due to a doctor’s appointment. He is bandaged, having fought with Ras the Exhorter and his men. The narrator does not recall the name, yet it turns out that the narrator does remember when he first came to New York City, in Chapter Seven, and saw a man speaking from a ladder. That man was Ras.

Brother Jack reminds them that the Brotherhood is opposed to violence. Then Brother Jack leaves, and discussions on strategy and future activities continue. They compare their efforts to galvanize the people to the work of Marcus Garvey, a political activist from many years before who was deported by the U.S. Government.

The narrator and Brother Clifton are speaking to a youth group when Ras and his men arrive. A street fight ensues. Ras defeats Clifton and is poised over him with a knife. Seeing in Clifton a color-traitor, Ras says that he should kill him. Yet Ras is moved to tears, and the narrator sees that Ras is indeed an exhorter.

Ras says that black pride is sapped by whites, that the dregs of white womanhood are offered up as a reward for the essence and the sweat of black men, and that working for the Brotherhood is a fool’s paradise. The narrator is held as if by magic, yet both the narrator and Clifton call Ras crazy. The spell is broken only when Clifton knocks Ras out. Clifton and the narrator leave, discussing Ras further.

The next morning, Brother Tarp gives the narrator a picture of Frederick Douglass. The two converse about the great work being done. The narrator calls community leaders regarding plans to protest evictions and gradually notices that his new Brotherhood name is becoming well-known in Harlem.
Analysis
The responsibility that the narrator has been seeking is finally his. Having learned the Brotherhood’s platform and ideology, he is ensconced as head of the Harlem office. Yet despite the ways in which black and white people are working together, the narrator’s ambivalence remains.

Along with Mary, Brother Clifton is one of the most admirable characters the reader has met. His charisma is reflected in the way the narrator describes him, and even in what Ras says to him. This also seems to be a time when the narrator is acting with the noblest of intentions as well. Yet what both Clifton and the narrator say to Ras may cause us to wonder whether or not either of them are such heroes after all.

One of the most telling moments of the chapter is when the narrator says to Clifton that Ras is crazy, to which Clifton agrees. This epithet of “crazy” is clearly a response based on what a listener is hearing, but does not wish to hear. This has occurred before, in the grandfather’s deathbed speech and from Mr. Norton regarding the Vet at the Golden Day. But the narrator himself has never pronounced anyone “crazy” until now. This suggests that the narrator is finally in a position to realize when someone is telling him more truth than he is comfortable with hearing.

Chapter 18 Summary and Analysis
Summary
The narrator finds an anonymous letter on his desk, warning him about “moving too fast,” considering that he is now in “a white man’s world.” Upset, the narrator calls in Brother Tarp. In that moment, the narrator sees his grandfather staring at him from Tarp’s face.

Once over that shock, the narrator asks Brother Tarp about the letter and about what others think of him. Tarp says he knows nothing about the letter, and has not heard any negative reports on the narrator. Tarp reminds the narrator about a controversial poster, depicting people brought together in universal Brotherhood, which had been the narrator’s idea. Tarp says that while some Brotherhood members were against the idea at first, they are now bragging about it.

Tarp then tells the narrator about how he got his limp. There is nothing physically wrong with his leg, but the trauma from dragging a chain (having escaped from a work-gang for some unnamed crime) stayed with him ever since. Tarp unwraps a package from his pocket, revealing the ankle link he forced open to escape. Tarp gives the narrator the link he kept for so long.

Tarp leaves, and the narrator decides that the letter was sent to confuse him, and he must stay focused on his work. Yet he wonders who sent the letter.

Brother Wrestrum visits the narrator and takes exception to the exposed link. Brother Wrestrum says the Brotherhood has enemies from both without and within. He says he continually questions himself, to make sure that he is serving the Brotherhood properly. That way, he says, Brother Tod Clifton’s accident will not be repeated. Clifton was at a rally when a fight began, and he started beating one of the white brothers by mistake.

A magazine editor calls, asking for an interview. The narrator begs off at first, but as he sees Wrestrum giving his views on what the narrator should do, the narrator decides to give the interview after all. Two weeks later, the narrator goes to a Brotherhood meeting. The agenda begins with charges that the narrator has been guilty of acting to focus attention on himself, rather than serving the Brotherhood selflessly.

Brother Wrestrum shows the brothers a magazine with the narrator’s face on the cover with the interview inside. The brothers discuss whether or not the narrator was right to give the interview, and the narrator’s position of fame in Harlem. The narrator says he has no need to defend himself, since he was acting in the
interests of the Brotherhood.

The narrator is asked to step outside while the committee sifts the information. He is called back and told that no wrongdoing was found. But there are other charges to investigate, and the committee has decided that the narrator is to leave Harlem and take up a new assignment: lecturing on “the woman question.” The only alternative is for the narrator to leave the Brotherhood. Overwhelmed by this reversal, where he least expected it, the narrator leaves Harlem quietly, without saying good-bye to his co-workers.

Analysis
This chapter shows more of the Brotherhood’s inner workings. Considering that universal cooperation is a tenet of the Brotherhood, the reader finds many instances of misunderstanding and suspicion from most of the brothers. Given what we have seen from other characters, such as the Vet and Emerson’s son, these feelings may well be the inevitable result of whites and blacks working together.

The “hearing” to determine whether or not the narrator acted improperly is a good example of this. Order is lacking, and the cold words increase the strong emotions.

The meeting is different from other confrontations in the novel, in that the narrator is on the same level with his attackers. When facing Bledsoe, or Lucius Brockway, the narrator was younger, a student or worker. Now he is an equal, yet the machinations of others defeat him.

Also significant is Brother Clifton’s attack on a white brother. While it is likely that the attack was a mistake, it is also possible that Clifton saw his chance to hit a white man and get away with it. Given what Ras said in the previous chapter, and the reactions his words received, hearing that Clifton attacked a white man may make the reader wonder about Clifton’s motives.

Chapter 19 Summary and Analysis
New Character
Hubert’s wife: an unnamed woman with whom the narrator has an affair

Summary
The narrator begins the lectures he was assigned in the previous chapter. He senses that the women, having heard all about him, simply see him before them and are entranced by whatever he says.

At the end of the first lecture, one woman approaches the narrator with a request for further explanations of the Brotherhood’s position regarding women. The narrator offers to discuss her questions privately, and she invites him to her apartment. Once there, she explains that her husband, Hubert, is out of town; otherwise, she says, he would have loved to meet the narrator.

It becomes clear to the narrator that the woman’s interests are not all intellectual in nature. His feelings are conflicted. He is about to leave when he is overcome by the moment, and he stays.

In the middle of the night, the narrator hears a sound. Looking up from the woman’s bed, he sees her husband looking at them. The husband and wife exchange a few brief, pleasant words, and the husband goes off, presumably to sleep in another room.

The narrator, angry with himself, dresses and leaves. The woman has gone back to sleep. The narrator considers whether he was set up in a compromising situation, and waits for words of censure and dismissal from the Brotherhood. Nothing happens, and the narrator arranges to meet the woman again. His lecture series continues, and he is more aware of the dynamics between himself and his audiences.
Some time later, the narrator is summoned to a meeting. There, Brother Jack asks the narrator if the latter has seen Brother Tod Clifton. When the narrator says he has not, he is informed of Clifton’s disappearance. The narrator is ordered back to Harlem immediately, to find Clifton and to rebuild the Brotherhood’s image in the community. The narrator has been gone from Harlem for only one month, but it seems clear that many changes have occurred in that time.

**Analysis**

As he usually does, the narrator begins a new experience with enthusiasm and energy, without thinking about what misadventures could accompany his actions. Although he claims (in the middle of this chapter’s second paragraph) to have a suspicious nature, it does not occur to him that any of the women might be interested in him personally.

The reader can tell that the woman is seducing the narrator not only through what she does but also by what she says. The first part of the chapter contains many words and phrases that have double meanings. The classic game of flirtation and suggestive language is being played here.

We are given the distinct impression that the woman is white. The narrator’s frame of mind, containing anger, excitement, and a little fear echoes the viewing of the naked blond woman in the first chapter’s battle royal. The commentary about servants and Pullman attendants trysting with white women also suggest the significance of interracial sexual relationships.

The narrator can see that this extramarital affair is of no importance to the married couple, and this is just a fling of the moment. Yet he elects to see the woman again. He feels off balance again with his white co-workers, yet the unpleasant surprise at the meeting is not the result of any perceived failure on his part. The narrator remains at the mercy of others.

**Chapter 20 Summary and Analysis**

**Summary**

The narrator begins searching for both the missing Brother Tod Clifton and Brother Maceo. In the process, the narrator realizes the extent of the damage done to the Brotherhood’s reputation and position in Harlem. Stopping in a well-known bar, the narrator finds out how little the Brotherhood is now liked. Only the defense of the friendly bar owner keeps the narrator from an argument with those who decry the Brotherhood, thinking themselves forsaken.

The narrator next tries the Harlem office, to seek out Brother Tarp, who is not there. In the morning, however, a number of Brotherhood members show up. The narrator, in addition to asking about Clifton, hears about the Brotherhood’s fall from grace in Harlem.

The narrator needs to confer with the downtown committee. When he is not asked to join their daily meeting, he travels downtown in an effort to ascertain the situation. Shut out and furious, he is on a separate errand when he sees a friend of Clifton’s. The narrator is about to ask the man about Clifton when he spies an object in the corner of his vision; it is a Sambo doll, like a marionette. The offensive object is being sold on the street, dancing puppet-style on a flat cardboard square. A sing-song spiel accompanies the pathetic dance, and then the narrator recognizes the man selling the Sambo dolls. It is Clifton.

The narrator, utterly aghast, can hardly believe his eyes. Clifton sees him and smiles awfully, but before the narrator can confront Clifton, the latter vanishes around a corner, running from a policeman. His head swimming with confusion and unanswered questions, the narrator witnesses a short, brutal fight, that ends with Clifton shot by the policeman’s gun.
Other police appear, keeping the narrator away from the dead Clifton. There is no one the narrator can talk with, since no one else saw the killing, and the narrator knows of no other friends of Clifton’s to seek out. He is trapped with his own thoughts and perceptions, and these shed no light on the situation. The narrator takes to the subways, without a clear destination. He watches the people around him, all strangers.

**Analysis**

It is hard to reconcile how the Harlem office lost such strength in just a month. The narrator and the reader are in similar positions of wonder and bewilderment.

The latest move from the Brotherhood’s central committee is clearly one of exclusion. They have no interest in including the narrator in their meeting, even when the narrator shows up at their headquarters. This can only increase the narrator’s paranoia.

The narrator finds Clifton and loses him without first getting any explanation. Selling Sambo dolls in the street seems insane. There is a lot of mystery as to why Clifton fights with the policeman, but the narrator explains it to himself. He thinks about what it is to fall outside of history, as Ras had once talked about. The narrator is finding in this lesson something to grasp and remain true to—the importance of showing history to other people.

Although the story line remains strong, and has even picked up momentum now, the lack of answers is disturbing, to both the narrator and the reader.

**Chapter 21 Summary and Analysis**

**Summary**

The narrator returns to the Harlem district. There are indications that the Brotherhood’s position is already improving somewhat, but all the narrator can do is mull over the details of the death and ask himself why he did not do something. He tosses the inert doll on his desk and addresses it bitterly. He then realizes that, distasteful though it might be, a public funeral for Clifton would serve a great purpose.

The youth members, the members of the Brotherhood with whom Clifton had spent the most time, have heard the news and approach the narrator. He confirms the report of Clifton’s death. The district begins to respond with organization and anger, and the narrator is kept very busy.

The funeral takes place on a hot Saturday afternoon and draws a great crowd. People from all social circles march, and the police watch carefully. The narrator observes all the details of the spectacle: the cheap gray coffin that seems to float above the heads of the mourners, the people looking on from the streets, the look of the clouds and the birds, and the sound of Tod Clifton’s name. Finally, the procession arrives at a local park. There, the narrator is given a signal to begin.

The narrator gives Clifton’s funeral address without any pre-written speech or notes. The novel includes all of the speech, which seems to harangue the crowd and sum up all of the narrator’s weariness and cynicism. As he speaks, the narrator feels that he is not doing it right, that the speech is not political and therefore not useful.

When the narrator is finished, he feels that he has failed. A preacher reads from the Bible, and then the Irish gravediggers bury the casket. The narrator walks the streets, taking in every detail, remaining deeply unhappy.

**Analysis**

While the narrator is highly aware of the unpleasantness associated with Clifton’s death, he also realizes the opportunity for regaining the Brotherhood’s lost status in the Harlem district. Whether or not he has forgiven Tod Clifton is not the point any longer.
The community seems to have done the same. Whether or not they have heard how Clifton died, and whether or not they actually came to mourn his death, they did come, and this bodes well for the Brotherhood’s position in Harlem.

The narrator took the only constructive approach regarding the funeral, in deciding that the manner of Clifton’s death is not nearly as important as what Clifton did as an activist for the Brotherhood. Yet despite this, and despite his anger and eloquence, his speech does not galvanize the crowd in any visible way.

The narrator did not pause to consider (but given what has happened in his extremely unstable relationship with the Brotherhood’s central committee, perhaps should have realized) that giving a speech at Clifton’s funeral would make him vulnerable to future accusations and attacks. Not knowing the Brotherhood’s position on Clifton, the narrator acts on his personal beliefs.

Chapter 22 Summary and Analysis

New Character
Brother Tobitt: the Brotherhood member who leads the attack upon the narrator in this chapter

Summary
The narrator goes to the central committee, which is waiting for him. Brother Jack asks about the event, and Brother Tobitt asks why the narrator organized the funeral and the eulogy. The narrator answers reasonably, but emotions escalate immediately.

The committee feels that a traitor such as Clifton did not deserve a hero’s burial. But more than this, the committee will not tolerate any member acting alone, as the narrator did. They act as if they concur with Brother Wrestrum’s earlier accusation that the narrator is acting selfishly, rather than as part of a machine. The maintenance of discipline is their main focus.

The narrator feels that the situation called for immediate action, rather than for board meetings. The community needed to see that the Brotherhood still cared and was still a presence for change. That could only be accomplished by doing what the narrator did. He operated out of consideration of the community.

Other factors come into play, such as who knows more about the people of Harlem. It transpires that Brother Tobitt is married to a black woman.

The conflict is not easily solved. The parties have no interest in appreciating views other than their own. Since the narrator is outnumbered and without power, he is obliged to acquiesce to the committee’s point of view. He is sent to Brother Hambro for further instructions.

Analysis
This chapter contains more sarcasm than any other chapter. The biting and cruel language exposes what the reader may have suspected all along—the realization that there is not very much brotherhood in the Brotherhood.

Brother Jack opens the conversation with what seems to be quiet good humor, but is actually sarcasm in repose. Brother Tobitt’s method is almost the same. Their techniques are reminiscent of the narrator’s confrontation with Bledsoe in Chapter Six.

The narrator’s moods swing somewhat, but he tries hard to keep control of himself. Many themes appear in this chapter: the individual versus the collective, the definition of a traitor, the question of who best knows the people of Harlem (and from where they derived this knowledge), and whether or not complete discipline and sacrifice are worthwhile goals.
Think of this chapter as a play. Much of its action is given in dialogue.

Chapter 23 Summary and Analysis

New Characters
Rinehart: a shadowy local figure, both a criminal and a preacher, for whom the narrator is repeatedly mistaken

Brother Maceo: one of the missing brothers; when the narrator finally finds him, Brother Maceo doesn’t recognize him because the narrator has on his “Rinehart disguise”

Brother Hambro: the narrator’s “instructor”

Summary
The narrator goes to Harlem. He avoids conversation, listening instead to the general talk about Clifton’s death. Ras is speaking at a street corner, from a ladder, and picks out the narrator for special scrutiny. The crowd is sullen, but the narrator defends the Brotherhood and himself, and gets the crowd on his side. Soon afterward, the narrator is attacked by men loyal to Ras and realizes that Ras is becoming bolder.

Seeing the hipster dress of some men nearby, the narrator ducks into a drugstore and, despite the darkness, gets a pair of sunglasses. The world is different now, and so, it seems, is the narrator. He is immediately mistaken for someone named Rinehart. This happens a total of nine times in the chapter. Wherever the narrator goes, people call him Rinehart or simply assume that he is Rinehart, as long as he wears the dark glasses and the hat he buys. Also, it seems that Rinehart holds many jobs, for police, prostitutes, local toughs, and even churchgoers stop the narrator in the street.

The mistaken identity has its advantages, since Ras has continued his rhetoric and is motivating the crowd to vent its anger on whites and members of the Brotherhood. The narrator decides to go to Barrelhouse’s bar, where he finds Brother Maceo, whom the narrator had been seeking earlier. Unfortunately, both Maceo and Barrelhouse assume that the narrator is Rinehart, and a simple misunderstanding leads to sudden problems and near violence.

Finally, the narrator goes to see Hambro, in Manhattan. In response to the narrator’s concerns about the Harlem district, Hambro says that the membership must be sacrificed. True to the Brotherhood’s rigid adherence to discipline and “scientific objectivity,” Hambro agrees that, for the purposes of expediency, those people who have already left the Brotherhood must be considered expendable. According to this view, the committee has a plan that it will announce at the proper time, and there is nothing more to say.

Hambro goes further, saying that it is impossible not to take advantage of the people. The trick was to take advantage of them in their best interests, which would be decided by the committee, using scientific objectivity.

The narrator has heard enough. He leaves and spends the rest of the chapter wrestling with himself. He feels that he has failed the community, that the best he could offer them is the wretched maneuverings of small minds. The narrator resolves to agree with them all, to fool them by acting the fool.

Analysis
The tension in Harlem is mounting steadily. The narrator is becoming more aware of the gulf between the people and the Brotherhood. As if confirming the public’s views of the Brotherhood, Brother Hambro’s pronouncements about the relationship between the masses and the Brotherhood repulse the narrator. He sees himself as an actor in a play. The Brotherhood’s program of utilizing “scientific objectivity” to manage and manipulate people reinforces the Brotherhood’s notion that individual people do not matter, as Brother Jack had told the narrator when the two first met. It seems that the Brotherhood is full of people that cannot really
see other people for who they are.

That the narrator is mistaken for Rinehart is yet another example of what the narrator comes to believe: that when people look at him, they don’t really see him. They simply see what they are expecting to see, whether that’s an ignorant southern hayseed, a college boy, a factory worker, a fink, a speech giver, a criminal, a preacher, or a sexual object. The narrator becomes whatever the observer thinks he or she is seeing.

One of the journeys of this book has been the narrator’s realization that not only was his grandfather not crazy, but that what his grandfather said made perfect sense. At the end of the chapter, the narrator is ready for his new course of action.

Chapter 24 Summary and Analysis

New Character
Sybil: the wife of one of the men (George) in the organization; she and the narrator have an abortive affair

Summary
The narrator begins to agree with whatever he hears at the Brotherhood, recognizing what it is that the committee wishes to hear and telling them nothing but that. He planned to seduce the wife of one of the Brotherhood’s men, and Brother Jack’s birthday party is the perfect place for the narrator to select a woman. But the narrator finds that his efforts with Sybil only depress him.

She is interested only in fantasies born out of racism. The narrator seems menacing to the white woman, and Sybil finds this prospect highly titillating. She sees the narrator as a form of entertainment, and longs to satisfy her assumption that his sexual prowess is far greater than her husband’s. Having gotten tipsy, she wants the narrator to rape her, and this disgusts him. Yet he must endure Sybil’s inanities when she becomes too intoxicated to leave, and his questions about the Brotherhood lead nowhere. Only a phone call urging the narrator to get up to Harlem ends their tryst.

The narrator puts Sybil in a cab. As he says good-bye, the narrator learns that she does not know his name. A few moments later, Sybil appears in the same cab. The narrator has to get rid of her again. Soon afterward, the narrator finds her waiting for him at 110th Street. The narrator puts Sybil in yet another cab and learns that Harlem is being torn apart. He asks her what the leaders of the Brotherhood have planned for him, but gets no answer.

The narrator takes a bus to 125th Street, upset and lost in his own thoughts. He has to use his briefcase as a shield against the pigeon droppings from the birds underneath a bridge.

Analysis
The narrator’s unpleasant fling with Sybil occupies most of the chapter. The two characters are acting at cross-purposes, each wanting something that the other cannot provide. Sybil acts very insensitively, but without meaning to, because it never occurs to her that she is treating the narrator as less than a person. For the first time in his life, the narrator decides, or realizes, that he is truly invisible. Sybil sees a black skin, not the person inside of it. This tires and angers him, yet never does he consider doing her any harm, or even trying to reason with her. The narrator is too smart for that.

The violence in Harlem that the narrator has been predicting seems to have arrived. Whether or not the Brotherhood is involved (and it seems unlikely), the climax of the novel is approaching.

Chapter 25 Summary and Analysis

New Characters
Dupre: the leader of a bunch of looters whom the narrator meets during the riots in this chapter
Scofield: one of the looters in the group

Summary
A full-fledged riot takes place in Harlem. Police shoot and the narrator is injured. Stunned, he wipes the blood from his head and continues. He joins a group of looters stealing goods but not harming anyone. They take clothes and various items; the narrator takes nothing, acting only as an observer. The narrator stays near Scofield, who checks the narrator’s wound and offers him a drink of scotch.

The narrator feels sure that the riot started because of Clifton’s death, but various accounts of its origin are circulating. There is widespread violence, blazing fires, and the unpredictability common to such situations.

A storeowner frantically persuades looters that he is colored, and his store is left undisturbed. At a hardware store, the men take flashlights and full buckets of fuel oil. Moving down the street, they pause at the spectacle of a milk truck topped with a singing fat lady offering free beer. They find this somewhat repellent.

Stopping at a tenement, the narrator sees that the oil was brought to burn it down. Dupre orders the men to evacuate the building. The narrator does not consider protesting, but a young pregnant woman begs Dupre to relent. He refuses.

The men douse the rooms, light their matches, and run down the stairs. The narrator, excited and impressed with the vision and execution of the intention, almost leaves his briefcase behind.

He is suddenly put in danger when someone calls him by his Brotherhood name. Ras is searching for him, and the narrator slips into the crowd. Soon afterward, more police arrive and are battered by bricks thrown from the rooftops. Theriot worsens and gets bloodier.

The narrator runs through the streets and sees more turmoil. He grows steadily angrier at the Brotherhood for having offered false promises for so long.

When he faces Ras and his men, the narrator is exhausted yet determined. He feels that Jack, the committee, and all the white powers in general are playing some game, and that he is one of the pieces moved across the board of Harlem. The narrator knows that he faces death if Ras gets him, and that the Brotherhood might find this to be very convenient.

However, Ras, now Ras the Destroyer, is acting like some kind of chieftain. He appears on horseback, dressed outlandishly. He throws a spear at the narrator. The narrator rolls clear of the weapon and tries to reason with Ras. When this fails, the narrator is ready to die, but instead takes the spear he has wrenched free and throws it at Ras, piercing both of Ras’ cheeks.

The narrator flees, trying to reach Mary’s. A broken water main knocks him down, compounding his weariness. He questions his perceptions, feeling unsure of reality. The narrator eavesdrops on two men discussing Ras’s battles with the police.

Leaving them, the narrator is accosted by two white men who ask him about his briefcase. Strangely embarrassed, the narrator runs away, and lifting a manhole cover, drops down into a new darkness. He hears them talk high above and taunts them with words that seem to make no sense.

To see his surroundings, the narrator opens his briefcase and burns what papers he finds there. In the process, he learns that Jack had written the anonymous letter the narrator received in Chapter Eighteen. The shock stupefies the narrator and makes him scream, and he is soon plunged into fantasies in which Jack, Bledsoe, and others ask him tormenting questions.
When the narrator awakens from this state, he is the narrator of the Prologue, telling the story of his invisibility, which is the story of his life.

**Analysis**

The landscape of Harlem is analogous to the narrator’s inner turmoil. Several things have been coming apart: the Harlem community, the narrator’s relationship with the Brotherhood, and his ability to relate to other people.

The scene is completely chaotic, but different from the chaos in the Golden Day, which was jovial and playful. Except for Mr. Norton, there were no whites there to regulate anyone’s behavior. Here, the mood is deadly, and police are everywhere. How the riot started is unimportant, except for the fact that the Brotherhood never “saved” the community, as the narrator had once envisioned.

It seems clear that the people of Harlem needed something in which to put their faith, and since the Brotherhood abandoned that role, they turned to violence, which helped Ras.

The people show different responses to Ras. The language that the two men discussing Ras use in their stories is vivid. They condemn his affected “King of Africa” attitude, but they are impressed with the power of his presentation.

The narrator’s sense of self and grasp on reality is slipping, or has slipped, away.

**Epilogue Summary and Analysis**

**Summary**

The narrator has told his story, and asks us what else he could have done. The narrator says that he has taken some time out, drank liquor, dreamed, and read books. He uses the word “hibernation” to describe his current status.

He still thinks about his grandfather and the deathbed advice, wrestling with what the man meant, and with how to put the advice into practice. The narrator says he is pondering the lessons of his life. He will leave it up to others to decide whether or not he understood history correctly. He wonders about responsibility for history, and about how people can save themselves.

The one specific incident that the narrator talks about is having met Mr. Norton in the subway. Their meeting is brief and, at least for Mr. Norton, disturbing. He does not recognize the narrator, is confused about how the narrator knows his name, and, most of all, has no idea what the narrator means by accusing Mr. Norton of being this man’s destiny. Mr. Norton ducks into an available subway car, and the narrator gets a big laugh from it. Then he goes back to his unnoticed home and continues being lost in his thoughts.

**Analysis**

Like the Prologue, the Epilogue takes place inside the narrator’s head. It is his last chance to explain his life and his choices. He gives the impression that he feels he made no choices, because history put him where he is.

If we were to meet the narrator, or someone like him, on a city street, we would be likely to assume that the person is mentally disturbed. As we have seen, characters in the novel are frequently accused of being “crazy” for what they say, when in fact there may be other explanations for their words.

Mr. Norton is perplexed by being told that he is the narrator’s destiny. Of course, the narrator is merely referring to something that Mr. Norton himself had said. Time has passed, but when we think about it and try to actually figure out time in the novel, we realize that not a great many years have passed since Mr. Norton
and the narrator were in the same car on that southern campus.

Towards the end of the Epilogue, the narrator mentions that he has been writing it all down, which explains the book we have been reading. He goes on to predict that invisibility is universal, and to suggest that, in some way, he is speaking for the reader.
Invisible Man tells an African American Pilgrim’s Progess, a modern black rite of passage. In part, its story could not be more literal, a South-to-North, Dixie-to-Harlem journey that recalls the movement of black Americans from the postbellum South to the northern cities. In equal part, however, the story operates as a kind of fantasia, a “dream” history, which serves as both the narrator’s past and that of most of his black American cocitzenry. As he looks back from his “border area” manhole, lit with 1,369 lightbulbs illegally running on electricity from a company named “Monopolated Light & Power,” he declares himself to be “coming out,” no longer either invisible or, as it were, uninscribed and wordless.

In this respect, he offers himself as both an actual man and as a key figure from African American folklore, a “man of substance, of flesh and bone, fiber and liquids” and a Jack-The-Bear whose time of “hibernation” has come to its appointed end. Dipping into blues and jazz, street talk and rap, he promises in the prologue to “irradiate”—that is, in every sense to seek to throw light upon—his own story and that of the larger American black-white encounter. Inevitably, the touchstones involve slavery, Reconstruction, the Jazz Age, the Depression, and interwar Harlem, with hints of the coming 1960’s Civil Rights and Black Power movements.

Ellison’s narrator in Invisible Man ranks as one of the most canny, daring characterizations in modern literature. Every action he takes, every transition in his life, almost everything he says, carries a double or emblematic implication without becoming simply or reductively allegorical. His role in the Battle Royal scene calls up the stereotype of the black male as pugilist, from slave fighter to Joe Louis. As a student, the narrator might well imagine himself as a would-be Booker T. Washington, but his goals are preset and accommodationist. In Trueblood and The Golden Day, he begins to see the “true” image white America holds of him and his community, that of either permanent inferior, sexual spectacle, or, at best, token professional.

In the North, equally, he can work at Liberty Paints, but only in the basement, as a support figure for a white, one-color, America. In The Brotherhood, his party membership again rests less in his own gift than in his willingness to follow the committee’s dictates, the white-set political line. If he speaks on women’s rights, various of the white sisters fantasize him as a sex fiend, a stud. Even in his role as con man, he betrays his true inner self. Finally, forced by the riot to an “underground” self-reckoning, once again both literal and fantastical, he “sees” and in turn demands to be “seen” in a manner beyond myth or stereotype. His own black selfhood and that of his African American community at last, thereby, emerge on terms undetermined by others.

This same doubling, or multiplication, applies to the other key presences in Invisible Man. Bledsoe incarnates a historic past gallery of “separate but equal” leaders, in one face “put’t’n on ol’ massa” and in another acting the part of mean, self-serving authoritarian. Norton, likewise, imagines himself all good intention, but he is in fact the embodiment of condescending white liberal racism. In the North, Mr. Emerson proves less the
reformer implied in his name than another white betrayer. Brother Jack, with his “political science,” proves as inadequate to the narrator’s needs as Ras, with his “Mama Africa” Rastafarian Black Nationalism. Tod Clifton, especially, moves from activist to figure of despair, as sad and ultimately self-destructive as the Sambo dolls he takes to peddling in the street. These and lesser figures—from Mary Rambo, a warm, transplanted black southern woman who befriends the narrator in Harlem, to Dupre, an arsonist-looter—in Ellison’s always inventive fashioning serve as both individuals and types, the one always in a teasing imaginative balance with the other.

Undergirding the whole of *Invisible Man* lie Ellison’s organizing metaphors and tropes—invisibility and sight, vision and blindness, blackness and white, underground and above—a complex, supremely adroit creation of texture. If H. G. Wells’s science fiction classic *The Invisible Man* (1897) hovers behind the title, so, equally, do a host of other eclectic sources from Dante to T. S. Eliot. At the same time, and throughout, Ellison calls upon his intimacy with the treasury of African American music and folklore. Citing, typically, the old Louis Armstrong version of “What Did I Do to Be So Black and Blue?,” the narrator, and Ellison behind him, answers with *Invisible Man*, storytelling with all the feints and improvisational riffs—and at the same time all the overall discipline—of a great jazz composition.

Whether read as “confession” or as “history,” the book fuses its “high” references with those of black, vernacular culture, verbal and musical, its seriousness of purpose with a winning talent for humor and well-taken irony. Best of all, perhaps, it manages to transpose, brilliantly, inventively, the black and white of America’s racial makeup into the black and white of the written page.
Themes

Identity
In *Invisible Man*, an unnamed protagonist sets out on a journey of self-discovery that takes him from the rural south to Harlem. Learning who he is means realizing that he is invisible to the white world, but by the end of his journey, the hero has the moral fiber to live with such contradictions. The overwhelming theme of the novel is that of identity. While the novel has to do with questions of race and prejudice, most critics agree that these ideas are subsumed under the broader questions of who we think we are, and the relationship between identity and personal responsibility. The invisible man's moment of self-recognition occurs almost simultaneously with his realization that the white world does not see him, but Ellison seems to be saying, “Well, don't worry about that.” Until the invisible man can see himself, he can only be passive, “outside of history.” At the beginning of the novel, even Jim Trueblood has a stronger sense of himself than does the hero: “And while I'm singen' them blues I makes up my mind that I ain't nobody but myself and ain't nothin’ I can do but let whatever is gonna happen, happen.” In fact, everybody but the invisible man seems to be aware of his problem. The vet at the Golden Day sees it, remarking to Mr. Norton: “Already he is—well, bless my soul! Behold! A walking zombie! Already he's learned to repress not only his emotions but his humanity. He's invisible, a walking personification of the Negative, the most perfect achievement of your dreams, sir! The mechanical man!” And Mr. Bledsoe, the college president, tells the hero, “You're nobody, son. You don't exist—can't you see that?” Ironically, when the invisible man offers to prove his identity to the son of Mr. Emerson, a white trustee, the son answers him in the careless manner of someone for whom identity has never been a question, “Identity! My God! Who has any identity any more anyway?” When the invisible man joins the Brotherhood, Brother Jack gives him a “new identity.”

Though he constantly stumbles, every misstep seems to bring the hero a little closer to solving the puzzle of who he is. For example, after the operation at the hospital, when a doctor holds up a sign that reads “WHO WAS BUCKEYE THE RABBIT?”, the invisible man begins thinking about his identity. And in the wake of Brother Clifton's murder, he remembers past humiliations and sees that they have defined him.

Individualism
Another theme that pervades the novel is that of individuality. Although he may be uncertain of his identity, the invisible man has never quite lost the sense that he is an individual. One of the superficial arguments he uses for leaving Mary Rambo without saying goodbye to her is that people like her “usually think in terms of ‘we’ while I have always tended to think in terms of ‘me’—and that has caused some friction, even with my own family.” He rationalizes the Brotherhood's emphasis on the group by deluding himself into thinking that it is a “bigger ‘we.’” But though he tries, the invisible man cannot fully suppress his individuality, which continues to intrude on his consciousness. After his first official speech to the Brotherhood, he remembers unaccountably the words of Woodridge, a lecturer at the college, who told his students that their task was “that of making ourselves individuals…. We create the race by creating ourselves.” At the funeral for Brother Tod Clifton, whose murder is one of several epiphanies, or moments of illumination, in the novel, the invisible man looks out over the people present and sees “not a crowd but the set faces of individual men and women.”

Duty and Responsibility
The theme of responsibility has to do with making choices and accepting the consequences of our actions. The invisible man uses the term at several reprises, but it is only toward the end of his adventures that he is able to match the word with its true meaning. In the course of the “battle royal,” he uses the words “social responsibility” to impress the Board of Education, because “whenever I uttered a word of three or more syllables a group of voices would yell for me to repeat it.” When he cannot get Dr. Bledsoe to see that what has happened to Dr. Norton is not his fault, the hero believes that by taking “responsibility” for the mishap he will be able to get on with his career. But what he means by taking responsibility is smoothing things over,
and he cannot control the result. As he moves from one troubling experience to another, however, a growing maturity is evident, and people come to depend on him. When Brother Jack asks him by what authority he organized the rally for the people following Brother Tod Clifton's funeral, the invisible man tells him it was on his “personal responsibility,” and offers a coolly reasoned defense. At the end of the novel, when he is about to leave his hole, he talks about the “possibility of action” and explains that even an “invisible man has a socially responsible role to play,” echoing with mild irony the phrase he once used without thinking.

**Blindness**

Blindness as a kind of moral and personal failing is a recurring motif, or theme, in the novel. Whether inflicted by others, as in the “battle royal,” where the young men are forcibly blindfolded, or as evidence of confusion, as when the invisible man describes stumbling “in a game of blindman's bluff,” the idea of blindness is used to multiple effect. The Reverend Homer A. Barbee is literally blind, Brother Jack has a glass eye, white people cannot see the invisible man, and the hero cannot see himself. A variation on the theme is the idea of looking but not seeing, of not trying to see, which comes back to the theme of responsibility. Various characters impress on the invisible man the importance of not accepting things as they are. “For God's sake,” the vet from the Golden Day tells him, “learn to look beneath the surface. Come out of the fog, young man.” And the son of the white trustee Emerson asks him, “Aren't you curious about what lies behind the face of things?”

**History and Folklore**

In *Invisible Man*, history and identity are inextricably bound: we are the sum of our history and our experience. This message is brought home in the novel both overtly—“What is your past and where are you going?” Ras the Exhorter asks an uncomfortable Brother Tod Clifton—and indirectly, as in Mary Rambo's advice to the invisible man that it is the young who will make changes but “something's else, it's the ones from the South that's got to do it, them what knows the fire and ain't forgot how it burns. Up here too many forgits.” That is, you are your history, but only if you remember it. An inventory of the sad belongings of the couple the hero finds on the Harlem sidewalk reads like a synopsis of the story of blacks in America, and the power of the associations the objects evoke inspires the invisible man to address a crowd for the first time. Closely related to the theme of history is the motif of folklore as a link to the past, particularly folktales, jazz, and the blues. The simple folk who appear in the book all seem rooted in a way the invisible man and others are not, and have a sureness about them that is reflected in their names: Jim Trueblood, Mary Rambo, Peter Wheatstraw, even Ras the Exhorter. Likewise, the hero's grandfather has a “stolid black peasant's face.” The vet at the Golden Day, who is a mental patient, but does not appear to be completely insane, tells Mr. Norton that he had made a mistake in forgetting certain “fundamentals…. Things about life. Such things as most peasants and folk peoples almost always know through experience, though seldom through conscious thought.”
Themes

Besides the social themes which play such an important role, *Invisible Man* is rich with possibilities for thematic interpretation and study. One possible approach can derive from Ellison's assertion that he was more interested in art than in protest. Published at a time when writing which emphasized the art of writing (rather than social content) was coming into vogue. *Invisible Man* may initially seem straightforwardly naturalistic and far removed from the works of writers such as John Hawkes and John Barth. However, if one reads the novel carefully, one finds a plethora of symbolic material and numerous instances of irony which relate more to the contexts of literary writing than to the illusion of reality. There are puns and direct allusions in the names of the characters; Trueblood, Ras, Rinehart, Norton, Bledsoe, and Mary are only a few of the more obvious examples. Furthermore, typical of much "postmodern" writing are the direct allusions to Ellison's being named after Ralph Waldo Emerson. Also, Ellison is not shy about introducing surrealistic or fantastic elements into the narrative. To a degree, therefore, one of the important themes could be argued to be that of the making of art.

Most important, however, is the more traditional theme of the individual person's quest for identity. This theme embraces the social and artistic concerns and is ultimately the most important aspect of *Invisible Man*. The narrator goes from a state of ignorance to a state of enlightenment represented by the 1,369 lights in his underground hiding place. He comes to see that he, as a Negro, has no identity to other people except as what they wish to see in him, and, therefore, he is invisible. One immediately notes the parallels to the post-World War II philosophical and literary works of Jean-Paul Sartre and Albert Camus, in which a person is known only by his acts, not by his words or internal character, and to the famous Sartrean line, "Hell is other people." Through most of *Invisible Man*, the narrator attempts to meet the expectations of other people, black and white, but does not face his existential responsibility to create his individual essence. In each case, therefore, whether as a student or an employee or the spokesman for the Brotherhood (a political organization based upon the Communist party), he is used as an instrument of someone else's concept of him as a member of his race.

In the tradition of the *bildungsroman*, the narrator is an innocent who gradually comes to recognize other people's corruption, self-deception, or deviousness. He moves from his own foolish belief that others are genuinely interested in him to the recognition that they are looking through him to whatever conception they have of his race. Ellison has said that minorities are particularly faced with this existential problem, although it is not limited to the underprivileged classes. If one becomes classified as a member of a group, one loses individual identity. Blacks, of course, can be stereotyped simply by the color of their face. The narrator, who struggles to make society recognize him, ultimately loses and embraces the quality of "invisibility." The themes raised are thus not simply those of race relations, but are the general human problems of loneliness, the self, and identity.
Characters

The Characters (Literary Essentials: African American Literature)

Foremost in the novel is the unnamed figure of the narrator. His is the voice through which the entire panorama of *Invisible Man* is reflected, a life begun in the Deep South and brought north to Harlem as America’s premier black city-within-a-city. In language full of richly oblique double-meanings and nuance, often bluesy and vernacular, he speaks of writing “confession,” of implying from within his specific case history that of an altogether wider, historic black America. He also serves as Ellison’s own surrogate, from start to finish cannily and reflexively aware of his literary “performance.” In both the prologue and the epilogue, and at each turning point in his career—the Battle Royal, the Trueblood “quarters,” the Golden Day, the Liberty Paints factory, The Brotherhood, his incarnation as Bliss Proteus Rinehart, the Riot, and his final “hibernation”—he functions as both the subject and the object of his own story, both the teller and, as it were, the tale. Few novels have created a subtler autobiographical self.

The narrator’s encounter with Bledsoe, the president of the black college to which he wins his scholarship, introduces the first of a line of characters marked out by splits and self-division. In one guise, Bledsoe plays the perfect Uncle Tom, fawning and grateful, and dancing to the tune of Norton, the white philanthropist from Boston. In another, he plays the black despot, the college’s administrative tyrant known to the students as “Old Bucket-head.” Ellison so fashions him as a kind of harlequin, one self hidden within the other.

Norton (“northern,” as his name implies) in turn acts out his double game. He can flatter himself that his “destiny” lies in helping black students to become dutiful mechanics and agricultural workers. However, when he encounters the incestuous True-bloods, impoverished black sharecroppers living in The Quarters, he reveals his own hitherto unacknowledged dark longings for his dead daughter. In the Golden Day brothel, Ellison has the veterans, ironically to a degree, associate him with a roll-call of other white would-be American messiahs, among them John D. Rockefeller and Thomas Jefferson.

The narrator subsequently hears the sermon of the Reverend Homer Barbee on returning Norton to the college. This blind “Homer” preaches a truly parodic Emersonianism, a message of uplift at odds with the life actually led by black Americans within a fearful, racist white Dixie.

On arrival in Harlem, the narrator meets one of the strong female presences in the novel, Mary Rambo. She takes him in, mothers him, and typifies a standard of black community care. He also meets in Brother Jack, the leader of The Brotherhood, another of Ellison’s deft caricatures. Patronizingly, Jack appoints the narrator “the new Booker T. Washington,” his personal apparatchik. He also speaks the language of “scientific terminology,” “materialism,” and other quasi-Marxist argot. When he leads a witchhunt against the narrator, only to have his “buttermilk” glass eye pop out, he grotesquely reveals himself for what he is, a half-seeing—or truly one-eyed—Jack.
Tod Clifton, the Harlem youth leader, is the novel’s martyr figure. Pledged to fight black joblessness, the color line, and (at the outset) Black Nationalism, Tod is shown to move increasingly into a fascination with Ras’s Caribbean “Africanness.” That he ends up peddling Sambo dolls, then shot by a white policeman, and finally the name at the center of the Harlem riot that ensues, points to Ellison’s interest in the black activist as both individual and icon.

In this, Tod links perfectly to Ras, The Destroyer, the militant Rastafarian whose politics recall the back-to-Africa nationalism of Marcus Garvey. However, if Ras derides The Brotherhood as a white-run fraud serviced by deluded black lackeys, he himself becomes a figure derided, an anachronistic Don Quixote replete with horse and shield. The novel thus returns in the aftermath of the riot to the narrator as once more the presiding “character” of *Invisible Man*, each figure he has put before readers part real, part mythic.
Characters Discussed (Great Characters in Literature)

The narrator

The narrator, the canny, unnamed voice of the story. The narrator looks back on a life begun in the Deep South and brought north to the United States’ premier African American city-within-a-city. In language full of richly oblique double meanings and nuances, he speaks of writing “confession,” of ending his “residence underground,” and of implying in his own specific case history that of an altogether wider, historic black America.

Dr. A. Herbert Bledsoe

Dr. A. Herbert Bledsoe, the president of the college that the narrator attends. In one guise, Bledsoe plays the perfect Uncle Tom, fawning and grateful, who dances to the tune of Norton, a white philanthropist. In another, he acts as a despot, the college’s presiding tyrant known to students as “Old Bucket-head.” He expels the narrator in the name of maintaining the image of “Negro” behavior that Bledsoe believes expedient to put before white America.

Mr. Norton

Mr. Norton, a New England financier and college benefactor. As his name implies, Norton equates with “Northern.” He is a figure of would-be liberal patronage who sees his destiny as helping African American students to become dutiful mechanics and agricultural workers. An encounter with the incestuous Truebloods, however, awakens his own dark longings for his dead daughter.

Brother Jack

Brother Jack, the leader of the Brotherhood, a revolutionary group. The white, one-eyed leader of the group’s central committee, he takes up the narrator as “the new Booker T. Washington.” His is the language of “scientific terminology,” “materialism,” and other quasi-Marxist argot. He leads a witch-hunt against the narrator, only to have his glass eye pop out, showing him as truly a half-seeing, one-eyed Jack.

Tod Clifton

Tod Clifton, a Harlem activist. Initially, Clifton operates as a Brotherhood loyalist, a youth organizer pledged to fight African American joblessness, the color line, and Black Nationalists. Fascinated by the Black Nationalist Ras’s Caribbean “Africanness,” however, he drops out. Tod is shot by a white police officer, and his death sparks a long-brewing Harlem riot.

Ras, the Destroyer

Ras, the Destroyer, a militant, West Indian Rastafarian. Ras advocates, in the style of Marcus Garvey, a back-to-Africa nationalism. He derides the Brotherhood as a white-run fraud serviced by deluded black lackeys.
**Themes and Characters**

*Invisible Man's* most important theme is the individual's quest for identity. The narrator moves from a state of ignorance to a state of enlightenment, represented by the profusion of light bulbs in his underground hiding place. He comes to see that his identity, as a black person, is wholly determined by other people's perceptions—and that, as a result, he is invisible. Whether as a student, an employee, or a political spokesman, he is an instrument of those who would see him only as a member of his race.

In the tradition of the *bildungsroman*, or coming-of-age novel, the narrator is an innocent who gradually comes to recognize other people's corruption, self-deception, and deviousness. At first he believes that others are genuinely interested in him; later he recognizes that they are looking through him to whatever preconception they have of his race. Ellison has noted that minorities in particular face this problem, losing individual identity through classification as members of a group. Blacks, of course, can be stereotyped simply by the color of their skin. The narrator, after struggling to make society recognize him, ultimately embraces the quality of "invisibility." His experience illustrates both the dehumanizing nature of racial prejudice and the agonizing loneliness that often triggers or accompanies the search for self-knowledge.

The nameless narrator is the most fully drawn character in *Invisible Man*. Since the reader experiences the entire novel from his point of view, the other characters appear, ironically, as "invisible" to him as he does to them, for he, too, is incapable of looking beyond preconceptions. Continually misinformed or self-deceived, the narrator learns, through a series of revelations, that people are seldom what they seem.

The earlier parts of the book focus on Dr. Bledsoe, president of the college that the narrator attends. An "example to his race," Bledsoe seemingly enjoys the respect of both whites and blacks. The narrator fantasizes about ascending someday to Bledsoe's position. But Bledsoe reveals his true character when the narrator accidentally exposes Mr. Norton, a white New England benefactor, to aspects of black life that Bledsoe has spent his life concealing. Norton comically passes out when confronted with an incestuous farmer, mental patients, and prostitutes. Bledsoe is furious, for he has spent his life exploiting liberal white preconceptions about black culture in order to gain power over the very people he purports to represent.

Another fascinating character is Jack, the man who recruits the narrator into the Brotherhood, a political organization based on the Communist party. Along with the other members of the Brotherhood, Jack claims to be interested in a world of equality but is guilty of lumping all blacks into a category. His political dogma limits the scope of his vision, a fact that the narrator finally realizes in a climactic scene where Jack's glass eye pops out. Others connected with the Brotherhood are equally guilty of stereotyping. One man thinks he understands Harlem because he married a black woman, and a woman married to an important "Brother" propositions the narrator because of notions about black males' sexual potency.

The most sympathetic character is Mary Rambo, a boarding house operator. Kind, suffering, and patient, she does not press the narrator for money when he loses his job. Her extraordinary patience ultimately angers and embarrasses the narrator, who comes to consider her a stereotypical, impoverished black saint. Less sympathetic is Ras the Exhorter, a flamboyant militant who reveals the Brotherhood's deceptions but is consumed by notions of total separation from or destruction of whites. Other characters include Lucius Brockway, the narrator's co-worker at Liberty Paints; Mr. Sparland, owner of Liberty Paints; DuPree, who decides to burn down the Harlem tenement where he lives; Trueblood, the incestuous farmer; Tod Clifton, a member of the Brotherhood who becomes disillusioned; and Brother Tarp and Brother Maceo.
Characters

It is impossible to discuss even half of the characters that appear in *Invisible Man*, but each has symbolic overtones contributing to the themes and action, and although most are less complex than they might be, they are consistently fascinating. The nameless narrator is the most thoroughly drawn character, and since the reader experiences all events of the novel from his point of view, the less complex qualities of the others seem, ironically, to show that the narrator is also incapable of seeing others beyond his preconceptions of them: They are as "invisible" to him as he to them. Each step in the narrator's education consists of a revelation in which people reveal that they are not what they seem, or rather, what the narrator wishes them to be. Certainly one of the most enduring qualities of *Invisible Man* is this gallery of characters, each one of whom provides many opportunities for study and explication.

The earlier parts of the book center on Bledsoe, the college president. As "an example to his race" Bledsoe enjoys the seeming respect of whites and blacks. The narrator fantasizes ascending to Bledsoe's position. However, Bledsoe's true character is revealed when the narrator accidentally reveals aspects of black life (which Bledsoe has spent his life concealing) to Mr. Norton, a white New England benefactor who comically passes out when confronted with an incestuous farmer, black mental patients, and prostitutes. Bledsoe exploits liberal white preconceptions for self-aggrandizement and power over the very people he purports to represent.

Another fascinating character is Jack, the man who recruits the narrator into the Brotherhood. Along with the other members of his organization, he purports to be interested in a world of equality, but he nonetheless is as guilty as a bigot of lumping all blacks into a category. He cannot see beyond the narrow limits of his political dogma, which the narrator finally recognizes in a dramatic scene in which Jack pops out his glass eye. Others connected with the Brotherhood are equally guilty of stereotyping. One man thinks he understands Harlem because he married a black. A woman married to another important "Brother" offers sex to the narrator because of rape fantasies and her notion of male blacks' sexual potency.

The most sympathetic, perhaps too sympathetic, character is Mary, a boarding house operator whose name recalls the mother of Christ. She is kind, long suffering, and patient. For example, when the narrator loses his job, she does not press him for money. Yet, it is her extraordinary patience and ability to take punishment that ultimately makes the narrator wish never to see her. She becomes for him a stereotypical impoverished black saint, and this embarrasses him. In contrast, there is the flamboyant Ras the Exhorter, a militant who reveals the deceptions of the Brotherhood, yet is filled with mad notions of Africa as the Promised Land and total separation from or destruction of whites.
Character Analysis

The Reverend Homer A. Barbee
A blind preacher from Chicago of substantial rhetorical skill who gives the Founder's Day speech at the college.

Dr. A. Herbert Bledsoe
Dr. Bledsoe is the president of the college attended by the invisible man. Called ‘‘Old Bucket-head’’ by the students, he is a shrewd survivor who has spent his career humoring the white trustees in the hopes of retaining his position. A person of considerable affectation, he can manage even in striped trousers and a swallow-tail coat topped by an ascot tie to make himself look humble. He is aghast when the invisible man tells him that he took Mr. Norton to see Jim Trueblood because that's what the trustee wanted to do: ‘‘My God, boy! You're black and living in the South—did you forget how to lie?’’ His recipe for success is to attain power and influence by making the right contacts and ‘‘then stay in the dark and use it!’’ His self-interest makes him capable of betrayal, as when he lets the invisible man head off for New York City thinking that the letters he is carrying addressed to various trustees are letters of recommendation.

Lucius Brockway
The invisible man's irascible second supervisor at Liberty Paints. ‘‘Lucius Brockway not only intends to protect himself, he knows how to do it! Everybody knows I been here ever since there's been a here.’’ His one worry is that the union will do him out of a job.

Brother Tod Clifton
Young and handsome, Clifton is the leader of the Brotherhood youth, ‘‘a hipster, a zoot suiter, a sharpie.’’ He has run-ins with Ras the Exhorter over their philosophical differences. He is friendly and helpful to the invisible man, despite the hero's being made his superior. ‘‘I saw no signs of resentment,’’ says the invisible man in admiration, ‘‘but a complete absorption in the strategy of the meeting…. I had no doubt that he knew his business.’’ Brother Clifton has put his full faith in the brotherhood, and when he is abandoned by it, his despair is total. He plunges ‘‘outside of history,’’ becoming a street peddler selling paper black sambo dolls, and is murdered by the police. His death is a defining moment for the invisible man.

Emma
One of the first members of the Brotherhood the invisible man meets. The hero is skeptical of the Brotherhood's motives when he hears Emma ask, ‘‘But don't you think he should be a little blacker?’’

Grandfather
The invisible man's grandfather, whom the protagonist had always thought of as a model of desirable conduct. He is dead when the novel begins, but his influence on the invisible man is powerful. His dying words were, ‘‘Son … I never told you, but our life is a war and I have been a traitor all my born days, a spy in the enemy's country ever since I give up my gun back in the Reconstruction. Live with your head in the lion's mouth. I want you to overcome 'em with yeses, undermine 'em with grins, agree 'em to death and destruction, let 'em swoller you till they vomit or bust wide open…. Learn it to the younguns.’’ These words prick the invisible man's complacency, and he remembers them as a curse that haunts him throughout his journey, a reminder that all is not right in the world.

Halley
The spirited manager at the Golden Day.

Brother Hambro
Hambro takes the invisible man through a four-month period of intense study and indoctrination after his
arena speech to the Brotherhood to correct his “unscientific” tendencies. “A tall, friendly man, a lawyer, and the Brotherhood's chief theoretician,” he tells the invisible man that “it's impossible not to take advantage of the people. The trick is to take advantage of them in their own best interest.”

**Invisible Man**
The unnamed protagonist of the novel. In explaining to the reader what he has done to be so “black and blue,” the hero says, “I was looking for myself and asking everyone except myself questions which I, and only I, could answer.” By the end of his adventures, he will conclude that “I am nobody but myself. But first I had to discover that I am an invisible man!” The invisible man starts his tale as an innocent, one who believes that “humility was the secret, indeed, the very essence of progress.” His greatest aspiration is to be an assistant to Dr. Bledsoe, the president of his college, who kowtows to whites in an attempt to hold on to his position. The invisible man believes, consciously or unconsciously, “the great false wisdom … that white is right” and that it is “advantageous to flatter rich white folks.” He grudgingly admires other blacks who do not share his scruples; for instance, he is both humiliated and fascinated by the sharecropper Jim Trueblood's self-confessed tale of incest, and he is similarly impressed by the vet at the Golden Day: “I wanted to tell Mr. Norton that the man was crazy and yet I received a fearful satisfaction from hearing him talk as he had to a white man.”

Although he has the “queer feeling that I was playing a part in some scheme which I did not understand,” he ignores his instincts, as when, for instance, he personally delivers to prospective employers in New York City what he foolishly believes to be positive letters of recommendation from Dr. Bledsoe “like a hand of high trump cards.” For every two steps forward, he takes one back. His experience in the factory hospital, for example, is a kind of awakening, and he develops an “obsession with my identity” that causes him to “put into words feelings which I had hitherto suppressed.” But though he is skeptical of the Brotherhood's motives in recruiting him—“What am I, a man or a natural resource?”—and their obvious emphasis on the “we,” the invisible man sets aside his misgivings and embraces the organization; “it was a different, bigger ‘we,’” he tells himself. He is kind, joining the Brotherhood partly out of desire to pay Mary Rambo the rent money he owes her, and loyal to people like Brother Tarp and Brother Clifton in whom he senses a fundamental goodness. But he is forever second-guessing himself, and it takes the raw injustice of Brother Clifton's murder to spark the invisible man into consciousness: “Outside the Brotherhood we were outside history; but inside of it they didn't see us…. Now I recognized my invisibility.” At first defiant—“But to whom can I be responsible, and why should I be, when you refuse to see me?”—by the end of the novel the invisible man is ready to come out, “since there's a possibility that even an invisible man has a socially responsible role to play.”

**Brother Jack**
The Brotherhood's district leader for Harlem, he befriends the invisible man after hearing him address a crowd gathered to witness the eviction of an elderly black couple, and sets about recruiting him to the Brotherhood. That his motives might be suspect is evident from the beginning, when he asks the invisible man, “How would you like to be the new Booker T. Washington?” (Washington was viewed negatively as an accommodationist by many blacks) and warns him, “You mustn't waste your emotions on individuals, they don't count.” Brother Jack turns out to be the author of an anonymous threat mailed to the invisible man.

**Mr. Kimbro**
The invisible man’s first supervisor at Liberty Paints.

**Mr. Norton**
A white philanthropist and trustee of the college attended by the invisible man, Mr. Norton describes himself as “a trustee of consciousness” and believes that the students of the college are his “fate.” He calls his “real life's work … my first-hand organizing of human life.” A romantic about race, he insists on being taken to the old slave quarters, where he expects to hear a lively folktale but instead is treated to a
matter-of-fact account of incest by Jim Trueblood. Norton is the cause of the invisible man's expulsion from the school.

**Old Bucket-head**
*See Dr. A. Herbert Bledsoe*

**Mary Rambo**
Mary Rambo runs a rooming house and takes the invisible man in after finding him ill in the street following his stay in the factory hospital. The only person to treat him with genuine affection, Mary is cynical about the big city, and puts her faith in the newcomers from the South: ‘‘I'm in New York, but New York ain't in me.’’ The invisible man does not think of Mary as a ‘‘friend’'; she was something more—a force, a stable, familiar force like something out of my past which kept me from whirling off into some unknown which I dared not face.’’

**Ras the Exhorter**
Modeled on Marcus Garvey, though not a caricature of him, Ras is a flamboyant West African nationalist who preaches black pride, a return to Mother Africa, and a willingness to die for one's principles. Ras and the Brotherhood are engaged in a perpetual turf war, and Ras repeatedly exhorts the black members of the Brotherhood to remember their history. He says to Brother Tod Clifton: ‘‘You *my* brother, mahn. Brothers are the same color; how the hell you call these white men *brother*?… Brothers the same color. We sons of Mama Africa, you done forgot? You black, BLACK!… You African, AFRICAN!’’

**Rinehart**
A mysterious figure who signs himself a ‘‘Spiritual Technologist.’’ The reader never meets Rinehart, but the invisible man is mistaken for him by so many different people that he ends up putting together a fascinating though confusing composite: ‘‘Still, could he be all of them: Rine the runner and Rine the gambler and Rine the briber and Rine the lover and Rinehart the Reverend. Could he himself be both rind and heart? What is real anyway?… Perhaps the truth was always a lie.’’ It is in trying to figure out Rinehart that the invisible man begins to see both how complex reality is, and that it is possible to live with contradictions.

**Sybil**
Wife of a member of the Brotherhood with whom the invisible man has a brief liaison in the hope of gaining inside information on the organization.

**Brother Tarp**
An old but ideologically vigorous member of the Brotherhood. ‘‘He can be depended upon in the most precarious circumstance,’’ Brother Jack tells the invisible man. Brother Tarp hangs on the invisible man's office wall a picture of Frederick Douglass which reminds him of his grandfather. Unlike the invisible man, who left the South more or less voluntarily, Brother Tarp was forced to escape to the North after spending nineteen years on a chain gang because ‘‘I said no to a man who wanted to take something from me.’’ He gives the invisible man a link from his ankle iron as a keepsake.

**Jim Trueblood**
Once respected as a hard worker and a lively storyteller, Jim Trueblood is a black sharecropper who has since shamed the black community and who shocks Mr. Norton with his matter-of-fact account of incest with his daughter. Despite the awfulness of his crime, Trueblood's refusal to stint on the details or to make excuses for himself reveals a basic integrity that is reflected in his name, and the invisible man listens to him with a mixture of horror and admiration.

**Veteran at the Golden Day**
A skilled doctor who served in France and on his return to the States is run out of town and ends up in the
local mental hospital. He attends to Mr. Norton after his heart attack at the Golden Day. The invisible man is impressed with the bold way the vet talks to the white trustee. The vet is the first person to grasp the invisible man's dilemma: ‘‘You cannot see or hear or smell the truth of what you see.’’

**Peter Wheatstraw**
A kindly rubbish man the invisible man meets in the streets of Harlem singing the blues and who makes him think nostalgically of home.

**Brother Wrestrum**
A troublemaker, jealous of the invisible man. He makes a false accusation that indirectly results in the protagonist's being taken out of Harlem and sent downtown.
Sample Essay Outlines

The following are topics on which you can write a substantial analytical paper. They are designed to test your understanding of major themes and details from the book as a whole. Following the topics are outlines you can use as a starting point for writing an analytical paper.

• **Topic #1**
  Several times in *Invisible Man*, a character states that another character is crazy. Pick two examples of this, and describe what is happening. What do these moments have in common, and why does one character say that the other is crazy?

  **Outline**
  I. Thesis Statement: *In several scenes of Invisible Man, a character states that another character is crazy; each character seems to have a specific reason for saying this.*
  
  II. The scene at the narrator’s grandfather’s deathbed
  A. The dying man is thought to be crazy
  B. The children are rushed away
  C. The narrator hears his grandfather’s words
  D. The advice turns out to make a lot of sense
  
  III. “The vet” tends to Mr. Norton at the Golden Day
  A. Mr. Norton asks about the vet’s history
  B. The vet comments on Mr. Norton and the narrator
  C. Mr. Norton says the vet is crazy
  D. The vet doesn’t sound crazy, but is in an insane asylum
  
  IV. The narrator says that Ras the Exhorter is crazy
  A. The narrator and Tod Clifton are fighting with Ras
  B. Ras is disappointed with them, and tells them so
  C. He is eloquent, and his words hurt them
  D. The narrator tells Ted Clifton that Ras is crazy

• **Topic #2**
  Pick three specific actions by characters other than the narrator. What does each action reveal about the character, and how can we judge these people on the basis of what they do?

  **Outline**
  I. Thesis Statement: *The specific actions in Invisible Man tell us much about the characters and give us a basis for judging them.*
II. Dr. Bledsoe blames the narrator for what happened to Mr. Norton
A. Bledsoe protects himself, doesn’t take a risk
B. He is unwilling to oppose the power structure
C. Shows the narrator that principles are useless
D. One cannot fight against a “machine of people”

III. Lucius Brockway attacks the narrator
A. Brockway does not wait for the narrator to explain
B. He is paranoid about losing his job
C. It does not occur to him that he cannot win the fight
D. When it is over, he seems pathetic

IV. Sybil asks the narrator to act as though he is raping her
A. She sees the narrator as “a black buck,” not as a person
B. She wants the narrator to participate in her fantasy
C. She does not wonder if the idea offends him
D. She does not consider that he has emotions

**Topic #3**
The novel describes various aspects of the narrator’s life, when he was in different places, doing different things. Which part of his life do you think was the best for him? Why?

**Outline**
I. Thesis Statement: *This novel describes various aspects of the narrator’s life, in some of which the narrator was happier and more fulfilled than in others.*

II. His college years
A. He remembers those times with loving detail
B. He remembers his teachers with admiration
C. He wanted to do a good job of chauffeuring Mr. Norton
D. He dreaded leaving the college

III. Coming to New York
A. He was very excited
B. He found all of the new stimuli fascinating, and tiring
C. He has dreams about his future
D. He made at least one friend: Mary

IV. Working for the Brotherhood
A. He believed strongly in the work that he did
B. The work utilized his public speaking skills
C. He was encouraged to think of all people as equals
D. He was given a lot of responsibility
Suggested Essay Topics

Prologue
1. What does the reader know about the narrator solely on the basis of the Prologue? Take this opportunity to play detective, and explain both what he reveals about himself explicitly and what inferences can be drawn, justifying your findings as you go along.

2. Focus on the fantasy section of the Prologue. What’s going on there? The narrator imagines a series of scenes beginning with a sermon. What themes does it reveal?

Chapter 1
1. Why might the adults present at grandfather’s deathbed have reacted the way that they did? If it’s true that the grandfather may have been crazy, what other possibilities exist?

2. Why would the audience listening to the narrator’s speech have reacted so strongly to the narrator’s mistake? Discuss the implications of his slip of the tongue.

Chapter 2
1. Examine the details the narrator gives about the college at the start of the chapter. What kind of picture is evoked? What do we know about that part of the narrator’s life?

2. Notice how the narrator is determined to show Mr. Norton something he’d never seen before. Follow the progression of statements, thoughts, and decisions bringing Mr. Norton and Jim Trueblood together.

Chapter 3
1. We are told that the men who visit the Golden Day are “shell-shocked,” which means that they are suffering from permanent stress from wartime battles. What other reasons might they have for being there?

2. The prolonged scene of chaos that unfolds inside the Golden Day is comparable with the descriptions of the battle royal. What are the differences? Look at the relationships between the people involved. What different purposes does the violence serve?

Chapter 4
1. Write a character sketch of Dr. Bledsoe based on the information in this chapter. What does the reader know about him? What inferences can be drawn from this knowledge? Be sure to support your observations.

2. Summarize the narrator’s “crimes,” as Dr. Bledsoe might call them. Explain how they happened, and whether or not the narrator could have avoided them. Who is right in this situation?

Chapter 5
1. The Founder is an important figure in the sermon. Does Reverend Barbee disclose the race of the Founder? By what information can the reader divine whether the Founder was black or white? What difference would this have made?

2. At the end of the chapter, the narrator feels that the sermon is not likely to make Dr. Bledsoe soft-hearted when considering the narrator’s situation. Why does the narrator feel this way? How might Dr. Bledsoe’s mood be influenced by the sermon? What about the sermon would create this mood?

Chapter 6
1. Consider Dr. Bledsoe’s way of looking at race relations. He tells the narrator that it didn’t matter what Mr.
Norton wanted to see or do; the narrator was in charge. Bledsoe also says that he thought that the narrator had more sense and was not such a fool. What were Dr. Bledsoe’s expectations of the narrator? How does he suggest that the narrator could have lied? How did the narrator fail to meet those expectations?

2. At one point in their talk, Dr. Bledsoe says that Mr. Norton could have made the narrator’s fortune. What does this mean and imply? Consider the relative positions of the narrator and Mr. Norton, and the fact that the narrator thinks about the possibility of getting something from Mr. Norton at the beginning of Chapter Two. What would the narrator have had to do in order to get something from Mr. Norton, and why was he unable to do it?

Chapter 7
1. It is important to remember what Dr. Bledsoe said about the Vet (hint: look about five pages into Chapter Six). Is it a coincidence that the Vet is going up to St. Elizabeth’s? Why would someone like Dr. Bledsoe want the vet to be sent away?

2. Describe the narrator’s impressions of both New York City and Harlem. What is different about his new surroundings, and what changes will they most likely lead to in the narrator’s life?

Chapter 8
1. Summarize the narrator’s fears. Are they reasonable, given what you have read in the novel? If the fears center on Dr. Bledsoe and Mr. Norton, are there grounds for the narrator to be concerned? If the fears are based on other feelings, is there evidence behind them?

2. In this chapter and the one before it, the narrator saw black people with jobs unlike those that blacks had in the South. Pick three examples and describe them. What responsibilities do these jobs involve? What does it imply to say that blacks can and do hold them?

Chapter 9
1. The narrator’s conversation with Emerson’s son has many twists and turns. What happens that complicates the discussion they have? Is it clear that Emerson’s son wishes to help the narrator? Why or why not?

2. The narrator thinks very deeply about a song he heard on the subway after leaving Emerson’s office. What is the significance of the song, both in the chapter and in the novel thus far? Discuss how the story in the song applies to the narrator’s life, especially to what Bledsoe has done to him.

Chapter 10
1. A wide variety of people interact with the narrator at the paint factory. How do they treat him? Follow the action of the chapter, and include some discussion of all of the interactions. Is there racism? Is the narrator treated as an individual?

2. Write a character sketch of Lucius Brockway, given what we are told in this chapter. Beyond this, what inferences can be drawn? Be sure to support your observations.

Chapter 11
1. This chapter shows a great range of internal moods in the narrator. Describe when and why his mood changes, especially based on the questions and his reactions to them.

2. How do the doctors and nurses treat the narrator, both in terms of what they do and how they do it? How does the behavior of these people compare to the treatment that the narrator has received from whites in the past?
Chapter 12
1. Describe Mary. What does the reader know about her, and what does the advice that Mary gives the narrator tell us about her?

2. The narrator sees many different kinds of people when he goes back to the Men’s House. His descriptions of the men reveal a lot about how they live in Harlem. What does the information in each of the brief descriptions tell us about the men?

Chapter 13
1. Discuss the significance of the narrator’s experience with the yam seller. How does it compare with the narrator’s breakfast in the diner in Chapter Nine? Why does eating the yams make the narrator think and feel about Bledsoe?

2. Summarize the narrator’s interview with Brother Jack in the cafeteria. How does each feel about the eviction, and how does each respond to the other’s viewpoint? What does the encounter help you learn about each of the characters?

Chapter 14
1. Examine the narrator’s reactions to the drunk man who asks him to sing. How does the narrator respond? Why does he respond in this way, and why does his response get such a reaction from those around him?

2. What does the reader know about the Brotherhood thus far? Review what Brother Jack says in Chapter Thirteen, combined with relevant quotations and material in this chapter, and sum up the group’s philosophy and agenda.

Chapter 15
1. Discuss the narrator’s thinking about leaving Mary’s place and going to the address the Brotherhood has found for him. Why does he think that it might be a bad idea? What advantages are there to moving? How does he explain his decision to himself?

2. What reasons do the woman and the man give for not wanting anything to do with the narrator’s package? Is what they say motivated from bitterness, or anger, or other emotions? Also, how does the narrator respond in each of the conversations?

Chapter 16
1. Go through the chapter and compare all the moments where the narrator mentions sight in one way or another. The discussion of this chapter includes some comments on blindness, and the narrator makes many other references to being seen, the uses of sight, and the forms of blindness. Explain his references to what eyes do or cannot do, in both the narration and the quotations, in terms of the novel thus far.

2. Discuss Brother Jack’s reactions to the narrator’s speech and to what the other Brotherhood members have to say about the speech. What do these reactions reveal about the character? Are they surprising, given what the reader has learned about Brother Jack previously?

Chapter 17
1. What are your impressions of the Brotherhood, based on both this chapter, and what you have learned from earlier chapters? How friendly an organization is it, and what about it (if anything) might make you suspicious?

2. Summarize what Ras says to the narrator and Clifton. What are your reactions to the speech he gives them? How does it fit in with the definition of “exhort”? Why do you think they call him crazy?
Chapter 18
1. How do you perceive interpersonal relations at the Brotherhood? What evidence of division can be seen in this chapter? Are these problems of communication simply the standard results of people working together, or are there deep conflicts between the members of the Brotherhood? Be sure to cite examples and details from the chapter.

2. Describe the meeting in which the narrator faces the charges against him. What is the mood, and how does it change? How do people communicate their views? How does the narrator handle himself? What should he have done differently, and why?

Chapter 19
1. Summarize the narrator’s discussion with the woman known only as Hubert’s wife. What messages are they sending to each other? Did the narrator have reasonable expectations for intellectual conversation when he went to her apartment?

2. What is the significance of the husband’s appearance in the apartment? What do the narrator and the reader know about the situation that they didn’t know before, and how does this knowledge tie in with the conversation between the narrator and the woman?

Chapter 20
1. Describe the mood in Harlem, based on what we read in this chapter. Use specific details from different moments and incidents, being sure to observe people and descriptions closely, and support your points.

2. Given what we know of Brother Tod Clifton, since having met him, try to give some explanation of his behavior. Concentrate on what Ras said to Clifton and the narrator in Chapter Seventeen. We have seen before that when characters act crazy, or are called crazy, there is generally something more at work. What might that be, in this situation?

Chapter 21
1. This chapter is filled with questions. Many of them are asked by the narrator, who does not expect an answer. Pick five of the rhetorical questions that the narrator asks and try to provide answers for them, based on what you have read about the subject.

2. Summarize the narrator’s funeral address. How many questions does he ask, and of whom does he ask them? What do you think he feels about the audience in the park? Does he say anything about himself, or the Brotherhood? What does he assume, about both Tod Clifton and his audience?

Chapter 22
1. Evaluate the argument from the point of view of your own logic. Whose position in the argument makes the most sense to you? Each stance is well-defined, and thoroughly contradicts the other. Be sure to explain which response makes the most sense to you.

2. How do the three men—the narrator, Brother Jack and Brother Tobitt—frame their comments? Which of the comments are sarcastic, and which ones serious? How well does each side communicate with the other?

Chapter 23
1. What do you think about the narrator’s reactions to the Brotherhood in this chapter? Brother Hambro has given his thoughts on the organization’s decisions and policies, and you have material from other chapters on which to draw. Do the Brotherhood’s plans make sense? Why or why not?
2. What is the narrator’s response to Rinehart and the roles that Rinehart plays? Summarize the narrator’s thoughts on Rinehart.

**Chapter 24**
1. The narrator seems to have conflicting emotions in his tryst with Sybil. Explain why this might be the case. What do they say to each other, and what disparate agendas are they pursuing?

2. Write a character summary of Sybil. Why is she in bed with the narrator? What does she want from him? Analyze what she does and what she says.

**Chapter 25**
1. Is the Brotherhood responsible for the riot in Harlem? Could the members have prevented it, or was it inevitable? Why does the narrator feel that the Brotherhood should be held accountable for what has happened?

2. When was it clear that the narrator wanted to go to Mary’s place? Why does the narrator desire to return to Mary’s, and what stops him? Why do you think he says that he was invisible to Mary?

**Epilogue**
1. Describe the narrator’s tone of voice in the Epilogue. He is explaining himself—how does he do that, and what impressions does his mood give you? Be sure to support your points with details from the text.

2. What is your reaction to the narrator’s meeting with Mr. Norton? How do they act and react? How is what the narrator says reminiscent of what the Vet has to say while tending Mr. Norton’s wounds, in Chapter Three?
Critical Context

*Invisible Man* quickly gained recognition as a landmark of African American, and American, literature on publication in 1952. Together with James Baldwin’s *Go Tell It on the Mountain* (1953), it was taken to signal a black literary renaissance, a breakthrough from supposed “Negro protest fiction” such as Richard Wright’s *Native Son* (1940), Ann Petry’s *The Street* (1946), or Chester Himes’s *Lonely Crusade* (1947). Supported by writers such as Saul Bellow as well as by a host of fellow black writers, Ellison won, among other major prizes, the National Book Award for *Invisible Man*.

There has long been agreement that the novel represents a pinnacle of African American literary achievement, with perhaps Jean Toomer’s *Cane* (1923), *Native Son, Go Tell It on the Mountain*, and Toni Morrison’s *Song of Solomon* (1977) as matching companion pieces. Its rich, startling ventriloquy, command of image, and skillful use of vernacular ensure a rare feast of narration. Such qualities carried over into Ellison’s essay work, too, as collected in *Shadow and Act* (1964) and *Going to the Territory* (1986). Occasionally, well-meant talk has arisen of a “School of Ellison,” composed, among others, of such writers as Leon Forrest, Toni Morrison, John Wideman, Clarence Major, Ishmael Reed, and James Alan McPherson. Ellison, however, remained resolutely his own man, and *Invisible Man* remains the upshot of a uniquely endowed imagination.
Critical Evaluation

In modern American letters, the development of African American literature has followed a zigzag course. The literary movement of the Harlem Renaissance in the 1920’s saw the flourishing of black writing, but the Great Depression dealt it a serious blow. The popularity and success of Richard Wright’s *Native Son* (1940) and *Black Boy: A Record of Childhood and Youth* (1945) resurrected African American literature in the 1940’s. The emergence of Ralph Ellison and James Baldwin in the 1950’s helped push the development of African American literature to a new height. *Invisible Man*, the only novel that Ellison published, won the National Book Award for fiction in 1953. In a *Book Week* poll of two hundred critics and writers in 1965, the book was voted the “most distinguished single work” published between 1945 and 1965 in the United States.

Besides drawing inspiration from Wright’s works, Ellison was also influenced by T. S. Eliot’s insistence upon the importance of tradition. Wright’s use of lengthy sentences, rapid flow of consciousness conveyed by a string of participles, and long lists of abstract nouns joined together by overworked conjunctions in *Invisible Man* reminds the reader of William Faulkner’s writing style. Ellison’s originality, however, lies in his skillful depiction and enthusiastic celebration of African American culture. Ellison believed that black vernacular, black folklore, and black music were highly developed cultural forms that helped shape the mainstream culture in America. African American writers who either looked down upon or ignored their own cultural heritage in their writings were often trapped in using stereotypes to portray African American experience; a conscious study and celebration of African American culture could release them from the bondage of stereotypes.

In *Invisible Man*, Ellison took pains to exploit African American culture to the fullest. His portrayal of Rinehart, for example, follows the trickster tradition in African American literature. Rinehart has several identities: He is a lover, a numbers runner, a preacher, and a con man. Meeting Rinehart helps the narrator understand why his grandfather had two identities: a public one (false) and a private one (real). It also makes him realize that the relationship between having an identity and not having an identity is dialectical: A person’s invisibility also gives that person an opportunity to create and adopt whichever identity he or she would like to have.

Ellison’s use of black-oriented humor in *Invisible Man* produces an effect similar to that of the blues. According to Ellison, blues is an impulse to keep the painful details and episodes of a brutal experience alive in one’s aching consciousness, “to finger its jagged grain, and to transcend it, not by the consolation of philosophy but by squeezing from it a near-tragic, near-comic lyricism.” Ellison revealed that several of the book’s themes and motifs were inspired by jokes that circulated among African Americans. The theme of invisibility, for instance, was developed from the joke that some blacks were so black they could not be seen in the dark. The paint factory’s slogan If It’s Optic White, It’s the Right White originated from another joke: “If you’re black, stay back; if you’re brown, stick around; if you’re white, you’re right.”

*Invisible Man* reverberates with the lyrical, musical, and rhythmic cadence of black English. Ellison borrowed phrases freely from different sources and used them effectively to accentuate his thematic concerns. *Invisible Man* abounds with phrases and sentences such as “I’ll verse you but I won’t curse you—,” “I yam what I am!” and “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.” The first part of the last sentence is taken from James Joyce’s *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* (1914-1915) and the second part is added by the author with a bearing on the theme of the book.

The tone of *Invisible Man* is bitter, ironic, and sometimes pessimistic. The style is vivid and flexible. When commenting on the style of the book, Ellison said: “In the South, where he (the protagonist) was trying to fit into a traditional pattern and where his sense of certainty had not yet been challenged, I felt a more naturalistic
treatment was adequate.”

As the hero passes from the South to the North, from the relatively stable to the swiftly changing, “his sense of certainty is lost and the style becomes expressionistic.” Later on, “during his fall from grace in the Brotherhood it becomes somewhat surrealistic.” Surrealism permits itself to develop nonlogically in order to reveal the operation of the subconscious mind. Ellison’s use of incongruous images in *Invisible Man* works well with his thematic accentuation of the protagonist’s phantasmal state of mind and the chaotic state of society.

Even though *Invisible Man* is about African American experience, the novel illuminates the common plight of people who are in earnest search for their true identity. Ellison’s thematic treatment of the conflict between dream and reality, between individual and society, and between innocence and experience appeals to both black and white readers. This thematic concern is highlighted by the fact that the book opens with the narrator’s claiming that his invisibility is not “exactly a matter of a biochemical accident to” his “epidermis” and it ends with the narrator’s making a foreboding declaration to the reader: “Who knows but that, on the lower frequencies, I speak for you?”
Invisible Man

This book begins with a prologue in which the narrator explains why he has gone underground. Essentially, he has retreated from a society in which he could find no place for himself as an individual. From his subterranean hideout somewhere in the depths of Harlem he reflects on his past as a means of regrouping in the present and preparing for his future.

He tells an extraordinarily vivid story about his authoritarian Southern background; his confusing experiences as a naive student at a black college, where he meets a visiting white philanthropist; and his journey to New York City, where he becomes involved with various religious and political groups.

Ellison is a virtuoso stylist who manages to combine the graceful economy of Ernest Hemingway’s best prose with the rather baroque imagination that William Faulkner exemplifies in many of his novels. Thus Ellison’s narrator is thoroughly lucid even as he describes episodes that get at the mystery and confusion of the roles people play in their everyday lives.

Rinehart, a character who never actually appears in the novel, is regarded as the epitome of the role-player. When the narrator is mistaken for Rinehart, he realizes that ultimately he too will have to play many roles— that he has, in fact, already played many roles, from black college student to mental patient to revolutionary and counter-revolutionary.

In addition to being steeped in the themes of American identity that appear in the work of so many authors from Herman Melville to William Faulkner, Ellison also makes splendid use of his musical training by blending jazz lyrics and improvisational motifs that are characteristic of a specifically black culture.

Bibliography


Byerman, Keith E. “History Against History: A Dialectical Pattern in Invisible Man.” In Fingering the Jagged Grain: Tradition and Form in Recent Black Fiction. Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1985. Sees Invisible Man as “a crucial text for contemporary black fictionists.” In each of the novel’s major phases, the college, the move to Harlem, and The Brotherhood, Ellison carefully undermines all fixed, cause-and-effect versions of history.


Gayle, Addison, Jr. “Of Race and Rage.” In *The Way of the New World*. Garden City, N. Y.: Anchor Press, 1975. Suggests this “picturesque novel” to be a four-part history of the “black man’s trials and errors in America.” Argues that the book’s prologue and epilogue add up to a depiction of “soul,” “the richness and fullness” of black heritage. Argues that *Invisible Man*, however, is to be faulted for its final assimilationism, the flaw of believing in “the path of individualism instead of racial unity.”


Critical Overview

*Ivisible Man* was published to instant acclaim, though its complexity did not necessarily make it an easy read. Writing in *Commentary* in 1952 Saul Bellow called it “a book of the very first order, a superb book,” praising in particular the episode in which Jim Trueblood tells his tale of incest to Mr. Norton. “One is accustomed to expect excellent novels about boys, but a modern novel about men is exceedingly rare.” Anthony West wrote in *The New Yorker* that *Invisible Man* was “an exceptionally good book and in parts an extremely funny one” and praised its “robust courage,” though he recommended skipping the Prologue and Epilogue and “certain expressionist passages conveniently printed in italics.” Like Bellow, West congratulated Ellison on having written a book “about being colored in a white society [that] yet manages not to be a grievance book” and noted Ellison’s “real satirical gift for handling ideas at the level of low comedy.” In his study *Native Sons*, Edward Margolies noted the importance of jazz and the blues to the narrative and commented that what Ellison “seems to be saying [is] that if men recognize first that existence is purposeless, they may then be able to perceive the possibility of shaping their existence in some kind of viable form—in much the same manner as the blues artist gives form to his senseless pain and suffering.” However, Margolies bemoaned the thematic weakness of the novel, which is that “Ellison's hero simply has nowhere to go once he tells us he is invisible.” In a 1963 article in *Dissent*, Irving Howe called the novel a brilliant though flawed achievement. “No white man could have written it, since no white man could know with such intimacy the life of the Negroes from the inside; yet Ellison writes with an ease and humor which are now and again simply miraculous.”

The style of the novel has occasionally been criticized as excessive—Howe found Ellison “literary to a fault”—but even the novel's critics found much to praise in the symbolism, style, and narrative structure. Opinion was divided over the section dealing with the Brotherhood. West called it “perhaps the best description of rank-and-file Communist Party activity that has yet appeared in an American novel,” but Bellow found it less than convincing, and Howe wrote that “Ellison makes his Stalinist figures so vicious and stupid that one cannot understand how they could ever have attracted him or any other Negro.”

The biggest controversy over the book has always had to do with whether or not it was intended for a universal audience. Bellow praised Ellison for not having “adopted a minority tone. If he had done so, he would have failed to establish a true middle-of-consciousness for everyone.” Howe felt rather that “even Ellison cannot help being caught up with the idea of the Negro … for plight and protest are inseparable from that experience,” though he did not say whether this was good or bad. Warren French asserts in *Reference Guide to American Fiction* that the book has frequently been misread: it is neither unique to the black experience nor “picaresque,” but both broader and more sophisticated. David Littlejohn straddled the debate, called *Invisible Man* “essentially a Negro's novel … written entirely out of a Negro's experience, … [b]ut it is not a ‘Negro novel.’ … It is his story, really, not the race's, not the war's, except insofar as he is of the race and in the war.” Black nationalists argued that Ellison was not stringent enough, and John Oliver Killens and Amiri Baraka were particularly vocal critics. Ellison's defense was that he had never been a propagandist.

In 1953, *Invisible Man* was awarded the National Book Award for fiction. But controversy over what it meant and to whom continued. In his preface to the 1981 commemorative edition of the novel, Charles Johnson, whose *Middle Passage* won the National Book Award in 1990, remembers a time in the 1960s when “both Ellison and poet Robert Hayden were snubbed by those under the spell of black cultural nationalism, and when so many black critics denied the idea of ‘universality’ in literature and life.” This attitude was largely reversed during the 1970s when white critics tired of waiting for Ellison's hypothetical second novel and black readers began to be more appreciative of the book's portrayal of black experience. Whatever the nature of the critical debate, *Invisible Man* has proved its staying power. Leonard Deutsch wrote that for all its brutal realism and cynicism, *Invisible Man* “is basically a comic and celebratory work, for the hero is ultimately
better off at the end: he has become the shaping artist of his tale.”
Essays and Criticism

The Invisible Man’s Journey and the Larger American Experience
From his earliest published writings in the late 1930s until his death in 1994 Ralph Ellison remained an outspoken commentator on American literature, culture, race, and identity, but his reputation has always rested most solidly on his one published novel, *Invisible Man*. Since its publication in 1952, *Invisible Man* has consistently been singled out as one of the most compelling and important novels of this century. Praised for both its artistic originality and its thematic richness, the novel continues to find new readers not least because of the reading experience it provides—at once inspiring and unsettling, lucid and complex, approachable and profoundly challenging. From the powerful first line of the novel (‘‘I am an invisible man’’), readers are engaged in the life of the narrator, this “invisible man,” as he tries to tell his story and “put invisibility down in black and white.” Moreover, the novel urges its readers to undertake a similar quest along with the narrator: to examine the painful realities of American history and culture and, in the end, to seek the ways in which they, too, may have “a socially responsible role to play.”

Like the familiar opening of *Moby-Dick* (‘‘Call me Ishmael’’), *Invisible Man* begins with a prologue by the novel's first-person narrator, but in this case the introduction comes without a name: “I am an invisible man.” The narrator's name remains hidden to the reader throughout the novel, but the importance of names and the act of naming becomes clear as his story unfolds. The narrator is “named” by nearly every person he encounters in the novel: He is, for example, a “boy” and a “nigger” to the “leading white citizens” of his town; just the same (to his surprise) to Dr. Bledsoe; a “cog” in the machine of Mr. Norton's “fate”; little more than a laboratory animal to the doctors in the factory hospital; a race-traitor to Ras the Exhorter; and a “natural resource” to the Brotherhood. Each person or group that the narrator encounters tries to identify him, to impose an identity upon him, while ignoring or denying his own emotional and psychological sense of self. As he reflects on his experiences from his “hole in the ground,” he understands that this misnaming is the real source of his identity crisis. He is “invisible” not from any lack of physicality or intelligence but because of a willed action of those around him, “simply because people refuse to see me.” But this blindness, this desire to call him by any name but his own, initially affects even the narrator himself. It takes him, as he acknowledges, “a long time and much painful boomeranging of my expectations to achieve a realization everyone else appears to have been born with: That I am nobody but myself.”

Achieving that “realization” requires the narrator to come to terms with his personal history and with his place in the larger history of America. The first words of the narrator's story in the first chapter of the book—“It goes a long way back …”—establish immediately the importance of history and memory to his quest, and his narrative itself constitutes both memory and history “in black and white.” Much of the tension of the story, however, results from the narrator's conflicted understanding of history and his desire to stifle his memories, to disconnect himself from his past. As he recollects his experiences at the college, for example, the narrator struggles to determine “what was real, what solid, what more than a pleasant, time-killing dream.” After rejecting the identity that he possessed at the college, the narrator is left with “the problem of forgetting it,” of quieting “all the contradictory voices shouting” inside his head. The narrator's difficulty in leaving his past behind resonates throughout his story, from the recurring voice and image of his grandfather to the physical reminders of his past that he carries with him throughout the novel.

Two physical objects in particular—Primus Provo's “FREE PAPERS” and Brother Tarp's chain link—act as vivid emblems of the painful realities of America's past. The narrator wants to believe that the legacy of slavery and southern chain-gangs belong to the distant past: When he reads the “fragile paper” that once released a man from slavery, he tells himself, “It has been longer than that, further removed in time….” But, as he begins to perceive in the factory hospital, the narrator's quest for his own “freedom” and identity can only be fulfilled when he recovers that history, when he understands its continuing relevance as
part of his own past. He recognizes this connection fully only after rejecting the Brotherhood's "scientific" language in favor of a more personal sense of history: "I began to accept my past and, as I accepted it, I felt memories welling up within me…. Images of past humiliations flickered through my head and I saw that they were more than separate experiences. They were me; they defined me." Only after seeing this composite picture of his past does the narrator recognize not only his invisibility but also the "great potentialities" and "possibilities" that exist in spite of that invisibility.

Of course, "potentialities" and "possibilities" are just what the narrator finds—for a time—in the grand missions of the Founder's college and the Brotherhood. At the college, the narrator identifies himself with Mr. Norton and with Dr. Bledsoe and feels that he is "sharing in a great work"; likewise, in the Brotherhood, he believes that he has found "a way to have a part in making the big decisions, of seeing through the mystery of how the country, the world, really operated." What attracts the narrator to both groups is, in part, versions of history and visions of the future that are full of meaning, purpose, and direction. But both groups, he eventually learns, maintain a strict control over all "possibilities," conceal all "contradictions," and, as the vet at the Golden Day prophesied, finally see the narrator as "a thing and not a man." These groups give him a "role" to play, but only as an "automaton," a "child," a "black amorphous thing."

When the narrator ends his story, then, by wondering if "even an invisible man has a socially responsible role to play," it is clear that the answer to his question rests on the entirety of his narrative and has no simple solution. "Social responsibility," first of all, is precisely what the racist "leading white citizens" of his southern town desired from him, the responsibility of keeping himself in a submissive and segregated "place." In contrast, the responsible role that the narrator seeks for the future will go hand in hand with a belief—even if it is his alone—in the "social equality" that he inadvertently pronounced to the horror of the white men. Such a role will also rest on "personal responsibility" and emotional integrity of the sort that Jack and the Brotherhood denied to him. The narrator desires a role that neither engulfs his identity, his humanity, and his memory, nor requires, in his words, "Rinehartism-cynicism." For his "mind," his self, to be satisfied, he can neither "take advantage of the people" nor take no responsibility at all: He "must come out" to play a meaningful part in society, whether or not he remains invisible to the people he encounters there. In the end, the narrator finds the key to his identity in a healthy contradiction, both "denouncing" and "defending" his society, saying "yes" and saying "no," affirming a world whose "definition is possibility" at the same time he refuses to be blind to negations of that promise.

A sense of "contradiction" and "possibility" may also, finally, be the key to the artistic power and continuing relevance of Ellison's Invisible Man. Just as his narrator offers "no phony forgiveness," no unambiguous moral to his story, so Ellison leaves many of the tensions and competing elements unresolved. Ellison implies that the truth of American society cannot be encompassed in absolutes such as hope or despair, idealism or cynicism, even love or hate, but rather requires a willingness on the part of each citizen to see both extremes and hold them in balance. As Ellison envisions it, living as a true American requires faith—faith in equality and democracy when they are most out of reach, in the possibility of coming together when segregation predominates, in human complexity when society is obsessed with stereotypes. That the novel continues to move readers almost half a century after it was written testifies not only to the power of Ellison's storytelling but also to the continuing relevance of these themes. Ellison's success in reaching new readers each year affirms, it seems, the narrator's final, unanswered question: "Who knows but that, on the lower frequencies, I speak for you?"


Ellison’s Ambitious Scope in Invisible Man

[In Invisible Man], Ellison attempted to portray the theme of Negro endurance and cultural continuity by devising a plot which would include a maximum of experiences common to the American Negroes, but which
could be employed by a wandering hero in an episodic manner. For this plot, he relied heavily on the social migration theme that promised equality to the Southern Negro but shattered his hopes in an economic jungle which ended with a dispossession in Harlem.…

In the novel one unnamed youth progresses from a high school setting in Greenwood to the Southern college for Negroes and from there to Harlem. He does not remain in Harlem but seeks employment in the white neighborhoods of New York City and expresses interest in a scientific Brotherhood before returning to Harlem. In the final riot scene he flees from Harlem and discovers an underground cellar near Harlem situated in a white community bordering the Negro ghetto. His motivation for leaving Greenwood was the scholarship presented him by the white community of the town. At the college, the hero again felt an external motivating force which this time catapulted him from the Southern college to New York supposedly under the same expectations that faced Eddie, Harry, and Marvin (of earning his college expenses for the next school year); but he soon felt the true motivating impulse of expulsion…. [Although] the hero in Invisible Man has achieved no recognition of his identity, he has developed a workable solution and method of continued searching.

Within the episodic migration theme, Ellison developed a central character … [who] is nameless and achieves an enlarged symbolic position. As he confronts the idiosyncrasies and overt violence of his environment and the white man's world that closes its doors to him, he is able to portray the frustrations and victories common to every man (“Who knows but that, on the lower frequencies, I speak for you?”); thereby, he achieves universal magnitude equivalent to the requirements for an epic hero.

Robert Bone, in his attempt [in “Ralph Ellison and the Use of Imagination,” Anger and Beyond, 1966], to classify Invisible Man as a picaresque novel, recognizes the heroic qualities in the unnamed character’s confrontations with reality: “His [Ellison’s] heroes are not victims but adventurers. They journey toward the possible in all ignorance of accepted limits. In the course of their travels, they shed their illusions and come to terms with reality.” The internal evidence from the novel further substantiates the heroic qualities of the hero, who alone must contend frequently with the machinations of the white mind.

During the high school address before the drunken audience at the smoker in Chapter 1, the speaker illustrates his speech with the account of “a ship lost at sea” whose sailors ask for fresh water from the first friendly vessel they meet. The reply stresses self-reliance: “Cast down your bucket where you are.” Like the captain of the distressed vessel, the Negro youth has been taught to seek help where it can be obtained. He must seek and strive for his own identity within society.

The encounter with Mr. Norton following the ill-fated Golden Day episode again resounds with an emphasis on self-reliance, for Mr. Norton explains that “Self-reliance is a most worthy virtue. I shall look forward with the greatest of interest to learning your contribution to my fate.” Do not Dr. Bledsoe’s letters manipulate the hero into a position of being rejected by Mr. Emerson in New York City, a rejection that forces the hero to rely on his own skills rather than the reputation of his Southern alma mater (“… that though the wide universe if full of good, no kernel of nourishing corn can come to him but through his toil bestowed on that plot of ground which is given to him to till”)?

Following the youth’s symbolic second birth from the prefrontal lobotomy machine, he collides with the street crowds of New York without a protective shield (his college ties that opened doors for him, or a strong body that enabled him to work in non-union plants and remain temporarily outside his Harlem environment); and he soon struggles for a new identity, although his “tail feathers” have been “picked clean” like Poor Robin’s. It is his encounter with a “yam” seller in Harlem that reverses his bewilderment and enables him to regain an identity:

This is all very wild and childish, I thought, but to hell with being ashamed of what you liked. No more of that for me. I am what I am! I wolfed down the yam and ran back to the old
Although this discovery and the search for identity has begun, it remains a disheveled stream of arabesqueness at the conclusion of the novel. Ellison’s hero apparently has yet a host of worlds to vanquish.

In his struggle the hero cannot act independently of all external forces. Ellison’s central hero is governed by his paternal grandfather’s deathbed command to act the part of an intelligencer toward the white society and “overcome ’em with yeses.” The hero, moreover, is also controlled by a naturalistic fate that is almost as important as the classical Olympian interference. Beneath this fate, the hero is allowed some degree of independence whereby he may become self-reliant. But this self-reliance is restricted to the Negro world; regardless of his solutions for establishing his identity, the society in which the hero lives and must find work is a segregated society that limits his opportunities. Unlike the racial injustice portrayed in Ellison’s vignette, “The Birthmark” (New Masses, July 2, 1940), when Matt and Clara are repulsed by the brutality and barbarism of a lynching, the segregated social conditions in Invisible Man manipulate the hero as though they were an amoral fate in which the hero finds himself. Within his limitations, the hero refuses to retreat from his heroic search for his identity. In the Epilogue, he realizes his need to return to the streets of Harlem rather than live continually in complacent seclusion. (The only men worthy of praise of the gods during the heroic age were those who accomplished noble deeds.) And so the hero reasons, “Life is to be lived, not controlled; and humanity is won by continuing to play in face of certain defeat”—a restatement of the conflict that plagued men for centuries.

Along with his grandfather’s deathbed command, which haunts the hero throughout the novel as Anchises’ predictions in the underworld influenced Aeneas’ struggle in Italy or as Achilles’ potential return to his father would have eliminated his chances for universal fame, a limited number of additional epic similarities appear in Ellison’s novel: the hero’s Dantesque descent in the Prologue, Sybil’s Circean attempts to detain the hero from his mission, examples of gory combat, and one mock epic battle.

In the Prologue, the Negro youth’s descent into a cave that appears in a “reefer” dream is similar to Dante’s progress into Inferno following his night of wandering in a lonely woods. During the Brotherhood portion of the novel, the hero has been denounced by the party leaders, but before he can effect his separation from the organization, he is transferred to the downtown section of New York and assigned to lecture on the position of women in the United States. The women of the Brotherhood and Sybil in Chapter 24 are unable to seduce the hero. Their attempt to sap his stoic will has failed, and they are unable to preclude his search for identity.

The battle scenes and physical flights from death echo of primitive combat. Near the end of the Harlem Riot, the hero “ran expecting death between the shoulder blades or through the back of my head, and as I ran I was trying to get to Mary’s.” In the Epilogue his description of his personal feelings upon recognition of his fated position in society reeks of gory details:

That is the real soul-sickness, the spear in the side, the drag by the neck through the mob-angry town, the Grand Inquisition, the embrace of the Maiden, the rip in the belly with the guts spilling out, the top to the chamber with the deadly gas that ends in the oven so hygienically clean—only it’s worse because you continue stupidly to live.

But Ellison, the Ellison of subtle humor, does not neglect at least one mock epic battle as Ras the Exhorter fights the uniformed New York policemen: “‘Hell, yes, man, he had him a big black hoss and a fur cap and some kind of old lion skin or something over his shoulders and he was raising hell. Goddam if he wasn’t a sight, riding up and down on this ole hoss, you know, one of the kind that pulls vegetable wagons, and he got him a cowboy saddle and some big spurs.’” The unnamed hero from a nebulously defined town of Greenwood and the college for Negroes in the South has migrated to Harlem where he witnesses
mock-chivalry and chaos but has yet failed to achieve his own identity.

Although the central character in *Invisible Man* is fictitious and nameless, the chaos that swirls about him in the final chapters presents a scene similar to the Harlem Riot of 1943. Ellison's clever meshing of fiction with historical fact and his structural development in the novel tend to produce a surface adventure with historical significance.

Intertwining through the episodes is Ellison's use of lyrics, which often are effective digressions and possess ironic overtones that suggest an atmosphere of defeat or of victory. Moreover, the spirituals and hymns, blues and jazz, recall slavery work songs and catastrophes that weld the centuries of the American Negroes' experiences into a collective event of suffering and expectation.

As a novelist, Ellison seems to have engaged his literary talents in a conscious effort of recording a century of Negro culture in *Invisible Man*. He records speech habits and musical lyrics of an oral tradition before they are lost to future ages. But his greater achievement is that he couches the lyrics and sermons within a framework of Negro expressions and history. His novel becomes no mere anthology of unrelated selections, but a unified presentation of the American Negroes' culture and heritage. The lyrics, moreover, reflect glimpses of the white culture that dominated the slavery and reconstruction eras of the South and was modified by Negro choirs. Spirituals and anthems left behind by the hero on the Southern college campus reappear in a pejorative form of insult ("Go Down Moses") voiced by the intoxicated members of the scientifically oriented Brotherhood. Conversely, the spiritual theme of "Swing Low Sweet Chariot" resounded throughout sections of Dvorak's *New World Symphony*.

In the hospital scene following the paint factory explosion, the hero is reminded of a work song as he struggles to free himself from the machine and as he attempts to recall his past identity. Mary Rambo's use of the "Backwater Blues" and Trueblood's singing of primitive blues laments are two characteristic examples of Ellison's heavy reliance on the blues form. Trueblood's children and those of Brother Hambro in New York, sing nursery and game songs, but the songs are those borrowed from the Anglo-Scottish community. Ellison's use of animal lyrics ("Poor Robin"), the jazz of the musical bars in New York, and the Harlem jive of Peter Wheatstraw ("She's got feet like a monkey / Legs like a frog—Lawd, Lawd!") together form a composite, along with his other musical types, of the American Negroes' culture and the experiences to which the invisible hero was subjected.

The musical references and lyrics parallel the geographic settings used in the structure of the novel and provide evidence of a cultural heritage that existed long before the events in the novel occurred. They are the remains of a primitive oral tradition among the American Negroes that Ellison sought to record in their authentic context before they were lost or obscured in fragmentated passages in printed anthologies. The scope of the novelist was ambitious enough, and the once oral musical tradition has become literature.

Ralph Ellison's "love" for the American scene somehow inspired him to capture the American Negroes' culture in an artistic form, and his *Invisible Man* is Ellison's attempt—a most successful attempt—to produce the great American Negro epic. For the reader aware of the American Negroes' culture, it is an Odyssey in disguise.

symbolizes. During his search, he is given another name by the Brotherhood, but it is no help. When he becomes a ‘‘brother,’’ he finds that brotherhood does not clarify his inner mysteries.

In creating his anti-hero, Ellison builds on epic and mythic conventions. The nameless voyager passes through a series of ordeals or trials to demonstrate his stature. First, he passes through the initiation-rites of our society—the battle royal (exposing the sadistic sexuality of the white southern world) and speechmaking that sends him to college are parts of this rite of passage, and he is tormented into the adult world. He passes this test by demonstrating his servility and naively interpreting his grandfather’s dictum: ‘‘Live with your head in the lion’s mouth. I want you to overcome ’em with yeses, undermine ’em with grins, agree ’em to death and destruction, let ’em swoller you till they vomit or bust wide open.’’ This is the first outlook of the invisible man—the paranoia fostered by ‘‘them,’’ the white oppressors; the boy here is Buckeye the Rabbit, the swift clever animal living by its wits beneath the jaws of the killer.

When he arrives at college, he is confronted by the deceit and duplicity of Negroes who have capitulated to a white world; he is broken by the powerful coalition of Bledsoe the Negro president and Norton the white trustee. His second trial shows him that the struggle is not a simple one of black against white, that ‘‘they’’ are more complex than his first experiences showed. He finds that both black and white can be turned against him.

The second phase of his career commences in the trip to New York, an exile from ‘‘paradise’’; in the city, he finds Bledsoe’s seven magic passports to success in the white world, the letters of recommendation are actually betrayals, variations of the dream-letter: ‘‘Keep This Nigger-Boy Running.’’ Thus, his primary illusions are shattered, but there are many more layers to the cocoon in which he sleeps.

For he is first of all a dreamer, a somnambulist, and sleep and dreams figure significantly in his image of himself. As he reassesses himself, his metaphor for new discoveries is the same: ‘‘ … it was as though I had been suddenly awakened from a deep sleep.’’ Yet each sleep and each awakening (little deaths and births) prove to be interlocked layers of his existence, a set of never-ending Chinese boxes. One climactic section of the novel details his second crucial awakening—the ‘‘descent into the underworld’’ which occurs in chapters 10 and 11.

Like the hero of myth and ritual, Ellison’s invisible man finally descends from life on the mortal plane into an underworld of death. This is the substance of the entire New York section of the novel. On arriving in the city, he recalls the plucked robin of the old song and imagines himself the victim of a fantasy-letter: ‘‘My dear Mr. Emerson … The Robin bearing this letter is a former student. Please hope him to death, and keep him running.’’ Then he takes the job at Liberty Paints, keeping white paint white by adding drops of pure black, under the ironic slogan, ‘‘If It’s Optic White, It’s The Right White,’’ which (like ‘‘If you’re white, all right, if you’re black, stay back’’) has been invented by a Negro, the ancient and malevolent Lucius Brockway. The anti-hero becomes a machine within the machines, and he finds that Brockway, an illiterate ‘‘janitor’’ is the heart of the whole industry. In the boiler room, an inferno, he is betrayed again by a Negro and ‘‘killed’’ through his treachery. But the death is the ritual death of the hero’s career—a death which leads to resurrection and a new identity.

After the explosion, the anti-hero awakens in a hospital, where he is resurrected by white doctors using an electroshock machine. Chapter 11 opens with a monstrous image of the demons of this underworld: ‘‘I was sitting in a cold, white rigid chair and a man was looking at me out of a bright third eye that glowed from the center of his forehead.’’ The doctors revive him (‘‘We’re trying to get you started again. Now shut up!’’) to the accompaniment of fantastic effects—Beethoven motifs and a trumpet playing ‘‘The Holy City’’ and dreamlike dialogue from the surgeons:
“I think I prefer surgery. And in this case especially, with this, uh … background. I’m not so sure that I don’t believe in the effectiveness of simple prayer.”

“The machine will produce the results of a prefrontal lobotomy without the negative effects of the knife.”

“Why not a castration, doctor.”

Then, as he is revived, the doctors construct an heroic identity for him, recapitulating his existence as a Negro, starting with the first folk myth guises of the clever Negro—Buckeye the Rabbit and Brer Rabbit: “… they were one and the same: ‘Buckeye’ when you were very young and hid yourself behind wide innocent eyes; ‘Brer’ when you were older.” The electrotherapy machine is an emblem of the mechanical society imprisoning the anti-hero: “I could no more escape than I could think of my identity. Perhaps, I thought, the two things are involved with each other. When I discover who I am, I'll be free.” This lesson of the resurrection is carried through the rest of the anti-hero’s journey.

The apparatus which resurrects the invisible man is a mechanical womb, complete with umbilical cord attached to his stomach which is finally cut by the doctors; he is delivered of the machine, and the doctors pronounce his new name—yet he remains nameless. The doctors, who follow a “policy of enlightened humanitarianism” declare that this New Adam will remain a social and economic victim of the machine: “You just aren’t prepared for work under our industrial conditions. Later, perhaps, but not now.”

The anti-hero sallies forth after his revival in the underworld “overcome by a sense of alienation and hostility” when he revisits the scene of the middle-class Negro arrivals in New York. He is now painfully aware of the hostility of his world, and he reacts not passively (“in the lion’s mouth”) but aggressively. In a symbolic gesture, he dumps a spittoon on a stranger whom he mistakes for his first nemesis, Bledsoe. The act is that of a crazed messiah: “You really baptized ole Rev!” Then he goes forth for a harrowing of hell.

He joins the Brotherhood, an infernal organization which meets at the Chthonian club. In the Brotherhood, he rises to authority, becomes a respected leader and demagogue and is finally again betrayed by the wielders of power, whites who manipulate Negro stooges for their own ends. But at the end of this episode, the penultimate phase of the hero’s career, he meets two important emblematic figures: Ras the Destroyer and Rinehart the fox. Ras, the black nationalist leader, is his crazed counterpart, and he harasses the invisible man until the night of the riots, when he attempts to hang and spear the anti-hero as a scapegoat for the mob—a dying god to appease the violence Ras releases. A contrast is Rinehart, who like Renyard is a master of deception and multiple identities: “Rine the runner and Rine the gambler and Rine the briber and Rine the lover and Rine the reverend.” He is a tempter, and the invisible man nearly succumbs to his temptation to freedom without responsibility; he strolls through Harlem disguised as Rinehart, the visible-invisible man who passes undetected through many identities. Ras offers the assurance of one undivided black identity and Rinehart the assurance of many shifting amoral identities—the faces of stability and flux. But the anti-hero avoids both traps, turning Ras’s spear on him and shucking the dark glasses and wide hat of Rinehart, then finally dropping literally out of sight underground at the climax of the riot. Ellison has said [in Writers at Work, 1965] that he took Rinehart’s name from the “suggestion of inner and outer,” seeming and being, and that he is an emblem of chaos—“He has lived so long with chaos that he knows how to manipulate it.” So Rinehart and Ras both represent chaos, two versions of disorder.

Loss of identity, sleeping and blindness are the figures that express the invisible man's confusion and despair as his world disintegrates. Then, after the cultural malaise climaxes in the riot, the final phase of the anti-hero's progress begins, a descent into the tomb—the netherworld across the Styx where heroes rest: “It’s a kind of death without hanging, I thought, a death alive…. I moved off over the black water, floating, sighing … sleeping invisibly.” So he remains immortal and waiting, like the heroes of myth who disappear and are
believed to wait should the world require them—like King Arthur and Finn MacCool, sleeping giants blended into the landscape. The invisible man, now grown into Jack-the-Bear, turns to New York’s sewer system, a black and labyrinthine underground—a fitting anti-hero’s mausoleum.

In this black crypt he destroys his old selves one by one as he searches for light, erasing his past—burning his high school diploma, a doll which is a bitter totem of Tod Clifton’s demise, the name given him by the Brotherhood, a poison-pen note, all the tokens of his identity. Then he dreams of castration and sees that the retreat has been his crucifixion—he has been cut off from the world of possibility. “Until some gang succeeds in putting the world in a strait jacket, its definition is possibility. Step outside the narrow borders of what men call reality and you step into chaos—ask Rinehart, he’s a master of it—or imagination.” Imagination in the end redeems the anti-hero and makes his flight from battle a victory, for it gives us his story. In his tomb he is not dead but hibernating, preparing for a spring of the heart, a return which may be either death or resurrection:

There’s a stench in the air, which, from this distance underground, might be the smell either of death or of spring—I hope of spring. But don’t let me trick you, there is a death in the smell of spring and in the smell of thee as in the smell of me.

The Easter of the spirit may be the emergence of the new man—no longer an anti-hero, invisible, nameless and dispossessed, but a true hero—or it may be the death of our culture.

The resurrection motif ties the story in the frame of prologue and epilogue, in the voice from underground:

… don’t jump to the conclusion that because I call my home a “hole” it is damp and cold like a grave, there are cold holes and warm holes. Mine is a warm hole. And remember, a bear retires to his hole for the winter and lives until spring, then he comes strolling out like the Easter cluck breaking from its shell. I say all this to assure you that it is incorrect to assume that, because I’m invisible and live in a hole, I am dead. I am neither dead nor in a state of suspended animation. Call me Jack-the-Bear, for I am in a state of hibernation.

Buckeye the Rabbit has grown into the formidable Jack-the-Bear (recalling the Bear’s Son of the sagas) as the anti-hero has passed his trials and journeyed on his downward path, reliving the recent history of the Negro. He lies in wait beneath the inferno, under the underworld, listening for the hero’s call.

Analysis

Places Discussed (Critical Guide to Settings and Places in Literature)

*Harlem

*Harlem. African American neighborhood of New York City’s Upper Manhattan in which much of the action takes place. The unnamed narrator lives there after the explosion of the paint factory. A surrealistic vision of the real city, the Harlem setting allows him to mix with a wide variety of people, from wealthy white women, who believe him to be a powerful, savage lover, to poor black prostitutes, who mistake him for a pimp named Rinehart. In Harlem readers see that the “invisible man” is not only invisible to whites but to fellow African Americans, as well. None of the characters, white or black, can see past racial and cultural stereotypes into the real invisible man.

Jack-the-Bear’s “hole.”

Jack-the-Bear’s “hole.” Apartment of the narrator in a white neighborhood near Harlem. Deep in the bowels of a “whites only” building, the apartment is a section of a basement that was walled off and forgotten in the nineteenth century, just as black America was walled off and forgotten after the passage of the Fourteenth Amendment in 1868. There the narrator steals electricity, thereby remaining invisible to the power company, and wires every inch of his walls and ceiling with more than one thousand light bulbs to bathe himself in brilliant light as he seeks knowledge about himself and his race.

State college

State college. Unnamed black college in Alabama to which the narrator wins a scholarship. Modeled on Alabama’s Tuskegee Institute, the college embodies the educational ideals of Booker T. Washington, who advocated gradual progress for blacks and continued separation of the races. The college’s central fountain is broken and dry, suggesting the exhaustion of Washington’s outmoded, conciliatory policies. The college is a model community in which “model” black citizens present to white benefactors a whitewashed version of black America—a veil behind which real black life is kept hidden.

The Quarters

The Quarters. Poverty-stricken black community near the state college. There one of the college’s white founders, Mr. Norton, encounters black poverty in the flesh for the first time: People live in shacks as squalid as those from antebellum days, suggesting how little progress African Americans have been permitted to make. In contrast to the ivy-covered buildings and manicured lawns of the “show” college, the Quarters features the weathered shacks and shabby farms that typified much of southern black life in the age of widespread sharecropping and Jim Crow laws. Dr. Bledsoe, the president of the college, keeps his white benefactors from seeing the Quarters. Thus, the truth of black life remains hidden behind the veil that is the
college.

Golden Day

Golden Day. Bar and brothel near the college, that is a microcosm of an insane society built on racism and hypocrisy. The Golden Day is filled with the “veterans,” patients from a nearby asylum, a group that includes World War I veterans and a variety of educated black professionals. They are considered insane because the veterans expected to return from the war to a Golden Day of full integration, and the professionals—doctors, chemists, and others—also expected to take their rightful places in society. The Golden Day and the asylum are, like the Quarters, kept carefully hidden behind the whitewashed veil that is the college, and they, too, represent hidden truths about black American life and the effects of racism.

Liberty Paint Factory

Liberty Paint Factory. New York factory in which the narrator gets his first job. There, too, he remains invisible as pro-union workers revile him as a scab and his supervisor, old Lucius Brockway, reviles him first as a spy, then as a union organizer. The enormous factory produces the whitest of white paints by adding a few drops of black pigment to each bucket, suggesting the hidden black foundations (stolen slave labor) underlying much of America’s industry and culture.

Factory hospital

Factory hospital. Medical facility in which doctors treat the narrator for injuries he receives in the paint factory explosion. They do not see him as a human being, but as a research subject, so he remains invisible even in the hospital.
Historical Context

The Great Migration
The civil rights movement of the 1950s and 1960s had its genesis in the Great Migration, the move north of 6.5 million black Americans from the rural South. This created large black communities like New York's Harlem and Chicago's South Side. In the early 1900s, black migration increased dramatically with the beginning of World War I in 1914, in response to the demand for factory workers in the North. While the move did not bring social justice to blacks, it did provide some social, financial, and political benefits, and it established the issue of race in the national consciousness. Both Ralph Ellison and his protagonist, like so many before them, made the journey north. When the invisible man tells the vet from the Golden Day that he's going to New York, the vet answers, “New York! That's not a place, it's a dream. When I was your age it was Chicago. Now all the little black boys run away to New York.”

Northern black factory workers could expect to make two to ten times as much as their southern counterparts, and thus newly arrived blacks from the South had an uneasy relationship with organized white labor. Their reluctance to jeopardize their access to the industrial job market by taking part in labor agitation was exploited by their employers to frustrate unions who hired black laborers to replace strikers. It was already clear by the 1930s that America's labor movement could only survive through integration, and between 1935 and the end of World War II 500,000 blacks joined the Congress of Industrial Organizations (CIO). But white opposition to bringing blacks into the unions persisted up to the time Ellison wrote Invisible Man. At Liberty Paints, an office boy tells the invisible man, “The wise guys firing the regular guys and putting on you colored college boys. Pretty smart. That way they don't have to pay union wages.” And when Lucius Brockway mistakenly thinks the invisible man has gone to a labor meeting, he fairly explodes. “That damn union,” he cried, almost in tears. ‘That damn union! They after my job! For one of us to join one of them damn unions is like we was to bite the hand of the man who teached us to bathe in the bathtub!’

American communists strongly advocated racial tolerance, thereby winning the support of black leaders and intellectuals, particularly during the Depression. Like Richard Wright Ellison leaned on the party for financial support and because it offered him a way of getting published. Nevertheless, Ellison objected to what he considered to be a kind of thought control, and he never became a party member. During World War II, when the party advised against pushing issues of racial segregation in the U.S. armed forces, Ellison became disillusioned. In Invisible Man, the hero returns from an absence only to discover that “there had been, to my surprise, a switch in emphasis from local issues to those more national and international in scope, and it was felt for the moment the interests of Harlem were not of first importance.”

Nationhood and Civil Rights
In 1916, Marcus Garvey came to the United States from Jamaica and founded the Universal Negro Improvement Association (UNIA). Like Ras the Exhorter in Invisible Man, Garvey was an ardent and flamboyant nationalist, and he electrified Harlem with his message of black pride and self-determination through the recolonization of Africa. But Garvey's arguments for racial separation were at odds with the integrationist efforts of communists, and the schism between the two groups would outlast Garvey's political demise in 1921. Another significant black nationalist figure of the 1930s was Sufi Abdul Mohammed; elements of his colorful personality turn up in Invisible Man in both Ras the Exhorter and Rinehart, the mysterious numbers runner and preacher.

Some 400,000 black soldiers served in World War I, but they found that their devotion did not translate into respect abroad during the war or at home after it. Once overseas, blacks were relegated to menial tasks, were passed over for combat duty, and were subjected to continual harassment by whites. The society to which they returned was even more conservative on issues of race than the one they had left. The black press, particular W. E. B. Du Bois's influential magazine The Crisis, was loud in its condemnation of reports of discriminatory
treatment made by returning black soldiers. The outrage felt by black veterans is described in an incident in *Invisible Man*, where a group of black World War I veterans cause a disturbance at a whorehouse and bar called the Golden Day. One veteran describes how he had served as a surgeon in France under the Army Medical Corps but was chased out of town on his return to America.

The prospect of a new draft in the wake of the eruption of conflict in Europe again in 1939 led to civil rights protests in the early 1940s and violent racial incidents between white southerners and black northerners at military bases across the United States. The issue was responsible for the Harlem riot of 1943. The climax of *Invisible Man* is a riot in Harlem allegedly instigated by the Brotherhood; the event is based in part on a riot that occurred there in 1935, which some commentators blamed on communist agitators.
Setting

The story takes place in a small southern town, at the nearby college for blacks, and in New York City during the late 1930s. Although Ellison denies any autobiographical elements in the novel, the town and college are reminiscent of his own Tuskegee Institute. More important than the place is the time of the setting. The narrator arrives in New York during the rise of socialism, expecting to contribute to and benefit from the changing times. Instead, he is continually duped. He lives in a basement apartment illuminated by 1,369 light bulbs, which provide, symbolically, enough light to examine his identity but which physically would produce enough heat to destroy life. Through a mistake, the power company pays his electric bill. A cave dweller, invisible to the world, the narrator searches for enlightenment within a supposedly enlightened society.
Literary Style

Point of View
At the outset of *Invisible Man*, the unnamed hero is in transition. He has discovered that he is invisible and has retreated from the world in defiance; but the reader senses that all is not resolved. In the adventure that the invisible man proceeds to relate in the first person (‘‘I’’), his voice changes over time from that of a naive young man, to someone who is clearly more responsible though still confused, to a person willing to deal with the world whatever the risks. The novel is framed by a Prologue and Epilogue. The story opens in the present, switches to flashback, and then returns to the present, but a step forward from the Prologue. Writing down the story has helped the hero to make up his mind about things. Leonard J. Deutsch attributes the complexity of the novel in part to this juxtaposition of perspectives of the ‘‘I’’ of the naive boy and the ‘‘I’’ of the older, wiser narrator. Anthony West, on the other hand, writing in *The New Yorker*, called the Prologue and the Epilogue ‘‘intolerably arty … the two worst pieces of writing in the work.’’

Setting
*Invisible Man* is set in an indeterminate time frame sometime between the 1930s and 1950s. The protagonist's adventures take him from an unnamed southern town to New York City, mirroring the migration during the period of the novel of over a quarter of a million African Americans from the rural South to the urban North in search of jobs. The novel opens on the campus of a southern black college whose buildings and environs are repeatedly described in honeyed terms. Nevertheless, in retrospect the hero remembers it also as a flower-studded wasteland maintained by the money of white philanthropists blind to the surrounding poverty. The action then moves to Harlem, a part of New York City associated with several political and cultural elements of importance in the novel: the active recruiting of black intellectuals by the Communist party in the United States, the rise of black nationalism, and the golden age of jazz.

Symbol
*Invisible Man* is rich with symbols that have given critics fertile ground for interpretation. For example, the ‘‘battle royal’’ that opens the book represents the novel in a nutshell and serves as a microcosmic portrayal of race relations in a socially segregated society. The narrator will clutch to him the briefcase the Board of Education awards him throughout his adventures, though he will burn its contents—which symbolize his middle-class aspirations—at the end. Ellison gives his characters names that often suggest something about their personalities, for example, Dr. Bledsoe, Jim Trueblood, Brother Wrestrum, or equally significant, as in the case of the protagonist, he does not name them at all. Songs figure significantly in the novel. In the prologue, for instance, the hero remembers the words to a Louis Armstrong song, ‘‘What did I do / To be so black / And blue?’’ and at the end of the catastrophic visit to the slave quarters, which will result in the hero's expulsion from college, the children are singing, ‘‘London Bridge Is Falling Down.’’ The lobotomy-like operation undertaken to make the hero more amiable backfires and instead brings him somewhat to himself, constituting a symbolic rebirth.

Literary Styles
The many stylistic elements used in *Invisible Man* are part of what make it such a literary tour de force. Warren French, for example, has described the formal organization of the narrative as ‘‘a series of nested boxes that an individual, trapped in the constricting center, seeks to escape.’’ Several critics cite the use of varied literary styles, from the naturalism of the events at the college campus, to the expressionism, or subjective emotions, of the hero's time with the Brotherhood, to the surrealism that characterizes the riot at the end of the novel. *Invisible Man* can be classed as a *bildungsroman*, or novel of education, similar to Voltaire's *Candide*, in which the hero moves from innocence to experience. It has also been called picaresque because of the episodic nature of the hero's adventures, but this term implies a shallowness that the invisible man is finally able to overcome. Comedy and irony are used to good effect in both the episode with Jim Trueblood and the scene at the Golden Day. But most important, Ellison drew on the knowledge of African American
folklore he acquired in his days with the Federal Writers Project, and the influence of that tradition, particularly jazz and the blues, is inextricably woven into the thought and speech of the characters. The Reverend Homer A. Barbee's address, for example, is alive with gospel rhythms: ‘‘But she knew, she knew! She knew the fire! She knew the fire! She knew the fire that burned without consuming! My God, yes!’’
Lit\(a\)ry Techniques

*Invisible Man* is primarily a naturalistic novel, rather than a realistic one. As in the novels of Emile Zola, Theodore Dreiser, and Frank Norris, the characters are limited by the circumstances of birth, intelligence, and social upbringing, seriously raising questions of the existence of free will in human beings. As Ihab Hassan observed, the characters are "sleepwalkers all, captives of their particular illusion, hence grotesques in the sense Sherwood Anderson gave to that word." Critics have pointed out that each turn in the narrator's fate is based not upon some willing act of his own, but upon accidental occurrences. Only the narrator's acceptance of invisibility seems to be an act of will, and yet even his discovery of the underground is precipitated by an accident. Also in the tradition of naturalism is the general tendency to have the characters represent types of people, rather than idiosyncratic individuals. Despite the fascinating array of characters, most can be generalized. Ras might be typical of back-to-Africa extremists, Bledsoe of establishment black leaders, and Norton of deluded philanthropists. To say, however, that *Invisible Man* is unrealistic is not to denigrate it. The novel operates on a near mythic level in which the interplay of symbols and meaning is designed to create greater insight than strict realism can give.

Ellison also exhibits greater flexibility than most of the naturalist writers. *Invisible Man* is often described as being surrealistic, because of the other worldliness of certain scenes and because it tries to go beyond reality to a higher level of truth. The dreamlike quality of the hospital scene, for example, is certainly not realistic and goes beyond the usual techniques of naturalism — although one can find dream sequences in Zola and others. As a whole, however, the novel cannot properly be called surreal, as its distortions are not sufficiently disorienting and because Ellison so strongly evokes a realistic sense of place. The feeling of the black college in the South and of Harlem are vivid and capture the corresponding reality of such places. Despite Ellison's occasional forays into the more adventurous techniques of the dream landscape, he tightly holds the reins and keeps *Invisible Man* within the limits of naturalism.

Another aspect of Ellison's technique, which has already been alluded to, is his frequent use of puns, allusions, and blatant symbolism. These literary devices create a detachment in the reader and a strong awareness of the presence of the novelist. If one, for example, notes that the name Tod means "death" in German and links it to Tod Clifton's fate, one takes pleasure in the author's cleverness, but in doing so, becomes aware of the book as contrivance, an awareness authors of the realistic school try to discourage. As earlier mentioned, these devices constitute a major portion of the techniques of postmodernism, and although they are neither invented by Ellison nor turn *Invisible Man* into a so-called "experimental" novel, they do add another level of complexity to an already complex book.
Literary Qualities

As in the naturalistic novels of Emile Zola, Theodore Dreiser, and Frank Norris, characters in *Invisible Man* are limited by the circumstances of birth, intelligence, and social upbringing. The naturalistic tradition raises serious questions about the existence of free will in human beings. Critics have pointed out that each turn in the fate of Ellison's narrator is based not upon willed action but upon accidental occurrence. Only the narrator's acceptance of invisibility seems an act of will. Also in the tradition of naturalism is the characters' general tendency to represent types rather than unique individuals. Despite the book's fascinating array of characters, most can be generalized: Ras is a typical backto-Africa extremist, Bledsoe an establishment black leader, and Norton a deluded philanthropist. *Invisible Man* operates on a near-mythic level where the interplay of symbols and meaning creates greater insight than a work of strict realism could provide.

Ellison exhibits greater flexibility than most naturalistic writers. *Invisible Man* is often described as surrealistic because of the otherworldliness of certain passages. As a whole, however, the novel cannot properly be labelled surreal; its distortions are not sufficiently disorienting, and Ellison strongly evokes a realistic sense of place. His vivid descriptions of Harlem and of the black college in the South capture the corresponding realities of such places. Despite Ellison's occasional forays into the more adventurous literary technique of the dream landscape, he keeps *Invisible Man* within the limits of naturalism.

Another literary device is Ellison's frequent use of puns, allusions, and blatant symbolism to create a sense of detachment in the reader and a strong awareness of the novelist's presence. Tod Clifton's first name, for example, means "death" in German. In light of Clifton's fate, Ellison's choice of name can be considered either a clever stroke or a contrivance. Characteristic of postmodernism, such deliberately playful, self-conscious techniques do not necessarily earn *Invisible Man* classification as an "experimental" novel, but they do add another level of complexity to an already complex book.

I am what I am.

Ellison's concept of the art of writing is strongly grounded in the tradition of Western literature. Critics have identified possible influences on Ellison's work ranging from the Russian authors whom he admired to other black American authors. One obvious literary precedent is Feodor Dostoevski's *Notes from the Underground*, in which the narrator becomes "The Underground Man" in order to distance himself from conventional society and thereby find his true self. Similarities in theme and structure create strong parallels between Dostoevski's short novel and Ellison's longer one. Further connections have been drawn with Richard Wright's short story "The Man Who Lived Underground." The nameless narrator of Invisible Man is clearly a descendant of Franz Kafka's Joseph K. in *The Trial*, particularly in his complicity in his own abuse. *Invisible Man* also contains numerous allusions to T. S. Eliot's poem "Ash Wednesday" and drama *Family Reunion*.

Because of its subject matter, Ellison's novel naturally draws upon the work of many American authors—among them nineteenth-century writers such as Mark Twain, Walt Whitman, Herman Melville, and Ralph Waldo Emerson. Emerson's philosophy of transcendentalism, in particular, forms a foundation for the narrator's quest for independence and his eventual acceptance of invisibility.

Ellison and Richard Wright grew to be close friends upon Ellison's arrival in New York in 1936. The older author encouraged Ellison to write, and *Invisible Man* bears the strong marks of Wright's influence. Other black Americans who influenced Ellison's work include James Weldon Johnson, W. E. B. Du Bois, Countee Cullen, Claude Mc-Kay, and Jean Toomer.
Social Concerns

Although *Invisible Man* has universal appeal in its reflection of the human condition, it is deeply rooted in the social problems faced by blacks in the United States. After World War II, great changes in the relationships between the races were obviously on the way. The military was desegregated, the color barriers in sports were brought down, and, about the time *Invisible Man* was published, the Supreme Court made its historic ruling against separate but equal schools. One of the reasons *Invisible Man* has been an enduring work is its contribution over the past thirty-five years to the ongoing dialogue between blacks and whites. The novel is subtler than most works dealing with racial oppression. Telling the tale through symbolism and certain deliberate distortions, it avoids being either a political harangue or a simple allegory. Its generally naturalistic style allows readers of any race to identify with the main character's humiliations, disappointments, and anger. Neither whites nor blacks are portrayed as being totally evil, nor totally without flaw, as one sees in the politically effective, but now virtually unread, *Uncle Tom's Cabin* (Stowe, 1852).

Another of Ellison's primary concerns is the extent to which black culture has formed and contributed to American culture, although that contribution has been absorbed and ignored. A powerful image in the novel which demonstrates this relationship is the episode at the paint factory in which the narrator mixes black dope into white paint. The dope disappears into the white without darkening it, but the paint will not dry properly without the additive. Also, the narrator discovers that deep in the bowels of the factory is an old black man whose intuitive operation of the boilers is superior to any engineer's and who makes the paint possible. Similar light and dark imagery weaves through the book. With a strong background in jazz, perhaps Ellison has always been more aware of the symbiotic relationship between the races. Jazz has been called America's major contribution to Western music and is primarily black in origin. In an interview with John Hersey, Ellison explained, "What makes for a great deal of black fury is the refusal of many Americans to understand that somebody paid for the nation's peace and prosperity in terms of blood and frustrated dreams." He adds that it was not only blacks who paid for America's success, thereby widening the category of underprivileged who became "invisible" as they were absorbed into the mainstream white, Anglo-Saxon, Protestant culture.

Additional Commentary

Of universal appeal in its reflection of the human condition, *Invisible Man* is deeply rooted in the social problems faced by blacks in the United States. After World War II race relations began to shift dramatically: the military was desegregated, the color barriers in sports broke down, and, in 1954, the Supreme Court made its historic ruling against racial segregation in *Brown vs. Board of Education*. More than thirty-five years after its publication, *Invisible Man* remains a timely book because of its ongoing contributions to breaking down prejudice. Subtler than most works dealing with racial oppression, the book employs symbolism and deliberate distortions to make its points, and successfully avoids being labeled a political harangue or a simple allegory. Ellison refrains from turning any of his characters into one-dimensional paradigms of good or evil, and readers of all races can identify with the main character's humiliations, disappointments, and anger.

One of Ellison's primary concerns is the extent to which black culture has been absorbed and ignored by an American culture it helped form. Two episodes at the paint factory where the narrator works are emblematic of this relationship. First, the narrator must mix black dope into white paint; the dope disappears without darkening the white paint, but the paint will not dry properly without the additive. Second, the narrator discovers that an old black man who works deep in the bowels of the factory intuitively understands how the boilers operate and makes the paint's production possible. Ellison weaves similar light and dark imagery through the book.

In an interview with John Hersey, Ellison explains, "What makes for a great deal of black fury is the refusal of many Americans to understand that somebody paid for the nation's peace and prosperity in terms of blood and
frustrated dreams." He adds that underprivileged citizens of all races have become "invisible" as they are absorbed into mainstream white, Anglo-Saxon, Protestant culture. *Invisible Man* treats the plight of all "invisible" citizens with sensitivity but challenges the society that continues to deny them full individuality.
Compare and Contrast

• **1930s:** Following an active policy of inclusion, the Communist party recruits many black leaders and thinkers.

  1952: A ‘‘witch-hunt’’ for communists begun by U.S. Senator Joseph McCarthy continues through the early 1950s and ruins many careers.

**Today:** The 1980s see the collapse of communism in Eastern Europe. In America, politics is increasingly middle-of-the-road. American communists are a small fringe group.

• **1930s:** The U.S. labor movement gains support under the New Deal, but prejudice against African Americans is widespread.

  1952: Union membership peaks in 1945 at 35.5% of the non-agricultural workforce and is still strong in the 1950s.

**Today:** Unions are fully integrated. But membership is at an all-time low, and unions are forced to compromise on wages and benefits to preserve jobs.

• **1930s:** Brain surgery to correct the behavior of mentally ill patients, or lobotomy, is widely practiced between 1936 and 1956.

  1952: Lobotomy is largely abandoned in favor of alternative treatments including tranquilizers and psychotherapy.

**Today:** Psychoactive drugs have become the first line of treatment for mental illness, and a de-emphasis of institutional care and the closing of mental hospitals have produced increased homelessness.

• **1930s:** Big bands in the swing era give way to bebop, the basis for modern jazz, which arises in Kansas City and Harlem. Major influences are Charlie Parker, Dizzy Gillespie, and Thelonius Monk.

  1952: Progressive, or cool, jazz, with less convoluted melodic lines, begins in New York City in the late 1940s and early 1950s. Lester Young and Miles Davis are major figures in the movement, which is better received critically than bebop.

**Today:** After a period of several decades of experimentation, including a style called fusion, jazz settles into a revivalist phase. Popular artists include Wynton and Branford Marsalis, David Murray, and John Carter.
Topics for Discussion

1. Why do the men who are giving the narrator a scholarship put him through such an ordeal at the club?

2. Why does President Bledsoe give the narrator unfavorable letters of recommendation without telling him about the content? Why does Bledsoe consider the narrator dangerous?

3. Compare the narrator's experience at the white men's club with Norton's at the Golden Day.

4. What is the symbolic significance of the narrator's working in a paint factory?

5. Why does the narrator first adopt, then reject the persona of Rinehart? In what ways does Rinehart restrict his freedom?

6. Why does the narrator first decline to buy a yam from the street vendor, then buy a second one?
Ideas for Reports and Papers

1. The narrator opens the book by saying that people refuse to see him. Analyze passages throughout the book that reinforce or refute this.

2. Some critics think there is an underlying Marxist philosophy at work in *Invisible Man*. Research Marxism and explain any parallels you see in *Invisible Man*.

3. Read Albert Camus's short novel *The Stranger* and compare it to *Invisible Man*.

4. What is the symbolic significance of the narrator's working in a paint factory?

5. Research Ralph Waldo Emerson's philosophy of "transcendentalism" and discuss how it influences the novel.

6. List the various identities or disguises the narrator takes on. What does he learn about his identity from each one?
Topics for Further Study

• Research some of the major demographic shifts occurring in the world today, and compare the reasons for them with those that motivated the Great Migration North of 1910-1970 in the United States.

• Explore current policies in medical ethics and informed consent and explain how these would affect the circumstances of the kind of operation performed on the invisible man in Ellison's novel.

• Investigate current housing laws regarding the elderly, and explain how the couple who are evicted from their apartment in winter in the novel would be affected by them, and what their options for alternative living arrangements might be.
Literary Precedents

Echoes of an extraordinary variety of earlier authors have been found in *Invisible Man*. Ellison himself was familiar with a great number of writers and his whole concept of the art of writing seems based on the tradition of Western literature. Critics have therefore traced the outlines of such disparate sources as the Russian authors which Ellison has admired (and upon whom he has lectured) to black American authors. The most obvious literary precedent is Dostoevsky's *Notes from the Underground* (1864), in which the narrator becomes "The Underground Man" in order to distinguish himself from conventional society and to find his authentic self. Affinities of theme and structure create strong parallels between Dostoevsky's short novel and Ellison's longer one, although the connections have been argued to have been transmitted through Richard Wright's "The Man Who Lived Underground." Parallels with Franz Kafka's *The Trial* (1925) can also be seen. The nameless narrator of *Invisible Man* is clearly a descendent of Kafka's Joseph K., particularly in his complicity in his own abuse. By trying to work within absurd rules, both characters compound the difficulties of their situations. Among other strong European influences is the picaresque tradition, in which a hero encounters a number of characters and situations on his way to self-discovery, and *Ulysses* (1922) by James Joyce.

Because of the subject, the novel naturally draws from many American authors. At Tuskegee, T. S. Eliot's *The Waste Land* (1922) helped awaken Ellison to literature as he wondered why nothing as accomplished had been created to explicate the black experience. Numerous allusions to Eliot's great poem can be found in *Invisible Man*. Eliot's "Ash Wednesday" (1930) and *Family Reunion* (1939) are also alluded to. Several nineteenth-century Americans, including Mark Twain, Walt Whitman, Herman Melville (especially in *The Confidence Man*, 1857), and Ralph Waldo Emerson, have thematic consequence in the novel, particularly the latter. Transcendentalism has been argued to be an important influence on Ellison, as the narrator achieves a transcendent independence in his acceptance of invisibility. Loose connections have also been found to the themes of William Faulkner and Ernest Hemingway.

When Ellison came to New York in the 1930s, he grew very close to Richard Wright and his earliest opportunities in writing were largely through Wright's encouragement. As Ellison's early short stories bear the strong marks of Wright's influence, so does *Invisible Man*, although Ellison (who usually denied being anything like the disciple of Wright that others knew them described) has plainly broken free of imitating his patron. Among other black American influences found in *Invisible Man* are the *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass* (1845), *The Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man* (1912) by James Weldon Johnson, *The Souls of Black Folk* (1903) by W. E. B. Dubois, the poems of Countee Cullen, Claude McKay, and Jean Toomer. There are other precedents and influences too numerous to mention because of Ellison's broad reading and artistic concerns. *Invisible Man* is a rich mine of antecedents and influences.
Media Adaptations

_Invisible Man_ was recorded by Dr. Marion J. Smith for Golden Voice Production, 1993.
What Do I Read Next?

- **Notes of a Native Son** (1955) is the first volume of James Baldwin's eloquent and influential essays about being black in America and abroad.
- **Middle Passage** (1990) is Charles Johnson's National Book Award winning tale of freedman Rutherford Calhoun's voyage to Africa as a stowaway aboard the slave ship Republic.
- **Native Son** (1940) by Richard Wright tells the story of Bigger Thomas's losing battle to escape the traps of race and class in Chicago in the 1930s after the job he takes working for a wealthy white family goes tragically awry.
- Ellison's **Shadow and Act** (1964) is a collection of essays and interviews in which the author explores the meaning of existence and experience.
For Further Reference


Bibliography and Further Reading

Sources


Further Reading


Nadel, Alan. Invisible Criticism: Ralph Ellison and the American Canon. University of Iowa Press, 1988. Nadel reads Ellison's novel as a commentary on the formation of the American literary canon through its allusions to canonical figures such as Emerson, Melville, and Twain.

O'Meally, Robert G. The Craft of Ralph Ellison. Harvard University Press, 1980. An important critical study of Ellison's life and his writing, with particular attention to Ellison's characters and the “fictional world” they inhabit.


Remnick, David. “Visible Man.” In The New Yorker, March 14, 1994, pp 34-38. Published just one month before Ellison's death, this essay discusses the importance of his writings to discussions of race in America since the 1960s.


Trimmer, Joseph F., ed. A Casebook on Ralph Ellison's Invisible Man. Thomas Y. Crowell, 1972. A collection of essays that places Ellison in the context of both a “racial heritage” and an “artistic heritage” and concludes with a listing of “possible discussion questions or research topics.”
Bibliography (Literary Essentials: African American Literature)


Byerman, Keith E. “History Against History: A Dialectical Pattern in Invisible Man.” In Fingering the Jagged Grain: Tradition and Form in Recent Black Fiction. Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1985. Sees Invisible Man as “a crucial text for contemporary black fictionists.” In each of the novel’s major phases, the college, the move to Harlem, and The Brotherhood, Ellison carefully undermines all fixed, cause-and-effect versions of history.


Gayle, Addison, Jr. “Of Race and Rage.” In The Way of the New World. Garden City, N. Y.: Anchor Press, 1975. Suggests this “picturesque novel” to be a four-part history of the “black man’s trials and errors in America.” Argues that the book’s prologue and epilogue add up to a depiction of “soul,” “the richness and fullness” of black heritage. Argues that Invisible Man, however, is to be faulted for its final assimilationism, the flaw of believing in “the path of individualism instead of racial unity.”


Interprets *Invisible Man* through three frames: as a series of ritual transformations, as a work of modernist tactics, and as a jazz improvisation.
