

Invisible Man Study Guide

The Picture Frame

Directions: Read the following information before answering the questions. Be prepared to discuss your responses.

In his prologue and epilogue, Ralph Ellison creates a frame for this story of the twentieth century black experience. He uses a nameless narrator to expose many of the stereotypical ideas people have about the black race. His is a complex story that unravels as the young man is thrown into one experience after another. The depth of Ellison's novel has been explored by many critics and has already inspired whole books. Our study cannot be comprehensive but should open new levels of understanding and appreciation for those who give it their time and attention.

1. Why has Ellison omitted the article *the* or *an* from his title?
2. Read Ellison's definition of *invisibility*. Who is invisible?
3. Read the last sentence of the epilogue. Who is included?
4. Suppose that you are included in the last sentence and he speaks for you. When have you felt invisible?
5. At the end of the second paragraph of the prologue, the narrator explains why people sometimes resort to violence or profanity. Why do people use such actions and words? Why are they seldom successful?
6. Why does the narrator beat up the man who insults him?
7. To understand the role Ras plays, you must pronounce his name "race." How do you expect him and blacks like him to cope with their place in white America?
8. The narrator distinguishes between civilization and culture. What is the difference?
9. Since the narrator feels invisible, he is justified in fighting darkness any way he can. What deeper meaning is implied in his needing so much light in his hole? What is the difference between him as a tinker and those whom he lists as American tinkers?
10. Like Dante's descent into purgatory in *The Divine Comedy*, the narrator's experience with marijuana takes him down into music that reveals parts of the black experience in America. What are the three levels that he passes through?

The Satire Begins

Directions: Read the following information and answer the questions. Be prepared for class discussion.

A Handbook to Literature gives an expanded definition of *irony* that may be helpful in detecting that the first chapter of this novel exemplifies that satirical device.

Irony is likely to be confused with *SARCASM*, but it differs from sarcasm in that it is usually less harsh. Its presence may be marked by a sort of grim humor and "unemotional detachment," a coolness in expression at a time when one's emotions appear to be really heated. Characteristically it speaks words of praise to imply blame and words of blame to imply praise irony applies not only to statement but also to event, situation, and structure.'

1. The narrator recalls the death of his grandfather and the strange statement he made just before he died. What did the narrator learn from his grandfather's talking about yessing people? Why did the grandfather refer to himself as a traitor?

2. Who was Booker T. Washington? What relationship does the narrator feel to him?

3. How is each of the following an example of satire in speech, event, or situation? Label the satirical device Ellison used.
 - a. the men's comments "Bring up the little shins" and "That's right, Sambo."

 - b. the nude dancer with the American flag tattooed on her stomach

 - c. the blindfolds

 - d. the men's behavior and language

4. What is the significance of the school superintendent's presence at the Battle Royal?

5. When the narrator begins to speak, he quotes from one whom he calls "that great leader and educator." Read the citation he makes and explain what it is really saying about black people. What satirical device has Ellison used?

6. When the narrator gets mixed up and says "social equality," he must immediately correct his error. What is the significance of that exchange between the speaker and audience?

7. "I was swallowing blood" seems a simple explanation for his being misunderstood. What is the author implying on a deeper level than the simple statement?

8. Comment on the significance of the superintendent's words as he presents the briefcase to the narrator.

"Boy," he said, addressing me, "take this prize and keep it well. Consider it a badge of office. Prize it. Keep developing as you are and some day it will be filled with important papers that will help shape the destiny of your people."

9. Comment on the significance of the gold coins' being actually "brass pocket tokens advertising a certain make of automobile."

10. What might be foreshadowed by the dream he has about going to the circus with his grandfather?

Contrasts

Directions: chapter 2 is filled with contrasts. Keep in mind the author's satirical purpose as you answer the following:

1. Why do you think Norton does not notice the ragged man dozing in his wagon at the side of the road?

2. In satirical writing, names are often important. Why do you think the author names the sharecropper *Trueblood*?

3. How does the following quotation reveal the distance between Norton and Trueblood? How is it an example of a satirist's use of grim humor? Explain.

"You have looked upon chaos and are not destroyed!" "No suh! I feels all right." "You do? You feel no inner turmoil, no need to cast out the offending eye?" "Suh?" "Answer me!" "I'm all right, suh," Trueblood said uneasily. "My eyes is all right too. And when I feels po'ly in my gut I takes a little soda and it goes away."

4. In what ways is Norton like the men of Greenwood who attended the Battle Royal?

5. How does the hundred-dollar gift fit with Norton's "first-hand organizing of human life"?

Expulsion from Eden

Directions: Answer the questions based on chapters 3-7.

1. List the mistakes the narrator makes that cause his expulsion from school. Include both acts and misconceptions that cause his problems.
2. Compare Jim Trueblood and Mr. Norton by the way that they have reacted after each has looked at chaos.
3. One demented veteran thinks Norton is Thomas Jefferson, his grandfather. What rumors about Thomas Jefferson might Ellison have had in mind? How would the truth of such a rumor destroy some of the superiority white men sometimes claim over black men?
4. Notice that among the veterans is a doctor and a chemist who each earned a Phi Beta Kappa key. What is the significance of the level of education and intelligence these men represent?
5. The doctor says to Norton and the narrator:
"Poor stumblers, neither of you can see the other. To you he is a mark on the scorecard of your achievement, a thing and not a man; a child

or even less-a black amorphous thing. And you, for all your power,
are not a man to him, but a God, a force-

What is the doctor trying to tell them and us about invisibility between individuals of different races or ages?

6. Bledsoe scolds the narrator for taking Norton to places black people wouldn't want a white person to see. Then Bledsoe tells Norton that he will severely discipline the young man and that one can't "be soft with these people." What do these speeches tell you about Bledsoe?
7. Toward the end of chapter 4 we read of Bledsoe's manners toward white people, beginning with, "Hadn't I seen him approach white visitors?" What do Bledsoe's statements tell us about his use of power?
8. The narrator tells how Bledsoe first came to the campus. This is an excellent example of using praise to imply blame as he says that Bledsoe "had made himself the best slop dispenser in the history of the school." What is the blame the narrator unwittingly has voiced?
9. What ability does Homer A. Barbee display as he speaks? What does his speech lack? What is the significance of the revelation that he is blind?
10. Considering what the narrator has just heard and seen, what is the meaning of the following sentence? "With such words fresh in his mind, I was sure Dr. Bledsoe would be far less sympathetic to my plea."
11. Reread Bledsoe's diatribe against the narrator, found at the beginning of chapter 6. What does it reveal about Bledsoe personally? about his care for the students? about the driving force of his life? what he considers the greatest humiliation? what he will do to stay in power?
12. What appears to be the narrator's greatest humiliation in this interview?
13. What early message from a relative of the narrator foreshadowed Bledsoe's remark, "Boy, I'm getting rid of you!"?
14. What is the significance of the snake crawling into the iron pipe at the side of the road?
15. The narrator speaks of his "prize brief case." Why is it of such value to him?
16. What new roles does the narrator see for black people in New York that he has never observed in the South?

A New Life in New York

Midway through chapter 9

1. How do we know that the narrator's naive optimism continues as he goes to see Mr. Emerson?
2. What does the young Emerson mean when he says, "They're all loyal Americans"? What is satirical about that remark?
3. What did the narrator's grandfather mean when he said, "Don't let no white man tell you his business, 'cause after he tells you he's liable to git shame he tole it to you and then he'll hate you. Fact is, he was hating you all the time"? Is that true, or was his grandfather paranoid?
4. What does young Emerson mean when he says, "I'm Huckleberry"?
5. What is the significance of young Emerson's catching himself when he says, "Some of the finest people I know are Neg-"?
6. Read the last sentence of Dr. Bledsoe's letter. What did he really mean? Is it something you've read in *Invisible Man* before?
7. How does the Robin tune apply to the narrator? How is his experience with the New York executives like the earlier experience in the Battle Royal?

The Fog of Optic White

Directions: Consider the satiric intent of the author as you answer the following questions. Be prepared for class discussion.

1. What is the underlying meaning of the motto the narrator sees as he comes through the fog?
2. The plant produces paint for the government and uses a screaming eagle as a trademark. What is the significance of those facts?
3. What odd ingredient is necessary in a small amount to create Optic White? How does that fit the title and one of the themes of the book? What is the difference between what Mr. Kimbro sees in the color and what the narrator sees? What might it mean?
4. How is the narrator's dismissal from his job similar to his expulsion from school?
5. Lucius Brockway, the black supervisor to whom the narrator is transferred, is a strange person. Considering the location of his workroom and his appearance, whom does he resemble?

6. What is the importance of Brockway's job? Considering whom he resembles, what is the author saying about the origin of Optic White?
7. What is the significance of the narrator's reading the slogan "If It's Optic White, It's the Right White" and his interpreting it as "If you're white, you're right"?
8. Notice the name the union members apply to the narrator when he enters their meeting and the name they use when they find out where he works. What is important about the difference?
9. As the narrator recalls the feeling that he is falling in space after the explosion, he says, "My head pressed back against a huge wheel." What might the author intend by the wheel? How does that image fit the theme?
10. Tie together what the narrator was taught about treating his elders and his reaction to Brockway's threat, what Brockway represents, and the fact that the young man is involved in an explosion.

The Search for Identity

Directions: Read the following information and answer the questions to discover the first steps the narrator makes in his search for identity.

Until this point in the story, the narrator has done little questioning of his identity. First he allowed his identity to be determined by the people of Greenwood, then by the personnel of the state college for Negroes. Even after he was sent to New York, he was dependent upon state college personnel for what he thought would be recommendations for work; next, he relied on Kimbro and Brockway for guidance at the Liberty Paint factory. After the explosion at the factory, he was subjected to a treatment that involved electrical pressure, a replacement for frontal lobotomy surgery often used on mental patients to make them less violent and more tractable. At the beginning of chapter 11, the narrator is being treated and experiencing confusion about the result. Through his somewhat delirious thoughts, he comes to the conclusion that if he can discover who he is, he will be free. Thus begins the process of his individual search for identity.

1. Early in chapter 11, the narrator wants to talk to the hospital staff to find the bridge between reality and illusion. How does the nonsense poem he remembers his grandmother quoting relate to the first time he saw dogs chasing black prisoners? What coping skills was she trying to teach him?
2. What does the doctor's confidence in his machine satirize about our modern society?
3. What are the results the doctor expects to get from the treatment? What does that satirically say white society hopes to achieve in dealing with minorities, particularly black people?

4. During the treatment, the doctors decide to have some fun at the narrator's expense. Explain the satire in their remarks about his dancing and having rhythm. Are these stereotypes still a part of today's society?
5. What is significant about the narrator's inability to remember either his own name or his mother's?
6. Explain the importance of his statement, "When I discover who I am, I'll be free."
7. What is satirical about the company's willingness to pay if it is not held responsible?
8. The narrator finally says he is no longer afraid. Explain the importance of that statement to discovering his identity.

Learning about the Brotherhood

Directions: Scan chapters 16 and 17 to find the answers to the following questions.

1. Although it seems that the narrator is open to being a part of the Brotherhood, there are clues that he has some suspicions about the organization and Brother Jack. List the evidence you find in chapter 16 and the first few pages of chapter 17 (up to the break in the text at which point Tod Clifton is introduced).
2. One night Tod and the narrator get into a fight with Ras, who will not kill one of his fellow black persons. After the fight, Ras gives the two young men some warnings about the Brotherhood. What are they?
3. Later, Tod says that Ras is dangerous. Explain why he feels that way and what he means by "sometimes a man has to plunge outside history."
4. What do the last three sentences of chapter 17 reveal about the philosophical position the narrator has adopted?
5. Read the last sentence of chapter 16. What was the narrator's feeling about the Brotherhood in relationship to his work? Compare that to his philosophy at the end of chapter 17. What change has taken place in his thinking?

Running from Harlem and Back

Directions: Answer the following questions. Be prepared to discuss your responses.

1. What does the following thought reveal about the narrator? "No, it wasn't me he was worried about becoming too big, it was the Brotherhood."
2. The woman who invites the narrator to her apartment says, "Women should be absolutely as free as men." Considering the time period of the novel, what should he have suspected?
3. While she talks on the phone he thinks of "forgotten stories of male servants." Why is this significant? What does he mean when he ends with, "But this is the movement, the Brotherhood"?
4. When the husband comes in, he doesn't seem surprised; but when the narrator thinks about the incident, he toys with Tarp's leg chain. What does the linking of these two things mean?
5. Tod Clifton's disappearance motivates the leaders to send the narrator back to Harlem. How does it fit the pattern of this segment of the story? What question remains about the reason why he was being sent downtown to lecture on the Woman Question?

Tod Clifton and the Brotherhood

Directions: Answer the following questions about the role played by Tod Clifton. Be prepared for class discussion.

1. Describe Tod Clifton's dolls. How are they made to dance?
2. The dolls are a caricature of the Negro in a white world. What is satirical about the name Tod gives the dolls? the two-sided, grinning faces? the price Tod asks? the line, "The sunshine of your lordly smile"?
3. Remembering the Battle Royal when someone shouted "Sambo" at the boys and the comments the infirmary doctor made about the narrator's dancing during the shock therapy, what do Tod's dancing dolls represent?
4. Considering that Brother Jack said history had passed by the old evicted couple and then that history had been born in the narrator's brain when he spoke at the eviction, how do you interpret the idea that Tod has "plunged outside history," as Ras had said some people must do?

5. Of what events in the United States does the policeman's treatment of Tod remind you?

A Time of Revelation

Directions: Answer the following questions based upon chapters 21-22.

1. What remark by Brother Jack shows that he believes in white supremacy?
2. As the narrator looks at Brother Jack after all that has happened, what does he notice about him? What have Brother Jack's remarks and actions shown him to be?
3. Compare Brother Jack to Homer Barbee, the man who spoke at the college chapel.
12. What does the narrator mean when he says, "Some of me, too, had died with Tod Clifton"?

Invisible Visibility

Directions: Read the following information and answer the questions.

Ras the Exhorter is becoming Ras the Destroyer, who sends his thugs out after the narrator. To Ras, the narrator is the personification of the Brotherhood and must be destroyed after abandoning Harlem. In his run from Ras' thugs, the narrator becomes acquainted with an elusive figure who has learned to work the system to his own advantage at the expense of everyone else.

1. After having encountered Ras and his thugs, how does the narrator make his escape?
2. Whom do several people mistake the narrator to be?
3. Why does the narrator buy a hat?
4. What does the narrator mean when he wonders if the man is both "mind and heart"?
5. The narrator muses that "outside the Brotherhood we were outside history; but inside of it they didn't see us." What does he mean?

Apocalypse Gone Awry

Part A.

Directions: Read the following information.

At the end of chapter 23, the narrator asks himself how Rinehart would get information about the inner workings of the Brotherhood. The narrator then decides he will find some woman close to one of the leaders, someone who could be made to spill out the secrets the men have been withholding from him. He can't use Emma, Jack's mistress, for she is too sophisticated; instead, he chooses Sybil because she can be plied with drink and will respond to attention since she is apparently unaccustomed to getting much from her husband. The encounter becomes another of Ralph Ellison's ironic twists.

Part B.

Directions: Use information from dictionaries, encyclopedias, books about ancient Greeks and Romans, or the Internet to answer the following questions.

1. What was a sibyl? (Notice the difference in spelling from the woman's name.)
2. What were the Sibylline Books?
3. What was Cumae? Where was it located?
4. Who was the Cumaean Sibyl? What connection did she have to the Sibylline Books?
5. Who was King Tarquin the Proud? What connection did he have to the Sibylline Books?
6. What place did the sibyls have in the Sistine Chapel?
7. Having considered who the sibyls were and what their places were in religion and government, what is ironic about using Sybil as the character's name?

The End as a Beginning

Directions: Read the following information and answer the questions.

The epilogue presents a philosophy of life that reflects existential thinking. Keep what you know of that philosophy in mind as you decipher what Ralph Ellison is saying in this final section.

1. Read the second paragraph of the epilogue. What does the narrator learn from the paradoxical problems he finds in dealing with people?
2. At the end of that paragraph, the narrator says that the situation makes him feel ill. Explain what he has found so distressing.
3. In the past, how has the narrator interpreted his grandfather's advice to "yes" the white people?
4. How does he now interpret what his grandfather may have meant?
5. According to the Declaration of Independence, what are some of those principles on which our country was founded?
6. In deciding what he wants, the narrator says, "not the freedom of a Rinehart or the power of a Jack, nor simply the freedom not to run." What then does he decide that he wants?
7. What does he mean when he tells Mr. Norton, "Take any train; they all go to the Golden D-"?
8. The narrator reflects that there is no reason to return to the South, which he now calls the "heart of darkness" because "the true darkness lies within my own mind." Then he comments that "all life seen from the hole of invisibility is absurd." What is he saying about his position and responsibility in modern society?
9. The narrator's revelations could have caused him to hate, but he says that the act of putting it down on paper has taken away some anger; now he both hates and loves. What value does he see in accepting such ambivalence?
10. The narrator says that the mind can't be whipped and must always remember that behind its plan of living is a chaotic background. What does he mean?
11. In the prologue, the narrator wrote of the Monopolated Light and Power: "I use their service and pay them nothing at all, and they don't know it." Now he says that "even an invisible man has a socially responsible role to play." Explain his change in attitude.