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Prestwick House
Literature
Teaching Unit

Chapter-by-Chapter Study Guide



Invisible Man

by Ralph Ellison

- Learning objectives
- Study Guide with short-answer questions
- Background information
- Vocabulary in context
- Multiple-choice test
- Essay questions
- Literary terms



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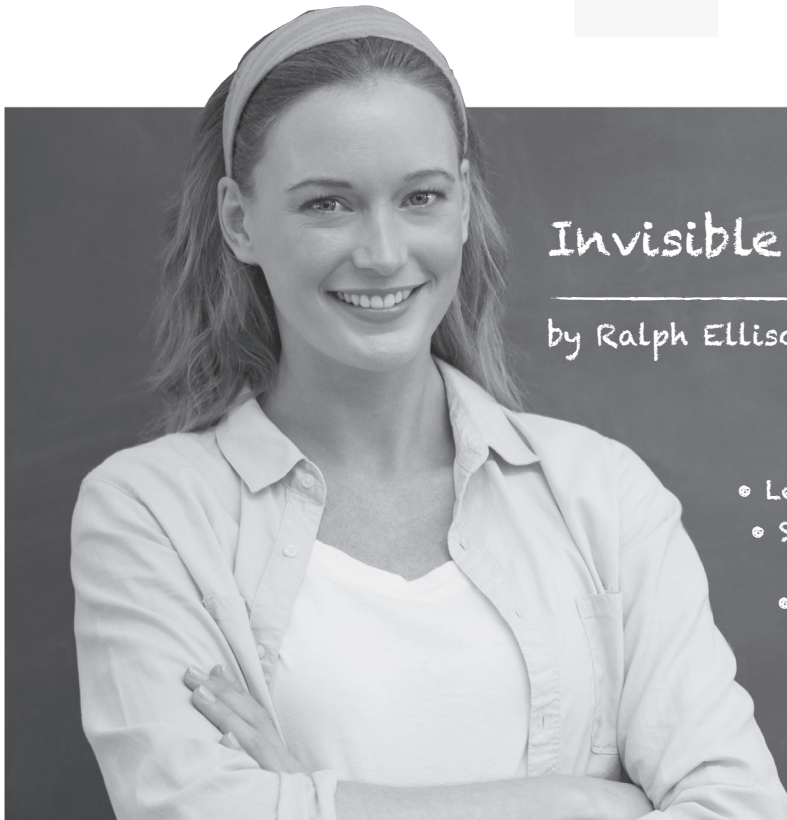
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Objectives

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

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

Questions for Essay and Discussion

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

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

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

Invisible Man

Prologue

VOCABULARY

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

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

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

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

3. How does the narrator feel when he sees Dr. Bledsoe patting the backs of the white patrons just before Barbee begins his speech?

4. What is the legend of how Dr. Bledsoe first came to the college? What is the symbolic connection between young Bledsoe's first job and his current position?

5. In what ways does the speaker compare the Founder to Jesus and Moses? Identify at least two quotes from the text. What might be harmful about portraying the Founder in such idealistic terms?

6. Barbee's epic speech is filled with poetic language and literary devices. Identify at least one example of each of the following literary terms as you read the speech: alliteration, personification, simile, metaphor.

Chapter Nine

VOCABULARY

catharsis – an emotional release
coup de grace – [*French*] “final blow”
cynicism – a negative attitude; distrust
deportment – one’s behavior; manner
ebony – a hard, dark wood; the color black
exasperated – greatly annoyed; frustrated
helical – spiral-shaped
malicious – spiteful; harmful
rookery – a crowded tenement
sadistic – deriving pleasure from cruelty

1. What is Ellison saying about the narrator in the following passage, as the narrator tries to step away from the man singing the blues in the street?

“...who got the damn dog? Now I know you from down home, how come you trying to act like you never heard that before! Hell, ain’t nobody out here this morning but us colored—Why you trying to deny me?”

2. How does the campus gossip about Dr. Bledsoe help him maintain his power and leadership at the college?

3. What does young Mr. Emerson say about ambition?

4. Briefly summarize the letter from Dr. Bledsoe to Mr. Emerson. What is the narrator’s reaction to the letter?
