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Teaching Ralph Ellison's

Invisible Man

from

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General Introduction to the Work

Introduction to *Invisible Man*

I*NVISIBLE MAN* IS A FIRST-PERSON novel that explores experimental boundaries of narrative point of view, much in the same way that Faulkner does in many of his novels. This novel simultaneously follows many conventions of the picaresque novel. The word *picaresque* comes from the Spanish word *picaro*, which means “scoundrel” or “rascal.” The picaresque novel is a satirical account of the rogue’s progress through society, making his or her way by wits alone in a corrupt society. Perhaps the most well-known example for high school students would be Twain’s *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, although Voltaire’s *Candide* and Kerouac’s *On the Road* also have picaresque elements.

In this story, we have an unnamed narrator who comes from a poor black family in the South. On a bizarre night, he emerges with a scholarship to a black college, but his misadventures there leave him alone, and virtually penniless, in Harlem. His college president, his first employer in New York City, and the leaders of the political movement he eventually joins all conspire to use and abuse him in ways that range from ridiculous to cruel; yet he manages to maintain a relative equilibrium and emerge strengthened from the process, determined to continue the war for racial equality.

Formalist Theory Applied to *Invisible Man*



Notes on the Formalist Approach

THE FORMALIST APPROACH TO LITERATURE was developed at the beginning of the 20th century and remained popular until the 1970s, when other literary theories began to gain popularity. Today, formalism is generally regarded as a rigid, and inaccessible means to read literature, used in Ivy League classrooms and as the subject of scorn in rebellious coming-of-age films. It is an approach that is concerned primarily with *form*, as its name suggests, and thus places the greatest emphasis on *how* something is said, rather than *what* is said. Formalists believe that a work is a separate entity—not at all dependent upon the author's life or the culture in which the work is created. No paraphrase is used in a formalist examination, and no reader reaction is discussed.

Originally, formalism was a new and unique idea. The formalists were called “New Critics,” and their approach to literature became the standard academic approach. Like classical artists such as da Vinci and Michaelangelo, the formalists concentrated more on the form of the art rather than the content. They studied the recurrences, the repetitions, the relationships, and the motifs in a work in order to understand what the work was about. The Formalists viewed the tiny details of a work as nothing more than parts of the whole. In the formalist approach, even a lack of form indicates something. Absurdity is in itself a form—one used to convey a specific meaning (even if the meaning is a lack of meaning).

The formalists also looked at smaller parts of a work to understand the meaning. Details like diction, punctuation, and syntax all give clues.



Activity One

Examination of Text for Shifts in Tone

1. In groups, or independently, students should examine the following scenes:

- **Chapter Five:** The narrator's italicized internal monologue during Rev. Barbee's speech
- **Chapter Twelve:** The narrator's italicized thoughts when he meets Mary Rambo
- **Prologue:** The italicized riff in the Prologue

Then, they should answer the following questions:

- What differences do you see in the narrator's emotional state in the italicized portions, as opposed to the portions in normal text on both sides of the portions?
 - What specific literary devices in those passages demonstrate those changes in emotion?
 - What purpose does separating these portions from the surrounding text have?
 - What similarities do you see between these italicized portions and lyrics to a song, or to poetry in general?
2. After the students answer these questions in their small groups, have the full class reconvene to discuss how Ellison uses form to communicate the emotional and psychological states of his narrator.

Marxist Theory Applied to *Invisible Man*



Notes on the Marxist Approach

THE MARXIST APPROACH TO LITERATURE is based on the philosophy of Karl Marx, a German philosopher and economist. His major argument was that whoever controlled the means of production in society controlled the society—whoever owned the factories “owned” the culture. This idea was called “dialectical materialism,” and Marx felt that the history of the world was leading toward a communist society. From his point of view, the means of production (i.e., the basis of power in society) would be placed in the hands of the masses who actually operated production, not in the hands of those few who owned it. It was a perverted version of this philosophy that was at the heart of the Soviet Union. Marxism was also the rallying cry of the poor and oppressed all over the world.

To read a work from a Marxist perspective, one must understand that Marxism asserts that literature is a reflection of culture, and that culture can be affected by literature (Marxists believed literature could instigate revolution). Marxism is linked to Freudian theory by its concentration on the subconscious—Freud dealt with the individual subconscious, while Marx dealt with the political subconscious. Marx believed that oppression exists in the political subconscious of a society—social pecking orders are inherent to any group of people.

Four main areas of study:

- economic power
- materialism versus spirituality
- class conflict
- art, literature, ideologies



Activity One

Finding the Difference Between Ostensible and Real Power

1. This activity can be done independently, in pairs, or in small groups. Have students analyze the following scenes:
 - the narrator's meeting with Dr. Bledsoe before being expelled from the college (Chapter Six);
 - the narrator's meeting with young Mr. Emerson in New York City (Chapter Nine).
 - What words does Dr. Bledsoe use that indicate his scorn for the traditional concerns of the black community about prejudice?
 - How might other members of the black community react if they were to hear what Dr. Bledsoe tells the narrator?
 - How does the narrator describe the discomfort that young Mr. Emerson feels during their meeting? How does physical description show the differences between Dr. Bledsoe's and young Mr. Emerson's attitudes toward the narrator?
 - What do the actual contents of Dr. Bledsoe's letter tell the reader about his commitment to racial justice?

Mythological/Archetypal Analysis Applied to *Invisible Man*



Notes on the Mythological/Archetypal Approach

MYTHOLOGICAL, ARCHETYPAL, AND PSYCHOLOGICAL CRITICISM are all closely related. This is because Freud formulated many theories around the idea of the social archetype, and his pupil, Carl Jung, expanded and refined Freud's theories into a more cross-cultural philosophy.

Critics who examine texts from a mythological/archetypal standpoint are looking for symbols. Jung said that an archetype is “a figure...that repeats itself in the course of history wherever creative fantasy is fully manifested.” He believed that human beings were born innately knowing certain archetypes. The evidence of this, Jung claimed, lies in the fact that some myths are repeated throughout history in cultures and eras that could not possibly have had any contact with one another. Many stories in Greek and Roman mythology have counterparts in Chinese and Celtic mythology, long before the Greek and Roman Empires spread to Asia and northern Europe. Most of the myths and symbols represent ideas that human beings could not otherwise explain (the origins of life, what happens after death, etc.) Every culture has a creation story, a life after death belief, and a reason for human failings, and these stories—when studied comparatively—are far more similar than different.

When reading a work looking for archetypes or myths, critics look for very general recurring themes, characters, and situations. In modern times, the same types of archetypes are used in film, which is why it has been so easy for filmmakers to take a work like Jane Austen's *Emma* and adapt it into the typical Hollywood film *Clueless*. By drawing on those feelings, thoughts, concerns, and issues that have been a part of the human condition in every generation, modern authors allow readers to know the characters in a work with little or no explanation. Imagine how cluttered stories would be if the author had to give every detail about every single minor character that entered the work!



Activity One

Analysis of Mary Rambo

1. Have students, independently, in pairs, or in small groups reread the italicized part of Chapter Twelve, in which the narrator first encounters Mary Rambo, after he emerges from the subway tunnel and answer the following questions:
 - In what ways does Mary nurture the narrator in this passage? How is this nurturing continued after he moves in as her boarder?
 - Why is it significant that this nurturing comes from a woman?
 - How does Mary fill other parts of the Earth Goddess role? How does she demonstrate an instinctive sort of power over those around her?