Invisible Man Study Guide

Invisible Man by Ralph Ellison

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Introduction

At its appearance in 1952, *Invisible Man* was immediately hailed as a masterpiece A work both epic and richly comic, It won the National Book Award for its author, Ralph Ellison. *Invisible Man* has been translated into fourteen languages and has never been out of print. A 1965 Book Week poll of two hundred writers and critics selected it as the most distinguished novel of the previous twenty years. Written in the style of a *bildungsroman,* or novel of education, the book chronicles the sometimes absurd adventures of a young black man whose successful search for identity ends with the realization that he is invisible to the white world. *Invisible Man* is structurally complex and densely symbolic; some critics, in fact, faulted it for what they saw as literary excess. A major controversy centered on the book's intended audience: some black critics argued that it was or should have been a "race" novel, while white critics were relieved that It was not. It also aroused the ire of black nationalists for sacrificing the broader concerns of black nationhood in the defense of a narrow individualism. This contentiousness dissipated over time, however, and the novel's enduring qualities are now undisputed. *Invisible Man* deals with themes of individuality, identity, history, and responsibility. The protagonist is repeatedly exhorted to look beneath the surface of things. Although Ellison freely acknowledged his debt to both European and African American literary traditions, he used an astonishing range of African American folk forms in constructing his protagonist's universe.

Critics agree that the influence of *Invisible Man* on American literature in general, and its role in bringing the blues and folklore into the mainstream of black experience in particular, is incalculable.

Author Biography

As a boy, Ralph Waldo Ellison announced that his ambition was to become a Renaissance man. "I was taken very early," he would write, "with a passion to link together all I loved within the Negro community and all those things I felt in the world which lay beyond." Ellison was born on March I, 1914, in Oklahoma City, Oklahoma, to Ida Millsap and Lewis Ellison, who died when Ralph was three. Ellison's mother worked tirelessly to provide a stimulating environment for Ralph and his brother, and her influence on the writer was profound.

In 1933, at the age of nineteen, Ellison hopped a freight train to Tuskegee Institute in Macon County, Alabama, where he majored in music. In the summer of 1935 he traveled north to New York City to earn money for his last year in college; he never returned to Tuskegee. Instead, be stayed in New York and worked for a year as a freelance photographer, file clerk, and builder and seller of hi-fi systems, still intending a career in music. But then Richard Wright, the noted author of *Black Boy* and *Native Son,* invited him to write a book review for the 1937 issue of *New Challenge,* and Ellison's career was decided.

In 1938 Ellison joined the Federal Writers Pr0ject, which gave him opportunities to do research and to write, and helped to build his appreciation of folklore. Like other black intellectuals in the 1930s, he found the Communist party's active antiracist stance appealing, but Ellison was also a fervent individualist, and he never became a party member. During 1942 Ellison was managing editor of the *Negro Quarterly,* but thereafter he turned to writing stories. Two of his most acclaimed stories before the publication of *Invisible Man* were "Flying Home" (1944) and "King of the Bingo Game" (1944); both dealt with questions of identity. Ellison met Fanny McConnell in 1944, and the couple married in 1946.

During World War II Ellison served as a cook in the merchant marines. He returned to the United States in 1945 and began *Invisible Man.* The novel appeared in 1952 and was a commercial and critical success, winning the National Book Award in 1953, although some black nationalists felt the novel was not political enough. Ellison continued to write short stories, and in 1964 he published *Shadow and Act,* a collection of essays and interviews about the meaning of experience. Many awards and lecture and teaching engagements followed, both at home and abroad, and Ellison became regarded as an expert on African American culture and folklore, American studies, and creative writing.

The major question of Ellison's later life was whether and when he would publish another novel He had reportedly been working on a book since 1955, but his progress was slow, and in 1967 a fire at Ellison's home destroyed about 350 pages of the manuscript. The novel was left unfinished at his death, although eight excerpts from it have been published in literary journals. In 1986 Ellison published *Going to the Territory,* a collection of previously published speeches, reviews, and essays. He died of pancreatic cancer on April 16, 1994.

Plot Summary

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 comers." 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 he 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 nine 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 Dame 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 narra *tor* 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 Too 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 Too Clifton's disappearance, he finds the movement weakened and disorganized and discovers Clifton on the street hawking paper Samba 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 was 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 comers; 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 inch, 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 dec1des 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 ills "hibernation" and—though still an invisible man in American society—find "a socially responsible role to play."

Introduction

Introduction Summary

Ralph Ellison attempts to explain the origins of this novel in the introduction. Ellison states that although the story takes place in a peacetime setting, it actually came out of another narrative that had been a war novel. In the summer of 1945, Ellison was on sick leave in Vermont when the story began revealing itself to him. Ellison describes working in a nice office in New York, and how no one really questioned his presence there. However, at home in his small apartment neighbors questioned his character for keeping strange hours. Ellison goes on to explain that his wife supported them with dependable income while he wrote.

The novel was written in Harlem, and Ellison used the voices, idioms and political concerns of those people with whom he shares a racial and cultural background – meaning African Americans. The original story Ellison was working on is about an African American pilot, who was taken hostage in a Nazi prisoner of war camp and who happens to be the highest-ranking American there. The main conflict of the story revolves around the racial tension this situation provides. Ellison goes on to describe that all wars are wars within wars for African Americans who have historically fought for the right to fight. Ellison recalls stories from African American soldiers while he was in the Merchant Marines, which address the issue of being equal in times of war but not during times of peace.

While Ellison was working on this story, he began understanding that there was a more complex underlying issue of the character's self-identity. Ellison tells of another story he wrote about another African American soldier being beat up by his fellow Americans, but then was greeted heroically by a group of Welshmen. Ellison begins hearing the voice of a narrator and dealing with the ideas of benign neglect and reverse discrimination. Meanwhile, Ellison is aware that despite these ideas, African Americans are really being kept in check and balance. Ellison describes whites as having a moral blindness to this situation, and therefore this leads to the concept of a character that is invisible. Ellison is aware that there needs to be an element of laughter in the narrator in order for there to be perseverance.

When Ellison sees an advertisement for a "Tom show," or showing of Uncle Tom's Cabin, he embraces the concept that history is a part of the present. Ellison begins noticing various experiences to use in this narrative. For example, Ellison uses his reporting of a riot in 1943 and details from church services and college ceremonies in his novel. Ellison also realizes that with the help of art, even war could be transformed into something deeper. Ellison becomes aware that the idea of invisibility is deep within the American culture.

Ellison tries to keep working on his original novel, and meanwhile tries to conceive of a character that could be a part of the American culture and experience the human

condition. Ellison begins realizing that the character should be young, powerless and ambitious for leadership, but doomed to failure. Giving the character intellectual depth was a struggle for Ellison. However, Ellison realizes that art and democracy can combine to be a raft of hope and draws upon the basic concept that every citizen could ideally become president. Ellison realizes the need for a narrator who can think as well as act. Ellison then had to overcome the task of understanding that there are human universals, but that racial stereotypes exist as well.

Ellison describes enjoying the act of writing this novel and drawing upon the African American culture of storytelling and folktales. Ellison also comments that the words of the prologue contain the ending. It is also important to note that this introduction was written thirty years after the original publication of the novel.

Introduction Analysis

The introduction contains important information about what experiences Ellison called upon in order to write this novel. First, we learn that Ellison's own experiences in Harlem helped him write about this environment. In addition, we learn that the racial tension of the time will play a big role in this novel as well as having history being alive in the present. Furthermore, Ellison's efforts writing his war novel provided him with the motifs and themes of this novel, which deal with invisibility being a part of the American culture. Finally, we learn how Ellison creates his unnamed narrator to be able to fully tell the story.

Prologue

Prologue Summary

The novel opens with an unnamed narrator saying, "I am an invisible man." The narrator goes on to say that he is not a ghost, but he is invisible because people refuse to see him with their inner eyes. The narrator explains that he is not complaining and that sometimes it is to his advantage to be invisible. However, the narrator sometimes doubts his own existence. The man describes an incident when a tall blond man bumps into him, and the narrator insists that he apologize to him. When the man does not, the narrator beats him and nearly stabs him. Later, the narrator sees the blond man in the newspaper claiming he had been mugged.

The narrator says he usually walks softly and does not try to wake the sleeping ones. He says he is carrying on a fight with Monopolated Light & Power by using their service without paying. The narrator explains that he has given up his old way of life, and lives rent-free in the basement of a building for whites. The narrator explains that he has filled this basement with 1,369 lights, and he states that light helps him to confirm his reality and that "The truth is the light and light is the truth."

The narrator owns one radio-phonograph, and he would like to have five in order to really hear the music in his basement, or hole. He describes a time when after asking for a cigarette he was given marijuana. The narrator says being invisible confuses your sense of time, and this is what he hears in Louis Armstrong's music. The narrator compares this with a time when he saw an average man knock out a prizefighter merely because of his timing. The narrator says the marijuana has given him a new way to listen to music, and this statement is followed by a section that describes the depth of the tempo and seeing a group of slave owners bidding for a naked girl. Then even lower, the narrator hears a congregation and preaching. Someone in this vision shouts at the narrator to go away and then he has a discussion with a woman who says she loves her master. Her master is dead because she killed him to save him from her boys whom the master fathered. They talk about freedom, and the woman complains of being dizzy and confused. One of the sons, a big man who is six feet tall, hits the narrator, and tells him to leave his mother alone. Then, the narrator is walking along a dark tunnel and says, "I was sore, and into my being had come a profound craving for tranquility, for peace and quiet, a state I felt I could ever achieve."

After coming out of this reverie, the narrator explains that the music has called him to action, and the narrator explains that he is in hibernation, or in preparation for action. He says that he has not had marijuana since this incident because he does not want to miss his moment of action. The narrator goes on to say how irresponsible his life is, but that "Responsibility rests upon recognition, and recognition is a form of agreement." He ends with saying that sleepwalkers and daydreamers must pay their price for their irresponsibility. Finally, the narrator says he was a coward.

Prologue Analysis

The prologue is full of confusing narration about how this man leads an invisible existence. The prologue, though a bit confusing and shocking, introduces the reader to some very important motifs of the novel. These motifs include the concepts of identity, racial issues, vision, truth, action and power. All of these motifs resurface in numerous ways throughout the novel.

Chapter 1

Chapter 1 Summary

The story goes back twenty years to when the narrator says he had always been looking for something, taking answers from other people, and being naïve. He says it took him a while to realize he was nobody but his invisible self. The narrator's grandparents had been slaves, and he says he was not ashamed of them. He says his grandparents worked hard after they had their freedom. We learn that the narrator's grandfather was a strange one, and that the narrator is said to take after him. On his deathbed, the grandfather tells the narrator's father that he wants him to continue the good fight and that he has been a traitor and a spy. The grandfather's final words cause much anxiety in the family, and they have a haunting effect on the narrator. The narrator reflects on what a meek man his grandfather was, and throughout his life, the narrator would feel guilty receiving praise and recognition when remembering his grandfather's words.

The narrator tells of giving an oration about humility on his graduation day. He was well praised and was invited to give the speech to a gathering of prominent white citizens. The gathering place was in the main ballroom of a hotel, and since he was there, the narrator was invited to participate in a battle royal before he gives his speech. The battle royal was to be fought by some of the narrator's classmates, and he describes his dislike for them. The boys are led out, given boxing gloves, and face a naked blond girl. The boys are horrified and do not know where they should look. The girl is dancing for the men, who are a group of drunk, hostile, and amused white men among who are the superintendent, bankers, lawyers, and doctors. Men try grabbing the woman, and soon she is tossed around in the air.

The boys are now forced into the ring for the battle royal. They are blindfolded and then turn on one another to fight in a big crowd. The crowd is yelling racial slurs urging the boys to beat up one another. Everyone fights hysterically, the narrator ends up fighting the largest boy in the group and then he is knocked out. The boys are gathered around a rug and are told to grab for the coins, gold, and bills that are on it. When the boys touch the money, they find that the rug has been electrified and are shocked. The men watching are entertained by the boys' frantic grabs, and one boy is thrown on his back on top of the rug. Finally, the boys are paid their money.

Next, the narrator tries to give his speech to the men. His mouth fills with blood and he has a hard time speaking. At one point, he makes the mistake of saying the words social equality instead of social responsibility. After the narrator makes his speech, the superintendent gives him a package that ends up being a briefcase containing a document offering him a full scholarship to the state college for black people. The narrator is happy, receives congratulations from his neighbors and even feels safe from his grandfather. However, that night he dreams of his grandfather telling to open an envelope inside the briefcase that reads, "Keep This Nigger-Boy Running."

Chapter 1 Analysis

This chapter marks the beginning of the long story about the narrator realizing that he is invisible and foreshadows the manner in which he will learn new life lessons. The events of the chapter are dark, chaotic, and ring frighteningly of the reality of racism. The boys in this chapter undergo humiliation, are pitted against one another, and then the narrator is supposed to feel honored when given a scholarship. The chilling dream is a message to the narrator about what his scholarship symbolically means – that others will be controlling his actions. The narrator will later remember the battle royal incident in relation to another equally chaotic time. In addition, the narrator will carry the briefcase throughout the novel, and the reader should pay attention to the symbolic objects that get placed in it.

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Chapter 2

Chapter 2 Summary

The story jumps to a description of the beautiful college town that ends disturbingly with the road that turns off to the insane asylum. The narrator tries to see again the beauty, but ends with the chapel during winter hearing a Christmas carol. The description continues with disabled veterans visiting whores and the narrator standing in the circle near the statue of the college's Founder lifting the veil off a kneeling slave. The narrator wonders about whether that experience was truly reality and why his memory is always of wintertime.

The narrator tells the story of when the millionaires visited the college on Founder's Day. He recalls one millionaire whom he drove for near the end of his junior year. The man, Mr. Norton, is from Boston and smokes cigars. While the two are driving, the millionaire speaks of the wonderful institution and why the Founder was so spirited about opening the college. The man speaks of fate and destiny, and he tells the narrator about the death of his daughter when she fell ill on a trip to Italy. The man says he dedicates everything he does in her honor, and says that the fate of everyone at the college is his family's and his daughter's fate. The narrator is very confused but tries to be polite and pretends to understand.

Eventually, the two drive out to the cabin of Jim Trueblood, who is a sharecropper. The narrator is uncomfortable with their destination and the white man's attention is attracted by the old logs of the cabin. The reader learns that Trueblood used to be a special singer at the college, but has since done something disgraceful which has put him at odds with the college. The men see two pregnant women on the lawn and the white man wants to get out and talk to the family. We learn that Jim Trueblood fathered both of these women's babies, and one woman is his wife and the other is his daughter. Mr. Norton is horrified, yet he gets out of the car when he sees Trueblood to speak with him.

The three men sit together in the shade, and the narrator notices that Trueblood has a wound on his cheek. Trueblood begins telling about how his family is doing better. He was upset when the college tried to get him and his family to leave the county when they learned what has happened in his family. Trueblood went to the sheriff to get help. Trueblood describes how fascinated the white men at the jailhouse were with his story, and how they helped him by getting him more work and allowing his family to stay in the county.

Trueblood tells about how cold it used to be for his family and that he used to sleep in between his wife and his daughter. One night he says he heard his daughter talking in her sleep and he started thinking about a girl he used to be with when he was young. He describes when he used to listen to the boats on the river. Trueblood says he thinks his daughter was dreaming about some boy she has been seeing, and that he tried to move away from her in the bed. Then, he says he is dreaming of walking into some

white people's front door and into their bedroom and seeing a white woman stepping out of a grandfather clock. He says the white woman grabs him in the dream and he cannot get away from her. In the dream, he finally gets away from the woman in the dream, but then cannot get the door open. When he is free in the dream he wakes up.

Trueblood says when he wakes up he is looking straight in his daughter's face that is screaming and hitting him. He says he tries to keep her quiet, and his wife wakes up and catches him. Trueblood tries to say it was just a dream, but his wife screams at him to get off their daughter and grabs a gun. Trueblood tells her buckshot spreads and that she will shoot their daughter. Trueblood says he was frozen and his wife hits him in the face with an axe. The wife runs out of the house puking, and Trueblood bleeds in the meantime. Trueblood's wife leaves to get other women to help her with her daughter, and everyone ignores Trueblood. Later, Trueblood's wife wants him to leave the family, but he will not go, and then he learns about the pregnancies.

Trueblood again describes how the people from the college want him to leave, but that he is being treated well by the white people. At the end of the story, the narrator describes his humiliation and fascination with the story. Mr. Norton does not feel well now, but before they leave, he gives Trueblood a hundred dollar bill. In the car, Mr. Norton appears to be ill and says he wants whiskey.

Chapter 2 Analysis

This chapter begins with the narrator's confused memory of his college years. However, the retelling of the experience with Mr. Norton and speaking with Jim Trueblood is very clear. The elements of the story deal with all of the relationships among the different characters and their socio-economic statuses. The story is a horrifying one about incest and rape, and the narrator claims that he hates men like Trueblood. However, somewhat ironically, Trueblood receives charity from white people at this time.

Chapter 3

Chapter 3 Summary

The narrator decides to drive to the Golden Day, a bar that is visited by the veterans. On his way, the narrator sees a line of the veterans walking towards the Golden Day. One vet believes he is a drum major and stands in the road so the narrator cannot get by. The narrator tells the vet he has General Pershing in the car, and this tricks the vet into getting out of the way. The narrator plans on going into the bar and leaving Mr. Norton in the car.

When the narrator gets to the bar, it is already full of vets, and when he walks in the door, someone tells him it will be the end of the world at five thirty. The narrator orders a whiskey, but the bartender will not let him walk out the door with it, and tells him to bring in the white man. When the narrator returns to the car to get Mr. Norton, he thinks that Norton is dying, and he manages, with the help of two vets, to drag him into the bar. The vets in the bar try to help the narrator, but they are mostly drunk and behave strangely. Finally, Mr. Norton has some brandy and opens his eyes. Mr. Norton asks where he is and the narrator rushes to explain the situation.

Then, a man named Supercargo, the vets' attendant, calls down from the balcony. We learn that the man is drunk, and begins demanding order. Instead, the vets begin fighting Supercargo on the stairway and at one point he is knocked out and vets continue beating him up. The narrator has to find Mr. Norton again, and when he finally does, he is unconscious again. The narrator describes the chilling feeling of touching Mr. Norton and says, "He was like a formless white death, suddenly appeared before me, a death which had been there all the time and which now had revealed itself in the madness of the Golden Day."

The narrator and another vet, who was formerly a doctor, bring Mr. Norton upstairs to a room. Two girls talk about Mr. Norton, and one says she loves white men and the other says she would kill an old man like Mr. Norton. The vet sends the narrator to get some ice, and when he returns they revive him. The narrator is afraid of what Mr. Norton will say and is anxious to get him back to the school. The narrator leaves to get Mr. Norton some water, and when he returns Mr. Norton is telling the vet that his diagnosis was identical to that of his specialist.

The vet tells his story of being a doctor, and says he remained in France to study and practice. The vet says he had gone to the college before going to France during the World War. He also comments that he wants the narrator to hear his story so he will not become a casualty like him. The vet says he had ulcers and learned at the same time that his work could bring him no dignity. The narrator is uncomfortable with how the vet speaks to Mr. Norton, and again tries to leave, but the vet tells them to rest. He ends the story telling them that after he had returned to the United States ten men in masks whipped him for saving a life.

The vet asks the narrator if he understands his story, and when he replies that he does not, the vet says that he's a zombie and says "He's invisible, a walking personification of the Negative, the most perfect achievement of your dreams, sir! The mechanical man!" Mr. Norton tells of his interest in the school as being part of his destiny, and the vet replies that the narrator is a mark on Mr. Norton's scoreboard and not even a person to him, and that Mr. Norton is a God or force to the narrator and that white is right.

Mr. Norton and the narrator hurry out of the room when the vet reaches for a pitcher to throw at them. A girl on the way down the stairs pushes Mr. Norton, and before they reach the car, Mr. Norton is unconscious again. When Mr. Norton is revived, the narrator can see that he is clearly angry.

Chapter 3 Analysis

The reader begins understanding what being invisible means in this story thanks to the commentary of the veteran in this chapter. The vet describes the narrator's identity as being mechanical and a result of the dreams of white men. The vet claims his illness came from realizing that his work would bring him no dignity, and this is a clue that in this novel and the story of racism, power and dignity are unattainable by these black men, because they have been blocked off from achieving it. However, at this point in the book, the narrator is unable to understand what the vet is trying to teach him.

Chapter 4

Chapter 4 Summary

As the narrator drives Mr. Norton back to campus, he is very afraid of what the consequences of the day may be. He comments that that he is in danger of losing the only identity he had ever known. The narrator wants to apologize to Mr. Norton and tell him that he hates the kind of people they had seen that day. The narrator leaves Mr. Norton in his room and is directed to bring Dr. Bledsoe, the college's president, and a doctor to Norton. When the narrator apologizes to Mr. Norton, he says nothing in return.

The narrator arrives at Dr. Bledsoe's office and describes him as having a round face with a bucket shaped head. The narrator says Bledsoe had always been kind to him and that the president was an example of the power and authority he dreams of attaining. Dr. Bledsoe is very upset by the events that the narrator briefly retells. Bledsoe is visibly angry, and yet before entering Mr. Norton's room he composes his face into a bland mask. The narrator observes a painting of the Founder and describes it as being profoundly disillusioned.

Dr. Bledsoe apologizes to Mr. Norton who replies that the narrator is not responsible for the day's events. However, the narrator is sent away and he knows Dr. Bledsoe is still angry with him. When the narrator walks out of the office, he is annoyed by a girl who asks him to pass on a message to her boyfriend.

When the narrator returns to his room he is stressed and thinking about his upcoming punishment. He describes how humble Dr. Bledsoe is in the presence of white men. The narrator skips his dinner and then receives the message that he is to go see Dr. Bledsoe again. When the narrator arrives, he sees Mr. Norton who says Dr. Bledsoe had to leave and the narrator has to see him at the chapel after the services. Mr. Norton says that he has explained everything to Dr. Bledsoe. The two say goodbye and the narrator tells Mr. Norton he would like to tell him about his fate later.

Chapter 4 Analysis

This chapter begins revealing who possesses power in this book. Mr. Norton, a wealthy white man clearly possesses power, and Bledsoe stands as a role model to the narrator as to what power he can attain as a black man. The narrator introduces the notion of disillusionment when looking at the picture of the Founder, and this is foreshadowing the lessons the narrator will learn in the next few lessons. The reader is aware that the narrator is in jeopardy of losing his identity as well.

Chapter 5

Chapter 5 Summary

The chapter opens with a description of the sound of vespers and the chapel. The narrator says the mood is of judgment and describes the moon as a white man's bloodshot eye. The imagery in the opening is dark with words like bloody, crucifixion, doom like, and torturous. The narrator describes the students entering the chapel with love in the sense of the way the defeated come to love their conquerors. He also describes the preaching here as being logical and different from the wild emotion from the preachers most of the students know at home. The narrator describes the millionaires as the flesh and the blood who carry out the virtues.

The narrator says that he has given speeches from the stage in this chapel. The plot changes into a reverie of some sort in which the narrator describes a speech with no words just counterfeit notes. The narration is directed towards a Susie Gresham and ends with saying she was a relic of slavery and of whom the narrator thought of with regret and shame.

Finally, the guests move onto a platform and the narrator describes how easily Dr. Bledsoe touches them. Dr. Bledsoe is described as meek and humble, yet his power is known through the story of walking across two states to attend the college and working his way up and impressing the Founder. Dr. Bledsoe is described as being a statesman and the college's coal-black daddy of whom the students are afraid. Singing begins, and then suddenly a guest the narrator has not noticed before rises. This man is described as being very ugly and fat.

The man begins speaking of enjoying his visit and moves on to describing the Founder's early years as a baby who was nearly killed when splashed with lye. The Founder was a very bright young boy who taught himself to read and worked very hard to attend college. The speaker describes the Founder's searching and traveling to find support for his vision. Once, when the Founder entered an unnamed state, people tried to kill him. The Founder is then told by a man, whose race is unknown, to go to a certain cabin. The Founder is shot in the head, and at the cabin, a man bound up his head. Then, the Founder traveled underground.

The narrator describes feeling sad for the first time hearing this story. The narrator learns that this speaker is the Reverend Homer A. Barbee from Chicago. The Reverend continues with the story saying it has a sad ending and that he and Dr. Bledsoe were there the day the Founder died. Again, the men were touring the states by train when the Founder went unconscious. The Reverend says he knew the Founder was dying. The Reverend describes a falling star that he and Dr. Bledsoe both saw. Then, the two men go in to speak with the Founder. The Founder tells Dr. Bledsoe that he must continue to lead and dies. The train continues on its way and becomes a mourning train. The Reverend describes the despair felt by the black community. The funeral is

described as an awful silence, but it was as if a great seed had been planted. The Reverend describes the early college and says that Dr. Bledsoe is a worthy role model.

The narrator says that the Reverend has made him see the vision of the campus, and now the idea of leaving it feels worse. Reverend Barbee falls on the stage after tripping over Dr. Bledsoe's legs, and the narrator realizes that the man is blind. The narrator feels like any act against the college is like treason and that is how he feels about the events of the day. Next, a white man speaks and there is some music, but the narrator does not stay to hear the rest of the service. When he leaves, he feels a growing resentment and feels sure that he will be expelled.

Chapter 5 Analysis

This chapter contains several symbols that relate to the motif of vision and disillusionment. The narrator describes the moon as a bloodshot eye and the Reverend is blind. The narrator feels like he is finally seeing the vision of the campus at the same time he is in danger of being expelled. This chapter still conveys the narrator as naïve and in fact unable to see his own circumstances and powerlessness.

The story of the Founder is full of imagery and language to convey the idea of a prophet who has survived death. The religious tone of this chapter suggests that the narrator has been indoctrinated into the religion of the vision of the college. However, the narrator is also on the brink of losing his involvement with this and feels like a traitor.

Chapter 6

Chapter 6 Summary

The narrator is watching people leave the chapel when he sees Dr. Bledsoe's Cadillac. However, the narrator is too afraid to see Bledsoe immediately and instead keeps thinking about what he will say to him. Finally, the narrator goes to see Bledsoe, and the discussion turns to Bledsoe saying he knows that Mr. Norton was at the Golden Day. Dr. Bledsoe begins grilling the narrator about how he could take Mr. Norton where he did. The narrator says Mr. Norton ordered him, and Dr. Bledsoe responds with asking the narrator if he has forgotten how to lie as a black living in the South. Dr. Bledsoe believes someone suggested to the narrator to take Norton on the trip he did and then he calls the narrator a nigger.

At this point, the narrator is shocked by what Dr. Bledsoe has called him. Bledsoe wants to know who the doctor at the Golden Day was, and then tells the narrator he needs to be disciplined. The narrator screams that he will fight Bledsoe and he will tell Mr. Norton about it. Dr. Bledsoe calls him a fool and says he does not know the difference between how things are and the way they are supposed to be. Dr. Bledsoe goes on to say that there is no one to stop him because he is the man in control with power. Dr. Bledsoe goes on to call the narrator a black educated fool and tells him he does not even exist. Dr. Bledsoe says he had to act the nigger and be strong to get to his position.

The narrator stops listening and begins questioning the truth of everything. The narrator feels like a child, and Dr. Bledsoe comments that he likes his fighting spirit. Bledsoe advises the narrator not to worry about pride and dignity. Dr. Bledsoe recommends that the narrator go away to work in New York and offers to send him with letters. The narrator only has two days to leave.

The narrator walks out of Bledsoe's office reflecting on the day's events and feeling sick to his stomach. He knows he can never go home to feel the disappointment and disgrace. The narrator goes to his room, counts his savings of fifty dollars and decides to leave for New York as soon as possible. In the morning, the narrator goes to see Dr. Bledsoe to request the letters. Dr. Bledsoe likes the narrator's attitude and says that black people must take responsibility for their actions and not become bitter. Dr. Bledsoe explains that the letters will be sealed and that the narrator is not to open them. The narrator counts seven letters and heads to the bus.

Chapter 6 Analysis

The motif of questioning truth and reality is raised in this chapter. The narrator learns that Bledsoe is a very different man from the humble one narrator has described before. The reader knows now that Bledsoe is preoccupied with having power, in spite of his advice to the narrator to not worry about power and dignity. This advice is also similar to

the veteran doctor's story about never being able to achieve dignity. The plot will change significantly with the narrator's move from the south to New York and the new phase of his life that he is entering.

Chapter 7

Chapter 7 Summary

The narrator climbs onto a bus and finds that the only other passengers are the veteran doctor from the Golden Day and his attendant. The narrator is not happy seeing the vet since he has been trying to forget about the recent events. The vet asks the narrator about Mr. Norton and begins telling him about the freedom he will be looking for when he heads north to New York. The vet predicts that the narrator will use a white woman, the most accessible symbol of freedom, to attain his own sense of freedom.

The vet tells the narrator that he is being transferred to Washington D.C. and suggests that it was also done because of recent events. The vet warns the narrator to play the game, but not to believe in it. The vet continues talking about white people controlling things, and his attendant grows annoyed with him. The vet mentions that many people have to experience a crime to experience freedom. At the next stop the vet and his attendant have to change buses, and he gives the narrator a final piece of advice to leave men like Mr. Norton alone. Although the narrator is relieved to be rid of the vet, he also feels very alone.

By the time the narrator reaches New Jersey, his hope is uplifted, and he begins planning how hardworking and well mannered he will be when facing the men whom he has letters for. The narrator gets off the bus and must take the subway to Harlem. The narrator is squeezed close to a white woman and is horrified because he cannot wiggle away from her. Once off the subway, the narrator is wide-eyed looking at the city and sees many black people all over. The narrator sees a man with a West Indies' accent shouting and a bunch of people are standing around him. Two white policemen standing nearby do not even respond to this man, which surprises the narrator. Finally, the narrator asks someone where Men's House is, is advised to stay clean and finally gets to his location.

Chapter 7 Analysis

Although the narrator is very annoyed by the veteran doctor, the vet's advice and predictions will end up foreshadowing many events of the novel. The narrator could have saved himself trouble if he had known to pay attention to the advice he received. However, the narrator is still in his world of disillusionment and does not know the difference between what is reality and what is not, as Bledsoe told him. New York is a very different world to the narrator, which suggests a new beginning. However, throughout the novel the narrator will struggle with his southern past and his new life.

Chapter 8

Chapter 8 Summary

The narrator has reached his small room. He becomes homesick when he notices a Gideon bible on a table, but he quickly turns his mind to planning his next day. At one point, his feelings of resentment for his predicament return, but he brushes these feelings aside and thinks about the important men he will meet. The narrator imagines himself as being charming and learning how to speak in the North.

The next day, the narrator describes walking in the rushed crowd wonders why some black men walk with pouches strapped to their wrists. These pouches remind the narrator of shackles. The narrator finally arrives at the office of Mr. Bates, but decides to wait before entering and looks out the window for a while. Finally, the narrator enters the office where a secretary greets him nicely and brings the narrator's letter in to Mr. Bates. The secretary returns saying that Mr. Bates is too busy to be seen and she asks the narrator to leave his address and name to be contacted by mail.

The narrator says he reaches several of the trustees' secretaries. While waiting for responses the narrator adjusts to the city describing being next to whites that are polite, yet hardly seem to notice him. A week goes by and the narrator still has heard nothing from the trustees. The narrator is worried about not finding work soon enough to save for his tuition in the fall. The narrator tries calling the trustees, but he is also refused. Finally, the narrator composes a letter to Mr. Norton in hopes of meeting with him, but also receives no response.

The narrator's anxieties grow because the secretaries have all been very encouraging, yet he still hears nothing. The narrator is also worried about appearing not to have money or work to the hotel in the case that he may need to request credit. The narrator has not even set aside money for the train fare home. Finally, the narrator receives a letter to meet with Mr. Emerson.

Chapter 8 Analysis

The narrator's hopes quickly turn to despair in this chapter. The narrator is worried about some sort of conspiracy against him. The reader will find that the narrator is often afraid of other's plotting against him. However, despite these worries the narrator never figures out any conspiracies in time to help himself.

Chapter 9

Chapter 9 Summary

The narrator is headed to meet with Mr. Emerson and describes a beautiful morning and the return of his confidence. On his way, the narrator is met by a man who is pushing a cart and singing. The man calls out to the narrator, and they walk along for a while talking though the narrator is confused by the man's ramblings. The man says that Harlem is a bear's den, but that it is the best place for him and the narrator. The man is carrying blueprints with him. Eventually, the two part ways, and the narrator walks on wondering about the song the man was singing.

The narrator walks into a drugstore for breakfast, and is bothered when the man behind the counter assumes that he will order the special of pork chops, grits, one egg, biscuits, and coffee. The narrator feels insulted by the idea that everyone can tell he is from the south, and instead he orders toast and orange juice. The narrator imagines his return to the south and the mysterious role he can play by having been north. The narrator recalls how much people talked about what they thought Dr. Bledsoe had done, and this is what the narrator wants to experience. The narrator realizes that away from campus he has a different view about life there.

The narrator reaches Mr. Emerson's office and describes it as looking like a museum with paintings, bronzes and tapestries. A man greets the narrator and takes his letter into another room. The narrator continues looking around the room and sees an aviary of tropical birds. The narrator is invited into another room by the same man who has greeted him. The man begins asking the narrator questions about what he would like to do in the future, and the narrator responds that he would like to return to college and become Dr. Bledsoe's assistant.

The man continues asking the narrator questions and learns that he has never read the letter. The man asks how many letters the narrator had and is clearly becoming agitated which confuses the narrator. The man wants to speak directly to the narrator and suggests that he is trying to disillusion the narrator. The narrator states he can prove his identity and the man replies with questioning who has identity anymore. Eventually, in the course of the confusing dialogue, the narrator believes this man is refusing to let him see Mr. Emerson because of his race, which the man adamantly denies. The man tells him it is best not to see Mr. Emerson, and the reader begins realizing that this man is Mr. Emerson's son. Finally, the man hands the narrator the letter to read.

The narrator reads the letter to learn that Dr. Bledsoe has informed the trustees that he is never to be allowed to return to the college and that it is best to mislead and confuse him. The letter states that the narrator has gone astray despite the expectations held for him. The narrator is understandably shocked by the contents of the letter and tells Emerson about what happened at the college to lead him to this situation. The man

advises the narrator not to blind himself to the truth and a comment that he does not believe what he did was so bad.

The narrator leaves the office while Emerson is in the middle of speaking, but he remembers Emerson's advice to try getting a job at Liberty Paints. The narrator begins humming a song to himself about a robin being picked clean and begins reflecting on what the song means. The narrator wonders if everyone else has a plan for him, and says out loud that he is a robin and snidely vocalizes that he is to be kept running. The narrator calls Liberty Paints and is to report to work in the morning. The narrator decides that he will kill Dr. Bledsoe and dreams of revenge all night.

Chapter 9 Analysis

Again, the narrator meets two men who try to give him advice that the reader will learn he should listen to. First, the narrator meets the man who describes Harlem as a bear's den and the narrator immediately learns that he has been fooled all this time by Bledsoe and the trustees. Next, young Emerson tries to advise the narrator to see the reality of his situation. However, this advice merely offends the narrator and he ignores it completely. Emerson even questions the reality of identity, but the narrator does not understand the meaning of these words at this time. By the end of the chapter, the narrator is beginning to understand the dream of his grandfather and the words about keeping him running.

Chapter 10

Chapter 10 Summary

The narrator arrives at the factory Liberty Paints and faces a sign that reads "Keep America Pure with Liberty Paints." The narrator obtains work easily enough, is escorted to where he will begin and told about trouble with management hiring black college men to replace union workers. The narrator is going to work for a mean, gruff Mr. Kimbro. The narrator's job is to drop a liquid into 'Optic White' paint cans and then paint a sample. The narrator learns that this white is used by the government and this specific batch is to be used on a national monument. The dropper liquid runs out, and the narrator is told to refill it; however, he is unsure of which tank to use. The narrator guesses which tank to use and notices the paint is becoming gray and goo-like. Mr. Kimbro comes to check on the narrator and tells him he has been using paint remover. The narrator angrily continues working and adds the correct dropper liquid to the batches he has already ruined. At one point, while Kimbro is checking the narrator's work he wonders if Kimbro is playing a trick on him.

After the narrator is done with the paint cans, Kimbro sends him back to the office saying he is fired. When the narrator reaches the office, he is told he has been reassigned to another job working with Lucius Brockway. The narrator is feeling very agitated and angry. The narrator goes to find Brockway and in a basement three levels underground, that is full of pipes and high-pitched noises. The door is marked with a danger sign. When the narrator finds Brockway, he tells him he is supposed to be his assistant. Brockway is a very small, older man, and he becomes hostile towards the narrator thinking that he has been sent there to take his job away. Brockway asks the narrator many questions about how he got the job and what education he has.

Brockway continues being suspicious of the narrator, but now he has him wiping and reading gauges. Brockway leaves for a moment and the narrator finds himself wondering how this old man could have such a responsible job, if Brockway were putting on an act, and whether this situation has to do with the union. The narrator figures out that they are making the paint base down in this basement. Brockway begins telling the narrator that he has been working at the plant since it opened, and when management thought they would replace him, all of the paint went bad. The owner, Mr. Sparland, came to ask Brockway to come back to work himself. The narrator continues disliking Brockway. Brockway begins telling the narrator more about how management has been trying to replace him, and that he came up with the company's slogan, "If It's Optic White, It's the Right White" which reminds the narrator of the expression "white is right."

The narrator leaves to get his lunch and when he enters the locker room he runs into a very hostile union meeting. Members accuse him of being an informant, and they question how he knows about the meeting. The narrator tries to stay uninvolved, and by the end of the confrontation, the union decides they will watch him and then decide

whether or not to let him join the union. The narrator describes feeling for the first time that hostility has really reached him and that his defenses were stripped away from him. The narrator leaves wondering how he could have been so passive and not defended himself.

When the narrator returns, Brockway is angry with him for being late. When the narrator comments that he was caught in a union meeting, Brockway becomes violently angry and threatens to kill the narrator. The narrator begins telling himself that he has been trained to listen to men like Brockway, and suddenly his mind changes and he stands up to the old man. The two men fight and the narrator believes that he has been stabbed, but he was actually bitten. After their scuffle, the narrator tries to reconcile with Brockway and continue work. Brockway tricks the narrator, sends him over to the big valves and runs out of the basement. The narrator is caught in an explosion of some sort, and is knocked unconscious. His ending thoughts are that of having lost an important victory.

Chapter 10 Analysis

The narrator is introduced into the working world of blue-collar workers and unions. The narrator is very out of place and unable to relate or connect with any of these people. Later in the novel, the narrator has other instances with being unable to identify himself with other people. The two main characters of this chapter, Kimbro and Brockway, are both equally hostile and untrusting of the narrator's education and background. It is important to note the recurrence of the idea that white is right, which is literally and symbolically identified by the speech of Kimbro and Brockway and in the symbolism of the pristine white paint.

Chapter 11

Chapter 11 Summary

The narrator finds himself sitting in a room with a doctor looking at him through a lens. The narrator is given medicine and discovers he is wearing white overalls. Someone asks the narrator what his name is, but he is unable to answer. The narrator is very unaware of what is happening, but gradually determines that he is in a hospital and he is undergoing some sort of electro-shock therapy. The narrator begins having memories of childhood songs again. Two doctors begin asking the narrator how he feels and he responds that he is too cramped in the contraption into which they have him strapped. The doctors continue having a conversation that suggests the narrator's treatment is supposed to be the non-surgical equivalent of a prefrontal lobotomy. The doctors discuss the change in personality the narrator will have and one of the men asks about the possibility of a castration. When the narrator undergoes more treatment, one man says that he is dancing and states that black people really do have rhythm. The narrator wants to become angry, but feels like he is unable to and is only confused.

The narrator goes unconscious again, and when he reawakens, he has difficulty separating himself and his body from the white room surrounding him. People around him try to speak with him, but he is unable to understand them, and again they hold a card for him asking what his name is, but he cannot remember it. Then they ask who the narrator's mother is, but he is unable to answer that either. The doctor asks whom Buckeye the Rabbit is, and the narrator can recall the children's song. Next, the narrator is asked who Brer Rabbit is. The narrator responds to nothing, and when the people finally leave him alone, he lays worrying about his identity.

Finally, the narrator is released from the machine, and he is able to ask and learn that he is at the factory hospital. Doctors cut a cord from his body, and the narrator feels as though the cord was a part of him. They examine the narrator and note that he is exceptionally strong, and one person comments that the narrator is a new man. The narrator waits for a meeting with the director.

When the narrator meets with the director, the director reads his name off a chart, which feels like a stab in the narrator's head. The narrator learns that he is to be released and he must sign a paper waiving the factory of all responsibility for his accident in order to receive insurance money. The narrator asks the doctor if he knows a Mr. Norton and feels confused again. The narrator asks his question again and then says that they picked poor Robin clean. The director looks confused and says goodbye to the narrator.

The narrator leaves feeling as if he has been a part of a crazy movie. Waking outside of the factory, he no longer feels afraid. The narrator finds a subway, returns to Harlem, and feels like his body and mind are disconnected.

Chapter 11 Analysis

This chapter marks another change in the narrator, and in fact, the treatments and cord cutting symbolize a rebirth of the narrator with new strength, a new identity, and the loss of fear. The narrator has several experiences in this novel that provide him with a new identity, and this clearly reveals his lack of a core identity below all of the new ones he adopts. The white room the narrator is a part of is also symbolic of the racial issues that he is trying to understand, and especially his attempt to understand his role in the white world.

Chapter 12

Chapter 12 Summary

The narrator gets off the subway and faints. A woman helps him and insists that he go with her to her home so she can take care of him. The narrator is confused and tries to go his own way, but the woman overpowers him and brings him home. The narrator feels relief and we learn that she is a well-known woman in Harlem named Mary Rambo.

The narrator comes out of his daze and speaks with Mary. Mary offers the narrator advice about taking care of himself, being a credit to the race, and not letting New York corrupt him. Mary also offers the narrator a room to rent if he ever needs it. The narrator returns to Men's House and is faced with hostility. The narrator feels contempt for those he believes are still disillusioned. The narrator describes the young men's fancy clothes and style with new eyes. When the narrator goes upstairs, he believes he hears the voice of Bledsoe, and dumps some container of brown slush on the man's head. The man ends up being a prominent preacher, and the narrator is barred from the building.

The narrator returns to Mary's home and rents a room for a while. The narrator describes this time as a time of quietness, but that he has also lost his sense of direction. The narrator develops an obsession with his identity and the need for revenge still from his campus expulsion. Feeling trapped, the narrator finds himself wanting to make speeches again.

Chapter 12 Analysis

This chapter shows the narrator trying to figure out himself and his new life. This period of rest is equally a period of uncertainty and lack of direction. Other than Mary, there is no one to tell him what to do or who to be. The narrator's need to give speeches is foreshadowing an event in the next chapter that ultimately drives the plot for the remainder of the book.

Chapter 13

Chapter 13 Summary

The narrator finds himself dwelling on old problems and eventually runs out into the streets feeling feverish. The narrator comes across a man selling yams and he purchases one feeling nostalgic for home. While eating the yams, the narrator experiences a sense of euphoria and imagines himself accusing Dr. Bledsoe of eating hog bowels and exposing him to white people who would no longer support his cause. The narrator describes a sense of freedom in being able to indulge in what he likes, and wonders how much he has lost by only doing what is expected of him.

The narrator walks down the street, sees an elderly black couple being evicted and feels a sense of foreboding. The couple's possessions are being thrown out into the street, and a crowd is gathered watching it happen. Many people are outraged and want to stop the event from happening, and at one point, the elderly couple wishes to return to the apartment for a final prayer. The narrator describes the couple's possessions as he sees them and they are old and cluttered, but he notices papers, which declared the elderly man a free slave. The narrator has a vision comparing the elderly couple's experience with the image of watching his mother hanging out her wash. The crowd's anger escalates when the marshals will not let the couple into the apartment to pray and the woman is shoved. The crowd is on the verge of attacking the men. The narrator begins addressing the crowd saying that they are law-abiding people and slow to anger. The speech turns to a description of how little the couple has accumulated at eighty-seven years of age, and the narrator requests that the couple be allowed to pray. Eventually, the crowd charges against the marshals and overpowers them. After the fighting, the crowd, along with some white people the narrator notices, brings the couple's belongings back up to their apartment, and then the police arrive.

A white girl tells the narrator she respected how his speech moved the crowd to action and tells him to run across the roof of the building to escape. The narrator is confused by her words but listens to her advice. As he is running across the roof, he notices that he is being followed. Finally reaching the street, the narrator tries to walk normally and the white man who had been following him addresses him. The man remarks on the narrator's persuasive speech and invites him somewhere for a cup of coffee. The narrator agrees, but is untrusting of the man believing that he is putting on some sort of an act.

When the two men sit down to talk, the white man questions the narrator's speech and comments on his anger and eloquence. The man speaks elusively about why the narrator should not waste his energy on the old people, but should focus instead on being a part of the historical movement at hand. The narrator is confused, and the white man goes on to tell him that his sentiments about the old folks and the south are dead. The narrator does not like the man's smugness and gets up to leave. The man tells him he performed his duty to the people and writes some information down for the narrator

before he leaves. The man ends with comparing individual and organized anger with criminal versus political action.

The narrator leaves wondering about the man's intentions and whether the meeting had been some sort of trick. The narrator describes the cold and wonders why so many people left warm weather for such cold. When the narrator's thoughts turn to the strong Mary, he feels better.

Chapter 13 Analysis

The yams in the opening of this chapter symbolize the narrator's past and his moment of awareness that he has done little in his life to please himself. The narrator is euphoric in recognizing that he can be free and live up to his own expectations. However, the narrator will remember this lesson for a very short time. The speech the narrator gives at the elderly couple's eviction will get him involved in an organization in the next chapter which explains the sense of foreboding he felt. Although the narrator is wary of the strange white man in this chapter, he will once again adopt other's values and opinions when he becomes involved in their organization.

Chapter 14

Chapter 14 Summary

Upon returning to Mary's home, the narrator smells cabbage and realizes that she is short on money, which is partly due to his inability to pay rent. The narrator begins feeling guilty for having turned down a possible job while living on Mary's charity. The narrator goes into the apartment for a short while and decides to call the number he was given by the white man in the previous chapter. After making the phone call, the narrator is annoyed by the man's abruptness and lack of surprise over the phone. The narrator is given an address to meet the man, who we now know as Brother Jack. When the narrator arrives at the address, he is picked up in a car containing Jack and several other men. The narrator learns that the car is headed to a party.

During the ride, the narrator is wondering about the men in the car and notices snow covering everything. The car pulls up to a building named *Chthonian*, and they are welcomed inside an apartment by a well-dressed woman. The narrator feels like he has been through this experience before and notices luxurious furnishings and attractive women in the room. The woman who greeted the men at the door, Emma, has a discussion about leaders being made and chewed up with Brother Jack before the men adjourn to another room to hold their meeting. The narrator also hears Emma commenting to Brother Jack that the narrator should be a little blacker and becomes upset.

The narrator thinks to himself that he needs to be careful with these people. The men gather to discuss what they would like from the narrator. The narrator is told that this organization, which the reader will come to know as the Brotherhood, works for a better world for all people and tries to gather people together. The narrator is asked if he would like to be the new Booker T. Washington, to which he responds that he believes more in the Founder. Brother Jack talks about the Founder being outside of history while Washington still lives in it. Brother Jack goes on to explain how the dead can rise again and live again during the present history. The narrator questions whether he is the right man for the organization, but he is given the job as a spokesman regardless. The narrator is to begin immediately and is told he will have to leave Mary's, he will be found a place to live, paid weekly, and that he must cut off communication with his family. The narrator is handed a slip of paper which gives him a new Brotherhood name and identity, but the reader never learns what that name is.

The narrator stays at the party all night and thinks to himself that he will pattern himself after the Founder and not Booker T. Washington. A man asks the narrator to sing a spiritual or work song, and Brother Jack becomes extremely angry and the man is taken out. This event causes quite a scene at the party, and the narrator tries to turn the incident into a laughing matter. A woman approaches the narrator and apologizes for the man who had requested the song, commenting that it was very backward of him given that the narrator is not there for entertaining. The narrator later dances with Emma and

is reminded of the veteran doctor's prediction that he would dance with white women. The narrator thinks to himself that white people assume that he knows things that he may not. This makes the narrator think of his grandfather having to quote the Constitution to vote.

The narrator returns to Mary's place at five a.m. and thinks about the new clothes he will buy. The narrator also wonders how much he can trust these men. The narrator looks forward to repaying Mary and thinks he will have a difficult time saying goodbye to her. However, he goes on to describe how he dislikes people like her who do not separate their identities from his. The narrator decides to leave his old problems behind and face his new ones. The narrator's closing thoughts are about how he would have to speak more clearly like the people at the party did.

Chapter 14 Analysis

The narrator shows very little caution during this chapter, and he is immediately welcomed into the Brotherhood. The Brotherhood uses ideology and science as a tool. Members will be heard to speak of ideas like living history and dispossession often in this book. However, clear goals and methods are rarely used by the organization as everything is spoken in terms of the ideology. The narrator will adopt the ideals of this organization as easily as he adopts the new name and identity with which they have provided him. Again, the reader sees that the narrator must leave behind his past to make way for his new self. The lesson the narrator learned from the yams has been quickly forgotten.

Chapter 15

Chapter 15 Summary

The narrator awakes in the morning to people in the building loudly banging on the steam line because there is no heat. The narrator notices a figurine of a black person that is used as a bank. The narrator finds it unbelievable that Mary would own such a mocking image and breaks it accidentally. The narrator tries to hide the figurine when Mary comes to the door. The narrator packs his belongings and places the broken figurine in his briefcase. The narrator goes out to the kitchen, washes up, and after listening to Mary talk, finally pays her with a hundred dollar bill for his rent. Mary says she will put some money aside for the narrator and thinks that he has won at playing the lottery. The narrator has coffee and leaves without telling Mary that he will not be returning.

The narrator is walking down the street and tries to throw the broken figurine away in a trash can when a woman yells at him, calls him a nigger, and tells him to pick his trash out. The narrator is irritated, but when she threatens to call the police, he takes the figurine back out of the trashcan. When the narrator continues walking, he drops the figurine in the street and a man picks it up to return it to him. The man accuses the narrator of being a dope peddler trying to make a drop. The narrator picks up the figurine again and gets on the subway where he sees a headline about the protest at the elderly couple's eviction.

The narrator buys himself new clothes and makes his way to an apartment in a Spanish-Irish neighborhood. The narrator has called Brother Jack, learns that he is to read some of the Brotherhood's literature and is to be prepared to make a speech that evening. The narrator is welcomed nicely at the apartment, begins reading his materials and decides to get rid of the broken figurine later.

Chapter 15 Analysis

This chapter shows the physical change of the narrator leaving his old life for his new one. The narrator has new clothes, a new home, new work and new friends now. However, this transition comes with a few minor trials while the narrator is trying to deal with the broken figurine. The figurine symbolizes racism and the narrator is unable to fully shed it. The narrator is called a racial slur and accused of being a drug dealer in the process.

Chapter 16

Chapter 16 Summary

The narrator is picked up by Brother Jack and some others to attend the rally in Harlem at which he is supposed to speak. When the men arrive at a large building, they wait in a dressing room for the audience to fill in. Some of the men are studying their speeches, and the narrator recognizes that they are in an arena where a famous boxer lost his sight in the ring. The narrator recalls being told the story by his father and begins feeling nervous about the speech he is to make. The narrator feels out of place and begins thinking about his double identity. The narrator realizes he needs to keep his past in the past, but that this other self looks on at him and reminds him of his cynical grandfather. The narrator continues thinking about the other self that he is becoming with a new and different personality.

The narrator walks outside for some air and recalls an event when a syphilitic had approached him and he had run away from the ill man. The narrator notices some policemen and returns to the dressing room. Once inside, the narrator has another memory of a bulldog named Master whom he had been afraid of as a child. The narrator describes Brother Jack as a toy bull terrier. Finally, the men take the stage and the narrator is blinded by the bright lights. Looking out at the audience the narrator is assured by Brother Jack that they are there to protect them. The crowd chants about no more people being dispossessed.

The narrator is the last to give his speech, and at first feels alienated because he cannot see the crowd because of the bright spotlight and the microphone feels strange to him. The narrator gives his speech by using a "down-to-earth," "we're fed up" approach. In the midst of his speech, the narrator forgets the phrases and wording from the material given him about the Brotherhood by Brother Jack. The narrator speaks heavily about being dispossessed and how uncommon the people are. The narrator speaks about the need for the people to regain their sight and join together. The narrator ends with discussing a personal transformation he is undergoing.

The audience reacts positively to the narrator's speech and he is cheered. However, when the group leaves the stage, other members call the speech unsatisfactory because of its use of emotion instead of scientific explanation and rationalization. Brother Jack defends the narrator, but concedes in explaining that the narrator is successful in gathering the people to invite action and that he needs in depth training to learn about the organization. The narrator learns that he will be training with a Brother Hambro for a few months, and this seems to placate the other members of the group.

The narrator returns home and is very tired, but he is unable to sleep due to his wandering mind. The narrator feels like he believed in everything he had said in his speech even though it had been unplanned. The technique the narrator used was also very different to him, and he thinks about the connection he had made with the

audience. While trying to analyze the speech, the narrator feels as though someone else had given it, and wonders about what had made him say that he felt more human. The narrator recalls a college literature professor who spoke of individuals contributing to their race by creating themselves and therefore creating a culture. The narrator considers whether he has become less Negro or less southern to achieve more for himself. Recalling Bledsoe and Norton the narrator considers his new opportunity looking forward to a powerful position and beginning his work.

Chapter 16 Analysis

The narrator has adopted his new role and is to be trained by Hambro in the ideology of the Brotherhood. The reader is aware that with this new role comes a new form of disillusionment for the narrator. This chapter contains several references to blindness, and this is certainly what the narrator is becoming. First, the narrator mentions the story of the boxer becoming blind. Next, the narrator is blinded by the lights during his speech. The narrator's speech is about people needing to regain their sight, yet the narrator is blinded himself. It is very important to note the narrator's desire for power, and as the old adage suggests, power corrupts. The reader should watch for how the narrator is blinded by his own search for power.

Chapter 17

Chapter 17 Summary

Four months have passed when Brother Jack calls the narrator at midnight to meet with him. The narrator stops for a drink with Brother Jack, and we learn that the narrator has been studying with brother Hambro who is described as a fanatic teacher and a spokesman for the Brotherhood. The narrator has daily discussions with Hambro, scheduled readings, and attends functions with him that act as lessons. The narrator learns different aspects of the Brotherhood and other members became familiar him. At the bar, Brother Jack finally begins speaking and the narrator learns that Hambro has told the organization that he is learning well. The narrator learns that he is to become the chief spokesman of the Harlem district. Brother Jack warns the narrator to be cautious not to underestimate the discipline of the organization.

Brother Jack escorts the narrator to show him the location of his new office, which is on the third floor of a converted church. The narrator is introduced to an older man named Brother Tarp whom Brother Jack describes as being young in his ideologies. The narrator returns to the offices in the morning to find the committee present minus one member named Tod Clifton. Brother Jack begins discussing the need to organize activity among the people and introduces the narrator to the group as their new spokesman. An extremely handsome, young black man enters the room, and we learn that Brother Tod Clifton leads the youth division. Brother Clifton explains his tardiness as being due to a run in with a man called Ras the Exhorter who is a black nationalist.

The narrator suggests gathering the community around the eviction issue and using speeches in the streets to gather the people. The narrator recalls the man he heard when he first came to Harlem and would like to use his methods. This same man we learn is Ras the Exhorter who does not like to see the mixing of white people and black people together. Brother Jack warns that there is not to be any violence and leaves the group to work. The narrator divides the labor, and reflects on his inability to label the people in the group into different types because they are so different from what he already knows. The narrator is relieved when Brother Clifton supports his efforts and does not act as a competitor.

Evening arrives and the group is on a street corner speaking when the narrator sees a group of twenty men approaching. The group is Ras the Exhorter's and a fight ensues. At one point, Ras and Clifton are fighting, and Ras appears as if he is going to stab Clifton, but holds back. Ras begins speaking to Clifton and the narrator about the pride of being African and black. Ras cannot understand how both men, especially Clifton who he describes as a king, could mix with white people. Ras's speech is wild and emotional, and at one point Clifton seems mesmerized by it. The narrator warns Ras that their group will be on the streets regularly and that he should prepared for that. Ras asks if the narrator and Clifton are awake or sleeping, and the speech ends with Clifton attacking Ras again after Ras accuses them of being traitors to their race. Clifton is

visibly shaken up by the encounter and comments that listening to Ras can make you crazy. The narrator finds himself feeling thankful for finding the Brotherhood.

The next morning, the narrator arrives at his office early when Brother Tarp hangs a picture of Frederick Douglass on the wall. The narrator begins calling community leaders about joining together to fight the community issue of evictions and is amused by how willing people are to join with him. The narrator reflects on the idea that things are so unreal to these people that they believe his name is real, and he ends with thinking that he is the person they think he is.

The organization throws a parade and the narrator is finding a sense of calm in his involvement. The narrator describes his success and the work that the Brotherhood is doing to make his name prominent. The narrator is becoming aware that he has two selves – the old self who dreamed of his grandfather, Bledsoe, and Mary, and a new self that is a spokesman for the Brotherhood. The narrator describes his desire to learn everything he can about the Brotherhood in order to rise to the top. The narrator thinks about Douglass took on a new name and the fame he gathered as an orator. The narrator also thinks about his grandfather telling him that a person starts as Saul and ends up as Paul. The narrator continues thinking about how you can never tell what path a person takes to make it in life. The closing thoughts of the chapter are about how well life is working out for the narrator.

Chapter 17 Analysis

The reader learns about how the narrator is trained in the methods and ideologies of the Brotherhood by Hambro. Brother Jack gives the narrator a very valuable tip to be careful of the discipline of the organization. This advice would have been useful as a warning to the narrator for late events in the story. However, the reader learns that the narrator is still preoccupied with his desire for power, which blinds him to Jack's advice. The narrator thinks about Douglass and the comments from his grandfather about Saul and Paul as a way to confirm that he can have two identities and be successful.

Chapter 18

Chapter 18 Summary

The narrator receives an unsigned letter of warning telling him to slow down so that he can continue helping colored people otherwise he will be cut down. Wondering whom the letter is from, the narrator calls Brother Tarp into the room. The narrator recognizes his grandfather's eyes in Tarp's face briefly, and then questions where the letter comes from. The two men talk about whether the narrator has any enemies with the other brothers, and Tarp says that there are not any he knows of. The discussion turns to a campaign that the members were initially against that shows a poster of a group of different races together depicting the past, present, and future. The organization eventually came to be proud of the campaign.

Brother Tarp tells the narrator about nineteen years of his life on a chain gang, and explains that his limp cannot be explained by doctors and because it comes from having been on the chain. Tarp says he was put on the chain gang because of what it cost him to say no, and one day he escaped. Tarp gives the narrator the piece of chain that he had filed through for his escape and tells him it is a reminder of for what they are fighting. The narrator is reminded of the chain on Bledsoe's desk, and after Tarp leaves, does not really want to keep the item. However, the narrator recognizes the importance of the item to Tarp, and thinks about it as an heirloom you would inherit from a father and becomes homesick.

The narrator feels like he has gone back in time briefly, and is relieved that he spoke with Tarp about the letter. The narrator believes that the letter is trying to touch on an old fear of distrusting whites. As the day continues the narrator wonders about who sent the message. Brother Westrum enters the narrator's office and immediately criticizes the chain on the narrator's desk saying that it goes against the Brotherhood because it shows differences instead of unity. Westrum continues discussing the idea that there are enemies in the Brotherhood and they have to watch themselves. Westrum brings up the idea that he believes the Brotherhood needs to wear some sort of an emblem that they can use to identify members who may be unknown to them. Westrum tells a brief story about Brother Clifton fighting a white man who was actually a brother.

The discussion is interrupted when someone calls to ask the narrator for an interview. The narrator tries to dissuade the person from interviewing him and recommends Brother Clifton, but the person is insistent. The narrator invites the interviewer down. During the phone conversation, Westrum has been trying to tell the narrator what to say. Westrum finally leaves, and the narrator thinks about his dislike for the man.

Two weeks later, the narrator has been called to the downtown headquarters for a meeting. The meeting is focused on Brother Westrum accusing the narrator of being an opportunist using the Brotherhood to pursue his own interests. Westrum uses the magazine article the narrator had been interviewed for the day of their last meeting as

his evidence. The narrator never read the article about himself, and he is sent out of the room while the group reads the article and deliberates. The narrator is angry that he cannot defend himself and feels like he has been stripped bare by Westrum.

The narrator is called back into the meeting and is told that the article is harmless. However, after a discussion about the Brotherhood having many enemies, the group tells the narrator that he will become an inactive member until charges are cleared or he must accept another assignment to lecture on the Woman Question. The narrator feels hurt and betrayed by the Brotherhood because he had believed in the organization, and now he wonders if this new assignment is a joke.

The narrator does not want to become inactive because he feels like he has just begun learning about new aspects of the organization. Leaving the building, the narrator begins feeling optimistic about his situation and intends to take on the new assignment deciding that this move from the Brotherhood is an affirmation that they believe in him. The narrator is relieved that he had not let his old southern fear ruin his career. The narrator leaves the Harlem office without saying goodbye to anyone.

Chapter 18 Analysis

The letter the narrator receives foreshadows trouble that the narrator will be facing. In fact, Brother Westrum's visit causes him to lose his position in Harlem, and by the end of the novel, this leads to even more conflict. Westrum appears to be an enemy to the narrator, and he has plotted against him. The narrator feels betrayed by the Brotherhood even though Brother Jack had advised him of just such a possible event happening to him. Again, the chapter ends with the narrator still being naïve about his powerless position within the organization.

Chapter 19

Chapter 19 Summary

The narrator is excited to attend his first lecture on the Woman Question and is very confident that everything is set up for it to be successful. However, the presence of a certain white woman asking ideological questions is the narrator's focus. The woman asking questions is described as being very womanly, fertile, and attractive. The narrator goes to the woman's richly decorated apartment to discuss ideologies and finds that the woman's husband, Hubert, is away.

The woman is clearly trying to seduce the narrator, and at one point, she describes the narrator's voice as primitive. The narrator tries to explain that his supported by science as well. As the discussion continues, the narrator wonders if this woman is a trap set up by the Brotherhood, and knows that he should leave. The narrator describes feeling trapped between biology and his ideology, and eventually he sleeps with the woman. The narrator does not know if he is dreaming or if a man really enters the room in the middle of the night and tells the woman to wake him early. The narrator is extremely disturbed and leaves the apartment still wondering if the man in the room was real.

The next day, the narrator nervously awaits a summons from the Brotherhood, thinking still that the previous night was a trap. The narrator now feels certain that the man who had entered the room was real. The narrator hears nothing from the Brotherhood and finally calls the woman from the previous night. The woman asks if the narrator will return and he replies yes. The narrator feels guilty and tense, but tries to remain confident and composed.

The narrator describes his new work downtown as being a little different. The audiences the narrator faces seem to expect something from the narrator. The narrator describes the audience as undergoing an unburdening after his speeches, while the narrator's guilt rises. One night, the narrator is called to an emergency meeting. He finds out that Brother Tod Clifton has disappeared from the Brotherhood and that the Harlem district has fallen into shambles. The narrator is relieved that his own issues are not discussed, and now ponders the situation in Harlem.

Chapter 19 Analysis

The narrator again is in a situation where he wonders if people have laid a trap for him. Part of the narrator's fear also stems from his guilt with sleeping with a white woman. Again, this event was predicted by the veteran doctor early in the book. The strange audiences that the narrator faces seem to respond to his speeches, yet he experiences even more uncertainty and guilt. The narrator's return to Harlem is very important for the remainder of the plot.

Chapter 20

Chapter 20 Summary

The narrator has to adjust to the rhythms of Harlem again and visits a bar expecting to find a Brother Maceo. Maceo is described as being one of the narrator's best contacts. When the narrator addresses two men at the bar as brothers, they become offended and begin to hassle the narrator. One of the men accuses the narrator of getting white fever and leaving Harlem. The narrator is surprised by this treatment, and after hearing that Maceo does not visit the bar, often finishes another beer and heads for the district office. While walking along, the narrator has accidentally almost walked to Mary's house. At the district, the narrator is surprised to find the windows dark and no sign of Brother Tarp. The narrator is beginning to fully realize that members have lost interest and have left the Brotherhood because they stopped fighting. The narrator spends the night at the office looking over records, but he is unable to find clues to explain the district's current situation.

In the morning, many members are in the district office, but no one is able to give the narrator specific information about Brother Clifton. The narrator learns that the emphasis had been switched from local issues to national and international issues. The narrator is expecting a call to be invited to the strategy meeting with the committee, but does not receive one. After calling around to other districts, the narrator realizes that he has been omitted purposefully. The narrator tries to attend the meeting anyways and is told that he may not enter. The narrator randomly decides to by a new pair of shoes.

The narrator is headed back to the district office when he notices a group gathered watching a man selling a grinning, black, dancing doll. The narrator has the same offended response to the dancing doll as he had to the bank figurine of Mary's. Then, the narrator realizes that the man selling the dolls is actually Tod Clifton. The narrator spits on the doll and the crowd glares at him. A policeman arrives and the crowd, including Clifton, disperses quickly. The narrator is left wondering about what has caused Clifton to leave the Brotherhood and picks up the doll he dropped. Later, the narrator sees a policeman following Clifton and pushing him along. Clifton turns to defend himself, and he is shot by the policeman. When the narrator tries to help he is sent away by the policeman, and we learn that Clifton is dead.

The narrator continues wandering around Harlem and continues thinking about Clifton's death and his purpose for leaving the Brotherhood. The narrator ponders the truth behind things of importance always being recorded, and believes that the policeman was Clifton's historian and judge. The narrator wonders about the history of people who do not write novels and history book. The narrator gets dizzy at the thought that outside of history and outside of the Brotherhood there are men who could be true saviors and leaders.

The narrator gets on the subway and notices two nuns, one in white and one in black, and humorously recalls a song about how heavy the cross is. The narrator wonders whether he is an accident, like Frederick Douglass, and whether he should have disappeared. The narrator finds peace in thinking that it is his job to get these people into the groove of history, and looks into their faces seeing that all of them resemble faces of people he had known in the South. The narrator witnesses kids stealing candy bars and a woman who trips the man chasing the boys. The narrator feels guilt that so much work had been done with so little change. The narrator reflects on his own obsession with the movement without calculating the results. Now he feels as though he is awakening from a dream.

Chapter 20 Analysis

The narrator is forced into questioning the Brotherhood during this chapter, and, after witnessing the death of Brother Tod Clifton, he seems to undergo a new awakening. The narrator first begins realizing that it is possible for people to be leaders without an organization like the Brotherhood. In addition, the narrator begins seeing people around him differently and begins recognizing people and connecting them with his past. The narrator's thoughts become more independent and less self-centered or obsessed with power. The death of Clifton is a symbolic death of a part of the narrator that believed in the Brotherhood.

Chapter 21

Chapter 21 Summary

The narrator returns to the district but is unable to break the news about Clifton's death. The narrator feels guilty for having spit on the doll and not trying to educate the crowd at that moment instead. Still thinking about the day, the narrator questions why he had not intervened and wonders if Clifton thought that he was a sell out. The narrator dismisses the idea, thinking it is too big, and continues wondering what he will tell the committee. The narrator thinks about organizing a funeral for Clifton in order to focus on the meaning behind his death and not the acts at the end of his life.

A group of youth members comes to the door to ask if Clifton's death is true, and the narrator tells them, they must fight. The narrator begins organizing the funeral and contacting the community. After days of meetings and planning, the funeral takes place on a hot, Saturday afternoon. The narrator notices members showing up whom he has not seen since his return. The black banners carried during the procession to Mount Morris Park read, "Brother Tod Clifton, Our Hope Shot Down." The narrator describes the slow marching, the heat and the groups of people who come out to watch the procession. The narrator ponders over the question of whether politics could ever be a communication of love. Finally, the procession arrives at the park, and an old man begins a song, which the narrator is jealous he had not begun singing himself in the spirit of the moment.

The narrator begins a speech about how there is little to know about Clifton and finds himself unable to tie in any of the politics of the Brotherhood. The narrator speaks about Clifton being dead because a cop liked the rhyme of trigger with nigger. The narrator ends with saying that Clifton aroused hope, believed in Brotherhood and died. The narrator feels that his speech failed because he could not speak about political issues. For the first time, the narrator realizes that he is seeing members of the crowd as individuals. After the burial, the narrator describes feeling listless and again describes the heat and the hot, sweaty crowd. The narrator describes the city and the policemen who watch, and realizes at the end that something has to be done with the tension before it is gone.

Chapter 21 Analysis

The important event of this chapter is most certainly the funeral procession. The procession has a dizzy quality and the reader is uncomfortably aware of the heat of the day. The narrator truly seems to see individuals for the first time in this chapter. Although the narrator feels that he was unable to speak about political issues, the reader knows that in fact the narrator has spoken about the right thing when addressing only the issue of Clifton's tragic death. The dizzy, hot, and tense elements of this chapter all foreshadow the disturbing events that are to come before the end of the novel

Chapter 22

Chapter 22 Summary

The narrator returns to the district office to find committee members, including Brother Tobitt and Brother Jack, waiting for him. The narrator faces them in the same way that he faces his grandfather in his dreams. The men ask about the funeral and immediately begin verbally attacking the narrator and questioning the success of the funeral. Brother Jack harasses the narrator for using the words personal responsibility to explain his actions. The narrator is accused of glorifying Clifton, who in their opinion was a traitor for his selling of what they call anti-Negro dolls. The narrator tries to defend Clifton by bringing up the circumstances of his death. The group tries to accuse the narrator of lecturing them about the condition of African Americans, and the narrator mocks Brother Tobitt for his comments about being married to a black girl. Brother Jack tells the narrator that he was not hired to think, and that the Brotherhood will tell him what to do, think, and say because they produce the ideas.

The narrator realizes that he is headed in a dangerous direction, and he tries to get out of it by remaining quiet. The conversation continues with the narrator trying to describe the needs of Harlem and with the committee members continuing to denounce his ideas. Brother Jack says the crowds of people are only a raw material for the Brotherhood, and they are no longer needed. The narrator tells the committee that the people believe the Brotherhood has betrayed them, and Brother Jack responds saying that the Brotherhood's job is to tell the people what to think.

The narrator then asks Jack if he is the people's great white father, and Jack becomes extremely offended and replies that he is their leader. Jack gets so agitated that he jumps up and pops out his glass eye into a drinking glass. The narrator did not know about Jack's glass eye, and he is horrified by Jack's image. Jack continues talking about sacrificing his eye for the Brotherhood. The narrator thinks about Brother Jack being blind and realizes Jack cannot see him symbolically, either. Again, the narrator feels like he is awakening from a dream when he sees Brother Jack for what he truly is – a rooster of a man.

The narrator feels very tired and begins merely nodding and listening to what he is told. Brother Jack tells the narrator he needs to visit Brother Hambro who will give him instructions and outline the Brotherhood's new program. The narrator is reminded to watch his temper and of the need to be disciplined. After the men leave, the narrator thinks about Clifton's death and thinks to himself that some of him died with Clifton, and that he has lost too much to be the same again.

Chapter 22 Analysis

The narrator feels threatened during the discussion with committee members during this chapter. Brother Jack's eye coming out acts as both a literal and symbolic revealing again of the vision motif. Although the reader knows that Jack is literally blind in one eye, the narrator's understanding that Jack is blind to seeing him with his other eye is more relevant. The narrator feels that Jack is unable to see him as an individual. Jack's comments about the crowds of people being a natural resource are very similar to the narrator's previous ideas of using the crowds to lead to his own power. The narrator undergoes another awakening during this chapter. The docile narrator at the end of this chapter will put on this humble face to the committee for a while longer.

Chapter 23

Chapter 23 Summary

The narrator is downstairs in the bar when a group of men tries to invite him into their argument about Clifton's death. The narrator does not get involved, has a drink, and leaves. Out on the street, the narrator is approached by different groups who are moved to action by the shooting. The narrator runs into Ras the Exhorter's men, and he is challenged by Ras to explain what the Brotherhood is planning to do about Clifton. The narrator cannot really explain anything, and two men begin to follow him and beat him up a bit before an onlooker intervenes. The narrator walks on and decides to buy a pair of dark green sunglasses behind which to hide.

As the narrator is walking along, he is approached by several people who mistake him for a man named Rinehart. The first person to do this is a young woman who is elated to think she sees Rinehart, but then warns the narrator not to go around pretending to be Rinehart. The second group to think the narrator is Rinehart are a group of young men that he waves off believing they are probably Rinehart's friends. The narrator comes across Ras again, but goes by unnoticed. The narrator feels that by appearing differently he has joined another group of people – the hipsters and zootsuiters. The narrator goes to the same bar that he had tried to find Brother Maceo in before, and he is unrecognized by the bartender, Barrelhouse. The narrator now sees Maceo and approaches him to test his disguise. Maceo does not recognize the narrator, and the two almost get in a fight when Maceo thinks the narrator is going to pull a knife on him. The narrator is kicked out of the bar, and he continues on his way.

The narrator walks along wondering about what type of man Rinehart is and how many people know him. The narrator overhears a group of men talking about needing guns to avenge Clifton's murder, and one man asks him, thinking he is Rinehart, to give him a job. The narrator thinks about how the world is seen so fluidly from behind such dark lenses when he is stopped by a woman asking him if he is Rine the runner and wanting the final numbers. The woman recognizes that the narrator is not Rinehart because of the kind of shoes he is wearing. As the narrator walks on, a cop car pulls over and a white cop threatens that he wants his cut by morning. Next, a group of men runs up with guns, the narrator explains what happened with the cop car, and one man says it is obvious that the narrator is not Rinehart.

As the narrator continues his walk, the streets quiet down and he thinks about how a white hat and dark sunglasses can hide his identity so well. Another woman approaches the narrator and tries to put money in his pocket until she sees that he is not Rinehart. As the narrator walks along, he comes across a church and takes a paper with a religious passage on it signed by Reverend Rinehart. The narrator is even more surprised when he goes into the church and hears a sermon that sounds like those of the south. Two older women approach the narrator believing that he is the Reverend

Rinehart. The narrator looks at the congregation and on a wall reads the words, "Let there be light."

The narrator leaves thinking deeply about how Rinehart can play so many roles – runner, gambler, briber, lover and Reverend. The narrator sees this as the fluid world Rinehart lives in and thinks that he should forget about him. However, the narrator continues thinking about the world without boundaries and feels that this is a new reality for him. The narrator reflects that outside of the Brotherhood was like being outside of history, while being inside was like being unseen. The narrator decides to visit Brother Hambro and puts the sunglasses and hat inside his pocket, which also contains Brother Tarp's leg chain and Clifton's doll.

When the narrator arrives at Hambro's home, he meets one of Hambro's children singing nursery rhymes. The narrator speaks with Hambro about the future of his district, and Hambro replies that the narrator's members will have to be sacrificed for the good of the Brotherhood. The narrator does not understand why this has to happen, and he is told by Hambro that the Brotherhood needs to make alliances with other political groups and that the aggressiveness of the black community needs to be slowed down. The narrator feels like this is mistreating the community, and Hambro responds that it is impossible not to do so. During the discussion, the narrator keeps throwing in random comments about Rinehart that confuse Hambro. Hambro tries to remind the narrator that decisions are based on scientific objectivity. The narrator is again reminded to have discipline and to follow along with the Brotherhood's plans. Hambro gives the narrator new material and instructions about the new plans.

After the narrator leaves he still ponders the meanings of sacrifice and leadership, and feels both like a person who is scarifying others and as a sacrificial victim. The narrator stops on a bench and thinks about whether he should leave the Brotherhood, but feels his only other avenue would be a self-betrayal to return to Bledsoe or Emerson. The narrator feels that he must stay in order to settle with Jack and Tobitt. The narrator considers that the Brotherhood does not care for his ambition or integrity, and he recognizes that he is invisible. This thought allows the narrator to see how it is possible for him to play two roles at the same time. The narrator is angered at the thought of being tricked by the Brotherhood, and begins once again accepts the past events, experiences, and people that helped define him as a person.

The narrator begins planning in his mind and determines that he will allow the Brotherhood to destroy itself because of its blindness, and he will help them do it. The narrator combines the personas of Jack, Norton and Emerson in his mind and realizes that all the white men tried to force their realities upon him. The narrator decides that he will use the advice of his grandfather to fight these men, and that he will overcome them by seeming to agree with them. The narrator continues in a crazed manner imagining how he will force himself on them and becomes fascinated with his ideas. The narrator wonders why he has not seen the possibility of playing two roles before, and thinks about an old slave being a scientist even as he pretended to be servile. The narrator also considers that African Americans had been tricked into believing that success was

about rising upward instead of the possibility of realizing success by traveling in any direction. The narrator recalls Bledsoe trying to explain this idea to him.

Lying in his apartment, the narrator describes the heat again and continues planning in his mind. The narrator plans to trick the Brotherhood about the involvement of the community by assuring them that the people are involved and positive. In addition, the narrator recognizes his need to find a source of intelligence in the committee since he now knows real objectives are never learned in the meetings. The narrator suddenly thinks of finding a woman to be his source of information. The narrator thinks that Emma, whom he had met at the Chthonian earlier in the book, would be a likely candidate and recalls dancing with her and an intimate conversation they shared about temptation. The narrator thinks about a birthday party being held for Jack and decides to begin his attack during this time.

Chapter 23 Analysis

The experience the narrator has while playing at being Rinehart opens up a new world of double realities for him. The narrator suddenly realizes that he can have more than one identity at a time. The narrator now feels that he is able to see the world and the Brotherhood for what they truly are. In fact, by the end of the chapter, the narrator is finally able to understand and utilize his grandfather's advice. The narrator plans to play the role of a docile Brother to help bring about the Brotherhood's downfall. The narrator also plans to use a woman to help him. This is another event the veteran doctor predicted earlier.

Chapter 24

Chapter 24 Summary

The narrator describes "yessing" the Brotherhood starting the next day and describes it as working perfectly because the community is falling apart. The narrator does not like the violence happening in Harlem, but he moves on with his plan regardless. The narrator reports to headquarters that things are settling down and is determined to present a positive image of Harlem no matter what. The narrator questions whether the Brotherhood believes in its own illusion that is now creating a second one. The narrator attends the birthday party at the Chthonian and realizes that he needs to find someone other than Emma to choose, for, as Jack's mistress, she is too knowledgeable of intrigue to use. The narrator's second choice is a woman named Sybil who is usually drunk and very unhappy with her husband. The narrator plans to meet with her the following evening at his apartment.

The evening of Sybil's visit, the narrator tries to manage things the way Rinehart would have and has flowers and alcohol on hand. The narrator begins regretting getting the woman so drunk when she asks him to pretend that he is raping her. Sybil begins describing that this in fact happened to a friend of hers and tells the narrator that she believes she is a nymphomaniac. Sybil and the narrator both continue drinking and eventually Sybil passes out. When Sybil awakens, the narrator leads her to believe that they had played out her rape fantasy when in fact he had been unable to. Both Sybil and the narrator doze off when the phone rings, and the narrator is told by a frantic voice that he needs to get to the district office and there is the sound of breaking glass in the background.

The narrator gets ready to leave and grabs his dust-covered briefcase that still contains Mary's bank. Sybil wants to stay with the narrator, but he places her in a cab. Both Sybil and the narrator are still very drunk, and as the narrator continues down the street, he comes across Sybil again who has gotten out of the cab. The narrator places her in a cab again asking the taxi driver to not let her out and to take her downtown. The taxi driver tells the narrator that things are coming apart in Harlem.

As the narrator heads in that direction, he is reminded of his first entry into Harlem. The narrator notices a church spire with a red light that seems to be of warning, and recognizes the hero's tomb. The narrator comes to a bridge, listens to the river and drinks out of a water fountain when he hears the sound of a crowd in the distance. The narrator continues walking towards Harlem and hearing sounds in the distance that he thinks are a message for him. Then, the narrator, suddenly hit by bird-droppings, begins running toward Harlem.

Chapter 24 Analysis

The night begins very drunkenly for the narrator and he is disturbed by Sybil's strange request. The narrator's plan for using Sybil has seemed to fail. The phone call and the narrator's trip to Harlem are all like the quiet before the storm. The narrator is headed for a very wild and confusing night. The narrator has brought his briefcase along with him and by the end of the following chapter, the symbolism of carrying this will become revealed.

Chapter 25

Chapter 25 Summary

The narrator reaches Harlem faces the sound of gunshots. A few men pushing a safe down the street warn the narrator to get out of their way, and the narrator is suddenly in the midst of a riot. The narrator sees policemen firing their guns, and the narrator is grazed in the head by a bullet and blood drips onto his face. A few men stop to help him, and they invite the narrator to join them in their looting. The narrator is still drunk and feels forgetful, but he still manages to hang onto his briefcase which contains Mary's bank, his Brotherhood identification, the anonymous letter he received and Clifton's doll.

The group of men has a plan, and amidst the looting and chaotic rioting, they talk about what caused the riot. Everyone has a different explanation; some say it is because of Clifton's death and some say it has to do with women. The group goes into a building and gathers flashlights and bucketfuls of oil. The narrator knows he is supposed to head to the district, but chooses to stay with these men. The group continues on its way and pauses to see a big woman on top of a Borden milk wagon throwing off bottles of milk and giving away free beer. The group of men feels a bit sobered by this sight. Finally, the group arrives at a big tenement building, and the narrator learns that the group's intention is to burn down the building. Many of the men live there and the building is in shambles and disease ridden.

A man named Dupre, somewhat the leader of the group, is very clear about getting the building completely cleared before they begin the fire. The narrator does not even think to interfere, and instead he plans to help. As people are evacuated, one pregnant woman stops to beg the men not to burn the building, but Dupre responds that his kid died from an illness in that building and it is a death trap. The men enter the building, splash the kerosene around, and finally light the building on fire. The narrator thinks about how the men have organized and carried out their own action. As the narrator is leaving the apartment, he drops his briefcase and must go back to retrieve it. A woman's voice calls out the narrator's Brotherhood name and he tries to avoid her.

The narrator is out in the rioting crowd again trying to leave the unknown woman behind and thinks about who may have called him down to Harlem. The narrator decides to head towards the district office, and along the way, he stops a man's arm from bleeding. A man from the group named Scofield is tagging along with the narrator. He asks about the woman who had been calling his name, but the narrator denies that it was he. More policemen arrive in riot gear, and Scofield pulls out a gun. The narrator drops behind a pile of baskets and overhears a couple's conversation and the man uses the phrase race riot. At this point, the narrator has an awakening and believes that this riot is a result of the Brotherhood's plans and decides that this violence is in fact murder. The narrator feels like he has been used to help cause this riot, and is shocked that it happened at the point when he finally thought he was free.

The narrator runs away carrying his briefcase and leaving Scofield behind. Running along different streets, the narrator witnesses different snapshots of the riot, and then he sees the horrifying sight of seven hanging naked white mannequins. Initially the narrator believed the mannequins were real and was frightened Sybil was one of them. The narrator continues running and comes across Ras the Exhorter, now named Ras the Destroyer, who is dressed like an African warrior in fur and carrying a shield. The narrator slips Tarp's leg chain over his knuckles and faces Ras's gang. Ras sees the narrator and throws a spear at him but misses. The narrator tries to speak to Ras and the crowd explaining how he had been used to create this riot and that they need to stop fighting to save themselves. No one will listen to the narrator, and he begins thinking about how unreal, yet very real, the situation is and what a fool he has been. The narrator continues thinking about the absurdity of the night and knowing that he no longer has to run from men like Jack, Bledsoe, and Norton, but rather that he has to run from their refusal to recognize everyone's American identity.

The narrator comes back out of his thoughts and throws the spear at Ras, which goes through his jaw. At this point, the narrator says that he has "surrendered [his] life and begun to live again." The narrator gets away from the threatening crowd and realizes he is running towards Mary's house. The narrator wishes he could tell the crowd to stop and comes to a street where the water main has burst and gets slapped across his eyes by a police horse's tail. The narrator runs blindly through the stream of water and continues on his way.

The narrator stops behind a row of iron fences and overhears a group laughing about the events of the riot. Each person tells an account of when he saw Ras during the riot. The narrator is confused about how these men can make the events sound funny, when they are also dangerous and sad. The narrator says that his grandfather had been wrong about "yessing" the people to destruction, and that he was really used as a tool. The narrator continues on, now determined to get to Jack. On his way, the narrator is stopped by men asking what is in his briefcase, and when he runs from them, he falls into a manhole and lands on top of black coal. The men shout down at him, and eventually get so angry with the narrator that they cover up the manhole.

The narrator becomes very tired in the black hole and describes his sleep as " . . . death without hanging . . . a death alive." The narrator still considers going to Mary's in the morning. However, the narrator does not know how long he sleeps for, and he underestimates how easy it would be to get out of the hole. The narrator finds three matches that the men had dropped down and begins burning papers in his briefcase to use for light. The first item the narrator burns is his high school diploma, next is Clifton's doll, then the anonymous letter, and then the slip of paper on which Jack had written his Brotherhood name. At this point, the narrator recognizes that the handwriting on the anonymous letter and the slip with his name are identical and is overcome again with anger. The narrator recalls losing his sense of time as he flounders about in his anger, saying that days or weeks may have passed.

The narration turns to a dreamlike quality, with the narrator describing being the prisoner of Jack, Emerson, Bledsoe, Norton, Ras, the school superintendent and others.

This group consists of the men who have controlled the narrator. The narrator addresses the group saying he is through with running and illusions, and as a result, they pluck his eyes out. Despite the pain, the narrator describes this as being empty, but can see a butterfly. Then the narrator tells the group that he can see their world, history and an iron man walking like a robot and shouts that they must stop him.

Finally, the narrator is awake, but still lies in the hole reliving the dream. He thinks about the men still being up in the world and making a mess of it. The narrator realizes that he cannot return to his previous life and his only options are to move ahead or stay underground. The chapter ends with the narrator's words, "The end was in the beginning."

Chapter 25 Analysis

The riot is wild and hectic, and the narrator experiences it while drunk. The crowd and people the narrator comes across all show him what people are capable of doing. The narrator has begun to believe that the Brotherhood has used him as a tool to help start this riot. The narrator begins to live again after throwing the spear at Ras. Then he is blinded by the police horse's tail. This reveals again the use of the vision motif. However, soon after this the narrator falls into the symbolic manhole onto coal and hibernates in a sense.

During this time, the narrator opens his briefcase, which contains documents that represent the people who have controlled his destiny. After finally learning that Jack had written the anonymous letter, the narrator has his vision of confronting the people who have been controlling him. They blind the narrator in order for him to see the truth. In his blindness, the narrator sees a butterfly and an iron man. The iron man is symbolic of who the narrator has become and what many other African American males are – robots in a world they are not in control of. Again, the veteran doctor at the beginning of the book warned the narrator of this when he called him a mechanical man. The final words of the chapter reveal that the narrator's life begins with this final understanding of the world.

Epilogue

Epilogue Summary

The narrator speaks directly to the reader about being an invisible man in a hole, which he has accepted. The narrator does not know if being in the hole puts him behind others or before them. The narrator wants to be honest, but realizes that being invisible makes this difficult, and says that he was never been more hated than when he tried to be honest. In addition, he realizes that he was never more loved than when he affirmed other people's beliefs. The narrator understands that his problem was always going in other people's directions and never his own. As a result, the narrator has taken to his hibernation.

The narrator comments that he is still plagued by his grandfather's advice, and wonders if his grandfather had meant to affirm the principle of the country and not the men. Next, the narrator wonders if his grandfather had meant that he had to take the responsibility for the men and the principle. The narrator questions his own intentions and knows that he does not want just freedom or power, and because he cannot take the next step, remains in his hole. The narrator says he carries his sickness within himself and deep down knows that he is to blame. This is what the narrator describes as soul-sickness.

The narrator continues to ponder what the next phase is and describes the world with infinite possibilities. The narrator has learned that men are different, and in the division of the world, there is health. The narrator speaks, "Whence all this passion toward conformity anyway?- diversity is the word." The narrator explains that life is about living and not being controlled, and that the fate is to become one, yet many.

The narrator then recalls an incident in the subway where he meets Mr. Norton who is lost and asking for directions. However, Mr. Norton does not recognize the narrator even after the narrator tells him that he is Mr. Norton's destiny. Mr. Norton becomes afraid of the narrator and leaves quickly on a train. Meanwhile, the narrator laughs hysterically.

The narrator continues with his thinking and mentions that he has considered returning south, but knows the true darkness is in his own mind. The narrator questions why he writes and says that he denounces and defends his words. The narrator describes being a desperate man, but he recognizes that a person must approach the world with as much love as hate. The narrator recalls his high school speech and the words about humanity, and realizes his grandfather would not have spoken like him because his grandfather accepted humanity and the principle.

The narrator says that his hibernation is over and that he smells spring, even with its scent of death. The narrator states, "the mind that has conceived a plan of living must never lose sight of the chaos against which that pattern was conceived," and he points out that this applies to societies as well. The narrator continues explaining that he will

leave his hole, and ends with saying that "Who knows but that, on the lower frequencies, I speak for you?"

Epilogue Analysis

The narrator addresses the reader with a list of the lessons he has finally learned. We hear again the mistakes the narrator made while following other people's plans, and now he knows that he must make his own plans, even if that means being hated. The narrator still ponders over his grandfather's words and now understands that his grandfather was more accepting of the principles of the country than the men, but that his grandfather understood humanity. The narrator describes carrying his own guilt and having a soul-sickness. The narrator describes a world that is full of many different people who are unified yet diverse. This notion is the antithesis of what he had believed in the Brotherhood.

The narrator continues on addressing the reader about why he has written this book and that his hibernation is over and it is time to return to the world. However, his words suggest he will remember the chaos of his previous life in his new one. The narrator ends the book with the question that maybe he is writing this story in order to speak for the reader. These words bring up the idea that perhaps the reader is also invisible or following other people's plans blindly. The words cause the reader to question his or her own role in the world.

Characters

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 Buckethead" by the students, he is a shrewd survivor who has spent his career humoring the white trustees ill the hopes of retaining ills position. A person of considerable affectation, he can manage even ill 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 he?" 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 be gins, 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 1 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 young-uns." 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 1 am nobody but myself. But first 1 had to discover that 1 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 1 received a fearful satisfaction from hearing him talk as he had to a white man."

Although he has the "queer feeling that 1 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 1 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'in 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 winding off into some unknown which I dared not face."

Ras the Exhorter

Modeled on Marcus Garvey, though not a caricature of him Ras 18 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 Chfton: "You *my* brother, main 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 try ing 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 Ins 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 18 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 mall is impressed with the bold way the vet talks to the white trustee. The vet is the first per son to grasp the invisible mall's dilemma: "You cannot see or hear or smell the truth of what you see."

Peter Wheatstraw

A kindly rubbiSh man the invisible mall 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.

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'in 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 ofhis 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 I 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 buff," 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."

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 ('T'), 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 'T' 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 Lonis 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 singmg "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 !'"

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 leached 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 bad been, to my surprise, a switch in emphasis from local issues to those more national and international ill 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 19308 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 anew draft in the wake of the eruption of conflict in Europe again in 1939 led to civil rights protests in the early 194Os 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.

Critical Overview

Invisible 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 in cest to Mr. Norton. "One is accustomed to expect excellent novels about boys, but a modem 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 slapping 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."

Criticism

- Critical Essay #1
- Critical Essay #2
- Critical Essay #3

Critical Essay #1

In the following essay, Dykema-VanderArk, a doctoral candidate at Michigan State University, examines how the individual journey of the "Invisible Man" can represent the larger American experience. He asserts that Ellison's novel concludes that "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 stereo types. "

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: "1 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 ills 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 19uoring 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 ills 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?" Mer rejecting the identity that he possessed at the college, the narrator 18 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 hood 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?"

Source: Anthony M Dykema-VanderArk, in an essay for *Novels for Students,* Gale, 1997.

BOOKRAGS

Critical Essay #2

In the following excerpt, Lillard places Invisible Man *within the epic tradition and calls the novel "a most successful attempt ... to produce the great American Negro epic.* "

[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 com 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 ills 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 man. .

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 brntality 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 contmually 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 mght 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 orgamzation 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 ill the side, the drag by the neck through the mob-angry town, the Grand inquisition, the embrace of the Maiden, the rip ill the belly With the guts Spilling out, the trip 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 rausing 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 Trneblood'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 Wheat-straw ("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 hovel 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 mu sical 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.

Source: Stewart Lillard, "Ellison's Ambitious Scope in Invisible Man," in *English Journal,* Vol. 58, No 6, September, 1969, pp 833-39.

Critical Essay #3

In the following excerpt, Schafer explores how Ellison's "invisible man" can be seen as an antihero in search of an identity.

The anti-hero of *Invisible Man,* though we come to know him intimately, remains nameless. He is no-man and everyman on a modern epic quest, driven by the message his grandfather re veals in a dream: "To Whom It May Concern ... Keep This Nigger-Boy Running." His primary search is for a name—or for the self it 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 rum 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 to 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 ill a hospital, where he is resurrected by white doctors using an electro-shock 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 1 prefer surgery. And in tins case especially, with this, uh ... background I'in not so sure that 1 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 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 antihero's journey.

The apparatus which resurrects the invisible man in 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 tins 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 Ins 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 winch 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 Ins 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 ills 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 not, 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 ills 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'in invisible and live in a hole, I am dead I am neither dead nor in a state of suspended animation Call in 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.

Source: William J Schafer, "Ralph Ellison and the Birth of the Anti-Hero", in *Critique' Studies* in *Modern Fiction,* Vol to, No. 2, 1968, pp 81-93.

Adaptations

Invisible Man was recorded by Dr. Marion J. Smith for Golden Voice Production, 1993.

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 to the United States

Explore current policies in medical ethics and informed consent and exp1ain how these would affect the Circumstances of the kind of operation performed on the 1Ovisib1e 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 to the novel would be affected by them, and what their options for alternative living arrangements might be.

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 rums 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 closmg of mental hospitals have produced increased homelessness.

1930s: Big bands in the swing era give way to bebop, the basis for modem Jazz, winch arises in Kansas City and Harlem. Major influences are Charlie Parker, Dizzy Gillespie, and Thelo nius 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.

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.*

Nobel prize-winner Toni Morrison's novel *Jazz* (1992) captures the rhythms and mood of African American life in Harlem in the 1920s.

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.

Further Study

Kimberly W. Benston, editor, *Speaking for You. The Vision of Ralph Ellison,* Howard University Press, 1987.

A wide-ranging collection of essays on Ellison's fiction and nonfiction as well as interviews With Ellison and poems written in his honor.

Ralph Ellison, *The Collected Essays of Ralph Ellison,* edited by John F Callahan, Modem Library, 1995.

A recent collection of all of Ellison's essays, reviews, and interviews, some previously unpublished. Includes the complete text of Ellison's two published collections, *Shadow and Act* and *Going to the Territory,* as well as his introduction to the Thirtieth Anniversary Edition of *Invisible Man*

Ralph Ellison, *Conversations with Ralph Ellison,* edited by Maryemma Graham and Amritjit Singh, University Press of Mississippi, 1995.

A collection of interviews with Ellison including considerable commentary on *Invisible Man*

John Hersey, editor, *Ralph Ellison A Collection of Critical Essays,* Prentice-Hall, 1974.

A collection of early reviews, an interview with Ellison, and several important essays on *Invisible Man*

Alan Nadel, *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.

Robert G O'Meally, *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.

Robert G. O'Meally, editor, *New Essays on Invisible Man,* Cambridge University Press, 1988.

A collection of five recent essays on *Invisible Man* with an historical overview in O'Meally's Introduction.

Susan Resneck Parr and Pancho Savery, *Approaches to Teaching Ellison's Invisible Man,* Modem Language Association, 1980.

Though intended primarily for teachers, tlus collection of brief essays also offers the first-time reader several productive avenues into Ellison's novel.

David Remnick, "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.

Eric J Sundquist, editor, *Cultural Contexts for Ralph Ellison's Invisible Man,* Bedford, 1995.

This useful collection "illuminates and contextualizes" Ellison's novel by gathering various historical and cultural documents, including speeches, essays, songs, and folktales.

Joseph F Trimmer, editor, *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."

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Warren French, "Invisible Man," in *Reference Guide to American Literature,* 3rd edition, St. James Press, 1994, pp. 993-94.

Irving Howe, "Black Boys and Native Sons,'" in *Dissent,* Autumn, 1963

Charles Johnson, "The Singular VisIOn of Ralph Ellison," preface to *Invisible Man,* Modern Library, 1994, pp. VII-XII David Little John, *in Black on White: A Critical Survey of Writing by American Negroes,* Viking, pp. 110-119

Edward Margolies, "History as Blues Ralph Ellison's 'invisible Man,' " in his *Native Sons: A Critical Study of Twentieth-Century Negro American Authors,* Lippincott, 1968, pp. 127-48.

Anthony West, "Black Man's Burden," in *The New Yorker,* Volume 28, No. 15, May 31, 1952, pp. 93-96.

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Introduction

Purpose of the Book

The purpose of Novels for Students (NfS) is to provide readers with a guide to understanding, enjoying, and studying novels by giving them easy access to information about the work. Part of Gale's□For Students□ Literature line, NfS is specifically designed to meet the curricular needs of high school and undergraduate college students and their teachers, as well as the interests of general readers and researchers considering specific novels. While each volume contains entries on □classic□ novels

frequently studied in classrooms, there are also entries containing hard-to-find information on contemporary novels, including works by multicultural, international, and women novelists.

The information covered in each entry includes an introduction to the novel and the novel's author; a plot summary, to help readers unravel and understand the events in a novel; descriptions of important characters, including explanation of a given character's role in the novel as well as discussion about that character's relationship to other characters in the novel; analysis of important themes in the novel; and an explanation of important literary techniques and movements as they are demonstrated in the novel.

In addition to this material, which helps the readers analyze the novel itself, students are also provided with important information on the literary and historical background informing each work. This includes a historical context essay, a box comparing the time or place the novel was written to modern Western culture, a critical overview essay, and excerpts from critical essays on the novel. A unique feature of NfS is a specially commissioned critical essay on each novel, targeted toward the student reader.

To further aid the student in studying and enjoying each novel, information on media adaptations is provided, as well as reading suggestions for works of fiction and nonfiction on similar themes and topics. Classroom aids include ideas for research papers and lists of critical sources that provide additional material on the novel.

Selection Criteria

The titles for each volume of NfS were selected by surveying numerous sources on teaching literature and analyzing course curricula for various school districts. Some of the sources surveyed included: literature anthologies; Reading Lists for College-Bound Students: The Books Most Recommended by America's Top Colleges; textbooks on teaching the novel; a College Board survey of novels commonly studied in high schools; a National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE) survey of novels commonly studied in high schools; the NCTE's Teaching Literature in High School: The Novel;and the Young Adult Library Services Association (YALSA) list of best books for young adults of the past twenty-five years. Input was also solicited from our advisory board, as well as educators from various areas. From these discussions, it was determined that each volume should have a mix of □classic□ novels (those works commonly taught in literature classes) and contemporary novels for which information is often hard to find. Because of the interest in expanding the canon of literature, an emphasis was also placed on including works by international, multicultural, and women authors. Our advisory board members□educational professionals□ helped pare down the list for each volume. If a work was not selected for the present volume, it was often noted as a possibility for a future volume. As always, the editor welcomes suggestions for titles to be included in future volumes.

How Each Entry Is Organized

Each entry, or chapter, in NfS focuses on one novel. Each entry heading lists the full name of the novel, the author's name, and the date of the novel's publication. The following elements are contained in each entry:

- Introduction: a brief overview of the novel which provides information about its first appearance, its literary standing, any controversies surrounding the work, and major conflicts or themes within the work.
- Author Biography: this section includes basic facts about the author's life, and focuses on events and times in the author's life that inspired the novel in question.
- Plot Summary: a factual description of the major events in the novel. Lengthy summaries are broken down with subheads.
- Characters: an alphabetical listing of major characters in the novel. Each character name is followed by a brief to an extensive description of the character's role in the novel, as well as discussion of the character's actions, relationships, and possible motivation. Characters are listed alphabetically by last name. If a character is unnamedfor instance, the narrator in Invisible Man-the character is listed as The Narrator and alphabetized as Narrator. If a character's first name is the only one given, the name will appear alphabetically by that name. Variant names are also included for each character. Thus, the full name Jean Louise Finch would head the listing for the narrator of To Kill a Mockingbird, but listed in a separate cross-reference would be the nickname Scout Finch.
- Themes: a thorough overview of how the major topics, themes, and issues are addressed within the novel. Each theme discussed appears in a separate subhead, and is easily accessed through the boldface entries in the Subject/Theme Index.
- Style: this section addresses important style elements of the novel, such as setting, point of view, and narration; important literary devices used, such as imagery, foreshadowing, symbolism; and, if applicable, genres to which the work might have belonged, such as Gothicism or Romanticism. Literary terms are explained within the entry, but can also be found in the Glossary.
- Historical Context: This section outlines the social, political, and cultural climate in which the author lived and the novel was created. This section may include descriptions of related historical events, pertinent aspects of daily life in the culture, and the artistic and literary sensibilities of the time in which the work was written. If the novel is a historical work, information regarding the time in which the novel is set is also included. Each section is broken down with helpful subheads.
- Critical Overview: this section provides background on the critical reputation of the novel, including bannings or any other public controversies surrounding the work. For older works, this section includes a history of how the novel was first received and how perceptions of it may have changed over the years; for more recent novels, direct quotes from early reviews may also be included.
- Criticism: an essay commissioned by NfS which specifically deals with the novel and is written specifically for the student audience, as well as excerpts from previously published criticism on the work (if available).

- Sources: an alphabetical list of critical material quoted in the entry, with full bibliographical information.
- Further Reading: an alphabetical list of other critical sources which may prove useful for the student. Includes full bibliographical information and a brief annotation.

In addition, each entry contains the following highlighted sections, set apart from the main text as sidebars:

- Media Adaptations: a list of important film and television adaptations of the novel, including source information. The list also includes stage adaptations, audio recordings, musical adaptations, etc.
- Topics for Further Study: a list of potential study questions or research topics dealing with the novel. This section includes questions related to other disciplines the student may be studying, such as American history, world history, science, math, government, business, geography, economics, psychology, etc.
- Compare and Contrast Box: an at-a-glance comparison of the cultural and historical differences between the author's time and culture and late twentieth century/early twenty-first century Western culture. This box includes pertinent parallels between the major scientific, political, and cultural movements of the time or place the novel was written, the time or place the novel was set (if a historical work), and modern Western culture. Works written after 1990 may not have this box.
- What Do I Read Next?: a list of works that might complement the featured novel or serve as a contrast to it. This includes works by the same author and others, works of fiction and nonfiction, and works from various genres, cultures, and eras.

Other Features

NfS includes The Informed Dialogue: Interacting with Literature, a foreword by Anne Devereaux Jordan, Senior Editor for Teaching and Learning Literature (TALL), and a founder of the Children's Literature Association. This essay provides an enlightening look at how readers interact with literature and how Novels for Students can help teachers show students how to enrich their own reading experiences.

A Cumulative Author/Title Index lists the authors and titles covered in each volume of the NfS series.

A Cumulative Nationality/Ethnicity Index breaks down the authors and titles covered in each volume of the NfS series by nationality and ethnicity.

A Subject/Theme Index, specific to each volume, provides easy reference for users who may be studying a particular subject or theme rather than a single work. Significant subjects from events to broad themes are included, and the entries pointing to the specific theme discussions in each entry are indicated in boldface.

Each entry has several illustrations, including photos of the author, stills from film adaptations (if available), maps, and/or photos of key historical events.

Citing Novels for Students

When writing papers, students who quote directly from any volume of Novels for Students may use the following general forms. These examples are based on MLA style; teachers may request that students adhere to a different style, so the following examples may be adapted as needed. When citing text from NfS that is not attributed to a particular author (i.e., the Themes, Style, Historical Context sections, etc.), the following format should be used in the bibliography section:

Night. Novels for Students. Ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski. Vol. 4. Detroit: Gale, 1998. 234-35.

When quoting the specially commissioned essay from NfS (usually the first piece under the Criticism subhead), the following format should be used:

Miller, Tyrus. Critical Essay on Winesburg, Ohio. Novels for Students. Ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski. Vol. 4. Detroit: Gale, 1998. 335-39.

When quoting a journal or newspaper essay that is reprinted in a volume of NfS, the following form may be used:

Malak, Amin. Margaret Atwood's The Handmaid's Tale and the Dystopian Tradition, Canadian Literature No. 112 (Spring, 1987), 9-16; excerpted and reprinted in Novels for Students, Vol. 4, ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski (Detroit: Gale, 1998), pp. 133-36.

When quoting material reprinted from a book that appears in a volume of NfS, the following form may be used:

Adams, Timothy Dow. Richard Wright: Wearing the Mask, in Telling Lies in Modern American Autobiography (University of North Carolina Press, 1990), 69-83; excerpted and reprinted in Novels for Students, Vol. 1, ed. Diane Telgen (Detroit: Gale, 1997), pp. 59-61.

We Welcome Your Suggestions

The editor of Novels for Students welcomes your comments and ideas. Readers who wish to suggest novels to appear in future volumes, or who have other suggestions, are cordially invited to contact the editor. You may contact the editor via email at: ForStudentsEditors@gale.com. Or write to the editor at:

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