

# Literacy Skills Teacher's Guide for

## Invisible Man

by

### Ralph Ellison

### Book Information

Ralph Ellison, Invisible Man  
Quiz Number: 19790  
Random House, 1947  
ISBN 0-679-72313-7; LCCN  
581 Pages  
Book Level: 7.2  
Interest Level: UG

A black man fervently searches for his identity.

**Award:** National Book Award/ Honors

**Topics:** Character Traits, Self-Acceptance; People, African American; Popular Groupings, College Bound; Recommended Reading, ALA Outstanding Books for College Bound; Recommended Reading, California Recommended Lit., English, 9-12

### Main Characters

- Brother Jack the ambitious leader of the Brotherhood who manipulates the narrator into inciting the people of Harlem to riot
- Brother Tarp a Brother from the South; he offers the narrator emotional and spiritual support by giving him a link of a leg chain as a talisman
- Brother Tobitt a self-righteous leader of the Brotherhood who believes his interracial marriage gives him special insight into the people of Harlem
- Brother Tod Clifton a handsome and intelligent employee of the Brotherhood who is murdered by the police after he has separated from the Brotherhood
- Dr. A. Hebert Bledsoe the domineering president of the state college for Negroes, who expels the narrator for accidentally allowing a white college trustee to see the seamy side of the African-American community
- Jim Trueblood a sharecropper who lives near the narrator's college; he is ostracized by the African-American community after he commits incest with his daughter
- Lucius Brockway a temperamental worker for Liberty Paints who viciously attacks the narrator because he believes the narrator is helping establish a union

Mary Rambo the kind-hearted and hardworking woman who rents the narrator a room; she does not evict him when he cannot pay the rent

Mr. Norton the elderly white college trustee who becomes ill while the narrator is taking him for a drive; he insists on stopping to speak to Jim Trueblood

the narrator a complex and unnamed man who tells how years of being manipulated and abused by others has caused him to realize that no one is able to see him for who he truly is

### Vocabulary

- advocate** an ally or defender of an idea or a person
- alienation** the isolation of an individual from the rest of society
- charlatan** a person who makes false claims; a cheat
- dissonance** a contradiction; lack of agreement; discord
- fathom** understand
- utopian** representative of an ideal world

### Synopsis

*Invisible Man* begins with a short preface from an anonymous narrator explaining that he is currently living in a hole in the ground lit with over a thousand lights powered by energy stolen from the local utility company. He then explains how he became "invisible."

His tale starts with the last words of his grandfather, who recommended his family adopt a passive-aggressive attitude toward the white society that has long oppressed them. The family is confused and horrified by the rage behind his words, and the narrator remembers them and tries to unravel their meaning throughout the novel.

As a young adult the narrator wishes to model himself after Booker T. Washington. Through his academic excellence, he earns the right to present a speech at a smoker for local white businessmen. When he arrives he is told to participate in a

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humiliating battle royal as part of the entertainment. He is shocked to discover that these regular meetings of the white men of the community have entertainment that include a strip tease dancer and blindfolded African-Americans fighting each other in a boxing ring. His anticipation of giving his speech and fear of the white men keep him from complaining. When he gives his speech, he is mainly ignored by the rowdy and drunken crowd until he accidentally uses the phrase "social equality." Frightened by the anger he has aroused, he quickly convinces the listeners that he meant to say "social responsibility." The white organizers reward him with a scholarship to the state college for African-Americans.

At the college he glories in the beautiful environment until he accidentally allows Mr. Norton, a white college trustee, to see the seamy side of the surrounding African-American community. Dr. Bledsoe, the African-American college president, is enraged by the narrator's naiveté. He expels the narrator from school. However, when the narrator threatens to report the expulsion to Mr. Norton, who had demanded that the narrator drive to that section of town, Dr. Bledsoe offers him letters of recommendation to seven businessmen in New York as a chance to redeem himself. The narrator convinces himself that he deserved to be punished and travels to New York after Bledsoe gives him the seven sealed letters.

In New York the narrator is at first filled with hope and great plans for his future. As time goes on, he becomes baffled when the letters do not result in any job offers. The mystery is cleared up when Mr. Emerson, the son of one of the businessmen, takes pity on the narrator and shows him that the letters ask the businessmen to help the president delude the narrator into believing he is being given a second chance. In reality, he will never be allowed to return to the college or be given a job by any of them.

After coping with his shock and disappointment, the narrator takes the advice of Mr. Emerson and applies for a job at Liberty Paints. There he fights

with Lucius Brockway, a paranoid African-American man who believes the narrator is part of a union plot to take his job and encourage disrespect toward the benevolent white owner of the factory. After the narrator wins the fight, one of the paint vats explodes, sending the narrator to the hospital.

Upon awakening, the narrator discovers he is being subjected to a series of illicit experiments designed to reduce his ability to act in an aggressive manner. When he is released he collapses in the street, and a woman by the name of Mary takes him to her home and helps him recover. He ends up rooming with her after he loses his room at the Men's House, and she allows him to stay even after his money runs out and he can no longer pay the rent.

One day while he is out walking, the narrator is moved to make a public speech to help an old couple he sees being evicted from their apartment. A member of an organization called the Brotherhood offers him a speaking job based on his rousing and compelling speech. After considering how much rent he owes Mary, he agrees. One condition of working for the Brotherhood is that he give up his name and his home and attend indoctrination classes. After extensive training on their scientific approach to social problems, the narrator is sent to Harlem to promote the Brotherhood.

In Harlem the narrator forms a good relationship with Brother Tod Clifton and Brother Tarp. His work is cut short, however, when Brother Wrestrum unjustly accuses him of self-promotion and the Brotherhood transfers him downtown. He is later transferred back to the Harlem office only to find it greatly diminished. Brother Tod and Brother Tarp are missing, and there is a strong feeling of hostility towards the Brotherhood within the community.

Soon afterward the narrator encounters Brother Tod selling Sambo dolls. Tod refuses to speak with him, but when Tod is arrested by the police, the narrator follows so that he can bail him out. Instead he sees Tod get shot down by a policeman after he resists being pushed around by the police. The narrator gives Tod a public funeral even though he is unable

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to find the leaders of the Brotherhood to get approval for his actions. At the funeral he gives a sincere and provocative speech. When he returns to his office, Brother Jack and Brother Tobitt tell him he will no longer be allowed to make his own decisions because he gave a funeral for a traitor to his race.

At this point, the narrator decides to adopt his grandfather's passive-aggressive stance. He is sent by the Brotherhood to be retrained. He becomes puppet-like and simply does what he is told to do and no more. This backfires on him when the people of Harlem riot, and he realizes that the Brotherhood used him to create inflammatory conditions in the neighborhood for their own purposes. He races through the riot thinking about how he has been manipulated by the Brotherhood. Eventually he comes across another leader in the community, Ras the Destroyer, who has criticized him for being an Uncle Tom. Ras orders his followers to hang the narrator, and the narrator falls down an open manhole while he is trying to escape.

Trapped underground, the narrator lights some papers to find his way and realizes that an anonymous threat sent to him earlier was written by Brother Jack. Enraged by the extent to which he has been betrayed, the narrator runs screaming through the tunnels until he is too exhausted to continue.

The story ends with the narrator noting that none of his colleagues or acquaintances have ever seen him for himself; he has been "invisible" all along. He withdraws from society and lives in a hole, but he cannot rid himself of the feeling that he still has some responsibility to society. He concludes by noting that he had to write this narrative so that people would know what was really happening while they were looking through him.

## Open-Ended Questions

Use these open-ended questions as the basis for class discussions, student presentations, or extended writing assignments.

### Initial Understanding

As he was dying, the narrator's grandfather said to his son, "I never told you, but our life is a war and I have been a traitor all my born days, a spy in the enemy's country ever since I give up my gun back in the Reconstruction...." Why was the narrator and his family so disturbed by Grandfather's last words?

*Up until his death, Grandfather had lived a quiet and unassuming life. There are a variety of reasons why this statement is so troublesome. One is that no one had ever known the real thoughts and feelings of his grandfather, who had been acting a part during his entire life. The mask worn by African-Americans is a major theme in this book, and the narrator puzzles over the meaning of his grandfather's words throughout the course of the text. Another reason the narrator finds the words disturbing is that his grandfather calls being what the white people want "treachery." The narrator begins to feel guilty for living a "model" life, as if he is deliberately deceiving everyone around him when he is cooperative.*

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#### Literary Analysis

The author intentionally spells Brother Clifton's first name as Tod. The word is German for death, and the narrator states after Brother Clifton's murder that "Tod Clifton's *Tod*..." Other than the obvious fact that he is murdered, how does this character represent death in this story?

*Brother Tod seems dead even before he is killed. The narrator comments on his unresponsive face and his seemingly complete departure from the man the narrator remembered him to be before the narrator was transferred downtown. The narrator seems to think that Clifton's assault on the policeman is virtually an act of suicide. But Brother Tod also acts as a catalyst for spiritual and social death: his murder causes the narrator to deaden himself and eventually causes the community to engage in a self-destructive outburst of frustration and desperation. At Brother Tod's funeral, the narrator loses the sense of purpose that has made him feel alive and human. When he is chastised for mourning Clifton, his response is to shut down and become a ghost of his former self. Eventually he ends up entombed in a hole in the ground, struggling to find a way to reincarnate himself. The community members have the opposite response: they are aroused into a murderous frenzy by Clifton's death and the narrator's speech interpreting the shooting. By rioting in the streets, they attempt to eradicate the society that, to them, is responsible for their oppression.*

#### Inferential Comprehension

Brother Jack says that the narrator must give up his old life and friends so that he does not accidentally give away information to outsiders. What might be another motivation for Brother Jack to rename the narrator, have him move, and ask him to stop associating with people from his previous life?

*One reason Brother Jack wants the narrator to give up his past is to keep him from people who might affect his ideas. He is also cutting him off from people who might give him a more reasonable ideological perspective when the Brotherhood begins to make strenuous demands of him. When the Brotherhood turns against the narrator, he is forced to go along with them because his entire identity is bound up in the Brotherhood's work. He no longer has friends, home, or work outside the Brotherhood. If he gives up his work, he gives up the person the Brotherhood created.*

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#### Constructing Meaning

The narrator remembers the college as a utopian place that is green, peaceful, and orderly. When he is forced to leave, he feels that he has been banished from all that is good. What metaphor does the imagery in these passages suggest?

*The beauty and innocence of his times at the college is suggestive of the Garden of Eden. When the author is expelled, he feels that Mr. Norton has tempted him to sin against the utopian world of the college and is the serpent that led him to his ruin. Dr. Bledsoe adopts the stance of an unforgiving and all-powerful God who insists that the narrator acted on his own free will and cannot blame his sins on Mr. Norton. His judgment on the narrator is the equivalent of God sending Adam from Eden. The narrator embarks on a journey through which he is repeatedly forced to shed his naive outlook on life and face the ways that evil has manipulated him. This is further emphasized by the many incidents that occur in places of darkness: tunnels, nighttime walks, places with darkened windows. The narrator finally empowers himself by lighting the darkness with the light bulbs in his hole, thus confronting and banishing the evil that has plagued and surrounded him.*

#### Teachable Skills

**Understanding Hist./Cultural Factors** The narrator mentions many leaders of the African-American community as role models for himself and the people around him. Have the students research the ideas of Marcus Garvey, Frederick Douglass, and Booker T. Washington. Discuss why these leaders appeal to the narrator at different points in his life.

**Understanding the Author's Craft** The author of this book takes a very strong position on certain issues. Although the narrator is victimized by both whites and his own race, in many ways he contributes to his own victimization. Give the students some statements by Ralph Ellison concerning the creation of this book or some autobiographical material about Ralph Ellison and have the students determine what they believe to

be the author's purpose in writing this book. Then have them debate whether they think the book is meant to show the battle of man versus man or man versus himself.

**Comparing and Contrasting** The narrator describes the racial tensions in America in the middle of the twentieth century. Have the students collect newspaper and magazine articles that represent the current status of this problem as well as some articles from the 1960's that illustrate the problems faced in that era. Have them discuss whether they believe conditions have improved, stayed the same, or worsened. Have them use their research to support their positions.

**Responding to Literature** The narrator in this story feels he is invisible because people are more interested in using him than getting to know him. Have the students write an essay about a time when they were made to feel invisible or alienated and their needs, ideas, or feelings were being ignored so someone else could get something they wanted.