

# *Invisible Man*

## Study Guide Student Copy

### Prologue

1. Why does the narrator believe he is an "invisible man"?
2. How does the narrator "carry on a fight against" the Monopolated Light and Power? Where is he living?
3. Often in novels light is a symbol for knowledge. Assuming that is true in this story, why do you think the narrator writes, "The truth is the light and light is the truth"?
4. Ellison's style of writing includes many play on words. What is the double meaning behind the title of Louis Armstrong's song - *What Did I Do to be so Black and Blue*?
5. What do you think the narrator is saying about race relations in the following passage? Do you agree with him?

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

## Chapter One

1. What does the narrator's grandfather say before he dies that makes the narrator feel guilty whenever anything good happens to him?
2. Some critics believe the Battle Royal is a parable that illustrates the state of race relations in the South before the Civil Right Movement. Assuming this is true, what do you think each of the following incidents from this Battle Royal is saying about the power of the whites in the South?

forcing the black boys to watch the white stripper -

the use of blindfolds in the fight -

the electrified rug -

3. List two things the narrator does in this chapter to "please" the white folks even after they have subjected him to the humiliating "Battle Royal."
4. What do the white men give the narrator at the end of his speech?
5. What do you think is the meaning of the following message the narrator's grandfather asks him to read in his dream?

"To Whom It May Concern," I intoned. "Keep This Nigger-Boy Running."

## Chapter Two

1. Some critics believe Ellison's description of the Negro college was inspired by T. S. Eliot's *The Waste Land*. A waste land is defined as land that is uncultivated or barren. What do you think the author is saying about the type of education the black youths receive at a college described as a wasteland?
2. How do you think the narrator feels about the millionaires who visit the school on Founder's Day and are described in the following passage?

"I'm convinced it was the product of a subtle magic, the alchemy of moonlight; the school a flower-studded wasteland, the rocks sunken, the dry winds hidden, the lost crickets chirping to yellow butterflies. And oh, oh, oh, those multimillionaires!"
3. List the two reasons Mr. Norton gives the narrator for wanting to support the school.
4. How does Trueblood justify sleeping with his daughter? Why is the narrator upset Trueblood is telling this story to a white man?
5. What does the following passage tell the reader about why Trueblood decides to continue to live at home and face his wife and daughter?

"I sings me some blues that night ain't never been sang before, and while I'm singin' 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. I made up my mind that I was goin' back home and face Kate; yeah, and face Matty Lou too."

6. Why do you think Mr. Norton's is interested in the story? What does the narrator think about Mr. Norton giving Trueblood one hundred dollars?
  
7. Ellison likes to give his characters names that tell the reader something about the personality of the character. Why do you think Ellison names the black man who sleeps with his daughter Trueblood?

## Chapter Three

1. Why does the narrator plan to “rush in and get the whiskey and leave” the Golden Day as quickly as possible?
2. What do you think the fat man is trying to tell the narrator in the following excerpt from the novel?

“ ‘Stop screaming!’ a voice commanded, and I felt myself pulled away. It was the short fat man.  
I clamped my mouth shut, aware for the first time that the shrill sound was coming from my own throat. I saw the man’s face relax as he gave me a wry smile.  
‘That’s better,’ he shouted into my ear. ‘He’s only a man. Remember that. He’s only a man!’ ”
3. What do you think has happened to the doctor to make him believe that his work can “bring him no dignity....I returned to save a life and was refused”?
4. Why does the doctor describe the narrator as “a walking personification of the Negative, the most perfect achievement of your dreams, sir! The mechanical man!”?
5. How is Mr. Norton hurt before leaving the Golden Day? What does Halley mean when he says the white man “caint die!”?

## Chapter Four

1. How are the narrator's feelings of innocence at what happens to Mr. Norton similar to Trueblood's lack of guilt over sleeping with his daughter?

2. What does the following excerpt from this chapter tell the reader about the narrator's purpose in life?

"Here within this quiet greenness I possessed the only identity I had ever known, and I was losing it. In this brief passage I became aware of the connection between these lawns and buildings and my hopes and dreams."

3. Why does the following speech from Dr. Bledsoe shock the narrator?

"Haven't you the sense God gave a dog? We take these white folks where we want them to go, we show them what we want them to see. Don't you know that? I thought you had some sense."

4. Why is the narrator grateful to Mr. Nelson?

## Chapter Five

1. What is the legend of how Dr. Bledsoe first came to the college? What do you think is the connection between young Bledsoe's job slopping hogs and his future job as president of the college?
2. In what ways does the speaker compare the Founder to Jesus and Moses?
3. Some critics believe that blindness in a character illustrates his ignorance about something. Assuming this is true, why do you think Ellison writes Homer A. Barbee as a blind speaker?
4. List two reasons the narrator is upset by Barbee's speech.
5. How does the narrator feel when he sees Dr. Bledsoe patting the backs of the white patrons just before Barbee begins his speech?

## Chapter Six

1. Ellison chooses the names for his characters very carefully. What does the following passage suggest to the reader about the meaning of the name Bledsoe for the president of the Negro college?

"The white folk tell everybody what to think - except men like me. I tell them;...It's a nasty deal and I don't always like it myself. But you listen to me: I didn't make it, and I know that I can't change it. But I've made my place in it and I'll have every Negro in the country hanging on tree limbs by morning if it means staying where I am."

2. Why does Dr. Bledsoe believe the narrator must be disciplined for letting Mr. Nelson meet Mr. Trueblood and the doctor at the Golden Day? What is the significance of the leg shackle Dr. Bledsoe keeps in his office?
3. What advice about surviving in the white world is Dr. Bledsoe giving the narrator in the following passage? In what way can the phrase "stay in the dark and use it" have a double meaning?

"You let the white folk worry about pride and dignity - you learn where you are and get yourself power, influence, contacts with powerful and influential people - then stay in the dark and use it!"

4. Why does the narrator decide to "accept the responsibility for what had happened" and "submit to punishment"?
5. In this novel, the papers the narrator is given are all of special importance to the story. What is the first paper given to the narrator for his new briefcase? How is it different from the seven letters given to him by Dr. Bledsoe?



## Chapter Seven

1. In the following passage from the novel, what advice about how to survive in the world does the old doctor from the Golden Day give the narrator?

“Play the game, but don’t believe in it...but play it your own way...Play the game, but raise the ante...learn how *you* operate.”

2. What do you think the doctor is referring to when he says to Crenshaw, “But...there’s always an element of crime in freedom”?
3. List the three parting pieces of advice the doctor gives the narrator before leaving him to change buses. What evidence is there that the narrator will probably not listen to the doctor’s well-meaning words?
4. Why is the narrator uncomfortable in the subway?
5. Why is the narrator surprised when he sees Ras making a speech on the streets of New York?

## Chapter Eight

1. What are the Negroes the narrator sees on Wall Street doing? What does their occupation tell the reader about the position of the black men in the powerful white world of Wall Street?
2. How does the narrator explain the strange looks he receives from the secretaries of the trustees?
3. Why does the narrator decide to write Mr. Emerson a letter instead of hand delivering Dr. Bledsoe's letter?

## Chapter Nine

1. What is Ellison saying about the narrator when the narrator tries to get away from the man singing the blues in the street?

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

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

3. What does young Mr. Emerson say about ambition?
4. The club Calamus is named after Walt Whitman's poems about homosexuals. What evidence is there in this story that young Mr. Emerson may be a homosexual?
5. How is the following passage from Bledsoe's letter to Emerson similar to the narrator's dream at the end of Chapter One where his grandfather makes him read a document that says, "To Who It may Concern ... Keep This Nigger-Boy Running"?

"I beg you, sir, to help him to continue in the direction of that promise which, like the horizon, recedes ever brightly and distantly beyond the hopeful traveler."
6. Why do you think Dr. Bledsoe gives the narrator the seven letters instead of just telling him to leave the school?
7. The author's full name is Ralph Waldo Ellison, named for the famous writer Ralph Waldo Emerson. Emerson is famous for his essay "Self Reliance" and his belief that all men are equal. He worked for the abolition of slavery. What similarities could there be between young Mr. Emerson from the novel and the famous writer Ralph Waldo Emerson?
8. What "revenge" is the narrator dreaming about at the end of this chapter?

## Chapter Ten

1. What indications are there that the paint plant could be a symbol for white America?
2. In what sense does the narrator's job at the paint factory, adding ten drops of black to the white paint making it *Optic White*, parallel the role of black men in the white world?
3. Some critics believe this chapter is an example of Expressionism, a writing style where the characters and their actions stand for inner meanings. Thinking in terms of expressionism, why does Kimbro transfer the narrator to the basement of another building?
4. In what way is Mr. Brockway's way of running his machines similar to Dr. Bledsoe's methods of running the Negro school?
5. What is the slogan Mr. Brockway makes up for the paint company? In what sense does this slogan sum up Mr. Brockway's philosophy of life?
6. What happens to the narrator in the following passage from the story?

“...and I turned, running now...up the stairs so far away and hearing the clear new note arising while I seemed to run swiftly up an incline and shot forward with sudden acceleration into a wet blast of black emptiness that was somehow a bath of whiteness.”

## Chapter Eleven

1. While the doctors are administering the shock treatments, why do you think the narrator clings to his memories of his childhood in the South?
2. What does the following passage from the chapter say about the results the doctors are hoping for from their experiments on the narrator?

“The patient will live as he has to live, and with absolute integrity. Who could ask for more? He’ll experience no major conflict of motives, and what is even better, society will suffer no traumata on his account.”
3. Many critics believe this chapter serves as a symbolic rebirth for the narrator. Cite incidents from the story to support or refute this idea.
4. What is ironic about the following quotation from the chapter?

“And remember you’ll be adequately compensated for your experience.”  
“Compensated, Sir?”  
“O, yes,” he said. “We follow a policy of enlightened humanitarianism, all our employees are automatically insured. You have only to sign a few papers.”
5. Why do you think Ellison uses the word *palaver* when he says good bye to the man in the white coat at the factory hospital?
6. At the end of this chapter the narrator returns to Harlem, but he is a changed man. What does he realize about himself on the train to Harlem that may be considered a life-altering revelation?

## Chapter Twelve

1. What is Mary saying when she tells the narrator,

"It's you young folks what's going to make the changes," she said. "Y'all's the ones. You got to lead and you got to fight and move us all on up a little higher. And I tell you something 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."

2. How does the narrator manage to get thrown out of the Men's House for "ninety-nine years and a day"? What does this action say about the changes in the narrator's personality?

3. What is the "ice" the narrator is talking about in the last paragraph of this chapter? Other than violence, how do you think he plans to release his resentment?

"And while the ice was melting to form a flood in which I threatened to drown I awoke one afternoon to find that my first northern winter had set."

4. Some critics believe that one of the main themes in this story is the comparison between the narrator's life in the South with his life in the North. Assuming this is true, what qualities of home in the South does the narrator find living in Mary's house?

## Chapter Thirteen

1. Why does the narrator experience an “intense feeling of freedom” when he eats the warm yam?
2. What is the narrator saying about Bledsoe when he accuses him of eating hog bowels in private?
3. Ellison is famous for his puns and plays on words. Find an example of a pun in this chapter illustrating the narrator’s new found freedom.
4. Why is the narrator compelled to make a speech at the eviction of the old people? What does he accomplish with his words?
5. Why does the narrator agree to get a cup of coffee with the white man who has escaped the eviction over the roof tops, just like the narrator?
6. What does the narrator think about Brother Jack’s job offer? Why do you think he is worrying about Mary at the end of the chapter?

## Chapter Fourteen

1. Why does the narrator change his mind and decide to accept Brother Jack's job offer?
2. Define Chthonian. Why do you think Ellison decides to use this word to name the building where the Brotherhood meets?
3. List two things the woman Emma says that may suggest to the reader that the narrator is soon to become a tool of the brotherhood.
4. Why does the Brotherhood want the narrator to move out of Mary's house?
5. What do you think the narrator thinks about Booker T. Washington in the following passage? Why doesn't he want to pattern himself after Washington?

"But to hell with this Booker T. Washington business. I would do the work but I would be no one except myself - whoever I was. I would pattern my life on that of the Founder."
6. Support or refute the following statement by citing incidents from the chapter: The narrator is not insulted by the drunk man's request that the narrator sing for the group.



7. What does the following passage from the novel tell the reader about the progress the narrator is making toward finding his own identity?

"I felt that I could never allow myself to show surprise or upset—even when confronted with situations furthest from my experience....it was nothing new, white folks seemed always to expect you to know those things which they'd done everything they could think of to prevent you from knowing."

## Chapter Fifteen

1. Briefly describe the cast iron bank the narrator uses to bang on the pipe. What can the figure on the bank symbolize for the narrator?
2. Why does the narrator try to hide the broken bank from Mary? How does he try to dispose of it when he leaves her home? Why do you think his efforts are fruitless?
3. Briefly describe the narrator's new apartment. What is his reaction to his new surroundings?

## Chapter Sixteen

1. What does the following metaphor from this chapter tell the reader about the narrator's relationship with Brother Jack?

"It was Master the bull dog; and I was the child who was afraid to touch him, although, panting with heat, he seemed to grin back at me like a fat good-natured man, ....He had barked the same note when angry or when being brought his dinner....I liked, but didn't trust old Master; I wanted to please, but did not trust the crowd. Then I looked at Brother Jack and grinned: That was it; in some ways, he was like a toy bull terrier."

2. List three kinds of dispossession the narrator talks about in his speech. How is he using the political technique he calls "I'm-sick-and-tired-of-the-way-they've-been-treating-us approach"?
3. Ellison often uses blindness in this novel to represent ignorance. What is he saying to the audience in the following passage from the novel when he compares the black race to one-eyed mice?

"Think about it, they've dispossessed us each of one eye from the day we're born. So now we can only see in straight white lines. We're a nation of one-eyed mice...."
4. Why do Brother Wrestrum and the unnamed man with the pipe object to the narrator's speech?
5. What evidence is there in this chapter that the main objection the Brotherhood has to the narrator's speech is their fear of the intensity and power he is capable of invoking from the crowd?
6. Where does the narrator think he has learned the phrase "more human"?

## Chapter Seventeen

1. Briefly identify the following characters introduced or reintroduced in this chapter.

Brother Hambro -

Brother Tarp -

Brother Tod Clifton -

Ras the Exhorter -

2. Why doesn't Ras the Exhorter kill Tod Clifton when he has the chance? How does he try to convince Clifton and the narrator to leave the Brotherhood?
3. What evidence is there in this chapter that Clifton is emotionally touched by Ras' words? What does Clifton mean when he says, "I suppose sometimes a man *has* to plunge outside history"?
4. Why do you think Brother Tarp gives the narrator a picture of Frederick Douglass for his wall?
5. Point out a possible flaw in the philosophy of the Brotherhood stated in the following quotation.

"We recognized no loose ends, everything could be controlled by our science. Life was all pattern and discipline; and the beauty of discipline is when it works. And it was working very well."

## Chapter Eighteen

1. Why is the narrator alarmed at the unsigned letter he finds in the mail?
2. What is the significance of Tarp's metal leg iron? Why does he pass it on to the narrator?
3. Why does Wrestrum object to the narrator openly displaying the leg iron on his desk?
4. Support or refute the following statement by citing incidents from this chapter: Brother Wrestrum sees the Brotherhood as a flawed but an effective tool to get equal treatment for people of all races.
5. How does Wrestrum betray the narrator?
6. Even though the Brotherhood finds the narrator innocent of trying to gain personal recognition from the magazine article, why do they decide to relieve him of his duties in Harlem and reassign him to the women's issues?
7. Why does the narrator decide to accept the new assignment?

8. Some critics think the Brotherhood is patterned after the Communist party that was active in Harlem in the 1930's and 1940's. What similarities do you see between the ideology of communism and the ideology of the Brotherhood? Do you agree or disagree that the Brotherhood may be inspired by the Communist Party activities of the times?

## Chapter Nineteen

1. What clues does the narrator have that the woman may want more from him than a discussion of ideology? Why doesn't he leave the apartment?
2. Some critics believe this chapter is a form of satire poking fun at the idea that white women desire black men. Support or refute this theory. If you disagree, what other reason could Ellison have for including this chapter at this point in the story?
3. Why is the narrator surprised by Clifton's disappearance? Why doesn't the narrator keep in touch with the Harlem membership?

## Chapter Twenty

1. How does Barrel explain the hostility the narrator experiences when he calls the man at the bar "Brother"?
2. Besides the hostility in the bar, list the other surprises the narrator finds when he returns to the Harlem headquarters?
3. What do you think the Sambo doll symbolizes in this story? Why do you think Clifton leaves the Brotherhood to sell these dolls?
4. Some critics think that in this chapter the narrator becomes aware of the individuals who make up Harlem rather than just seeing them as a faceless group. Find a quotation in this chapter that helps to demonstrate the narrator's awakening to the sights and sounds of the people living in Harlem.

## Chapter Twenty-one

1. Why does the narrator decide to give Clifton a large funeral?

2. What box is the narrator referring to in the following passage?

“Now he’s in this box with the bolts tightened down. He’s in the box and we’re in there with him, and when I’ve told you this you can go. It is dark in this box and it’s crowded. It has a cracked ceiling and a clogged-up toilet in the hall.”

3. List two reasons the narrator’s speech does not have any political statements pertaining to the Brotherhood’s philosophy.

4. What does the following quotation from this chapter tell the reader about the mood of the people in Harlem after Clifton’s funeral?

“The crowd were boiling figures seen through steaming glass from inside a washing machine; and in the streets the mounted police detail stood looking on....men and horses of flesh imitating men and horses of stone.”

## Chapter Twenty-two

1. Why does Brother Jack sarcastically say, "The great tactician of *personal* responsibility regrets our absence"? How does the Brotherhood view the narrator's decision to give Clifton a grand funeral?
2. Why does Tobitt think he knows everything he needs to know about the black situation in Harlem? What does Brother Jack say that makes the narrator respond by asking Brother Jack if he would like the blacks in Harlem to address him as "Marse Jack"?
3. Blindness in a character often illustrates the character's ignorance about something. What do you think is the significance of Brother Jack having one glass eye? How is this partial blindness linked to his belief in the Brotherhood?
4. Brother Jack thinks the narrator is joking when he says, "... maybe you'll recommend me to your oculist," I said, "then I may not-see myself as others see-me-not." What do you think the narrator is cleverly telling Brother Jack by making this joke about his glass eye?
5. What is the mood of the narrator at the end of this chapter? What evidence is there that he does not want to leave the Brotherhood?



## Chapter Twenty-three

1. Why does the narrator decide to wear sun glasses like the three men in cream-colored suits he sees in the street?
2. List the people who mistake the narrator for Rinehart. What can you infer about Rinehart's character by these encounters?
3. Some critics believe Rinehart is more of a character type than a real person. Others believe Rinehart is an example of another path the narrator could take to cope with life in Harlem. Whom do you think Rinehart represents in this chapter? What is the significance of the hat and dark glasses the narrator needs to be Rinehart?
4. How does Hambro explain the Brotherhood's decision to sacrifice the members of the Brotherhood in the narrator's district?
5. Hambro tries to tell him that his new job will be to teach the people of Harlem about the Brotherhood. What does the narrator mean when he says,  
    "I don't think I can," I said.  
    "Why? It's just as important."  
    "Because they are against us; besides, I'd feel like Rinehart...."
6. Why does the narrator think he is both the sacrificer and the victim?

7. What does the following quotation from the chapter tell the reader about the narrator's intentions concerning his future relationship with the Brotherhood?

"I would remain and become a well-disciplined optimist, and help them to go merrily to hell. If I couldn't help them to see the reality of our lives, I would help them to ignore it until it exploded in their faces."

8. The narrator needs a contact on the inside who can help him to know their true objectives. He decides to find some woman in the organization that he can seduce and use to get information. Support or refute the following statement by citing incidents from the story: The narrator is not a ladies' man and should try a different way of getting inside information about the Brotherhood.

## Chapter Twenty-four

1. Why does the narrator decide to try to get information from Sybil?
2. What does Sybil want from the narrator? What happens to break up the disastrous evening? What does the narrator take with him, besides Sybil, when he leaves his apartment?

## Chapter Twenty-five

1. Who starts the riot in Harlem?
2. Why doesn't the narrator try to question or interfere with the men who are burning down the apartment building?
3. What is the narrator saying about the committee in the following passage from the chapter?

“I could see it now, see it clearly and in growing magnitude. It was not suicide, but murder. The committee had planned it. And I had helped, and had been a tool. A tool just at the very moment I had thought myself free. By pretending to agree, I had indeed agreed....”
4. Why does the narrator open his brief case and look for his dark sun glasses? What does the narrator say to try to protect himself from Ras the Destroyer?
5. Read the following quotation. What do you think the narrator is saying about life?

“And that I, a little black man with an assumed name should die because a big black man in his hatred and confusion over the nature of a reality that seemed controlled solely by white men whom I knew to be as blind as he, was just too much, too outrageously absurd. And I knew that it was better to live out one's own absurdity than to die for that of others, whether for Ras's or Jack's.”

6. What do you think is the significance of the narrator's being drenched by a broken water main just before he is chased into the manhole by the men who want to steal his brief case?
7. List the papers the narrator burns from the brief case in the correct order. What does he realize about Jack when he burns the anonymous letter? What is important about the items remaining in his briefcase after he burns the papers?
8. What do you think the last sentence in this chapter means? "The end was in the beginning."

## Epilogue

1. The narrator proposes a new interpretation of his grandfather's deathbed advice in the following passage from the Epilogue.

“...that we were to affirm the principle on which the country was built and not the men, or at least not the men who did the violence. Did he mean say “yes” because he knew that the principle was greater than the men....”

What principle is the narrator referring to in this passage?

2. Why does the narrator mean when he says “diversity is the word”?
3. Why is the narrator coming out of his “hole”?
4. The last line in the book is:  
“Who knows but that, on the lower frequencies, I speak for you?”

In what ways do you think the narrator might speak for you?

