

## Discussion Questions for *Invisible Man*

1. What makes Ellison's narrator invisible? What is the relationship between his invisibility and other people around him? Is the protagonist's invisibility due solely to his skin color? Is it only the novel's white characters who refuse to see him? What other factors contribute to his invisibility?
2. What are the narrator's dreams and goals? How are these variously fulfilled or thwarted in the course of the book? What are the particular difficulties—race, class, gender, or others—that block his success? Does he overcome these difficulties? What motivation does he have to overcome them?
3. What is the significance of the grandfather's deathbed speech? Whom or what has he betrayed? How does the narrator deal with this betrayal? What other characters in this book resort to the same strategy of smiling betrayal?
4. What cultural tendencies or phenomena does Ellison hold up for satire in this novel? What are the real-life models for the Founder, the Brotherhood, and Ras the Exhorter? What types of ideas do they represent? How does the author convey the failures and shortcomings of these people and movements?
5. Why might Tod Clifton have left the Brotherhood to peddle demeaning dancing Sambo dolls? What does the narrator mean when he says: "It was as though he [Clifton] had chosen . . . to fall outside of history"? How would you describe Ellison's vision of history and the role that African-Americans play within it?
6. More than fifty years after it was first published, *Invisible Man* is still one of the most widely read and taught books in the African-American literary canon. Why do you think this is so? How true is this novel to the lives of black Americans in the twenty-first century? How true is it to the life of every one of us?
7. In spite of its vast success, Ellison's novel—and the author himself—have been fiercely criticized in some circles for insufficiencies in representing the African American community or for representing it in a negative light. Do you think this is true? Do you think Ellison makes artistic compromises in order to make the novel accessible to all readers?
8. How does Ellison describe the South and New York? What do these places mean to the different characters? What role does New York play in the formation of the invisible man's identity? How much has he learned from living in the urban setting? How is the urban setting compared and contrasted with the rural South?
9. What makes *Invisible Man* a Great Book? Explore this question from both the literary point of view and the common theme we are focusing on in this course.
10. In spite of the fact that the protagonist is black, the novel deals with universal issues that are not just limited to blacks or other minority groups. What universal themes has the author explored? Are there any that are relevant or important for us today? How do they help us to understand the human condition and identity?