

Ralph Ellison, *Invisible Man*

Interpretive Questions

Why does his grandfather's disturbing advice to overcome the white man with "yeses" and "undermine 'em with grins" become a "constant puzzle" and "curse" to the narrator?

1. Why do the dehumanizing rites of the battle royal fail to shake the narrator's commitment to his formula for personal success—humility and hard work? (Chapter 1)
2. Why does the narrator dream that his grandfather tells him to open the briefcase and read the engraved document with the message, "To Whom It May Concern . . . Keep This Nigger-Boy Running"? (Chapter 1)
3. Imagining himself back at school, why does the narrator wonder if the statue of the college Founder is lifting a veil from the face of a kneeling slave or lowering it more firmly in place? (Chapter 2)
4. Why does Mr. Norton insist that the narrator, and the other students at the college, are his "fate"? (Chapter 2)
5. Why do we learn that the source of Mr. Norton's fascination with Jim Trueblood's story is his own unacknowledged incestuous desires? (Chapter 2)
6. After leaving the Golden Day, why is the narrator so shaken by Mr. Norton's anger that he feels he is losing the only identity he had ever known? (Chapter 3)
7. Why does the narrator feel a numb, violent outrage when Dr. Bledsoe tells him, "This is a power set-up, son, and I'm at the controls"? (Chapter 6)
8. Why does the revelation of Dr. Bledsoe's and the trustees' treachery cause the narrator, for the first time, to ask himself who he is? (Chapter 9)
9. Why is Lucius Brockway the black father figure at whom the narrator finally strikes back? Why does "a wild flash of laughter" struggle to rise from beneath the narrator's anger at the old man? (Chapter 10)
10. Are we meant to admire Lucius Brockway, the secret machine "inside the machine" of Liberty Paints, who enthusiastically allows himself to be exploited by the white industrial system? (Chapter 10)
11. Why does the author have the factory hospital doctors cure the narrator by means of an electric lobotomy machine? Why are we told that inside the hospital machine the narrator feels utterly alone, and lost in a "vast whiteness"? (Chapter 11)
12. Why is the narrator's release from the confinement of the machine described in terms that suggest a surreal birth? Upon leaving the hospital, why does the narrator feel as if he is in the "grip of some alien personality lodged deep within" him? (Chapter 11)

Why does the narrator feel that working for the Brotherhood will save him from "disintegration"?

1. Why is the narrator's first real act of positive self-assertion to eat a yam while walking along the street? Why does the narrator—declaring "I yam what I am"—resolve never to be ashamed again of the things he likes? (Chapter 13)
2. Why does the narrator fear the rush of empathic feeling that draws him to the old couple evicted onto the street? Why is the narrator especially disturbed by the sight of the old man's free papers? (Chapter 13)
3. Staring at the old couple's belongings on the street, why does the narrator feel as if he himself "was being dispossessed of some painful yet precious thing" that he "could not bear to lose"? (Chapter 13)
4. When recruiting the narrator for the Brotherhood movement, why does Brother Jack emphasize that the narrator is not like the old people, that he is emerging as "something new"? Why does he tell the narrator that he mustn't waste his emotions on individuals—"they don't count"? (Chapter 13)
5. Why does the narrator decide to rely on the judgment of the Brotherhood when they demand that he leave Mary and live elsewhere in order to be a Harlem leader? Why does he accept without questioning their providing him with a new name? (Chapter 14)
6. Why does the narrator feel compelled to hide from Mary the shattered bank with its grotesque caricature of a grinning Negro? Why are we told about the narrator's unsuccessful attempts to get rid of the cast-iron bank and the coins that filled it? (Chapter 15)
7. Why does the narrator tell the audience in the arena that "Something strange and miraculous and transforming" was taking place in him—that he feels suddenly more human? Why does he tell the audience that he has found his "true family! . . . true people! . . . true country!?" (Chapter 16)
8. Why does the narrator say that he felt as if he had awakened from a dream when Jack tells him he wasn't hired to think and he realizes that Jack doesn't "see" him? (Chapter 22)
9. Why does the "scientific objectivity" of the Brotherhood—its practice of sacrificing the weak—remind the narrator of being locked inside the hospital machine? (Chapter 23)
10. Why is Hambro unable to convince the narrator of the correctness of the Brotherhood's methods? Why does the narrator insist that Hambro see him as an individual? (Chapter 23)
11. Why must the narrator be disillusioned with the Brotherhood and articulate his invisibility—before he is finally able to accept his past with all its humiliations? (Chapter 23)
12. Why does the narrator determine to use his invisibility to destroy the Brotherhood by overcoming them with yeses? (Chapter 23)

Why does Tod Clifton, a political activist, decide to fall out of history and sell Sambo dolls?

1. Why does Clifton knock Ras down when the black nationalist accuses him of being a "black traitor to the black people for the white people"? What is the silent question that Clifton seems to ask Ras as he looks gravely down at the black militant? (Chapter 17)
2. Why does Clifton tell the narrator that "sometimes a man has to plunge outside history . . . Otherwise he might kill somebody, go nuts"? (Chapter 17)
3. Why is the Sambo doll described as having two faces, one that grinned back at Clifton while the other grinned forward at the crowd? Why are we told that Clifton "had been making it dance all the time and the black thread had been invisible"? (Chapter 21)
4. After the narrator spits on the Sambo doll, why does the potbellied man point at the doll, then at him, and explode with laughter? (Chapter 20)
5. Are we meant to view Clifton's final, violent act of self-assertion as deliberately suicidal? (Chapters 20 and 21)
6. Why does it suddenly occur to the narrator that it might be transitory ones like the zoot suiters—"men out of time" whose lives are too obscure to be recorded in history—who are the "true leaders, the bearers of something precious"? What does the narrator mean when he says, "What if history was a gambler, instead of a force in a laboratory experiment, and the boys his ace in the hole"? (Chapter 20)
7. Why does the narrator conclude that it was his job to get inside the "groove of history" all of the black men and women who had previously been invisible to him? (Chapter 20)
8. Why does the narrator's discovery that Rinehart inhabits a world of possibility—a "vast seething, hot world of fluidity"—profoundly shake his view of reality? (Chapter 23)
9. Why does the narrator say that perhaps "only Rine the rascal" was at home in a world without boundaries? Why are we told that Rinehart, the man of multiple identities, has a smooth tongue, a heartless heart, and is ready to do anything? (Chapter 23)
10. What does the narrator mean when he says that "somewhere between Rinehart and invisibility there were great potentialities"? Does Rinehart suggest a way out of the narrator's double bind—"Outside the Brotherhood we were outside history; but inside of it they didn't see us"? (Chapter 23)
11. Why are we told that the narrator moves as one with the "black river" of rioters, his "personality blasted"? Why does the author describe the rioters in language that recalls the fluid world of Rinehart? (Chapter 25)
12. Why does it turn out that by pretending to agree with the committee, the narrator made himself its tool just when he had thought himself most free? Why does the reality of the riot—a mutual destruction of blacks engineered by and for the purposes of whites—recall the battle royal? (Chapter 25)

Why is the narrator compelled to put his "invisibility down in black and white"—to exchange the role of orator and rabble-rouser for that of hibernating writer—in order to discover who he is?

1. Why does the narrator say that being imprisoned and invisible in the coal hole is a kind of living death? Why does the narrator compare himself to Jim Trueblood's jaybird that "yellow jackets had paralyzed in every part but his eyes"? (Chapter 25)
2. Why does the narrator dream, in a state between sleeping and waking, that he is castrated by Jack, Bledsoe, Norton, Ras, and others from his past? Why does he tell them that his testicles hanging from the bridge are their sun and moon, and that his seed wasting upon the water is all the history that they will make? (Chapter 25)
3. Why does the narrator's dream end with the bridge striding off like "an iron man, whose iron legs clanged doomfully," and the narrator screaming, "No, no, we must stop him"? (Chapter 25)
4. While listening to the music of Louis Armstrong in his warm, bright basement hole, why does the narrator have a vision of an old woman who tells him that freedom "ain't nothing but knowing how to say what I got up in my head"? (Prologue)
5. Why does the narrator have another storyteller, Jim Trueblood, resolve his feelings about how he's both guilty and not guilty by singing the blues? Why does Trueblood's resolution take the form of deciding "I ain't nobody but myself and ain't nothin' I can do but let whatever is gonna happen, happen"? (Chapter 2)
6. Why does the narrator end his prologue with the threat of violence, asserting that all "dreamers and sleepwalkers must pay the price, and even the invisible victim is responsible for the fate of all"? (Prologue)
7. Why does writing down his story show the narrator that at least half the blame for his invisibility, what he calls his "sickness," lay within himself? (Epilogue)
8. Having learned to view the world as possibility, why does the narrator see "imagination" as the alternative to "chaos" when a person opts to step outside the borders of reality? (Epilogue)
9. What does the narrator mean when he suggests that black people must "affirm the principle on which the country was built" because, given the circumstance of their origin, they "could only thus find transcendence"? (Epilogue)
10. Why does the narrator conclude that he has overstayed his hibernation—that "even an invisible man has a socially responsible role to play"? (Epilogue)
11. What does the narrator mean when he says that he wants more than simply "the freedom not to run"? Are we meant to think that by the end of the novel he has found a way to rejoin society without being made to run? (Epilogue)
12. Why does the narrator end his epilogue with the suggestion that his listeners may also be invisible? Why does he say this idea frightens him? (Epilogue)

Evaluative Questions

1. Does the narrator in Ellison's novel speak for young black people today? Are blacks in the United States still required to conform to roles defined for them by whites?
2. Do you agree with Ellison's suggestion in *Invisible Man* that the strength of America as a democracy lies in its cultural diversity?
3. How can we best realize Ellison's vision of returning all Americans to a sense of personal moral responsibility for democracy?
4. Taking into account all of the images of failed leadership in *Invisible Man* (Bledsoe, Norton, Jack, Ras, Clifton, and the narrator), what might Ellison's definition be of a great American leader for the black community?