

# Study Guide for *Invisible Man* by Ralph Ellison

## Terms

- |              |                     |                   |                      |
|--------------|---------------------|-------------------|----------------------|
| 1. imagery   | 8. reliability      | 15. trickster     | 22. propaganda novel |
| 2. symbolism | 9. naïve narrator   | 16. picaresque    | 23. slave narrative  |
| 3. prologue  | 10. point of view   | 17. gothic novel  | 24. naturalism       |
| 4. epilogue  | 11. taboo           | 18. kunstlerroman | 25. realism          |
| 5. irony     | 12. rite of passage | 19. bildungsroman | 26. surrealism       |
| 6. satire    | 13. stereotype      | 20. epic novel    | 27. Freudianism      |
| 7. idiom     | 14. allegorical     | 21. quest novel   | 28. existentialism   |

## Imagery and Symbolism

1. How does the vision imagery relate to the theme of invisibility? Consider darkness and light, blindness and insight, visibility and invisibility.
2. Discuss the significant dreams in *Invisible Man*.
3. How does the collection of items in the *Invisible Man*'s briefcase parallel his own development?
4. What is the symbolic importance of the Sambo doll?
5. Investigate any Christ symbols in the novel.
6. Discuss the symbolic function of names in *Invisible Man*.
7. How does Ellison use the running man metaphor?
8. Ellison does not use color imagery, but depends solely upon black and white. What do these colors mean in his novel and how does he demonstrate his meanings?
9. How does Ellison use food symbolically?
10. Discuss the function of music.
11. What do the Zoot suiters symbolize for the *Invisible Man*?
12. Explain how paper objects signal important turning points for the narrator.
13. How are animal and machine imagery used?

## Significant Scenes

1. How does his grandfather's "curse" and death scene affect the *Invisible Man* throughout the book?
2. In what ways is the Battle Royal an initiation rite?
3. Explore the possible meanings of Trueblood's narrative — as an inversion of sexual Taboos, "puttin' on the massa" slave tale, racial purity symbolism, pure sexual titillation, etc.
4. Explain why *Invisible Man*'s confrontation with Dr. Bledsoe is so devastating for him.
5. What is really happening in the scene between young Emerson and the *Invisible Man*?
6. Why must the *Invisible Man* fight Brockway?
7. In what ways does the *Invisible Man*'s hospital experience resemble death and rebirth?
8. Why does Ellison develop in such detail the scene between the *Invisible Man* and Sybil?
9. How does Tod's death affect the *Invisible Man*?
10. What insight does the *Invisible Man* gain by disguising himself as Rinehart?

## Characterization

1. Is the *Invisible Man* a hero or an anti-hero?
2. Compare and contrast the characters of the young men who figure significantly in the novel — Tod Clifton, Ras the Exhorter/Destroyer, and Rinehart.
3. Compare and contrast the characters of the older men who figure significantly in the book — Dr. Bledsoe, Lucius Brockway, and Brother Jack.
4. Compare and contrast the characters of the women who figure significantly in the novel — Mary Rambo, Sybil, and Emma.

## Structure

1. The book is organized around four adventures which are essentially the same adventure again and again, moving from the particular to the universal in scope. What adventure?
2. The book moves from a state of illusion to a state of perception using the controlling metaphors of vision to express these states, and the metaphor of death and rebirth to mark the passage from one condition to the other. Explain.
3. The novel is a succession of episodes which finally strip the hero of his illusions and his innocence. Explain.
4. There is an odyssey taking place on four levels – geographic, social, historical, and philosophical. Explain.
5. The book is a quest novel with two searches – the quest for a father or a mother and the quest for brotherhood. Explain.
6. The book is one long ironic joke wherein the trickster tricks even himself. Explain.
7. The book is a dramatized version of black history, especially noting the movement from the South to the North, from the country to the city, from the field to the factory, from slavery to emancipation. Explain.
8. The book is an elaborate striptease, wherein masks are removed and stereotypes are discarded until we are left finally with the inner soul of one man facing himself. Explain.
9. Ellison has said that the novel is divided into three parts, each of which has its own artistic style, moving from realism to expressionism to surrealism, as the narrator moves from the familiar to the unfamiliar. Explain.
10. Ellison uses language to musical effect in several notable scenes -- the description of the college campus, Trueblood's confession, the chapel scene and Tod Clifton's funeral. The "music" of these sections -- their rhythm, assonance, and alliteration—both heightens their meaning and plays against it. Explain.

## Philosophy

1. Define "Rinehartism."
2. In general, what view of history does the Invisible Man embrace?
3. Is this an existential novel?
4. Is this novel comic or tragic?
5. What is Dr. Bledsoe's personal philosophy?
6. What is the ideology of the Brotherhood?

## Type of Novel

1. In what ways does this novel draw upon the traditions of the following kinds of novels – gothic novel, epic novel, picaresque novel, quest novel, bildungsroman, kunstlerroman, and propaganda novel?
2. Does this novel satisfy Stepto's definition of a slave narrative which combines both ascent and immersion forms?

## Motif Strands

Using the motif chart form provided or your own chart, trace the ten main motifs throughout the novel –

- dreams
- sex
- violence
- paper
- vision
- symbolic objects
- oratory
- music
- family
- power