

Williamette University Study Questions

(many adapted from Brooke Allen, James Andreas, and Susan Resneck Parr)

We have ordered these questions so that they follow, roughly, the order of *Invisible Man*. Many of them refer, however, to incidents and characters at several points in the novel. We suggest that you read through all of the questions as we begin discussing the novel, and then return to the list as we read, giving particular attention to questions relevant to that section of the book under discussion. Any of these questions may provide points of departure for our discussions.

Beginnings

1. What sense do you make of the title and of the epigraphs to the novel?
2. What kinds of cultural reference points does the Invisible Man mention? On what sources does Ellison draw? What does he do with these sources? That is, consider not just what Ellison may draw from the works on which he builds, but also why he chooses these sources, what he does not take from them, and, especially, how they are transformed in this novel.
3. Why does Ellison begin his novel at the conclusion? What specifically do you learn of the protagonist's condition at the conclusion? What sense do you make of his pastimes and memories? What has he retained from his "battles"? Why does he fight with the white man at the beginning of the prologue? What do you make of the Monopolated Light Company? What is the significance of the sermon and the questioning of the mother?
4. The narrator's grandfather tells him to "overcome 'em with yeses, undermine 'em with grins, agree 'em to death and destruction, let 'em swoller you till they vomit or bust wide open" (16). How does the narrator's interpretation of this advice change during the course of the novel? Do you feel that Dr. Bledsoe shares the grandfather's philosophy? What about Tod Clifton? And what about Rinehart?
5. Why is the protagonist left nameless throughout the novel?
6. What is the significance of the battle royal? What structure or pattern does it set up for the remaining adventures of the novel? Why is the protagonist chosen to "represent his race"? How is the woman treated in the scene? What roles do battle royals or fights play in later episodes in the novel?
7. Why are these prominent white men so impressed with the Invisible Man [IM]? Do they really believe in humility and nonviolence, or in the "social responsibility" they expect IM to address in his valedictory speech?
8. The town leaders at the battle royal tell the narrator, "We mean to do right by you, but you've got to know your place at all times" (31). What kind of help are the men actually offering?

9. What “place” in the world do they plan for young black people? Is there any real benevolence included in their wish to dominate?

10. What do you make of his dream at the end of Chapter 1? As you read, note his other dreams and the dreams others would impose on him.

11. What is the significance of the briefcase treasured by Invisible Man throughout the novel?

College

12. What is the significance of the Founder’s posture in his statue on campus?

13. Why is Mr. Norton so affected by Jim Trueblood’s story?

14. Why have white people lavished help upon Trueblood since his disgrace, when they ignored him before his crime?

15. Why do the students and teachers at the college hate and fear Trueblood and the other “black belt” inhabitants?

16. Why doesn’t Dr. Bledsoe give the narrator a second chance at the college?

17. Ellison carefully lays out the geography of the state college for Negroes, with its whitewashed buildings, its black powerhouse, the barren road leading to the insane asylum, and the nearby shanties of the “black belt.” How does this map symbolize the idealistic vision of the school and the hard realities of black life which the school’s philosophy attempts to deny?

18. Mr. Norton is “a bearer of the white man’s burden,” a “symbol of the Great Traditions” (37). How does he personify the paternalistic ethos, for better and for worse?

19. Many critics suggest that the veterans at the Golden Day represent the repressed black middle-class--that these are the men who would have been the community’s doctors, lawyers, teachers, and scientists had they been allowed the same opportunities as whites. Do you agree with this thesis?

20. The “doctor” at the Golden Day calls the narrator “a walking zombie, the most perfect achievement of [Norton’s] dreams” (94). What does he mean by this? What is the narrator’s reaction? Does he eventually come to share the doctor’s opinion?

21. How does Ellison, with both his black and his white characters, employ the metaphor of blindness? How does the metaphor of blindness relate to that of invisibility?

22. In *The Souls of Black Folk* (1905), W.E.B. DuBois theorized that the black American has two selves. How does Dr. Bledsoe exemplify that principle? How does the principle

cause the breakdown of Tod Clifton's character?

23. The Founder and his followers make much of the Christian virtue of humility. In what ways can Invisible Man be seen as an elaborate critique of that virtue?

NYC

24. Why does the narrator refuse grits and pork chops at the breakfast counter?

25. Why does young Mr. Emerson show Invisible Man the contents of the letter? Why does Invisible Man mistrust his offers of friendship?

26. Young Mr. Emerson sees himself as Huck Finn and the narrator as Jim. What is the social significance of such a fantasy? What is the psychological significance?

27. What is the function of the references to Eden and of the many serpentine images in the novel?

28. What is the motto of the Liberty Paint Company? What is their method of keeping paint pure white? In what way does the ethos of the company resemble that of the American Republic? What is the symbolic significance of the paint factory? More specifically, why is it called "Liberty" Paints? What do you make of the motto "Keep America Pure" and the trademark of the screaming eagle (196, 198)? What is Optic White used for? How might this be significant? What are some possible meanings of the 10 drops of black dope making the paint whiter? What's the significance of the paint looking different to IM and to Kimbro (205)?

29. Why is Lucius Brockway against unionization?

30. Is Brockway being used by the white bosses, or is he taking advantage of his position and knowledge to use others?

31. What are the ingredients of satire, in terms of both imagery and action, in the Liberty Paint factory episode?

32. What's the significance of Lucius Brockway and IM's encounter with him? More specifically, how does Brockway's role in the paint factory comment on the role of black labor in America? What's the significance of Brockway's slogan for Optic White, and of Brockway having helped make it up? Why does Brockway object to the union? How is Brockway like or unlike the narrator's grandfather? How is he like or unlike Bledsoe?

33. What's the significance of IM's experience in the hospital? More specifically, in what ways does the discussion sound "like a discussion of history" (236)? How is it a commentary on American history? What indications are there that the experience in the hospital constitutes a rebirth for IM? In what way would this be appropriate at this point in the novel?

Things Fall Apart

34. What does the freedom to like chitterlings, yams, or spirituals mean to the narrator?
35. Ellison gives a detailed catalogue of the belongings of the elderly evicted couple. What do these individual items signify?
36. Examine two or three of the Invisible Man's speeches. How does speech (i.e., language) clarify his perceptions of himself and the institutions that dominate his everyday actions? Look at his speeches in thematic and rhetorical detail. For instance, discuss the eviction speech. With what premise does he begin and to what conclusion is he led? How is his attitude toward "social responsibility" modified by this particular speech?
37. Why does Emma think Invisible Man should be "a little blacker" (303)?
38. Discuss the relationship of IM to the white women in the novel: e.g., the stripper, the wife of the brother, Sybil. In contrast, what does he learn from Mary Rambo? How is she different from the white women he comes into contact with?
39. What's the significance of the bank in chapter 15 (319)? Why does IM notice it at this point in the story? Why can't he get rid of it (328, 330)? Does this figure recall other episodes in the novel?
40. Upon his arrival in New York, Invisible Man observes that "a new world of possibility suggested itself to me faintly, like a small voice that was barely audible in the roar of city sounds" (159). Does he retain that faint sense of possibility despite the events of the novel?
41. Reflecting on the black race after his encounter with the blueprint peddler, Invisible Man feels both pride and disgust. How are these two emotions juxtaposed in his feelings for Mary Rambo? For Tod Clifton? For Rinehart?
42. How does the narrator's vision of Mr. and Mrs. Provo, the evicted couple, differ from Brother Jack's? Do the two men have the same difference in outlook when it comes to Tod Clifton?
43. What does the Brotherhood mean when it uses the word "History"? And "Science"?
44. At the end of Chapter 16, IM recalls a literature professor discussing the Irish modernist writer James Joyce's *Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, and arguing that the problem of the protagonist of that novel was not, as Joyce had said, "one of creating the uncreated conscience of his race, but of creating the uncreated features of his face" (354). What is the significance of this passage? Might it be related to IM's comment that he has "always tended to think in terms of 'me'" (316)? Might it be related to the beautiful girl's nightmare described in the Prologue (7)?

All that is Solid Melts into Air

45. What are Ellison's debts to Freud, Marx, and the existentialists? In this connection, note the references to the Invisible Man as mechanical and robotlike.
46. Why does Brother Tarp choose the narrator to be the recipient of his leg chain?
47. Is Invisible Man's rage at Clifton's Sambo doll more than just racial? Does he see it as specifically mocking him?
48. What does the word "Tod" mean in German? Why is this a symbolically appropriate name for Tod Clifton?
49. Why does the narrator reject Ras the Exhorter's philosophy? In what ways does Ellison make Ras's philosophy both attractive and repellent?
50. Invisible Man wonders how the white men of the Brotherhood differ from the trustees of his college. Do they, in fact, differ fundamentally? If so, in what ways?
51. How does Invisible Man react when he is told he will be concentrating on "the woman question"? How are women as a group treated in the novel?
52. The narrator mockingly calls Brother Jack "the great white father" (473). In what way have Jack and the Brotherhood assumed the psychological role of slaveowners?
53. In Chapter 17, IM connects the fight with Ras to the battle royal (372). In what ways is this an apt comparison? In what ways might the fight with Ras be significantly different from the battle royal? In Chapter 18, the narrator comments that Brotherhood strategy meetings were usually "like a prizefight or a smoker" (398). In what ways might this meeting be like the battle royal, which took place at a smoker?
54. Brother Tarp is repeatedly associated with IM's grandfather (378, 384). Why? In what ways are they similar figures? In what ways are they different? What other characters in the book might you usefully compare with Tarp?
55. What does IM's experience with the Brotherhood suggest about the process of identity formation? They give him a new name (309), and he reflects that he would be "no one except myself--whoever I was" (311). Before his first Brotherhood speech, he thinks he will have to keep his "traitor self. . . pressed down" (335), and that when he begins to speak he will "be someone else" (336). After the speech, he says "I was someone new" (353). When he begins his work in Harlem he thinks "I am what I think I am" (379) and that "there were two of me" (380).

All hell breaks loose

56. How and why does IM play with words--with words like yam ("I am what I am") and names like Rinehart (rind and heart)? What does he make of nigger and trigger in his

funeral speech for Tod Clifton? In other words, what does his knowledge of language teach him? From whom does he learn about language?

57. How does the protean character of Rinehart come to represent a world of possibilities for Invisible Man? Does Invisible Man accept or reject those possibilities? Is “Rinehartism” cynicism, or realism?

58. Invisible Man wonders what value personal integrity can have in his cynical world. Does it seem to you that it is possible to retain one’s integrity while dealing with the likes of Dr. Bledsoe or Brother Jack? Do any of the book’s characters in fact retain their integrity?

59. What does Invisible Man mean when he says that Sybil sees him as an “entertainer” (521)?

60. In 1963 the African-American author James Baldwin wrote: “In most of the novels written by Negroes until today...there is a great space where sex ought to be; and what usually fills this space is violence.” Is this true of Invisible Man? What role do women play in the story? Are they even regarded by the narrator as being fully human?

61. In what way is the riot at the end of the book reminiscent of the battle royal at the beginning?

62. What has accounted for the change in Mr. Norton’s manner when he meets the narrator at the end of the book?

63. Why does Invisible Man move underground after the riot?

64. Who wrote the anonymous letter and why?

65. Comment on the final dream of IM where all the major characters reassemble to discuss his progress-or regress. What do you make of the blinding/castration theme in the dream? Is he castrated or blinded or both? Of what illusions is he free? How does he interpret his dream?

66. At the end of the novel, Invisible Man says, “Whence all this passion toward conformity anyway?--diversity is the word. Let man keep his many parts and you’ll have no tyrant states. Why, if they follow this conformity business they’ll end up by forcing me, an invisible man, to become white, which is not a color but the lack of one....America is woven of many strands; I would recognize them and let it so remain” (577). The debate between the value of diversity versus conformity--or consensus--is still very much alive today, more than forty years after the appearance of Invisible Man. What contribution does the novel make to this cultural debate?

67. The narrator finally concludes that “Even an invisible man has a socially responsible role to play” (581). This is an important tenet of Ellison’s philosophy, for he believed that art should serve democracy. In what way is Invisible Man a novel that deals specifically with the problems and challenges of democracy?