

Invisible Man Book Notes

Invisible Man by Ralph Ellison

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Author/Context

Ralph Ellison was born in Oklahoma City, Oklahoma in 1914 and was raised in an environment that encouraged self-fulfillment. Ellison went to Tuskegee Institute from 1933 to 1936 where he was trained as a musician. In 1936 Ellison visited New York and met author Richard Wright. This interaction led to his first attempts at fiction. *Invisible Man* (1952), his first novel that began as a war novel and made the transition to a novel questioning racial identity, was met with accolades. *Invisible Man* won the National Book Award and the Russwurm Award. Ellison also published reviews, short stories, articles, and criticism that appeared in many national magazines and anthologies.

In addition to his writing career, Ellison has also been a fellow of the American Academy in Rome from 1955 to 1957 in addition to teaching at Bard College. Following that, in 1961 Ellison served as an Alexander White Visiting Professor at the University of Chicago. 1962 to 1964 found him at Rutgers University as Visiting Professor of Writing. He was even appointed to the American Academy of Arts and Letters in 1964. After that he worked at New York University for ten years and was also a charter member of the National Council on the Arts and Humanities, a trustee of the John F. Kennedy Center for the Performing Arts, and a trustee of the Colonial Williamsburg Foundation.

Some of his other writings include two collections of essays, *Shadow and Act* (1964) and *Going to the Territory* (1986). Ellison died in 1994 leaving behind a legacy of essays, criticism, and fiction which explore the nuances of racial identity.

"Ellison is recognized as one of the most influential and accomplished American authors of the twentieth century. He is best known for his highly acclaimed novel *Invisible Man* (1952), a work that affirms the need for the individual to attain self-awareness."

In *The Critical Review* in 1976, F.H. Langman said that "Although [*Invisible Man*] tells the story of a black man's search for himself - his name is never given - it represents more than the quest for black identity. It is at once more specific, a very individual story, and more general, dramatizing the identity-crisis of a whole society."

Although Ellison wrote no other great novels during his lifetime, his crowning achievement, *Invisible Man*, is still considered one of the classics of American literature.

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Plot Summary

Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man* is the story of a young black man whose name the reader never learns. He is a young man from the South who is haunted by his grandfather's deathbed warning against conforming to the wishes of white people because the young man sees that as the way to be successful.

The narrator's first real glimpse at the cruel manipulation of white people comes when he is invited to the local men's club to read the speech he prepared for his high school graduation. He gives the speech and is rewarded with a briefcase and a scholarship to a black college, but only after he endures the humiliation of performing for the white men there. He and several black boys are forced to box each other and then scramble around a rug pulsing with electric current to grab coins while the white men laugh at their pain.

The narrator goes off to college and determines to model himself after Dr. Bledsoe, the college's dean and a successful black man who is well respected in his community and his field. Unfortunately, the narrator makes a dreadful mistake when he is chauffeuring Mr. Norton, a wealthy white man who donates a great deal of money to the college. He inadvertently reveals the seedier side of the black race by allowing the man to stop and speak with Joe Trueblood, a poor, black man ostracized from the black community because he got his own daughter pregnant. After the upsetting encounter with Trueblood, the white man is feeling weak and needs a drink, so the young man takes him to the closest place he can think of, the local black bar and brothel. After a disastrous encounter with a mentally altered war veteran, the narrator takes Mr. Norton back to campus. Dr. Bledsoe is so furious with the narrator's indiscretion and stupidity that he expels him. Dr. Bledsoe offers him some hope, however, by offering to write him several letters of recommendation to deliver to the school's trustees in New York. The dean tells the young man that if he makes enough money for tuition, he can come back to school.

The young man sets out for the city unaware that the letters of recommendation are really a hoax just to get him quietly away from the school. Once he finds out about the letters, he is so broke that he takes a job in a paint factory where he has an accident. He wakes up in the factory hospital where they are doing painful experiments on him that leave him disoriented. He recovers somewhat and is released only to dump a spittoon on some man whom he mistakes for Dr. Bledsoe at his boarding house.

After that incident, he moves into a room in a kindly woman's apartment and stays there without a job until he gets caught up with the Communist party. They give him a position as a speaker in Harlem and he works with them until he becomes so disillusioned by their politics and betrayal that he gets caught up in a riot in Harlem and falls into a manhole. He builds himself a room in the cellar of an all-white building and hibernates there contemplating his relationship to reality and the invisibility he feels is caused by his race. He lives in that hole until he runs into Mr. Norton one day in the subway and

realizes that he will no longer conform to white expectations of him. Instead, he will reclaim his humanity by being who he is and no longer struggling to change that.



Major Characters

Invisible Man: He is the narrator of this story. He is a black man who feels invisible because people don't ever really look at him. His race precludes any deeper contact than a merely surface acknowledgment. People look at him and assume that all the stereotypes of being black apply to him and then they look no further.

Mr. Norton: Mr. Norton, an old white man and co-founder of the narrator's college, is the catalyst for the narrator's expulsion and betrayal by Bledsoe.

Dr. Bledsoe: Dr. Bledsoe is the dean of the narrator's college, and he is the narrator's idol because he is a black man successful in the realm of academia. Dr. Bledsoe tricks the narrator into believing that he's going to New York with letters of recommendation for work, when he's really carrying letters that demean him.

Brother Jack: Brother Jack is a local leader of the Communist party who recruits the narrator to be the speaker for and to Harlem.

Minor Characters

Grandfather: The narrator's grandfather died angry with himself for always submitting to white authority instead of standing up for himself. This idea haunts the narrator because he believes that to be successful, he has to gain the approval of white people. Because of this attitude, the narrator feels like a traitor.

Trueblood: Trueblood is a black man shunned by his own people but supported by the white people of the town after an accidental incestuous encounter with his daughter.

Emerson: Mr. Emerson is a trustee of the school in New York, and when the narrator goes to see him, he meets with Mr. Emerson's son instead. Because this young man is sympathetic, he lets the narrator in on the bogus letters of recommendation.

Lucius Brockway: Brockway is a black man who works in the engine room at Liberty Paints. He is the narrator's boss for a day until the narrator is in some sort of accident in the room where the paint base is made and is taken to the factory hospital.

Mary: Mary is a kind black woman who takes the narrator in and lets him rent a room from her until he joins the Communists and moves away.

Brother Hambro: Hambro is a well-educated Communist who trains the new speakers in Communist doctrine. The narrator trains with Hambro for several months before he is allowed to give public speeches again.

Brother Clifton: Clifton is an enthusiastic and charismatic young activist in the Harlem district, and the narrator is initially threatened by Clifton's presence.



Ras the Exhorter: Ras is a Black Nationalist agitator who considers the black men of the Communist party traitors to their race because they are still acting as the white man's puppets.

Rineheart: Rineheart is a con-artist who takes advantage of the people of Harlem in his roles as a bookie, a gambler, a lover, and a preacher. The narrator is mistaken for Rineheart when he disguises himself in dark glasses and a big hat.

Sybil: Sybil is the wife of a committee member of the Brotherhood, and the narrator sleeps with her in an attempt to get information that could help him destroy the Brotherhood. Sybil, however, has no useful information for him.

Objects/Places

Hole: The narrator lives in a hole to hide himself from the rest of the world because he's not sure whether or not he's real because he feels invisible.

Leather Briefcase: The narrator is awarded the leather briefcase by the white men at the club where he is humiliated along with several other black boys. He keeps the briefcase with him because it makes him look important.

Golden Day: The Golden Day is a brothel and bar where black people congregate. The narrator takes Mr. Norton to this place when the old man is sick and then he is expelled because he exposed the white man to the seedier side of black folks by showing him the Golden Day.

Letters of Recommendation: Dr. Bledsoe writes letters of recommendation for the narrator under the guise that he can use them to find a job in New York so that he can earn tuition to come back to school. What the narrator doesn't know is that the letters of recommendation are really letters warning potential employers against hiring the young man.

Liberty Paints: Liberty Paints is the company that he goes to work for after he finds out that Bledsoe's letters of recommendation are fake. While he's at Liberty Paints where he works for a day, he is in an accident that lands him in the factory hospital where they experiment on him without his permission.

Brotherhood: The Brotherhood is the Communist party led by Brother Jack and several other men.

Dancing paper Sambo dolls: Clifton sells these dolls just before the cop shoots him, and the narrator keeps the doll in his pocket. He is disgusted by the degradation that the dolls promote, but he holds on to it because he can't figure out why Clifton would make or sell those things.



Quotes

Quote 1: "I am one of the most irresponsible beings that ever lived. Irresponsibility is part of my invisibility; any way you face it, it is a denial. But to whom can I be responsible, and why should I be, when you refuse to see me?" Prologue, pg. 14

Quote 2: "'To Whom It May Concern: . . . Keep This Nigger-Boy Running.'" Chapter 1, pg. 33

Quote 3: "had a feeling that your people were somehow connected with my destiny. That what happened to you was connected with what would happen to me . . ." Chapter 2, pg. 41

Quote 4: "to repress not only his emotions but his humanity . . . [to be] invisible, a walking personification of the Negative, . . . the mechanical man!" Chapter 3, pg. 94

Quote 5: "The white folk tell everybody what to think -- except men like me. I tell *them*" Chapter 6, pg. 143

Quote 6: "I felt that even when they were polite they hardly saw me, that they would have begged the pardon of Jack the Bear, never glancing his way if the bear happened to be walking along minding his business. It was confusing. I did not know if it was desirable or undesirable . . ." Chapter 8, pg. 168

Quote 7: "a former student of ours (I say *former* because he shall never, under any circumstances, be enrolled as a student here again) who has been expelled for a most serious defection from our strictest rules of deportment." Chapter 9, pg. 190

Quote 8: "the friends of *all* common people" Chapter 13, pg. 282

Quote 9: "His name was Tod Clifton, he believed in Brotherhood, he aroused our hopes and he died." Chapter 21, pg. 459

Quote 10: "yassuh" Chapter 23, pg. 509

Quote 11: "America is woven of many strands; I would recognize them and let it so remain. It's 'winner take nothing' that is the great truth of our country or of any country. Life is to be lived, not controlled; and humanity is won by continuing to play in face of certain defeat. Our fate is to become one, and yet many -- This in not prophecy, but description." Epilogue, pg. 577

Topic Tracking: Anger

Topic Tracking: Anger

Chapter 1

Anger 1: Anger is the catalyst for much of the action throughout *Invisible Man*, and as a result, it is an important theme in the novel. The first encounter with genuine anger is through the narrator's grandfather. The old man dies angry with himself for always giving in to white people and following their rules. The old man's anger at his own submission haunts the narrator.

Chapter 3

Anger 2: Mr. Norton's anger has the power to irrevocably alter the narrator's life, and he only has this power because he is white and the narrator is black. Because the young man knows the danger of Mr. Norton's anger, he is very nervous about what will happen to him when he gets back to school.

Chapter 10

Anger 3: The narrator is angry with Dr. Bledsoe for betraying him and setting him up to fail. He wants to avenge himself on Dr. Bledsoe because of it.

Chapter 11

Anger 4: Brockway is angry that the paint company has sent someone to work with him because he thinks that the narrator is trying to take over his job. The narrator is angry with Bledsoe, at his first boss at the paint factory, as well as the men in the union meeting who called him a fink. Then Brockway picks a fight with him, so the narrator beats him up.

Chapter 12

Anger 5: The narrator is so angry at Bledsoe that he doesn't think twice before dumping a spittoon on a man that he mistakes for Bledsoe at the boarding house. Because of his actions, he's kicked out of his room and forced to rent a room from Mary because he has no money and no place else to go.

Chapter 13

Anger 6: The narrator is angered by the way that white men callously throw the possessions of the old black couple into the street. Their lack of compassion sparks the crowd of black spectators to act on behalf of themselves and the old couple.

Chapter 18



Anger 7: The narrator is angry that after he's devoted himself to the Communist cause in Harlem, he's now being charged with using the cause to further his own importance. Despite his anger, he doesn't want to leave the Brotherhood, so he settles for a position dealing with women's rights until the investigation clears him of the allegations.

Chapter 22

Anger 8: The leading committee of the Brotherhood is angry with the narrator because he has acted without their instructions, and they think that he's becoming a renegade. They don't like the way that he's taking initiative instead of waiting for orders, and they have to subdue him to keep him under their control. The narrator is angry with the committee for being so slow to respond to situations in Harlem and his anger leads him to consider leaving the Brotherhood.

Chapter 23

Anger 9: The narrator is angry that the Brotherhood has decided to sacrifice the people of Harlem and their needs in order to further the Brotherhood itself. He is so furious at this idea that he decides to avenge himself and Harlem by unraveling the Brotherhood from the inside out.

Chapter 25

Anger 10: The people of Harlem are so angry over the senseless death of Tod Clifton and the way that the organizations like the Brotherhood who claim to want to help them are just ineffective. In protest or outrage, or both, the people take over Harlem, looting and destroying, to finally move it out of a state of stagnation.



Topic Tracking: Betrayal

Chapter 1

Betrayal 1: Much of the Invisible Man's experience is betrayal by the people and ideals that he trusts. It begins when the narrator goes to the men's club expecting to give his speech and feeling honored at the respect that such an invitation implies. When he arrives at the club, he sees that the only reason he's there is to entertain the white men of the town with his own humiliation.

Chapter 2

Betrayal 2: Trueblood betrays his race because in the eyes of his people, he diminishes every positive thing that black people have accomplished by committing the foul sin of incest.

Chapter 6

Betrayal 3: Dr. Bledsoe tells the narrator that he has betrayed his race and his college by showing Mr. Norton, a wealthy white man, the defective members of their race. He says that the narrator has set back the work of the college because he has shown Mr. Norton too much.

Chapter 9

Betrayal 4: Dr. Bledsoe betrays the narrator by letting him believe that he's going to write letters of recommendation to help him out when really the man's purpose is just to send him as far away from the school as possible and leave him stranded. This particularly wounds the narrator because he had looked up to Dr. Bledsoe as someone whom he aspired to be like.

Chapter 18

Betrayal 5: The narrator is betrayed by one of the Brotherhood when he is accused of using his position in the Communist group to further his own importance. The fact that it was a black man who made the accusations is all the more cutting because the narrator didn't expect one of his own to try to bring him down.

Chapter 20

Betrayal 6: The narrator feels betrayed when he sees Clifton selling Sambo dolls. The promising young man is now promoting an image that hinders the black race because it encourages an idea of submission and dominance over black people. To see someone with such potential to be a leader peddling such a destructive idea makes the narrator feel cheated.



Betrayal 7: As the narrator walks through Harlem he realizes that he has betrayed the people there because all of his speeches haven't helped them at all. He's been promising them help and change, but he's really done nothing but talk.

Chapter 22

Betrayal 8: The Brotherhood feels that the narrator was wrong to give Clifton a hero's funeral because Clifton betrayed the Communist and his own race because he sold those Sambo dolls. The narrator feels betrayed by the Brotherhood because they won't help, lead, or support the people of Harlem when they are ready to act.

Chapter 23

Betrayal 9: The Brotherhood has betrayed the narrator and the people of Harlem because they are planning to shift away from the promises of help and support that they've given to Harlem in favor of furthering the power of the Brotherhood politically. Instead of keeping their word, the Communists are ditching the black people so that they can gain recognition in some more significant way.

Chapter 25

Betrayal 10: The narrator has been betrayed completely by the Brotherhood and he has betrayed his people by being a puppet for the Brotherhood. When he falls into the manhole and can't get out, he thinks about all the betrayal that he's faced and decides that it's better to stay in a dark hole in the ground than to resurface only to be betrayed again.



Topic Tracking: Invisible

Prologue

Invisible 1: The narrator feels invisible because no one sees him for himself. Instead, people see him as a black man and leave it at that. They look no deeper and no further into who he is, and so now he hibernates in a secret room in the basement of a building full of white tenants. He hides there in preparation for some sort of action, some attempt to make himself seen, although he's not sure yet what that is.

Chapter 3

Invisible 2: The war vet explains the idea of invisibility when he talks about how black men are expected to repress their emotions and thoughts and follow the instructions that white people give them. Because of this subjugation, they become less than human in a way, and therefore become invisible.

Chapter 6

Invisible 3: The narrator is invisible because he is powerless to help himself even though Dr. Bledsoe lied about not expelling him. Although the young man wants to protest the dishonesty, there is nothing he can do about it because he is not in a position of authority and so he doesn't exist.

Chapter 8

Invisible 4: The narrator is initially pleased by the way that white and black people live side by side in New York. Then he comes to realize that although the people of color aren't necessarily spoken down to and mistreated as obviously as they are in the South, they aren't acknowledged any more in New York than they are in the South either.

Chapter 13

Invisible 5: After the narrator speaks to the crowd at the eviction, he seems to lose some of his invisibility because he can't just disappear into the crowd. Brother Jack seeks him out to become a speaker for the local Communist group, so because the young man had a voice in front of the crowd, he's visible now.

Chapter 15

Invisible 6: When the narrator tries to get rid of the broken cast-iron bank, he can't seem to get by with it. He's no longer invisible and inconspicuous enough to just drop the bank in the street without anyone noticing or to put it in someone's trash can. He seems to be noticed everywhere he goes now.

Chapter 17



Invisible 7: The narrator has lost all of his invisibility now because he is well known among the city's leaders and the people of Harlem. His position with the Brotherhood has given him fame, a voice, and power, and so his invisibility is lost temporarily.

Chapter 22

Invisible 8: The narrator wants to leave the Brotherhood because he begins to see how they are trying to manipulate him and the people of Harlem rather than helping them. Unfortunately, the narrator knows that if he leaves the Brotherhood, he'll be invisible again because he will no longer have a well-known name or a voice.

Chapter 23

Invisible 9: The narrator realizes that even while he felt visible and empowered because of his position with the Brotherhood, he was really only a puppet being controlled by the committee. Now his true powerlessness has been revealed to him when he learns that the Brotherhood is going to quit working for Harlem and move in another direction. The narrator realizes that he never really had the ability to help Harlem because he was just a figurehead for the Brotherhood.

Epilogue

Invisible 10: The narrator has been invisible since he went underground because he was so disgusted with the betrayal he'd experienced. Now he has decided to come out of his hibernation and join the world again not as an invisible man who conforms to the expectations of white society, but as an individual who, in his most basic sense, is a human and therefore the voice of all humanity.

Prologue

The Invisible Man is a real man, flesh and bone, but he is invisible because people refuse to see him. He feels stifled by the stereotypes of his race and believes that when people look at him, those stereotypes are all they see because they don't look any deeper than that. He lives secretly in an underground hole, the basement of a building where white people live, and he siphons off electricity from the Power Company. 1,369 light bulbs brighten his small underground room along the walls and ceiling because light makes him feel real. He sometimes listens to jazz records and hears not just the music and the words, but the music's underlying message of suffering. He once listened to Louis Armstrong while he smoked weed, and the combination made him contemplate race and freedom. What he experienced at that moment was so shocking and overwhelming that he never smoked weed again. He stays in the secret basement room because he is hibernating and preparing for action. He says that he realizes that his invisibility is irresponsible. In fact, he says, "I am one of the most irresponsible beings that ever lived. Irresponsibility is part of my invisibility; any way you face it, it is a denial. But to whom can I be responsible, and why should I be, when you refuse to see me?" Prologue, pg. 14

Topic Tracking: Invisible 1

Chapter 1

The narrator's story goes back to when his grandfather died cursing his own submission to white oppression. His grandfather had always gone along with what white people expected of him, and so now whenever the narrator is successful, his grandfather's words haunt him because it makes him feel like a traitor to his own race.

Topic Tracking: Anger 1

The first specific example of this traitorous feeling occurs when the narrator is invited to give a speech at a men's club as a reward for doing well enough in school to speak at his high school graduation. Although the narrator goes to the club to give the speech, he is surprised when the men of the club first gather him up with a group of black boys and make them put on boxing shorts. Then the boys are corralled into the room with the white men to watch a stripper, which is humiliating for the black boys in their thin shorts because their erections are obvious to everyone. After this first humiliation, the boys are then blindfolded and put into a boxing ring to blindly beat each other senseless. What the narrator doesn't realize until it is too late is that the two boys who are left in the ring have to fight each other for the prize money. He is left facing the biggest of the group of boys, and as they fight, he tries to bribe the boy into falling so that the narrator can look good in front of the white men to whom he will eventually present his speech. The other boy refuses the bribe and knocks the narrator out. When he comes to, he sees that a rug has been placed in the front of the room and there is money on the rug. The boys are called up front to grab as much money as they can, but the rug is electrically charged so that each time they touch the metal, they are shocked. The white men in the room enjoy the show as the black boys scramble for money and suffer each time they touch the coins. Once this display ends, the boys are paid five dollars each (and the boy who won the boxing match got ten dollars) and sent home. The narrator, however, stays to present his speech to the men who were only moments before laughing as he and the other boys struggled to gather money without getting shocked by the electrified rug. When he gives his speech, the men either mock or ignore him. But after he is done, they present him with a leather briefcase and a scholarship to a black college. That night the narrator dreams of his grandfather. In the dream his grandfather shows him a letter inside the briefcase, and the letter says, "To Whom It May Concern: . . . Keep This Nigger-Boy Running." Chapter 1, pg. 33 He doesn't realize then the role that the idea in the dream will play in his life.

Topic Tracking: Betrayal 1

Chapter 2

When the invisible man goes to college, he works as a chauffeur for the prestigious guests of the school. His trouble begins the day that he drives Mr. Norton, a wealthy, old white man who is a co-founder of the college. As he drives Mr. Norton, the old man asks the boy about his plans for the future and explains that his own future is wrapped up in the lives of all the black students at the college because he helped found the school. He says that he "had a feeling that your people were somehow connected with my destiny. That what happened to you was connected with what would happen to me . . ." Chapter 2, pg. 41

The old man wants to see the country around the school, some place that he's never seen before, so the narrator takes him driving down a road that goes past an old slave cabin where Trueblood lives. Trueblood is a black man now shunned by his community because he impregnated his own daughter. Mr. Norton, unaware of the situation, wants to stop at the cabin and talk to the people outside, but the narrator is uncomfortable. When the old man insists, the narrator can do nothing but comply, and so he sits with Norton and Trueblood on the porch as Trueblood explains to Norton that he didn't mean to have sex with his daughter. He, his wife, and his daughter shared a bed while the other children slept on the floor. In the middle of the night, Trueblood was dreaming about sex and woke to realize that he was having intercourse with his daughter, but at that point, the two of them were too carried away to realize the seriousness of the situation or to stop themselves. When Trueblood's wife woke up and saw what had happened, she bashed the side of his head and got an axe to finish him off. But she couldn't kill him for his sin against their daughter. Instead she and all the other black people of their community shun him. He still lives in their cabin, but his wife won't speak to him and neither will his daughter who is pregnant with his child. As Trueblood tells the story to Mr. Norton who listens in fascination, the narrator is embarrassed because he feels that Trueblood and people like him reduce the accomplishments of black people everywhere. He makes the entire race look bad in front of white people. The ironic thing that Trueblood points out is that before this disaster, the white people ignored him, but now that the black people have turned their back on him for his outrageous wrong, white people give him money and help him out.

Topic Tracking: Betrayal 2

Mr. Norton seems shocked and upset by the story, so the narrator encourages him to leave. Before they go, however, Mr. Norton gives Trueblood one hundred dollars. The narrator is shocked and outraged that someone so low-down would get that much money from a white man when he does everything right and is never rewarded so highly. Mr. Norton seems ill and says he needs whiskey, so the narrator takes him to the nearest place he can think of where whiskey is available, the Golden Day.

Chapter 3

On the way to the Golden Day, Mr. Norton grows so weak in the backseat of the car that he passes out. The narrator brings him inside the brothel hoping to revive him with whiskey, and it works. But then the brothel is flooded with black war veterans who have come over from the nearby insane asylum. While Mr. Norton is conscious but still sickly, a fight breaks out between the veterans and their guard, and in the chaos, Mr. Norton loses consciousness again. One of the veterans, only semi-sane, helps the narrator carry Mr. Norton upstairs and out of the fighting. When Mr. Norton wakes again after a few minutes, the black veteran, formerly a doctor, talks to the old man about how he was a respected surgeon in France. When he returned to the United States after the first World War, however, he was driven from a town where he tried to save lives and beaten for his efforts, so he gave up surgery. As the vet talks, more rage and nonsense begins to come out and the narrator is frightened of the way that the old vet speaks to the doctor with such a tone of equality and authority. The vet keeps talking about how black men are trained to be zombies who bend to the will of white people, "to repress not only his emotions but his humanity . . . [to be] invisible, a walking personification of the Negative, . . . the mechanical man!" Chapter 3, pg. 94 The narrator and Mr. Norton get so nervous that they try to leave amid the ruckus in the bar below. On the way out Mr. Norton stumbles and scrapes his head against the screen door, and the narrator can tell that the man is angry, so they hurry away.

Topic Tracking: Invisible 2

Topic Tracking: Anger 2

Chapter 4

When the narrator returns to the college campus with Mr. Norton in tow, Dr. Bledsoe, the black dean of the college and the narrator's idol, is furious with the boy. While Mr. Norton tries to convince the dean that all that happened was not the narrator's fault, the young man is still uneasy because he has to meet with Dr. Bledsoe that day to determine his fate at the college. Dr. Bledsoe promises Mr. Norton that the young man will not be expelled, but the narrator is still uncertain.

Chapter 5

The narrator goes to the college's evening church service before his meeting with Dr. Bledsoe. During the service a visiting preacher tells a moving story about the college founder's life and how, on his deathbed, he selected Dr. Bledsoe as his successor. The young man is so moved by the story and so distraught at the idea of being kicked out of the college that he loves that he leaves the church service and waits in the dark by the administration building. He waits to meet Dr. Bledsoe and feels lost at the idea of what to do once he's expelled.

Chapter 6

The young man meets with Dr. Bledsoe after the church service, and he is expelled because he has put the school in danger by exposing the most unflattering part of the black community to Mr. Norton, a man who has so much financial pull with the school. The narrator defends himself in an unexpected outburst. He vows to tell Mr. Norton and anyone who will listen that Dr. Bledsoe has broken his promise to Mr. Norton and expelled the young man anyway. Dr. Bledsoe warns him to tell anyone that he wants because no one will listen to him. No one will believe the boy over him because he is so powerful that he defies the hierarchy of racial power. "The white folk tell everybody what to think -- except men like me. I tell *them*" Chapter 6, pg. 143, and because of that power, the young man is defenseless against the dean's decision. Yet the narrator does gain something favorable from the outburst. Dr. Bledsoe says that he admires the boy's spirit and so he offers to give him letters of recommendation so that he can find some work in New York City. He says that if the boy works and earns enough money for the next year's tuition, he can come back to the college. The narrator accepts the expulsion and the letters of recommendation and leaves for New York the following morning.

Topic Tracking: Invisible 3

Topic Tracking: Betrayal 3

Chapter 7

When the narrator climbed on the bus to New York he was surprised to see that the veteran who had spoken so brashly to Mr. Norton at the Golden Day was being transferred to another hospital. He knew that Dr. Bledsoe had arranged to have the vet sent away. The veteran keeps telling the young man to play the white man's game but never believe in it, and the narrator is confused about what the vet means so he just ignores him.

On the New York subway to Harlem for the first time the narrator is uneasy because the subway car is so packed that he has to touch a white woman. The fact that she doesn't scream for help or even seem angry about it shocks the young man. He is further surprised when he arrives in Harlem and sees that it is run by black people for black people, and because of this he is optimistic about his chances for success in this city. The prevalence of black people in positions of authority, like police officers, makes him certain that with his letters of recommendation from Dr. Bledsoe, he'll certainly do well there.

Chapter 8

The narrator sends the letters of recommendation that Dr. Bledsoe has given him to the offices of several of the school's trustees expecting to find work with them. He waits for more than a month, but he never hears back from any of them. There is one trustee who was out of town, and just when he is about to give up hope of finding a job, he gets a letter from Emerson. The narrator wants to go see Emerson to find out whether or not he can get a job there, but he doesn't know if he should or not because he's never been in this position before. The young man's getting desperate because he's running out of money as he waits to hear back from Emerson, and because he lied and told his parents that he had a job already, he can't ask them for money. He doesn't even have enough money for the bus fare home, so he's running out of options. And although he was pleased by the way that white people and black people co-exist in New York, he's noticed that the white people don't really see him at all. "I felt that even when they were polite they hardly saw me, that they would have begged the pardon of Jack the Bear, never glancing his way if the bear happened to be walking along minding his business. It was confusing. I did not know if it was desirable or undesirable . . ." Chapter 8, pg. 168

Topic Tracking; Invisible 4

Chapter 9

The narrator, finally desperate to find work, goes to Mr. Emerson to ask for a job. He has the final letter of recommendation from Dr. Bledsoe with him, but instead of Mr. Emerson himself, he meets with Mr. Emerson's son. The man reads the letter of recommendation and out of sympathy, he warns the narrator that the letters are derogatory. Dr. Bledsoe's letter explains that the narrator is "a former student of ours (I say *former* because he shall never, under any circumstances, be enrolled as a student here again) who has been expelled for a most serious defection from our strictest rules of deportment." Chapter 9, pg. 190 The narrator is shocked at the betrayal because Dr. Bledsoe was once his idol. He realizes that these letters are the reason that he hasn't heard from any of the trustees with whom he hoped to work, so now he must find some more common job so that he can have enough money to live. He leaves Mr. Emerson's office and finds his way to Liberty Paints, a paint factory where he's hired. He can't help but think about how much he'd like revenge against Dr. Bledsoe for his betrayal.

Topic Tracking: Betrayal 4

Topic Tracking: Anger 3

Chapter 10

The narrator goes to work at the paint plant immediately. After he makes a mistake with his first boss, a white man, he is sent down to the basement to work with Lucius Brockway, a black man in charge of the room where the paint base is made. He and Brockway dislike each other from the start because the narrator doesn't like the way that the old man orders him around, and Brockway dislikes the narrator because he's educated. Brockway suspects that the narrator is trying to take his job. On his lunch break, the narrator stumbles upon a union meeting in the locker room, and he's thrown out because the union members don't trust him. He's offended by their reaction, but he doesn't know anything about unions anyway. When Brockway asks why he was gone so long, the narrator explains what happens and the two get in a fist-fight because Brockway doesn't like unions and he thinks that the narrator is a member. The fight ends when the narrator knocks Brockway's false teeth out, and only a few minutes after their truce, the narrator is in some sort of explosion that knocks him out.

Topic Tracking: Anger 4

Chapter 11

When the narrator wakes, he is in the factory hospital being treated for the injuries that he sustained in the accident. Although it is unclear what his specific injuries are, he undergoes some sort of shock treatments that cause him great pain and leave him unable to respond when the doctors ask him what his name is. He can't remember his name, and he's disoriented. The whole experience is cloudy like a hallucination. When they release him from the hospital (and his job at the paint factory), his brain feels out of sync with the rest of him. The hospital experience leaves him feeling altered.

Chapter 12

As the narrator walks back to his room at the boarding house he faints. Mary, a kind black woman, helps him to her apartment where she lets him rest and fixes him soup. When he is feeling better, he goes to the boarding house where he rents a room. He notices as he walks through the lobby that people are looking down their noses at him because he's wearing a workingman's overalls instead of business attire. He thinks that they believe his clothes suggest that he's given up the dream of difference and power that they once all had in common before he knew about Bledsoe's sabotage. Before he makes it out of the lobby, he sees a man who looks like Bledsoe from behind. Blinded by his lust for revenge, he dumps a spittoon on the man's head only to realize too late that it's not Bledsoe. He begins renting a room from Mary that night because he is kicked out of the boarding house. While he lives with Mary she always talks about his responsibility to make something of himself to empower and uplift his race. He lives with her for a while with no job and no definite direction.

Topic Tracking: Anger 5

Chapter 13

He feels restless after staying in the apartment so long, so he goes out into the New York winter. As he walks down the sidewalk, he sees a man selling baked yams. He buys one and thinks as he eats it how he used to pretend that he didn't like yams, chitterlings, and other soul food because he thought liking that food made him seem ignorant and common. He'd learned from Dr. Bledsoe to push away the things that made him seem like a common black man whether he liked them or not, but after Dr. Bledsoe's betrayal, the young man no longer feels the need to keep up the pretense.

He comes across a crowd gathered on the sidewalk in front of a building where an elderly, black couple is being evicted. He joins the disgruntled crowd of black people and fights his conflicting desire to fight to help these people or to just leave it alone. The crowd gets rowdy, and without realizing what he's doing, he begins to speak to them to try to soothe the crowd before someone gets shot because the marshal is standing in the doorway with a loaded gun aimed at them. Though his speech slows them down momentarily, eventually they rush past him and attack the white man with the gun. As part of the crowd beats the white man, the rest of the people begin to carry the old couple's possessions back into their apartment. In the middle of the camaraderie some white people who claim to be "the friends of *all* common people" Chapter 13, pg. 282 show up to help move the furniture until the police come. The young man is inside the building when the police arrive, and a young, white woman directs him to the roof to get away. Her help surprises him, but he takes her advice.

Topic Tracking: Anger 6

As he crosses the neighboring roofs of a block of buildings, the narrator sees a white man following him. Afraid that it's a cop who knows about his role in the outburst at the eviction, the narrator moves faster. When he gets to the last building, he runs down the stairs and steps onto the street to blend in with the crowds. He's standing at a crosswalk feeling sure that he lost the guy who was following him until the man beside him congratulates him on his speech. The narrator is even further startled when the man who followed him across the rooftops invites him to a cafe for coffee and cheesecake. Too curious to pass up the invitation, the narrator goes with the odd redheaded man who calls himself Brother Jack. As they sit in the cafe Brother Jack asks the narrator to join their Communist organization and act as a speaker to and for the black community. The narrator declines the offer, but Brother Jack gives him a card with his phone number just in case the young man changes his mind.

Topic Tracking: Invisible 5

Chapter 14

Back at Mary's apartment, the narrator keeps thinking of the job offer he turned down and how much money he owes Mary. The more he thinks about his debt, the greater his temptation to accept the job just for the paycheck. The narrator goes to a payphone and calls the number Brother Jack had given him. He meets Brother Jack and several other men who pick him up in a car and take him to a posh party where everyone is well dressed and elegant. The narrator feels out of place and confused about the purpose of his presence there.

Brother Jack and the men who had been in the car with them on the way to the party offer to make the narrator the next Booker T. Washington, and the narrator can't resist the opportunity to be important. He agrees to join the Brotherhood. The men decide to change his name and relocate him. They give him enough money to repay Mary and to buy himself some new clothes. People at the party welcome him among them, but one drunken man causes a scene when he asks the narrator to sing some old slave spirituals. The drunken man is thrown out, and the narrator realizes that in his new job he must be prepared for anything and keep his fear and uncertainty hidden.

He gets back to Mary's apartment late that night and decides to leave early in the morning and just leave the money on the table because he doesn't want to explain himself or deal with an emotional goodbye.

Chapter 15

The narrator wakes early in the morning to the sound of people throughout the building banging on the steam pipes. Angry at the racket, he looks around for something with which to bang on the pipes. He finds a cast-iron bank shaped like a grinning Negro and is shocked that Mary would have such an insulting thing in her apartment. He uses the degrading representation to bang on the pipes until the bank breaks apart. He feels bad for breaking it despite its ugliness, so he hides it in the briefcase he still carries and plans to throw it away after he leaves.

The noise wakes Mary as well and he is forced to give her the money face-to-face. He tells her that he got it by playing the numbers for the first time, beginner's luck. He doesn't tell her that he's moving out.

When he leaves, he tries to throw away the bank wrapped in newspaper, but when he puts it in a trash can in front of a row of houses, the woman who lives there yells after him to come back and get it. She makes a scene, so he retrieves the broken bank from the trash can and then tries to drop it on the ground at a crosswalk. A few minutes later a man brings it back to him telling him that he dropped it. When the narrator denies it, the man holding the bank thinks that he's holding the evidence for some crime. The narrator puts the newspaper-wrapped bank back in the briefcase and keeps walking. He goes to buy himself a new suit and then calls Brother Jack for his instructions. Brother Jack gives him directions to his new apartment in the middle of a white, Irish neighborhood, and at his new apartment he spends the day reading the Communist literature left there for him in preparation for a rally that night.

Topic Tracking: Invisible 6

Chapter 16

At the rally that night the narrator is the last to speak and through his fear he is inspired by the energy of the crowd. Words flow out of his mouth and the crowd loves him. He gets them all riled up, but when he and the other speakers leave the arena he learns that most of the other speakers disapproved of his speech because it appealed to emotion rather than intellect. They explain to him that intellectual is their style. Brother Jack disagrees with them, but he makes plans to have Brother Hambro train the narrator for the next few months.

The narrator is proud of his speech and the crowd's reaction to it, but he begins to question something he said in his own speech about becoming more human. He agrees to study with Hambro so that he can pursue his own ideas when he's done with his Communist training.

Chapter 17

Four months after his first speech, Brother Jack finally calls the narrator back to action. At midnight Brother Jack calls him and they go to a bar in Harlem where the narrator will now become the new chief spokesman in the Harlem district. At the new office the next day, the narrator is introduced to his associates and among them is Brother Clifton, a handsome and charismatic young man. The first plan of action to gain clout and political position is to get the city leaders to back the Communist group in Harlem on the issue of evictions. The Communist group also decides to hold rallies in the Harlem streets the way that Ras the Exhorter, a Black Nationalist, does.

At the first rally Ras' gang of thugs picks a fight with the Brothers. As Ras and Clifton fight, Ras pulls a knife, but he can't stab Clifton. Instead he begs Clifton and the narrator to join the Nationalist group and band together. He wants them to separate from the enslaving white man who is just using them. Clifton and the narrator refuse to listen to his crazy ranting and they leave.

As time passes the narrator's new name and his position with the Brotherhood make him well known. He is a leader of Harlem and he's glad for his place in the Brotherhood.

Topic Tracking: Invisible 7

Chapter 18

The narrator receives an anonymous note warning him to slow down or the very people who supported him would be the ones to cut him down. The note unnerves him, but he defies it. A few weeks later the narrator goes to a meeting where one of the black Brothers accuses him of using the Brotherhood to make himself important and attempting to become a tyrant by controlling the Harlem district.

The narrator is shocked and disappointed when the Brotherhood decides to investigate the ludicrous allegations. They ask him to work on issues of women's rights in a different part of the city or just step down from his position all together. The narrator chooses to leave Harlem until the investigation clears him of the accusations made against him.

Topic Tracking: Betrayal 5

Topic Tracking: Anger 7

Chapter 19

After a lecture on women's rights, a white woman invites the narrator back to her home to discuss the Brotherhood ideology over coffee. She seduces him and her husband comes home in the middle of the night. As the narrator lies in bed with a sleeping, married woman, her husband opens the door to her darkened bedroom and looks in to tell her to wake him early in the morning. He never acknowledges seeing the narrator there and the narrator isn't certain that the man saw him, but rather than waiting around to find out, the narrator leaves. He spends the next few days waiting for a call from the Brotherhood to reprimand him for sleeping with one of the wives of a Brother, but when the call comes in the middle of the night, it's not about his affair. Brother Clifton is missing and Ras the Exhorter is taking over Harlem, so the narrator is being sent back to the district.

Chapter 20

The narrator returns to Harlem only to find that things are very different. The people of Harlem no longer trust the Brotherhood because they feel that it has stopped working for them. Many of the narrator's co-workers in the district are gone and to further the isolation he feels, he's not called to participate in the Brotherhood strategy meeting. He takes a walk because he is so bothered by what's happening in the Brotherhood and Harlem, and as he walks, he sees Clifton working as a street merchant selling dancing paper Sambo dolls. Shocked and hurt to see a promising Brother now defiling the race by selling such a degrading product, the narrator sees Clifton run away when the police head in his direction. A few minutes later he sees the cop pushing Clifton in front of him as they walk down the sidewalk. Clifton hits the cop and the cop shoots him. The narrator stands on the curb and watches Clifton die.

Topic Tracking: Betrayal 6

When he makes his way back to the district office, he looks around him and sees the people of Harlem. He looks at them and their living conditions and realizes that none of his speeches ever improved their lives. He sees that all the people around him are just unknown individuals whom history will ignore when they're gone.

Topic Tracking: Betrayal 7

Chapter 21

The narrator organizes a public funeral service for Clifton without the permission of the Brotherhood because no one will return his calls or contact him. Hundreds of people show up for the funeral procession to the cemetery. When the young man stands to speak at the funeral, he knows that the people are waiting for him to get them stirred up, but he can't make the eulogy a political statement. He can't get past what they all know: "His name was Tod Clifton, he believed in Brotherhood, he aroused our hopes and he died." Chapter 21, pg. 459

Chapter 22

The narrator returns to the district office after the funeral to find the leading committee of the Brotherhood waiting for him. They are angry that he gave Clifton a hero's funeral because they consider him a traitor for selling the Sambo dolls. The narrator tries to explain that the focus is on the fact that Clifton was gunned down for a slight offense. He tells the committee members that the people of Harlem are ready to act and waiting for the Brotherhood to lead them despite the fact that the Brotherhood let them down before. The committee is angry that he didn't wait for their orders before he acted because it shows a lack of discipline of which the Brotherhood disapproves. Brother Tobbit, a white member of the Brotherhood, verbally lashes out at the narrator for claiming to know the minds of the people of Harlem. Tobbit insists that he is more in touch with the black community than the narrator is because his own wife is black. The two men argue and as their argument escalates, Brother Jack gets so angry that his glass eye shoots out of his head and scares the narrator. Brother Jack explains how he lost his eye for the cause, for the Brotherhood, and he tries to intimidate the narrator into seeing that discipline is sacrifice. When the narrator is properly subdued, the committee members leave after giving him orders to see Brother Hambro for new instructions. Brother Jack tells the narrator that he knows how he feels, but the narrator doesn't believe him. The young man thinks that Brother Jack's good eye is just as blind as his glass eye. The narrator suddenly wants to extract himself from the Brotherhood, but he knows that if he does, then he returns to being a nobody, an invisible man.

Topic Tracking: Betrayal 8

Topic Tracking: Anger 8

Topic Tracking: Invisible 8

Chapter 23

The narrator decides to see Hambro that night, but on the way to visit with his Communist instructor Ras the Exhorter is rallying to call the people together to act out against the senseless death of Tod Clifton. Ras calls out the narrator in front of the crowd and asks what the Brotherhood is going to do about Clifton's shooting. The narrator avoids the question and leaves as quickly as he can, but Ras' henchmen follow him. In front of a movie theatre the men start beating the narrator up, but the doorman of the theatre stops them. The narrator buys dark glasses and a hat to disguise himself from Ras' goons. In the new get-up people begin to mistake him for some man named Rineheart. Intrigued by several encounters with people who mistake him for this man, he sets out to discover Rineheart's identity and learns that he is a bookie, a gambler, a lover, and a preacher. He is a con-artist; he fools the people of Harlem the same way that the Brotherhood does.

The narrator sees Hambro and learns that the Brotherhood is sacrificing the people of Harlem's needs in order to pursue the greater good of the organization. The young man is surprised and disappointed, but he begins to want revenge against those who want to sacrifice him and the people who trusted him. He sees that his grandfather and Dr. Bledsoe were right. The narrator learns that the black man is invisible and the only thing that he's wanted or needed for is to say "yassuh." Chapter 23, pg. 509 He decides to unravel the Brotherhood and realizes that to get inside information on the committee's plans he'll need to get close to some of their women.

Topic Tracking: Betrayal 9

Topic Tracking: Invisible 9

Topic Tracking: Anger 9

Chapter 24

The narrator, in his desire to get even with the Brotherhood for screwing him and Harlem, begins to fool the committee into believing that Harlem supports their every move and that things there are progressing in support of the Communist cause. At Brother Jack's birthday celebration, the narrator realizes that he can't use Jack's mistress to get information because although she would sleep with the narrator, she would never give up whatever information she had. He chooses another woman, Sybil, whose husband is a member of the leading committee of the Brotherhood. He sets up the seduction scene, but it's already too late to get out of it when he realizes that she has no information that he can use. After their drunken encounter he gets an emergency call from the district office in Harlem and has to leave right away. He's drunk and disoriented, and he can't get rid of Sybil because she keeps getting out of the cab he found for her and trying to follow him. He finally convinces her to go home and the cabbie warns him that all of Harlem is in an uproar. The narrator, briefcase in hand, makes his way to the Harlem district.

Chapter 25

When the narrator makes it to Harlem he can hear gunshots, shouts, and breaking glass all around him. A bullet grazes his head as police chase men who are running down the street with a safe. Some of the looters help him up and take him along with them as they loot a hardware store and then burn their tenement building. Although he knows that he should go to the district office, he helps the men start the blaze and some woman recognizes him as a leader from the Brotherhood. He runs away but stops short in his flight when he sees seven white women hanging nude from lampposts. The realization that they're mannequins doesn't really ease his mind. As he stands there shaking off the shock of the mannequins in the darkness Ras, dressed as a tribal chieftain, approaches with a mob following him. Ras, on a horse, recognizes the narrator and hurls a spear at him. When the spear misses the young man, Ras tells his henchmen to hang the narrator. The young man tries to convince the crowd that although he has been used to trick them, Ras has as well because if they follow Ras' lead, they'll be mowed down by police as a lawless bunch. The crowd doesn't listen to him and he has to fight his way out of the mob with Ras' spear and his briefcase. The narrator escapes and finds himself running to Mary's apartment, but he doesn't make it there. Some men ask him what's in his briefcase and as he's trying to get away, he falls into an uncovered manhole. The men put the cover on the hole and leave him there with a book of matches. He sleeps there as Harlem erupts above his head, and when he wakes, he can't find his way out of the hole because there is no ladder to the street above. While he's down there he dreams that all the people who have betrayed him are standing around him laughing. In his dream they castrate him and tell him that his illusions are gone. When he wakes again he decides that he's done with all of them. He can't return to where or what he was before, so he decides to just stay underground.

Topic Tracking: Anger 10

Topic Tracking: Betrayal 10

Epilogue

So that is the story of the invisible man. That is how he came to live in this hole that is the cellar of an all-white building. He's searched for his relationship to reality and the world and visibility. The answer he's come up with is diversity: "America is woven of many strands; I would recognize them and let it so remain. It's 'winner take nothing' that is the great truth of our country or of any country. Life is to be lived, not controlled; and humanity is won by continuing to play in face of certain defeat. Our fate is to become one, and yet many -- This is not prophecy, but description." Epilogue, pg. 577

Before the narrator decided to come out of hibernation for good, he saw Mr. Norton lost in the subway one day. The old man asked him for directions and he asked Norton if he remembered that the narrator was Norton's destiny. The old man had no clue what the narrator was talking about and he got on a train as fast as he could to get away. The invisible man has decided to leave the cellar and to go on living, not to conform, but to live because on the most basic level, his voice is the voice of all humankind.

Topic Tracking: Invisible 10