

Name _____ Class pd. _____ Date _____ Score _____

Introduction

Invisible Man is a classic. First published in 1952, the book immediately saw success, while also receiving its share of scorn for the taboo elements within its pages. *Invisible Man* uses the same Homeric format that was introduced through the character of Odysseus and later successfully mimicked by characters like Huckleberry Finn. In other words, the narrator in Ralph Ellison's text is about to experience a journey. However, unlike Odysseus and Huckleberry Finn, the narrator's journey is full of sarcasm and spite. These qualities lead the reader to view the narrator in an antiheroic light. Perhaps he best resembles the archetypical antihero of Holden Caulfield, in J. D. Salinger's classic work, *The Catcher in the Rye*. Both characters struggle with autonomy as they sift their way through disillusionment.

Initially, Ellison's text appears to be about race. The novel starts in the Deep South, as Ellison immediately establishes the theme of "us versus them" through the battle royal. Upon graduation from high school, Ellison's narrator attends an African-American college in the South where he is duped time and again. The white, hegemonic society suppresses black living and culture, forcing acquiescence to whims and politics. Even those whom the narrator trusts, like Mr. Norton, end up abusing the narrator, making him their pawn. Eventually, the narrator heads north, only to discover race is just as much an issue in the areas once known as free states. Once north, the narrator ventures into the heart of the African-American world: Harlem, New York. Here he encounters all sorts of people. There are those who are out to destroy him, such as Ras (pronounced *Race*) and Brother Jack. Yet, beautiful people do exist: namely, Mary Rambo. Through her nurturing character, the narrator is shown the love he desperately needs. In a novel full of racial tension, hers is a world with respite.

To claim that *Invisible Man* is only about race is an absurdity. In addition to race, ideas including autonomy also emerge. Such elements course throughout the book but are seen most clearly when the narrator is a part of the Brotherhood. The Brotherhood is officially introduced to the reader in the second part of the book; though this organization and its members appear genuine, they are anything but. Upon moving to the North, the narrator joins the Communist organization which uses the plight of the African Americans to further its own cause. The narrator is swept up in the movement and becomes another cog, only breaking free by novel's end.

In the beginning of the novel, the narrator has a dream in which he hears his grandfather say, "Keep this nigger-boy running." So begins the running (and almost ruining) of a man. *Invisible Man* is an epic, worthy of that title and worth mentioning in the same breath as the other classic epics which precede it. The intent of this unit is to help students to experience a work that otherwise may be perceived as too daunting.

Invisible Man is a dense book, full of complex characters and themes. Though comprehensive, the lessons that follow are not meant to be exhaustive; rather, they allow students to gain an appreciation for the text and to dive deeply within the postmodern world of Ellison.