INVISIBLE MAN
VINTAGE BOOKS EDITION

CONCEPT ANALYSIS

ORGANIZATIONAL PATTERNS

Invisible Man is divided into twenty five chapters, along with a prologue and an epilogue. In the prologue, we are introduced to the narrator, a nameless black person who says he is invisible as a human-being and that all the whites around him are blind. Then, starting with chapter one, he begins to tell his story and how he ended up living underground in New York as an “invisible man.” After the story, in the epilogue, the narrator repeats some of the same ideas in the prologue. He states that even though he is underground and invisible, he is not blind. Being there, in a place he has illuminated with over a thousand light bulbs, he searches for the truth, including who he truly is. At the end, he concludes that writing his story has done very little other than to relieve himself of his bitterness. He decides he needs to emerge from the underground and accept his social role in society.

ISSUES RELATED TO THE STUDY OF LITERATURE

• THEME

The dominant theme in the novel is individuality vs. conformity. On multiple occasions the narrator tries to do something that will set him apart from everybody else (he hopes to be the next Booker T. Washington). However, each time he tries he is always persecuted in some way. For example, when he joins the Brotherhood at Harlem he uses his oratory skills to persuade the people, which results in infuriating the Brotherhood. People constantly want him to do what they want, rather than allow him to pursue his own course of action. Being forced to conform to how society believes blacks should act is what leads the narrator to becoming invisible. The narrator is unsure whether this invisibility is a good thing or a bad thing. He says, “It is sometimes advantageous to be unseen, although it is most often rather wearing on the nerves” (3).

Students can relate to this issue because sometimes in school their individuality is lost as they are expected to conform to certain social standards. Students often employ various methods to express individuality, such as through clothing. A great resource for discussion of this theme would be the short story “An American Childhood” by Annie Dillard (published by Holt, Rinehart, and Winston).

The other theme in the book is the struggle of minority groups in a white-dominated society. The narrator is expelled from school, fired from a job at a paint factory, and used by white
members of the Brotherhood. Although the narrator has the skills and ability to contribute much to society, his skin color pulls him beneath the whites and they walk all over him.

This theme relates specifically to ELL students, but the class can discuss other modern social issues as well, even within the school (jocks vs. nerds, etc.)

- **SETTING:**

  The setting of the story plays a crucial role as the book delves into the issues of race and equality. At the beginning of the novel, the narrator is living in the South, a society where whites once dominated over blacks as slave masters. The narrator discovers that very little has changed, even though the society now hides underneath the mask of opportunity. When he is invited to present his graduation speech in front of the prominent men of the city, he is ordered to do things against his will and is severely injured in a blindfolded boxing match they force him to participate in. Following a series of events, the narrator is eventually expelled from his college and realizes that he has very little value in a white-dominated society.

  The next major setting in the book is Harlem, New York. Harlem is famous for being a place where blacks are grouped together in deplorable circumstances. At first, the narrator finds it to be a place of opportunity for equality, at least among his own people. But he soon realizes that even Harlem is dominated by whites who are trying to draw sympathy towards their party (the Brotherhood). The narrator is rejected by some of his black peers and is eventually forced by both races to live underground.

  Because the book heavily discusses the issues of race and equality, it is very significant that the two major settings of the novel would take place in a white-dominated society and a black-dominated society. Inequality is an issue in both places and the narrator finds that to survive in either society one must become a slave to the ideals of the society. In other words, they must become invisible.

- **POINT OF VIEW/NARRATIVE VOICE**

  The entire book is told from the perspective of the narrator in first person. The narrator is speaking to the reader, but also seems to be reflecting for his own benefit. Appropriately, the narrator never reveals his name, making him truly invisible to the reader. For example, the book begins with him saying, “I am invisible . . . That invisibility to which I refer occurs because of a peculiar disposition of the eyes of those with whom I come in contact. A matter of the construction of the inner eyes, those eyes with which they look through their physical eyes upon reality” (1). He does not tell us his name, only that he is invisible.

- **FORESHADOWING**

  Lemley, BYU, 2009
The prologue is an example of foreshadowing simply because through the prologue we know where the narrator will end up at the end of the story. However, there are other examples as well. For instance, on page 152 the narrator is working in a paint factory. He is told to put ten drops of black paint into the white paint. He does so, and the black soon disappears, foreshadowing that he is to become invisible in a white society. At another instance, the narrator receives an anonymous letter telling him, “Do not forget if you get too big they will cut you down. You are from the South and you know that this is a white man’s world” (289). Sure enough, at the end of the novel the narrator is cut down by the very people with whom he had been working.

THE CENTRAL QUESTION/ENDURING ISSUE

*Invisible Man* deals with the struggle of being true to oneself and being recognized for individuality. What does it mean, then, to be recognized for who you truly are? In what ways should individuality be expressed? This question could be especially meaningful for students because they are at the age when they are seeking their independence. Many students express their individuality by the way they dress. Some choose to actively participate in activities while others choose to participate in anti-social behavior.

After compiling a list of possible ways to express individuality, students can than discuss which ways are most helpful and which are most hurtful. They should then compare the things the narrator does to express his individuality compared to Ras. While the narrator demonstrates the most individuality while giving his rousing speeches, Ras tends to be more violent. Both men have troubles with their approaches. Students should discuss these differences and similarities.

AFFECTIVE ISSUES RELATED TO THE WORK

- Students can relate to the issue of stereotypes that appears in Ellison’s novel. Students that are classified as nerds, jocks, Goths, etc. cease to become three-dimensional to those around them. They can probably relate to the frustration that the narrator feels when people do not see past his skin color, but instead make pre-judgments on him and thereby inhibit his abilities.

- The novel also deals with lies and deception. Teenagers deal with this constantly, detecting lies from adults and from their peers. Just as the narrator’s heart is crushed when he realizes that the college president lied about his letters of referral. What experiences have the students had where they felt they had been lied to or deceived? How do they relate to the narrator’s frustration?

- Minority students in any classroom may be able to relate to the difficulty of trying to fit into a white-dominated society. This could be a very sensitive question for a lot of people, but it would be interesting to see how many members of the majority recognize racial prejudice compared to the number of minority students and how they feel.

*Lemley, BYU, 2009*
VOCABULARY ISSUES

There is a lot of slang used in the book, mostly by undereducated blacks. We first encounter this kind of language in the second chapter during Trueblood’s narrative, but we see much more of it after the narrator moves to Harlem. It is not difficult to understand the slang. “Git” is substituted for “get” and “yessuh” for “yes, sir.” Ras says “mahm” instead of man.” Making the students aware of the dialect/slang of these characters should help them get through these passages with ease. The following is sample of Ras’s speech from page 281: “You t’ink I’m crazy, is it c’ase I speak bahd English? . . . What they do to you, black mahm?” This would also be a good time to talk about Ebonics with the students and how it is a very structured dialect. Talking about its rules could help the students better understand the passages.

Besides that, there are a few words and phrases that may need to be clarified for the students, such as “vox humana” (178) or “myopically” (182). See the Vocabulary Strategy section for ideas on how to teach vocabulary from this book.

BACKGROUND KNOWLEDGE

The latter part of the book takes place in Harlem, New York. It would be helpful for students to be familiar with this area and the history behind it. Perhaps the class could spend a day learning about the Harlem Renaissance and the various movements that were taking place in one of the worst living conditions in America. The Brotherhood that the narrator joins is one example of these movements. It also might be advantageous for the students to learn about communist movements and their fight for equality, as well as the Women’s Rights movement, both of which play a role during the narrator’s time in Harlem.

IMPLICATIONS FOR STUDENTS OF DIVERSITY

Racial equality is the major issue in the novel. Therefore, students of diversity should be able to easily relate to the narrator’s feelings of being set apart from the rest of society. Sometimes students of diversity have a hard time proving to their white peers that they are truly American, just as the narrator finds it difficult to gain equal standing with the people around him. The issues that the narrator deals with will speak particularly to students of diversity.

GENDER ISSUES

Lemley, BYU, 2009
Most women in *Invisible Man* are depicted as little more than a tool, or else mindless bodies focused only on physical satisfaction. The first women we are introduced to are a nude dancer in the first chapter, a mother and daughter impregnated by the same man in the second chapter, and several prostitutes in the third chapter. Later on in the story, the narrator is seduced by a woman who just wants to live out her fantasies and just a few chapters later he tries to seduce another woman to gain information he wants. Ironically these last two incidents occur shortly after he speaks in favor of women’s rights.

The only woman in the story who seems human is Mary, who hospitably takes the narrator into her home and cares for him after he finds himself abandoned and homeless. However, even the narrator says that he does not “think of Mary as a friend” (196). He says she is more like a force. Women are heavily neglected in this novel and when they do appear, they do not seem to be three-dimensional characters.

After reading the depiction of women in this novel, teachers should hold a class discussion on gender roles. Girls in the class could possibly discuss their feelings on the portrayal of women in the novel and how they wish to be viewed by men. This could quickly become a very sensitive topic, so teachers should use caution. It would also be worthwhile for the teacher to give a brief history on the contributions of women. The class could then name women they can think of who have changed the world, such as Florence Nightingale, Amelia Earhart, etc.

**RESEARCH ISSUES/PROJECT IDEAS**

- Research what life was like in Harlem in the early 1900s and then research what it is like today. Students can write a short compare/contrast essay. This project will help them become more familiar with the setting of the story and also help them realize that some of these problems continue even today.

- Ras tries to explain to the narrator and Clifton that The Brotherhood is making them traitors to their own race, using them to advance their own purposes. In Rudolph Fisher’s “City of Refuge,” King Solomon Gillis faces a similar situation. Have the students divide into groups and have each group research a piece of literature from the Harlem Renaissance (such as poetry by Langston Hughes). Have each group do a presentation for the class.

- Throughout the novel the narrator is trying to express his individuality. Have the students observe people in public places, such as the mall, and how these people try to express their individuality. The next day they will divide into small groups and discuss their observations.

- Dr. Bledsoe sends what the narrator thinks are letters of recommendation to several businesses, and the narrator is shocked when he discovers that the letters were actually instructions not to hire him. Have the students write letters of recommendation for themselves, including what they would like a letter to say about them. If appropriate, hold mock interviews and let the students present their letters to each other.

*Lemley, BYU, 2009*
Invisible Man is a reflection on how the narrator has been invisible to everybody around him. Have the students write about themselves. In what ways have they felt invisible? In what ways have they felt forced to conform to somebody else’s idea of what they should do or be. WARNING: Some students are likely to complain about school or even about you as a teacher. Use this activity at your own risk.

ENRICHMENT IDEAS

- A great resource for the Harlem Renaissance is found at [http://www.loc.gov/rr/program/bib/harlem/harlem.html](http://www.loc.gov/rr/program/bib/harlem/harlem.html).
- Pictures of the Harlem area. A good variety can be found by doing a Google Image Search under “Harlem New York.” CAUTION: The teacher should do this, NOT the students, since some inappropriate pictures may come up in the search results (I came across two).
- Louis Armstrong’s music.
- Books about Jim Crow Laws depicting the life that the narrator and his ancestors would have led.