**Unit on Ellison’s Invisible Man**

This unit places Ellison’s class work against the backdrop of a variety of literature—interviews with slaves, poetry, historic documents, and thoughts by contemporaries. The novel is, at its core, about the search for identity. It is both universal and particular. Included you will find a list of possible sources, Study Questions for each chapter and a list of essay topics. There is the option for group work to explore additional works of literature, It is just a beginning, because as our nameless narrator notes, history ‘boomerangs’ us back to the beginning.

**MATERIALS\* (most are easily found on line or in anthologies)**

FICTION:

Ellison, Ralph *Invisible Man*

Hughes, Langston, *Norton Anthology of Poetry*, pp.1067-1070

Other Poems/Short Fiction\*

Dunbar, Paul Selected Poems\*

Angelou, Maya Selected Poems\*

Brooks, Gwendolyn, Selected Poems, *Norton Anthology of Poetry*, pp. 1182-1185

NON-FICTION:

Documents

Slave Interviews from *We Are Your Sisters*, Dorothy Sterling, ed.\*

Douglass, Frederick *My Bondage and My Freedom*, excerpts, *MacMillan*, pp. 225-229

Washington, Booker T. *Atlanta Exposition Address*\*

Du Bois, W. E. B. *Niagra Movement Address*\*

King, Martin Luther, *Letter from Birmingham Jail*\*

*Position Paper of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee*\*

Other

Gates, Henry Louis "Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Black Man" in *The New Yorker*, October 25, 1995\*

As Langson Hughes observed:

You are white-

yet a part of me, as I am a part of you

That's American

Sometimes perhaps you don;t want to be a part of me

Nor do I often want to be a part ofyou.

But we are that's true!

As I learned from you,

I guess you learn from me

(from *Theme for English B*)

Our study will begin with slavery, through Reconstruction, the black migration north, the Harlem Renaissance, the Civil Rights movment and current era of Clarence Thomas, Rodney King, and OJ Simpson. The goal is to try to ascertain how as a nation we have arrived to the point where Gates observes "we remain captive to a binary discourse of accusation and counter-accusation, of grievance and counter-grievance, of victims and victimizers." Fundamental to our study is an exploration of myths which abound about this experience --their creation, salience, and appeal. As students of literature, we will continue to look at material from the perspectives of both the author and the reader, to explore the fallacy of cultural literacy that Gates reminds us "presumes that shared narratives equal shared meanings."

Central to the unit will be a close reading of *Invisible Man*. The rest of the material will serve as a means to expand our understanding. Oppression and defiance are part of both novels and part of the more general story as well. These books raise one of the central themes of American literature --the search for identity. Balance and interaction between those forces which define a person's life are crucial. How individual and collective identity surface is the general question we will explore throughout the year with fictional and non-fictional sources. The poetry of Maya Angelou is as powerful as the protests of Reverand King. Much of what you will read is harsh, some if it to the point of being brutal, yet much is beautiful and uplifting. Allow yourself to be moved by this story, for as Ellison hoped, "the struggle for identity of his invisible man becomes every person's struggle to find himself, to give himself a name and a form that are uniquely his."

**GROUP WORK**

Each discussion group will select a book from those below (or suggest another). Each member of the group will read the book. The group will produce an assignment that includes study questions for discussion and possible writing topics.

Malcolm X, *The Autobiography of Malcolm X*

Toni Morrison, *Beloved or Tar Baby or Jazz*

Richard Wright, *Native Son*

William Styron, *The Confessions of Nat Turner*

James Baldwin, *Go Tell It On the Mountain*

Study Questions: Invisible Man

General

1. What is existentialism?

2. How is the development of identity an ongoing process? What role does the perception of others play in this process?

3. What importance do names of characters play in the novel.

To Be Continued

Prologue

1. What makes narrator invisible?

2. What is problem the with the way most people view the world around them?

3. What causes people to'bump' into one another?

4. What is the point of recounting the episode where he bumps into the man? Why does he claim that it wasn't his fault?

5. What is ironic about his battle with Monopolate Light and Power?

6. Describe his home.

7. What is his metaphor for the path of history? Do you believe he is accurate?

8. Why does he recount the story of the fight --how did the yokel win?

9. Describe what he hears in the music. How does it exist on several levels?

10. What does the phrase, "blackness of my invisibility" mean?

11. What does he mean by "But to whom should I be responsible and why should I be, when you refuse to see me?"

Chapter 1

1. What was wrong with his early attempts at self discovery?

2. Of what is he ashamed?

3. What were his grandfather's dying words and advice? Why did they confuse him? How did they resonate for him?

4. Describe his experience at the battle royal. How did he see himself as superior to the others? What shocked him about the spectators?

5. How did he empathize with the dancer?

6. What is ironic about the 'limitations' imposed during the boxing match? How does he cheat? What is his biggest concern during the fight?

7. Why does he try to throw the fight?

8. How is getting the money both a trick and a metaphor?

9. From whom does he quote in the speech?

10. What is the reaction of the audience to his speech? What is his prize?

11. What dream did he have that night? What is its significance?

Chapter 2

1. Describe the college.

2. What happens on Founders Day, generally? What special task does the narrator have? Describe his passenger and their initial interaction.

3. What picture does he describe on p. 39?

4. At what point does he think of his grandfather?

5. Why does Norton bring up Emerson? Why has he gotten involved with the school?

6. Who is Jim Trueblood? What has he aroused so much contempt from the black community

7. How do those who live in the shacks feel about those at the college?

8. What is Norton's reaction to Trueblood? How does he misinterpret Norton?

9. How had the school tried to bribe Trueblood and why did the whites support him?

10. What is Trueblood's explanation for what happened?

11. Describe the dream which begins on p. 57.

12. Why is he surprised at the reaction of white folks?

13. What is Norton's immediate reaction? Why is narrator angry at Norton's generosity?

Chapter 3

1. What is ironic about name of the bar?

2. What is unusual about the veterans? Why do they make the narrator uncomfortable?

3. Why won't the bartender serve him?

4. What connection does Sylvester claim exists between him and Mr. Norton?

5. What causes the disturbance to order? Of what is Supercargo a symbol?

6. What does the narrator mean on p. 86 when he describes Norton as more than a man?

7. What is special about the vet who tends to Mr. Norton? How does he explain 'fundamentals' (p. 91). Why is he frightening to the narrator?

8. How are things turned upside down in the bar? in the vet's life?

9. Why does the vet consider the narrator a zombie? misguided? [Keep him in mind --this is major foreshadowing]

Chapter 4

1. Why would the 'folks at home' be happy at his expulsion?

2. Why was he even more distressed in the context of the school?

3. Why did he feel as if he were losing his identity?

4. What did he wish that he could explain to Mr. Norton?

5. What had been on the school's property formerly?

6. What are his feelings towards Dr. Bledsoe? Why is Bledsoe surprised at the narrator's stupidity? How does Bledsoe compose himself before he sees Mr. Norton?

7. Why does he resent transmitting the message to his next door neighbor?

8. Why does the narrator have a hard time believing the conversation he had with Bledsoe?

Chapter 5

1. How does the dusk contrast with the narrator's predicament?

2. How does this service differ from those at home?

3. How was this students' Eden?

4. How does Bledsoe combine humility with familiarity with sterness?

5. What is the myth of Bledsoe? the reality? What is his function in and to the white world?

6. How/Why does Rev. Barbee recount the story of the Founder's rise and fall? How does it "renew the dreams in our hearts" (p. 118)? How is Barbee's preaching style a trace of the narrator's origins?

7. How does the story legitimize Bledsoe?

8. How does the story of the Founder compare to the story of Jesus?

9. What is the impact of the story on the narrator?

10. What fact about Barbee is revealed at the end of the speech? What is its significance?

11. What statue does he see after he leaves the chapel?

Chapter 6

1. On what grounds does Bledsoe criticize the narrator? Had he acted 'properly'? Why is Bledose amazed at his foolishness?

2. What does Bledsoe believe he should have done?

3. What myth does the narrator believe that Bledsoe does not?

4. How has he hurt the school?

5. How does the narrator plan to discredit Bledsoe? Upon what assumption is it based? How does Bledsoe prove it to be untrue?

6. How does Bledsoe define power (p. 142) and how is it linked to Gates' understanding of power?

7. What is Bledsoe's ultimate goal? How has he embodied the grandfather's advice?

8. What is Bledsoe's truth? Why will it prevail?

9. Why does the narrator accept his punishment? How has Bledsoe agreed to help?

Chapter 7

1. Who else is on the bus? Why is this ironic? What advice does he give the narrator? How is it similar to Bledsoe's?

2. How is being the north different? What is the significance of a black policeman?

Chapter 8

1. What observation does he make about his sense of time?

2. How could he be different in the north?

3. Who is the only one who contacts him?

Chapter 9

1. What traces of the south does he find up north?

2. What is the significance of the breakfast he orders?

3. What is the reaction of Mr. Emerson to his plight? Of what is he a symbol?

4. Why is the narrator wary of him?

5. Why does Emerson believe he 'knows' him already?

6. Why doesn't he want the narrator to see his father?

7. What had been in Bledsoe's letter? How is it a realization about his dream about his grandfather?

8. What is the narrator's immediate reaction?

Chapter 10

1. For whom is he working? How has Liberty Paint made its reputation?

2. How is the narrator being used?

3. What is his job? How is it a metaphor?

4. What choice must he make? What resulted from his mistake?

5. Who is his next master? Why does he feel superior to Brockway and why does Brockway distrust him?

6. How is Brockway like Bledsoe? What relationship does he have to the owner of the company? How is his a position of power?

7. How is the paint slogan a metaphor?

8. What does he encounter at lunch time? What's a fink?

9. Why is Brockway so anti-union? How does the narrator react to his verbal assault?

10. What happens to the narrator? How had it been engineered by Brockway?

Chapter 11

1. Where is the narrator?

2. How does he process this experience? How does Ellison write this to convey the narrator's perspective?

3. What unconnected thoughts go through his mind?

4. Of what debate is he the subject? How are there racial overtones?

5. Of what is his medical treatment a symbol?

6. What question is he asked that he cannot answer?

7. How does the company hope to compensate for his injury?

8. Why is he no longer afraid of Norton and the others?

9. How does this chapter serve as a transition on his path to self discovery?

Chapter 12

1. Where does he go?

2. What are Mary's hopes for him? Why does she think he'll achieve his goals?

3. How did his entire life up to that point 'congregate' in the lobby? Why did he now feel contempt for it?

4. Why is he barred from the men's hotel? What is the significance of this?

5. During this phase, why is he content to have contact only with Mary?

6. How is this chapter a continuation of his transition and a period of conflict?

Chapter 13

1. What is the symbolic importance of the yams?

2. Wha timaginary dialogue does he have with Bledsoe?

3. What scene does he witness? How is it similar to the mob scene in Huck? How does he become a participant in it?

4. What emotion to those witnessing the eviction share?

5. What 'artifacts' are on the sidewalk? What phases of life (both individual and collective) do they represent?

6. Why does the woman want to return to her apartment?

7. How does the narrator give double meaning to being dispossessed? What is the crowd's reaction?

8. Who witnesses this scene? What offer does he make to the narrator?

9. Why does he tell the narrator not to waste emotions on the old people? What is his view of history? Why doesn't he understand the narrator's connection to the old people who were evicted?

10. How is this the central chapter of the book? How is his transition completed?

Chapter 14

1. As the narrator enters the party, why does he have a sense of having been there before?

2. What is the goal of the brotherhood? the approach?

3. According to Brother Jack, why do people look to the past? What power do the dead have?

4. How is the narrator trading in one set of myths for another?

5. What are the conditions of his new job? Why doesn't he question them?

6. What is the signficance of the piece of paper Brother Jack gives him?

7. What remains his goal?

8. What stereotypes of black people persist, even among this 'forward' looking group?

9. What reflects about Mary does the narrator make? Of what is she a symbol?

Chapter 15

1. What disturbs his sleep?

2. Describe the bank? Of what is it a symbol? What does he do with it? Why can't he get rid of it?

3. Why won't Mary take his money?

Chapter 16

1. What was the last public speech he gave? How is it similar to/different from this one?

2. How has he transferred his loyalty to the brotherhood? What does he question about the organization?

3. Why do these images of childhood go through his mind?

4. What is physical hindrance during the speech? How is Ellison using his blindness?

5. How is he encouraged during the speech? Why is he criticized afterwards?

6. How are there two approaches within the Brotherhood?

7. How is truth about power again revealed?

8. The reference to Stephen on p. 354 --what is his problem?

9. Why is he thankful to Bledsoe and Norton?

Chapter 17

1. How has he spent the last 4 months?

2. What is Jack's goal? How is he similar to Bledsoe?

3. What is contradiction of his new assignment? 4. How is Clifton described?

5. Who is Ras? Why does he make reference to Garvey? What question does Ras ask the narrator? For what does he caution him? What truths does Ras impart?

6. How does this encounter invoke images of the battle royal?

7. What question does Ras ask that Bledsoe also asked? Who else had used the term " a black educated fool." (p. 375)

9. Whose picture hangs in the office?

10. What reflection does he make after calling the Men's House?

11. What path does he travel in the brotherhood? How is it similar to his previous path?

Chapter 18

1. What advice does he get? Who might have sent the note?

2. What is slogan/poster of brotherhood?

3. What is significant about Tarp's story? How is his chain similar to/different from Bledsoe's?

4. What is the nature of the disagreement between narrator and Wrestrum?

5. Of what is narrator accused? Why is it a crime?

6. Why does he resent the accusation? How does this encounter destroy his illusions about the brotherhood?

7. How does he turn his rejection into something positive? How is he still the same person from the beginning of the novel?

Chapter 19

1. What happens after the lecture? Of what does she say she is afraid? How does it convey an underlying racism?

2. How is the scene which begins on p. 414 similar to Trueblood's dream?

3. How have Ras's accusations come true?

4. What is he afraid will be the repercussions of this action?

5. Why does he get a new assignment?

Chapter 20

1. What has happened in his absence? What shift had the brotherhood made?

2. What does he see being sold downtown? What is the adman's pitch?

3. What is significance of name, behavior of doll? 4. Why doesn't he leave?

5. What question does he raise about Clifton and does he hope that reimmersion in the brotherhood will make a difference?

6. How is the march of Clifton and the cop a familiar one?

7. What questions does he ask about Clifton? How do they reflect his lack of transformation from the beginning?

8. How does he define history? How is this definition limited to a narrative? How does he raise questions of counter-narrative?

9. How is person's history a people's history?

10. How does he question Jack's sense of history?

11. When he emerges from the subway, how does he see Harlem for the first time? How is he now awaken from a dream?

Chapter 21

1. What does he realize about the doll?

2. What question does he ask of himself?

3. What plunge did Clifton take?

4. What is response to Clifton's death? How is it used and abused by others?

5. What moves the crowd? What is Biblical reference? What is only thing the narrator remembers?

6. What mistake does he say Clifton made?

7. What is his final perception of the crowd?

Chapter 22

1. What is the brotherhood's response to the funeral?

2. How is he again a "black educated fool"?

3. How is this scene with scene with Jack similar to one with Bledsoe in chapter 6? How has he changed?

4. How is racism/hypocrisy of brotherhood exposed?

5. How does narrator question their view of history?

6. How does Jack purport to be the author of the narrator?

7. What does the reader learn about Jack physically?

8. How does the narrator feel when leaving this meeting? At what other time did he feel this way?

Chapter 23

1. How has the murder of Clifton stimulated grassroots protests? What is Ras's protest?

2. For whom is he mistaken? What is the significance of his name?

3. How does the world look different to him? at him?

4. How had he missed noticing Rinehart before?

5. What is the message on the handbill? Of what does it remind him?

6. What does he realize by going through the world as Rinhart?

7. What is the significance of columbus?

8. What is Hambro's plan/rationalization? What does the narrator hold during their argument?

9. What is Hambro's reality/his idea of progress/sacrifice?

10. How is the narrator both a sacrificer and a victim?

11. What does narrator mean by "I was and yet I was unseen."

12. What conclusion does he reach?

13. How does he begin to understand/define his invisibility?

14. What truth does he finally realize? What becomes his battle plan?

Chapter 24

1. How does he implement his plan?

2. What is his appeal to this woman?

Chapter 25

1. What does he still have with him? What is in it?

2. What was the catalyst for the riot? Who was leading it?

3. Which stores escaped looting? 4. What role does he play?

5. How is this similar to/different from the eviction scene in Chapter 13?

6. Why does he go back to the burning building?

7. What had been the brotherhood's real goal all along? How is it akin to the battle royal?

8. How is this connected to the story of the boxer and the yokel in the prologue?

9. How/why had Ras's name changed? Of what does he try to convince Ras?

10. How is he still running? (p. 559)

11. What would his death symbolize? What form would his murder need to take?

12. What saves him? Where does he want to go?

13. What does he now realize was wrong with his grandfather's advice?

14. Where does he end up? How has he always been there?

15. What does he realize by going through the briefcase?

16. What sort of freedom does he achieve?

17. Why does he decided to stay underground?

Epilogue

1. What is the price of acceptance?

2. How has his own personal history boomeranged?

3. How had the others been running too? How were they linked?

4. What is the merit of diversity? What is colorlessness a false goal?

5. What is the purpose of telling the story of seeing Mr. Norton on the subway?

6. What is the link between where one is and who one is?

7. Does the narrator "speak for you"?

Invisible Man: Essay Topics

1. Ellison includes several dreams in the novel. Select three and explain how they convey some of the themes of the novel.

2. One of the important aspects of this book is the power of language. Analyze some of the major "speeches" of the novel [the audience can be just one person]. How do they affect the speaker as much as the listener? What do they reveal about power of language and the formation of an individual's identity?

3. How does the "advice" Invisible Man receives from his grandfather at the end of Chapter One "keep this nigger running" haunt him throughout the novel?

4. How does that fact that all of society's institutions --education, politics, religion, etc -- are false affect Invisible Man's search for identity.

5. Gates says "we remain captive to a binary discourse of accusation and counter-accusation, of grievance and counter grievance, of victims and victimizers." Explain this quote and relate it to novel.