

Notecards for invisible man

[Literature](#), [Novel](#)



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power drain... This invisibility clearly symbolizes the racism indigenous to America in the first half of the century. " " While the novel has to do with questions of race and prejudice, most critics agree that these ideas are subsumed under the broader questions of who we are, and the responsibility between identity and personal responsibility. " " In Invisible Man, an unwanted protagonist sets out on a journey of self-discovery that takes from the rural south to Harlem. " " Learning who he is means realizing that he is invisible to the white world, but by the end of his journey the hero has the moral fiber to live with such contradictions. " " Mr. Bledsoe, the college president, tells the hero, " You're nobody, son. You don't exist---can't you see that? " " Although he may be uncertain of his identity, the invisible man has never quite lost the sense that he is an individual. " " One of the superficial arguments he uses for leaving Mary Rambo without saying goodbye to her is that people like her " usually think in terms of ' we' while I have always tended to think in terms of ' me'---and that has caused some friction, even with my own family. " " At the funeral for Brother Tod Clifton, whose murder is one of several epiphanies, or moments of illumination, in the novel, the invisible man looks out over the people present and sees ' not a crowd but the set faces of individual men and women. "' " When he cannot get Dr. Bledsoe to see that what has happened to Dr. Norton is not his fault, the hero believes that by taking ' responsibility' for the mishap he will be able to get on with his career. But what he means by taking responsibility is smoothing things over, and he cannot take the result. " " When Brother Jack asks him by what authority he organized the rally for the people following Brother Tod Clifton's funeral, the invisible man tells him it was on his '

personal responsibility' and offers a coolly reasoned defense. " " At the end of the novel, when he is about to leave his hole, he talks about the 'possibility of action' and explains that even an 'invisible man has a socially responsible role to play,' echoing with mild irony the phrase he once used without thinking. " " Whether inflicted by others, as in the 'battle royal,' where the young men are forcibly blindfolded, or as evidence of confusion, as when the invisible man describes stumbling 'in a game of blindman's buff,' the idea of blindness is used to multiple effects. " " The Reverend Homer A. Barbee is literally blind, Brother Jack has a glass eye, white people cannot see the invisible man, and the hero cannot see himself. " " A variation on the theme is the idea of looking but not seeing, of not trying to see, which comes back to the theme of responsibility. " " Various characters impress on the invisible man the importance of not accepting things the way they are. " " For God's sake, " the vet from *The Golden Day* tells him, " learn to look beneath the surface. Come out of the fog, young man. " " In the adventure that the invisible man proceeds to relate in the first person ('I'), his voice changes over time from that of a naïve young man, to someone who is clearly more responsible though still confused, to a person willing to deal with the world whatever the risks. " " The many stylistic elements used in *Invisible Man* are part of what make it such a literary tour de force. " " *Invisible Man* can be classed as a bildungsroman. " " Ellison drew on his knowledge of African American folklore he acquired in his days with the Federal Writers Project, and the influence of that tradition, particularly jazz and the blues, is inextricably woven into the thought and speech of the characters. " Example- " But she knew, she knew! She knew..... " " *Invisible*

Man begins with a prologue by the novel's first-person narrator, but in this case the introduction comes without a name: 'I am an invisible man.'" " The narrator's name remains hidden to the reader throughout the novel, but the importance of names and the act of naming becomes clear as his story unfolds. " " The narrator is 'named' by nearly every person he encounters in the novel: He is, for example, a 'boy' and a 'nigger' to the 'leading white citizens' of his town; just the same (to his surprise) to Dr. Bledsoe; a 'cog' in the machine of Mr. Norton's 'fate'; little more than a laboratory animal to the doctors in the factory hospital; a race-traitor to Ras the Exhorter; and a 'natural resource' to the Brotherhood. " " Each person or group that the narrator encounters tries to identify him, to impose an identity upon him, while ignoring or denying his own emotional and psychological sense of self. " " As he reflects on his experiences from his "hole in the ground," he understands that the misnaming is the real source of his identity crisis. " " In Invisible Man history and identity are inextricably bound: we are the sum of our history and our experience. " " This message is brought home in the novel both overtly-'What is your past and where are you going?' Ras the Exhorter asks an uncomfortable Brother Tod Clifton. "...and indirectly, as in Mary Rambo's advice to the invisible man that it is the young who will make changes but 'something's else, it's the ones from the South that's got to do it, them what knows the fire and ain't forgot how it burns. Up here too many forgits'" " Closely related to the theme of history is the motif of folklore as a link to the past, particularly folktales, jazz, and the blues. The simple folk who appear in the book all seem rooted in a way the invisible man and others are not, and have a sureness about them that is reflected in their

names. " " Achieving that ' realization' (" That I am nobody but myself. ") requires the narrator to come to terms with his personal history and with his place in the larger history of America. " " The first words of the narrator's story in the first chapter of the book-' It goes a long way back...'-establish immediately the importance of history and memory to his quest, and his narrative itself constitutes both memory and history ' in black and white.'" " Much of the tension of the story, however, results from the narrator's conflicted understanding of history and his desire to stifle his memories, to disconnect himself from the past. " " As he recollects his experiences at the college, for example, the narrator struggles to determine ' what was real, what solid, what more than a pleasant, time-killing dream?'" " The narrator's difficulty in leaving his past behind resonates throughout his story, from the recurring voice and image of his grandfather to the physical reminders of his past that he carries with him throughout the novel. " "...Primus Provo's ' FREE PAPERS' and Brother Tarp's chain link-act as vivid emblems of the painful realities of America's past. " " The narrator wants to believe that the legacy of slavery and southern chain-gangs belong to the distant past: When he reads the ' fragile paper' that once released a man from slavery, he tells himself, ' It has been longer than that, further removed in time...'" " But as he begins to perceive in the factory hospital, the narrator's quest for his own ' freedom' and identity can only be fulfilled when he recovers that history, when he understands its continuing relevance as part of his own past. "

Example- " I began to accept my past and, as I accepted it, I felt memories welling up withing me.... " " When the narrator ends his story, then, by wondering if ' even an invisible man has a socially responsible role to play,' it

is clear that the answer to his question rests on the entirety of his narrative and has no simple solution. " " ' Social Responsibility,' first of all, is precisely what the racist ' leading white citizens' of his southern town desired from him, the responsibility of keeping himself in a submissive and segregated ' place.'" " In contrast, the responsible role the narrator seeks for the future will go hand in hand with a belief—even if it is his alone—in the ' social equality' that he inadvertently pronounced to the horror of the white men. " The narrator desires a role that neither engulfs his identity, his humanity, and his memory, not requires, in his words, ' Rinehartism-cynicism.'" " For his ' mind,' his self, to be satisfied, he can neither ' take advantage of the people' nor take no responsibility at all: He ' must come out' to play a meaningful part in society, whether or not he remains invisible to the people he encounters there. " " In the end, the narrator finds the key to his identity in a healthy contradiction, both ' denouncing' and ' defending' his society, saying ' yes' and saying ' no,' affirming a world whose ' definition is possibility' at the same time he refuses to be blind to negations of that promise. " " Dr. Bledsoe's wrath falls on the narrator with unanticipated fervor (chapter four). " Bledsoe tells him that he should have manipulated Mr. Norton: " We take these white folks where we want them to go, show them what we want them to see. " " The college president describes the necessity of lying to whites ('[T]he only way to please a white man is to tell him a lie!') and talks about the black man's social invisibility (refer to C4). He proclaims that he has created a place for himself in the country's all-white society by playing the role of a deferential black yea-sayer. " " The hero wakes up in a white room in the factory hospital. He is strapped to a machine

and given electroshock therapy intended to (as he overhears a doctor explain) to ' produce the results of a prefrontal lobotomy.... as complete a change of personality as you'll ever find in your famous fairy-tale cases of criminals transformed into amiable fellows.'" " When the treatment ends, he finds that he can no longer remember his identity. " " A doctor tells him, ' Well boy, it looks as though you're cured.....'" " The narrator is released, sent to see the director, where he reacts with stabbing to the sound of his own name, which begins to trigger his memory. " " A crowd has gathered near a house where two white men are depositing an old black couple's belongings onto the street. Memories of his childhood return as he stares at the sad household clutter exposed to public scrutiny. " " In chapter fourteen the narrator is introduced to the Brotherhood, a secret quasi-Communist organization whose members meet at swank parties and talk elliptically of their mission to ' work for a better world for all people'" " The narrator is stunned by the posh apartment to which he is taken and moved by Brother Jack's pronouncement of his future as the next Booker T. Washington. The Brotherhood offers him a large salary, provided he sever all ties with his past and adapt a new name and residence. " " That evening Brother Jack and a coterie of party members take him to give a speech at a rally in Harlem (chapter sixteen). After an initial hesitation, he forges a bond with the audience, rousing them to a fever pitch. The brothers are appalled, deeming the speech politically irresponsible. " " Because Brother Jack defends him, the narrator is allowed to keep his job on the condition that he go through three months of indoctrination into his part principles under the guidance of Brother Hambro. He agrees, leaving the meeting convinced that he has

finally found a way ' to have a part in making the big decisions, of seeing through the mystery of how the country, the world, really operated.'" " " Nonetheless the narrator proves a successful organizer, and within weeks the Brotherhood clinches power in the district. The narrator's fame spreads rapidly; for a short stretch he lives ' dominated by the all-embracing idea of Brotherhood.'" " " Then he receives an anonymous letter warning him of jealousy among the white leaders (chapter eighteen). Soon a white member, Brother Westrum, accuses the narrator of self-promotion. In a scene evoking the arbitrary vindictiveness of the union meeting, the members vote for an investigation and order the narrator temporarily demoted, sending him downtown to lecture on the ' Woman Question.'" " " When the narrator insists that he was giving the people of Harlem the guidance and action they craved, Brother Jack answers, ' We do not shape our policies to the mistaken and infantile notions of the man on the street. Our job is not to ask them what they think, but to tell them!'" " " Brother Jack shocks the narrator by pulling out his own eye-it's artificial!-and dropping it in a glass of water. His real eye had been lost in the name of discipline, he says, admonishing the hero to obey with the same selflessness. " " The brothers leave the protagonist to wander the darkened streets of Harlem, where he runs across Ras leading a rally (chapter twenty-three). The two argue about Clifton's death, and the narrator leaves to escape Ras's henchmen. He decides to disguise himself, but when he buys a pair of dark sunglasses and a wide-brimmed hat, he is immediately mistaken for someone named Rinehart. " " In this mood of increasing tension, passerby continue to mistake the hero for Rinehart. He learns through various encounters that the man is a womanizer,

gambler, mob leader, and pimp. He then stumbles into a church meeting and realizes that Rinehart is also a crooked minister, robbing his elderly congregation of their cash. " " He realizes that the Brotherhood must have planned the race riot, sacrificing Harlem for the sake of propaganda. His cynical acquiescence has not served as resistance to the Brotherhood, but rather as a tool, facilitating the party's plan. " " As he faces imminent death, the narrator realizes the absurdity of the causes he has supported and the hatred soon to bring about his own death, as well as the truth about his invisibility—he is just one small black man about to be extinguished by another. Empowered by the thought that it is ' better to live out one's own absurdity rather than die for that of others,' he throws Ras's spear, catching the chieftain in the jaw and narrowly escapes through a looted store. " " He tries to burn a torch by lighting all of the important documents he has saved—his high school diploma, his Brotherhood papers, the paper doll from Brother Clifton—but he cannot find a way out. Caught in a ' state neither of dreaming nor of waking,' he has a vision of disputing former role models and disavowing his earlier illusions. He awakes to the realization that he cannot return to his former life. " " In our society Man-Himself-is idolized and publicly worshipped, but the single individual must hide himself underground and try to save his desires, his thoughts, his soul, his invisibility. He must return to himself, learning self-acceptance and rejecting all that threatens to deprive him of his manhood. " " The Negro's life in our white land and time is, as Ellison knows it, a relentless unreality, unreal in that the Negro as a group is loved, hated, persecuted, feared, and envied, while as an individual he is unfelt, unheard, unseen—to all intents and purposes invisible. " "

Though at the time he understands his grandfather's ambiguous creed only imperfectly, the hero recognizes that it is somehow his heritage. " " Consequently, the hero suffers a sense of guilt—not for having compromised himself but for failing somehow to effect his grandfather's ends. Ironically, he also feels guilt for deceiving the white ' enemy,' though he has ' agreed them' not to death or destruction, only to renewed complacency. " " The point about all the representatives of social power the narrator encounters—teacher, preacher, doctor, factory-owner, Party member, whatever—is that they all seek to control reality and they believe that they can run it according to their plan. " " To this extent one can say that they have a mechanizing attitude towards reality, and it is no accident that the narrator is constantly getting involved with literal machines (in the factory, the hospital, etc.) as well as with what one might call the mechanizers of consciousness, the servants of church, college or Party. " " On the other hand there is the point that these institutions, these people at the social controls, do seem to give the individual a role, a place in the scheme of things. " " At one stage the narrator is enthusiastic about the Party because it gives the world a meaningful shape and himself an important role in it: ' everything could be controlled by our science. Life was all pattern and discipline.'" " In the novel, identity is connected to the narrator's self-perception, his ambition, and his view of society. " " The mutability of identity is one feature of this theme that is explored throughout the novel. In his youth, the narrator aspires to become an educator at the black college, a position of power that would raise his social status. He is ready to do anything in order to achieve his ambition. When the dream is shattered while the narrator is looking for

work in Harlem, he begins to view his earlier self as naïve. " " At this early stage in his self-awareness, the narrator still desires to be a leader and believes he can outrun those who would destroy his hopes. " " When he is given a new name by the Brotherhood, he begins to see himself as a leader within his Harlem community. As he becomes more deeply involved with the Brotherhood, he discovers that community goals are as important as individual ambition. " " His own ambition for power is subsumed by his commitment to the Brotherhood. This sense of self, rooted in a group identity, is shaken when the Brotherhood decides to investigate claims of opportunism being made against the narrator. " " After witnessing the death of Clifton, the Invisible Man delivers a rousing eulogy for his friend, believing still in the ideals of the Brotherhood and confident about his place within it. When he takes on the disguise of Rinehart and tricks people into believing he is someone he is not, he realizes that perception of reality is imperfect. " " Gradually, amid all these changes in self-perception, the Invisible Man comes to conclude that others have used him as a material object, as a disposable resource, to achieve their own ambition of becoming more powerful. " " By the end of the novel, the narrator wants an identity that can protect him from those who would oppress him. The choice of invisibility is a subversive one because it claims the same space, the space of the unnoticed and unimportant, that others had previously consigned him to in order to accomplish their own gain. " " He can claim this identity as a liberating one because his expectations and ambitions have changed from the desire to become individually powerful to experiencing the absurdity of reality that is observable from his position of invisibility. " " The idea that identity is

changeable is linked at various points in the novel to changes in the narrator's self-perception. Identity, as it is explored in *Invisible Man*, is a relational concept. Who a person is and what a person imagines he is depends on his relationships, experiences, and interactions with others. " " The identity of invisibility that the narrator chooses by the end of the book has both benefits and drawbacks. The biggest advantage associated with the narrator's invisibility is the freedom he feels from not participating in the oppressive hierarchical systems of value determined by economic standing and skin color. " " Yet for the narrator, invisibility is also an isolating condition. By the end of the novel, he states that writing down his experiences has led him to see patterns in the chaos and absurdity that order society 's certainties. This realization leads him to declare that he will live above ground again. He will come out of hibernation and cast off his invisibility. " " From dreams and amnesia to a collective past invoked through symbolic objects and oratory, the relationship between memory and history is an important theme in *Invisible Man*. Often, the narrator's experiences with memory provoke him to a new understanding of himself in the present. " " For example, the *Invisible Man* remembers his dead grandfather through dreams and visions at various points in the novel. The narrator's memory of his grandfather's last words, when he declared his view that one should use subversion and resistance strategies to confront systems of oppression, surfaces at several points in the novel. " The memory of the grandfather comes to represent an important example of how to survive with self-awareness, integrity, and dignity in a segregated culture. " The relationship between memory and identity appears again in scenes in the

factory hospital where the narrator is recovering after a work-related accident he suffered while employed by Liberty Paints. Neither the reader nor the narrator know how long he has been a patient, but it is clear that he has been subjected to electroshock therapy, which has destroyed his sense of self. " " Initially, he cannot remember anything about himself: not who he is, not his name, not his mother. He begins to recover his identity only when a lab technician questions him about Buckeye the rabbit. For the narrator, this name triggers memories of childhood rhymes and stories that link him with a folkloric past and with an African-American oral history. " "

Significantly, it is at this point of memory that the Invisible Man begins to associate his confinement with the inability to articulate who he is, and thus to associate his freedom with the ability to remember, name, and remake his identity. " " There are many images and objects in the novel that arouse the collective memory of slavery in the mind of the narrator. His observation of an elderly couple's free papers and a photograph of Abraham Lincoln during the eviction scene is one instance. " " Another instance is when Brother Tarp presents the Invisible Man with the broken shackle that had bound his ankle when he worked on a chain gang. To the narrator, the severed shackle represents a link between Brother Tarp and his ancestors, many of whom lived in slavery. " " Communal memory, past and present, is also invoked through language, speeches, and song. The scene of Brother Clifton's funeral procession is an example of communal memory. " " In Invisible Man, communal and individual memory overlap, converge, and separate in complex ways. Ellison's representation of how history and the past inform present identities and collective memory is a central feature of the narrator's

ability to become self-aware. " " Ellison dramatizes racial stereotyping when the narrator first meets the members of the Brotherhood. One of the Brothers antagonistically asks him to sing, arguing that all black people sing. The Brother himself attempts a song. Before the Invisible Man can respond to this, other Brothers respond that the narrator will not sing. Tensions escalate, and the man who made the original request for a song is escorted out of the party. " " On the street one day, the narrator comes across Tod Clifton, a friend who has left the Brotherhood and is now selling sambos, dolls modeled on an offensive stereotype, to a sizable crowd on the sidewalk. The narrator is both angry and confused about why Clifton would choose to make money by selling caricatures of blackness. The sambos were representations of servile and " happy " slaves, and they were sometimes invoked to rationalize slavery. " " The Invisible Man's changing identity takes place alongside societal ideas about race, although it is not only these notions that shape his identity. The way he is treated by other characters and the employment options that are available to him in the novel are conditioned by social conceptions of race. " " He is treated as a disposable commodity by Dr. Bledsoe, Liberty Paints, and even members of the Brotherhood, both because he is black and because of individuals' greed for power and the factory 's greed for wealth. However, the narrator also chooses to see blackness as an agent of possibility. He is able to maintain his invisibility, a position that he perceives to offer him infinite possibilities, at least partially because he is black. " " I am invisible, understand, simply because people refuse to see me. " " I am not complaining, nor am I protesting either. It is sometimes advantageous to be unseen, although it is

most often rather wearing on the nerves. " " Without light I am not only invisible, but formless as well; and to be unaware of one's form is to live a death. I myself, after existing some twenty years, did not become alive until I discovered my invisibility. " " You weren't being smart, were you, boy?" he said, not unkindly. " No, sir!" " You sure that bit about 'equality' was a mistake?" " 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 their inner eyes, those eyes with which they look through their physical eyes upon reality. " " Beneath this fate, the hero is allowed some degree of