

Understanding History Through the Literary Reviews of *Invisible Man*

By Virginia Brackett, Ph.D

Overview

Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man* created quite a stir following its 1952 publication. It received reviews by prestigious literary figures and publications. In this post-reading lesson designed for advanced high school or college students, students learn about the social and political climate in which Ellison published his masterpiece through reading critical reviews of his work. Each selection below offers choices for student response.

Curriculum Standards

- Reading comprehension at grade level appropriate material
- Analysis of an author's implicit and explicit philosophical assumptions and beliefs about a subject.
- Critical interpretation of the validity and truthfulness of arguments set forth in a text

Time Required

One class period to introduce the activity. One period of discussion following the writing portion.

Materials Needed

- Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man*
- Internet connection

The Lesson

1. After finishing the novel, *Invisible Man*, and reading the biography on **Ellison's life**, students will pick from one of the three reviews offered from the links below. After reading the reviews, they will complete the writing exercise(s) that follows each review.

A. Read Irving Howe's review at:

<http://www.english.upenn.edu/~afilreis/50s/howe-on-ellison.html>

Irving Howe published his review in *The Nation* on May 10, 1952. In one paragraph that discusses what he sees as negative aspects of the novel, Howe concludes by writing, "the unfortunate fact remains that to define one's individuality is to stumble over social fences that do not allow ... "infinite possibilities."

In an essay, identify the "social fences" that African Americans faced during the Jim Crow era. Then discuss whether you agree that the *Invisible Man* could realistically state, "my world has become one of infinite possibilities." If you agree, what are some of those possibilities the novel's hero envisions?

In an essay, defend or refute Howe's statement that Ellison reduces many of his characters to "caricature," even to "clowns." Identify examples in addition to those of the Stalinists that Howe identifies. You might want to argue that Ellison does draw caricatures, but that he does so on

purpose, to co-opt the trend of caricatures of blacks that were so popular to the day. Go to the jimcrowhistory.org **image gallery** for a look at those caricatures.

B. Read Saul Bellow's review at:

<http://www.English.upenn.edu/~afilreis/50s/bellow-on-ellison.html>

Saul Bellow's review of *Invisible Man*, "Man Underground," appeared in *Commentary* in June, 1952. Bellow makes the comment, "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, in invisibility. He must return to himself, learning self-acceptance and rejecting all that threatens to deprive him of his manhood."

In an essay, discuss whether it would have been possible for a black man living during the Jim Crow era to learn such self-acceptance and manage to reject "all that threatens to deprive him of his manhood."

Creative Exercise: Mr. Bellow asks the reader to "suppose that the novel is, as they say, played out." Write an additional chapter to *Invisible Man*, in which you imagine what the Invisible Man would do next in his invisible state. How might he use his newly discovered power to fight Jim Crow laws and beliefs? What of those "infinite possibilities" would he realize, and how?

C. Read Wright Morris's review at:

<http://www.nytimes.com/library/books/072098ellison-invisible.html>

Wright Morris's review of *Invisible Man*, "A Tale From Underground," appeared on April 13, 1952. He associates the novel with Dante's *Divine Comedy*, when the narrator descends into hell. Morris writes that a traveler in hell might view what he observes as allegory, or symbolism, where the figures represent "force, figures of good and evil, in a large symbolical frame, which makes for order, but diminishes our interest in their predicament as people." He notes this could be the high price the underground being pays: "We are deprived of uniqueness."

In an essay, discuss figures from the novel that you see as symbolic or allegorical figures. Think of laws and customs inherent to the Jim Crow era to help you identify relationships between characters and ideals of the time. Consult the "Jim Crow Etiquette Guide" and the "Jim Crow Laws" listed at **<http://www.ferris.edu/news/jimcrow/menu.htm>**.

2. After the students have finished the writing portion of the assignment, hold a class discussion on the differences in perception between how people receive Ellison's novel today and how they received it in 1952.

Suggested Resources

American Collection: American Literature Resources

http://www.ncteamericancollection.org/awg_ellison_ralph.htm

Jimcrowhistory.org Ellison gateway

Jimcrowhistory.org Ellison bio

This lesson was submitted by Virginia Brackett, Ph.D., a professor at Triton College.