Invisible Man

Study Guide by Course Hero

What's Inside

Book Basics 1

In Context 1

Author Biography 2

Characters 3

Plot Summary 7

Chapter Summaries 12

Quotes 34

Symbols 36

Themes 36

Suggested Reading 37

Book Basics

AUTHOR

Ralph Ellison

YEAR PUBLISHED

1952

GENRE

Fiction

PERSPECTIVE AND NARRATOR

Invisible Man is told in first person from the perspective of an unnamed narrator.

TENSE

Invisible Man is narrated in past tense, as if it were a memoir, although the author claimed it was not an autobiography.

ABOUT THE TITLE

The title references the narrator's central struggle: feeling invisible in a society dominated by white culture.

In Context

Segregation

Invisible Man was published in 1952, during the height of racial segregation in the United States. To keep African Americans apart from whites following Reconstruction (the period after the Civil War during which the federal government established criteria for the reentry of Southern states into the Union), state and local governments in the South passed laws mandating "separate but equal" treatment for African Americans. These discriminatory "Jim Crow" laws were in place from the 1870s to the mid-1960s and enforced separation of blacks and whites in schools, public transportation, restaurants, facilities such as hospitals and prisons, and even restrooms, swimming pools, and drinking fountains. Rather than ensuring "equal treatment," the laws resulted in inferior conditions for African Americans. The laws reflected the views of many Americans—particularly Southerners—that black people were intellectually and morally inferior. Although *Invisible Man* is not officially a protest novel—in fact, Ellison maintained that the novel was intended as a comment on humanity—the narrator's struggles in *Invisible Man* result from segregation.

Booker T. Washington, W.E.B. DuBois, and Marcus Garvey

Many black intellectuals fought against Jim Crow and argued for racial integration. However, Booker T. Washington, founder of Tuskegee University in Alabama and a respected educator and civil rights leader, believed black people should accept their position as "second-class citizens" and work to prove themselves worthy of full integration. He preached that hard work and economic equality would win the respect of whites and eventually lead to cultural advancement. Washington became quite famous and powerful, acting as a race relations expert for U.S. Presidents Theodore Roosevelt and William Howard Taft by promoting black subservience. He never backed down from his beliefs, even when fellow black academics such as W.E.B. DuBois criticized him for protecting segregation over the social equality of his own people.

DuBois founded the Niagara Movement, which advocated for full civil rights and political representation. The movement encouraged black citizens to get in touch with their African roots, while violently calling for social equality. Both Washington and DuBois took extreme positions, and many black people found themselves unable to affiliate with either leader's belief system, leaving them feeling alienated within both black and white cultures.

Marcus Garvey was a leader of the black nationalist movement and believed African Americans should return to Africa to found a new nation. He created a shipping company to establish trade between Africans in the Americas and Africa. Critics say he was the inspiration for the character of Ras the Exhorter, although Ellison said he did not model the character on Garvey.

Harlem Race Riots of 1935 and 1943

Ellison called on the race riots of 1935 and 1943 in Harlem to portray the riot in *Invisible Man.* The riot of 1935 was caused by the public's misunderstanding of the treatment of a teenage boy who had committed petty theft. Angry, underemployed citizens believed the boy had been harmed and protested by rioting. In 1943 the cause of the riot was the shooting of a black soldier who had punched a police officer while trying to stop his mother from being arrested. Some progress had been made in meeting the needs of Harlem residents by 1943, but racial discrimination was prevalent, and solving the problem was not a priority of President Roosevelt. In both riots the violence erupted spontaneously, and the targets were Harlem businesses owned by whites who refused to hire blacks.

Bildungsroman

Although not a traditional coming-of-age novel, *Invisible Man* is categorized as a *bildungsroman*, a novel focusing on the narrator's formative years or spiritual awakening and growth. The narrator struggles to understand his singular existence within the vastness of larger society, making this an existential novel. The book challenges readers with its jazz music style, swaying between harsh realism, dreamlike fantasy, and political satire. Upon its publication in 1952, the novel garnered high praise; it won the National Book Award in 1953. *Invisible Man* was the only novel Ellison published in his lifetime, perhaps because the novel was held in such high esteem that any other works would have invited fierce criticism.

Author Biography

The grandson of freed slaves, Ralph Ellison was born in Oklahoma City on March 1, 1914. Although he grew up poor, Ellison earned a scholarship to Tuskegee Normal and Industrial Institute (now Tuskegee University)—the country's foremost black college. He studied music and hoped to become a composer, and his love of improvised jazz music clearly influenced his writing style in *Invisible Man*.

Although deeply involved in the civil rights movement, Ellison not only rebuked Tuskegee president president Booker T. Washington's belief that African Americans should remain subservient to whites but also rejected the violent separatist beliefs of Marcus Garvey, leader of black nationalist and Pan-African movements. Despite the popularity of both movements, Ellison did not believe it was possible for blacks to live "separate but equal" from whites. Ellison recognized that the two cultures were tangled together, impossible to separate. As an artist, he believed it was his responsibility to show, in his words, "the unity of [the] American experience beyond all considerations of class, of race, of religion."

Copyright © 2017 Course Hero, Inc.

After moving to Harlem, New York, Ellison worked alongside such black writers and social activists as Langston Hughes, James Baldwin, and Richard Wright to encourage African Americans to embrace their cultural heritage. The novelist Richard Wright particularly influenced Ellison's literary works. Wright's black characters were typically uneducated Southerners oppressed by their white counterparts. In contrast Ellison wanted to present an educated, thoughtful, and ambitious black man. Wright wrote protest novels (works of fiction that address current social problems) about the black experience, and Ellison wanted to extend this focus by capturing humanity's struggle against limitations from social attitudes, self-doubt, and the challenges presented by life itself. Ellison portrays all of these in *Invisible Man*. Perhaps because of its success, *Invisible Man* would be the only novel Ellison published in his lifetime. He died on April 16, 1994. His much anticipated follow-up, *Juneteenth* (1999), which he worked on for nearly 40 years, was heavily edited and published after his death to disappointing reviews.

A chronological list of Ellison's book-length works includes the following:

- *Invisible Man* (1952)
- *The Collected Essays of Ralph Ellison* (1995)
- *Flying Home and Other Stories* (1997)
- *Juneteenth* (1999)

Characters

Narrator

The unnamed narrator is a young, light-skinned black man who becomes disillusioned in his quest to create a unique identity for himself within a racist society. The narrator feels invisible because everyone sees him as they wish to see him based on their expectations of black men, not as the unique individual he desires to be. Throughout the novel, the narrator is haunted by his grandfather's deathbed advice and, as a result, is "kept running" by the white men in power. In his pursuit of making a name for himself, he fulfills his grandfather's ominous prediction that he will act "treacherously" against his people by inadvertently "selling out" the black residents of Harlem.

Dr. Bledsoe

When the narrator first arrives at the college, he idolizes everything about Dr. Bledsoe—his legacy, his sway with white men, his wealth, even his light-skinned wife. He blindly follows Bledsoe's philosophy that "white is right," hoping that it will earn him the same prestige. When the narrator is expelled from school, however, he learns that Dr. Bledsoe only acts subservient to whites because doing so affords him a position of power. In addition to expelling the narrator, Dr. Bledsoe also sends him to New York with treacherous letters of recommendation.

Mr. Norton

Mr. Norton is a wealthy, white trustee who has spent his life making large donations to the black college the narrator attends. Mr. Norton claims he supports the college because he has always felt his fate was tied to the fate of the black race, and to honor his deceased daughter's memory, but it soon becomes clear that Mr. Norton is only interested in creating a philanthropic legacy that suggests he is concerned with racial equality. He shows little interest in the real struggles of black individuals, except in the case of Jim True blood, whom he finds voyeuristically fascinating.

Jim Trueblood

Living just outside campus, Jim Trueblood represents the black "savage" stereotype of the uneducated Southern black man. Trueblood gained notoriety in town for his incestuous relationship with his daughter, whom he impregnated while he was having a dream. Although "ignorant," Trueblood has learned to exploit the story to his family's advantage. He knows that white people like Norton want to save the lowest of black people, so he uses the story to gain work and charity, even if it means being forced into the outskirts of society.

Mary

Mary Rambo represents the strength of the black community. After witnessing the narrator collapse on the street after being released from the factory hospital, Mary takes him in, feeds

Copyright © 2017 Course Hero, Inc.

him, and even offers him a room. When the narrator can no longer pay rent, Mary allows him to stay for free, hoping that he'll become a strong leader in the black community someday. Although the narrator is initially grateful for Mary's generosity, his time at the Brotherhood leads him to resent her.

Ras

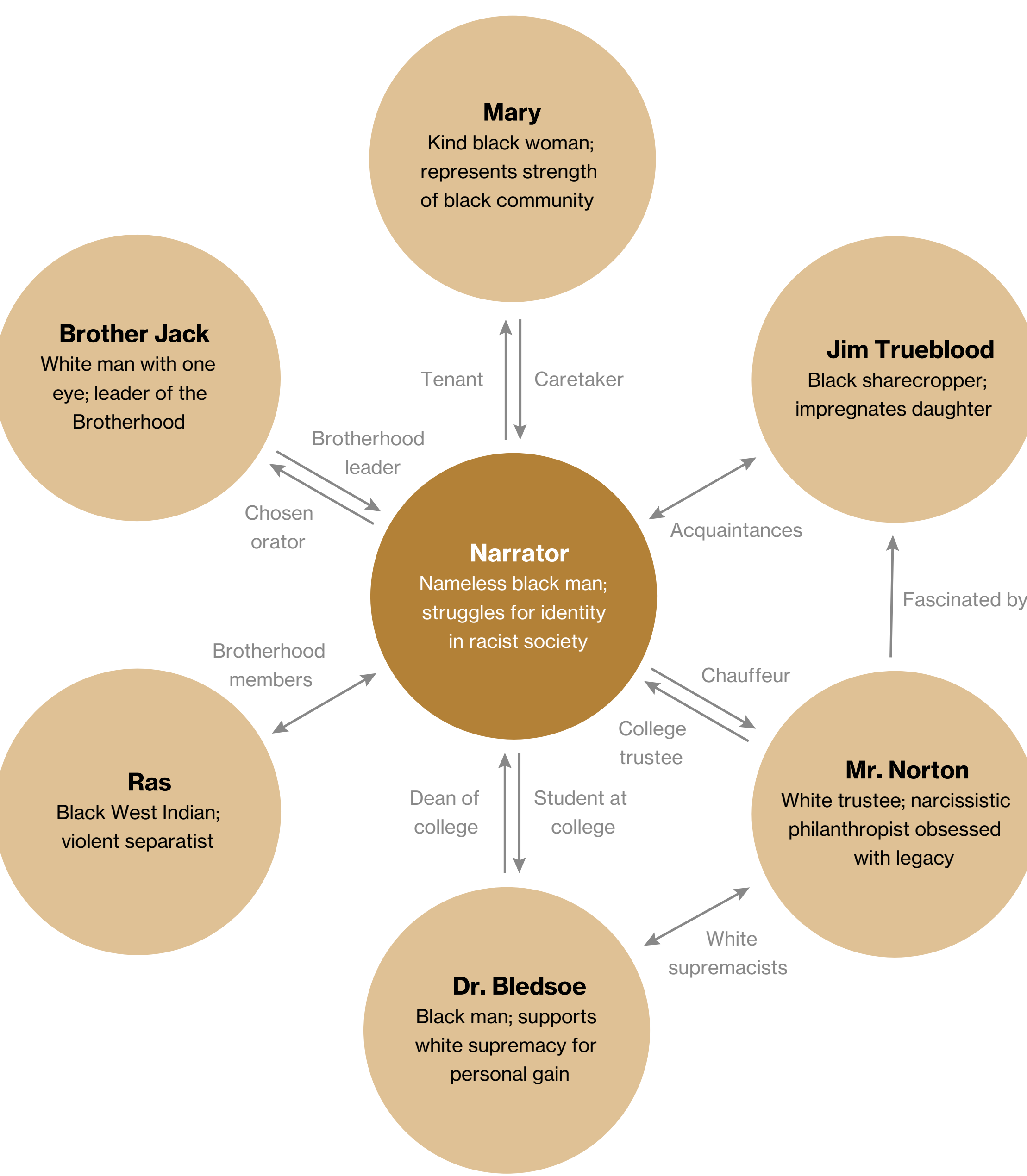
Ras the Exhorter, who later becomes Ras the Destroyer, is a violent black separatist, which means he believes black Americans should start a society completely separate from white Americans. He refuses civil rights help from sympathetic whites, and believes anyone who takes it to be a traitor to the race. Ras believes that any relationship with the white race is a continuation of oppression, so he preaches for all black people to quit working for white bosses and to refuse to shop at white-owned stores or even hold civil conversations with white men. He hates the narrator and his affiliation with the Brotherhood, which is multiracial and therefore blasphemous.

Brother Jack

Brother Jack is the white leader of the Brotherhood in Harlem. Although the Brotherhood is formed to improve the lives of black Americans, in reality, it is a corrupt system exploited by Brother Jack and his cohorts. When the narrator first meets Brother Jack, he seems like a heroic force, quickly giving the narrator a respectable job and wage. Over time, however, it becomes clear that Brother Jack is using the narrator as a tool to advance his own motives. He has no real desire to improve the life of Harlem residents—easily abandoning them at the end of the novel—and is only interested in amassing personal power and wealth. He is described as having red hair and a glass eye, two characteristics that illustrate his evil and flawed vision regarding racial equality.

Copyright © 2017 Course Hero, Inc.

Character Map



- Main character
- Other Major Character
- Minor Character

Copyright © 2017 Course Hero, Inc.

Full Character List

Character	Description
Narrator	The unnamed young black man, who refers to himself as an invisible man, spends the novel trying to identify himself as an individual within society's racist expectations of what it means to be a black man.
Dr. Bledsoe	The president of a prestigious black college, Bledsoe is more interested in maintaining his personal power than in truly enlightening his students.
Mr. Norton	Norton is a white trustee who funds the college in a narcissistic attempt to shape his legacy, even though he has no interest in the actual struggles of the students he claims to support.
Jim Trueblood	Trueblood is an ignorant black sharecropper who lives near campus; he is infamous for impregnating his own daughter.
Mary	Mary is a kindly black woman who nurtures the narrator after the paint factory explosion. She symbolizes the strength of the black community.
Ras	Ras the Exhorter is a belligerent, angry black man who opposes the Brotherhood and incites riots in Harlem.
Brother Jack	Brother Jack is the white leader of the Brotherhood in Harlem.
Reverend Barbee	Reverend Barbee is the blind Southern reverend who preaches about the Founder's legacy.
Lucius Brockway	Lucius Brockway is the boiler room worker responsible for exploding the paint factory.
Tod Clifton	Tod Clifton is the black member of the Brotherhood who becomes disillusioned with the organization and turns to selling Sambo dolls on the street to white tourists.
Crenshaw	Crenshaw is the attendant to the veteran doctor.
Dupre	Dupre is a looter who misleads the narrator into helping burn down a tenement building during Harlem's race riots.
Young Emerson	Young Emerson is the seemingly homosexual son of a wealthy white man who self-servingly helps the narrator find a job.
Emma	Emma is Brother Jack's mistress and a powerful female member of the Brotherhood.
Founder	The Founder is the educator who founded the black college the narrator attends; he is a civil rights leader with a mythic legacy.
Grandfather	The narrator's grandfather advises him to remain subservient to white men even if doing so is treacherous.
Brother Hambro	Brother Hambro is the leader in the Brotherhood charged with the narrator's training and indoctrination into Brotherhood ideologies.
Mr. Kimbro	Mr. Kimbro is the paint factory manager who doesn't notice when the Optic White paint is sent out slightly gray.
The Provos	The Provos are an elderly black couple evicted from the Harlem apartment, an event that prompts the narrator's first street speech.
Scofield	Scofield is a looter who misleads the narrator into helping burn down a tenement building during Harlem's race riots.

Copyright © 2017 Course Hero, Inc.

Sybil	Sybil is the neglected wife of a white Brotherhood member; the narrator attempts to seduce her.
Brother Tarp	Brother Tarp is the brotherhood member who escaped slavery on a chain gang and becomes the narrator's mentor.
Unnamed White Woman	The narrator sleeps with an unnamed white woman from the Brotherhood in Chapter 19.
The Veteran Doctor	The shell-shocked war veteran from the Golden Day speaks the truth despite being labeled insane.
Peter Wheatstraw	Peter Wheatstraw is a cart-man and folk singer who first encourages the narrator to embrace his slave heritage.
Brother Wrestrum	Brother Wrestrum is the opportunistic, meddling brother who accuses the narrator of using the organization for personal gains.

Plot Summary

Invisible Man is the fictional memoir of an unnamed black narrator's journey to self-discovery. The narrator is not invisible because of a physical ailment or a freak accident; he is invisible because society sees him simply as a "black man"—a label filled with racist expectation. His true self is invisible, both to the outside world and to himself. He must confront racism, exploitation, and abuse to define his individuality.

At the opening of the novel, the narrator sits at his grandfather's deathbed somewhere in America's South during the late 1920s to early 1930s. The old man tells the narrator that the key to success as a black man is to remain subservient to whites. He also tells him, however, that such behavior is treacherous. This confusing advice follows the narrator throughout his life as he struggles to define treachery and his responsibility to anyone other than himself. Shortly after his grandfather's death, the narrator is invited to give his graduation speech to a group of prominent white men, who appreciate the speech's message of black subservience. At the event, however, the narrator is horrified to discover that part of the evening's entertainment is a "battle royal" pitting his fellow black students against each other in a brutal, blindfolded fight. Bloodied and bruised from the battle, the narrator delivers his speech and is rewarded with a scholarship to a prestigious black college.

In his third year at college, the narrator is given the "honor" of chauffeuring a wealthy white trustee, Mr. Norton. The day doesn't go as planned, and Mr. Norton is exposed not only to an incestuous black sharecropper but also to a brothel full of mentally disturbed war veterans. As a result of this incident, the narrator is expelled from school and sent to New York with a handful of recommendation letters to search for work. Unsuccessful at finding a job, he learns that the recommendation letters from his college actually warned prospective employers of his unpredictable, violent tendencies. The treacherous lie shatters his dreams of ever returning to school.

Desperate for money, the narrator takes a job at Liberty Paints, a factory that produces Optic White paint for the government. His first job is adding a solvent to muddy brown paint and stirring it until the paint is white enough to cover coal. He is later sent to work in the boiler room alongside Lucius Brockway, a crotchety old African American man who believes the young black workers should be grateful for the jobs given them by whites and shouldn't fight for social equality. Enraged to learn that the narrator accidentally attended a union meeting, Brockway attacks him. Then the narrator is injured in a factory blast and sent to recover at the factory hospital, where the doctors administer unnecessary shock treatments that erase his memory. Deemed "cured" by the doctors, the narrator recovers at the home of a kindly black woman, Mary Rambo.

While at Mary's, the narrator rediscovers his passion for public speaking and, at Mary's annoying insistence that he become a productive member of the black community, joins the Brotherhood, an organization created to protect the socially oppressed. After being fully indoctrinated in the Brotherhood's ideals, the narrator enjoys a quick rise to power, becoming the leader of the organization's Harlem division. He is surprised by how powerful he feels delivering speeches, and he often speaks passionately from the heart, much to the chagrin of the organization's members. His fellow Brothers eventually accuse him of using the Brotherhood to further his own purposes—a hurtful and untrue accusation. As a result, he is removed from his post and sent to head up the women's division downtown.

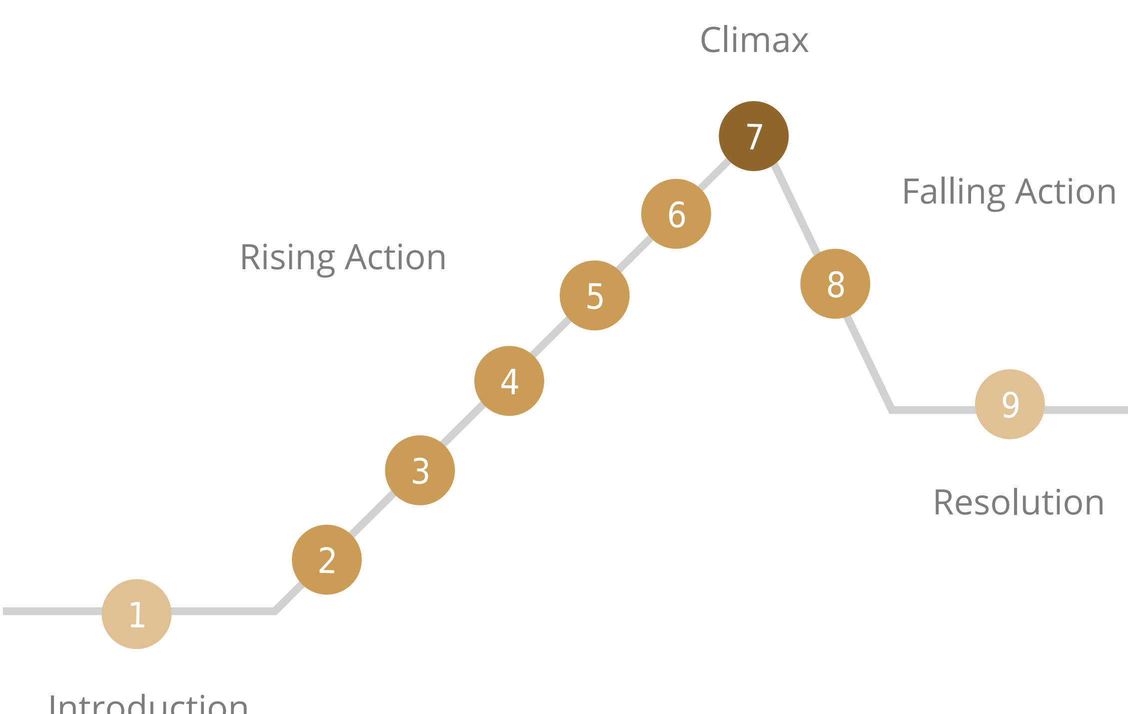
Copyright © 2017 Course Hero, Inc.

He returns to Harlem when he learns that the organization is losing traction in the community and that his friend, Brother Tod Clifton, is missing. Soon after returning to headquarters, the narrator discovers Clifton selling racist Sambo dolls in the park for the amusement of white tourists. Despite the bond between the two men, Clifton pretends not to see the narrator, who spits on the dolls and tries to crush them beneath his feet. The police arrive, and during the scuffle, officers shoot and kill Clifton. Unable to make contact with anyone in the organization, the narrator arranges Clifton's funeral on his own.

As time passes, the narrator grows increasingly disillusioned with the Brotherhood and their ideals. He realizes that the organization has manipulated him and he has "sold out" his neighbors. Determined to destroy the organization from the inside, the narrator vows to follow his grandfather's advice and "overcome 'em with yeses." He pretends to agree to the organization's new plans, but hopes to uncover enough information to destroy them. He unwittingly plays right into the Brotherhood's plans to turn power over to the violent Ras the Exhorter, who incites brutal race riots across Harlem. This way, the Brotherhood can destroy the black community by leading the community to destroy itself. As the narrator rushes to Harlem to demand answers from the organization, he is confronted by Ras, who demands that the "traitor" narrator be lynched. Racing through the erupting violence, the narrator leaps into an uncovered manhole and "hibernates" underground for the next 15 years.

Copyright © 2017 Course Hero, Inc.

Plot Diagram



Introduction

1. The narrator describes discovering his invisibility.

Rising Action

2. After the battle royal, the narrator attends college.

3. The narrator is expelled for his outing with Mr. Norton.

4. The narrator moves to Harlem and tries to find a job.

5. The paint factory explodes; the narrator moves in with Mary.

6. The narrator joins the Brotherhood as a key orator.

Climax

7. Tod Clifton is killed; the narrator arranges his funeral.

Falling Action

8. The narrator becomes "Rinehart" through a simple disguise.

Resolution

9. Harlem erupts in race riots; the narrator flees.

Copyright © 2017 Course Hero, Inc.

Timeline of Events

Late 1920s–early 1930s

The narrator's grandfather dies, giving him cryptic advice on his deathbed.

Shortly after

The narrator delivers his graduation speech; wins the battle royal.

Three years later

After driving Mr. Norton around campus, the narrator is expelled.

Autumn

In Harlem, the narrator delivers his letters of recommendation.

Autumn

The paint factory explodes; the narrator recovers at Mary's apartment.

Winter

The narrator joins the Brotherhood, serving Harlem and downtown.

Spring

Tod Clifton is killed by police; the narrator arranges his funeral.

Summer

After discovering Rinehart, the narrator seeks revenge against the Brotherhood.

Summer

Ras calls for the narrator to be lynched; the narrator flees through the Harlem riots.

Fifteen years later

Copyright © 2017 Course Hero, Inc.

Course Hero

After living underground, the narrator writes these memoirs.

Copyright © 2017 Course Hero, Inc.

Chapter Summaries

Prologue

Summary

The novel opens with the words "I am an invisible man" spoken by a narrator who will remain unnamed throughout the novel. The narrator explains that he is invisible simply because no one sees him. One evening a white man with blond hair and blue eyes bumps into the narrator and calls him an offensive name. The narrator leaps onto the man, demanding an apology. He beats the man nearly to death, but the man continues his racist rant, refusing to apologize. The next morning, newspapers report that the man had been mugged. The narrator defends his actions, saying that he's been invisible for so long, he sometimes wonders whether he exists at all. To prove that he's real, he must "bump people back."

For a while, the narrator had lived as a law-abiding citizen, but when he realized that society didn't value or appreciate him, he went into "hibernation." Now he lives in a hidden room below an all-white apartment building. He has covered the ceiling and walls with lightbulbs, which he burns around the clock, pleased to be stealing so much electricity from Monopolated Light & Power. He listens to Louis Armstrong records at full volume and looks forward to the day when he can listen to five record players simultaneously.

Analysis

The prologue is placed before the main story but takes place after the action of the novel as a framing device. It introduces the novel's main themes and conflicts as the narrator describes what his life is like and how he got to this point. The novel follows the narrator on his journey from naive youth to enlightened man. When the narrator says he's invisible, he means that he has no individual identity. When people see him, they simply see a black man, allowing their personal definitions of what a "black man is" to define him. Regardless of what the narrator says or does, society refuses to let him define himself. When he attacks the white man for calling him an offensive name, the narrator is trying to force the man to see him as a person, not as a label. When the white man refuses to apologize, the narrator almost kills him. However, he refuses to accept responsibility for his actions: "To whom can I be responsible ... when you refuse to see me?" The narrator views himself as the victim of a "blind" society that refuses to recognize him. The blond man represents the white society that "bumped *me* ... insulted *me*" and is therefore deserving of the narrator's violent response. The morning newspapers report that the white man was mugged, casting him as the victim and perpetuating the narrator's invisibility.

The narrator's living situation is also highly symbolic. He burns 1,369 lights simultaneously because "light confirms my reality." Stealing electricity is a source of pride in his invisibility. Throughout the novel light is symbolic of enlightenment and social education, whereas darkness is symbolic of ignorance. Those who refuse to acknowledge the narrator as an individual are often described as "blind" or "sleepwalking," which are simply different ways of saying that they live in the dark.

Finally, the prologue introduces the importance of jazz. The narrator listens to Louis Armstrong records, not only hearing the music but also "feeling" it. Listening to jazz allows the narrator to experience a convergence of time, as past and present mingle together in the music. The narrator describes time as a boomerang, suggesting that history is not linear but layered, coming back on itself. His riff reflects on slave history and civil rights issues without mentioning them directly, but it's clear that the novel will focus on race relations and defining black identity.

Chapter 1

Summary

The narrator's realization that everyone was trying to define him goes back as far as he can remember. Chapter 1 narrates events from 20 years before when the narrator was a boy. On his deathbed, the narrator's grandfather urges him to "keep up the good fight." He essentially advises the narrator to conform to the white man's expectations while remaining vigilant and bitter inside. He continues to say, however, that this is how he lived his life, and on his deathbed he realizes it was "treacherous." The narrator's family believes the man has lost his mind, but these words haunt the narrator throughout the

Copyright © 2017 Course Hero, Inc.

novel.

At his high school graduation the narrator delivers a well-received speech on the importance of humility, and he is invited to give the speech again at a meeting of the town's highest-ranking citizens. Before he gives the speech, however, he is herded into a group of fellow black students. The group of young men are stripped down to their shorts and forced to watch a naked woman with an American flag tattoo on her stomach dance while the white men ogle and taunt them and the woman. Then the students are blindfolded and forced to fight. The narrator manages to be one of the last two standing, but he ultimately loses the fight. Bloodied and bruised, the students are then given their reward: coins thrown onto an electrified rug that they must scramble to pick up while the white men cheer them on. Although the pain of being electrocuted is excruciating, the narrator lunges for the gold coins, which are later revealed to be worthless brass tokens. Exhausted and bloody, the narrator finally gives his speech, but the audience is too drunk to care what he's saying. When he mistakenly says "social equality" instead of "social responsibility," however, everyone takes notice. At the end of his speech, the superintendent presents him with a calfskin briefcase and a scholarship to "the state college for Negroes." The narrator is overwhelmed with joy. That night he dreams that the letter inside the briefcase actually says "Keep This Nigger-Boy Running."

Analysis

The grandfather's deathbed riddle haunts the narrator like a curse throughout his life. The advice seems to be contradictory—conform to the white man's expectations if you want to succeed, but if you do, it will be "treacherous" to your people. The novel never fully explains what the grandfather means, which makes the advice as puzzling for readers as it is for the narrator. It seems, however, that the grandfather is advising his grandson to wear masks—to embody two personas—his true self, which must remain hidden if he wants to succeed, and the meek, grinning, agreeable black man white society wants him to be. As a young man the narrator interprets this advice to simply mean obedience. When he obeys the outrageous demands at the town hall meeting, he is rewarded with a college scholarship. He thinks he's cracked his grandfather's code, but his dream reminds him that by blindly obeying white demands, he will forever be jumping through hoops for approval. Just as he took part in the battle royal for worthless brass tokens, he will be forced to continue "performing" for whatever scraps generous white men feel like throwing at his feet. Not until much later in the novel does the narrator realize his grandfather was advising him to pretend to be submissive, changing society from the inside.

The white men at the meeting view the young black students as savages or animals. For perverted entertainment, the students are brutally pitted against each other. The narrator goes along with it because he really wants to deliver his speech: "I ... felt that only these men could judge truly my ability." The narrator acts like a "Sambo," or a negative black stereotype—which one man calls him in this scene—willing to do anything, eagerly anticipating the white man's approval.

Before the battle, the young men are stripped down and forced to watch a naked woman dance while the white men ogle, taunting and hollering as the boys get aroused. The dancer notably has an American flag tattoo on her stomach—a symbol of freedom, equality, and liberty—values the novel suggests are as inaccessible to young black men as the beautiful blond woman is.

Chapter 2

Summary

The narrator attends the college to which he received the scholarship. He describes the beautiful campus and a bronze statue of the college's founder. The Founder lifts a veil off the eyes of a slave, but when the narrator remembers it now, he isn't sure whether the veil is being lifted or "lowered more firmly in place."

In his junior year the narrator takes a job chauffeuring Mr. Norton, one of the white trustees of the college. The narrator takes the job, hoping the wealthy philanthropist will take a liking to him and "give [him] a large tip, or a suit, or a scholarship next year." Mr. Norton has some spare time before his next meeting and asks the narrator to drive him around campus. As they drive, Mr. Norton talks about his "pleasant fate" and how it is tied with the fates of the students at the college. He first began funding the college after his beautiful, good, and pure daughter died on a sailing trip. Everything Mr. Norton has done since her death has been as "a monument to her memory."

Copyright © 2017 Course Hero, Inc.

Mr. Norton becomes interested in the old log cabins he sees when the narrator absentmindedly drives through the outskirts of town. The area is where poor sharecroppers live, and Mr. Norton becomes particularly interested in two pregnant women he sees. The narrator knows who the women are and hopes desperately that Mr. Norton won't ask any questions. He does, and the narrator reluctantly tells him that Jim Trueblood impregnated both women: his wife and his daughter. Mr. Norton cannot contain himself and demands to speak to Mr. Trueblood. He approaches Trueblood, blazing with "something like envy and indignation" and demands an explanation. It's clear that Trueblood is used to the fascination and has told the story many times: His family was huddled together in one bed to keep warm. He had a vivid dream in which he was making love to a girlfriend he had when he was young, but when he woke up, he was horrified to see that he was having sex with his daughter. His wife also woke up and beat him senseless. Trueblood can't believe how the experience has changed his life. Suddenly, white folks have been giving him work and charity to help support his family. Mr. Norton, after hearing the story, shakily pulls a $100 bill out of his wallet and hands it to Trueblood before stumbling back to the car.

Analysis

Norton's fascination with Jim Trueblood's incest story tells the reader a lot about his character. He's a little too interested in the details, particularly after describing at length his own daughter's beauty and purity. His look of "envy and indignation" suggests that he wishes he could have done what Trueblood did, but he would never stoop as low as the black "savage" that Trueblood's character represents. Trueblood's story reminds readers of the myth during segregation that black people, especially men, needed to be separated from white people because they were dangerous. Segregation laws perpetuated the idea of the "black savage"—an animalistic, violent, and sexually powerful black man living outside of civilized society. For being uneducated, Trueblood has mastered the art of storytelling, and it's clear he has told this story many times, perhaps even embellishing and polishing it to suit his audience. Although Trueblood's actions were deplorable, he uses the story to his advantage, knowing that white benefactors are only interested in "saving" the lowliest blacks: "Now lotta folks is curious and goes outta they way to help," Trueblood says. In exchange for money, white benefactors—like Norton himself, who gives Trueblood $100 after hearing his story—buy into the black savage myth by being able to say they helped Trueblood, while safely keeping him where he belongs, separated from "civilized" society.

For Norton, Trueblood is an extreme example of how he views all black men. He has dedicated his entire life to "civilizing" the black race, telling the narrator, "your people [are] somehow closely connected with my destiny." Although Norton's donations to the school seem charitable, he is simply feeding his own narcissism. He is not actually interested in bettering anyone's lives; he is interested in creating a grand legacy in which he is perceived as a generous white man lifting the black race out of darkness. He repeatedly demands success from the narrator, saying, "if you fail *I* have failed." The narrator has a moment of clarity wondering how he could affect Norton's legacy when Norton "don't even know my name," but he suppresses the doubt to remain obedient.

The theme of blacks being obedient to whites in order to achieve success is repeated many times in this chapter. The narrator blindly follows Norton's orders, hoping that the rich, white man will bestow gifts upon him. Similarly, the school administration is at the beck and call of its white trustees, so much so that the narrator questions whether the Founder's statue celebrates black enlightenment or white interests.

Chapter 3

Summary

Norton needs a "stimulant" after hearing Trueblood's story and asks the narrator to drive him to the nearest bar for a whiskey. He needs the drink immediately, he claims, so the narrator nervously drives him to the nearby Golden Day, a bar and brothel on the black side of town. The narrator tells Norton to wait in the car while he runs inside, but the bartender refuses to serve him whiskey to go. When the narrator returns to the car, Norton has fainted, so he enlists the help of some veterans to carry Norton's body inside. The narrator is beside himself with nerves, not only because Norton is the only white face in the black bar, but also because the customers are all shell-shocked war veterans enjoying an afternoon away from their assisted-living home.

Inside the bar the veterans' attendant is upstairs with a prostitute, leaving the disturbed men unattended. They

Copyright © 2017 Course Hero, Inc.

surround Norton, intrigued by his presence. When the attendant—a brutish hulk of a man—demands order, the veterans lose control. A violent brawl ensues, with the men beating their attendant nearly to death. Norton faints again and is brought upstairs to rest in one of the prostitute's rooms. The veteran who helps carry Norton upstairs was once a successful doctor. In fact, his résumé deeply impresses Norton when he returns to consciousness. Norton presses to learn more about the veteran, who describes his education at the same college the narrator attends as well as his disillusionment with the world. No matter how talented or accomplished he was, he would always remain lower in society than white doctors. He criticizes Norton and the college for suggesting that black students can hope for freedom, and he blatantly calls Norton a narcissist masquerading as a philanthropist. When the narrator suggests they leave immediately, the veteran calls him a "walking zombie" and "the most perfect achievement of [Norton's] dreams. ... The mechanical man!" Outraged, Norton leaves the room, falls down the stairs, and rides back to the college campus in silence.

Analysis

In an example of verbal irony, the group of "insane" war veterans speaks the truth. The doctor, in particular, has an enlightened view of the world, however disillusioned, that makes everyone else uncomfortable. He sees Norton's generosity as a mask for his narcissism, and he chastises the narrator's blind obedience. When the narrator ignores the veteran's warnings, he shouts, "Behold! a walking zombie! Already he's learned to [suppress] his humanity." By blindly following Norton's orders and being concerned with Norton's legacy, the narrator ceases to be human—he is invisible. He is Norton's "perfect achievement" because he, like the college superintendents, will carry out Norton's wishes without challenging his authority or questioning his motivations. It is much easier for the narrator and Norton to dismiss the man as crazy than to listen to him. When he can't ignore what's going on around him, Norton faints, repeatedly overcome by the realization that he has no control.

The veterans—who are labeled as crazy but actually speak insightfully—challenge the strict behavioral codes created to keep order. When provoked, they react violently, nearly beating their attendant to death. This reaction represents a suppressed person's desire to overthrow oppression and parallels the encounter with the white man that the narrator describes in the prologue. Ellison's novel was published during segregation, when discriminatory laws against blacks were put in place under the ruse of maintaining social order. *Invisible Man* is clearly a protest novel, and this scene nods to the brutality of violent uprising.

Chapter 4

Summary

As the narrator drives Mr. Norton back to the campus, he feels overwhelmed with worry about his future. Even though the events at Trueblood's and the Golden Day weren't his fault, he knows he will be blamed for them. Back on campus, Mr. Norton refuses to listen to the narrator's weak apologies and requests a meeting with Dr. Bledsoe. The narrator stumbles nervously over to Dr. Bledsoe's office, and he meekly explains the day's events. Bledsoe is outraged, quickly rushing to Norton's room. Bledsoe blames the narrator for everything, despite Norton's insistence that it wasn't the narrator's fault. Before dismissing the narrator from the room, Bledsoe demands that he attend chapel that evening. In the hallway outside Norton's room, the narrator is approached by a girl who asks him to deliver a cryptic message to her boyfriend. The narrator considers asking her to spy on Bledsoe's conversation with Norton, but he decides against it. That evening, he returns to Norton's room and learns that he is being dismissed from his chauffeuring responsibility even though Norton insists he doesn't blame him for the day's events.

Analysis

The idea of moral responsibility is central in this chapter as everyone—the narrator, Bledsoe, and Norton—places blame for the day's unusual events. The narrator blames Trueblood and the vets, refusing to take any responsibility for himself. He "hates" the men he blames because he knows he'll be strictly punished. He considers pleading with Norton for mercy, "I would do his bidding and teach others to rise up as he wished them to," he thinks. In his hatred, the narrator separates himself from other black men, viewing them as beneath him because he is educated. He dreams of being like Dr. Bledsoe, a man of power, a man the narrator calls "a leader of his people." This view of Bledsoe as a hero will become another example of

Copyright © 2017 Course Hero, Inc.

Course Hero

situational irony when his treachery is revealed in upcoming chapters. To stay in the good graces of these men, the narrator is willing to do or say anything, unquestionably following their teachings. The narrator doesn't realize that this blind devotion is what will cause his invisibility, and that he is truly becoming the "mechanical man" the veteran doctor accused him of being in Chapter 3. When Mr. Norton assures Bledsoe that the narrator wasn't at fault, Bledsoe won't listen: "You can't be soft with these people," he says. In this statement, Bledsoe, like the narrator earlier, distances himself from a black man he believes beneath him.

Before Bledsoe enters Norton's room, he composes himself, making his face "a bland mask." When he addresses Mr. Norton, "his lips [are] already a smile." Bledsoe fulfills the "happy slave" role for the white trustees, pretending that everything is fine and the white man is always right. He willingly turns his back against his "own people" to please the man in power rather than creating conflict. Although Bledsoe has power, he is weak. He is the "treacherous" character the narrator's grandfather warned against in his cryptic deathbed message.

Finally, when he dismisses the narrator from his post, Norton says he "won't be needing the machine." By emphasizing his relationship with the car over his relationship with the narrator, Norton reveals the narrator's invisibility. There is no empathy or humanity in his harsh dismissal.

Chapter 5

Summary

Leaving Norton's room, the narrator rushes to evening chapel. Despite Norton's assurance that he isn't to blame, the narrator is still filled with a sense of doom. He immediately picks Bledsoe out of the crowd and watches with wonder as Bledsoe converses with (and even touches!) the white trustees. He recalls sitting in the chapel for various events, including those featuring visits by speakers "eager to inform us of how fortunate we were." He recalls white speakers as messiahs come to save the black students, while he recalls black nationalist speakers—those preaching equality and empowerment—as dangerous beasts. At today's chapel service, the respected Reverend Barbee, a black preacher from Chicago, has come to sermonize on the Founder's legacy. Starting with the days after emancipation, Reverend Barbee delivers a long speech about education as the key to freedom. He describes the Founder's history, comparing him to mythic figures such as the biblical Moses. The audience is enraptured by the reverend's words, and even the narrator is moved to tears. On his deathbed, the Founder begged Bledsoe to "take on the burden. Lead them the rest of the way."

When the Founder died, Reverend Barbee says, a dark despair clouded over black people as they "felt the dark night of slavery settle once more upon them." They would have remained in this darkness without Dr. Bledsoe to enlighten them. Barbee carries on about Bledsoe's commitment, dedication, and triumphs as a leader, urging the young students to model themselves after his example. Overcome with emotion, Barbee stumbles off the stage, and his thick glasses fall off. The narrator looks into Barbee's eyes and realizes that he is blind. The narrator is deeply moved by the evening's speeches, so much so that he rushes out before the service has concluded.

Analysis

Recalling the image of the Founder's statue, the college purports to enlighten students through their education, symbolically "lifting the veil" of slavery. The narrator views black speakers who encourage equality and freedom as beasts. He is much happier to view the white trustees as messiahs—the key to his freedom—even if it means perpetuating white power. Once again readers see that trustees such as Norton are not interested in educating students to create social equality; they are interested in crafting their own legacies built on white supremacy.

This long chapter serves to create a myth around the Founder. He is described as a man of biblical proportions, whose rise from slavery to power not only embodies the American Dream but also is viewed as "magic." His story is spellbinding, particularly when retold through the powerful oration of a Southern preacher trained to rally a crowd's emotions. The Founder's beliefs are so pure and powerful that there is no doubt he had an entire race's best interests at heart. When he died, he transferred that legacy to Bledsoe, and the narrator and Reverend Barbee assume his ideals are the same: enriching the lives of black students. Barbee's sermon idolizes the Founder and Bledsoe simultaneously. Overwhelmed, the

Copyright © 2017 Course Hero, Inc.

narrator stumbles from the chapel certain that there will be no mercy from a man with such moral conviction.

Barbee's blindness, however, suggests that he doesn't see the truth—he doesn't see the flaws in the Founder's ideologies or the flaws in Bledsoe's character.

Chapter 6

Summary

The narrator takes in the beautiful details of the campus, deep in thought while walking back to Bledsoe's office for his punishment. He knows that after Barbee's rousing speech about the importance of humility and keeping one's head down, there is no way his sins against Norton will be forgiven. He fears he will be expelled, and he thinks about how that will disappoint everyone (including Norton himself).

When Dr. Bledsoe returns to his office from the chapel, he calls the narrator in and mocks him for giving Norton the "full treatment" by taking him to see Trueblood and the Golden Day. No matter how the narrator tries to explain his decisions, Bledsoe refuses to listen, fully blaming him for the day's events. He demands to know who put the narrator up to showing Norton the depraved side of black life. When the narrator insists it was Norton himself who asked to see these places, Bledsoe is incensed: "Nigger, this isn't the time to lie. I'm no white man," he says. The narrator is shocked that Bledsoe would call him such a degrading name. The questioning continues as Bledsoe wants to know everything about the veteran doctor at the bar. The narrator recalls what he can, but Bledsoe isn't satisfied with the responses. He continually disparages the narrator and then bluntly says, "Boy, I'm getting rid of you." Outraged, the narrator shouts that he'll fight Bledsoe's decision, and that he'll tattle to Norton. Bledsoe laughs in his face and delivers a speech about how he is the most important man on campus—more important than the white trustees—and that he'll "have every Negro in the country hanging on tree limbs" before he'll give up that power. He admits that he had to degrade himself to get to where he is today, but he won't give it up for anything, and he enjoys "clipping" cocky young men who challenge him. Apparently amused by the narrator's spirit, Bledsoe gives him seven letters of recommendation to distribute to white trustees in New York to help him find a job. Bledsoe promises that if he works hard and makes something of himself, the college will consider accepting him back next year.

The narrator is heartbroken to have been expelled from school, but despite the degradation of his meeting with Bledsoe, he trusts Bledsoe's judgment. He believes Bledsoe did what was best for the school and for the black race. Hopeful, he clutches his letters and boards a bus bound for New York City.

Analysis

Everyone the narrator encounters as he walks to Bledsoe's office to learn his punishment is cast in shadow or walking "like a blind man." The narrator doesn't yet know it, but everyone on campus is symbolically blind to Bledsoe's treachery and the distorted position he has put them in.

Barbee's sermon has just raised Bledsoe to godlike status in the narrator's eyes, so his mocking tone is unexpected. As the conversation continues, Bledsoe's true colors are revealed. He is not interested in enlightening or bettering anyone's life other than his own. He is outraged that the narrator is honest, trusting, and obedient—three characteristics the college claims to reward. When the narrator explains that he brought Norton to those unscrupulous places to keep him happy, Bledsoe responds that even "the dumbest black bastard in the cotton patch" would have known that "the only way to please a white man is to tell him a lie." He lists a variety of lies the narrator could have told to avoid Trueblood's farm and the Golden Day, and when the narrator seems surprised, Bledsoe calls him a "nigger." Clearly Bledsoe does not value the students he has been entrusted to educate. His hateful speech continues with his suggestion about the free-thinking veteran doctor—"a Negro like that should be under lock and key"—and his final admission that he would lynch every black man in town to keep his position of power. The reader may recall the narrator's wondering whether the Founder was lifting the veil off the slave's head in the statue or pushing it more firmly into place. After this conversation, it's clear that though the Founder had good intentions, the treacherous Bledsoe ensures that the veil will remain firmly in place and that his students remain forever "in their place"—subservient to the powerful. Whether Bledsoe was ever the idealistic youth (similar to the narrator) in Barbee's sermon, it's clear that he has self-servingly distorted the Founder's vision.

Copyright © 2017 Course Hero, Inc.

When the narrator suggests that he'll turn Bledsoe in to Norton, who earlier promised the narrator wouldn't be held responsible, Bledsoe bursts into laughter: "You're nobody, son," he says. "You don't exist—can't you see that?" Bledsoe reveals painfully racist situations he experienced and how he overcame that feeling of invisibility by embracing his power. Even though he has to "act the nigger" to claim his "prize," he will never relinquish what he believes society owes him. When he agrees to help the narrator find a job in New York, he encourages him to learn what he can from influential whites and "then stay in the dark and use it!" His words mirror the narrator's grandfather's advice to remain subservient, using invisibility to hide change. Although he has the opportunity to change society, treacherous Bledsoe serves only himself.

Chapter 7

Summary

Feeling as if he is dreaming, the narrator realizes that the only other passengers on the bus are the veteran doctor and his new attendant. Because the bus is segregated, with only a few seats available for black passengers, he is forced to sit next to the doctor. The doctor is being transferred to a hospital in Washington, DC, a move he believes Bledsoe is responsible for. He teases the narrator about the "freedoms" he will experience up North—with music, entertainment, and women—and warns him to "play the game, but don't believe in it." When the narrator arrives in New York, he feels overwhelmed. He is shocked to see black people simply living their lives, walking confidently down the street, working jobs, and even congregating in a civil rights protest. He rides a crowded subway to the Men's House in Harlem but gets off to walk when the crowd presses him against a white woman and he fears retribution.

Analysis

Away from college, the narrator is unsure of everything, including his identity. His self-esteem was tied to his education, and he cannot tell anyone, even his parents, that he's been expelled. His truth is hidden, and he feels like he's in a dream. Confused, he is once again confronted by the wise veteran doctor, who urges him to "come out of the fog." His views are vastly different from Bledsoe's, but his core advice is the same—learn how to "play the game." He warns that men like Bledsoe have an image that doesn't always match their intentions and that it's possible to use his invisibility in society to his advantage by not trusting anyone. His final advice is to "leave the Mr. Nortons alone." Interestingly, the veteran teasingly accuses his new attendant of having a criminal background, suggesting that it's possible to create an entirely new identity by leaving the past behind—something he clearly hopes for the narrator.

The narrator is immediately confronted with racial tensions in New York. A powerful orator (later revealed to be Ras the Exhorter) delivers a black nationalist speech calling for the complete separation of blacks and whites. The narrator is terrified of this image of black power. Similarly, he is uncomfortable with blacks having equal rights in the city—so uncomfortable, in fact, that he bolts from the subway when forced to stand close to a white woman. He fantasizes about returning to the college and winning back Bledsoe's trust. He is truly blind to his reality and continues to trust fully in Bledsoe's words.

Chapter 8

Summary

In his room at the Men's House, the narrator tries to read the Bible but finds himself unable to concentrate. He can't have blind faith anymore: "This was New York. I had to get a job and earn money." He considers trying to steam open the letters to see what they say, but he decides that breaking Bledsoe's trust isn't worth it. Instead of dwelling on the negativity of his expulsion, the narrator decides to focus on the positive connections he's about to make.

He travels around the city eagerly delivering his letters. Each time, he hands a sealed envelope to the secretary, who takes it to the "important men" the narrator is hoping to meet. The secretaries all come back with the same answer—thanks for stopping by, and he'll call you soon. The secretaries are all kind but somewhat puzzled by his presence. He tries not to lose hope. A week later, he begins to feel impatient, worried that if he doesn't start work soon, he won't be able to save enough money for next year's tuition. He wishes desperately that one

Copyright © 2017 Course Hero, Inc.

of the letters had been addressed to Mr. Norton, and he boldly decides to write one himself. This letter, like all the others, goes unanswered.

Analysis

The narrator puts away the Bible in this chapter, symbolically placing all his faith in Bledsoe, who has promised to help him. As time passes, however, the narrator begins to question Bledsoe's intentions in sending him to New York. He wonders whether this is part of his punishment, but he resolves to remain optimistic about his circumstances. He believes that if he follows Bledsoe's orders, he will absolutely find a job in a powerful company. He is young, naive, and blind to the reality of racism—even in New York—that would prevent him from easily climbing the ranks to success.

He has no job and no money—not even enough to buy himself a train ticket home—but he continues to put blind faith in Bledsoe's message of unquestioning obedience. Even his fantasies perpetuate Bledsoe's message of black subservience. When he imagines meeting the important white men to whom his letters are addressed, the narrator says he will "hardly ever speak above a whisper," and that no matter what is asked of him, he will always say yes: "there was no other word." The reader may pick up on the reality of the narrator's situation before he does—that Bledsoe's letters are incriminating rather than praising—but for now, the narrator is content in the fog that prevents him from seeing his situation clearly.

In a bold move, the narrator writes a letter to Norton asking for help because he believes in Norton's statement of their shared fates. The letter goes unanswered, of course, because Norton likely doesn't even remember the narrator's name, and even if he does, he doesn't care about his situation. These are the narrator's final moments of hope before his dreams are shattered.

Chapter 9

Summary

Delivering his final letter of recommendation, the narrator travels to the home of Mr. Emerson. Along the way he meets a black man hauling a cart of discarded blueprints, singing blues songs the narrator recognizes from his childhood. The man approaches the narrator and repeats the same puzzling question—"is you got the dog?"—growing more agitated by the narrator's confusion. For his part, the narrator is alarmed by the cart-man, comparing him to the "insane" vets from the Golden Day. As the cart-man follows him, however, the narrator softens, and the two begin talking. The man explains that he's carrying around real blueprints because "folks is always making plans and changing 'em." He compares Harlem to a bear's den, and he forgives the narrator for misunderstanding his question about the dog. Although the narrator barely understands what the man is talking about, he feels a strange comfort talking to him. When they part ways, the narrator is overcome with a feeling of pride for his race. Leaving the cart-man, the narrator stops at a café for breakfast. The waiter suggests a typically Southern breakfast of pork chops, grits, and biscuits, which offends the narrator. He orders toast and juice, even though the special sounds much better. When he leaves, he is angered to see the waiter serving the Southern special to a white man.

Emerson's son greets the narrator when he arrives. Young Emerson leaves the narrator alone while he reads the letter, and the narrator surveys the home, filled with so many artifacts from Asia and Africa that it resembles a museum. He is particularly taken with the aviary filled with exotic birds. When Young Emerson returns, he has a strange look on his face, and he babbles about his therapy sessions and injustice in the world. He performs a sort of interview in which he questions the narrator about his experience at college and tries to convince him to finish his studies elsewhere. Eventually, he lets the narrator read Bledsoe's letter. Bledsoe's "recommendation" is actually a warning that this "former student" is permanently expelled from the college for behavior so terrible he had to be misled into leaving. The letter suggests that for everyone's safety, he continue undisturbed in his "severance with the college." In short, the letter suggests that the narrator is dangerous and contact with him should be avoided. Blind with anger, the narrator storms from the house. Young Emerson shouts that the Liberty Paints factory is hiring. Resolved on finding revenge, the narrator calls the factory and is hired immediately.

Copyright © 2017 Course Hero, Inc.

Analysis

The narrator is confronted with his Southern past twice: first with the cart-man's songs and then with the Southern breakfast in the café. Both times his automatic response is offense. To him, the silly songs and Southern food represent slave history and "lesser than" blacks—much like Trueblood's character did in Chapter 2—and he doesn't want to be associated with those stereotypes. After some time, however, he finds comfort in the cart-man's songs because they remind him of home, and he's been terribly homesick since leaving campus. The cart-man's question—"is you got the dog?"—is a black idiomatic greeting basically asking how things are going or if everything is okay. His character further symbolizes black history in his references to jazz music and black folktales such as Jack the Bear. Like Bledsoe, the narrator had previously been disgusted by those base aspects of his identity and had tried to hide them, appearing "whiter" and more educated than ignorant counterparts like the cart-man. As they part ways, however, the narrator thinks fondly of the songs and feels a sense of pride in his people. This suggests to the reader that his character is changing, already discarding some of the harsh brainwashing from his education.

His views of the world are completely shattered when he learns the treacherous truth of Bledsoe's letters. It's unclear why Bledsoe has put so much effort into breaking the narrator down, but the novel suggests self-hatred. Like the narrator, Bledsoe had once been blindly obedient and idealistic. Bledsoe completes his transformation from uplifting mentor, like the Founder, to someone who upholds the myth of white supremacy, like those who broke his own spirit. Although he hasn't literally "lynched" the narrator to maintain his power, Bledsoe believes he has lynched (or destroyed) the narrator's future.

Young Emerson is an interesting character because he straddles the reality between being a powerful white man and an outcast. He may be homosexual. Although this is never stated explicitly, he rests his hand gently on the narrator's knee, and he refers to himself as an "unspeakable." He feels compelled to aid the narrator, battling his sense of injustice in the world. He is sympathetic to the feeling of being an outsider and of having someone else—in this case Bledsoe—define your future. He is wary of telling the narrator the truth, however, because he knows it will shatter the narrator's views of the world. Yet he carries on saying, "There is no point in blinding yourself to the truth." His efforts to help the narrator seem somewhat self-serving, however, as he is clearly struggling with acceptance himself. The novel contrasts these two outsiders: the narrator is truly alone, broke, and without a safety net; however, though Young Emerson may feel isolated from his father, he has enormous wealth, many friends, and opportunities for advancement the narrator could only dream of. When Young Emerson sees a bit of himself in the narrator, the novel reminds the reader that—although well intentioned—he is simply another white man defining the narrator.

Chapter 10

Summary

The narrator starts his new job at the Liberty Paints factory. He reports to his gruff supervisor, Mr. Kimbro, and is given the task of dropping black oil into muddy paint and then stirring it vigorously until it becomes "optic white." The batch of paint the narrator works on is the government's large order for repainting a national monument. The work is fine until the narrator runs out of the black "dope" needed to turn the paint white. Mr. Kimbro, who has already warned the narrator not to ask any questions and to simply do what he's told, vaguely tells him to get more dope from the tank room. The narrator is faced with 10 different tanks, however, and the dope he chooses actually turns the paint a gooey gray. Kimbro is outraged and threatens to fire the narrator. He adds another mixture to the paint that lightens the gray effect.

Later, the narrator is sent down to the boiler room to work alongside the crotchety Lucius Brockway. Brockway is an old man who has been working the machines for more than 25 years, clinging onto his job by spewing vitriolic hatred at anyone—including the narrator—whom he perceives as a threat. He hates young black men because they're "ungrateful" for their jobs, and to prevent losing his job to one, Brockway refuses to write down any information about the machines and how they work. He knows everything about the machines and the layout of the factory, and it's his job to create the base for all the paint. He gives the narrator one job: watching the boiler gauges to ensure they don't overheat.

During lunch, the narrator returns to the locker room and

Copyright © 2017 Course Hero, Inc.

unintentionally interrupts a union meeting. He knows very little about unions and has no intention of joining one, but the members immediately accuse him of being a snitch and threaten to harm him. Their leader convinces them to perform an internal investigation of the narrator's character before passing judgment, and they let him go. Returning to the boiler room, Brockway is furious that the narrator attended a union meeting and attacks him. The two come to blows, beating each other. When he realizes that he is physically no match for the narrator, Brockway rigs the boilers to explode.

Analysis

Liberty Paints functions as an extended metaphor for race relations and race expectations in the novel. The main paint color produced at the factory is Optic White, which is described as being so pure that one would have to crack open a lump of painted charcoal "with a sledge hammer to prove it wasn't white clear through!" It is impossible to ignore the comparisons of the paint factory covering "blackness" with white paint to the narrator's desire to suppress his black heritage and appear more educated, or "white." Ellison reinforces this comparison by calling the finished paint a "graduate." The fact that the paint is being sent to a national monument, however, suggests a larger theme of "whitewashing" national history by failing to acknowledge black contributions. This idea is underscored by the details of Lucius Brockway's contributions to the Optic White paint. He seemingly created the formula and masterminds daily production—"ain't a ... thing that happens down here that ain't as iffen I done put my black hands into it!"—yet he receives no credit for his work. He is confined in a hot, dirty room 3 feet (.9 meters) below ground level. He is despised by his coworkers and constantly fears losing his job. Meanwhile, the white bosses, who admittedly don't understand how he bases levels of production work, get rich.

Brockway could potentially benefit from his contributions with the support of a union, but he's too fearful (and angry) to join. Brockway is from the same generation as the narrator's grandfather, believing that financial success is enough, and the black race shouldn't agitate for social equality. He hates the young union boys because they threaten his job. Like Bledsoe, Brockway is only concerned with his personal success, not the success of the next generation.

Throughout this chapter the narrator is repeatedly told not to ask questions and to simply be obedient: "You have to catch on by doing exactly what I tell you." Everyone in the factory has an idea of who the narrator is—Mr. Kimbro thinks he's a fool, the union members think he's a snitch, and Brockway thinks he's a liar. Everyone casts judgment on him without giving him the opportunity to explain himself. This suggests that even though the North is freer than the South for a black man, the narrator is still a victim of racial expectation. In the North he is still invisible as an individual and will have to fight to create his own identity.

Chapter 11

Summary

The narrator wakes, dazed, in a hospital, being peered over by doctors who discuss his treatment. Although the narrator is merely stunned from the explosion, the doctors decide to keep him a few days for observation. He is given a pill and promptly passes out. When he wakes again, he is being roughly strapped to an electric shock machine. Without explanation, he is given three rounds of shock treatments, which are horrifically painful and almost completely erase his memory. As he bounces wildly on the table, one of the doctors jokingly remarks that "they really do have rhythm, don't they?" After the treatments, the narrator can no longer remember his name, where he came from, or why he's in the hospital. In the recovery area, a doctor writes questions on a card. Questions like "Who are you" and "What is your name" are met with a blank stare, much to the doctor's frustration. Trying a different tactic, the doctor writes, "Boy, who was Brer Rabbit?" At first the narrator is angered by the question, but a wave of comforting nostalgia washes over him. Soon after, he is able to rise from his hospital bed, is deemed "cured," and is released. Before he goes, he signs papers acknowledging that the paint factory is not responsible for his injuries. In exchange he receives a small compensation.

Analysis

This chapter functions as a metaphorical "rebirth" for the narrator. His past is literally erased through the invasive shock treatments, and he has no choice but to recreate his identity. The reader is reminded of the veteran doctor's advice in

Copyright © 2017 Course Hero, Inc.

Chapter 7 to "be your own father" in that the narrator reenters the world alone. The doctor's question of "What is your mother's name" elicits no response. The narrator has no mother, no father, no identity. Interestingly, he responds to questions about Brer Rabbit and Buckeye the Rabbit, two characters from slave folktales. This suggests that even in reinventing himself, the narrator will never be able to escape the slave culture. At first the narrator is angered by these cultural references—they represent the same aspects of culture he despised in Trueblood and the cart-man—but that disgust melts into comfort. He is no longer interested in "whitewashing" his identity, and he doesn't have to hide his cultural identity any longer.

Chapter 12

Summary

The narrator takes the train back to Harlem and plans to return to his room at the Men's House, but he collapses on the street. A kindly black woman named Mary helps him up and takes him back to her house. She lets him rest in her bed and feeds him warm soup. She talks at length about the responsibility young, black men have to uplift their race, suggesting that the narrator should become a community leader. When he's feeling well again, he returns to the Men's House. As soon as he walks through the doors, though, he realizes that he won't be able to stay here. He feels angered by all the people he sees, the "college boys working to return to school down South," the cultural leaders, the reverends, the dreamers who still believe in "freedom within segregation." As he walks to his room to collect his things, he sees a laughing man he believes to be Dr. Bledsoe. In a rush of fury, he empties a spittoon over the man's head, only to learn that it's not Bledsoe but a prominent black preacher. Banned from the house, the narrator must elicit the help of a porter to retrieve his belongings.

With nowhere else to go, the narrator returns to Mary's house. He pays rent for as long as he can, until his compensation check from the factory runs out. Even when he can no longer pay, Mary allows him to stay and feeds him well. She hopes that the narrator will make something of himself and repay her kindness in the future. The narrator doesn't know what to do with his future and finds Mary's constant preaching about his social responsibility annoying.

Analysis

A complete opposite to Dr. Bledsoe, Mary believes firmly in the strength of the black community and that all black people have a responsibility to look out for one another. She takes the narrator in without question, and feeds and houses him until he is strong enough to return to the club. She does so out of a feeling of obligation to her race, and with the hope that the narrator will feel inspired to uplift his race as well. Mary is one of the only kind characters in the novel, and she represents the new type of mother for the narrator.

When the narrator returns to the Men's House, he is faced with a variety of characters who represent everything he is leaving behind: students, educators, cultural leaders, and so on. He has no desire to define himself within these groups; he is going to create a new identity for himself, completely individual to the labels these black men seem to have accepted for themselves. By dumping the spittoon over the man's head thinking he is Bledsoe, the narrator reveals that he is capable of lashing out against his perceived injustice. His character is growing from the naive, obedient boy at the novel's opening. As such, he shirks everyone's expectations for him. For example he finds Mary's insistence that he become a cultural leader annoying, and he wants to identify himself without help or input from anyone else.

Chapter 13

Summary

The narrator leaves his apartment to get some fresh air and is angered by the shop signs selling products to make black customers appear "whiter." He comes across a man selling baked yams and is overwhelmed with nostalgia. The yams are sweet and warming. He eats them hungrily and feels more positive with each bite. Although the yams fill him with homesickness, he is "suddenly overcome by an intense feeling of freedom." He fantasizes about what people from his former life would say if they saw him enjoying something so "black" in the middle of the street. Eating the yams unleashes a rage against Bledsoe for turning against his race. The narrator fantasizes about how confronting Bledsoe with his heritage would ruin him. His euphoria soon wanes when he bites into a frostbitten yam.

Copyright © 2017 Course Hero, Inc.

As he walks down the street, the narrator sees an elderly couple being evicted from their apartment by two large white men. The men throw the couple's belongings on the street, including the old man's yellow freedom papers. The old woman pleads with the narrator to save her Bible and sobs to the white men that she just wants to go back into her house to pray. The narrator watches in disgust as all the personal effects of the old couple are carelessly tossed into the snow. When one of the white men strikes the old woman for trying to return to her house, the gathered crowd erupts in anger. Amid the chaos, the narrator finds his voice. He bellows, "We're a law-abiding people and a slow-to-anger people." He pleads with the crowd to be angry but wise. Everyone has turned to listen to him, even the white men. With the crowd's undivided attention, he speaks for several minutes, focusing on the collective destiny "we all have" of being dispossessed. Despite his moving, inspirational speech, violence erupts. The narrator admits to being "beside myself with excitement." He flees the violence over the rooftops, recognizing that he's being followed.

Just when he thinks he has escaped successfully, a voice says, "That was a masterful bit of persuasion, brother." The white man, who is later revealed as Brother Jack, invites him out for coffee and praises his eloquent speech. He offers the narrator a job working as a speaker for his organization. The narrator leaves, sure he'll never contact Brother Jack again.

Analysis

After consistent rejection, pain, degradation, and depression, the narrator finally finds his voice. It should come as no surprise to the reader that the narrator's voice is formed soon after he accepts his past—symbolized by the baked yams, which nourish his body and soul. The yams break through the cold, literally and figuratively, to soothe the narrator's depression. His feeling of freedom is contrasted with anger that his culture has been suppressed for so long, which unleashes in a rage against Bledsoe. Men like Bledsoe have taught him that enjoying black culture makes him socially inferior, but now that the narrator has no interest in earning white approval, he is happy to embrace his culture: "I yam what I am!" he happily exclaims.

When the narrator witnesses the eviction of the elderly couple, he sees the helplessness of his entire race. He is particularly moved to see the old man's freedom papers. The old man must have worked hard, he thinks, to earn freedom from slavery, only to find that his new life is nothing more than a new type of slavery. The narrator recognizes how this social dispossession and helplessness in the face of white power affects his entire race, and witnessing this injustice fuels his voice. His speech illustrates the collective destiny of the black struggle in a world so influenced by skin color. His seemingly contradictory speech encourages the crowd to follow the law but blames the law for causing the elderly couple's plight, creating the same moral ambiguity as his grandfather's deathbed speech. While fleeing, he witnesses flashes of death and birth imagery—the funeral parlor and the woman in labor—further symbolizing his rebirth.

Brother Jack seems interested in the plight of the black people but encourages the narrator not to focus on the "individuals." Although his motivation is different, Brother Jack presents another example of a white character who sees African Americans as labels, refusing to acknowledge their individuality. The narrator had been moved by the elderly couple as dispossessed human beings, however to Brother Jack they are "dead-in-living." Interestingly, despite Brother Jack's insistence to forget individualism, the narrator thinks working for the Brotherhood might provide him the opportunity to create a new identity for himself.

Chapter 14

Summary

The narrator returns to Mary's apartment, where she is cooking cabbage, another smell from his childhood. Realizing that Mary cooks cabbage three times a week and thus must be poor, he decides to take the job and contribute to the household. Brother Jack soon picks him up in a car filled with three other men, saying they are going to a party. The car pulls up in front of an expensive-looking building, the Chthonian. The narrator is shuffled into a large, opulent room where he meets Emma, a beautiful woman who does not move away from him when they are pressed together in a doorway. As Emma pours him Southern bourbon to drink, the narrator reflects on feeling actually "seen" by her on an equal, human level, not based on the color of his skin. This comfort though is dashed when he overhears Emma whispering to Brother Jack, "But don't you think he should be a little blacker?" He wonders again why he

Copyright © 2017 Course Hero, Inc.

is there and what they could possibly want from him.

Later the narrator is brought into the library, where a group of men, "the Brotherhood," have gathered. They say their mission is to work for a better world for all people, to combat the dispossession of heritage. They praise the narrator's gift for speech and ask if he would be interested in being the new Booker T. Washington. The narrator cannot believe what he is hearing. He concurs that Booker T. Washington was an important figure in black history, but not as great as the Founder. The narrator is uncertain whether they have chosen the right man, but he takes the job anyway. To join the Brotherhood, however, the narrator must adopt a new name, identity, and apartment.

After the narrator returns to the party, a drunken man asks him to sing some old Negro spirituals. Brother Jack lashes out that the narrator doesn't sing, but the drunken man repeats his request until Brother Jack has him removed. The guests are deeply embarrassed, and the room falls deathly quiet. The narrator laughs hysterically, which is somewhat infectious. He stays at the party until 5 a.m. and then stumbles home to Mary's. When he sees that she has changed his sheets, he is filled with gratitude. He will be sad to leave Mary, but decides that "history makes harsh demands of us all."

Analysis

Although the narrator doesn't fully trust Brother Jack, he takes the job offer hoping to better Mary's life. He is deeply appreciative of Mary's generosity, and even though her determination was annoying, she desires to make him into something she will be proud of. His financial goal to make Mary's impoverished life more comfortable is contrasted starkly with the opulence of the party at the Chthonian. The great hall is revealed to be a Brotherhood building, which leads the narrator to wonder how they can afford such lavishness; certainly the money they've earned should go back into the community they claim to serve. Although the narrator doesn't realize it yet, this scene clearly portrays the organization's corruption.

Emma's question of whether the narrator is black enough to lead their Harlem division sheds light on inner racism within black communities. Throughout the novel various characters are mocked or criticized for having light skin. To the outside world, lighter skin is better—readers many recall the skin-lightening products that angered the narrator in the previous chapter—because "white is right." But in strong black communities where cultural heritage is still appreciated, lighter-skinned blacks are viewed with the same distaste as whites. Emma questions whether the black community will listen to the light-skinned narrator. It leaves the narrator feeling depressed that he is still judged by his skin color even within the black community. It also perpetuates the idea of image being more important than individuality.

Even though the narrator has made a successful step forward in his life, he still feels pressure to hide his true self. For example, he hides his fear when dancing with Emma, and he hides his admiration of the Founder's views. He feels uncomfortable having to leave Mary's home, but he desperately wants to make something of himself. The theme of reemergence is expanded as the narrator must cease contact with his family and take on a new identity: he sheds his old life in the expectation that this metamorphosis will allow him finally to be seen as an individual in the world.

Chapter 15

Summary

The narrator awakens after his long night out with the Brotherhood. His ears throb, his body aches, and he scratches himself until he bleeds. Someone in an apartment upstairs pounds the steam line, causing an unbearable commotion. Searching for something to bang against the pipes in protest, he finds a cast iron Negro bank, a piece of "early Americana." The "self-mocking" image that consumes coins through a red, grinning mouth fills the narrator with rage. He wonders why Mary would keep such a hideous item in her home. He smashes the bank against the pipe, destroying it. Coins and pieces of the iron bank's face fall to the ground. He sweeps the broken pieces into a package and hurries into the kitchen to meet Mary for breakfast. He gives Mary a $100 bill, which she initially refuses, certain the "white folk" will think she stole it. Suddenly, the kitchen is overtaken with a swarm of roaches, which the narrator helps her kill before leaving. As he walks to his new office, he tries to discard the broken bank pieces in a garbage can, but a "short yellow woman" calls him a "field nigger," implying he is not clean or respectable. When she threatens to call the police, he digs the package out of the

Copyright © 2017 Course Hero, Inc.

garbage can, soiling his clothes and hands in the process.

The narrator continues on his way, feeling lonely and depressed. He drops the package in the snow, glad to finally be rid of it, but a few blocks later a man chases him down to return it to him. He calls the narrator a "confidence man" trying to work a "pigeon drop." On the subway he notices a man reading a newspaper with an article about the "Violent Protest over Harlem Eviction." The narrator rushes to the next newspaper stand, buys a newspaper, and hungrily reads about the events. This restores his confidence, and he goes to buy an expensive suit. The narrator's new apartment is comfortably furnished and bright. He takes a bath and reads about the Brotherhood. He notices the package with the broken bank pieces on the table and decides to dispose of it later.

Analysis

The central thematic image from this chapter is Mary's bank, which the narrator destroys at the same time that he "shatters" his old identity and accepts the new one created for him by the Brotherhood. In a way, the bank represents the narrator's distorted views of himself: he is eager to take the money and prestige offered to him by the white man, willing to give up everything and blindly follow another white man's (Brother Jack's) bidding. The bank is ominously "choking, filled to the throat with coins," suggesting the narrator's decision to join the Brotherhood for money will not end well. As the novel progresses, it becomes clear that in the Brotherhood, the narrator is another black man unquestionably doing the bidding of a white man—in a way, he is a "slave" to the Brotherhood's wishes. It is not a coincidence that the narrator notes his head is "about to explode" only moments before he "explodes" the bank on the pipes.

The symbolism of the bank shifts later in the chapter. Like the Sambo doll and the chain in the briefcase, the smashed pieces become symbolic of the "baggage" of slavery that all black men must carry with them, underscored by the narrator's frustrating inability to dispose of the pieces. Both people who stop the narrator from discarding the pieces are black and, like his grandfather, encourage the narrator to maintain a subservient attitude. This reinforces the theme of inner racism, suggesting that the security the narrator felt upon arriving in Harlem was due to Mary's kindness rather than belonging to the black community at large. The bank pieces return a final time, at the end of the chapter, when the narrator is bathed and wearing an expensive new suit. Despite his best efforts to create a new identity, he is reminded that true transformation is impossible. Instead of embracing his new identity truthfully, the narrator is forced to lie throughout the chapter—to Mary about the money, to the man about the package, and to himself about his identity—in order to progress.

Chapter 16

Summary

The narrator travels with Brother Jack to the Brotherhood rally where he is to give his first speech. While waiting in the dressing room, the narrator discovers a photograph of a boxer who lost his sight, reminding him of a story his father told of also being beaten blind in a fight. This makes the narrator increasingly sad and restless. He is nervous and notices his legs in their new blue trousers. He contemplates how these can be the same legs that went through so much pain (school, the hospital, and battle royal). He realizes they are the same legs "on which I've come so far from home," and if he is successful tonight, these legs will take him on a road to something new. As the narrator waits to go onstage, his mind wanders through daydreams and memories, remembering first a syphilitic man begging for change with a diseased hand and later a neighborhood dog, Master, who despite being chained to a tree frightened the narrator as a boy.

The signal comes for the narrator and the others to enter the stage. As he walks out, the spotlight temporarily blinds him and he falls. He can no longer see the audience. He starts off nervously, but applause kicks in his adrenaline. In all the excitement, the narrator forgets the freshly learned phrases of the Brotherhood and decides to just rely on his instinct and tradition. He gives a passionate speech about dispossession using an analogy of a man throwing stones at a pair of one-eyed men. The one-eyed men blame each other because in their partial blindness, they don't see the third man. The narrator urges the audience to work together to fight against dispossession, saying, "Let's take back our pillaged eyes! Let's reclaim our sight!" He is so overwhelmed by the emotion in the room that he begins to weep. The narrator feels the speech is an overwhelming success, but the Brothers surprisingly offer only negativity and criticism. They call the speech "dissatisfactory" and "the worst you could have done." They

Copyright © 2017 Course Hero, Inc.

Course Hero

say the speech was hysterical, irresponsible, incorrect, backward, and reactionary. Nevertheless, when the narrator returns home that night, he is proud of what he said and of the connection he felt to the audience and the black race.

Analysis

This chapter is full of references to blindness, eyes, and seeing clearly, linking the theme of vision to the narrator's quest for identity. In his speech the narrator suggests that blindness to each other's realities pulls a society apart (like the pair of one-eyed men blaming each other on the street). Speaking passionately, the narrator urges the audience to work together for advancement against social dispossession. In short, this speech summarizes many of the novel's events. So many characters, such as Dr. Bledsoe, Mr. Norton, Lucius Brockway, and even the Brotherhood itself, blind themselves to the individuality of those around them to protect their personal gains. The narrator sees that for an entire community to be raised up, everyone must work together. The speech rallies the audience into a frenzy. They believe him and are ready to take action. The narrator feels surprise, then, when the Brotherhood claims his speech was a disaster. They are only interested in progressing the organization's politics, not in truly uplifting the community. They had hired the narrator to be an unthinking mouthpiece for the organization and are worried about the true power of his persuasive speech. They send him for further education with Brother Hambro, which will no doubt be similar to the "white is right" education he received in college.

This chapter is also filled with foreshadowing. Although the narrator doesn't yet understand that the organization is using him, he feels uncomfortable with their request for unquestioning obedience. He compares Brother Jack to the dog, Master, from his childhood. Even though the dog was chained to a tree, he still worried it could hurt him. The other daydream, of the syphilitic man with the disfigured hand, hints at the personal destruction and emotional decay the narrator must undergo in his pursuit of money and fame with the Brotherhood. The fact that both dreams are summoned from his childhood suggests that the narrator will sacrifice even more of his personal identity in pursuit of his dreams. In his new suit, he already struggles to recognize himself as his transformation begins to take place.

Chapter 17

Summary

After four months studying Brotherhood ideologies with Brother Hambro, the narrator is thrilled to learn that he has been appointed chief spokesman for the Harlem branch of the Brotherhood. His main duty, Brother Jack says, will be to keep the people "stirred up," gaining as many new members as possible. He warns the narrator to "Say what the people want to hear," but "in such a way that they'll do what we wish."

At his first Brotherhood meeting, the narrator is pleased to have some of his ideas recognized. He also learns more about Ras the Exhorter, the powerful speaker he saw on his first day in Harlem. Ras, a separatist, believes in the superiority of the black race. As such, he views all black members of the Brotherhood as traitors to their people. He promotes violence as a way of demanding civil rights and loathes the Brotherhood for allowing white men to speak about social needs in a black community. The narrator finds himself drawn to Tod Clifton, a handsome and kind young Brotherhood member.

That evening the narrator gives a speech about the Brotherhood to a large group of residents in Harlem. Suddenly, a gang of 20 men attack the crowd, led by Ras the Exhorter. During the violence, the streetlamps break and men fight in darkness. A man attacks the narrator and calls him "Uncle Tom," but the narrator successfully fights him off. Clifton battles Ras, who pins him to the ground and pulls out a knife. Instead of killing Clifton, Ras begins to weep. Even though he views Clifton as a traitor, he says he cannot kill another black man. He pleads with Clifton and doesn't understand why he is working with white men, claiming they will just betray him in the end.

Analysis

After years of struggle, the narrator believes he has finally been rewarded for all his hard work when he is promoted to chief spokesman. However, no announcement of his promotion is made during his first leadership meeting, and he is given the promotion on April Fools' Day. Both of these seemingly small details foreshadow the fact that this promotion will not be the personal advancement the narrator had hoped for. During the

Copyright © 2017 Course Hero, Inc.

confrontation with Ras and his gang, the narrator is called an "Uncle Tom"—a racist term for a black man who is willingly subservient to white masters—and a "sellout." Both derogatory terms suggest that by working for the Brotherhood, the narrator is betraying his race for personal success. The thought of being pawns in a white man's plan is so emotional for separatists like Ras that it brings the violent man to tears. He pleads with the narrator and Clifton to join his work because "brothers are the same color"—meaning that all black men have the same goals. Although his words are powerful, they aren't necessarily true. The narrator has suffered terrible losses as a result of other black men's actions, such as the expulsion from Dr. Bledsoe and the factory explosion from Lucius Brockway.

This chapter is filled with bullfighting imagery—both in the bar El Toro (Spanish for "the bull") and in the fight between Clifton and Ras. Bullfighting is a violent sport where color is used to taunt and instigate action. The sport is an especially fitting symbol for the rising conflicts and violence in Harlem. In this ominous foreshadowing of violence, it's unclear whether the narrator is the bullfighter or the bull—the one causing destruction or the one fanning the flame.

Finally, this chapter creates a strong bond between the two young orators: the narrator and Tod Clifton. They are both talented, handsome, and ambitious. The parallels between the two men will become increasingly important as the novel progresses and Clifton grows disillusioned with the Brotherhood's ideals.

Chapter 18

Summary

The narrator finds an unsettling letter mixed into the Brotherhood mail warning him that it's a white man's world and not to "go too fast" or "they will cut you down." The letter unnerves the narrator and he calls in Brother Tarp. Brother Tarp promises that the Brotherhood is pleased with the narrator's work and that he shouldn't worry. Later, he tells the narrator that he worked on a chain gang for 19 years, finally escaping by twisting open his leg chain. He pulls the oily piece of metal from his pocket and gifts it to the narrator for luck. Although the narrator is uncertain what to do with the link, it reminds him of the tradition of a father passing a watch down to his son. He is flooded with memories of his past that he swiftly tries to suppress. When Tarp leaves, the narrator feels confident again. Before long, the "meddling" Brother Wrestrum enters the room and demands to know the meaning of the chain, and when he learns the story, he requests that the narrator get rid of it. Wrestrum chastises that symbols like these only dramatize the difference between black and white men. He implores the narrator to trust "other" (white) Brothers because they are the organizers who will free black citizens from their oppression. Perplexed and annoyed by Wrestrum's unsolicited rant, the narrator wonders if Wrestrum wrote the letter. Two weeks later, at a Brotherhood meeting, Wrestrum accuses the narrator of using his position within the Brotherhood for personal gain. Wrestrum steps up his claims by supposing the narrator is an opportunist who wants to be a dictator. Seething with anger, the narrator looks around the silent room and sees Wrestrum is getting away with his outrageous claims. When asked if he has anything to say to defend himself, the narrator contends that Wrestrum is a liar and a scoundrel. Brother Jack asks him to briefly leave so the rest of the committee can discuss Wrestrum's claims.

Although Wrestrum's claims are later deemed false, Brother Jack defends him, saying he was only "thinking of the good of the Brotherhood." While the Brotherhood investigates the narrator more fully, he has been reassigned to the women's division downtown. Disheartened but refusing to be broken, the narrator convinces himself that this new transfer will be a challenge and that he has the skills to effectively promote any part of the Brotherhood, even women's issues.

Analysis

The most significant symbol in this chapter is Brother Tarp's leg shackle. A physical symbol of his slavery, the chain is now twisted open to symbolize his freedom. The fact that Brother Tarp still walks with a limp, however, suggests that the wounds of slavery can never completely be forgotten. In keeping the chain, Brother Tarp acknowledges that he is never free of his baggage, in the same way that the narrator carries around the calfskin briefcase. By giving the narrator the chain, he becomes like a father figure, encouraging the narrator to learn and grow from his own struggles. Wrestrum's tone-deaf request that the narrator dispose of the chain suggests that he, like Mr. Norton, cannot accept that people continue to be affected by the legacy of slavery after emancipation. The chain

Copyright © 2017 Course Hero, Inc.

is a brutal reminder of the exploitation of African Americans, a reminder that blames the men like Wrestrum (and Norton) who benefited.

Wrestrum's accusation that the narrator is an opportunist is particularly ironic. It's clear that Wrestrum is desperate to make a name for himself in the organization and uses his false accusations to be viewed as a dedicated, sacrificial leader. He is exactly the type of opportunist he accuses the narrator of being. In this way, Wrestrum becomes yet another white man who keeps the narrator "running."

The letter in this chapter parallels the recommendations given to the narrator when he left the college. The whites in the Brotherhood, like Mr. Norton, reveal the racist truth behind their public actions.

Chapter 19

Summary

After the narrator's first lecture for the women's division of the Brotherhood, he is approached by a white woman who invites him over for a cup of coffee to explain the organization's ideologies to her. Although uncomfortable, the narrator accepts. At her luxurious apartment, the narrator tries to discuss political issues, but the woman isn't really listening. She leans closer and closer to the narrator, clearly trying to seduce him. The narrator is both angered and intrigued by the woman's interest, and despite wanting to "smash her," the narrator relents and sleeps with her. Shortly after, the narrator wakes to hear the woman's husband come home from a business trip. He looks into his wife's bedroom and gives no response to the narrator being there. Terrified that he is being set up or tested, the narrator flees the apartment. For the next week, he worries that the organization will punish him for his indiscretion. When he is eventually called into headquarters, it is because he is being sent back to Harlem to regroup the followers; Brother Clifton is missing.

The narrator suspects that the husband is a member of the Brotherhood and that he's being set up, a theory that is neither proven nor dispelled. The narrator is called into headquarters soon after his indiscretion, however, and coldly told that his time with the women's league is ended and that he must return to New York. It's unclear whether he is being punished or if he is truly needed in the wake of Clifton's disappearance.

Analysis

In this short chapter the civil rights movement parallels the feminist movement. Readers see both African Americans and American women as second-class citizens unworthy of equality. The wife, like the narrator, is never named, suggesting that women are afforded the same sense of invisibility or "living outside of history" as African Americans. The woman who seduces the narrator is not really interested in politics, as she suggests. She is interested in acting out her racist sexual fantasies of being taken by a "primitive black buck."

Many scholars have criticized *Invisible Man* for its lack of complex female characters. The women in the novel are either asexual mother types (like Mary) or sexual deviants (like the wife, the various prostitutes, and Sybil, who will be introduced later). This creates a strong parallel between the two movements, as both groups—women and African Americans—are viewed through the stereotypical labels and expectations created by white men.

Chapters 20–21

Summary

Chapter 20

The narrator returns to Harlem to rejoin the Brotherhood there. He visits a favorite bar of Brother Maceo's and recognizes some of the other patrons as men the Brotherhood once aided. He greets them by saying, "Good evening, Brothers" and is surprised that the men seem offended. The bartender informs him that the Brotherhood has been focusing on national issues rather than local, resulting in many needy locals feeling abandoned. Many of the Brothers, like Brother Maceo, have left the city. Returning to his old office, the narrator is annoyed that there is no one there and that no information has been left for him regarding the planning meeting. Brother Tarp has left, taking all his belongings and the Frederick Douglass poster with him. No one calls, but the narrator hurries to headquarters

Copyright © 2017 Course Hero, Inc.

anyway. When he arrives, however, it's obvious that the leaders excluded him on purpose.

Angered, the narrator decides to buy a new pair of shoes. Leaving the store, he comes across a young man selling paper Sambo dolls. He is shocked to see that the young man is actually Tod Clifton. The narrator is so horrified to see Clifton hawking racist dolls that he spits on him. Clifton makes eye contact with the narrator but doesn't react to seeing him there. Suddenly, a lookout whistles as a police officer approaches. Clifton quickly gathers up his Sambo dolls and scurries away. The narrator follows, snatching up a Sambo doll Clifton missed. The officer catches up with Clifton, and the two get into an argument. Clifton strikes the officer, who pulls out his gun and shoots Clifton dead.

Leaving the scene of Clifton's murder, the narrator struggles to understand why Clifton left the Brotherhood, why he would sell the Sambo dolls, and why he would strike the officer. He realizes that the Brotherhood had been using Clifton, just as they were using him, and that Clifton found his own way to escape.

Chapter 21

The narrator returns to the district offices. His head is still reeling from what he's seen, and he struggles to break the news. When he does announce it, the young Brotherhood members are grief-stricken. Overwhelmed with guilt that he witnessed Clifton die, the narrator decides to organize a public funeral to mourn him. He tries numerous times to contact headquarters, but no one will return his calls. On his own, the narrator brings Clifton's death to public attention through posters, contacts with preachers, and newspaper articles. He organizes a protest march before Clifton's funeral, with black banners that read: "Brother Tod Clifton. Our hope shot down."

During the march the narrator feels emotional when he hears old slave spirituals being sung. He realizes he hasn't planned a speech, so when he is called to give the eulogy, he speaks from his heart. He repeats the details of Clifton's death, saying Tod Clifton's name over and over. He urges the audience to forget about Clifton and go home. The eulogy isn't political, even though the narrator knows he could have used the platform to advance Brotherhood philosophies.

Analysis

Together these two chapters function as the climax of the novel and a major turning point in the narrator's growth. As soon as the narrator returns to Harlem, it's clear that things are changing and he isn't part of the movement. The Brotherhood is hiding things from him and excluding him from meetings, which leaves the narrator feeling blindsided. When he realizes the Brotherhood has taken advantage of him, he thinks, "I'd been asleep, dreaming." Once again, just as the narrator creates an identity for himself—this time as a community leader—and is no longer invisible, the rug is pulled from under him, and he must scramble to find where he belongs. It's interesting to note that during the funeral march, the narrator becomes emotional when he hears old slave spirituals being sung. They have taken on new meaning for him, and they resonate deeply. He feels connected with the songs, and he feels how the collective slave history ties him with every black man in the audience, including Tod Clifton. This is a stark difference from the narrator's disgusted reactions to slave history at other points in the novel, which highlights his personal growth. He is slowly realizing the impossibility of escaping his past to completely rewrite his identity.

Seeing Tod Clifton selling the Sambo dolls is shocking. Sambo is a racist stereotype of an ignorant slave, happy to be subservient to his master. Clifton elevates the stereotype by putting the puppet on strings, like a marionette, to accentuate Sambo's inability to think or move on his own. At first the narrator is outraged that Clifton would denigrate his people by selling the doll, perpetuating a stereotype just to make money. After Clifton is killed and the narrator has time to reflect, however, he realizes that he and Clifton were nothing more than dancing Sambos for the Brotherhood, whose ideologies and practices they followed without question. The narrator did everything the Brotherhood asked of him—changing his name, moving into a new apartment, leaving Harlem, and more—and was excluded and forgotten in return. The Brotherhood has even abandoned its original mission of helping disenfranchised locals, which inadvertently makes the narrator an enemy of the people he had tried to serve. Clifton realized this long before the narrator, which is likely why he disappeared. No longer able to define himself as a leader and with nowhere to turn, Clifton self-destructed. Clifton was well versed in race relations and knew that striking an officer would be a death sentence. The narrator realizes that Clifton wasn't running away from the officer; he was purposefully running toward his own death.

Copyright © 2017 Course Hero, Inc.

By placing the discarded Sambo doll in his briefcase—the symbol for slavery's "baggage"—alongside Brother Tarp's chain, the narrator acknowledges the doll's power as a symbol for black suppression. Just as his grandfather suggested, the narrator, like every other black man, must carry the Sambo stereotype with him. Before the funeral the narrator realizes that Clifton's selling of the dolls was ironic—a way to use the stereotype to his advantage—reclaiming the stereotype in order to define it. Clifton's act was similar to the use of the word "nigger" among African Americans: by using the word within their community, they strip it of its intended meaning and reclaim it.

Throughout both chapters, the narrator struggles with the idea of history and legacy, wondering how an unknown black man like Clifton would be remembered, rather than lost to invisibility, especially when the white man has all the power to record history. The reader is reminded of the attack scene in the prologue, when the narrator is reported as a mugger instead of an attacker. The narrator feels overwhelmed with his responsibility to record Clifton's death honestly because he had been there to witness it. During the eulogy the narrator repeats Tod Clifton's name over and over, rescuing him from invisibility and forcing the audience to see him as an individual. He cannot bring himself to turn Clifton's legacy into a political abstraction. He cannot simply be a martyr, another black man killed by a white officer. He has to be something more. In his death, at least, Clifton can be an individual.

Chapter 22

Summary

The narrator is called to headquarters to discuss Clifton's funeral. Clearly the Brotherhood is upset that the funeral wasn't used as a platform to promote its politics. The narrator tries to defend himself against their mocking tones by saying he tried to honor his "personal responsibility" to Clifton's memory. This statement, "personal responsibility," changes Brother Jack's irritation to anger. He snaps sarcastically at everything the narrator says, repeatedly calling him a "great tactician," and mocks the emotion the narrator feels after witnessing Clifton's murder. All Brother Jack seems to care about is the fact that Clifton was selling Sambo dolls, which could damage the Brotherhood's reputation. He shows no sympathy for the death of a man he once claimed to be his friend. Angered by their response when he was trying to do his best, the narrator shouts back accusingly, speaking out of turn and blatantly disrespecting Brotherhood leaders. He claims to know more about the situation than the leaders ever could because they are white and the narrator and Clifton are both black. Again, he defends his decisions by claiming that he did his best—and what else could he do when the committee refused to answer his calls—but Brother Jack chides, "You were not hired to think." The narrator retorts that he must respond to the cries of Harlem's people, that responding is his responsibility, to which Jack angrily replies, "Our job is not to ask them what they think but to tell them!" This is a step too far for the narrator, who accuses Jack of living like a slave master: "Wouldn't it be better if they called you Marse Jack?" he cries. Outraged, Jack lunges across the table, and his glass eye pops out. The narrator is dumbfounded. He had no idea Jack was partially blind. Smirking, Jack tells him that he lost his eye on duty, sacrificing more for the cause than the narrator could dream of. Calming, Jack tells the narrator to visit Brother Hambro for instructions about the new program, which he assumes the narrator will help carry out without question.

Analysis

The narrator's character has grown significantly from the timid student at the novel's opening. Now that he has found his voice, he uses it to speak his mind, regardless of audience. He defends himself to the white leaders of the Brotherhood, even shouting back, mocking, and disrespecting them. He claims to know more about Harlem's needs than the leaders ever will because he is black while the leaders are white. He has accepted his cultural roots and, unlike Bledsoe, no longer wishes to earn power by serving a white master. In the argument with Jack, the Sambo symbolism becomes even stronger when he admits that the narrator was hired "not to think" but to unquestionably carry out the Brotherhood's plan. He also makes it clear that all Harlem residents—although it appears he is speaking primarily about the black residents—are simply pawns he can use to progress his own agenda. Brother Tobitt, a fellow leader, tells the narrator that he's married to a "fine, intelligent Negro girl" as if that makes him more an expert of the black community than the narrator himself. The fact that he calls his wife a "girl" instead of a "woman," however, reveals his inability to view her—or any other African American—as his equal, a point the narrator

Copyright © 2017 Course Hero, Inc.

catches immediately.

The narrator organized the funeral not only to honor Clifton's life but also to give the black community a chance to grieve its loss. The Brotherhood, however, views Clifton as a traitor for selling the Sambo dolls, judging his entire life and legacy for this one act, completely disregarding the good work he did for the Brotherhood. The narrator recognizes that white men write history and that Clifton would be remembered for this singular accident had the narrator not carried out the funeral. He hoped to honor the complexity of Clifton's character rather than view him in a simplistically negative light, the fate to which Trueblood is condemned.

The narrator is at a crossroads. He wants to stay in the Brotherhood because he wants to create a legacy for himself, but he recognizes its corruption—the group's inability to see the true needs of the community, symbolized again in Brother Jack's glass eye. He resolves to remain part of the organization but to never lose his voice.

Chapter 23

Summary

After leaving the meeting, the narrator decides to visit Brother Hambro, hoping that he can answer more questions about the Brotherhood's new plans. On the street, Ras confronts him and demands to know how the Brotherhood will avenge Clifton's death. An angry crowd has gathered, and when the narrator responds peacefully, he is accused of being a talking head for the organization. Ras demands action and sends his goons to rough the narrator up. The narrator realizes that Ras is a great threat to his safety, so when he escapes he quickly buys a pair of sunglasses and a hat to hide his identity. In the new disguise, he is mistaken by multiple people on the street, who believe him to be a man named "Rinehart," who seems to be a feared and respected criminal. The narrator is shocked by how well his disguise works, as even close friends are unable to recognize him. A woman on the street slips money into his pocket, and he nearly starts a fight with Brother Maceo in the bar. Throughout the events the narrator adopts the mind-set, language, and actions of Rinehart, beginning to fool even himself. Confused at his willingness to fight a friend simply to remain undercover, the narrator notes, "I was ready [to fight] not because I wanted to but because of place and circumstance." Outside the bar after the near fight, the narrator learns that Rinehart was a gambler, a pimp, and, shockingly, a reverend.

When he finally arrives at Hambro's apartment, the narrator is full of questions and demands answers. He cuts right to the chase and asks what is to be done in Harlem. Hambro reiterates the importance of following the organization's plan, and eventually he admits that the residents of Harlem will have to be sacrificed to the greater good. The narrator is shocked. He has worked so hard to create unity within the community, but it was for nothing: like Mr. Norton, the organization was simply using them to build legitimacy. The narrator sees that he has helped the white man take advantage of his people. He vows revenge.

Analysis

Through the character of Rinehart, the narrator learns the possibility of disguise. Rinehart uses his invisibility to hide in plain sight, embodying multiple identities at the same time: a preacher, a pimp, a gambler, and a hustler. Rinehart can captivate religious audiences, beautiful women, even white policemen without compromising his goals. This idea fascinates the narrator, who has spent his entire life trying to please others whereas Rinehart solely pleases himself. The narrator is surprised how easy it is to switch from one identity to another. Wearing a simple hat and glasses, he is completely unrecognizable to even close friends. He feels the change in himself, too, saying he is "ready to beat [Maceo] to his knees" during the fight even though it isn't real. He is accepted as Rinehart so easily, he realizes, because people see what they want to see when looking at him. In this way, he has always been invisible. No one sees him as an individual: they see only the label they have placed on him.

When he finally makes his way to Brother Hambro's house for further training, the narrator learns that the people of Harlem must be "sacrificed" to the Brotherhood's larger goals. Readers should note the symbolism here in that the name Hambro is a combination of *Sambo* and *Brother*. The narrator and Hambro engage in a debate about what sacrifice means—can the people be sacrificed if they don't give themselves willingly—before the narrator realizes that he has been duped all along. The Brotherhood was never interested in the needs of the disenfranchised Harlem residents. The group intended

Copyright © 2017 Course Hero, Inc.

to create wealth and political sway, which explains why it can so easily disregard the needs of its community. The Brotherhood is no more interested in African American needs than Dr. Bledsoe was. By helping the organization exploit his community, the narrator realizes that he is a Sambo, allowing the powerful brothers to pull his strings. Enraged, he vows to destroy the Brotherhood from the inside. Finally understanding his grandfather's deathbed advice, he vows to "overcome 'em with yeses."

Chapter 24

Summary

To enact his plan, the narrator needs more inside information, so he decides to seduce Emma—Brother Jack's mistress—hoping that she'll reveal the Brotherhood's plan to him, allowing him to sabotage it. He attends Brotherhood meetings and agrees with everything they say. He lies and says the Harlem community is pleased with the change in focus and that membership is up, despite growing violence in the community.

The narrator decides that Brother Jack's birthday party will be the perfect place to seduce Emma, but once there he realizes that Emma is too streetwise to give him any information. Instead, he chooses to seduce a neglected housewife named Sybil. Sybil is only too eager to meet the narrator at his apartment, but once there, she reveals that she has no interest in politics and that she hopes the narrator will help her act out a rape fantasy. Sybil gets very drunk—so drunk, in fact, that the narrator insists they have already had sex and she believes him. Then she passes out. Suddenly, the phone rings, and the narrator hears a violent fight on the other end. A voice shouts for him to get out of the city. As the narrator rushes toward Harlem, he is unsure if the members of the Brotherhood will be awaiting him in a trap or if people truly need his help. Along the way a group of pigeons fly overhead and cover him in droppings. The scene reminds the narrator of the bird droppings that covered the Founder's statue at the college.

Analysis

The Brotherhood has failed to view Harlem residents as individuals, instead viewing them as a mass unit to be manipulated. When he realizes this, the narrator decides to gather information against the Brotherhood by manipulating a woman. He doesn't see the irony in his plan to treat a woman as an object to achieve his goals. It is also ironic, then, that the woman he chooses to objectify—Sybil—has dark plans to manipulate the narrator for her own goals, acting out a sexual fantasy.

Sybil, like the unnamed woman from Chapter 19, represents a parallel between the oppression of women in this era and the oppression of minorities. Sybil, like the narrator, feels invisible and is desperate for someone to show interest in her. Her rape fantasy perpetuates the sexually powerful "black buck" racist stereotype and suggests the violence of a relationship in which only one person or organization has power.

The symbolism of white droppings splattering across the image of black men is that both men, in hoping to enrich the black community, unwittingly promoted white supremacy.

Chapter 25 and Epilogue

Summary

Chapter 25

Harlem is in chaos when the narrator arrives, with police shooting indiscriminately into the looting crowds. Almost immediately the narrator is grazed by a bullet, covering his face in blood. Two men, Dupre and Scofield, stop to help him, giving him whiskey to drink and a handkerchief to stop the bleeding. The three men share an interesting discussion about what started the riots. They think it might have been because the police shot a woman, or because a white woman was talking to a black man, or maybe because of "that young guy" who was killed by police. Both men have been busy looting clothing and grocery stores, and they think the narrator's briefcase must be filled with valuable contraband. They're just glad the chaos will provide them with the perfect opportunity to carry out their secret plan. Intrigued, the narrator follows the men as they

Copyright © 2017 Course Hero, Inc.

meet up with a larger gang of men to gather buckets and kerosene. Making their way quickly through the rioting crowds, the men huddle outside a derelict tenement building. Suddenly, the narrator realizes that the plan is to burn it down. A pregnant woman begs Dupre not to carry out his plan, but he won't be swayed. The gang—including the narrator—makes its way to the top floor, warning residents to get out. As each floor empties, the men douse it with kerosene. The narrator feels vaguely that he should stop them, but he decides that the plan is already in motion and he wouldn't be able to stop it anyway. As the building burns down, he is filled with "fierce excitement" and races down the stairs. As he runs, however, he realizes that he dropped his briefcase and turns back to find it. He rushes out of the building again, stopping to help an injured man who mistakes him for a doctor.

The streets are overrun with chaos, and despite the mounted officers shooting at passersby, the narrator is still determined to reach headquarters. He runs through a looted store and finds that all the mannequins have been strung up by their necks, creating the image of a room full of lynched bodies. There, Ras and his gang confront him. Immediately, Ras calls for the "traitor" to be lynched alongside the mannequins for his treacherous acts against the black race. The narrator tries to defend himself by saying that he sees the truth now: the Brotherhood planned the riots. The Brotherhood's sinister intent was to build up the Harlem community and then abandon its people, knowing they would turn against the Brotherhood and align with the violent Ras. When Ras refuses to listen, the narrator begs that they kill him for his sins, not for the Brotherhood's crimes. Realizing that he won't be awarded individuality even in death, the narrator flees. As he runs, two police officers who mistakenly think his briefcase is filled with looted goods follow him. Rather than turn the briefcase over, the narrator jumps into an open manhole. Mockingly, the officers put the cover back over the manhole, leaving the narrator to die. In searching for a way out, the narrator burns the contents of his briefcase as a makeshift torch. After a terrifying dream in which people from his past surround and castrate him, the narrator wakes and realizes that he cannot return to his old life. He decides to stay underground and "hibernate."

Epilogue

In the short epilogue the narrator muses about his life in hibernation. He has learned that the only thing that makes him human is love; this was his grandfather's message. He would love to stay underground forever, away from expectations and "darkness" above ground, but his mind requires more stimulation. Clearly this, not his skin color, race, or culture, is what makes him human.

He recalls bumping into Mr. Norton while on the subway one afternoon. The man was much older now than the last time the two met. Mr. Norton appeared lost, and the narrator rushed up to give him direction. Norton cannot remember him.

Finally, the narrator decides he has hibernated long enough, and it is time to leave his hiding place. He hopes that by writing his story, he will speak to other invisible people.

Analysis

The rioters don't actually know what they're protesting; they just want to participate. In the end it doesn't really matter what caused the riots because newspapers will only report the violent backlash. The reader is reminded of the mugging scene in the novel's prologue, in which the narrator—a victim—is blamed for the incident. No matter what the rioters are protesting, history will only remember their destruction, reporting on black violence and crime as if the reaction were the true story. The narrator refers to this when he suggests that the person who records history is the one with the power.

Under Ras's leadership, the riots were inevitable. The Brotherhood, which turned out to be a racist organization working to destroy black communities, could ensure that the rioting residents would take the blame for the neighborhood's destruction. By "yessing" the Brotherhood, the narrator sold out his people, a realization that leaves him feeling as guilty as if he had knowingly agreed to the plan. The situation is symbolized by the tenement burning. Swayed by powerful orators, the narrator unsuspectingly arrives at the building with a bucket of kerosene in hand. Even though he knows he should try to stop the men from burning the building, the narrator follows the plan because he feels powerless to change anything. It is interesting to note the parallels between Dupre and Brother Jack, both filled with disdain for what they wish to change and with the belief that destroying what they hate is "the only way to get rid of it."

Another parallel drawn in this chapter is between the narrator and Dr. Bledsoe. When the narrator stops to help the injured

Copyright © 2017 Course Hero, Inc.

man, he is literally and figuratively covered in the blood of his sacrifice. He, like Bledsoe, has betrayed his people for personal gain. It is no coincidence, then, that the injured man mistakes the narrator for a doctor—a mistake that horrifies the narrator.

At the end of the novel, the narrator leaps into an open manhole to escape Ras's gang and a pair of police officers who demand that the narrator hand over his briefcase. When they ask what's inside, the nearly hysterical narrator says over and over, "I still have you in my briefcase." The officers assume he's crazy, but what the narrator seems to understand is that he's been carrying around the baggage of slavery—the "white is right" mentality that perpetuates white supremacy. As he burns each of the items in the case, he symbolically frees himself of their power over him. Only by destroying his past "illusions" is the narrator able to start his life anew.

The story ends where it began, underground. But in the Epilogue, the narrator is ready to start life anew. His hope for his memoir—to reach and help others—is another affirmation of his determination to engage with the world.

“” Quotes

> *"I am an invisible man. ... I am invisible, understand, simply because people refuse to see me."*

— Narrator , Prologue

This quotation sets up the premise of the book. The narrator seeks to create an identity for himself that people can see.

> *"I was looking for myself and asking everyone except myself questions which I, and only I, could answer."*

— Narrator , Chapter 1

The narrator describes his central conflict: trying to identify himself in a racist society filled with expectations of what it means to be a black man.

> *"Overcome 'em with yeses."*

— Grandfather , Chapter 1

The riddle of advice the narrator's grandfather gives while on his deathbed haunts the narrator his entire life. At first he takes it to mean simply "obey," but he later decides that his grandfather meant to "pretend" to agree.

> *"You are my fate, young man."*

— Mr. Norton , Chapter 2

Mr. Norton prides himself on his generosity toward black youths, saying that their fates are intertwined. In reality, however, Mr. Norton is only interested in perpetuating his own legacy. He has no interest in the struggles or achievements of individual students like the narrator.

> *"I'll have every Negro in the country hanging on tree limbs by morning."*

— Dr. Bledsoe , Chapter 6

Dr. Bledsoe is the dean of the most influential African American college, claiming to empower black youths. In reality, Dr. Bledsoe would willingly sacrifice any of his students to maintain his personal power.

> *"Ambition is a wonderful force ... but sometimes it can be blinding."*

— Young Emerson , Chapter 9

Copyright © 2017 Course Hero, Inc.

These words, spoken by Young Emerson, highlight the narrator's fatal flaw. The narrator's desire to make a name for himself within the Brotherhood blinds him to the truth of their racist ideals and their plan to sacrifice the residents of Harlem.

> *"We are the machines inside the machine."*

— Lucius Brockway , Chapter 10

Brockway is the most important employee at Liberty Paints, but he receives no credit for his work (and asks for none). Lucius's unrecognized contributions to the company's success mirror the unrecognized contributions of many African Americans in America's history.

> *"When I discover who I am, I'll be free."*

— Narrator , Chapter 11

The narrator spends the entire novel trying to create an identity for himself, but he is enslaved by others' perceptions of what a black man should be. At the end of the novel, he burns the symbols of his enslavement, and even though he is alone underground, he finally feels free.

> *"I yam what I am."*

— Narrator , Chapter 13

After eating warm yams that remind him of his Southern childhood, the narrator takes the first step toward accepting his heritage as part of his unique identity.

> *"I was caught between guilt and innocence, so that now they seemed one and the same."*

— Narrator , Chapter 19

This quotation highlights the moral ambiguity of the novel. Who should the narrator be accountable to for his crimes if he is invisible—and is he really guilty if he has been pushed into a corner?

> *"Where were the historians today? And how would they put it down?"*

— Narrator , Chapter 20

The narrator is deeply concerned with making a name for himself in history—with being remembered for his contributions rather than just his race. He realizes, however, that white men write history and can choose which details to include or omit. For a while he tries to appease white men to be remembered, but he later decides that it's okay to live "outside of history."

> *"His name was Clifton and they shot him down."*

— Narrator , Chapter 21

At Clifton's funeral the narrator feels compelled to say his friend's name over and over, ensuring that he is seen as an individual and not as an emblem for the struggles of the black community.

> *"By pretending to agree I had indeed agreed."*

— Narrator , Chapter 25

The narrator learns the harsh truth that by refusing to stand up to the Brotherhood, he has aided their plan to cede power to Ras, sparking the race riots. At the end of the novel, the narrator is filled with as much moral ambiguity and confusion over "treacherous" behavior as he was in the beginning.

Copyright © 2017 Course Hero, Inc.

Symbols

Liberty Paints

The Liberty Paints factory functions as an extended metaphor for race relations and race expectations. The most popular paint produced at the factory is Optic White, which is so pure it can cover even the blackest coal. The paint symbolically covers blackness in the same way that the narrator's education sought to hide his black heritage, or cultural "blackness." Ellison reinforces this comparison by calling the finished paint a "graduate." The fact that the paint is being sent to a national monument, however, suggests a larger theme of "whitewashing" national history by failing to acknowledge black contributions. This idea is underscored by the details of Lucius Brockway's contributions to the Optic White paint. He seemingly created the formula and masterminds daily production—"ain't a ... thing that happens down here that ain't as iffen I done put my black hands into it!"—yet he receives no credit for his work. He is confined in a hot, dirty room 3 feet (.9 meters) below ground level, despised by his coworkers, and constantly fears losing his job. Meanwhile, the white bosses, who admittedly don't understand how he bases levels of production work, get rich.

The Sambo Doll

On the surface, Clifton's dancing Sambo dolls are cheap racist images used to entertain white audiences for a quick profit. Sambo is the name for a stereotype of a subservient, lazy slave happy to serve his master. Clifton reinforces this stereotype by putting the dolls on strings, like marionettes, highlighting their inability to think or move on their own. The sight of the doll deeply offends the narrator, who doesn't yet realize that he and Clifton were both puppets for the Brotherhood. When Clifton realized that he had become "a dancing Sambo" for the organization, he cut ties and attempted to reclaim the negative stereotype, stripping it of meaning, by ironically selling the dolls for his advantage. Unable to face the reality of being an emotional slave, Clifton self-destructs.

Mary's Bank

Mary's bank is a twofold symbol. First, its grinning, coin-gobbling appearance symbolizes the narrator's identity. When he joins the Brotherhood, he agrees to do a white man's bidding without question, making himself a "slave" to the organization, which has hired him to act—"not to think." The narrator does so for money, "performing" much like the bank, which greedily flips coins into its open mouth, suffocating with greed. After the narrator shatters the bank and is unable to discard the pieces, however, the bank—like the briefcase, the chain, and the Sambo doll—becomes symbolic of the baggage of slavery, the racist stereotypes every black man faces. Despite his best efforts to create a new identity for himself—adopting a new name, a new apartment, a new suit—the narrator cannot discard the pieces, suggesting that true transformation is impossible.

Vision

Almost all of the characters in the novel—even the narrator when he is Rineheart—wear glasses, which are symbolic of their varying inabilities to recognize the narrator's struggles to identify himself. Some characters, such as Reverend Barbee and Brother Jack, are described as being blind (Reverend Barbee completely and Brother Jack in one glass eye). So is the boxer who is glimpsed only in a photograph. Characters who offer the narrator some support, or who recognize aspects of the struggle (Dr. Bledsoe, Lucius, Young Emerson, Mr. Norton, Mary Rambo), wear glasses, which suggests their impaired vision of the "truth." Those who see the world and race relations clearly (the veteran doctor, Jim Trueblood, and Peter Wheatstraw) do not wear glasses.

Themes

Copyright © 2017 Course Hero, Inc.

Invisibility

The unnamed narrator wants nothing more than to be seen as an individual in a society where racist expectations label what he "should" be before he has the chance to prove anyone wrong. As a result, the narrator feels unseen or invisible. In seeking to create a unique identity for himself, the narrator repeatedly denies his true self—his culture and heritage—to create an identity that will make others proud. First, he tries to suppress his Southern heritage, then he tries to cover his "blackness" with "white manners and ideologies" while in college. In Harlem he literally takes a new name, Rinehart, only to find that this, too, pushes him further from his true self. As the narrator matures, however, he begins to see that invisibility isn't always a bad thing. When he "meets" Rinehart, for example, he learns that by donning disguises, he is able to pursue his own goals without others' expectations getting in the way. He had always believed that pleasing others would bring him success, but as Rinehart, he follows his own pleasure and creates his own rewards. It is also by being "invisible" that the narrator learns to change society. In the novel's prologue, the narrator wonders how an invisible man could be held accountable for his actions. Ultimately, however, the narrator is desperate to create a unique identity, one that will be remembered in history, which would be impossible if he remains invisible.

Racial Expectations

As the narrator tries to form a unique identity for himself, he finds that everyone else in society has an expectation of what it means to be a "black man." At college and at the Brotherhood, he is expected to embody Booker T. Washington's ideologies that "white is right," dutifully following the orders of his white leaders without question. He, and those in power, believe that obedience will bring success. In New York he is immediately identified as a Southerner who likes soul food, folktales, and jazz music. White women view him as a sexually powerful "black bruiser," whereas white men view him as a sort of Sambo (a negative stereotype of blacks based on an 1808 short story by Edmund Botsford). All the narrator wants is to be seen as an individual. He is unsure of his identity, but he knows that he wants to make a name for himself within the black community, first as a successful college student and then as a community leader with the Brotherhood. No matter the situation, however, the narrator is only seen as others label him. As the narrator attempts to move further away from racial expectations, he is frustrated to find that he moves further away from his individuality. The only way to free himself completely is to go "underground" and wait for the right time to emerge.

Slavery's Baggage

Although the narrator was born a free man, he is forced to carry the baggage of slavery's legacy with him everywhere. The "baggage" is symbolized in the calfskin briefcase the narrator wins at the end of the battle royal. Throughout the novel he fills the case with other symbols of enslavement to white men, such as the letters, his diploma, the Sambo doll, pieces of Mary's broken bank, and Brother Tarp's leg chain. Even when he is in the middle of the tenement fire, the narrator returns for the briefcase, suggesting the impossibility of simply leaving this baggage behind. It is only at the end of the novel, when the narrator chooses to plunge into darkness, that he is able to rid himself of the baggage and truly create a new identity for himself.

Suggested Reading

Foley, Barbara. *Wrestling with the Left: The Making of Ralph Ellison's Invisible Man.* Durham: Duke UP, 2010. Print.

Hill, Michael, and Lena M. Hill. *Ralph Ellison's Invisible Man: A Reference Guide.* Westport: Greenwood, 1971. Print.

O'Meally, Robert, ed. *New Essays on Invisible Man*. New York: Cambridge UP, 1988. Print.

Sundquist, Eric J. *Cultural Contexts for Ralph Ellison's Invisible Man: A Bedford Documentary Companion.* Boston: Bedford Books of St. Martin's, 1995. Print.

Trimmer, Joseph F., ed. *A Casebook on Ralph Ellison's Invisible Man.* New York: Crowell, 1972. Print.

Copyright © 2017 Course Hero, Inc.