

Exam Study Guide: Invisible Man (Prologue - Chapter 9)

I. Central Themes & Motifs

- **Invisibility:** Analyze the narrator's evolving definition of this state. Consider its social, psychological, and philosophical dimensions as presented in the Prologue and developed in early chapters.
- **Blindness vs. Sight:** Track the literal and figurative uses of blindness, vision, and insight. Examine which characters are blind, which claim to see, and the consequences of each condition.
- **Identity & Self-Definition:** Study the forces that seek to define the narrator (family, school, benefactors, society) versus his own attempts to understand who he is.
- **Deception & Betrayal:** Focus on performances, hidden agendas, and the gap between appearance and reality. Pay special attention to scenes involving advice, letters, and public speeches.
- **The "Curse" of History:** Understand the impact of the past (personal, familial, and racial) on the present. Analyze key symbolic objects and speeches that connect the narrator to history.

II. Character Analysis: Motivations & Philosophies

- **The Narrator:** Trace his initial mindset and how key events challenge his beliefs. Focus on his desire for approval, his naivete, and his moments of dawning awareness.
- **Dr. Bledsoe:** Decipher the source and nature of his power. Analyze his philosophy of leadership and survival within a racialized power structure. Contrast his public persona with his private actions.
- **Mr. Norton:** Understand his stated motivations versus his unconscious assumptions. Analyze his worldview and how it is shattered or confirmed by his experiences.

- The Grandfather: Interpret the paradoxical meaning of his deathbed speech. Consider its function as a haunting guide or curse throughout the narrator's journey.
- Minor but Significant Characters:
 - Jim Trueblood: Analyze the complex reactions his story provokes and what he represents to different characters.
 - The Veteran/Doctor: Understand his critique of the narrator and the institution. Analyze his role as a prophetic or chaotic truth-teller.
 - Reverend Barbee: Examine the purpose and effect of his storytelling. Analyze the dramatic irony surrounding his character.
 - Young Mr. Emerson: Contrast his interaction with the narrator to those of other white authority figures.

III. Symbolism & Key Imagery

- Light and Darkness: Go beyond simple binaries. Examine the narrator's complex relationship with light (both seeking and using it) and what it reveals or hides.
- The Briefcase and Its Contents: Identify the items the narrator accumulates. Analyze what they symbolize collectively and individually regarding his prescribed path.
- The College Statue: Closely read the physical description of the statue. Interpret the central visual ambiguity and its broader implication about the school's mission.
- The "Cast-Iron Bank": If referenced, consider what this object represents in terms of stereotype, economic oppression, and the narrator's internal struggle.
- Locations as Symbols: Be prepared to analyze how these settings function symbolically:
 - The "hole" or basement
 - The idyllic college campus vs. the slave quarters
 - The Golden Day saloon/hospital

- The Battle Royal arena

IV. Literary Devices & Narrative Structure

- Irony (Situational, Verbal, Dramatic): Identify moments where the outcome is opposite of what is expected, where words convey a meaning opposite to their literal sense, and where the audience knows more than a character.
- Tone Shifts: Analyze how the author's attitude toward the subject changes, particularly when moving between descriptions of ideals (the campus, the speech) and reality (the battle, Trueblood's cabin).
- Foreshadowing: Identify early events, speeches, or symbols that hint at later developments in the narrator's journey and understanding.
- Frame Narrative: Understand how the Prologue, set in the narrator's present, shapes our understanding of the past events he recounts.
- Allusion: Be ready to discuss the thematic relevance of cultural references, such as specific pieces of music mentioned in the Prologue.

V. Critical Scene Analysis

Be prepared to write analytically about the purpose and meaning of the following pivotal scenes. Consider: plot development, thematic revelation, character insight, and use of literary devices.

1. The Battle Royal and speech that follows.
2. The narrator's drive with Mr. Norton, including stops at the slave quarters and Jim Trueblood's cabin.
3. The chaotic episode at the Golden Day.
4. The narrator's meetings with Dr. Bledsoe and the consequences.
5. Reverend Barbee's sermon.

6. The narrator's reading of the sealed letters.
7. The conversation with young Mr. Emerson.

VI. Study Strategies

- Create a Timeline: Map the narrator's journey from the Prologue through Chapter 9, noting key events and his evolving emotional/intellectual state.
- Character Chart: List major characters, their stated philosophies, their key actions, and how they perceive/define the narrator.
- Symbol Log: Track recurring symbols (e.g., briefcase, light, eyes) and note their context and possible meanings each time they appear.
- Thematic Quotations: Gather 2-3 key quotes for each major theme. Be able to explain who said it, the context, and its significance.
- Practice Close Reading: Re-read the descriptions of the statue, the Golden Day, and the Prologue's "hole." Annotate for diction, imagery, and tone.