

LESSON NOTE ON LITERATURE-IN-ENGLISH WEEK 3

SUBJECT:	Literature-in-English
TOPIC:	Non-African Prose “Invisible Man” by Ralph Ellison
CLASS:	SS2
WEEK:	3

MAJOR CHARACTERS

1. The Narrator
2. Dr Bledsoe
3. Brother Jack
4. Ras the Exhorter

MINOR CHARACTERS

1. Young Emerson
2. Mr Norton
3. Mary Rambo
4. Lucuis Brockway
5. Brother Tod Clifton
6. The School Superintendent
7. The Narrator’s grandfather

BACKGROUND

The novel, “Invisible Man” portrays the racial stratification (the state of being divided into social classes) of the American society, which has led to the marginalization of African-Americans for more than 3,000 years. The first group of African-Americans who came to the United States were brought as slaves. Many African-Americans had to contend with racism daily, in a society that relegated them to the fringes and where they are regarded as intellectually and racially inferior to the white people. “Invisible Man” was written against the backdrop of this innate desire in every man to be treated as a human being and to attain success in spite of one’s colour.

PLOT ACCOUNT

“Invisible Man” is the story of a black American in the twentieth century who sought to be known, successful and well acclaimed but had to learn through diverse experiences, of his invisibility as a black person in a white-dominated society. At the beginning of the novel, the Narrator (who remains nameless throughout the story) emphasizes his invisibility. He notes that this invisibility is as a result of people’s inability to see him or take note of him. In reality, he is not invisible but he admits that he has been hiding

from the rest of the world by living underground. He has also been stealing electricity from the Monopolised Light and Power Company. He uses 1,389 bulbs at the same time while Louis Armstrong's 'What Did I Do to Be So Black and Blue' is repeatedly playing on a phonograph. In the American society where the Narrator lives as a black person, he is expected to defer (submit) at all times to the whims and caprices (desires and decisions) of the whites.

At different stages in the narration, the author shows how the black person is humiliated by the whites who want to show that blacks are inferior to them. An example of this occurs when the Narrator gets an opportunity to present a speech at the 'Battle Royal programme, for the white seniors. The white seniors organised a brutal blindfolded boxing match for nine of his classmates, an event, which, he discovers to be part of the evening's entertainment for the "smoker" (a kind of stage party). The boxing match is followed by humiliating events: The boys must scrabble for what appear to be gold coins on an electrified rug (but which turns out to be only worthless brass tokens). Then the Narrator now bruised and bleeding is finally allowed to give his speech in front of the drunken white men who largely ignore him until he accidentally uses the phrase "social equality" instead of "social responsibility" to describe the roles of blacks in America. At the end of the speech, despite his degrading and humiliating ordeal, the Narrator proudly accepts his prize: a calfskin briefcase containing a scholarship to the state college for Negroes. That night, the Narrator's grandfather appears in a dream, ordering him to open the briefcase and look inside. Instead of a scholarship, the briefcase contains a note that reads, "Keep This Nigger Boy Running." After gaining admission into the college, the Narrator distinguishes himself academically so much that he is given the privilege of driving Mr Norton, a wealthy white trustee of the college.

Focusing on the event of one fateful day, the Narrator then recalls his college days. The Narrator follows Mr Norton's orders and takes him to Golden Day which serves as a beer parlour and brothel for blacks. At Golden Day, he witnesses an argument between a doctor and a military veteran, who challenges Mr Norton on the issue of race relations. The trustee is provoked and asks the narrator to drive him back to the college. The Narrator is however, expelled from his beloved college for taking Mr Norton to this place and sent to New York, armed with seven letters from his dean (Dr. Bledsoe). The letters he believed are letters of recommendation but in reality are letters confirming his expulsion. The letters written by Dr. Bledsoe depicted him as someone worthless, undignified and irresponsible. It is at Mr Emerson's office, one of the men to whom the letter is addressed, that the narrator learns the exact contents of the letters. With the assistance of Mr Emerson's son, the Narrator is offered a menial job at the Liberty Paints Plant, a paint manufacturing factory. He initially declines but later accepts the offer. Unaware that he is one of the several blacks hired to replace white workers out on strike. Nearly killed in a fire explosion that was a set up by his employer Lucius Brockway, the Narrator subsequently undergoes a gruelling ordeal at the paint factory hospital, where he finds himself the object of a strange experiment that he is used as guinea pig for electric shock treatment by the hospital white doctors. After his release from the hospital, the narrator

finds refuge in the home of Mary Rambo, a kind and generous black woman, who feeds him and nurses him back to health. Although grateful to Mary, whom he acknowledges as his only friend, the Narrator, anxious to earn a living and do something with his life, eventually leaves Mary to join the Brotherhood, a political organization that professes to be dedicated to achieving equality for all people. Under the guidance of the Brotherhood and its leader, Brother Jack, the Narrator becomes an accomplished speaker and leader of the Harlem District.

After the tragic death of Tod Clifton, a prominent black brother who left the Brotherhood to sell an obscene dancing doll named Sambo, without a sales permit. He was shot by a white policeman, the Narrator becomes disillusioned (disappointed) with the disparity (difference) between what the organization preaches and what its leaders practice. As a result, he decides to leave the Brotherhood, headquartered in an affluent section Manhattan and returns to Harlem where he is confronted by Ras the Exhorter (now Ras the Destroyer) who accuses him of betraying the black community. To escape the wrath of Ras and his men, he disguises himself by donning a hat and dark glasses.

One of the significant discoveries by the Narrator is the fact that his mentor Brother Jack, who had introduced him to the Brotherhood is partly blind, a metaphorical reference to the fact that the Brotherhood is 'blind' to its faults. Enraged that he, like Clifton, had only been tools in the hands of the Brotherhood to be used and dumped at will, he decides to take his grandfather's advice; that he should tell whites the kind of lies that they want to hear. The Narrator is also disappointed at the wiles of the Brotherhood and he begins to map out how to revenge.

The Narrator discovers that the Harlem community has been erupted in violence. He joins some of the men to burn a tenement building, where he and some of the arsonists lived. He also encounters Ras the Exhorter, who gives directives that the Narrator should be killed. Ras throws a spear at the narrator and it misses him narrowly. Before he flees from the scene, the narrator throws the spear at Ras and it goes through his cheeks. The Narrator flees only to encounter some men who he had mistaken for police officers, in an attempt to run from these men, the Narrator falls into a utility hole and the men that he is running away from cover the manhole. It becomes his abode for an indefinite period; he does not leave the place until the end of the story. Thus, the end of his story is also the beginning of a new phase of experience for him. It is the manhole that he comes to terms with his invisibility as a black person in America. As the narration comes to its climax, the Narrator expresses his desire to end his hibernation and leave the manhole.