**Invisible Man by Ralph Ellison: A Summary**

An unnamed narrator speaks, telling his reader that he is an “invisible man.” The narrator explains that he is invisible simply because others refuse to see him. He goes on to say that he lives underground, siphoning electricity away from Monopolated Light & Power Company by lining his apartment with light bulbs. The narrator listens to jazz, and recounts a vision he had while he listened to Louis Armstrong, traveling back into the history of slavery.

The narrator flashes back to his own youth, remembering his naïveté. The narrator is a talented young man, and is invited to give his high school graduation speech in front of a group of prominent white local leaders. At the meeting, the narrator is asked to join a humiliating boxing match, a battle royal, with some other black students. Next, the boys are forced to grab for their payment on an electrified carpet. Afterward, the narrator gives his speech while swallowing blood. The local leaders reward the narrator with a brief case and a scholarship to the state’s black college.

Later, the narrator is a student at the unnamed black college. The narrator has been given the honor of chauffeuring for one of the school’s trustees, a northern white man named Mr. Norton. While driving, the narrator takes Mr. Norton into an unfamiliar area near the campus. Mr. Norton demands that the narrator stop the car, and Mr. Norton gets out to talk to a local sharecropper named Jim Trueblood. Trueblood has brought disgrace upon himself by impregnating his daughter, and he recounts the incident to Mr. Norton in a long, dreamlike story. Mr. Norton is both horrified and titillated, and tells the narrator that he needs a “stimulant” to recover himself. The narrator, worried that Mr. Norton will fall ill, takes him to the Golden Day, a black bar and whorehouse. When they arrive, the Golden Day is occupied by a group of mental patients. The narrator tries to carry out a drink but is eventually forced to bring Mr. Norton into the bar, where pandemonium breaks loose. The narrator meets a patient who is an ex-doctor. The ex-doctor helps Mr. Norton recover from his fainting spell, but insults Mr. Norton with his boldness.

Shaken, Mr. Norton returns to campus and speaks with Dr. Bledsoe, the president of the black college. Dr. Bledsoe is furious with the narrator. In chapel, the narrator listens to a sermon preached by the Reverend Barbee, who praises the Founder of the black college. The speech makes the narrator feel even guiltier for his mistake. Afterward, Dr. Bledsoe reprimands the narrator, deciding to exile him to New York City. In New York, the narrator will work through the summer to earn his next year’s tuition. Dr. Bledsoe tells the narrator that he will prepare him letters of recommendation. The narrator leaves for New York the next day.

On the bus to New York, the narrator runs into the ex-doctor again, who gives the narrator some life advice that the narrator does not understand. The narrator arrives in New York, excited to live in Harlem’s black community. However, his job hunt proves unsuccessful, as Dr. Bledsoe’s letters do little good. Eventually, the narrator meets young Emerson, the son of the Mr. Emerson to which he supposed to be introduced. Young Emerson lets the narrator read Dr. Bledsoe’s letter, which he discovers were not meant to help him at all, but instead to give him a sense of false hope. The narrator leaves dejected, but young Emerson tells him of a potential job at the factory of Liberty Paints.

The narrator reports to Liberty Paints and is given a job assisting Lucius Brockway, an old black man who controls the factory’s boiler room and basement. Lucius is suspicious of his protégé, and when the narrator accidentally stumbles into a union meeting, Brockway believes that he is collaborating with the union and attacks him. The narrator bests the old Brockway in a fight, but Brockway gets the last laugh by causing an explosion in the basement, severely wounding the narrator. The narrator is taken to the factory’s hospital, where he is strapped into a glass and metal box. The factor’s doctors treat the narrator with severe electric shocks, and the narrator soon forgets his own name. The narrator’s sense of identity is only rekindled through his anger at the doctors’ racist behavior. Without explanation, the narrator is discharged from the hospital and fired from his job at the factory.

When the narrator returns to Harlem, he nearly collapses from weakness. A kind woman named Mary Rambo takes the narrator in, and soon the narrator begins renting a room in her house. The narrator begins practicing his speechmaking abilities. One day, the narrator stumbles across an elderly black couple that is being evicted from their apartment. The narrator uses his rhetorical skill to rouse the crowd watching the dispossession and causes a public disturbance. A man named Brother Jack follows the narrator after he escapes from the police. Brother Jack tells the narrator that he wishes to offer him a job making speeches for his organization, the Brotherhood. The narrator is initially skeptical and turns him down, but later accepts the offer.

The narrator is taken to the Brotherhood’s headquarters, where he is given a new name and is told that he must move away from Mary. The narrator agrees to the conditions. Soon after, the narrator gives a rousing speech to a crowded arena. He is embraced as a hero, although some of the Brotherhood leaders disagree with the speech. The narrator is sent to a man named Brother Hambro to be “indoctrinated” into the theory of the Brotherhood. Four months later, the narrator meets Brother Jack, who tells the narrator he will be appointed chief spokesperson of the Brotherhood’s Harlem District.

In Harlem, the narrator is tasked with increasing support for the Brotherhood. He meets Tod Clifton, an intelligent and skillful member of the Brotherhood. Clifton and the narrator soon find themselves fighting against Ras the Exhorter, a black nationalist who believes that blacks should not cooperate with whites. The narrator soon starts to become famous as a speaker. However, complications set in. The narrator receives an anonymous note telling him that he is rising too quickly. Even worse, another Brotherhood member named Wrestrum accuses the narrator of using the Brotherhood for his own personal gain. The Brotherhood’s committee suspends the narrator until the charges are cleared, and reassigns him to lecture downtown on the “Woman Question.” Downtown, the narrator meets a woman who convinces him to come back to her apartment. They sleep together, and the narrator becomes afraid that the tryst will be discovered.

The narrator is summoned to an emergency meeting, in which the committee informs him that Tod Clifton has gone missing. The narrator is reassigned to Harlem. When he returns, he discovers that things have changed, and that the Brotherhood has lost much of its previous popularity. The narrator soon after discovers Clifton on the street, selling Sambo dolls. Before the narrator can understand Clifton’s betrayal, Clifton is shot dead by a police officer for resisting arrest. Unable to get in touch with the party leaders, the narrator organizes a public funeral for Clifton. The funeral is a success, and the people of Harlem are energized by the narrator’s speech. However, the narrator is called again to face the party committee, where he is chastised for not following their orders. The narrator confronts Brother Jack, whose glass eye pops out of its socket.

Leaving the committee, the narrator is nearly beat up by Ras the Exhorter’s men. Sensing his new unpopularity in Harlem, the narrator buys a pair of dark-lensed glasses. As soon as he puts on the glasses, several people mistake the narrator for a man named Rinehart, who is apparently a gambler, pimp, and preacher. The narrator goes to see Brother Hambro for an explanation of the Brotherhood’s dictates. Hambro tells the narrator that Harlem must be “sacrificed” for the best interests of the entire Brotherhood, an answer the narrator finds deeply unsatisfying.

The narrator, disillusioned by Hambro’s words, remembers his grandfather’s advice to undermine white power through cooperation. The narrator plans to sabotage the Brotherhood by telling the committee whatever it wants to hear, regardless of the reality. He also plans to infiltrate the party’s hierarchy by sleeping with the wife of a high-ranking member of the Brotherhood. The narrator meets Sybil, a woman who fits the bill, at a Brotherhood party. However, Sybil knows nothing, preferring to use the narrator to play out her fantasy of being raped by a black man. While Sybil is in his apartment, the narrator gets a call that a riot is going on in Harlem.

The narrator rushes uptown to find that Harlem is in chaos. The narrator falls in with a group of looters. The looters soon escalate their violence, burning down their own tenement building to protest the poor living conditions. The narrator runs into Ras the Exhorter again, now dressed as an Abyssinian chieftain. Ras sends his men to try to hang the narrator. The narrator barely escapes from Ras’ men, only to meet three white men who ask him what he has in his briefcase. When the narrator turns to run, he falls into a manhole. The white men seal the narrator underground, where the narrator is forced to burn his past possessions to see in the dark.

The narrator returns to the present, remarking that he has remained underground since that time. The narrator reflects on history and the words of his grandfather, and says that his mind won’t let him rest. Last, the narrator says that he feels ready to end his hibernation and emerge above ground.

**Source:** [**https://www.litcharts.com/lit/invisible-man/summary**](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/invisible-man/summary)

**Quotes for Discussion**

**Quote 1: "I am one of the most irresponsible beings that ever lived. Irresponsibility is part of my invisibility; any way you face it, it is a denial. But to whom can I be responsible, and why should I be, when you refuse to see me?"**

**“I was naïve. I was looking for myself and asking everyone except myself questions which I, and only I, could answer. It took me a long time and much painful boomeranging of my expectations to achieve a realization everyone else appears to have been born with: That I am nobody but myself. But first I had to discover that I am an invisible man! Prologue, p. 11**

**Quote 2: "'To Whom It May Concern: . . . Keep This Nigger-Boy Running.'" Chapter 1, p. 21**

**Quote 3: "had a feeling that your people were somehow connected with my destiny. That what happened to you was connected with what would happen to me . . ." Chapter 2, p. 25**

**Quote 4: "to repress not only his emotions but his humanity . . . [to be] invisible, a walking personification of the Negative, . . . the mechanical man!" Chapter 3, p. 54**

**Quote 5: "The white folk tell everybody what to think -- except men like me. I tell them" Chapter 6, p. 80**

**Quote 6: "I felt that even when they were polite they hardly saw me, that they would have begged the pardon of Jack the Bear, never glancing his way if the bear happened to be walking along minding his business. It was confusing. I did not know if it was desirable or undesirable . . ." Chapter 8, p. 93**

**Quote 7: "a former student of ours (I say former because he shall never, under any circumstances, be enrolled as a student here again) who has been expelled for a most serious defection from our strictest rules of deportment." Chapter 9, p. 104**

**Quote 8: "the friends of all common people" Chapter 13, pg. 282**

**Quote 9: "His name was Tod Clifton, he believed in Brotherhood, he aroused our hopes and he died." Chapter 21, p. 247**

**Quote 10: "** **Yesl Yes! YES! That was all anyone wanted of us, that we should be heard and not seen, and then heard only in one big optimistic chorus of yassuh, yassuh, yassuh! All right, I'd yea, yea and oui, oui and si, si and see, see them too; and I'd walk around in their guts with hobnailed boots. " Chapter 23, p. 274**

**Quote 11: "America is woven of many strands; I would recognize them and let it so remain. It's 'winner take nothing' that is the great truth of our country or of any country. Life is to be lived, not controlled; and humanity is won by continuing to play in face of certain defeat. Our fate is to become one, and yet many -- This in not prophecy, but description." Epilogue, p. 311**

**Source:** Invisible Man by Ralph Ellison, the eBook version shared via email.