

**The summer reading assignment is due no later than August 17 with a test within the first 3 weeks. Carefully read all the information below.**

You should read **Invisible Man** by **Ralph Ellison**.

## **THE AUTHOR AND HIS TIMES**

In 1952 a first novel by a virtually unknown black American named Ralph Waldo Ellison was published. Reviews of the novel were ecstatic, and in 1953 Ellison's *Invisible Man* won a prestigious National Book Award for Fiction. Suddenly the author was in great demand for interviews and lectures, and he found himself being compared not only with black writers like Richard Wright, but also with Herman Melville and Mark Twain, Ernest Hemingway and William Faulkner. *Invisible Man* was a phenomenon. In 1965 the phenomenon took on even greater proportions when a group of some 200 authors, critics, and editors named *Invisible Man* the most distinguished American novel of the previous twenty years.

The passage of time from 1965 to the mid-1980s did little to change the high regard for this remarkable novel. If a similar vote were taken in the mid-1980s, *Invisible Man* would likely be near the top of any list of the best American novels written since the end of World War II in 1945.

Who was the man who wrote this novel? What were his roots, his influences? What was his preparation for writing a book that has had such impact?

He was born on March 1, 1914, in Oklahoma City, the son of Lewis Ellison from Abbeyville, South Carolina and Ida Milsap Ellison from White Oak, Georgia. They had left the South and moved to Oklahoma to avoid the persecution of blacks, and to find the freedom of the frontier. Times were hard and the Ellisons were poor, but they were proud and ambitious for their children. Lewis Ellison, always a great reader, named his son for Ralph Waldo Emerson, the influential nineteenth century apostle of equality, self-reliance, and individualism. The son would eventually live up to his name. Ida Ellison brought back books, magazines, and newspapers from the white homes where she worked. She was a woman who spent her life fighting against economic and social injustice. "When I was in college," Ellison said, "my mother broke a segregated-housing ordinance in Oklahoma City, and they were throwing her in jail, and the NAACP would get her out.... She had that kind of forthrightness, and I like to think that that was much more valuable than anything literary that she gave me.

In 1933, when he entered Tuskegee Institute in Alabama as a scholarship student, he could already play and write both jazz and classical music and had also been involved with traditional black church music. It was a heritage that would have important influence on his writing.

Tuskegee Institute was Ellison's home for three years, and it is clearly the model for the college in *Invisible Man*. Not only do the buildings and environment in the novel strongly resemble Tuskegee, but the portrait of the Founder bears striking resemblance to the image of Tuskegee's founder, Booker T. Washington, about whom Ellison was clearly ambivalent.

The conservative southern environment of Tuskegee was a shock to Ellison, but his intellectual development during his years at the college more than made up for the social disadvantages. The music faculty was excellent, as was the English department. He read the major works of the Harlem Renaissance, a sudden outburst of creativity by black writers that had begun in the 1920s, and dreamed of being a part of that movement himself. But the writer who excited him most was the famous poet T. S. Eliot. Ellison was stunned by the freshness and originality of Eliot's *The Waste Land*. "I was intrigued by its power to move me while eluding my understanding," he said later; and themes, symbols, images, and jazz rhythms of Eliot's great poem can be found in *Invisible Man*.

At the end of his junior year at Tuskegee, Ellison boarded a train and headed north to New York. He didn't have enough money to pay for his senior year at college and so set out for the place where gifted young blacks went to begin their careers-Harlem. Harlem meant black culture. It meant such jazz musicians as Duke Ellington and Teddy Wilson. It meant the Apollo Theater and the Savoy Ballroom, the Lafayette Theater and WPA Negro Theater Company. It meant a reunion with Ellison's old friend from Oklahoma City, the blues singer Jimmy Rushing; and it meant a new friendship with a leading poet of the Harlem Renaissance, Langston Hughes.

It also meant poverty and loneliness and a struggle to stay alive. Finally, and most important, it meant becoming friends with the most significant influence on his early writing, the novelist Richard Wright. Wright's collection of four stories, *Uncle Tom's Children* (1938), and his novel, *Native Son* (1940), made him the best known black writer in the United States during Ellison's period of apprenticeship in New York. In many ways, Wright was Ellison's first mentor. An active member of the U.S. Communist Party, Wright encouraged Ellison to write from a leftist point of view, because he believed at the time that the Communists had the best interests of blacks at heart. Under the influence of Wright and other Marxist thinkers, Ellison wrote more than twenty book reviews from 1937 to 1944 for a variety of leftist periodicals, especially *New Masses*. He praised writers dealing with social issues, such as Wright and John Steinbeck, and attacked writers who failed to give adequate attention to blacks' social, economic, and political problems.

But Ellison was never a Communist party member, and he never believed in communism. The limits that the party placed on individual expression were far too strong for him. As early as 1937, when he traveled to Dayton, Ohio, for his mother's funeral, Ellison had begun seeing himself as part of a larger literary tradition. He read not only writers of the Harlem Renaissance but also Ernest Hemingway, James Joyce, Gertrude Stein, and Fyodor Dostoevsky. Dostoevsky's *Notes from Underground* became one of the models for *Invisible Man*.

Ellison's preference for literature over politics led him to question the Communist party, and the Communist attitude toward blacks during World War II caused a final rupture between the party in the United States and most of the black writers who had supported it during the 1930s. The Brotherhood section of *Invisible Man* strongly echoes the feelings of Ellison and other black writers that the party had been using blacks for its own ends.

In 1943, during World War II, Ellison joined the U.S. Merchant Marine because he wanted to make a contribution to the war effort in a service that was not segregated by race. He served for two years, and during that time he began to write fiction in earnest. Among his writings of the time were two of his best short stories, "Flying Home" and "King of the Bingo Game," both published in 1944. In these stories Ellison began to find a voice and an identity as a writer, and it is no accident that in the next year he started to write *Invisible Man*.

The novel, which began with the words "I am an invisible man" scribbled on a piece of paper in a friend's house in Vermont, took seven years to complete.

In writing *Invisible Man* Ellison drew on a wide range of experience, but his novel is not purely autobiographical. Ellison should not be identified with his unnamed narrator. But Ellison uses his personal experience imaginatively to create a remarkably inventive piece of fiction. He draws on his experience at Tuskegee to write the college chapters and his knowledge of the Communist party to write the Brotherhood chapters. He uses his rich and varied experience in Harlem as the basis for his description of street life in New York. Other sources for Ellison were his reading and the rich folk heritage of blacks. He uses the blues and jazz rhythms, folktales and jive talk, and characters drawn from frontier literature, as well as the tales he heard in the streets of Oklahoma City while growing up. The novel begins and ends with references to jazz musician Louis Armstrong singing, "What did I do / To be so black / And blue?"

One of the unusual things about *Invisible Man* is that it was immediately popular with both whites and blacks. Ellison has the rare ability in this novel to present a hero with whom people of diverse backgrounds can identify. Not only did the unnamed hero stand for the black man searching for his identity in a white world, but he seemed to represent to white college students any young man going through a crisis of values on his way to discovering himself. Readers on both sides of the Atlantic viewed *Invisible Man* as a work to be read alongside the popular plays and novels of Jean-Paul Sartre and Albert Camus.

During the 1960s the popularity of *Invisible Man* decreased, not so much with whites as with blacks. Many young black writers resented *Invisible Man's* having been named the most distinguished novel of the past twenty years. They did not think that Ellison spoke for them because he was too much of an "Uncle Tom," a black who served the white man's interests. A generation accustomed to outspoken black leaders such as Malcolm X and Stokely Carmichael wanted its literature more radical. In the 1970s, many black poets and novelists emphasized the uniqueness of black life. Ellison refused to go in that direction. For him the core of America lay in the genuine integration of white and black.

"I don't recognize any white culture," he said to his friend, the black writer James Alan McPherson. "I recognize no American culture which is not the partial creation of black people. I

recognize no American style in literature, in dance, in music, even in assembly-line processes, which does not bear the mark of the American Negro."

Ellison became a member of the American literary establishment. He taught at Bard College, Rutgers, the University of Chicago, and New York University. He served as a trustee of Bennington College. He became a member of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences and the National Institute of Arts and Letters. In 1964, he published a second book, *Shadow and Act*, a collection of essays about his personal life, as well as about literature, music, and the black experience in America. He worked on a second novel, about a black evangelist and a white orphan boy whom he has adopted. Parts of the novel were published as stories, but the complete novel had not been published by the mid-1980s.

And so Ralph Waldo Ellison remained a paradox. He had survived the criticism of the 1960s and 70s to become one of the most admired black American writers of the 1980s. At the same time he remained a one-novel man, and his admirers and critics alike wondered whether that second novel would ever be published.

Well, you could say, it may be all right being a one-novel man if the novel is as good as *Invisible Man*.

-excerpt from Spark Notes

## Selecting Readings for the AP English Language and Composition Course

Because the learning objectives of the course are complex and multiple, teachers must select course readings from a variety of potentially appropriate texts. The readings in the course should lead students to "listen" actively (in a spirit of inquiry) and broadly (across disciplines, history, culture, geography, and genres) to public conversations about consequential topics and questions. Selected readings should assist students in comprehending multiple perspectives on a topic and interpreting both long and short texts of various genres in print and other media (e.g., documentary films, graphic arts, photography). Readings should also serve as models of successful or unsuccessful rhetorical approaches.

## TEXTUAL CONTENT

Issues that might, from particular social, historical, or cultural viewpoints, be considered controversial, including references to ethnicities, nationalities, religions, races, dialects, gender, or class, may be addressed in texts that are appropriate for the AP English Language and Composition course. Fair representation of issues and peoples may occasionally include controversial material. Since AP students have chosen a program that directly involves them in college-level work, participation in this course depends on a level of maturity consistent with the age of high school students who have engaged in thoughtful analyses of a variety of texts. The best response to controversial language or ideas in a text might well be a question about the larger meaning, purpose, or overall effect of the language or idea in context. AP

students should have the maturity, skill, and will to seek the larger meaning of a text or issue through thoughtful research.

-AP Language and Composition Course Description 2014

## **AUTHOR'S STYLE**

*Invisible Man* is a stylistic performance of the highest order, a delight and a constant series of surprises to anyone who loves words. That's one view. The other is that it is a confusing mass of shifting styles that only serves to keep the reader from knowing what's going on. Therefore, take this section of the study guide as a warning: *Invisible Man* is not an easy novel to read, and if you want to get the maximum pleasure and understanding from Ellison's dazzling use of language, you will have to work at it.

Ellison's first stylistic device is word play. He loves puns, rhymes, slogans, and paradoxes. "I yam what I am!" cries the narrator, after buying a hot buttered yam from a street vendor in Chapter 13. "If It's Optic White, It's the Right White" is a slogan for the Liberty Paint Factory coined by the black Lucius Brockway. It reminds the narrator of the old southern expression, "If you're white, you're right." "All it takes to get along in this here man's town is a little \*\*\*\*, grit, and mother-wit," says Peter Wheatstraw, a street blues singer in Harlem. What all these expressions and many others have in common is that they are not only funny and clever, they also embody folk wisdom that the narrator needs to hear and understand.

Ellison also has a fine ear for all kinds of speech-especially varieties of black folk dialect. All the black folk characters-Jim Trueblood, Burnside the Vet, Brockway, Wheatstraw, Mary Rambo, Brother Tarp, and at the end the two black revolutionaries Scofield and Dupree-speak in their own varieties of black folk dialect and exhibit a kind of knowledge that the more educated "white" characters seem to lack, a "street" knowledge that has passed from South to North, from generation to generation, and needs to be remembered.

Ellison's stylistic range is enormous. In Chapter 2 he writes a description of the college in the style of the poet T. S. Eliot. In Chapter 4 he writes a sermon modeled on the classic oratory of black preachers throughout the South in the early twentieth century. Influenced by a range of writers from Eliot and Joyce to Dostoevsky and Richard Wright, he can write in whatever style suits his purpose at the time. When asked about his changing styles in the novel, he said, "In the South, when he [the narrator] was trying to fit into a traditional pattern and where his sense of certainty had not yet been challenged, I felt a more naturalistic treatment was adequate.... As the hero passes from the South to the North, from the relatively stable to the swiftly changing, his sense of certainty is lost and the style becomes expressionistic. Later on during his fall from grace in the Brotherhood it becomes somewhat surrealistic. The styles try to express both his state of consciousness and the state of society."

Excerpt from [pinkmonkey.com](http://pinkmonkey.com)

## **ASSIGNMENT:**

All written work should be in a spiral notebook or a composition notebook. You can type the work (and paste it in the notebook) or write it in black ink.

**Define** the following terms that represent some of the relevant stylistic elements in this book: realism, naturalism, expressionism, surrealism, figurative language, rhetorical question, diction, syntax, tone, dialect, symbol, setting, and style.

For **ONE** chapter in each of the chapter units listed below, complete the following:

1. Write a 3 sentence summary of the chapter
2. Copy a sentence or short passage in the chapter that is an example of figurative language and explain how it is figurative
3. Copy and identify a stylistic element in the chapter
4. What do YOU think about this chapter? What does it mean? Do you like it? Is there a character here you like? Is it funny? Is it violent? How do you feel?

Choose one chapter from each of the units below:

Ch.1-4      Ch. 5-8      Ch. 9-12      Ch. 13-16      Ch. 17-20      Ch. 21-24

**Use a different page for each chapter and write on the FRONT of the pages only. You will have 6 total entries. You can add your own art or copies of pictures if you'd like (and if they're relevant).**