

INVISIBLE MAN PROLOGUE EXCERPT HANDOUT (TEACHER) - THE LITERARY WORK OF RALPH ELLISON

From *Invisible Man*, by Ralph Ellison

I am an invisible man. No, I am not a spook¹ like those who haunted Edgar Allan Poe; nor am I one of your Hollywood-movie ectoplasms. I am a man of substance, of flesh and bone, fiber and liquids - and I might even be said to possess a mind. I am invisible, understand, simply because people refuse to see me. Like the bodiless heads you see sometimes in circus sideshows, it is as though I have been surrounded by mirrors of hard, distorting glass. When they approach me they see only my surroundings, themselves, or figments of their imagination - indeed, everything and anything except me.²

Nor is my invisibility exactly a matter of a biochemical accident to my epidermis. That invisibility to which I refer occurs because of a peculiar disposition of the eyes of those with whom I come in contact. A matter of the construction of their *inner eyes*³, those eyes with which they look through their physical eyes upon reality. I am not complaining, nor am I protesting either. It is sometimes advantageous to be unseen, although it is most often rather wearing on the nerves.⁴ Then too, you're constantly being bumped against by those of poor vision. Or again, you often doubt if you really exist. You wonder whether you aren't simply a phantom in other people's minds. Say, a figure in a nightmare which the sleeper tries with all his strength to destroy.⁵ It's when you feel like this that, out of resentment, you begin to bump people back. And, let me confess, you feel that way most of the time. You ache with the need to convince yourself that you do exist in the real world, that you're a part of all the sound and anguish, and you strike out with your fists, you curse and you swear to make them recognize you. And, alas, it's seldom successful.⁶

¹ The term "spook" was a derogatory word used to describe Black people during this time period. Rather than using the word as racial slur, Ellison expands the reader's understanding of the literal definition of spook as it relates to invisibility.

² If people are seeing "everything and anything except me," what are people seeing?

³ What does Ellison mean by the "inner eye" and those with "poor vision"? How do we develop this "inner eye" through which we view others and the world in general?

⁴ What does Ellison mean when he said "it is sometimes advantageous to be unseen"?

⁵ What is Ellison referring to here? Could he be talking about how stereotypes of certain groups have the power to distort or even "destroy" a person's real identity of who they are? Explain.

⁶ What does Ellison tell us here about how people react when they feel "unseen"?

From <i>Invisible Man</i> , by Ralph Ellison	We think this section means...
<p>1. I am an invisible man. No, I am not a spook like those who haunted Edgar Allan Poe; nor am I one of your Hollywood-movie ectoplasms. I am a man of substance, of flesh and bone, fiber and liquids - and I might even be said to possess a mind. I am invisible, understand, simply because people refuse to see me.</p>	<p><i>I am figuratively “invisible.” Not invisible like a ghost or a supernatural being. While I am a human being made of flesh and blood, people do not see me or my humanity, making me “invisible.”</i></p>
<p>2. Like the bodiless heads you see sometimes in circus sideshows, it is as though I have been surrounded by mirrors of hard, distorting glass. When they approach me they see only my surroundings, themselves, or figments of their imagination - indeed, everything and anything except me.</p>	<p><i>Because of prejudice and stereotyping, people do not see the real me, they see some distorted version of me and of the world.</i></p>

<p>3. Nor is my invisibility exactly a matter of a biochemical accident to my epidermis. That invisibility to which I refer occurs because of a peculiar disposition of the eyes of those with whom I come in contact. A matter of the construction of their <i>inner</i> eyes, those eyes with which they look through their physical eyes upon reality.</p>	<p><i>I am not invisible like the invisible man from the stories but rather made invisible because of the warped worldview held by others in society.</i></p>
<p>4. I am not complaining, nor am I protesting either. It is sometimes advantageous to be unseen, although it is most often rather wearing on the nerves. Then too, you're constantly being bumped against by those of poor vision.</p>	<p><i>While it can be a good thing to go unnoticed or unrecognized, being "unseen" can wear on a person because the larger society is constantly "bumping" into you by failing to treat you with human dignity.</i></p>

<p>5. Or again, you often doubt if you really exist. You wonder whether you aren't simply a phantom in other people's minds. Say, a figure in a nightmare which the sleeper tries with all his strength to destroy. It's when you feel like this that, out of resentment, you begin to bump people back. And, let me confess, you feel that way most of the time.</p>	<p><i>Because society does not recognize your humanity and celebrate your identity you can begin to doubt your own sense of self. Those that feel "invisible" then take action to be "seen" by "bumping" people/society back.</i></p>
<p>6. You ache with the need to convince yourself that you do exist in the real world, that you're a part of all the sound and anguish, and you strike out with your fists, you curse and you swear to make them recognize you. And, alas, it's seldom successful.</p>	<p><i>Those that are "unseen" or unheard, those with little power in society, begin to protest, resist and act in an effort to be "seen" or to be treated fairly by the larger society -- although the protagonist notes that these actions are oftentimes not successful.</i></p>