

RALPH ELLISON: AN AMERICAN JOURNEY

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MORE ABOUT *INVISIBLE MAN*

The Hero's Journey

- 1) Obtain a copy of *Joseph Campbell and the Power of Myth* with Bill Moyers and select a segment defining the hero's quest for identity and correlate with Invisible Man's heroic journey as described in the film.
- 2) Compare the "rite of passage" for Invisible Man to other literary "rites" familiar to students - *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, *Catcher in the Rye* and others. Is the "sophisticated, troubling maturity" described in the DVD present in other famous American literary works?

The Trueblood Incident

- 1) Find textual evidence from the novel to either support or reject the interpretations offered by the critics cited in this segment.
- 2) Discuss the gravity of the controversial sexual elements of the scene with the ribald humor that Ellison employed which is present in the scene. Is the humor appropriate?

Confrontation with Dr. Bledsoe

- 1) Discuss what kind of man Dr. Bledsoe is as revealed in dramatization. Select quotations from the Bledsoe chapters that support your analysis.
- 2) Study photographs of lynching in *Without Sanctuary* by James Allen and Hilton Als or at website <https://withoutsanctuary.com> and discuss the impact of Bledsoe's comments to *Invisible Man* in light of the photographs.
- 3) Search artist Renee Billingslea's installation entitled "Lynching in America" and read her statement about her art. Discuss the impact of Dr. Bledsoe's lynching remarks to *Invisible Man* in light of her art.

Booker T. Washington: Model for Dr. Bledsoe?

- 1) Locate copy of *The Atlanta Compromise Speech* (e.g., in Washington's *Up From Slavery*), then find examples in Chapter 6 of *Invisible Man* to establish the Bledsoe/Booker T. Washington connection.

THE BROTHERHOOD

- 1) By research, determine why the American Communist Party would appeal to black intellectuals like Ellison, Richard Wright and Langston Hughes.
- 2) In small groups, students should be assigned either chapter 14, 16, 17, 18 or 22 to locate evidence of the "overly dogmatic" nature of the Communist Party/Brotherhood and report findings to the class.
- 3) Teachers should consult Mark Naison's *Communists in Harlem During the Depression* and Mark Solomon's *The Cry Was Unity: Communists and African Americans, 1917-1936*.

HARLEM RACE RIOT: FACT AND FICTION

- 1) Study the background of selected black activists of the 1950's and 60's to find a connection to the "growing racial pride" of Harlem in the 1940's.
- 2) Locate a copy of "Stage on Screen: Twilight Los Angeles" performed by Anna Deavere Smith and compare The Rodney King riots of 1992 and the Harlem riots of 1943 as reimagined by Ralph Ellison to understand the paradoxical nature of rioting as both violent event and carnival-like event.

RALPH ELLISON: PUBLIC AND PRIVATE PERSONALITIES

- 1) Students should draw up a list in small groups of examples of the "anger" of Ralph Ellison in *Invisible Man* and compare their lists with the whole class to arrive at some conclusions about the tone of the novel.
- 2) Compare the "lack of social activism" of Ralph Ellison as posed in the interviews with a similar charge leveled at British writer Joseph Conrad in relation to his novel *Heart of Darkness*. See African novelist Chinua Achebe's interview with Bill Moyers and discuss the role of the novelist as activist.
- 3) As a whole class together, brainstorm on the board all of the events in the novel that could be labeled "unpredictable," and discuss how these events as presented by Ralph Ellison add to the beauty of his art.
- 4) Debate the proposition that the personality of the author should affect our perception of his or her artistic creation.

ELLISON AND HIS CRITICS: A FORUM

Integration vs. Black Nationalism

- 1) Discuss the question, what are the cultural forces that have contributed to the longevity of *Invisible Man* in American culture?
- 2) Discuss *Invisible Man* as a novel that supports the notion of a multi-racial democracy.

- 3) Go online to research the significant current activists on both the integrationist and segregationist sides of the racial divide.
- 4) Discuss as a class whether the "double consciousness" described in the film is present in other ethnic fiction - Asian-American, Hispanic-American, etc.
- 5) Select a segment from the documentary film *I Remember Harlem* or from internet sources to discuss the life and views of Marcus Garvey. Then compare Garvey with Ras the Destroyer.

The Blues, Heroic Individualism and Collective Action

- 1) Obtain a copy of Louis Armstrong's "What Did I Do to be so Black and Blue," play for the class, and discuss the point of view in the song. Why would Ralph Ellison choose this song in particular to highlight in his novel?
- 2) Have students locate and bring in blues songs. Students should transcribe the lyrics and discuss in light of the "triumph and pain" mentioned by critics in film.
- 3) Locate specific textual allusions to songs in *Invisible Man*, place on an overhead projector, leading to conclusions about the accuracy of the "blues ontology" idea in the film.
- 4) Students should be referred to Ellison's essay "Blues People" in his collection *Shadow and Act*; after reading, students are to compare Ellison's comments in the essay to textual evidence from *Invisible Man* to arrive at conclusions as to the importance of music in the novel.
- 5) Students should be divided by instructor into two camps - each half should prepare evidence from the novel as to the importance of either individual action or collective action. This discussion should lead to conclusions about the nature of this false dichotomy.

Black Arts Movement: Art or Propaganda

- 1) Have students cite or research other novels that have helped change the way Americans felt about race or other social or political problems (*Uncle Tom's Cabin*, *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, *Native Son*, etc), then discuss the role of serious writing as an agent of social change, especially as it relates to *Invisible Man*.

African American Identity: African or American

- 1) Students should read "Change the Joke and Slip the Yoke" in *Shadow and Act* prior to discussing as an entire class the role of black folklore as presented in *Invisible Man* as a necessary ingredient of identity.

- 2) Discuss and research the contributions of African-Americans to American culture. What aspects of modern American culture originated in the African-American community?
- 3) Discuss how Ellison's novel makes the black nationalism/separatist argument untenable if black culture is essential to American culture.

JUNETEENTH: ELLISON'S WORK IN PROGRESS

- 1) Research the history of Juneteenth online. Students should prepare a paragraph on why the date is important to Black history and American history.
- 2) Students should discuss, led by instructor, the decision to posthumously publish an unfinished novel - is this appropriate?
- 3) Students should be asked to locate in *Invisible Man* potential seeds of *Juneteenth* in chapter 23 in the Rinehart episode. Discuss.
- 4) Discuss the role of love in *Invisible Man* as presented by author Toni Morrison in the film as she reads *Juneteenth* - where is the notion of the denial, the spurning of love important in *Invisible Man*?
- 5) Have the instructor obtain a copy of *Juneteenth* and have students do a "Quaker reading" in class or for the school to get a sense of the extraordinary use of language by Ellison.
- 6) Motivated students could read *Juneteenth* for extra credit or to complete a required outside reading project.
- 7) Discuss the view that turning one's back on African-Americans is tantamount to Original Sin, being expelled from the Garden of Eden.

RALPH ELLISON'S LEGACY

- 1) Assign groups of students a particular critical essay on the importance of Ellison's contribution to American and world literature. A selected chairperson of each group could then share the essence of the essay with the whole class. Instructor could help the class arrive at a satisfactory conclusion as to his legacy.
- 2) Students could complete an essay on one of the controversial topics presented in the film, taking an arguable thesis from one of the critics interviewed for the film