“We are each other’s harvest; we are each other’s business; we are each other’s magnitude and bond.”
Gwendolyn Brooks, Paul Robeson (1971)

“We upstanders do not stand by while someone is wronged; they do not wait for someone else to take responsibility; they do not look away when someone is in need; they stand up in a positive way.”
cas.nyu.edu/page/Upstander

Hailed at its publication in 1952 as a masterpiece, *Invisible Man* is a brilliant example of intellectual, psychological, and existential depth and introspection. A searing critique of racism and discrimination, Ellison’s novel questions the real reach of our ideals of liberation and freedom through the voice of an unnamed young black man, a protagonist for whom reality jars with hope and promise. On every page, the novel challenges readers to assess both self-awareness and social responsibility.

*Invisible Man* is a coming-of-age novel that begins with the narrator living underground and hiding from the world in a basement lit up by 1,369 lights, each bulb jury-rigged with electricity siphoned from the local power company. From this space, the narrator tells his story,
which takes him from his all-black college in the rural South to the noisy, bustling streets of New York City. Along the way he encounters a variety of individuals, none of whom seem trustworthy. And he navigates several kinds of institutions—social, educational, political, and corporate—all with equally dubious goals. At the outset of the novel, the narrator states, “All my life I had been looking for something, and everywhere I turned someone tried to tell me what it was. I accepted their answers . . . I was naïve.” Slowly the narrator comes to realize the ways in which individuals and institutions are quick to define him, and he begins the process of finding his own voice and reversing his own invisibility. At the end of the novel the narrator declares, “I’m shaking off my old skin . . . I’m coming out . . . there’s a possibility that even an invisible man has a socially responsible role to play.” *Invisible Man* suggests that heroism is an everyday act; it is the emergence of an individual from silent invisibility into honest action.

**POINTS TO CONSIDER**

The questions and themes below are meant to guide you in your initial ruminations about Ellison’s *Invisible Man*. We hope you will use them as springboards for continuing conversations, debates, and questions in dorm rooms, classrooms, chat rooms, dining halls, and in and about the streets of New York City.

**On Being Seen**

At its most obvious, invisibility refers to the refusal or inability of Americans of all kinds to acknowledge African-American values, contributions, histories, and lives. At a more subtle and psychologically profound level, the narrator’s invisibility is self-referential. He attributes his invisibility to his naive acceptance of racial narratives that position him and other blacks as subservient.
An important aspect of the narrator’s journey is learning how to see, how to know oneself, and how to be the author of one’s own story. As the novel develops, the narrator comes to understand the ways in which what we know of as “history” depends on who records it. The narrator begins to realize that there is no single history, but rather multiple histories, and that the recognition of any one historical narrative depends upon the power and privilege of its author.

The symbolism of seeing and being seen emerges repeatedly through the text and is one of the most salient aspects of Invisible Man. References to light, dark, sight, blindness, and eyes abound. Borrowing from classical epic appear in characters like blind orator Homer Barbee, glass-eyed Brother Jack, and the handicapped veteran who tells the narrator and the trustee that they are “poor stumblers” who “cannot see or hear or smell the truth.” Vision is also crucial in the context of navigating, defining, and orienting spaces, in the basement with 1,369 lightbulbs, in the paint factory where the narrator fails to reproduce “Optic White,” and in Harlem on its “snow-covered landscape lighted . . . by the nervously stabbing beams of passing cars.” Consider, finally, the arena where the narrator delivers his speech. Here there is a “slanting shaft of brightness” marking the entrance before he finds himself again in the dark and “climbing” toward a light so strong it blinds him. Ellison threads a poetic interplay of lightness and darkness throughout the novel.

The questions surrounding visibility also connect to power, privilege, and desire. When the narrator sees the performance of a white woman in an all-male club, he states, “Had the price of looking been blindness I would have...”
looked.” Desire is represented as looking at something forbidden (presumably because of the mixed-raced eroticism at play). However, in a deeper sense, the suggestion is not only that it is dangerous to look, but also that the danger lies in a black man’s gaze.

Is Being Seen Enough?
The philosopher Emmanuel Levinas argued that the beginning of ethical life is the face-to-face encounter: treating someone as fully human means looking at them; listening and speaking together. Moving from invisibility into sight, then, is just the beginning. Ellison’s novel in this way is highly relevant today. Take, for example, the scene in which Brother Clifton is shot and killed on a Harlem street by police. This scene is eerily reminiscent of recent events—the 2014 shooting of Michael Brown in Ferguson, the 2014 death of Eric Garner on Staten Island, or the 2015 death of Freddie Gray in Baltimore—to name only three. These scenes are available to us not in a fictional narrative with a carefully chosen lens, nor only by varieties of eyewitness testimony, which frequently conflict. Our new technologies enable different and numerous ways of seeing and recording that have made these particular events concussive, exploding out into the public sphere. Anyone with a smart phone or camera can post their accounts online, which means numerous authors of any single event. Looking isn’t enough. What matters are the stories we see and then tell. How are narratives of race and violence disrupted by new technologies? How are issues of visibility, resistance, and justice complicated by multiple authors? It is no accident that *Invisible Man*, the first novel of an unknown writer, remained on the best-seller list for sixteen weeks when it first came out or that it since has sold millions of copies. *Invisible Man* continues to ring true, in style and substance, even sixty-three years after its initial publication.

Art and Representation
*Invisible Man* compels us to ask who crafts stories about the human experience; how do they do so, and why? The answers to these questions reveal something about the wide spectrum of human experience itself. Ellison, whose first artistic passion was for music,
wrote *Invisible Man* with jazz in particular on his mind. Tellingly, literary luminaries such as Saul Bellow and critics like Harold Bloom praised *Invisible Man* not only because of its content but also because of its unique, cadenced narrative. The novel references jazz music and figures repeatedly, but even more notably the narrative itself flows much like that of a jazz composition, with improvised rhythms and movements accompanying the narrator’s psychological and geographic meanderings. In addition to the stylistic influences of African American music and speech, one can also sense the ways in which earlier writers like Langston Hughes (*The Ways of White Folks*), Richard Wright (*Native Son*), Mark Twain (*The Adventures of Tom Sawyer*), and Fyodor Dostoevsky (*Notes from the Underground*) influenced Ellison’s subject matter and style.

Ellison maintained a variety of interests from music, both classical and jazz, to sports, theater and photography, and in 1964 he published *Shadow and Act*, a collection of essays on these and other subjects. Yet Ellison, like his narrator, chose fiction as his vehicle for representing issues he wanted to address. What does jazz offer as a model for fiction?

**Everyday Heroism**

Ellison once stated, “This is not an attack upon white society: It is what the hero refuses to do in each section which leads to further action. He must assert and achieve his own humanity; he cannot run with the pack and do this” (*Shadow & Act*, pp. 179–80). How does the anonymity of the narrator work (or conflict) with the heroic?
Identity and Action

“It took me a long time and a 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!” The narrator goes through a series of painful events that teach him of this “invisibility.” What does invisibility “look like” in your own cultural context?

Ellison suggests that we are each called to action and resistance. How has this played out in ways important to you? What are the rewards and the dangers of the kind of assertion Ellison represents?

“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” (Invisible Man, p. 3). In what ways can it be advantageous to be unseen? Why might being unseen wear on the nerves?

In Invisible Man, the narrator’s race is visible, yet racial recognition is not always obvious, nor are other aspects of identity, such as physical ability, sexual orientation, religious conviction, or political commitment. How may the relative visibility of a salient aspect of your identity affect you? What are the potential benefits and burdens (e.g., social, psychological) of this visibility or invisibility?

Writing and Social Change

Ralph Ellison has said, “I am a novelist, not an activist . . . But I think that no one who reads what I write or who listens to my lectures can doubt that I am enlisted in the freedom movement. As an individual, I am primarily responsible for the health of American literature and culture” (New York Times, November 20, 1966). Do you think writers who write about social issues are by default activists? Why or why not?

“Why do I write, torturing myself to put it down? Because in spite of myself I’ve learned some things. Without the possibility of action, all knowledge comes.
to one labeled ‘file and forget,’ and I can neither file nor forget” (*Invisible Man*, p. 579). In what ways does this quote reflect both a psychological and social purpose to writing?

In *The New York Times Magazine*, Roger Rosenblatt wrote, “The optimism of ‘Invisible Man’ lies not in the events that befall the protagonist, but in what he becomes. Up to that point, he is Every Black Man in America; wherever he turns (to capitalism, Communism, nationalism, nihilism), someone is trying to make him disappear” (*NYT*, January 1, 1995). Do you see the ending of the novel as optimistic? Why or why not?

### A HISTORICAL AND CULTURAL CONTEXT

Ellison wrote *Invisible Man* during a time of dynamic social and cultural change. The following timeline provides a window onto these changes as well as onto the literary, artistic, and political moments that almost certainly influenced Ellison before, during and after he wrote *Invisible Man*. As you scan the dates and events, consider pivotal moments in the histories of class, race, and gender that we did not include. How do they complement or complicate what we’ve provided below?

**Building Democracy**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Event</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1912</td>
<td>The NAACP begins counting lynching deaths of African Americans. By 1959 more than 4,730 blacks are murdered by mob violence.</td>
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<tr>
<td>1914</td>
<td>Ralph Ellison is born in Oklahoma City, Oklahoma, named after Ralph Waldo Emerson.</td>
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<tr>
<td>1917</td>
<td>Forty African Americans and eight whites are killed in race riots in Illinois.</td>
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<tr>
<td>1917</td>
<td>Thousands of African Americans march along Fifth Avenue in New York City to protest racial discrimination and violence.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1918</td>
<td>World War I ends.</td>
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1919 The nation witnesses violence against recently-discharged African American soldiers. African American success in the industrial north and white resentment spark race riots across the country.

Harlem Renaissance

1920 Mamie Smith records “Crazy Blue,” reportedly the first blues record.


1925 Countee Cullen, one of the most important poets of the Harlem Renaissance, publishes Color, his first book of poems. Marian Anderson wins a New York Philharmonic Orchestra singing competition.

1926 Langston Hughes publishes The Weary Blues.

1929 The stock market crashes, initiating the Great Depression and ending the “Jazz Age.”

1933 Ellison enters the Tuskegee Institute on a scholarship to study music. He plays the trumpet. He is drawn to jazz, but studies classical music because his plan is to pursue a career as a composer and performer of classical music.

1935 Jazz pianist Count Basie forms what eventually becomes Count Basie and His Orchestra, one of the most important bands of the swing era. The Harlem Race Riot occurs, triggered by anger over racial discrimination by white-owned businesses. Langston Hughes’ Mulatto is the first play by a black writer to open on Broadway.

1936 Ellison moves to New York City to earn money so he can finish at Tuskegee. He plans on returning, but is unable to raise the funds. He meets poet Langston Hughes and writer Richard Wright, the latter of whom encourages him to follow a career in fiction-writing. His literary influences are Ernest Hemingway, James Joyce, Gertrude Stein and Fyodor Dostoyevsky.
Pre-World War II Period

1938 Ellison gets a job through the Federal Writers' Program, an offshoot of the New Deal-sponsored Works Progress Administration. Ellison writes an ethnography called “The Negro in New York,” as part of his job.

1939 Singer Marian Anderson is denied permission to sing at the hall of the Daughters of the American Revolution because she is black. Marian Anderson and Ralph Ellison each had apartments at The Beaumont, 730 Riverside Drive, New York City. The site is eventually established as a landmark by the Landmarks Preservation Commission.

1940 Richard Wright publishes Native Son, a novel about race relations in the United States.

1940-41 Jacob Lawrence shows Migration of the Negro, an exhibition of sixty paintings illustrating the migration of southern blacks to northern cities. This series is currently on exhibit at New York City’s Museum of Modern Art.

The 1940s

1941 As the U.S. enters World War II, the role of African Americans in the U.S. military grows.

1943 At the start of World War II, Ellison joins the Merchant Marine.

1944 Writer Rayford Logan edits What the Negro Wants, an anthology of essays by African American intellectuals demanding racial equality.

1947 Jackie Robinson, the first African American to play baseball in the major league, debuts at Ebbets Field with the Brooklyn Dodgers and wins the Rookie of the Year Award.

1947-51 Ellison writes Invisible Man.
The Civil Rights Era

1948  President Harry Truman issues an executive order desegregating the U.S. military.

1950  Gwendolyn Brooks is the first African American to win a Pulitzer Prize.

1950  Ralph Bunche wins the Nobel Peace Prize for his work mediating the Arab-Israeli conflict in the Middle East.

1952  *Invisible Man* is published by Random House.


1954-55  Ellison travels to Paris to lecture and lives in Rome to work as a fellow of the American Academy of Arts and Letters.

1955-56  Rosa Parks refuses to give up her seat on a Montgomery, Alabama, bus. This and other actions eventually lead to the landmark U.S. Supreme Court ruling that segregation on Montgomery, Alabama, buses is unconstitutional.

1959  Miles Davis records “Kind of Blue”; John Coltrane is saxophonist on the album.

1961  Jackie Robinson is the first African American baseball player inducted into the Baseball Hall of Fame in Cooperstown, New York.

1963  March on Washington, Martin Luther King, Jr. delivers his famous “I Have a Dream” speech.

1964  President Lyndon Johnson signs the Civil Rights Act.

1964  Martin Luther King, Jr. is awarded the Nobel Peace Prize.

Ellison: Later in Life

1969  Ellison receives the Presidential Medal of Freedom.

1970  Ellison is made a Chevalier of the Ordre des Arts et des Lettres by France and appointed a permanent member of the faculty at New York University as the Albert Schweitzer Professor of Humanities.
1975  Ellison is elected to the American Academy of Arts and Letters.
1985  Ellison is awarded the National Medal of the Arts.
1994  Ellison dies of pancreatic cancer.
1996  *Flying Home and Other Stories* is published posthumously.
1999  *Juneteenth*, Ellison’s second novel, is published posthumously.
2007  Scholar Arnold Rampersad publishes a critical biography of Ellison.
2010  *Three Days Before the Shooting* is released posthumously.

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2015 FRESHMAN DIALOGUE CONTEST

Try your hand at creating your own ending of *Invisible Man* by entering the Freshman Dialogue 2015 Alternate Ending Contest. There are two versions of the contest: one text and the other graphic. Awards of up to $200 will be given to contest winners. Submissions due by October 1, 2015. For more details, visit https://wp.nyu.edu/freshmandialogue/.