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# *Invisible Man: Critical Thinking*

## Prologue

**Directions:** Read each question. On a separate sheet of paper, answer in complete sentences.

1. What major themes are introduced in the Prologue? (Hint there are two.)
2. How does the Prologue discuss existentialism?
3. The narrator's central struggle involves the conflict between how others perceive him and how he perceives himself. Racist attitudes cause others to view him in terms of racial stereotypes—as a mugger, bumpkin, or savage. But the narrator desires recognition of his individuality rather than recognition based on these stereotypes. The “blindness” of others stems from an inability to see the narrator without imposing these alien identities on him. Why do you think the narrator desires to be seen for who he is rather than stereotypes? Explain.
4. The episode with the blond man and its subsequent treatment in the newspaper serve to illustrate the extent of the narrator's metaphorical slavery. The man's insult, which we can assume was a derogatory racial epithet, dehumanizes the narrator. Why do you think the narrator attacked the blond man?
5. The newspaper's labeling of the incident as mugging marshals the narrator's act of resistance against racism into the service of racism: the blond man becomes the victim rather than the assailant, while the narrator and his motives become invisible to the public. Others have again managed to define the narrator's identity according to their own prejudices. Explain how the newspaper's labeling might have affected the narrator. What is going through his mind? How will he react?
6. The narrator speaks to us through his written text without revealing his name, shrouding himself in another form of invisibility in order to gain the freedom to speak freely. Why do you think the narrator never reveals his name?
7. Invisibility also affords the narrator the opportunity to steal electricity from the power company. By illegally draining their resources—both electrical and otherwise—he forces the company to acknowledge his existence yet preempts any response from them, including any racist response. By remaining metaphorically and literally invisible to them, he announces himself as a presence but nonetheless escapes the company's control. What is the narrator's purpose in this?
8. The excessive lighting of the narrator's underground hole (he uses 1,369 bulbs) not only emphasizes the narrator's presence to the electric company authorities; the narrator also attempts, with this light, to “see” himself clearly without the clouding influence of outside opinion. Explain what this means in your own words.

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# *Invisible Man: Critical Thinking*

## Chapter 1

**Directions:** Read each question. On a separate sheet of paper, answer in complete sentences.

1. The narrator's grandfather introduces moral and emotional ambiguity. Meaning, it is not certain what is considered right or wrong, it is left up to the reader, and there is more than one interpretation. The grandfather confesses that he deems himself as a traitor. The reader never learns who the grandfather feels he betrayed (himself, his family, his ancestors, future generations, or perhaps his race as a whole?). For in the interest of his family's self-protection, he advises them to maintain two identities: on the outside they should embody the stereotypical good slaves, behaving just as their former masters wish; on the inside, however, they should retain their bitterness and resentment against this imposed false identity. Why do you think the grandfather gave this advice? Explain what the grandfather meant.
2. Despite his grandfather's warnings, the narrator believes that genuine obedience will win him respect and praise. To some extent, he is right, as the white men reward his obedience with a scholarship. Yet they also take advantage of his passivity, forcing him to take part in the degrading and barbaric battle royal. What do you think the narrator's grandfather would say about this scene?
3. The battle royal episode extends the novel's motifs of blindness and masks. The boys' literal blindfolding in the ring parallels the men's metaphorical blindness as they watch the fight: the men view the boys not as individuals, but as inferior beings, like animals. They force the boys to conform to the racial stereotype of the black man as a violent, savage, oversexed beast. Do you believe that things like this still happen today? Do people still hold on to racial stereotypes and try to force it upon them? Explain.
4. The narrator, blind in so many ways, has not yet learned to see behind the masks, behind the surfaces of things, behind the veils put up by white society. Only too late does he discover the falsity of the supposedly gold coins and of white generosity—the painful electric current running through the innocuous-looking rug. Do you agree that people wear masks? Is it possible to see through people's masks?
5. The white men's reaction to the narrator's slip in substituting "social equality" for "social responsibility" in his speech underlines Ellison's point. Whereas the men act with some benevolence toward the narrator when he embodies their idea of the model black citizen, they show their true faces when he threatens white supremacy. The moment he exhibits an individual opinion, the men demand that he reassume the good slave role. By rewarding him with the briefcase and scholarship only when he does so, the men restrict his social advancement to their terms. What does this sudden hostility reveal about the white men? What are the pros and cons of being a "model black citizen"?

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## **Chapter 2-3**

**Directions:** Read each question. On a separate sheet of paper, answer in complete sentences.

1. With the character of Mr. Norton, the novel introduces another instance of white supremacy and self-aggrandizement (promoting oneself) masquerading (disguised) as generosity and philanthropy. He explains to the narrator why he became involved in the college, he says, in the Golden Day, "I felt . . . that your people were somehow closely connected with my destiny" (Chapter 3). Earlier, in the car, he tells the narrator, "You are my fate" (Chapter 2). Norton never concedes to the narrator the right to claim his fate as his own; instead, their fates become one, with Norton claiming ownership over both. Is it possible to claim someone's fate? Do you agree that people, like Mr. Norton, have their own self-interests at heart? Explain.
2. Explain the scene with Mr. Norton and Jim Trueblood. Why do you believe Mr. Norton gave him money at the end of their conversation? Explain.
3. Mr. Norton's detailed description of his own daughter suggests that Trueblood's story may provide Mr. Norton with an imaginative outlet where he vicariously can live out his own incestuous desires. Norton continuously mentions his daughter's beauty and remarks, "I could never believe her to be own flesh and blood." Mr. Norton then hands the narrator money, just like he did with Trueblood after describing his incest. Do you believe that there is a connection between Jim Trueblood and Mr. Norton? Is it possible for Mr. Norton to have the same desires as Trueblood? Explain.
4. The veteran identifies Mr. Norton as a narcissist by stating that Mr. Norton sees the narrator as a mark on the scorecard of his achievement. What does the veteran mean by this? Explain.
5. The veteran stated, "Poor stumblers, neither of you can see the other..." By saying this, the veteran is figuratively removing the narrator and Mr. Norton's blindfold. Meaning, Mr. Norton wishes to believe himself as an influential humanitarian. While the narrator wishes to believe that the college offers him freedom to determine his own fate and identity. Neither is true and the veteran is not afraid to point this out. The veteran is the only character to recognize and speak the truth. Yet, society labels him insane for daring to see beneath the surface and for telling people what he has seen. Do you believe the veteran is insane? Does this happen today where people are labeled insane for seeing things for what they are? Explain.

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## Chapter 4-6

**Directions:** Read each question. On a separate sheet of paper, answer in complete sentences.

1. We see that Bledsoe uses masks not only to dupe the white establishment but to dupe his own students. The narrator's grandfather advised his family to use masks as a form of self-defense and resistance against racist white power, but Bledsoe uses masks as a weapon against members of his own race. Explain how Bledsoe does this.
2. Bledsoe's character shows the ultimate limitations of the grandfather's philosophy: African Americans will not win true power for themselves as a people if they continue to lead double lives. Do you agree with this? Why or why not?
3. Barbee regards the Founder as a god of sorts, whose ideology should be trusted completely, like a religion. The sermon declares that the Founder's ideology and life represent a universal example that should be followed blindly rather than skillfully manipulated, as Bledsoe does. This is known as blind faith. Do you believe that people follow religion blindly? Explain.

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## Chapter 7-9

**Directions:** Read each question. On a separate sheet of paper, answer in complete sentences.

1. Booker T. Washington was an American educator, author, orator, and adviser to multiple presidents of the United States. During the time in which the novel is set, Booker T. Washington's philosophy that blacks should put their energy toward achieving economic success (improving quality of life) rather than agitate (fight) for social equality (equal rights) reigned in the South as the predominant ideology for the advancement of Black Americans. During this time, both whites and blacks embraced Washington's philosophy. Do you agree with Washington's approach? Should people of color fight for a better life rather than fight against racism?
2. At the Golden Day in Chapter 3, the veteran points out how Booker T. Washington's philosophy actually promotes enslavement and blindness to the real problem of racism. Bledsoe exiles the veteran from the South for holding this belief, just as he expels the narrator from school. The veteran is sent to another asylum, just another form of confinement. Why do you believe that Bledsoe forced the veteran to leave the South?
3. Unlike the veteran, the narrator wants to leave the South. He has desired to relocate for years. The narrator used his freedom of speech to defy the masquerade (masks that people wear to hide who they really are). Why do you believe that the narrator would want to leave the South?
4. The veteran describes to the narrator the American power system. People like veteran and the narrator are being controlled by important white pulling strings. As if the narrator and veteran are marionette dolls. The people controlling their lives are invisible, hidden behind masks. When they pull their strings, they treat them like an object rather than a human being. The veteran believes that the puppet masters are all white; however, the veteran fails to recognize how Bledsoe wields the same control over other blacks. Do you agree that ALL puppet masters are white? Or do you believe that people like Bledsoe, who attempt to control people of the same color, exist?
5. The narrator desperately wants to escape the American power structure. Because of this, he gladly migrates North in search of freedom. Explain how New York is different from the South. What are the major differences?
6. In New York, the narrator cannot escape prejudices of the South. For example, in the deli, when the waiter assumes that the narrator would enjoy a stereotypical Southern meal. Despite the narrator's desire to escape the South, if he disowns his Southern origins, he is also disowning a part of himself. He would be repressing his identity. Do you agree? Is it possible to forget where you came from? Does where you come from shape who you are?
7. We quickly discover that Bledsoe betrayed the narrator by giving him letters to employers making sure the narrator would never get hired. By expelling the narrator and ensuring his banishment from the white community in New York, Bledsoe single handedly caused the narrator to go on a new path for freedom. Why do you think Bledsoe betrayed the narrator? How will this later affect the narrator?

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# Invisible Man: Critical Thinking

## Chapter 10

**Directions:** Read each question. On a separate sheet of paper, answer in complete sentences.

1. The narrator's experiences at Liberty Paints show the historical myth that the North is the land of freedom for black Americans. The narrator quickly finds out that the North perpetuates its own racist social structure. Explain how the North is in its own way racist just like the South.
2. In order to create the "optic" white color for Liberty Paints, it is necessary to mix the base with the dead black chemical to produce the blinding white paint. The fact that you have to mix the base with black demonstrates how the brilliance of whiteness needs blackness. Meaning, in order for white to shine, black has to be mixed in. This serves as a metaphor for American culture during this time. White dominance and privilege derive from the oppression and lower status of the black community. White power would not exist without disempowering the blackness. Do you agree with this? Why or why not?
3. The narrator encounters the frustrating truth that coming to the North has not afforded him the freedom to define his own identity. Brockway brands him a traitor and forces a violent confrontation. The portrayal of conditions at Liberty paints strongly contradicts Booker T. Washington's belief that economic advancement leads to freedom. Ellison is basically saying that no amount of hard work and industriousness done by black Americans will grant them social/political equality because whites will never grant them that equality out of sheer goodwill. Do you agree with Ellison that equality will never be granted? Why or why not? Is there hope for America to become united?
4. Read the statement. Decide whether or not you agree with it. Explain why.  
"Racism is only relevant to people of color."
5. How do you think whites feel about race? Explain.

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# Invisible Man: Critical Thinking

## Chapter 11

**Directions:** Read each question. On a separate sheet of paper, answer in complete sentences.

1. The narrator's experiences in the hospital mark an important transition in *Invisible Man*. The narrator experiences a figurative rebirth. Ellison fills this chapter with imagery making it seem as though the narrator is a newborn child—he wakes with no memory, an inability to understand speech, and a wholly unformed identity. This rebirth involves no parents as the narrator faces the doctors alone. The lack of mother and father makes the narrator recall the veteran's advice that the narrator should be his own father. That is, create his own identity rather than accept an identity imposed on him from the outside. Have you ever experienced a rebirth of your own? Do you think it's possible to recreate yourself?
2. The idea to castrate the narrator is presented by the doctors as the narrator is in the hospital. This idea underscores white America's hidden obsession with black sexuality. Whites tend to see blacks as animals who cannot control themselves. As seen in Mr. Norton's bizarre curiosity about Jim Trueblood's incest. Also seen in Chapter 1, as the black men are forced to lust after a white woman. Why do you think that white people were so obsessed with black sexuality? What did whites believe that blacks were animalistic?
3. As the narrator sets out in New York, he takes the advice of the veteran and decides to hide himself by being open, to define his own identity, and to become his own father. The narrator finds his ability to speak bluntly of men like Bledsoe and Norton. He overcomes his blind devotion to the college and ideology that rules it. Because of this, when he leaves the hospital he feels stronger and no longer afraid. Explain how the narrator has changed since the battle royal scene in chapter one. What do you think he will do next?

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## Chapter 12-15

**Directions:** Read each question. On a separate sheet of paper, answer in complete sentences.

1. What kind of role does Mary play in the Narrator's life?
2. Why do you think Mary is so kind to the narrator, giving him a place to stay and not worrying about rent? Do you think she's been in this situation herself?
3. After consistent rejection, pain, degradation, and depression, the narrator finally finds his voice. It should come as no surprise to the reader that the narrator's voice is formed soon after he accepts his past—symbolized by the baked yams, which nourish his body and soul. Do you think the narrator made the right decision to embrace his heritage and not be ashamed of where he came from? Why or why not?
4. Yet, in joining the Brotherhood the narrator stands poised to abandon his heritage once again. By granting the narrator membership in a social and political movement, the Brotherhood temptingly revives his dreams of living a life of social significance. Why do you think the narrator is so quick to “forget” his past again? Explain.
5. It soon becomes clear that the Brotherhood is using the narrator as a means toward its own ends. Emma's comment to Jack that the narrator should be “blacker” indicates that the members of the Brotherhood relate to the narrator not as an individual human being but rather as an abstract symbol of his race. Do you believe that people ONLY see others for their race? Or even just use someone else's race to their own advantage?



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# Invisible Man: Critical Thinking

## Chapter 16-17

**Directions:** Read each question. On a separate sheet of paper, answer in complete sentences.

1. The narrator calls for an end to the blindness that causes such interracial divisions and urges the formation of a united front. His speech, however, becomes ironic when we learn that he cannot even see his audience. He becomes a blind leader of a blind audience. The narrator stumbles blindly as he leaves the microphone, just as Reverend Barbee does after his sermon in Chapter 5, and as the prizefighter must have done after his blinding bout in the ring. Explain what Ellison means by “blindness” in your own words.
2. Some members of the Brotherhood become dissatisfied with the narrator’s speech because of its lack of “scientific” content. What does this mean? Why would the speech upset them?
3. Although the narrator initially believes that his membership in the Brotherhood has made him into a new person, his nightmares about figures from the past suggest that his past cannot be erased and that it will continue to haunt him. Does this happen in real life? Is it possible to forget the past or will it haunt you?
4. By dedicating himself to his work, the narrator has indeed gained a well-known public identity. However, he suffers intense internal conflict between his public and private selves, and consequently feels as if he is “running a foot race” against himself. Explain how the narrator is one person in public and a different person in private.
5. The narrator’s observation that he is running a foot race echoes his dream in Chapter 1 in which he opens his briefcase to find the envelope containing a paper that reads “Keep This Nigger-Boy Running.” Clearly, the Brotherhood’s attempt to refashion the narrator’s identity doesn’t celebrate his individuality but rather keeps him running, searching to define himself against stereotypes. Explain the footrace he is running.

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# Invisible Man: Critical Thinking

## Chapter 18-19

**Directions:** Read each question. On a separate sheet of paper, answer in complete sentences.

1. Much of Ellison's novel contemplates the advantages and disadvantages of invisibility; in Chapter 18, the narrator learns a lesson about visibility. He recognizes the extent of his visibility when he receives the anonymous letter. The letter's author echoes a sentiment similar to that of the Southern whites, Bledsoe, and others—don't fight too hard too fast for racial equality. With this in mind, do you think it's better to be seen, to be (visible) or to walk through life unnoticed (invisible)?
2. Brother Tarp's dark past belies the notion that one can escape the South's racist legacy by fleeing to the North. Although he escaped the brutal conditions of the chain gang, Tarp continues to suffer from the wounds that he incurred during his nineteen years of slavery; his persistent limp attests to these wounds' permanence. Though no longer enslaved, he still walks as if in chains. He also believes in the importance of remembering this dark past: although he limps involuntarily, he quite deliberately chooses to keep his shackle as a reminder of his bondage. Do people tend to carry their past with them like Brother Tarp? If so, is it a good or bad thing? Explain.
3. Like the narrator's grandfather, Brother Tarp cautions the narrator never to become too complacent about his freedom; he gives the narrator his shackle to help him follow this advice. Tarp's shackle recalls the shackle that Dr. Bledsoe keeps on his desk at the college. Yet Tarp's shackle lies twisted and rusted from authentic use; Bledsoe's attests to no personal past but, rather, serves rather as a superficial, inauthentic decoration. Bledsoe's unbroken shackle symbolizes the continuing legacy of slavery, while Tarp's shackle, broken open during his escape, signifies the freedom of a fugitive prisoner. Explain, in your own words, the key differences between Brother Tarp and Dr. Bledsoe.
4. When Brother Wrestrum advises the narrator to put the leg shackle out of sight, noting that it dramatizes the racial differences within the Brotherhood, he exhibits a blindness and ideology similar to that of Bledsoe and the narrator's college as an institution. The black college students emulate white culture and white values in return for the opportunity for social advancement. Much as the college students shun their black Southern cultural heritage and history, Wrestrum advises the narrator to hide this symbol of the brutal historical experiences of black Americans. Unlike Tarp, he wishes to forget and abandon that history. He believes servile invisibility will ease the racist attitudes of some of the Brotherhood's members. Who is right here? Brother Tarp or Brother Wrestrum? Should you forget the past or let it serve as a reminder? Explain.
5. In the episode in which the narrator sleeps with the white woman, we see another instance of the North's veiled version of racism. In the South in which the novel is set, mixed meetings with both black and white social activists would probably not occur, and very few white women would consider sleeping with a black man. Yet, while this Northern white woman listens politely to the narrator's words, expresses admiration for him, and sleeps with him, she does not do so out of color blindness. Rather, to the white woman, the narrator embodies the "primitive" black male; she treats him as an object, using him to indulge her sexual fantasies. With this knowledge, explain how this contributes to the narrator's developing invisibility?

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# Invisible Man: Critical Thinking

## Chapter 20-21

**Directions:** Read each question. On a separate sheet of paper, answer in complete sentences.

1. These chapters focus sharply on the ideas of belonging and betrayal. Explain how/where we see these ideas conveyed in the chapters.
2. The men the narrator encounters in the bar have left the Brotherhood in anger at the organization's gradual abandonment of the Harlem community. Thus, they distance themselves from the group's treachery. Explain why these people left the Brotherhood. What makes the Brotherhood so bad?
3. Clifton has also left the Brotherhood. Unlike the others who fall silent and lose their political voice, Clifton commits a worse treachery than the Brotherhood. He begins selling puppets that perpetuate stereotypes of blacks. Why do you think Clifton committed this treachery?
4. The narrator's encounter with Clifton contains powerful symbolism. Although Clifton's Sambo dolls appear to move of their own accord, they actually move only when pulled from above by their strings. Thus, the text implies that black Americans continue to live like marionettes, their motions determined by white puppeteers. The stereotypes and expectations of a racist society compel them to behave only in certain ways, move according to certain patterns, never allowing them to act according to their own will. Explain this idea that people are controlled by invisible strings pulled by other people (often white people). Is there always someone pulling the strings? Is the concept of free will impossible?
5. As the committee has excluded the narrator from its decision-making process, the narrator consciously chooses to act individually in regard to Clifton's funeral. During his eulogy, the narrator attributes Clifton's death specifically to racism; he doesn't speak in vague terms of general oppression, as is the tendency of Brother Jack. Moreover, the narrator repeatedly utters Clifton's name, emphasizing Clifton's own individual identity, which the Brotherhood attempted to strip from him. In doing so, the narrator hopes to engrave the memory of Clifton into the minds of the black community. What was the impact of the narrator going against the Brotherhood with this impromptu funeral? How did the Brotherhood react? Did the narrator do the right thing?

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# Invisible Man: Critical Thinking

## Chapter 20-21

**Directions:** Read each question. On a separate sheet of paper, answer in complete sentences.

1. At this point in the novel, the narrator finally loses the illusion that he can remain a free individual within the Brotherhood. He learns that the condition for membership in the Brotherhood is blind obedience to its ideology. Just as his college hired to show Mr. Norton only what the college wanted Mr. Norton to see, the Brotherhood hired to say only what it wants people to hear, to be like the dancing Sambo doll, playing a role defined by the Brotherhood. The Brotherhood is an organization that tries to influence politics. Is the Brotherhood representative of how politics work today? Explain.
2. It is revealed in these chapters that Brother Jack has a glass eye. This is symbolic of both the blindness of the Brotherhood's ideology and the group's attempt to hide this blindness. Brother Jack also states that he lost this eye to prove his loyalty to the Brotherhood. Explain the significance of Brother Jack saying this and how it relates to the blindness of the Brotherhood.
3. Rinehart proves to be one of the strangest and most ambiguous figures in *Invisible Man*; though he never appears in the flesh, he serves as a powerful symbol of the idea of a protean or shape-shifting sense of identity, against which the narrator's own fragile sense of identity can be compared. Rinehart is all things to all people, and those individuals whom the narrator encounters while he wears his sunglasses impose a variety of identities upon him. This fluidity of character plays a major role in the narrator's crucial realization that he is invisible—that he has never had a self because he has always adopted a self given to him by others. What is the significance of knowing about Rinehart, but never actually seeing him? How does this impact the narrator's story? Do you believe Rinehart is as great as everyone makes him out to be?
4. The narrator's conversation with Hambro shatters his remaining illusions about the Brotherhood. Rather than view the Harlem community as a collection of individuals, the Brotherhood treats Harlem as a collective mass, an object to be manipulated for its own ends. Angry that he and his people have been exploited as instruments to others' ends, the narrator plots, ironically, to manipulate someone associated with the Brotherhood—namely Emma—for his own ends. How does the narrator manipulate Emma for his own ends? Explain.

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# Invisible Man: Critical Thinking

## Chapter 24-Epilogue

**Directions:** Read each question. On a separate sheet of paper, answer in complete sentences.

1. The episode with Sybil may serve to comment on the similar positions of white women and black men in society. As in Chapter 19, Ellison portrays a white woman as a neglected wife, not at all interested in politics. Like the woman in Chapter 19, Sybil relates to the narrator as an abstraction, an object to be used for one's own purposes, and he relates to her in much the same manner. Do you agree with this? Are white women oppressed just as much as people of color? Explain.
2. The text emphasizes the narrator's exploited status in the scene in which he becomes covered with bird droppings. Bird droppings appear earlier in the novel as well, covering the statue of the Founder of the narrator's college. Much as people like Dr. Bledsoe manipulate the Founder as an abstract symbol and not as a person, the narrator has been used as an abstract symbol by the Brotherhood. He and the Founder have suffered the same fate: both have been used as a means to dupe others into blind allegiance to an ideology. Explain how the narrator was "used".
3. The narrator's encounter with Ras in Chapter 25 shows how when faced with the prospect of death, the narrator decides in a climactic moment that he would rather live out his own "absurdity" than die for someone else's. The concept of absurdity plays a central role in the existentialist school of thought, which portrays the world as "absurd"—that is, full of labor and effort while lacking inherent value or meaning. The positive program of existentialism calls for the individual to affirm his or her own worth and sense of meaning despite the absurdity of the universe. The narrator's realization of the world's absurdity prepares him to write his memoirs and eventually cast off his invisibility at the end of the Epilogue. Explain existentialism in your own words. Relate to the narrator's experience with this philosophy. Is the concept of existentialism relevant today?
4. The narrator's briefcase figures as a rich metaphor during the riot. First given to him by the white men in the "battle royal" scene in Chapter 1, the briefcase and its contents have come to symbolize the manipulation that the narrator has suffered: the Sambo doll and its invisible strings, the remains of Mary's coin bank, the piece of paper bearing his Brotherhood title, and the anonymous letter warning him not to assert himself too strongly. The briefcase and its contents represent moments from the novel in which others have tried to define his identity. Therefore, even as the narrator flees through the streets, he cannot find safety or freedom. He carries these items not only as literal but also as figurative baggage: as he runs, he drags along a burden of stereotypes and prejudices. What is the significance of the narrator burning all these items? Why did he do this?
5. At the end of the novel, the narrator's story has come full circle: the novel begins and ends with his underground life. The story's cyclical nature, along with the narrator's claim that his time of hibernation is over, implies that the narrator stands poised for a kind of rebirth. He rejects the idea that a single ideology can constitute an entire way of being; a perfect society created according to a single ideology would necessarily limit the complexity of each individual, for each individual constitutes a multitude of various strands. As the novel draws to a close, the narrator remains bewildered regarding his own identity but determined to honor his individual complexity and his obligations to society as an individual. Is the narrator right? Is it important to be an individual? Is there no true right answer for every problem?