*Invisible Man* Discussion Questions/Tasks

For AP Lit with Mr. Bah

Questions and small group discussion topics:

1. Discuss the examples of exploitation in Chapter One. How does the chaos of this scene compare to the chaos of the scene in The Golden Day (saloon/juke joint)? What does Ralph Ellison intend to show us?
2. What role does Jim Trueblood play in the novel, especially for Mr. Norton, Dr. Bledsoe, the students at the college—others? Analyze Jim Trueblood’s name as well.
3. Who is Booker T. Washington, and how is he relevant to this novel? (Students may use their “smart” phones to look up Booker T. Washington.)
4. In what ways does the novel’s narrator seem naïve? Give examples.
5. Who is Mr. Norton, and what does he represent?
6. Also look up Frederick Douglas, Marcus Garvey and W.E.B. DuBois.
7. Track the narrator’s intellectual development. How aware is he? When in the novel do you see him learning important life lessons? Etc. Is this a hero’s journey. Look up “Hero’s Journey.” What elements, if any, does this novel share with the journey model?
8. Remember I have said that many of these characters represent a philosophy, movement or world view. What do the characters in this novel represent? Here is a list:
   * + - The Grandfather
       - The unnamed narrator
       - Dr. Bledsoe
       - Mr. Norton
       - Jim Trueblood
       - The Vet
       - Reverend Barbee
       - Mr. Emerson
       - Mr. Kimbro
       - Lucius Brockway
       - Emma of the Brotherhood
       - Brother Jack of the Brotherhood
       - Ras the Exhorter (sounds like Extorter, first introduced as Ras the Destroyer)
       - Brother Tod Clifton
       - Mary
       - Brother Hambro
       - Brother Tarp
       - Brother Wrestrum
       - MacAdams (who questions “what community?” page 425)
       - Rinehart
       - Sybil
       - Any more so far?
9. Consider this novel section by section, or even scene by scene.
   * Scenes:
     + - Prologue
       - The battle royal
       - The college
       - Taking Mr. Norton to the juke joint
       - Men’s House
       - The paint factory
       - The union meeting at the factory
       - The hospital
       - The eviction
       - Mary’s house
       - The Brotherhood
       - The Black Nationalists
       - The anonymous letter left on the narrator’s desk
       - The “Rainbow of America’s Future” poster
       - Brother Tarp’s leg iron, the story of it, and Brother Westrom’s response to seeing it on the narrator’s desk
       - The charges brought against the narrator before the committee of the Brotherhood, and their resolution, and this leads to—
       - What is the general conflict between the Brotherhood’s plan for Harlem and the narrator’s view of what should be done?
       - The role of women the story, think in general and in specifics about particular women, the woman meets the narrator after his first downtown speech on the “woman problem,” who brings the narrator home to “discuss ideology” (her husband appears briefly)
       - The Sambo dolls, the whole scene
       - The funeral, the old man who starts the song, and the funeral speech
       - The meeting with the Brotherhood committee after the funeral—what did the narrator do wrong? What is the overt argument and personal, sub-textual argument between the narrator and Brother Tobitt
       - What does the narrator learn “from” Rinehart? What does Rinehart prove or suggest about life?
       - What happens in the Barrlehouse’s bar, The Jolly Dollar, between Brother Maceo and the narrator when he is wearing the hat and sunglasses? What does this suggests or show?
       - What is the message of Brother Hambro’s final lesson (pages 500—505). Note that Hambro’s son is singing “Humpty Dumpty.”
       - What is the narrator’s final plan for dealing with the Brotherhood?
       - The epilogue
       - And so on…
10. Consider the brief case. What it might represent, if not perverted by the context in which it exists, what it does end up representing, and the objects it contains, at one time or another: The letters, the head of the “picaninny statue”(from the mechanical toy bank), etc.
11. Also consider these items as separate symbols:
    * + - The briefcase
        - Statue at the college
        - The “mechanical, picninny statue, toy bank”
        - The paint, and paint factory
        - The yams being sold by the street vendor
        - White as color, white lines on roads
        - Light
        - A neon sign in Harlem that reads, “CHECKS CASHED HERE.”
        - Bull fighting imagery, especially starting with the paintings in the El Toro Bar.
        - Brother Tarp’s leg iron
        - The anonymous note left for the narrator on his desk
        - The Sambo dolls
        - The “lynched” mannequins
        - Falling into a coal cellar
12. List and consider all of the narrator’s speeches.
13. Note that the narrator remarks that the fight between the Black Nationalists and the Brotherhood recalls to him the battle royal.
14. Note that Ras speaks in an accent. Sound it out. What does it sound like, and from where might Ras be?
15. Who is using whom in the relationship between Sybil and the narrator? How? Why? Note that the narrator seems to develop some odd affection for her, worrying about her possibly being in the riot. Notice her drunken pronunciation of “beautiful.” What does the narrator say about it?
16. Why do a group of men burn down their own apartment building?
17. Discuss in detail Ras’s final moments in the novel? What becomes of him?
18. Why can’t the narrator find Mary’s house (in both literal and figurative/ symbolic senses)?
19. What does the narrator learn about the anonymous note near the end of the novel? What is the import of this realization? Reread the note.
20. Reread the prologue and epilogue.
21. Keep adding to this list