

AP English Literature and Composition
Question 3: Literary Argument (2018)
Sample Student Responses

Sample I

[1] During the height of World War II, Ralph Ellison began his seven-year journey of writing the immensely complex, genre-bending, and influential novel, Invisible Man (1952). Ellison, mirroring the efforts of the Pittsburgh courier's "Double V Campaign," a movement advocating African-American victory in the war abroad, and in terms of racial injustice at home, focused on the African-American's struggle to combat ubiquitous prejudice while attaining self-understanding. The African-American narrator symbolically unnamed for the entirety of the novel, introduces himself as an "invisible man." Yet, his invisibility is rather than akin to that of a heroic archetype who spies on criminals with literal transparency, metaphorical in its nature. He claims to be "invisible," on the basis that his humanity, throughout his experience, is never seen. In the world of racism that America encapsulates – especially in the mid-20th century – he is only perceived as a façade of confining stereotypes imposed on African-Americans. Although the "gift" of metaphorical invisibility, as shown through the novel's varied characters, can be utilized to (arguably) bolster freedom – freedom in terms of anonymity – Ellison, through the "Invisible Man's" reflections, asserts that such invisibility is immensely impairing, as it stubbornly presents its victims from making an impact on society as they're imprisoned in oppressive expectations. Ellison ultimately implies that an acceptance of one's invisibility, rather than a firm ideology on how to relieve it, is the path to self-understanding.

[2] It becomes clear early in the novel that, although presented with a tone of pessimism, this metaphorical invisibility can, in some ways, be advantageous. The narrator himself, for example, steals electricity to power his 1,369 lightbulbs that decorate his underground home – such an obsession with light reflects his urge to be seen. Similarly, his own grandfather (a former slave) held an optimistic approach to invisibility, arguing that one could "Overcom'em with yesses, undermin'em with grins, [and] agree'em to death and destruction" – that a subtle mockery of prejudice – simply accepting his position of absurdity – would bring contentment and relief from oppression (talking the moral high ground). Similarly living with his "head in the lion's mouth" (an emblem of oppression) a mysterious veteran that the narrator meets at the Golden Day (a bar populated by mentally unstable veterans) advocates the acceptance of invisibility, arguing that it is a "gift" allowing one to flow freely through society anonymously, secure from the strict demands of social reputations and influence.

[3] Although the narrator's invisibility may act as a gift in certain situations, it ultimately acts as an immense burden standing between himself and his goals, as well as his urgency to live an impactful life. A symbolic experience with buttered yams in Harlem outlines the confining nature of stereotype-driven invisibility. Biting into a hot yam, saying "I yam what I am," thus conforming to the stereotypes of African-Americans, the narrator feels free, he has escaped the prison of expectations for "proper" or "good" blacks set by white society, unlike Dr. Bledsoe (a leader at an all-black college) who is shameful of his deep urge to eat chitterlings

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and lose his “proper” reputation. The negative influence of invisibility is also emphasized in the symbolic inclusion of Sambo dolls. Tod Clifton, a former member of the Brotherhood – a social activism group – ironically sells Sambo dolls on the street and ends up being murdered by a policeman for his disobedience. The dolls act as symbols for the power of stereotypes to control behavior – “Sambo” is the epitome of a stereotypical character. Just as the transparent strings control the dolls’ gestures, stereotypes, often unconsciously, control the actions of the groups that they’re imposed on – they are, in essence, the transparent strings that fuel the embodiment of stereotypes. In addition, the narrator’s invisibility, paired with the metaphorical blindness of the Brotherhood (who acted as if they cared about blacks for their own moral fulfillment while simultaneously using the narrator as a tool for their agenda) get in the way of his desire to preach his ideals – he is thus rendered incapable of making a social impact because his audience fails to see his message.

[4] Ultimately, the invisible man’s metaphorical invisibility can be seen as a tool for freedom in anonymity. However, as made obvious by the many roadblocks that it presented in his life, it is simultaneously incapacitating – an invisible man with a blind audience is futile. With such ideas in mind, Ellison implied that it takes an acceptance of one’s invisibility to feel fulfilled in a world of oppression. At the same time, however, it is vastly important to find one’s own approach to life, as clashing ideologies tend to worsen the dilemma (the college, the Brotherhood, and Ras the Exhorter). Thus, in that the invisible man learned that he must find his own way to adapt to his environment, and his own self, he “on the lower frequencies,” speaks for everyone.

Sample H

[1] Beautiful women seem to have it all. Especially in Hollywood, beautiful actresses become “it girls” and leading ladies. Yet a beautiful actress is hardly ever permitted to play roles such as the laughable sidekick or the terrifying ex-convict (if they do so, it is often with prosthetics to detract from their beauty!). Beautiful Hollywood women, it seems, land less interesting roles. In Virginia Woolf’s Mrs. Dalloway, Elizabeth Dalloway finds herself in a less interesting “role” by virtue of her beauty. Though her contrast with characters such as Miss Kilman reveals that beauty is necessary to attain success, Elizabeth’s frustration at the way she is stereotyped demonstrates that – for women trapped in strictly-enforced gender roles – traditional beauty is a double-edged sword.

[2] The relationship between Miss Kilman and Elizabeth enables the latter to see what her life would be like without beauty or wealth. A social pariah by virtue of her appearance and political beliefs, Miss Kilman earns the scorn of almost everyone in Mrs. Dalloway save Elizabeth. Miss Kilman thus turns up her nose at beauty and society, deigning herself to be above such pursuits. Yet her social status and isolation compared to other characters in the novel make it clear that these pursuits are, to some degree, necessary. Even so, Elizabeth idolizes Miss Kilman, failing to notice the cost of her teacher’s social station. Miss Kilman is the antithesis of the world in which Elizabeth feels trapped, causing Elizabeth to believe that a loss of beauty or class will solve her problems.

[3] Frequent comparisons between Elizabeth and flowers draw attention to the ways Elizabeth is dismissed as more than a pretty face. While boarding the omnibus after her lunch with Miss Kilman, Elizabeth bemoans that people seem to always compare her to hyacinths, lilies, or other flowers. Indeed, Clarissa and Sally both compare Elizabeth to a hyacinth and a lily, respectively, at different points in the novel. Flowers are passive and immobile creatures, plucked and admired for their beauty, but lacking any other qualities. Thus, comparisons to flowers reduce Elizabeth to the single external quality of her beauty. Idolizing qualities such as intelligence and verve in Miss Kilman, Elizabeth does not welcome this attention to her appearance. However, older figures like Clarissa and Sally understand that beauty holds the key to social success in their society, and so view comparisons to flowers as the highest compliment.

[4] Unjust gender roles have placed Elizabeth in a double-bind. Without her beauty, she would be ridiculed, isolated and reduced to Miss Kilman’s social station. With beauty, Elizabeth is pegged as a passive flower and relegated to traditional women’s roles. The two strongest mentors in her life – her mother and Miss Kilman – wish her to pick one path or the other. Elizabeth’s ultimate appearance at Clarissa’s party suggests that perhaps she chooses beauty and society – but was it even a choice at all, with the cost of eschewing these qualities so great?

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[5] Elizabeth Dalloway no doubt possesses extraordinary beauty, but whether this beauty is to her benefit or detriment is another question entirely. Elizabeth's appearance has cast her in the role of gorgeous inguene. Like beautiful Hollywood actresses, Elizabeth faces a long battle against gender norms if she wishes to break out of her typecasting.

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Sample G

[1] Though each person is dually blessed and burdened with a multitude of gifts, how we choose to utilize what we are given is completely determined by ourselves. In Ian McEwan's *Atonement*, Briony has the gift of prolific writing at a young age, but when she begins to attempt to solve her own problems through writing happy endings, McEwan shows the reader that Briony's attempt to play God is not only futile but also destructive, not at all telling of reality.

[2] At a young age, Briony's attempt to assert control over her younger cousins through her play, "The Trials of Arabella" briefly introduces the detrimental effects Briony's gift can have on the Tallis family. While Briony has a very specific outcome planned for the play, her cousins, more specifically Lola, "thwarts" Briony's vision, and she becomes petulant and immaturely takes out her anger on plants in a field near her house. In a chain of unfortunate events, Briony asserts her power over Robbie, when she accuses him of raping Lola, to show that she, indeed, is more powerful than her cousin. In a way, this is Briony's attempt to show Lola that although, as director of "The Trials of Arabella," she gave Lola that leading role of Arabella, she still holds all the control in the palm of her hands and can throw it around whenever she chooses to. In this stage of Briony's life, her writing can be seen as a gift, since through her assertion of control over her cousins through both of her writing and the "resolution" of a heinous crime, Briony is portrayed as a hero.

[3] When both Robbie and Cecilia are dead due to the second world war, Briony again attempts to use her writing in a childish endeavor to regain control over the situation; only this time, McEwan does not allow Briony to accomplish what she had done so many years ago. In this stage of Briony's life, her writing becomes more of a burden to her: although she tries tirelessly to write a happy ending for Robbie and Cecilia to be reunited and live happily ever after after the war, she is unable to finish the book because she develops vascular dementia and begins to lose her memory.

[4] Briony's gift of writing serves as a reminder that although we may attempt to assert control over every aspect of our life, we need to realize that life is messy and it is impossible to truly mold life to perfection, or our own terms. This is clear first through Briony's unsuccessful attempt to coerce her cousins into enthusiastically and satisfactorily fulfilling her vision of "The Trials of Arabella," then further through McEwan's punishment of vascular dementia. Further, the chain of events in *Atonement*, beginning all with Briony's accidental viewing of Robbie and Cecilia having sex, leading to the both of their deaths in World War II goes to show that full control of life is truly unattainable. The complex nature of Briony's gift is conveyed through her benevolent intentions paired with the unexpected or tragic outcomes.

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[5] In conclusion, through Briony's gift of writing, McEwan conveys the message to readers that despite our desire to want the world a certain way, we cannot assert out control unnecessarily, because the results may not be as we expect.

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Sample E

[1] Time and time again, works of literature have featured characters who are given/possess a literal or figurative gift. The gift may hold high measures, and hold great power through the literature piece but also, at times, the gift often holds a burden on the character or causes a problem in the piece of work. The Picture of Dorian Gray by Oscar Wilde shows a young man, Dorian Gray, who does not age, and although at first this seems like a blessing to him, it quickly begins to burden him and arise problems.

[2] Dorian Gray is a young man obsessed with beauty. When his painter friend paints a portrait of Dorian Gray, Gray finds it so beautiful he bursts out in tears and wishes to stay this beautiful, as a painting, forever. This arises many problems, how Dorian's nature of being so self-conceded leads to the other around him feeling unworthy to be with him. Many of Gray's friends die and his lover kills herself. Dorian blames all his problems to his youth and beauty, one he quickly becomes aware is his curse.

[3] Wilde uses Dorian Gray's gift to portray the overall meaning of the book that youth and beauty are not everything, that being vain will only arise problems with not only yourself, but with those around you as well. In the novel, Wilde, right from the beginning, establishes Dorian Gray's vain character and foreshadows the inevitable destruction of the painting that started it all. Beauty and youth are Dorian Gray's main priority /purpose in his life, that it keeps him from forming real relationships. Prince Henry is immediately attracted to Dorian from his [Dorian] beauty but eventually as time went on and everyone (except Dorian) aged, problems arose when people began to notice Dorian not aging. In the end, it causes' Dorian to cry in agony, wishing to never have been "cursed" with the beauty and youth he had originally wished for. Wilde's work holds meaning to this day by showing Dorian's struggle with everlasting youth and beauty. Wilde portrays that being to self-conceded and vain leads to inevitable misery.

[4] Many works of literature often portray a character with a literal or figurative gift. This gift may have positive influences at first, yet many times it serves as an advantage and disadvantage, causing problems. In The Picture of Dorian Gray by Oscar Wilde, Dorian Gray is given the gift of beauty and youth, and with this gift it attracts people towards Dorian. Although Dorian becomes extremely vain and disregards other very quickly. This gift of eternal youth and beauty leads to the death of his friends and broken relationships with others – leading Dorian Gray to be miserable. Wilde uses Dorian's gift and the whole novel to portray the message that beauty is not everything and how it can lead to many problems and misery.

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Sample C

[1] In the story of “The Tempest” by Shakespeare there is a wizard who was casted away with his infant daughter to an inhibited island for years.

[2] This wizard has special powers, with them he was able to free someone from a spell and make them a servant. He had so much power he created a tempest when someone from the land he was casted away how cane in a boat. The power of this wizard was strong, but he could not keep his daughter on his side. When the ship was shipwrecked onto the island his daughter finds a handsome man from the boat and falls in love. Even though he wanted to hurt and punish those who casted him away, his daughter was able to stop him.

[3] No matter the power or wisdom the wizard had, his weakness was his daughter and his love for her. His daughter who was once the thing that kept him going fell in love with the son of the king, which led to the wizard having to stop himself to keep his daughters happiness.

[4] A powerful wizard has the gift of his daughter, which turns into a problem when she falls in love with the son of the king. This leads to him following his daughters wishes.

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Sample B

[1] A novel that has a character with a literal of figurative gift was the main character in Frankenstein. He was given a gift that was a burden, but also an advantage and a problem.

[2] Frankenstein was created by a mad scientist. He was created for evil. He was also created to be hideous. Frankenstein terrorized the town. Everyone in the village was terrified. This became a burden when he never meant to do harm to the small community. He was seen as a monster. The advantage that this created was that the mad scientist was able to successfully use this as he wished.

[3] The gift that he was given contributed to the story by teaching a lesson to not judge someone based on looks. Frankenstein was made as an ugly hideous and terrifying character, but never meant to do any harm.

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Sample A

[1] In the story of Metamorphosis, the main character under goes a huge physical change that impacts the entirety of his life. Although many saw his change as purely a burden, the change revealed a lot to the main character which could've been perceived as a gift.