

English 380
Reading *Invisible Man*:
Race, Politics, and Culture in America—Past, Present, and Future

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*America is woven of many strands; I would recognize them and let it so remain....
Our fate is to become one, and yet many—This is not prophecy, but description.*
—Ralph Ellison, *epilogue to Invisible Man*

Overview: In this class we will consider Ralph Ellison’s 1952 novel *Invisible Man* in its historical, cultural, political, philosophical, and literary contexts. We will seek to understand the novel’s complex vision of the intersections of race, politics, and culture in America, drawing not simply on resonant contexts from Ellison’s pre-Civil Rights nation, including some of his own essays, but also on texts, tropes, and ideas from the early republic and the nineteenth-century United States that constitute the backstory of *Invisible Man*. Accordingly, we will place Ellison’s novel into dialogue with a range of literary works and cultural objects from different historical epochs: the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution of the United States; Louis Armstrong’s “(What Did I Do to Be So) Black and Blue?”; the *Plessy v. Ferguson* and *Brown v. Board of Education* Supreme Court cases; and novels, stories and essays by Frederick Douglass, Ralph Waldo Emerson, Mark Twain, W. E. B. Du Bois, and others. Students will use these assigned readings as points of departure for their own research into Ellison’s influences, contexts, and intertexts in preparation for the course’s culminating project: an electronic annotated edition of *Invisible Man*, which members of the class will plan, edit, and execute in a series of stages throughout the semester. This assignment will not simply function to create a compendium to this landmark work, but also as an occasion to meditate on the ways in which Ellison’s novel—with its penetrating vision of democracy, slavery and freedom, history, temporality, and the politics of the imagination—resonates in our own America.

Objectives: This course guides students through the intellectual challenges and pleasures of reading Ellison’s classic American novel. To this end, you will:

- practice the skills of literary analysis and close reading, focusing in particular on how to read Ellison’s novel through the lens of its specific historical and cultural contexts as well as from more philosophical vantage points;
- cultivate the ability to formulate original, compelling arguments about the project of a literary text and support these arguments with evidence of various kinds and analysis;
- deploy the research tools available at the McDermott Library;
- gain basic fluency with online publishing platforms; and
- synthesize the above skills to create an electronic annotated edition of *Invisible Man*.

Required Texts (it is essential that you purchase the specific editions identified below):

- Ralph Ellison, *Invisible Man*. New York: Vintage, 1995. ISBN: 0679732764

- John F. Callahan, ed., *The Collected Essays of Ralph Ellison*. Rev. edition. New York: Modern Library, 2003. ISBN: 0812968263
- Mark Twain, *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*. Ed. Thomas Cooley. 3rd ed. New York: Norton, 1998. ISBN: 0393966402
- Additional readings available on SharePoint (print hard copies for yourself)

Recommended Texts & Resources (available in the library and/or online):

- Joseph Gibaldi, *MLA Handbook for Writers of Research Papers* (7th ed.)
- *America: History and Life*. Available online at:
<http://web.ebscohost.com/ehost/search/advanced?sid=97a485b9-6859-47b6-af28-3e8491695ff1%40sessionmgr12&vid=1&hid=13>
- *MLA International Bibliography*. Available online at:
<http://web.ebscohost.com/ehost/search/advanced?sid=3b4e29e8-f296-4e45-94d1-9409ceac689f%40sessionmgr14&vid=2&hid=13>
- Lexis-Nexis Academic (news and legal archive). Available online at:
<http://www.lexisnexis.com/hottopics/lnacademic/>

ASSIGNMENTS AND EXERCISES

Participation: This course requires your active, informed, and energetic participation. Participation counts for 20% of your final grade, and as such it will have a significant impact on your overall course performance. You will receive feedback about your class participation at the midpoint of the term. Besides attending all class meetings and bringing the appropriate materials to class (e.g. readings, essays), to receive a strong participation score you must also contribute in a meaningful way to the discussion in every class session. To “contribute in a meaningful way” signifies to answer a question, ask an informed question, respond to a colleague’s point, or put forth your own idea, and in so doing to move our conversation forward. In other words, both the quantity and the quality of your contributions matter. Your comments should emerge from your engagement with the readings and thus you should be able to refer to specific page numbers to support your points.

Annotated Edition: The final project for this course is the creation of an annotated electronic edition of *Invisible Man*. The edition will identify and comment on the influences, ideas, and ambitions of this landmark American novel, by highlighting its engagement with resonant literary, cultural, political, legal, philosophical, and historical contexts. The project will be developed throughout the semester, and the labor will be divided among the members of the course. You will make use of electronic publishing programs (e.g. SharePoint, WordPress) to execute this task. A number of smaller assignments (outlined below) will serve as preparatory and planning exercises and will facilitate your completion of this major project.

Blog Posts: You will be required to make regular contributions to our course blog on SharePoint. The purpose of these posts will be for you to identify connections between *Invisible Man* and the various contexts. For instance, you might sketch out how you see Ellison drawing on—and revising—the legacy of interracial friendship in Mark Twain’s *Huck Finn*. Your posts should also raise questions about the novel (e.g. “What might we make of the protagonist’s allusion to class struggle?”). The comments and questions raised in this forum will serve as a record of your thoughts

and as working notes that will facilitate your completion of the final project. Each student will be expected to post to the blog at least one every week.

Synthetic Essays: In the first and second half of the course, you will write a formal essay (3-4 pp.) reflecting on our collective discussions of Ellison's novel. You should propose an interpretation of a passage from *Invisible Man* that draws on the various intertexts and contexts we have read. Think of these essays as (long) drafts of the kinds of annotations you'll compose for the final project.

Assessment: Your performance in this class will be based on the quality of your blog posts and your synthetic essays, as well as on the strength of your class participation and especially the final project you submit at the end of the term. Your final grade will be calculated according to the percentages outlined below.

Grading Breakdown

Before PROG

Participation: 10%

Blog Posts: 10%

Synthetic Essay 1: 10%

After PROG

Participation: 10%

Blog Posts: 10%

Synthetic Essay 2: 10%

Final Project: 40%

POLICIES, PROCEDURES, AND OTHER IMPORTANT POINTS

Course SharePoint Site: Announcements, electronic versions of course documents, and other useful information will be available on our SharePoint site.

Communication: E-mail is an official mode of correspondence for this class. As such, you are responsible for all communiqués I send to your USAFA e-mail address. E-mail is also the best way for you to contact me.

Extra Instruction: I am available for extra instruction should you need it. Send me an e-mail, and we will work together to arrange a meeting at a mutually convenient time. Please note that while I will not review complete essay drafts, I will gladly listen to your ideas and help you to think through the steps of your argument or a particularly challenging paragraph or two. Should you wish to have someone review a draft of your paper, please visit the Writing Center. Be sure to seek any assistance you may need well in advance of paper deadlines.

Reading Assignments: Reading assignments outlined below on the course calendar will be discussed in class on the day on which they are listed. Readings not contained in the required texts for the course are available on our SharePoint site under the Additional Readings tab; these texts are marked "SP" below. Please read the assigned piece(s) by this date, annotate key passages in the text, and come prepared to engage in a lively discussion about the text(s). Note that electronic versions of our readings are not permitted; you must bring a paper copy of whatever work(s) we are discussing with you to class.

Writing Assignments: Unless specified otherwise, all written work is to be submitted in hard copy form at the beginning of the class session in which it is due. Late assignments will be penalized. Because of the cumulative nature of the assignment sequence in this course, and so that I can return

your graded work promptly, extensions will not be granted except under extraordinary circumstances. Only typed papers will be accepted; please double space your essays, set your margins to one inch, and use a standard font (e.g. Times New Roman) at the 12 pt. size. Number your pages in the upper right-hand corner, only print on one side of each page, and staple your essay before turning it in. Be sure to give your paper a provocative title that speaks to the essay's argument (e.g. not "Essay 1"). Finally, follow MLA guidelines; for details, see our SharePoint site.

Documentation and Academic Integrity: Crucial guidelines and resources regarding documentation standards for your written work and the Dean's policy on academic integrity are posted on our SharePoint site under "Documentation Resources." Be sure to review these items. You are required to abide by these regulations; failure to do so will hurt your grade and may cause you to commit plagiarism inadvertently.

COURSE SCHEDULE

I. Reading *Invisible Man*

| <u>Class</u> | <u>Date</u> | <u>Assignment</u> |
|-----------------------------------|--------------|--|
| 1 | Wed 7 Jan | Introductions |
| 2 | Fri 9 Jan | Due: Retrospective/Prospective Blog Post (submit to SharePoint by 5 PM) |
| 3 | Mon 12 Jan | Ralph Ellison, <i>Invisible Man</i> (pp. 3-70) |
| 4 | Wed 14 Jan | Ellison, <i>Invisible Man</i> (pp. 71-150) |
| 5 | Fri 16 Jan | Ellison, <i>Invisible Man</i> (pp. 151-195) |
| <i>Martin Luther King Jr. Day</i> | | |
| 6 | Wed 21 Jan | Ellison, <i>Invisible Man</i> (pp. 196-260) |
| 7 | Fri 23 Jan | Ellison, <i>Invisible Man</i> (pp. 261-332) |
| 8 | Tues 27 Jan | Ellison, <i>Invisible Man</i> (pp. 333-408) |
| 9 | Thurs 29 Jan | Ellison, <i>Invisible Man</i> (pp. 409-461) |
| 10 | Mon 2 Feb | Ellison, <i>Invisible Man</i> (pp. 462-534) |
| 11 | Wed 4 Feb | Ellison, <i>Invisible Man</i> (pp. 535-581) |

II. Influences and Intertexts: Literature and Legacy

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|------------------------|--------------|--|
| 12 | Fri 6 Feb | Ralph Waldo Emerson, "Self-Reliance" (SP) Ellison, "Hidden Name and Complex Fate," in <i>Collected Essays</i> |
| 13 | Tues 10 Feb | Herman Melville, <i>Benito Cereno</i> (pp. 34-89) (SP) |
| 14 | Thurs 12 Feb | Melville, <i>Benito Cereno</i> (pp. 89-102) (SP) |
| <i>President's Day</i> | | |
| 15 | Tues 17 Feb | Mark Twain, <i>Adventures of Huckleberry Finn</i> (pp. 1-73) |
| 16 | Thurs 19 Feb | Twain, <i>Huckleberry Finn</i> (pp. 74-134) |
| 17 | Mon 23 Feb | Twain, <i>Huckleberry Finn</i> (pp. 135-227) |
| 18 | Wed 25 Feb | Twain, <i>Huckleberry Finn</i> (pp. 228-296) |
| <i>NCLS</i> | | |
| 19 | Tues 3 Mar | Due: Synthetic Essay 1 |

III. Affirming the Principle: Between the Ideal and the Real

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|--------------------|-------------|--|
| 20 | Thurs 5 Mar | Draft of The Declaration of Independence (SP) The Constitution of the United States of America (SP) |
| 21 | Mon 9 Mar | Frederick Douglass, "What to the Slave is the Fourth of July?" (SP) |
| 22 | Wed 11 Mar | Ellison, "On Initiation Rites and Power: A Lecture at West Point"; "The Little Man at Chehaw Station"; "Address at the Whiting Foundation," in <i>Collected Essays</i> |
| <i>Recognition</i> | | |
| 23 | Mon 16 Mar | Majority and dissenting opinions in <i>Plessy v. Ferguson</i> (SP) "The Effects of Segregation" (brief filed in <i>Brown v. Board of Education</i>) (SP) |
| 24 | Wed 18 Mar | Booker T. Washington, Atlanta Exposition Address (SP) W. E. B. Du Bois, "Of Our Spiritual Strivings" and "Of Mr. Booker T. Washington and Others," from <i>The Souls of Black Folk</i> (SP) |

25 Fri 20 Mar Danielle S. Allen, “Prologue” and “Beyond Invisible Citizens,” from *Talking to Strangers* (SP)

Spring Break

IV. Listening to the Lower Frequencies: Music and Philosophy

26 Tues 31 Mar Louis Armstrong, “(What Did I Do to Be So) Black and Blue?” (lyrics and audio) (SP)

27 Thurs 2 Apr Ellison, “Blues People,” in *Collected Essays*

V. Falling Back into History: Minstrelsy, Temporality, and Trope

28 Mon 6 Apr Eric Lott, excerpts from *Love and Theft* (SP)
Steven C. Dubin, “Symbolic Slavery: Black Representations in Popular Culture” (SP)

29 Wed 8 Apr *Bamboozled*, dir. Spike Lee (DVD on reserve in library)

30 Fri 10 Apr *Bamboozled*

31 Tues 14 Apr **Due: Synthetic Essay**

VI. Rereading *Invisible Man*: An Annotated Edition

32 Thurs 16 Apr **Due: Reflection on Blog Post Queries**

33 Mon 20 Apr Library Research

34 Wed 22 Apr **Due: Annotated Edition Proposal, including sources**

35 Fri 24 Apr Work Session

36 Tues 28 Apr Work Session

37 Thurs 30 Apr **Due: Preview of Annotated Edition Online Architecture**

38 Mon 4 May Work Session

39 Wed 6 May Work Session

40 Fri 8 May **Due: Annotated Edition**