

## HERTOG WINTER 2021 SEMINAR

### RALPH ELLISON'S *INVISIBLE MAN*

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In the introduction to his classic 1952 novel, *Invisible Man*, Ralph Ellison wrote that his task was “one of revealing the human universals within the plight of one who was both black and American.” The novel is rightly celebrated as an enduring document of the black experience – one still timely today, as black Americans reiterate Ellison’s demand to be “seen” and judged as individuals. But it is also a larger meditation on identity, citizenship, and the enduring American idea and ideal of *E Pluribus Unum* (“out of many, one”).

This seminar will meet online weekly on **Thursdays** from **6 to 8 PM ET**.

#### Course Materials:

- Ellison, Ralph, *Invisible Man* (Vintage, 1995)
- Course Reader

**Discussion Papers:** Each fellow will be responsible for completing a brief discussion paper (1-2 pages, single-spaced). See below for your assignment. **Papers are due the day before your assigned session by 5 PM ET.** They should be posted on the course Slack channel and will be part of the assigned readings for the session. Paper-writers should be ready to briefly present their ideas during the seminar.

#### Resources:

To learn more about the ideas and figures discussed in this course, we encourage you to explore a project supported by the Hertog Foundation: **The Great Thinkers** (<http://thegreatthinkers.org/>) and **Contemporary Thinkers** (<http://contemporarythinkers.org/>) websites. These sites are aimed at introducing important thinkers in Western thought, with a particular emphasis on politics and philosophy.

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**Thursday, December 31, 2020**

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**6 – 8 PM ET**

**Session I: In the South**

#### Readings:

- Ellison, *Invisible Man*, Prologue, Chs. 1–6

**Recommended Listening:** [Louis Armstrong, “\(What Did I Do To Be So\) Black And Blue”](#)

## Questions:

1. In what sense is Invisible Man invisible? Why does he use the collision with the blond man to illustrate his invisibility? **(Respondent: Eliza Pillsbury)**
2. What do we learn about Invisible Man and life in the South from the Battle Royal scene (Ch. 1)? **(Respondent: Margaret Johnson)**
3. Does Invisible Man make a mistake in taking Mr. Norton to Trueblood's house and the Golden Day? What are we supposed to learn from those episodes? *(Bonus: What is the significance of Supercargo being knocked out in the Golden Day scene?)* **(Respondent: Jack Carlson)**

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**Thursday, January 7, 2021**

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**6 – 8 PM ET**

**Session II: New York**

## Readings:

- Ellison, *Invisible Man*, Chs. 7–11
- Ellison, "What America Would Be Like Without Blacks," April 6, 1970

## Questions:

1. What is the significance of the letters Invisible Man brings with him to New York? **(Respondent: Isabelle Thelen)**
2. What does Ellison mean to say about America with the episode at Liberty Paints? What will the white paint be used for? What are its ingredients? **(Respondent: Alec Greven)**
3. During the psychiatric examination, Invisible Man identifies himself with Buckeye the Rabbit for a moment before suppressing that thought. Who is Buckeye the Rabbit, and in what sense is this scene a turning point in the novel? **(Respondent: Elan Wilson)**

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**Thursday, January 14, 2021**

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**6 – 8 PM ET**

**Session III: Joining the Brotherhood**

## Readings:

- Ellison, *Invisible Man*, Chs. 12–16

**Recommended Viewing:** [Diana Schaub: The Life and Ideas of Booker T. Washington, Conversations with Bill Kristol](#)

## Questions:

1. Why is Invisible Man moved to give a public speech after the eviction? What do we learn about Invisible Man from this speech that we did not know before? **(Respondent: Else Drooff)**
2. In Ch. 14, Brother Jack promises Invisible Man that he will be “the new Booker T. Washington, but even greater than he.” What does this promise mean to Invisible Man? In general, what does Invisible Man (or Ellison) think of Booker T. Washington in this novel? **(Respondent: Mariam Diallo)**
3. After Invisible Man’s first speech as a member of the Brotherhood, the Brothers disagree among themselves about whether the speech was a mistake or not. What is the issue that divides them? Why does Invisible Man recall his grandfather and his college literature teacher at this moment? **(Respondent: David Jia-Lung Tsai)**

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Thursday, January 21, 2021

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6 – 8 PM ET

Session IV: Crisis

## Readings:

- Ellison, *Invisible Man*, Chs. 17–20

## Questions:

1. In Ch. 17, Ras the Exhorter and Tod Clifton argue violently. What are they arguing about and which side is Invisible Man on (at the time of this incident or later)? **(Respondent: Cole Fontenot)**
2. In Ch. 18, Brother Tarp gives Invisible Man a present, but Brother Wrestrum objects to Invisible Man showing that present off. What is the present, and why does Brother Wrestrum insist that Invisible Man put it away? **(Respondent: Ellie Gardiner)**
3. How does Invisible Man’s speech at Tod Clifton’s funeral differ from his previous speeches? Is this speech a political speech? **(Respondent: Maxim Quint)**
4. Why is Brother Jack missing an eye? Why does Invisible Man only learn about Jack’s eye after Tod Clifton’s death?

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Thursday, January 28, 2021

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6 – 8 PM ET

Session V: Falling Out of History

## Readings:

- Ellison, *Invisible Man*, Chs. 23–25, Epilogue

**Questions:**

1. Who is Rinehart, and what does he mean to Invisible Man? What does his name mean? (**Respondent: Joel Bossous**)
2. Why does Invisible Man leave the Brotherhood? Why does he choose to live underground after the climactic riot? (**Respondent: Lucianna Onderwyzer Gold**)
3. In the final pages of the book, Invisible Man recalls and reinterprets his grandfather's deathbed advice. Why does he now say that his grandfather meant for him to "affirm the principle on which the country was built and not the men"? How has the action of the novel prepared him for that insight? (**Respondent: Ryn Delgado**)