

Master of American History and Government  
Ashland University

**AHG 510C:**  
**Great American Texts: Ralph Ellison**

*Sunday, July 8 to Friday, July 13, 2007*  
Instructor: Peter W. Schramm

**Course Description:**

Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man* (1952) is the great American novel about race, perhaps even the great American novel. It considers and affirms the principle—that "mysterious binding force"—that holds us together as a people and that is tied to our own history. In doing so it raises all the important political questions about equality, freedom, rights and justice; the legacy of slavery and white supremacy, our "human and absurd diversity." The novel's deliberate attempt, in Ellison's words, "to return to the mood of personal moral responsibility for democracy", makes perfectly clear the connection between literature and politics. The seminar will also consider a few of Ellison's essays bearing directly on *Invisible Man*.

**Required Texts:**

- Ralph Ellison, *Invisible Man*
- Ralph Ellison, *The Collected Essays of Ralph Ellison*
- Course Pack (CP)

**Learning Objectives:**

This course has three main objectives: to engage in the serious reading of a text in American history and government; to understand how novels, more specifically, *Invisible Man*, comment upon political principles; to deepen our understanding of the American character and of the meaning of freedom, equality, race, and other political ideas in the American context. More specifically, the course intends to increase the students' familiarity with and understanding of:

- How to study a book thoroughly and comprehensively
- The structure of plot and theme in *Invisible Man*
- How Ralph Ellison uses a narrative pattern, plot episodes, shifting styles, series of reversals, dialogue, and allusions, to depict character and to comment upon political ideas
- Ellison's analysis of the moral core of American civilization, human nature, freedom, equality, love, hate, justice, race, and music

**Course requirements:**

A short seminar paper and a final examination. Grades will be assigned in the following way:

Contribution to in-class-discussion: 25%

Seminar Paper: 25%. This will be due during the week; instructions for it will be given in the first meeting of the course.

Final Examination: 50%

**Students auditing the course as a part of a Teaching American History Grant program must complete the readings and fully participate in the seminars during the week.**

## Sunday, July 8

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### 4:30 pm – 6:00 pm Introduction & Session 1

**Topic:** Democratic politics and the novel; Ralph Ellison on the function of a writer; citizen or stranger

**Focus:** What is the function of a novel in a democratic polity? What does it have to do with identity, race, improvisation, and adaptability? What is the connection between the writer and the reader?

**Readings:**

Ellison, “In a Strange Country” (CP)  
“Brave New Words for a Startling Occasion,”  
“The Novel as a Function of American Democracy”

### 7:30 pm – 9:00 pm Session 2 Sunday Evening Institute Lecture (attendance is required)

## Monday, July 9

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### 9:00 am - 10:30 am: Session 3

**Topic:** Identity

**Focus:** Who is the Invisible Man? Why does he live underground? Why does he love light? In what sense has he made poetry out of being invisible? Why does time, and slipping in and out of it, seem important? What did IM do to be so black and blue?

**Readings:**

*Invisible Man*, Prologue

### 10:50 am - 12:20 pm: Session 4

**Topic:** The Battle Royal and the speech

**Focus:** IM recalls his youth. What did he learn from his grandfather? How was his grandfather different from his father? What is the Battle Royal? What does IM do when he is being blindfolded? What is the significance of IM’s speech? Why does the novel begin with a battle and a speech? Why does IM give the speech he gives; because he believes it or because it works?

**Readings:**

*Invisible Man*, Chapter 1

## **1:30 pm – 3:00 pm: Session 5**

**Topic:** Irony

**Focus:** Why did IM receive a scholarship? Why does IM stop the car when he is ordered to? Is Trueblood's story true? Does Mr. Norton think it's true? Does IM? What is the significance of IM meeting the vets at the Golden Day? Why is IM upset?

**Readings:**

*Invisible Man*, Chapters 2-4

## **Tuesday, July 10**

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### **9:00 am - 10:30 am: Session 6**

**Topic:** Power, black

**Focus:** IM listens to a sermon about the founder of the college by a blind preacher from Chicago. Is there a difference between the founder as described by the preacher and the current president of the college, Dr. Bledsoe? How does IM know? What effect does this knowledge have on him? What advice about books does he get from the vet? What surprises IM when he arrives in Harlem? Why doesn't he get any job offers? Why does the letter say, "Please hope him to death and keep him running"? Why does IM recognize the music, and why is he upset at the drugstore when he is advised to order "the special"? Is he angry? Why does he take the job at Liberty Paints?

**Readings:**

*Invisible Man*, Chapters 5-9

### **10:50 am - 12:20 pm: Session 7**

**Topic:** Power, white

**Focus:** What is the significance of the neon sign above Liberty Paints, "Keep America Pure with Liberty Paints"? What is the factory's motto? What happens to the ten black drops of "dope" into buckets of glossy white paint? Why does IM find it difficult to work for Mr. Kimbro, the "slave driver"? Why does IM get into a fight with Louis Brockway? What happens in the hospital and what effect does it have on IM? What does he do at Mary's place? What is the significance of Mary and why is he is bothered by her constant talk of leadership and responsibility?

**Readings:**

*Invisible Man*, Chapters 10-12

**2:00 pm – 3:30 pm: Session 8\*\*\* *Please note time change for this session***

**Topic:** Good Food

**Focus:** What does IM eat from the street vendor? What is the significance of the speech IM gives during the eviction scene? Why is he invited to join the Brotherhood?

**Readings:**

*Invisible Man*, Chapter 13

**Wednesday, July 11**

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**9:00 am - 10:30 am: Session 9**

**Topic:** Science

**Focus:** What happens at Mary's place as IM prepares to leave? IM gives another speech at the Brotherhood rally. Why is this speech considered "incorrect" by Brother Jack? What makes it unscientific? What effect does this have on IM? IM recollects his old English professor's words: "Stephen's problem, like ours, was not actually one of creating the uncreated conscience of his race, but of creating the uncreated features of his face. Our task is that of making ourselves individuals." So then, how do individuals create a culture?

**Readings:**

*Invisible Man*, Chapters 14-16

**10:50 am - 12:20 pm: Session 10**

**Topic:** Black Unity

**Focus:** How does IM receive being appointed spokesman for the Brotherhood? Why is Brother Clifton attacked by Ras the Exhorter?

**Readings:**

*Invisible Man*, Chapter 17

**1:30 pm – 3:00 pm: Session 11**

**Topic:** The Woman Question

**Focus:** What is the meaning of the letter he receives and Brother Tarp's gift? Why does IM get demoted to look after the woman question? Why did IM think he could speak about women? What is the significance of his seduction by a white woman?

**Readings:**

*Invisible Man*, Chapters 18-19

**Thursday, July 12**

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**9:00 am - 10:30 am: Session 12**

**Topic:** Time

**Focus:** IM finds Brother Clifton selling Sambo dolls on a street corner. What does IM mean by falling outside history? Why does the policeman shoot and kill Clifton? What is the significance of IM's ruminations about visibility, time, and reality in the subway? What is the significance of the music at the funeral? What does he mean when he tells the assembled at the funeral, "What are you waiting for, when all I can tell you is his name?"

**Readings:**

*Invisible Man*, Chapters 20-21

**10:50 am - 12:20 pm: Session 13**

**Topic:** Music

**Focus:** Why does brother Jack criticize IM for organizing Brother Clifton's funeral? Although IM feels like he'd been watching a bad comedy, he still doesn't want to leave the brotherhood. Why not?

**Readings:**

*Invisible Man*, Chapter 22

**1:30 pm – 3:00 pm: Session 14**

**Topic:** Humor

**Focus:** What is the difference between the North and South? What does that have to do with his new identity as Rinehart? Is he surprised that he can get away with it? Why does he say we are "nowhere"? Is this chaos? Is this good? Why does he say that Rinehart, this "renaissance man," was "a principle of hope"? What does IM mean by this statement: "Everywhere I've turned somebody has wanted to sacrifice me for my own good—only *they* were the ones who benefited." Why does IM laugh? What is the joke?

**Readings:**

*Invisible Man*, Chapter 23

**Friday, July 13**

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**9:00 am - 10:30 am: Session 15**

**Topic:** A Little wisdom; from ranter to writer

**Focus:** What is IM's plan? What does "yessing them" mean? Why is he interested in Sybil? Why is she interested in him? Why is he running? What is the significance of being almost accidentally shot? Why doesn't he go along with Scofield purposes? How does he end up in the hole? How does time get confounded in this last narrative? Does he understand that the Brotherhood used him as a tool in murder? What is IM's theme as a writer? What does reality have to do with invisibility and honesty and the mind? What does his grandfather have to do with the principle, and its affirmation? What is IM's description of our fate? Does IM now doubt his humanity? Is he still an innocent? Does he take on responsibility? Can the world be put in a straight jacket by some gang? Until then the definition of the world is "possibility" because individuals are diverse; and this explains his grandfather's acceptance of both the principle and his humanity. What does IM affirm in the end?

Readings:

*Invisible Man*, Chapter 24-25, Epilogue

**10:50 am - 12:20 pm: Session 16**

**Topic:** Recognition, Responsibility, Agreement, Principle, Freedom; or, a world of infinite possibilities

**Focus:** Review and Questions

**Readings:** Ellison, from the *Essays*: "What America Would Be Like Without Blacks," "The Art of Fiction: An Interview," "A Completion of Personality: A Talk With Ralph Ellison," "Twentieth-Century Fiction and the Black Mask of Humanity," "Change the Joke and Slip the Yoke," "Note for Class Day Talk at Columbia University," "Commencement Address at the College of William and Mary," "The World and the Jug," "On Initiation Rites and Power: A Lecture at West Point."

**1:30 pm – 3:00 pm: Session 17 - Final Examination**