

The Midwest Faculty Seminar
PRESENTS
Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man*
January 19-21, 2012

THIN PIECE

Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man*, one of the landmarks of twentieth-century American literature, has long been the focus of vibrant critical debate. In the context of its time, the novel is relatively well understood. There exists an abundant critical literature on, for instance, the political implications of the narrator's famous search for self, on the importance of modernism to Ellison's style, and on the narrative of African-American history embedded in Ellison's text. Less, however, has been done by way of connecting the novel's engagement with the realities of the United States in the 1950s to those that define the America in which we live, a set of questions that, for those reading today, the novel's famous ending cannot fail to raise.

This seminar begins, therefore, by trying to consider the text and context of Ellison's powerful novel in order to grasp it as a product of its time, with presentations by scholars interested in cultivating new approaches to some of its fundamental features. We will discuss the novel's interest in the city and the language of submersion in light of mid-century transformations in the organization of urban and suburban space. We will also examine the novel's innovative use of varied artistic mediums—oratory, folklore and music, to name just a few—in order to think through the novel's relationship to modernism and modernist form. And we will explore the importance of music to Ellison's literary style, asking about its influence on the novel and the novel's commentary on the music it so intimately engages.

But the seminar also tries to bring these historical perspectives on the novel into conversation with scholars interested in constructing the link between issues of importance to its time and questions of relevance to our own. Much has been written, for instance, about the novel's representation of African-American history, about the political implications of the "you" invoked in the final lines of the text, and about the novel's interest in different kinds of performance technique. But how does the novel's interest in African-American history help us place the novel and its history in relation to the history of our present? What is implied in any attempt at reading the "you" of the novel as in some way speaking to us? And how can the work of adapting *Invisible Man* to the stage shed light on the relevance of its issues to those of interest to an audience today?

At stake in these questions is, of course, a set of novel approaches to a text that is as well known as any in the American canon. But thinking through *Invisible Man* in this way also has an import that goes somewhat beyond the interpretation of a classic literary text. The question of *Invisible Man's* relation to our time is simultaneously a question of the relevance of the issues it raises—about race and democracy, identity and the American dream—to the America in which we live. Our hope is that the seminar can produce a better sense of our relationship to the text, and of the relationship of the text and its questions to the world we call our own.

Presenters will include Ken Warren (English), Adrienne Browne (English), Ivy Wilson (English-Northwestern), Travis Jackson (Music), Adam Green (History), Oren Jacoby (Playwright, *Invisible Man*) and John Callahan (Literary Executor for the Ellison estate).