**Lit 302: The Literature of Invisibility**

**Prof. Sebastian Knowles**

**Spring 2022**

**Tuesday and Thursday 13:15-14:25**

A picture containing text

Description automatically generated

Description:

We will study what it means to be invisible in society, reading the works of J. K. Rowling, Ralph Ellison, and Viet Thanh Nguyen.

Texts:

J. K. Rowling, *Harry Potter and the Sorcerer’s Stone*

Ralph Ellison, *Invisible Man*

Viet Thanh Nguyen, *The Committed*

Other texts will be made available on the course website (indicated by an asterisk below).

Course Calendar

Week 1 (2/15, 2/17) Instructor in transit from US. For Tuesday’s class (2/15), watch Bong Jong-Hoo’s film *Parasite* (even if you have seen it before).

For Thursday’s class (2/17), identify three moments in the film when someone or something is invisible. Send your responses by e-mail to [Sebastian.knowles@fulbright.edu.vn](mailto:Sebastian.knowles@fulbright.edu.vn) by **Monday February 21.**

First Written Response Due Mon 2/21 (see above)

Week 2 (2/22, 2/24) *The Committed*, “Prologue: We”

*Invisible Man*, “Prologue”

*Harry Potter*, “The Mirror of Erised” (Chapter 12)

Second Written Response Due Mon 2/28

Week 3 (3/1, 3/3) *The Committed*, “Part 1: Me” (Chapters 1-5)

Third Written Response Due Mon 3/7

Week 4 (3/8, 3/10) *Invisible Man*, Chapter 1 (“The Battle Royal”)

*Harry Potter*, “The Midnight Duel, “Halloween, “Quidditch” (Chapters 9-11)

Fourth Written Response Due Mon 3/14

Week 5 (3/15, 3/17) *The Committed*, “Part 2: Myself” (Chapters 6-10)

Fifth Written Response Due Mon 3/21

Week 6 (3/22, 3/24) *Invisible Man*, Chapter 2 (“Trueblood”)

*Harry Potter*, “The Sorting Hat,” “The Potions Master” (Chapters 7-8)

Week 7 (Tue 3/29) Italo Calvino*, Invisible Cities* I: “Valdrada”\*

Italo Calvino, *Invisible Cities* II: “Phyllis”\*

**NO CLASS THURSDAY 3/31: SPRING BREAK**

Short Paper Due Mon 4/4

Week 8 (4/5, 4/7) *The Committed*, “Part 3: I” (Chapters 11-15)

Week 9 (4/12, 4/14) *Invisible Man*, Chapters 3-5 (“Eden”)

*Harry Potter*, “Diagon Alley,” “The Journey from Platform Nine and Three-quarters” (Chapters 5-6)

Week 10 (4/19, 4/21) *The Committed*, “Part 4: Vous” (Chapters 16-17)

Week 11 (4/26, 4/28) *Invisible Man*, Chapter 6-9 (“Harlem”)

*Harry Potter*, “Nicolas Flamel,” “Norbert the Norwegian Ridgeback” (Chapters 13-14)

**NO CLASS TUESDAY 5/3: INDEPENDENCE & LABOR DAY**

Week 12 (Thu 5/5) Italo Calvino, *Invisible Cities* III, “Moriana”\*

Week 13 (5/10, 5/12) *The Committed*, “Part 4: Vous” (Chapters 18-20)

Week 14 (5/17, 5/19) *Invisible Man*, Chapter 10-11 (“Liberty Paints”)

*Harry Potter*, “The Forbidden Forest,” “Through the Trapdoor” (Chapters 15-16)

Long Paper Due Mon 5/23

Week 15 (5/24, 5/26) *The Committed*, “Epilogue: Tu”

*Invisible Man*, “Epilogue”

*Harry Potter*, “The Man With Two Faces”

**CLASS ENDS THURSDAY 5/26**

**Learning Outcomes**

We will read the entirety of Viet Thanh Nguyen’s *The Committed*, his 2021 sequel to the Pulitzer Prize winning book *The Sympathizer*. (It is not necessary to have read the first book, since the plot is helpfully recapitulated in the opening section.) *The Committed* is a searing indictment of colonialism, and presents a nameless narrator who is split into three separate selves. We will also read the beginning third of Ralph Ellison’s *Invisible Man*, the 1952 masterpiece on which *The Committed* is very loosely based. Like Nguyen, Ellison introduces a nameless narrator whose internal conflicts threaten to tear him apart. We will read most of J. K. Rowling’s brilliant treatment of the subject of otherness and belonging, *Harry Potter and The Sorcerer’s Stone* (originally published in 1997 as *Harry Potter and the Philosopher’s Stone*), which painfully exposes the divide between wizards and humans. Additional texts introducing other theoretical angles on the question of invisibility will be brought in as necessary. Students will be evaluated on four things: 1) class participation throughout the course, 2) a short presentation, 3) five written responses keyed to the readings, and 4) two written papers, the first analyzing a small shared aspect of the texts, and the second providing an opportunity for a broader perspective on what is a wide-ranging subject of inexhaustible interest to human beings.

**Course Requirements**

1) Attendance and Participation (10%)

Regular attendance is expected; students may not miss more than two sessions without an excuse. Students will be assessed on their active contributions to classroom discussion.

2) Presentation (15%)

Each student will give a short in-class presentation on a subject raised by the week’s reading. Presentations will take place weekly according to a schedule drawn up in the second week of term.

3) Written Responses (5% each)

On the Monday of weeks 2, 3, 4, 5, and 6, you will be asked to send a written response to the previous week’s reading to the instructor by e-mail. The response should be between 100-200 words, and can be personal, critical, tangential, philosophical, creative: anything you like.

4) Short Paper (20%)

On the Monday of week 8, you will be asked to submit a short paper (3-5 pages) on some point of connection you have made between two or three texts read for the course so far. This paper should be submitted by e-mail. For instance, in both *Invisible Man* and *Harry Potter and the Sorcerer’s Stone* there is an opening battle sequence: for Ellison, it is the “battle royal” in Chapter 1, and for Rowling it is the Quidditch match. How do these two compare? We will come up with other points of connection through class discussion.

5) Long Paper: (30%)

On the Monday of week 15, a final paper (5-7 pages) will be due on a subject of your choosing related to the theme of the course. This paper should be submitted by e-mail. You will have an opportunity to discuss your paper topic with the instructor in individual conferences. Papers will be returned at the final class. Papers can be about the reading material or on another text that presents the invisibility theme. Some possibilities for paper topics include:

* Why are other planets invisible to us? (The Fermi Paradox: where is everybody?)
* How does Viet Thanh Nguyen’s *The Committed* act as a sequel to *The Sympathizer*?
* What other section of Ellison’s book introduces an important aspect of the invisibility theme?
* What is the later relevance of the Invisibility Cloak in the Harry Potter series?
* Other texts with the invisibility theme: H. G. Wells, “The Invisible Man,” Guy de Maupassant, “The Horla, or Modern Ghosts,” Christopher Marlowe, *Dr. Faustus*
* Invisibility in Film: *Parasite, The Shadow, The Amazing Transparent Man, The Invisible Man, The Hollow Man, Ghost*
* What significant population events are now invisible to us through the lens of history?
* “Passing” and “Code-switching”: becoming an other as a form of concealment
* Invisible Ink: Forms of Deception and Disguise in Magic and Spycraft
* The Disappeared: Genocide and Political Power
* What Is Your Name?: The Crisis of Identity in Nguyen and Ellison
* Race, Gender, Class: Three Sides of an Invisible Triangle
* “Nothing is Sacred”: Invisibility and Nothingness
* Liberty Paints: The Freedom of the Invisible Self
* “If It’s Optic White, It’s the Right White”: Invisibility and Perception

**Contact**

To schedule an appointment, please contact me before or after class, or through e-mail at [sebastian.knowles@fulbright.edu.vn](mailto:sebastian.knowles@fulbright.edu.vn) . I will respond promptly to all e-mail queries.