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# **Complicating Consciousness: *Jane Eyre*, *Invisible Man*, and the Buddhist Principle of “No Self”**

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## **Abstract**

This lesson plan was created for an eleventh grade English elective class called “Reading Consciousness,” at an independent boarding school just south of Boston. During the summer before this class, students are required to read and annotate Ralph Ellison’s *Invisible Man* and Charlotte Brontë’s *Jane Eyre*. Together with their teacher, students then reread *Invisible Man* in the fall and *Jane Eyre* in the spring. The hope is that the commitment of rereading and the process of engaging with their peers and instructor will lead to a greater understanding of the texts, and of experiences and ideas that inform an awareness of the self.

This early lesson plan asks students to think critically about the very idea of “consciousness,” through an engagement with the Buddhist philosophical principle of *anatta* or “no self” – the idea that consciousness consists of “thoughts without a thinker,” as there is no permanent, underlying substance that can be called an individual self. By framing the course in terms of such fundamental concepts, I hope to highlight the ways in which secular and religious influences construct knowledge. Furthermore, with this lesson, I hope to facilitate the practice of interrogating one’s own assumptions and to make visible what might have been rendered invisible.

## Essential Questions

How can I understand my worldview?

How is my worldview shaped/informed by a religious and/or secular influences?

How can I make sense of multiple truths?

How can I learn from examples of dialectical contradictions?

What happens when we adopt an interdisciplinary approach to thinking and learning?

Why is religion so hard to talk about?

How might we anticipate religion in this novel and how does religion influence our culture now?

## Learning Objectives

Identify and interrogate one's own assumptions

Examine the negative space: what's not there can be as important as what's there

Understand the intersections of identity with embedded culture

Make sense of multiple truths

Write clearly and concisely about the self, the text, and the world

Reflect on the development of a perspective/worldview

Consider the influence of a personal identity

## Procedure (also see daily lesson plans on slides below)

**Day 1:** Think about what it means to read well (the "Reading" in Reading Consciousness) and what it means to bring your own values and understandings into the analysis of a text.

Homework: Interview friends/family about the origin of their value systems, using questions like the following:

What values do you try to live by?

How do you hold yourself accountable to these values?

Where do these values come from?

Do you share these values with anyone in your community?

How have your values changed over time?

**Day 2:** Discussion about what consciousness means and how we know what consciousness means. Short lecture on the terms “secularism” and “religious worldview” with challenge to the secular/religious binary.

Homework: Skim definitions of “consciousness” in *Stanford Encyclopedia* (it excludes any direct religious references, but that’s not to say it’s not influenced by religious references). Watch the following two YouTube videos, exploring Buddhist views of consciousness:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=b2JRMEDQORM>

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qtwB7oHo2Jw>

**Day 3:** Discussion about new understanding of “consciousness.” Skim definitions of *Stanford Encyclopedia* for “consciousness” as related to religion, and Buddhism specifically). Discussion about how to know and how to look for “what’s missing.”

Homework: Critical Response Journal

### Assessment

Write a critical response journal to answer the following question: through which lenses do you typically interact with literature? Provide an example from literature you have recently read other than *Invisible Man* and *Jane Eyre*. In what ways do they intersect? After this lesson, which lenses do you wish to employ more of in the future? How will you develop these lenses and in what ways will they be valuable to you?

### References

Harriss, M. Cooper. *Ralph Ellison’s Invisible Theology*. New York University Press, 2017.

Kornfield, Jack. “Identity and Selflessness in Buddhism: No Self or True Self?” *Tricycle Magazine*.  
<https://tricycle.org/magazine/there-no-self/>

Stanford Encyclopedia Online

***For information about the Religious Worlds of New York summer institute for teachers, and more resources to enrich your teaching on religious diversity, visit [www.religiousworldsnyc.org](http://www.religiousworldsnyc.org).***



# Complicating Consciousness

Ms. Rachael Abernethy



## Wednesday, September 15

- **Moment of Silence**
- **On reading well (“Reading” in Reading Consciousness)**
  - Read sections of *How to Read a Book*
  - Bringing yourselves and your perspectives into the analysis of the text
  - What parts of yourself do you bring into analysis?
- **Mini Lesson on Interviewing**
  - Choosing the right people
  - Interview questions
  - Asking permission
  - Recording/note taking
  - Thanking your interviewee



## Homework due Friday, September 17

1. Ask friends/family what their values are and where they come from, what they bring with them wherever they go



## Friday, September 17

- Moment of Silence
- “Consciousness” in “Reading Consciousness”
- Free write: What does consciousness mean to you?
- How do you know what consciousness means?
- How is our knowledge related to our values (family, heritage, religion, philosophy?)
  - Bring in what you learned from your interviews here
- What are secular and what are religious worldviews?
  - What do they look like in the everyday experience?
  - Challenge the binary: maybe more of a spectrum? Can you have one without the other?



## Homework: Due Monday, September 20

1. Skim read [definitions of consciousness according to the Stanford Encyclopedia](#)
2. Watch [youtube video about consciousness](#)
3. Watch [youtube video about consciousness](#)





## Monday, September 20

- Moment of Silence
- What does consciousness mean?
  - What lens did you use to answer this question?
  - What are some other lenses you could use to answer this question?
  - Is one lens more legit or important than another? Why?
  - Is one lens more embarrassing or less important than another? Why?
- Skim read [definitions of consciousness from the Stanford Encyclopedia](#)
- What's missing?



# Homework due Wednesday, September 22

1. Read [article by Jack Kornfield “Identity and Selflessness in Buddhism: No Self or True Self?”](#)



## Wednesday, September 22

- Moment of Silence
- What happens when an authority privileges some ideas over others?
- How does the Stanford Encyclopedia impact your worldview?
- Let's look at the opening passage....

*I am an invisible man. No, I am not a spook like those who haunted Edgar Allan Poe; nor am I one of your Hollywood-movie ectoplasms. I am a man of substance, of flesh and bone, fiber and liquids - and I might even be said to possess a mind. I am invisible, understand, simply because people refuse to see me.*

- How do you know which lens to use to analyze Ellison's work?
- How do you know which words to respond to?



# Homework due Friday, September 24

1. Start critical response essay



## Friday, September 24

- Moment of Silence
- Keep working on critical response