

AP LIT 2022- 2023 Summer Reading

The Vanishing Half

By

Brit Bennett

Dear Scholar,

So glad you have joined our community!

Your summer reading for AP LIT is *The Vanishing Half* by Brit Bennett.

Please read this document carefully and then read the novel!

How to acquire the novel: Many of you were able to check out this novel from me during the last days of school. If you did not do this, you can read the novel online in several places, or check out the novel at your neighborhood library. ALL scholars should have a library card.

Here is one of the several online pdfs I found: <https://yes-pdf.com/book/3474/read>

How to focus your reading: When we think -- or write or speak -- critically of literature we act upon one or more assumptions about what makes the text significant. How we “look at” a novel depends on the lens (or set of assumptions) we bring to it. A lens is a great focusing tool, helpful in directing us toward interesting or important aspects of the text.

We are going to look at *The Vanishing Half*, (TVH) specifically the characters, using the idea of performativity. Performativity is a concept that questions the stability of categories such as race, gender and other identities. Instead of being a “given,” (so the theory goes) these categories rely on -- and are created by -- repeated performances of language, actions, and body language, and the specific cultural context or “frame” we find ourselves within. This idea of performativity also posits that we actually “impersonate” categories of identity which existed prior to our own “self” -- much as the actor takes on a role in an *a priori* script.

Think of this idea from a theatrical perspective: imagine that our everyday life is in fact a series of linked performances. For each “performance” we don the appropriate persona, recognizing that those who interact with us are also performing. The setting or “frame” of each performance is also very important: for example, when teachers and students meet in the classroom, we all know how to “act.” How would our performances change if we met at a mutual family friend’s backyard picnic?

What to consider as you read:

As you read TVH over the summer, examine, reflect on and take notes on the following:

- ❖ Consider the ways in which many of these characters become “someone else.” HOW is this done?
- ❖ Consider this ontological question: CAN we become someone else? Where are “we” when occupying the identity of “someone else?”

- ❖ Consider the ways many of these major characters become who they are. Consider Bennett's definition of identity as "something that is fluid and something that is permeable and something that is constantly changing." [12:15]
- ❖ Over the summer, think of your own ideas about identity (find or make or modify a definition of identity that works for you). Consider the paradox of identity as described in the comment by Bennett below:

"We have so many institutions and systems in place that break along these lines of race or gender or other forms of identity, and yet those identities, in and of themselves, are fluid . . . and not only that, but they're not even knowable . . . so I was interested in the flimsiness of those categories but at the same time the effect of these categories on our lived realities." [12.58]

- ❖ Over the summer, as you read this novel, pay close attention to the structural choices the author makes -- literally, how the novel is put together -- and develop some theories about how this particular text's structure
 - manages time and place and the fragmentation of both
 - emphasizes certain ideas and concepts by patterns, repetition, or interruption
- ❖ How do the structural choices made by Bennett convey aspects of these characters' human experience? Could she have written this novel using the traditional story arc? Why or why not?

How to prepare for our unit on this novel:

Read, think, take notes, and develop some ideas of your own about performativity, identity, and the novel's structure. If you take notes in a notebook, cite the evidence that brought about your ideas, so we can follow along in our texts.

Bring your novel and your **handwritten** notes -- either stickies in the text, or in a notebook, however you take them -- to class on Monday September 5th and we can begin discussing your ideas!

If you have questions for me, I will be back in the country August 1st, and happy to respond then. You can send your questions to our summer Remind:

<https://www.remind.com/join/apl-summer>

Enjoy this fascinating read, and I will see you in a few months!

Sincerely,

Ms Sutton