

(1914-1994)



Ralph Ellison

Major Works

Invisible Man (1952). Reprinted in Modern Library, 1994, with a preface by Charles Johnson.

Shadow and Act (1964).

Going to the Territory (1986).

The Collected Essays of Ralph Ellison. Edited by John Callahan, preface by Saul Bellow. Random House, 1995.

Contains *Shadow and Act* and *Going to the Territory*, as well as other, newly-discovered, works.

Flying Home and Other Stories. Edited by John F. Callahan. Random House, 1996.



1952

"I am an invisible man. No, I am not a spook like those who haunted Edgar Allen Poe; nor am I one of your Hollywood-movie extoplasms. 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. Like the bodiless heads you see sometimes in circus sideshows, it is as though I have been surrounded by mirrors of hard, distorting glass. When they approach me they see only my surroundings, themselves, or figments of their imagination -- indeed, everything and anything except me."

- From prologue of *Invisible Man*

Ralph Ellison's novel, *Invisible Man*

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Life

- Ralph Waldo Ellison was born March 1, 1914 in Oklahoma City, Oklahoma to Lewis Alfred and Ida Millsap Ellison. At the beginning of this century, Oklahoma had not been a state for very long and was still considered a part of the frontier. Lewis and Ida Ellison had each grown up in the South to parents who had been slaves. The couple moved out west to Oklahoma hoping the lives of their children would be fueled with a sense of possibility in this state that was reputed for its freedom. Though the prejudices of Texas and Arkansas soon encroached upon Oklahoma, the open spaces and fighting spirit of the people whom Ellison grew up among did provide him with a relatively unbiased atmosphere.

Life

- The death of Lewis Ellison in 1917 left Ida, Ralph, and his younger brother Herbert quite poor. To support the family, Ida worked as a domestic and stewardess at the Avery Chapel Afro-Methodist Episcopal Church. The family moved into the parsonage and Ellison was brought into close contact with the minister's library. Literature was a destined medium for Ellison, whose father named him after Ralph Waldo Emerson and hoped that he would be a poet. His enthusiasm for reading was encouraged over the years of his youth by his mother bringing books and magazines home for him from the houses she cleaned. In addition, a black episcopal priest in the city challenged the white custom of barring blacks from the public library and the custom was overturned. Ellison's horizons were broadened to a world outside his own sheltered life in Oklahoma City, by the many books now available to him in the library.

Life

- During his teenage years, Ellison and his friends imagined being the eclectic combination of frontiersmen and Renaissance Men. The ideal they created gave them the courage to expect anything out of life. They believed that they had the ability and power to do whatever they wanted in life as well as or better than men of any race. Ellison first used this credo when he attacked the medium of music, participating in an intense music program for twelve years at the Frederick Douglass School in Oklahoma City. Although he received musical training in many instruments as well as theory, he held a high preference for the trumpet and was talented enough to obtain training from the conductor of the Oklahoma City Orchestra. Ellison took part in playing at many concerts, marches, bands, and celebrations for the town. During the midst of this study, he did not lose sight of his desire to be a Renaissance Man, however, and spent time playing football, working at small jobs, and experimenting in electronics.

Life

- In 1933, Ellison left Oklahoma and headed to the Tuskegee Institute in Alabama to study music, with the help of a scholarship he had won from the state of Oklahoma. One of his music teachers at the school was Hazel Harrison who would later introduce Ellison to Alain Locke, a New Negro thinker, who would lead Ellison to his writing career years later through connections to Langston Hughes and Richard Wright. At Tuskegee, Ellison excelled in his music program as well as taking a particular liking to his sociology and sculpture classes and the outside classroom which Alabama provided. Though not pleased with the desire of the state's people, black and white, to categorize him as he had never experienced at home, he did appreciate the chance to raise his own consciousness concerning the rest of the country he lived in. Literature would also influence his stay at Tuskegee as he again delved into the expansive libraries at his disposal. T.S. Eliot's "The Waste Land," with its elusive lyricism would particularly influence him. Disappointed in the limited capacity of African-American literature at this point, Ellison practiced playing with the force of words as he had found Eliot to do. He would later use the experiences from Tuskegee and the injustices he encountered in the South to structure his writing of [Invisible Man](#).

Life

- Due to financial problems, Ellison left Tuskegee after his third year. Introduced to Augusta Savage, a black sculptor in Harlem who liked his work, Ellison moved to Harlem, New York in 1936, still hoping to be able to return to school. Ellison lived in New York for most of the rest of his life. One of New York's lures was its energy and reputation of energy and freedom. Ellison enjoyed living in Harlem as it was a tremendously vibrant cultural center in the 1930s and 1940s. After living there for a year, however, he was forced to leave for several months which he found very upsetting. His mother died, and he attended the funeral in Dayton, Ohio. The return to New York though was promising because of a meeting with Richard Wright, who would have a large literary influence on Ellison. This meeting along with his inability to find a steady job playing the trumpet led Ellison to immerse himself more in his writing. His first book review is published in New Challenge entitled "Creative and Cultural Lag." Soon after, as his literary style began to take form, he wrote his first short story, "Heine's Bull." It was not published.

Life

- Although Ellison had a few writing successes, finding jobs and money was still extremely difficult during the Depression. Finally in 1938, Wright aided him in getting a job with the Federal Writers' Project. During this time, Ellison came into contact with many interesting interviewees from which he gleaned an interest in folklore and the distinctly African-American collection of rhymes, games, stories, and so on. The glimpse into personal lives enriched his knowledge of American culture and added to his stock of experiences learned in Oklahoma and Alabama. Much of his time was employed by the Project, but Ellison still found ways to submit materials to radical periodicals of the day, as influenced by the leftist Wright, such as *Negro Quarterly*, *New Challenge*, and *New Masses*. Between 1937 and 1944, he published over twenty book reviews. His reviews were often touched by a criticism of the lack in a "conscious protagonist" in order to embrace a text's political significance. This belief of Ellison's later led to his break with his beloved mentor, Richard Wright, as Ellison criticized the character of Bigger Thomas in Wright's masterpiece, *Native Son*. Still, the time Ellison wrote his reviews was very much a growing time for him. He published his first short stories, such as "Slick Gonna Learn", "The Birthmark", "King of the Bingo Game", and "Flying Home". The early War years also gave Ellison the chance to edit *Negro Quarterly* and begin *Invisible Man*. Moving away from leftist politics and their champion, Wright, he also joins the Merchant Marine and many of his stories take on a wartime flair. In 1946, he marries Fanny McConnell. The quality of his writing reached masterful proportions by the end of World War II, as he had learned to incorporate the likes of Twain, Faulkner, Dostoevsky, and Hemingway into his work. His own voice arose in full power and in 1952 he published *Invisible Man*.

Life

- The years following this great work are not as prolific as the ones preceding. Some even say that after the publication of [Invisible Man](#), Ellison became nearly invisible himself. However, at the time of publication, Ellison was uncertain of its acceptance and said another novel was in the works in case the first was not a success. This novel was never needed to prove Ellison's skill and the only other one which he produces is left unfinished at the time of his death from cancer in 1994, partly because of a fire destroying over 300 pages of an earlier manuscript in 1967. However, Ellison was visible in certain arenas around the country during the many years between 1952 and 1994. He published two acclaimed books of essays, *Shadow and Act* and *Going to the Territory*. Ellison also received many awards for his masterpiece, [Invisible Man](#), and for his overall career during the second half of his life. These honors include the National Book Award, Russwurm Award, and the election to the American Academy of Arts and Letters. Lastly, Ellison spent a great deal of time teaching in various colleges. In 1970, he became the Albert Schweitzer Professor of Humanities at New York University. Ellison continued until the day he died spreading and cultivating his vision of America and art: the conscious protagonist and the use of blackness to break categories instead of sustaining them.

Invisible Man



- [Short Summary](#)
- [Character List](#)
- <http://www.classicnote.com/ClassicNotes/Titles/invisibleman/summ1.html> For a full summary of IM, please go to the above link.
- **Other Links:**
 - [Chapter summaries, copies of significant reviews and critical essays \(both in general and in relation to other African-American fiction\)](#)
 - [Brief autobiography, Ellison links, Press-Gopher links, bibliography](#)
 - [Biography, criticism, links](#)
 - [Biography, chronology and context of works, bibliography of works and criticism, essays and speeches, interview bibliography, pictures](#)
 - [Critical essay by Gerald Early that ties in many of Ellison's works and criticism of his work.](#)

Prologue Summary:

- The Prologue is an introduction to the complex narration of how one man came to recognize his own invisibility. It begins by acknowledging invisibility and proceeds to describe the state of the narrator's life as it will be after the final chapter but before the Epilogue. Thus the twenty-five chapters which follow the Prologue explain to the reader the events which put the narrator underground where he currently living.
- He first describes what he means by invisible. He is not a ghost or a man with transparent skin. He is invisible by virtue of how others react to him. They do not accept his reality and thus live as though they do not see him. He gives a more direct example by explaining how he almost killed a white man whom he bumped into on the street. He continued to attack the white man as long as the man refused to apologize and kept insulting him. The narrator then realized that the man does not see him as an individual and the narrator walked away laughing at the thought that the man was almost killed by a "figment of his imagination".
- The narrator takes his revenge on society in silent, unsuspecting ways, such as stealing electricity from a power company by wiring his room full of light bulbs. He resolves to cover even the floor of his underground hole with bulbs, out of spite and a desire to hold and control as much light as possible. Light is truth and vice versa, he claims. In this way, his hibernation will be warm and well lit and he will continue to be alive.
- Music is another source through which he gains power in his lair. By listening to Louis Armstrong, he hopes to feel his body vibrate and to become aware of a new sense of time. He explains that when he smokes a reefer one day, the music takes on a new meaning and he sees into the spaces between time. His dreamlike state finds him asking a woman of his illusions what freedom is and her son telling him that he must learn it from himself. Until then, he blames society for his irresponsibility and admits to his own cowardice.

Chapter 1 Summary:

- The first chapter provides quite a contrast to the novel's Prologue as the narrator takes the reader back to his experiences as a naive high school student. The chapter focuses on a gathering of the town's most influential white citizens held the day after the narrator's graduation. Because of the narrator's well-received oration at graduation, he is asked to repeat his speech at the gathering, which he deems a great honor. Upon arriving at the fancy ballroom, he learns that before his speech he must first participate in the "battle royal" to be fought by several black boys hired for the occasion. The boys are led into the main hall where the narrator is shocked at the drunkenness of many of the town's most respected members. Half naked, the boys are only part of the night's entertainment. Pushed to the front of the hall, they are brought into full view of a naked, blond woman who is expected to dance for the crowd. The incredible humiliation of the scene causes most of the boys to want to run away but they are kept in place as the white men of the group chase the terrified woman around the room. The next event of the night directly involves the narrator and other boys; they are all made to wear blindfolds and enter the boxing ring.

Chapter 1 Summary:

- Covered in darkness, voices from the smoky room yell jeers and taunts to the boys until they are incited to fight. The fighting becomes hysterical and crazed, though slightly less tortuous for the narrator when he maneuvers his blindfold in such a manner to allow a little vision and more control over his fights. Suddenly, however, he is left in the ring as one of the final two who must fight until one wins. The narrator is mostly concerned that he will not get a chance to relay his speech, finally deciding to just fall to the floor with one of Tatlock's punches. The boys are then taunted one last time when the white men throw gold coins onto a carpet and encourage them to grab for the money. The carpet turns out to be electrified, and a jolt is received by anyone touching a coin. The narrator attempts to grab as many coins as possible without touching the carpet and does so, almost throwing a seated white man onto the carpet by holding onto his chair leg. The narrator is then finally allowed to give his speech during which the men do not even bother to listen. Regardless, the narrator receives a scholarship at the end of the night and is so pleased that he ignores the earlier shame and the voice of his dying grandfather which continues to haunt him in his dreams.

Analysis:

- The structure of the first chapter is a series of events told from memory with the expressed purpose of teaching the reader why later events will unfold. Not only is the chapter prefaced with an explanation of its goal but it also ends, somewhat cyclically, professing how the narrator himself did not understand the nature of the events which took place. He states that he would not make sense of the experience until attending college, thus prefacing the next chapter. With the author's intentions consciously in mind, the reader then has an easier time recognizing the weighted symbolic images involved within the chapter. The grandfather is a device used by Ellison to foreshadow heavily the rest of the novel as well as enhance the illustrations presented during the chapter. Appearing at the beginning and the end, the grandfather provides a lesson to the young narrator which his parents then tell him to ignore. The guilt of treachery that his grandfather instills in him follows him into the gathering of white men and ends the chapter haunting him in a dream that, he notes, he has dreamt often since. The experience of the gathering is the beginning of a race against himself, as the grandfather writes in the dream: "Keep this Nigger-Boy Running".

Analysis:

- **The battle royal represents the state in which the white men of the society enjoy keeping the black men, a state of darkness, confusion, and fear. In addition, the white men can vicariously live out their desire to be less civilized, as they become in reality by constructing the event and by creating a blind rage within the boys they have hired to fight. The boys are blinded by a white blindfold - an easy metaphor - which the narrator circumvents in order to approach the battle royal slightly less like an animal. Before he moved the blindfold though, he notes that he had never truly experienced darkness before and it scared him. In this manner, his invisibility is again foreshadowed as the reader knows that he will fade as a character into more darkness as the novel progresses.**

Analysis:

- The idea of invisibility surfaces most within the chapter during the speech, which the narrator has continued to practice for even in the most humiliating of moments. Increasing the hypocrisy embedded in the upright citizens gathering, the men not only fail to listen to the speech but yell to the narrator to speak up when his throat is choked by blood. Nauseated and overwhelmed, he makes the mistake of saying "social equality" instead of "social responsibility" and is almost thrown out of the room. Only by thoroughly swallowing the hypocrisy of the room and the events he has had to participate in can he finally exit the scene without further harm and in the possession of his prize. Sadly, the narrator accepts this prize as an award well worth his humiliation. He cannot yet understand his grandfather's message because he still refuses to spit out the blood and speak for himself.

INVISIBLE MAN Chapter summary

- Prologue on invisibility (Norton p. 2359-)
- **COLLEGE**
- 1 Battle Royal
- 2 Norton hears Trueblood's story
- 3 Norton at "The Golden Day"
- 4 Norton and I. return; I. faces Bledsoe
- 5 Homer Barbee's sermon about The Founder
- 6 Bledsoe to I. on lying to white; kicks him out

- **NEW YORK CITY**

- ~~7 bus-ride to NYC; last lesson from Mad Vet; Harlem~~
- 8 I. looks for a job
- 9 I. meets rapping man; meets Young Emerson
- 10 day at paint factory; Brockway; the Union; paint explosion
- 11 electric lobotomy
- 12 Mary Rambo takes I. in; evicted from Men's House
- 13 yams; the old couple evicted; I's speech; meets Jack
- 14 hired by Brotherhood; Jack & dances with Emma
- 15 says goodbye to Mary, moves to Brotherhood apt downtown

- 16 makes first Bro. speech (remembers lit. class lesson)
- 17 first rally, w/ Tod Clifton, meets Ras the Exhorter
- 18 good talk w/ Tarp, I. is denounced by Wrestrum
- ~~19 transfer downtown to speak on Women Question; faces not the "class struggle" but the "ass struggle"~~
- 20 Harlem again: watches Clifton shot by police; contemplates his failure on subway
- 21 Tod Clifton's funeral march
- 22 Brotherhood policy change w/out I. knowing; he is denounced
- 23 I. realizes he can be mistaken for Rinehart & plans to subvert the Brotherhood
- 24 Jack's party; I. takes Sybil home; gets call to hurry to Harlem
- 25 riot in Harlem; looting; I. driven underground

Web Resources

- <http://www.rohophoto.com/ralph.htm> Ralph Ellison Memorial Gallery
- Reuben, Paul P. "Pal - Ralph Ellison."
<http://www.csustan.edu/english/reuben/pal/chap10/ellison.html>.
- Classic Note
http://www.classicnote.com/ClassicNotes/Authors/about_ralph_ellison.html
- American Masters:
http://www.pbs.org/wnet/americanmasters/database/ellison_r_homepage.html
- <http://www.centerx.gseis.ucla.edu/weblio/ellison.html> **Ralph Ellison Webliography**

Question

- What does invisibility mean by Ellison?
Give examples.