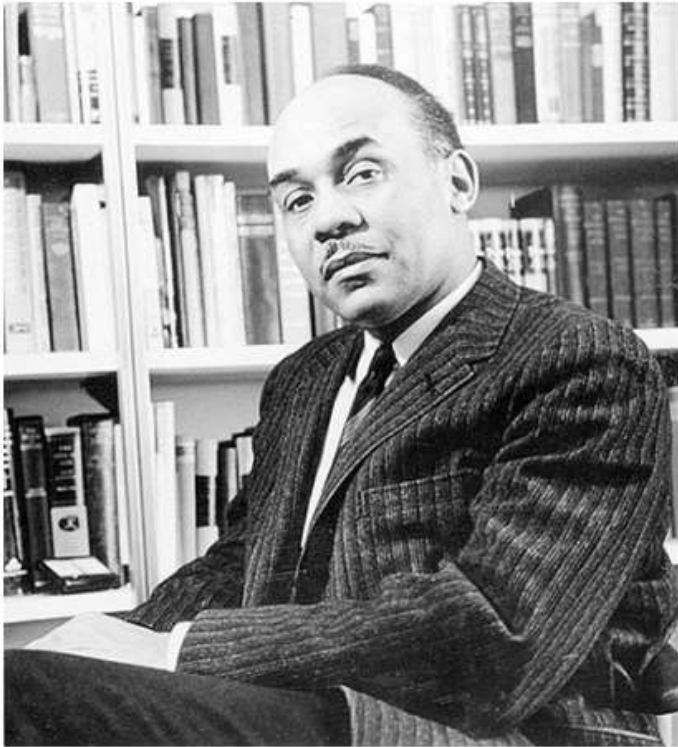


Ralph Ellison

Ellison, Ralph



Record Information

Source: National Archives and Records Administration.

Record Type: Photograph or Illustration

Date: b. 1914–d. 1994

Description:

Ralph Ellison moved to New York City from Alabama in 1936 and began writing essays, reviews, and short stories. He developed friendships with Langston Hughes, Richard Wright, and other figures of the Harlem Renaissance, but he did not consider himself part of that movement. In 1952 Ellison published his seminal novel, *Invisible Man*, which won the National Book Award in 1953. He is shown here in 1961.

Ralph Waldo Ellison was born on March 1, 1914, to Oklahoma City pioneers Lewis Alfred Ellison and Ida Millsap Ellison. A businessman and former soldier with a passion for literature, Lewis Ellison named his son after the American author Ralph Waldo Emerson with the hope that the name would endow him with a similar love and talent for literature. Ellison's younger sibling was named Herbert.

He was famed as a critic and for his internationally acclaimed novel, *Invisible Man*, Ralph Ellison began writing during the concluding years of the Harlem Renaissance but, despite a close association with author Langston Hughes and an affinity for jazz, considered his work separate from that of the *New Negro* movement rather than an extension of it.

After his father's death when Ellison was three, his mother continued to encourage his intellectual development by later providing him with magazines discarded by employers in her work as a domestic. Among the magazines she presented him was *Vanity Fair*, the same publication in which Carl Van Vechten during the 1920s promoted the works of Langston Hughes, James Weldon Johnson, Bessie Smith, Ethel Waters, and others associated with the Harlem Renaissance.

Although Ida Ellison eventually remarried twice, Ralph Ellison's childhood was essentially one of poverty that forced his mother to constantly relocate while generally

raising her sons alone. Attending Oklahoma City's Frederick Douglass School at the elementary and high school levels, Ellison became a student of music. He learned to play the trumpet for his high school band as well as with local jazz bands.

Ellison graduated from the Frederick Douglass School in 1932. He then joined the legions of men and women who rode illegally on freight trains during the Great Depression to travel to Alabama. There, he enrolled in Tuskegee Institute, the vocational training center founded by Booker Taliaferro Washington. At Tuskegee, he continued his formal study of music and developed an interest in sculpture while pursuing literature as a valued hobby. His reading of T. S. Eliot's "The Wasteland" is often cited as a catalyst in Ellison's recognition of literature as a medium capable of triggering transcendent experience for both readers and writers. While attending Tuskegee, Ellison briefly met Howard University professor of philosophy and editor of the *New Negro* anthology Alain Locke.

Approaching his senior year at Tuskegee, Ellison traveled in 1936 to New York City, where he hoped to earn money to continue his education and to study sculpture with Augusta Savage. In New York, he met Alain Locke for the second time. With Locke was Langston Hughes, to whom he introduced Ellison. The contact with Hughes developed into a friendship that would last decades and through which Ellison was introduced to writings by left-wing authors. Moreover, Hughes also introduced Ellison to the artist Richmond Barthe, who further assisted Ellison in becoming acclimated to New York City.

Rather than returning to Tuskegee as he first had planned, Ellison soon settled in Harlem. Again through Langston Hughes, in 1936 Ellison met Richard Wright, with whom he also formed a close literary friendship. Working with Dorothy West and Marian Minus in 1937 on the *New Challenge* magazine, Wright was instrumental in the publication of a book review by Ellison, his first essay in such a journal. The following year, Ellison began to contribute regularly to the communist-influenced magazine *New Masses*. Writing for *New Masses*, he gained a reputation as an insightful observer and skilled interpreter of social trends and issues in American society.

On September 17, 1938, Ellison married performing artist Rose A. Poindexter. They separated after less than a year together but did not officially divorce for another six years.

Also in 1938, Ellison joined the Works Progress Administration's (WPA) New York City branch of the Federal Writers' Project (FWP). Like other writers affiliated with the FWP, he gathered for its archives biographies, profiles of communities, historical research, folklore, and reports on various social and cultural practices among African Americans. Among those with whom Ellison worked at the FWP were Dorothy West, Claude McKay, Sterling Brown, who headed the Negro Affairs Division of the FWP, William Waring Cuney, and Richard Bruce Nugent.

Ellison began in 1939 working on *Slick*, his first novel, from which a section called "Slick Gonna Learn" was later published in *Direction* magazine. Although the novel remained unpublished, Ellison wrote throughout the early 1940s a series of critical essays for influential journals that increased his renown and influence as a writer. In addition, in 1942 he edited the *Negro Quarterly* with Angelo Herndon, the radical labor leader

whose life had been the subject of Langston Hughes's one-act play *Angelo Herndon Jones*. In his editorials, reviews, and essays, Ellison often described works by Harlem Renaissance writers as lacking in ideological content or aesthetic formulation. He championed Langston Hughes for his exploration of black folk culture but criticized other Harlem Renaissance writers for producing flawed literary works based on that of their white counterparts, echoing an observation previously voiced by writer Wallace Thurman.

Ellison began in 1943 a two-year stint in the Merchant Marines during World War II. That same year, he wrote for the *New York Post* an account of the Harlem Riot that tore through the community on June 20.

Following his divorce from Poindexter in 1945, Ellison married Fanny McConnell Buford in 1946. Initially an aspiring writer herself, Fanny Ellison gave up her literary pursuits to work as a secretary and maintain a steady income while her husband worked from 1945–52 on his second novel, *Invisible Man*.

Prior to its publication, sections of *Invisible Man* appeared in the journals 48: *Magazine of the Year*, *Horizon*, and *Partisan Review*. Upon its publication, as with most literary works eventually declared masterpieces, critics were divided over the book's merits and qualities. W. E. B. DuBois, who at the height of the Harlem Renaissance had championed the propaganda potential of black literature over its artistic value, predictably found Ellison's novel too heavy on aesthetic structure and too light on racial militancy. By contrast, many of those whites to whom Ellison had become a leading literary and cultural critic hailed the novel as a literary triumph. The book is essentially the story of a young African-American man's struggle to determine his own identity and destiny in a society unsupportive of black men's lives. Capable of being read on many different levels, Ralph Ellison, in one of his most famous essays, "Change the Joke and Slip the Yoke," described the book as his hero's "memoir, . . . one long, loud rant, howl and laugh."

The novel went on in 1953 to win the prestigious National Newspaper Publishers' Russworm Award, the National Book Award, and a certificate of recognition from the *Chicago Defender*. Following those in 1954 was the Rockefeller Foundation Award. The overwhelming success of *Invisible Man* allowed Ellison to launch a career as an educator and to elevate his already formidable standing as a public intellectual. Whereas fellow writers such as Wright, Chester Himes, and James Baldwin relocated to Paris, France, to practice their craft, Ellison in 1955 received a Prix de Rome Fellowship that allowed him to live and work for two years in Italy. Upon his return to the United States, he continued teaching at various colleges and universities while also engaging in important debates on African-American and American culture.

A collection of Ellison's essays was published under the title *Shadow and Act* in 1964. In 1965, a *New York Herald Tribune Book Week* poll recognized Ellison as one of the top ten most influential novelists in the United States and *Invisible Man* as the most substantial and distinguished novel published by an American author after World War

II. He was awarded the Medal of Freedom in 1969 and France's Chevalier de l'Ordre des Arts et Lettres in 1970.

A second novel on which Ellison reportedly worked throughout the 1960s was destroyed in a fire in 1967. Almost two decades later, in 1986, he published a second collection of essays titled *Going to the Territory*. He continued to publish essays, interviews, and excerpts from a novel in progress up until his death in New York City on April 16, 1994. Appointed literary executor of Ellison's estate, John Callahan published *The Collected Essays of Ralph Ellison* as part of Random House's Modern Library series in 1995 and a collection of short fiction titled *Flying Home and Other Stories* in 1996. *Juneteenth*, a novel culled from the reportedly epic story on which Ellison was working when he died, was published in 1999. Sculptor Elizabeth Catlett in 2000 produced a 15-foot-monument called *Invisible Man* in tribute to Ellison. Professor of English Lawrence Jackson in 2002 published the first major biography of the author, titled *Ralph Ellison: Emergence of Genius*, detailing the first half of Ellison's life.

To commemorate the fiftieth anniversary of the publication of *Invisible Man*, biographer Arnold Rampersad, author Horace Porter, editor John Callahan, and moderator Paula Moya held a symposium on the novel at Stanford University, California, April 24, 2002. Rampersad, the award-winning biographer of Langston Hughes, was at that time working on a full-scale biography of Ellison.

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