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# Ralph Ellison: Biography

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## Ralph Ellison (1913-1994)

(3057 words)

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On 1 March 1913, in Oklahoma City, Oklahoma, one of the five states that became part of the United States in the twentieth century and the forty-sixth state in the union, Ralph Waldo Ellison was born to Lewis Ellison, a laborer from South Carolina, and Ida Millsap Ellison from Georgia. That Ralph Ellison was born in the former Territory, both Indian and western frontier, will become a significant part of his personality and will contribute a perspective to his writing that, along with his distinctive style, will position him among the great writers of the United States.

On both the maternal and paternal sides of his family Ralph Ellison had grandparents who were enslaved. Alfred Ellison, the writer's paternal grandfather, was among fewer than thirty other persons held in slavery by a widow named Mary Ann Ellison in Fairfield County, South Carolina. As yet, the record is not clear on the disposition of Alfred Ellison after the widow sold her holdings to David Aiken, a wealthy and notoriously violent and anti-abolitionist cotton farmer in Abbeville, South Carolina. During the waning years of Reconstruction, however, the un-schooled Alfred Ellison married Harriet Walker, whose ability to read apparently contributed to the education of her ten-year-old brother-in-law, William Ellison. Also during Reconstruction, Alfred Ellison became a public figure in Fairfield County, South Carolina, holding the position, severely attenuated, of the Town Marshal of Abbeville, South Carolina. This town, however, was under the implicit if not explicit control of powerful white residents such as David Aiken, whose resistance to freedom for black people in Abbeville persisted well after the end of the Civil War. After the contested presidential election in 1876, Samuel J. Tilden, the Democrat candidate and governor from New York, was defeated by the Republican Rutherford B. Hayes, whose accommodations to the South, including removal of federal troops from South Carolina, helped precipitate the nadir of Reconstruction. Ralph Ellison's grandfather Alfred, who had dutifully voted democrat, lost his position as town marshal and later disavowed ever having had any true allegiance to the party.

Ralph Ellison's father, Lewis Ellison, was Alfred and Harriet Ellison's fourth child and their first son. In 1898, Lewis Ellison took the opportunity available to him to leave Abbeville; he enlisted in the United States Army, joining the Twenty-fifth U.S. Colored Infantry and later participating in the Spanish-US-Cuban war and in the conflict in the Philippines. Three years later, Lewis Ellison returned to South Carolina after his removal from the military for refusing the direct

order of an officer. The intolerable racial climate in South Carolina and his previous military experiences in Colorado and New Mexico very likely influenced Lewis Ellison to set his sights on the Territory soon after it became the forty-sixth state in 1907. He settled briefly in Tennessee, where he probably met his future wife Ida Millsap. They both moved to Oklahoma where during Reconstruction there had been talk of making the territory a settlement for emancipated black people. The idea to re-settle African Americans in the western territory had come under consideration because a number of the displaced Indigenous nations, specifically those persons among them who were propertied and engaged in slavery, supported the Confederate forces, and thus were subject to land reapportionment. Also, the Afro-American Colonization Company in Guthrie, Oklahoma, later promised great opportunities for ambitious black people. This promise could not be taken lightly, as Oklahoma was developing what would become its reputation as the state with the largest number of all-black towns, including Langston with its promise of a black university as well as Boley, Taft, Arkansas Colored, Wewoka, Canadian Town, Tullahassee, Arcadia, Lincoln City, Tatums, Red Bird and others, all of which were established in the Territory between 1865 and 1920.

Ida Lucy Millsap was born on a plantation in Walton County Georgia. Her formerly enslaved parents Polk and Georgia Millsap were sharecroppers who had a great deal of hope for their daughter. Ida Millsap attended school and learned to read and write, an opportunity that neither of her parents shared. Ida Millsap Ellison, recognizing her own quashed desires, had high ambitions for her two surviving children, Ralph and Herbert. Her first child, Alfred, died in infancy. Along with Lewis Ellison, she attempted, through hard work as well as political activism, to secure a life for their children that was less burdened by the difficulties their parents knew well. While for the Ellisons life in Oklahoma was clearly an improvement on South Carolina and Georgia, they found that the formerly open frontier territory was becoming, under statehood, more and more racially restrictive. These increasingly restrictive conditions and Ida Ellison's sense of justice were perhaps among the issues that influenced her, in 1914, to campaign actively for the Socialist candidate for governor of the state of Oklahoma, Fred Holt; and to support the Socialist candidate for President, Eugene V. Debs. She remained politically active during Ralph Ellison's youth, and was arrested several times for violating segregated housing laws in Oklahoma City while he was a student at Tuskegee.

When Ida Ellison's son Ralph was three years of age, shortly after the birth of Herbert, her entrepreneurial husband Lewis Ellison suffered an accident while working in his business selling coal and ice. He subsequently died from what were very likely the effects of his injuries combined with an unsuccessful medical procedure following the incident. Now a widow, alone and caring for two young children, Ida Ellison's aspirations for her children's success, comfort and stability were never stifled by the difficulties that she encountered. She purchased a cornet for her older son and encouraged him to read widely. Ralph Waldo Ellison has commented extensively on the effect that his name had on him, a name given to him by Lewis Ellison, who wanted his son to become a great man of letters like his namesake Ralph Waldo Emerson.

However, Ida Millsap and the Millsap family also had an impact on Ralph Ellison, as is reflected in his writing, especially in his acclaimed novel *Invisible Man*, by his presentation of black women as important repositories of cultural knowledge; and by his use of Polk Millsap, his maternal grandfather, as the pivotal grandfather-character in the novel.

For Ida Ellison there must have been a great sense of accomplishment and pride when her son Ralph received a scholarship to study music at Tuskegee Institute. Ralph Ellison's formal education in music began in the second grade while he was a student in Zelia Page Breaux's music appreciation course at the Frederick Douglass School in Oklahoma City. Breaux drilled her students in classical music and trained their ears to recognize standard compositions by Beethoven, Handel and Brahms, among others. By the time, however, that young Ellison began his formal study of music at Douglass, his exposure to classical music had already begun at Avery Chapel AME Church where the choir frequently performed classical compositions. Breaux's instruction and support, along with extracurricular instruction on the mellophone or E flat peck horn and the trumpet provided by his neighbor Joseph Meade, led to Ralph Ellison's joining his school's band. While a member of this band, Ellison also traded his labor, in the form of lawn maintenance, for private lessons on the trumpet from Ludwig Hebestreit, a classical conductor, member of the Oklahoma Symphony Orchestra, and music teacher for the highly acclaimed and all-white Classen High School. Ellison expanded his musical repertoire by being attentive to the music he heard while living and working around the dance halls in Oklahoma City and listening to the musicians who performed at Zelia Breaux's Ira Aldridge Theatre. Ellison was also well acquainted with the important jazz musicians who made their homes in Oklahoma City, including the musically talented Christian family that comprised Charlie Christian who was three years Ellison's junior, Jimmy Rushing who was a few years older than Ellison, as well as Walter Page, founder of the Original Blue Devils, along with Oran "Hot Lips" Page and other members of that band. During his youth, Ellison also heard, on the radio and in live jazz performances, Lester Young, Louis Armstrong, and Duke Ellington.

After his graduation from high school in 1932, one year behind his classmates, Ralph Ellison failed to gain admission to the music program of the Colored Agricultural and Normal School at Langston. During the spring of the following year, he did however gain admission into the music program at Tuskegee Normal School and Industrial Institute, arriving on campus the summer of 1933. Ellison traveled to Tuskegee during one of the worst Depression years, after hopping trains from Oklahoma City to Tuskegee because neither his mother nor any of their family friends had the money to help pay for his transportation. Ellison's education at Tuskegee, the all-black school in Alabama founded by Booker T. Washington, was supported by a scholarship from the school's newly established and, for a brief period, well-endowed school of music. Alabama proved to be a challenge for the independent-minded Ellison, whose Oklahoma upbringing, although far from a racial haven, had provided the bookish young man with numerous examples of successful black people who commanded and in fact frequently demanded social justice and

freedom, without any accommodations made to racial hierarchies. Such assertions of black identity were not, and had not been in the past, a part of the Tuskegee philosophy in the 1930s.

Ellison did, however, find a variety of books in the Tuskegee library which kept his intellectual energies alive, including African American literature, African American literary and historical treatises, and the writings of philosophers and thinkers such as Karl Marx and Sigmund Freud. T.S. Eliot's long poem *The Waste Land* was of particular influence on Ellison, as he became increasingly disaffected with Tuskegee. Eliot's poem provided Ellison with a literary analogue to jazz, as both the poem and jazz exemplify an art form that attempts to bring together seemingly disparate elements, particularly tradition and innovation. This poem also crystallized for Ellison the possibilities available to a musician interested in both classical music and jazz. After Ralph Ellison's artistic interests shifted from music to sculpture and finally to literature, the insights that he gained through his understanding of the techniques of jazz and of Eliot's *The Waste Land* influenced the writing of the only novel he published during his lifetime, *Invisible Man*.

Ellison's path to literary acclaim began during the summer of 1936, his junior year at Tuskegee. That year Ralph Ellison traveled from Alabama to New York seeking employment so that he could pay for his education at Tuskegee, which had begun to experience difficulties as a result of the Depression. On his second day in New York, Ellison had a brief encounter with Alain Locke and Langston Hughes in the lobby of the Harlem YMCA where Ellison had taken a room the day before. Alain Locke, the influential editor of the anthology *The New Negro* had visited Tuskegee earlier that year, giving Ellison an opportunity to meet him. Through Locke, Ellison met Hughes, who brought Ellison to the attention of Richard Wright, the then left writer who had moved to New York after a disagreement with Communist Party officials in Chicago. When Ellison met Wright, the older writer was Director of the Harlem office of the *Daily Worker*. With the assistance of Richard Wright, Ralph Ellison would publish his first serious writing, a review of Waters Turpin's novel *These Low Grounds*. Wright published Ellison's review, which appeared along with Wright's essay "Blueprint for Negro Writing," in the only edition of *New Challenge*, co-edited by Dorothy West, Richard Wright, and Marian Minus in 1937. Wright also brought Ralph Ellison into his circle of left intellectuals among whom Ellison, for a while, found a sense of political and intellectual parity. Ralph Ellison did not return to Tuskegee to complete his degree. He remained in New York and embarked on the writing career from which he would primarily derive his livelihood for fifty-seven years until his death in 1994.

Ralph Ellison's first important literary piece, "Hymie's Bull," was scheduled for publication in the failed second issue of *New Challenge*. Ellison wrote "Hymie's Bull" during the summer of 1937 before traveling to Dayton, Ohio in October to visit his ill mother who died one day after his arrival. Ellison stayed in Dayton until the spring of 1938 and while there wrote his first four short stories before his return to Harlem in April.

The years 1938 through 1942 were eventful for Ralph Ellison. In September of 1938, Ellison married Rose Aramita Poindexter, a dancer and actress from the upscale Edgecombe Circle area of Harlem; the marriage was essentially over by November of 1941, although they did not divorce until 1945. Throughout their marriage, Ellison worked in Franklin D. Roosevelt's Federal Writers' Project, wrote reviews for *New Masses*, which gave him a sense of legitimacy as a professional writer, and worked on projected novels. Part of his first novel project, "Slick," appeared in *Dissent* magazine in 1939 as "Slick Gonna Learn". This chapter was the only part of the project ever to see publication. At the insistence of Angelo Herndon, in 1942 Ellison left the Federal Writers' Project and *New Masses* in order to become the managing editor of *Negro Quarterly*. Herndon offered Ellison a salary comparable to the one he was making at the FWP but his salary was paid erratically and the journal survived only four issues.

In 1943 Ellison then received a contract and advance from the publishers Reynal and Hitchcock for a manuscript based on his character from the short story "Flying Home". The publishers requested that Ellison deliver the manuscript in August 1945, but the project had to be delayed as Ellison was drafted into military service. He immediately sought and gained entry into the National Maritime Union in an attempt to remain out of the Army, finding time before he shipped out on the Merchant Marine vessel *SS Sun Yat Sen* in September to write a commissioned piece for the *New York Post* on the now well-known 1 August 1943 uprising in Harlem.

After his return to the United States in 1945, following two tours with the Merchant Marines, and a bout of sickness with tropical diseases contracted in the maritime service, Ralph Ellison applied for and received a Rosenwald Fellowship. Ellison was still intent on writing his novel based on the short story "Flying Home," when the words "I am an invisible man," serendipitously passed through his mind. These words altered Ellison's whole conception of his manuscript and led to his novel *Invisible Man*, the first part of which was published in the October 1947 issue of *Horizon* as "Invisible Man". The completed novel appeared in print seven years later in 1952. This novel won for Ralph Ellison the National Book Award Gold Medal, the National Newspaper Publishers' Russwurm Award, and a Certificate of Award from the *Chicago Defender* in 1953. Prior to the publication of his novel, Ellison's prominence as a writer and literary critic was well on its way to being established by his short stories, reviews, and articles that had appeared in *The Antioch Review*, *The New Republic*, *Common Ground*, and other important magazines. His 1945 essays, on Wright's *Black Boy*, "Richard Wright's Blues", and Bucklin Moon's *A Primer for White Folks*, "Beating That Boy," had repositioned Ellison—who had moved away from his left views—within the literary and intellectual circles of New York. The next year Ralph Ellison married Fanny McConnell, the woman who remained his wife until his death in 1994.

Ellison's plans for another novel never resulted in a final manuscript. His working title for this second novel was variously "And Hickman Returns" or "And Hickman Arrives." Several chapters from this prospective novel were published over a period of seventeen years, beginning

in 1960 when “And Hickman Arrives” was published in *Noble Savage*, a then-recent and short-lived magazine venture undertaken by Saul Bellow, John Berryman, Arthur Miller and others, including Ellison as a contributing editor. Six years later a fire at Ellison’s home in the Berkshires destroyed over 350 pages of his “Hickman” manuscript. One chapter, which Ellison entitled “Juneteenth”, from his novel-in-progress appeared in *The Quarterly Review of Literature* in 1965; and that title became, in 1999, the name of Ralph Ellison’s posthumously published second novel.

Ralph Ellison’s short stories, as well as selected letters he exchanged with fellow writer Albert Murray, are collected in volumes entitled *Flying Home and Other Stories* (1996) and *Trading Twelves* (2000). Ellison collected his essays in two volumes, *Shadow and Act* (1964) and *Going to the Territory* (1986). In *Shadow and Act*, Ellison brings together selected essays published between 1942 and 1964 and in *Going to the Territory* he collects sixteen pieces that he wrote between 1957 and 1985.

Ralph Ellison’s stature as a prominent novelist and man of letters is now well-established throughout the English-speaking world. In addition to the awards already mentioned above, Ellison received the American Medal of Freedom, The National Medal of Arts, and the *Chevalier de l’Ordre des Arts et Lettres*, conferred on him by Andre Malraux. He was elected to the American Academy of Arts and Letters and as a fellow of the academy lived in Rome while working on his “Hickman” novel. Ellison was a member of the National Council on the Arts, and he taught or lectured at several colleges and universities, including Rutgers, Yale, Bard, the State University of New York, and was the Albert Schweitzer Professor of Humanities at New York University.

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