Chapter – 2

Ralph Ellison: Mind and Mirror

Ellison is a writer who has carved his identity by virtue of his art and intellect. He is one of the most influential and accomplished American authors of the twentieth century known especially for his only novel Invisible Man published in 1952. Although he is not a prolific writer, he is skilled, impressive and lyrical.

Present day African American authors look at Ellison with mixed feelings. Those who are Marxists have not forgiven him for his picture of the brotherhood in Invisible Man. Those who are African American nationalists object to Ellison’s insistence that he is a part of the western humanistic tradition as well as of the Negro American tradition, and he represents both in his writings. Both groups however recognize Invisible Man as a significant American novel. It is also the finest product of the integration movement in Negro writing - a movement that began really with the first Negro novel.

Ralph Waldo Ellison was born in Oklahoma City on March 1, 1914 to hard-working and highly informed lower middle class parents Lewis Ellison and Ida Millsap Ellison. His father, originally from Abbeville, South Carolina, was a soldier who had served in Cuba, the Philippine Islands, and China before marrying Ida Millsap of White Oak, Georgia and migrating to Oklahoma, where he became a construction worker and later a small scale entrepreneur. Ellison’s great grandparents were slaves, but Ellison insists that they were strong African American people who, during Reconstruction, held their own against southern whites.

An upwardly mobile couple, Lewis and Ida moved to Oklahoma because it was still considered the American frontier and the Ellisons felt that it would provide better opportunities than the South. They raised Ellison in an atmosphere that added to his
material needs and enriched him spiritual heritage. In order to make his family comfortable and give him a secure start in the world, Lewis Ellison rented a house on North Byers, surrounded by whites.

About his name, Ellison in his essay “Hidden Names and Complex Fate”, in *Shadow and Act*, points out that his father had named him after Ralph Waldo Emerson. He recalls that “much later after I began to write and work with words, I came to suspect that my father believed in the “suggestive powers of names and of the magic involved in naming” (*Collected Essays*, 95). He admired Ralph Waldo Emerson, the poet and philosopher, so much that he named his son after him. Saddled with a name that caused him “no end of trouble” and discomfort, Ellison avers that having reached the grades “where it was necessary to learn something about Mr. Emerson and what he had written, such as the ‘concord Hymn’ and the essay ‘Self-Reliance’,” he avoided his works “like the plague” (*Collected Essays*, 197) and reduced his own middle name to the mere initial, “W”.

Oklahoma was just a seven year old state when Ellison was born, its newness and the lack of a tradition of slavery allowed him to believe that nothing was hopelessly beyond the reach of the African American world. During his boyhood, Ellison could not be stopped from having white friends or doing what he wanted to do even though there was the supremacy of Governor William H. “Alfalfa Bill” Murray. As teens, Ellison and his comrades resolved to become Renaissance men, a concept that seems to have acted as a grounding force throughout his life. They took up the symbols of Renaissance Men and values from African American, Indians and whites. Ellison wanted to walk like the haberdasher he admired, Milton Lewisohn; to read everything he could get his hands on at the Paul Laurence Dunbar Library; to play hockey and varsity football; to imitate the styles of certain “Vague and constantly shifting figures”- from the community, from lore,
literature and movies. Harris Trudier in his *Afro-American Writers 1940-1953* quotes Ellison recalling his teens:

> My friends and I were exploring an idea of human versatility and possibility which went against the barbs or the palings of almost every fence which those who controlled social and political power had erected to restrict our roles in the life of the country (38).

When his father died of stomach ulcer, Ellison was three. He cherishes in his dream the last view of his father:

> I could see his long legs, his knees propped up and his toes flexing as he rested there with his arms folded over his chest, looking at me quite calmly; like a kindly king in his bath. I had only a glimpse, then we were past

(*Collected Essays*, 35).

Lewis Ellison left behind the well thumbed “thick anthology of poetry” which Ellison took as his dearest possession as recounted by Arnold Rampersad in *Ralph Ellison: A Biography*. After this bereavement, “Ellison’s life was changed forever and so, too, were the lives of his mother and brother Herbert Maurice Ellison” (7). The young Ellison endured “years of shabby rented rooms, hand-me-down clothing, second rate meals, sneers and slights from people better off and a pinched scuffing way of life”. (7)

The death of Lewis Ellison in 1917 left Ida, Ellison and Herbert quite poor. Now their resourceful mother Ida supported herself and her sons by working as a domestic in white homes and as a 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. Ellison’s enthusiasm for reading was encouraged over the years of his youth by Ida who brought him books and magazines which were scraps for the whites. In
addition, a black Episcopal priest challenged the white custom of barring African Americans from the public library and the custom was overturned.

To help Ida, Ellison started work before he was twelve; he did various menial jobs as shoeshine boy, bread and butter boy, car washer, drug store worker and other odd jobs. Thus he was exposed to various challenges and experiences of life, Oklahoma life, both good and bad; West Hollie in *Through a Writer’s Eyes* quotes Ellison’s reminiscence:

> *did* get into my imagination and it gets into the things I write…. All this is precious stuff for a child to have contact with and I know now that had I been white or rich or whatever, I couldn’t have had a richer time of it (42).

Oklahoma City was a boomtown in Ellison’s formative years of life. The city cultivated in an interest in jazz, in reading, and in the local folk literature. During 1914 in Oklahoma City, there were no caste lines so rigidly drawn as in other parts of the South and this privileged Ellison to enjoy a freedom to partake of the various crosscurrents of American life. He encountered persons of different backgrounds and learned their songs, dances and literature in the public schools. Moreover, he attended films and theatre and read books avidly, and some of these suggested to him the limitations of African American life.

Through one of the ironies of segregation, the African American school system laid particular stress on training in classic music, and Oklahoma was a music-centered, town enriched with heroes like Charlie Christian, Jimmy Rushing, Lester Young, William “count” Basie, Ivy Anderson, Ethel Waters and Hot Lips Page. Ellison had exposure of Armstrong’s various tunes. He heard church performers, marching bandsmen and various saxophones. Ellison himself wanted to become a music composer. Ellison got music lessons from his teacher and superintendent of music Mrs. Zelia N. Page Breaux at the
Douglass High School Band. Ellison was stamped forever by her confidence and energy. The music opened wider for him. He remembers:

It was Mrs. Breaux who introduced to the basic discipline required of the artist. It was she who made it possible for me to grasp the basic compatibility of the mixture of the classical and vernacular styles which were part of our musical culture. (Collected Essay, 609)

Ellison began to think of a career in music and Mrs. Breaux as his main guide. He learned music theory at Douglass High School and picked up a working knowledge of several brass instruments as well as the soprano saxophone, but the trumpet was his favorite instrument. He sat as the first-chair trumpeter in the Douglass School band and as the group student conductor, played light classics and marches at the church recitals, graduations exercises, football games, parades and social functions of lodges and fraternities. From his boyhood onward, he was caught up in the creative tension between the folk and classical traditions which remained the richest resource of his art.

After graduating from high school, Ellison’s love of music took him to Tuskegee Institute in Alabama in 1933, where he wished to write a symphony that might encompass the varied experiences of his boyhood and also express the explosive power of the blues in the classical forms.

Financially poor, he chose to go to Tuskegee Institute by hitching a freight train. With the help of a scholarship he had won from the state of Oklahoma, he majored in music and music theory and expected to become a professional musician. One of his music teachers in the school was Hazel Harrison whom Ellison took as a special inspiration. She would later introduce him to Alain Locke, a New African American thinker, who would lead Ellison to his writing career in later years.
Until his second year at Tuskegee, Ellison considered music his primary field of artistic self-expression. The year 1935 was a turning point. It infused in him a love of reading modern fiction and poetry. While working in the library he began to explore literature, examining T.S. Eliot’s *The Wasteland* (1922). He found the poem intriguing as he explains in *Shadow and Act*. He was able to relate his musical experience to it, he had discovered the musicality in the work and it was that which really got Ellison interested in writing. He reminisces and writes in his essay, “Hidden Name and Complex Fate:

I went to Tuskegee to study music, hoping to become a composer of symphonies, and there, during my second year, I read *The Wasteland* and that, although I was then unaware of it, was the real transition to writing (*Collected Essays*, 203).

Ralph Ellison was taught history of the Negro in his grade school where he learnt about the New Negro Movement which included writers as Langston Hughes, Countee Cullen, Claude McKay, James Weldon Johnson and others. These people inspired Ellison with their poetry, but ultimately *The Waste Land* seized his mind:

I was intrigued by its power to move me while ending my understanding. Somehow its rhythms were often closer to those of jazz than were those of the Negro poets, and even though I could not understand then, its range of allusion was as mixed and as varied as that of Louis Armstrong (*Collected Essays*, 203).

Due to financial problems in 1936, at the end of his junior year, Ellison left Tuskegee. Introduced to Augusta Savage, a black sculptor in Harlem, New York in the same year, hoping to earn money and return to his studies in the fall, Ellison lived in New York for the rest of his life. He was lured to New York by a magical promise of greater freedom. It was a city of myth which went far into the Negro experience.
Ellison expected New York to be a place of dreams coming true “where wonderful music existed and where there was a great tradition of Negro American style and elegance” but in reality, Ellison was left disillusioned. He tells of the trauma suffered by many southern African Americans who migrate to the North. Harlem was by no means the Freedom Land heralded in folklore. He writes in “Harlem is Nowhere”, “To live in Harlem is to dwell in the very bowels of the city… ruin… no dream… overcrowded and exploited politically and economically, Harlem is the scene and symbol of the Negro’s perpetual alienation in the land of his birth.” (321)

Ellison on his second day in New York happened to meet Alain Locke, whom Ellison had heard speak at Tuskegee. Accompanying Locke was Langston Hughes. He writes:

I met Dr Locke again not much later when I went to Harlem. The morning after I arrived, as I was walking on 125th street, I met two people who were heroic figures for me at the time, Alain Locke and Langston Hughes. It was a brief meeting, no more than Locke introduced me to Hughes, and some small talk. I was to see Locke only once or twice again over the next twenty years (Collected Essays, 445).

About Langston Hughes, Ellison recalls that in March 1932 Langston Hughes visited Oklahoma to read his poems at Langston University. The university was named after his great-uncle John Mercer Hughes- a black abolitionist. Though during that time ‘black writers meant little to him’ (Rampersad, 43). Nevertheless, around 1932 Langston Hughes seems to have some sort of impression on him. Rampersad adds:

Eventually Hughes and Ellison would become close friends. But at this time,
Ellison hardly knew what he believed about Hughes’s writing or anyone else’s.

Music was his future. (43)

Ellison in his essay ‘Remembering Richard Wright’ says:

The morning after my arrival in New York, I encountered standing in the entrance of the Harlem YMCA two fateful figures. They were Langston Hughes, the poet, and Dr. Alain Locke, the then head of the Philosophy Department at Howard University. I had never seen Langston Hughes before, but regardless of what is said about the quality of education provided by the old Negro schools (ours was named for Frederick Douglass), we were taught what is termed “Black History” and were kept abreast of current events pertaining to our people. Thus, as early as the sixth grade we were made aware of the poetry of Langston Hughes, along with the work of the other Negro Renaissance writers, so I recognized Hughes from his photographs (Collected Essays, 664).

Hughes went to Harlem’s Apollo Theater with Ellison on numerous occasions. At this meeting Hughes asked Ellison if he would deliver two books to a friend, André Malraux’s Man’s Fate and Days of Wrath, indicating that he could read them first if he wanted to. As Ellison’s essays demonstrate, he not only read Man’s Fate, but it had a profound impact upon him.

Through Hughes he met Richard Wight and a friendship between Wright and Ellison blossomed. Like Ellison, Wright too was basically an African American intellectual with southern backgrounds trying to survive in New York. They talked endlessly about politics and art, drank, and exchanged jokes (9). Wright was impressed
with Ellison’s ability to discuss literature in such detail. He urged Ellison to write a short story, but Ellison begged off. To Ellison:

Writing was far from a serious matter; it was playing with the secret lore of a fascinating but less glorious art to which I owed, I believed, no prior dedication.

(It would be many years before I was to learn of my father’s hope that I would become a poet.) Nor had I invested in writing any long hours of practice and study. Rather it was a reflex of reading, an extension of a source of pleasure, escape and instruction. *(Collected Essays, 50)*

Wright was then editor of the *New Challenge*, and for the first issue persuaded Ellison to write a book review for Water Edward Turpin’s new novel *Those Low Grounds*. Ellison ventured into writing and wrote the review entitled “Creative and Cultural Lag” for the same. It appeared in the fall 1937 issue of *New Challenge*. Ellison had entered the world of writing. He felt satisfied at being published in a magazine of national circulation, alongside such writers as Wright, Margaret Walker, Sterling Brown and others.

Wright encouraged the young musician in the art of writing, and emphasized on him the importance of craft, hard work and deep thought. He guided Ellison to such writers as Henry James and discussed the literary effects of Conrad, Joyce and Dostoevsky.

When Wright asked Ellison to contribute a short story for the Winter 1937 number of *New Challenge*, he agreed. Using his knowledge of hoboing on trains, he wrote “Hymie’s Bull”, his first story. The narrator of “Hymie’s Bull” is a young black hobo, riding the rails in the middle of the Depression, who witnesses the brutality of the railroad bulls, but escapes their attempt at revenge after a white hobo kills one of them. The story
is over influenced by Hemingway’s style and effect of Wright is seen nowhere, though he had learned a great deal about writing from Wright. As the second issue of New Challenge did not appear, “Hymie’s Bull”, would be published much later. Ellison’s literary executor John F. Callahan reports that “Hymie’s Bull” was one of the six unpublished stories of his lifetime, kept in the folder with the frayed “Early Stories” label.

Ellison’s New York apprenticeship was interrupted when he learned in February 1937 that his mother who had moved to Dayton, Ohio had died suddenly. He was shocked by the news. He rushed to Dayton for her funeral. Ellison recalls his mother’s death and the awesome Dayton winter during the recession of 1937:

February is a brook, birds, an apple tree- a day spent alone in the country. Unemployed, tired of reading, and weary of grieving the loss of my mother, I’d gone into the woods to forget. So that now all Februaries have the aura of that early morning coldness, the ghost of quail tracks on the snow-powdered brook which I brushed aside as I broke the brook to drink; and how the little quail tracks went up the ice, precise and delicate, into the darker places of the bank-ledge undisturbed. (Collected Essays, 3)

Grieving, Ellison spent seven months in Dayton with his brother, Herbert, hunting rabbits and quails and reading wildly. He borrowed several books from the public library downtown which included Thomas Mann’s Freud, Goethe, Wagner and copies of New York Times and Hemingway’s To Have and Have Not as well. Hemingway was his “true father-as-artist”. It was in Dayton, Ellison turned his attention to the task of learning to write fiction.

Ellison emerged from this bereavement with a clear purpose: he would return to New York and channel all his creative energies into becoming a writer. With Wright’s
help Ellison joined the Federal Writers’ Project and received $103 per month. The Project offered Ellison a number of assignments which required research and writing. Ellison would collect facts, tales and folklore for books on African Americans. He would also study history which deepened his knowledge about language and folklore. The folklore and language became the keys to his culture and personal identity. The information collected by him and his appreciation for folk tales, offered him many themes for his fiction. The Project also aided him to be in acquaintance with seasoned, professional writers and also with beginners like him. He pursued his Project assignments with diligence and sincerity as he had done for his music studies. He systematically scrutinized the prefaces of Henry James and Joseph Conrad, studied William Faulkner, James Joyce, Ernest Hemingway, Mark Twain and Fyodor Dostoevsky; and held long conversations with Richard Wright.

Between 1938 and 1944, Ellison produced some 57 articles and eight stories. His first two stories are clearly apprentice pieces, “Slick Gonna Learn”, which appeared in the September 1939 issue of Direction. This story is an excerpt from a novel Ellison conceived but never wrote. Ellison began “Slick Gonna Learn” in Dayton, while he was pouring over stories by his favorite writers and studying their style. The story is set in the Deep South, and tells that Slick, when his pregnant wife most urgently needs a doctor’s care, is laid off his job at the Hopkins plant. He is left with only a few dollars to his name. Desperate for cash, he finds himself in a crap game and his hand is cold. When he loses his last two dollars and asks Bostic, a local pimp, for a five-dollar loan, Bostic refuses. The pimp then suggests that Slick’s wife might earn his money back for him: “If it’s goodnough to sell.” Blind with fury, Slick attacks both Bostic and a white policeman on the scene. For striking a white man, Slick finds himself in court. (11). As in Wright’s stories and novels, Ellison’s protagonist also achieves a sense of power and worth as a
human being through violence. Hitting the officer in the midst of confusion is an action unconsciously willed by Slick; as such it produces a healthy solution, at least psychologically, to the dilemma of “Living Jim Crow”.

“The Birthmark”, Ellison’s second published story appeared in New Masses, 2 July 1940. The action of this lynching story is again stark and violent: and again the political meanings preside. A black youngster named Willie has been lynched. His brother Matt and sister Clara, are told that the boy has been hit accidentally by a car, are summoned to identify the body. Like “Slick Gonna Learn”, this story deals with the harshness of African American life in the segregated South. It raises questions about injustice and the way it is faced by the African Americans. Outwardly Matt seems very passive and the whites order him about and refer to him as “boy”. In order to identify the body on the highway, Matt searches for the birthmark on Willie’s stomach and sees that the youth has been castrated. “Don’t know car do nothing like that,” he remarks. For Matt’s impudence a policeman smashes him in the back with his gun barrel and yells, “We don’t have no lynchings in this state no more!”

Both “Slick Gonna Learn” and “The Birthmark” involve African American characters who are terrorized by a viciously racist society. Described by a distant narrator in reportorial terms, these characters are not especially particularized in speech, dress, or manner. As in most African American proletarian stories, they appear as ordinary representatives of the African American masses caught in the courtrooms and squad cars and on the highways of southern towns. Much of the dialogue occurs at close, hot range between poor, innocent African American and mean white lawmen. Both stories protest police brutality in a direct manner.

Ellison has portrayed African Americans as the hapless, angry victims of social abuse, trapped in the cul-de-sacs of their environment; their birthmark, like Willie’s is a
scar of castration. It is also the mark of blackness, which covers their bodies and limits their freedom in the New World.

Ellison wrote three Buster-Riley stories in the forties in which he dramatizes his boyhood feelings. These stories, however, are built on dialogues between two young boys, Buster and Riley, and deal with the aspirations of those whose spirits remain irrepressible despite a repressive environment.

The first of Buster-Riley stories is “Afternoon” (American Writing, 1940). Ellison reminisces of his boyhood in Oklahoma. Buster and Riley are rambunctious curious boys who explore their world and resist their families’ attempts to control them. The boys’ parents uphold their community’s traditional values usually the most conservative ones. The boys grudgingly accept some of these values, and duck others. They witness their guilt when they fail to obey their parents.

Buster and Riley are given rebel, “mannish” strength from an old folk hero. “Mister Rabbit” the trickster comes to Buster’s mind, and the two boys chant a kind of song of praise:

Well, I met Mister Rabbit
Down by the pea vine
‘An I asked him where’s he gwine
Well he said Just kiss my behind
And he skipped on down the pea vine .(36)

In this story, Ellison has concentrated on the brutalities of existence and on the moment of violent confrontation.

The second in the series of Buster-Riley stories is “Mister Toussan” which is tightly woven and the finest one. It concerns a white man, Mr Rogan, who refuses to
allow the boys to eat cherries from his tree. Folklore, overheard and traded by Buster and Riley, pulls their thoughts into flight, to freedom and deliverance of a folk hero.

The boys dream about a flight through time and tell the tale of “Mister Toussan”, inflating the Haitian revolution of 1781 and Toussaint L’Ouverture’s part in it to gigantic dimensions. In fact, this stretched version of the incident tells that at the time of actual Haitian revolt, the tale of the black revolutionary grew into a kind of folktale and spread like wild fire among American slaves.

“That I had the Wings, is based on a childhood experience involving Ellison, his brother Herbert, and Frank Mead, a neighbor in Oklahoma City. Here Riley has been confined to his backyard for the day because he fell off the church roof chasing pigeons the day before.

In New Masses, Ellison wrote with almost singular authority about the tricky business of the war, race, and radicalism, because the party wanted African Americans to see not betrayal but foresight and wisdom in its new position. Ellison and African American intellectuals like him had become more important than ever.

In 1942 Ellison quit the Federal Writers’ Project and he became managing editor of The Negro Quarterly. He worked under the editor Angelo Herndon and staff for one year and left just before the journal folded. For The Negro Quarterly Ellison wrote a review of William Attaway’s novel Blood on the Forge, and an unsigned editorial comment, which obliquely criticized the Communist Party; it also advocated that African American leaders concentrate more on the interests and needs of African Americans. As managing editor of The Negro Quarterly, he reached boldly across the racial divide.

With the Quarterly dead, Ellison through his friend Add Bates found a job in Merchant Marine as a third cook. Ellison opted for the merchant marine partly because he
wanted to contribute to the war, but didn’t want to be in a Jim Crow army. For about three months, Ellison was assigned to one ship or another, but not at sea.

Finally on December 27, 1943, after taking the oath of loyalty, Ellison was certified for duty as a second cook and baker. The next day, he joined the crew of the Liberty Ship SS *Sun Yat-Sen* as it steamed out of New York Harbor. Taking up the job in the merchant marine, Ellison seemed dignified and took it as the most democratic of all services. During his voyage, Ellison had been kept ignorant of his destination (for security reasons). He discovered only on docking that he was now in Swansea, Wales, the southwesterly corner of the United Kingdom. It was a hub of naval traffic to and fro from North America. His first visit outside the U.S. was surprisingly pleasant. The Welsh, proud of their distinct cultural values, had a passion for music, dance and talk. This seemed to unite them and their African Americans visitors; unlike white Americans, the locals were not concerned by interracial dating.

Ellison’s new freedom and responsibilities and his loneliness, spurred his creative energies. Two short stories were generated out of this visit. First, a patriotic story, “In A Strange Country”, which is about an African American roughed up by a white soldier outside Wales. Entering in a state of rage and despair, the African American man is slowly made to feel his own humanity again because of the way the local people receive him.

The second story “A Storm of Blizzard Proportions”, tells of an African American visitor to Wales, who must now part from a blue-eyed local woman who wants to marry him. She has no inkling of the ordeal they would face in the United States. Brooding on the figure of Jack Johnson, the black boxer who twice had defiantly married white women, the man must concede that he lacks Johnson’s fighting spirit, as well as Johnson’s capacity for joy.
After a brief stay in bombed-out London, the *Sun Yat-Sen* headed back into the Atlantic for the voyage home. The trip was an ordeal. Back at New York, Ellison met the most important woman of his life- Ida Espen Guggenheimer, a Jewish lady aged seventy-eight. She was impulsive, intelligent and warm-hearted and often helped Ellison financially. Ida came to love Ellison because of his intellectual vitality and shrewdness, his commitment to socialism and the promise of his literary greatness.

During his service period in Merchant Marines, Ellison was awarded a Rosenwald Fellowship to write a novel. Ellison had outlined one novel on war time, though he had later abandoned it, but the short story ‘In a Strange Country’ made its way out as an offshoot of the abandoned novel. It concerns a young black serviceman in the midst of World War. Here a young black man, Parker makes discoveries about his absurd and dangerous position as an African American GI overseas. The white American comrades greet Parker by shrieking, “It’s a nigger!” and beating him until his eye is swollen. Ellison wrote to Ida that he took the story as “the most ambitious and conceptually mature fiction that I have ever attempted”.

During the same year (1944), appeared Ellison's two most remarkable stories, “King of the Bingo Game” and “Flying Home”. “King of the Bingo Game” is a third-person story in which a greenhorn migrant from the South to Harlem draws bingo and the right to take a turn at the wheel of fortune and the jackpot. Despite his urgent need for money to secure help for his wife, the act of spinning the wheel becomes his energy, his life, his God. The king of Bingo feels so liberated by the act of pressing the button that he cannot let go until it is forcibly taken by security cops. One of the cops blackjacks him at the same moment whom he sees the wheel stop at double zero and the jackpot. “King of the Bingo Game” anticipates the fluidity, violence, chaos and the surreal in *Invisible Man*. 
The second story “Flying Home” deals with two thwarted flights; that of the black pilot Todd, whose plane collides with a buzzard and crashes in a field in Macon County; and that of Jefferson, who comes to Todd's rescue. Jefferson's folktales and actions enable Todd to recognize where he is and who he is and to come back to life by following the old black peasant and his son out of a labyrinthine Alabama valley. The folktales also serve the function of telling that he must eventually confront the evils of Jim Crow Alabama, however high he has flown.

While still in Merchant Marines service, Ellison learned that the Julius Rosenwald Fund had awarded him a fellowship in creative writing. Ellison had already a plan for a novel to be set in a Nazi prison camp. In this wartime novel he takes a black pilot, shot down and captured by the Nazis, and placed in a detention camp where he is the highest-ranking officer. This plot invited trouble. Ellison knew next to nothing about the military or about prison camps. It did not achieve enough unity to satisfy its maker, though, and only one section was published as a story titled “Flying Home”.

In the Merchant Marine voyage, Ellison was physically exhausted by hard work. So he went on sick leave to his friend's place in Wakesfield, Vermont. He also took the novel he had begun. Certain ideas came into his mind. He had been reading Fitz Roy Raglan’s *The Hero* (1936), a study of historical and mythic heroes, and he had been thinking of leadership in the African American community.

One morning in 1945, still in Vermont, Ellison scribbled the words, “I am an invisible man” – which turned out to be his novel’s first sentence, and pretty soon Ellison had a novel going and he began to work out a conceptual outline for it. With the help of Fanny McConnell, his second wife, he continued to work on it for seven years and finished *Invisible Man*, which was published in 1952 by Random House.
"Invisible Man" begins with the prologue, the penultimate stage in the unnamed main character’s development. He has been on the run; now he is in his underground hole. Faced with his explored hibernation, his impulses at first are vindictive; he siphons electricity from the Monopolated Light and Power Company, and he ascends to ground level where he engages in an act of personal terrorism. Repelled by his own violent behavior, he returns to this warm underground shelter, gets high, and listens to jazz records such as Louis Armstrong’s “What Did I Do to Be Black and Blue?”. As he begins a mental descent through layers of consciousness, he encounters images from his racial past: a sermon on the “Blackness of Blackness” and a dialogue between a slave woman and her mulatto children; into his dream state also comes a character named Ras the Destroyer, from whom he had fled until he plunged into his dark sanctuary. Returning to waking consciousness, the invisible man believes that the music he has been listening to demands action, and “I believe in nothing if not in action” ("Invisible Man").

Before he can act in a meaningful way, however, the invisible man must confront and come to terms with his identity and his life. The best way to order the chaos of his experience, he reasons, is to tell the tale of how he got into the hole in the first place. His narrative then proceeds on two levels; on the first level, episodes from his life are reconstructed so readers can share them as the naïve boy experienced them; simultaneously, on the second level, the voice of the older, wiser, and judgmental narrator is heard as he interjects his satirical asides. This dual perspective, in part, accounts for the novel’s complexity.

"Invisible Man" since its publication in 1952 has been recognized as one of the most important works of fiction of its time. It was on the bestseller list for sixteen weeks and won the National Book Award. Its critical reputation and popularity have only grown in the more than five decades since its publication. Since 1970, master’s and PhD
dissertations on Ellison and this great novel have proliferated. It is proved to be a great work of art. Wright Morris opines on this artistic work:

Ellison has an abundance of that primary talent without which neither craft nor intelligence can save a novelist; he is richly, wildly inventive; his scenes rise and dip with tension, his people bleed, his language stings. No other writer has captured so much of the confusion and agony, the hidden gloom and surface gaiety of Negro life. His ear for Negro speech is magnificent…. The rhythm of the prose is harsh and tensed, like a beat of harried alertness. The observation is expert…. For all his self-involvement, he is capable of extending himself toward his people, of accepting them as they are, in their blindness and hope. (5)

After *Invisible Man*, two more pieces showcasing the character Mary Rambo, appeared: “Did You Ever Dream Lucky?” (*New World Writing*, 1954) and “Out of the Hospital and Under the Bar” (*Soon, One Morning*, 1963). The second one had originally been intended to be the part of *Invisible Man*. In 1956 Ellison published one of his best stories, “A Coupla Scalped Indians” (*New World Writing*), which in vein of the earlier Buster and Riley stories, centers on two boys, one of whom is explicitly referred to as Buster. When the boys hear the nasty mouth, signifying trumpet, as they walk toward the carnival from far off in the woods, Buster improvises words to go with what he hears in the music’s free flight:

“Saying,

So ya’ll don’t play ‘em, hey?

So ya’ll don’t play ‘em, hey?
Well pat your feet and clap your hands,

Cause I’m going to play ‘em to the promised land.

“Man, the white folks know what that fool is signifying on that horn they’d run him clear on out the world.”

It is the narrator who, recently “scalped” (circumcised) like Buster, blunders into knowledge, in the tabooed shack of old Aunt Mackie for which others might run him “out the world”. Dazed, he emerges from his ambiguous, solitary man child’s encounter with this ancient woman, mysterious and magical as the moon, whose naked body belies her wrinkled face with its telltale hairs and tenders him the promise, and beauty of youth and the tidal pull of sexuality. “All is real”, he confides in wonder. Alone in the night, his sharpened senses touched by the shapes of nature the narrator’s nuanced sensibility becomes suddenly attuned to feelings that open him to the mystery and possibility of life and the world.

Ellison’s theme, the initiation into manhood, plays itself out against an encounter with the sphinx like Aunt Mackie, portrayed alternately as appealing and repugnant, young and old, angel and devil, seductress and seduced, in short, a symbol of human experience. The story achieves a perfect and self contained expression of its theme.

From 1937 when, at Richard Wright’s urging, Ellison published his first piece, a review of Waters Edward Turpin’s novel, These Low Grounds, until his passing in 1994, he wrote more than seventy-five essays, addresses, reviews, and conference talks. Almost half of these, along with a few of his numerous interviews, were collected in Shadow and Act (1964) and Going to the Territory (1986). “Most of the essays”, he notes in his introduction to Shadow and Act, “are occasional pieces, written for magazines whose editors provided opportunities for me to reduce my thinking – indeed, often to discover what I did think- to publishable form.”(Collected Essays, 56)
Taking the title ‘Shadow and Act’ from lines in T.S. Eliot’s 1925 poem “The Hollow Men”, Ellison sets out to probe the meaning of experience, to understand what lies below the surface of the act. The work _Shadow and Act_ is lined in three general themes: the first part of the book investigates literature and folklore; the second deals with Negro music and the blues and jazz artists who have created it; and the last section offers a cultural and political examination of the relationship of Negro subculture to the rest of the nation. Some critics proclaim that _Shadow and Act_ has autobiographical overtones. Two pieces, the Introduction and “Hidden Name and Complex Fate”, are explicitly autobiographical in design. Ellison draws on his experience about writing:

> The act of writing requires a constant plunging back into the shadow of the past where time hovers ghostlike. When I began writing in earnest I was forced to relate myself consciously and imaginatively to my mixed background as American, as Negro American, and as a Negro from what in its own belated way was a pioneer background.(56)

The essays in _Shadow and Act_ were written over a span of twenty-two years and none were retouched. Ellison’s skills of writing over these twenty two years seem to develop from Marxist-oriented WPA worker of “The Way It Is” (1942) to the seasoned writer of 1964. He was concerned only with art.

_Shadow and Act_ is a computation, a unified work of art where Ellison has defined what African American life is. _Shadow and Act_ is handled adequately with the themes of African American and American Literature and music and politics through the mode of interviews and autobiographical notes. The book is also adorned with the writings on Kenneth Burke, André Malraux, and Stanley Edgar Hyman. It includes Henry James’s _The American Scene_ (1907), and James Baldwin’s _Notes of a Native Son_
(1955). It has book and movie reviews and political commentary as well as documents for an autobiography, which provide another context for *Shadow and Act*.

Ellison’s second book of essays *Going to the Territory* was published in 1986 comprising of sixteen speeches, reviews, and essays written since 1957. It is a work of exploration of literature and folklore, jazz and culture, and the nature and quality of lives that African Americans lead. Ellison continues to explore “Americanness” and to analyze America’s uniquely pluralistic culture. In “The Little Man at Chehaw Station” he observes, “On the level of culture, that the diverse elements of our various backgrounds, our heterogeneous pasts, have indeed come together, “melted” and undergone metamorphosis” (514). Ellison provides in this book, fresh readings of William Faulkner and Richard Wright, along with new perspectives on the music of Duke Ellington and the art of Romare Bearden.

Ellison’s reputation as an artist continues till date. Jonathen Yardley applauds him saying, “In only three books Ellison had accomplished more than most writers can hope to do in dozens.” In a Book Week poll, two hundred authors, editors and critics select *Invisible Man* as the most distinguished novel published by an American during the previous twenty years.

Ellison’s reputation has undergone a remarkable metamorphosis over the years. His liberation was considered out of step with the times by the New Left and Third World spokespersons of the late 1960s and early 1970. He incurred their displeasure in 1965 when he participated in President Johnson’s White House Art Festival – a function which Robert Lowell conspicuously boycotted.

As times change, so do attitudes. A number of young African American writers who had distanced themselves from Ellison earlier have come full circle. Larry Neal, for example, who with LeRoi Jones edited *Black Fire*, a 1968 anthology of African American
writing had excluded Ellison, but subsequently admitted to “wincing” where he reread his comments about Ellison in the afterword to *Black Fire*. Refusing to be co-opted by white critics who analyzed *Invisible Man* in formalistic terms, African American critics increasingly marvel at Ellison’s treatment of African American life. They find his monumental novel a profound examination of the richness and beauty and heroism of the African American experience. Similarly the 1980 Carleton Miscellany entitled “An Ellison Festival” contains only glowing tributes from black writers and critics.

Very few literary events have aroused greater anticipation than the long-awaited appearance of Ellison’s second novel. Ellison had been publishing fragments of the novel or work-in-progress, and as such eight excerpts from this work-in-progress had appeared in such journals as *Noble Savage, Iowa Review* and *New American Review*. The design of the novel in progress emerges from these published fragments. Set in the South during the period from about 1920 to 1960, its central characters are Reverend Alonzo Zuber Hickman, reformed jazz trombonist, and the light-skinned (white?) orphan boy Bliss, whom Hickman adopts and rears to be a revival circuit evangelist. It is Bliss, boy minister-in-training, who raises the lid of a coffin during Rev. Hickman’s sermon on resurrection, causing wonder on the boy’s part and the reader’s about whether or not the church “performance” debases the sacred ritual with stage tricks. Eventually Bliss who, like Rinehart in the *Invisible Man*, is something of a devilish trickster disappears into the white community, passing for white. Years later he surfaces as a Senator Sunraider, bitter and eloquent spokesman for white supremacy who, to compound the mystery, retains certain distinctively African American ways of gesturing and talking.

Ellison spent reconstructing the novel or work-in-progress, after a large section of the original work of about 365 pages burned in 1967. Ellison’s manuscript some 2,000 pages was edited by John Callahan, the literary executor of Ellison Ellison’s estate and at
last the work was posthumously published as *Juneteenth* in 1999 named literally for the celebration of June 19, 1865, the day two and a half years after the Emancipation Proclamation was decreed.

Throughout his career, Ellison though did not produce much work after the publication of *Invisible Man*, but his art is proliferating and life full of active period. He was always busy in arenas around the country during the many years from 1952 until his death in 1994. From 1955 to 1957 Ellison was a fellow of the American Academy in Rome. Returning to the United States, he taught and lectured at a wide range of institutions including Bard College, the State University of New York at Stony Brook, the University of Chicago, Rutgers, Harvard, Brown, and Yale. He was awarded the Presidential Medal of Freedom in 1969; the *Chevalier de l’Ordre des Arts et Lettres* in 1970 by the French Minister of Culture, Andre Malraux; and the National Medal of Arts in 1985. Ellison was also a charter member of the National Council on the Arts and Humanities, and from 1970 to 1979 was Albert Schweitzer Professor in the Humanities at New York University.

Ralph Ellison continued spreading and cultivating his vision of America and art: the conscious protagonist and the use of blackness to break categories instead of sustaining them. During his life’s journey, it was Fanny McConnell, Ellison’s wife, who shouldered Ellison hand to hand for more than forty years. In his last days, Ellison had begun to feel poorly and weak and the laboratory tests confirmed the presence of pancreatic cancer. Fanny was plunged into depths of sorrow and despair. Ellison was fully bed-ridden and kept listening to music by Prokofiev and Louis Armstrong, to which he nodded his head in somber appreciation. “On Saturday, April 16 (1994)”, as his biographer Arnold Rampersad reveals, “with the music of Bach playing softly, and with
Fanny snuggled tightly against Ellison on the hospital bed, Callahan saw a single tear roll slowly down his cheek. Then he was gone.”(365).

Stanley Crouch, an American poet, essayist, editor, and critic in his essay dated 9 May 1994 "The Oklahoma Kid," in *The New Republic*, pays tribute to Ralph Ellison:

> When Ralph Ellison saddled up the pony of death and took that long, lonesome ride into eternity on Saturday morning, April 16, the quality of American civilization was markedly diminished. He had always traveled on a ridge above the most petty definitions of race and had given us a much richer image of ourselves as Americans, no matter how we arrived here, what we looked like or how we were made. Alone of the internationally famous Negro writers of the last half-century, Ellison had maintained his position as a citizen of this nation.