

Ralph Ellison

In writing *Invisible Man* in the late 1940s, Ralph Ellison brought onto the scene a new kind of black protagonist, one at odds with the characters of the leading black novelist at the time, Richard Wright. If Wright's characters were angry, uneducated, and inarticulate—the consequences of a society that oppressed them—Ellison's *Invisible Man* was educated, articulate, and self-aware. Ellison's view was that the African-American culture and sensibility was far from the downtrodden, unsophisticated picture presented by writers, sociologists and politicians, both black and white. He posited instead that blacks had created their own traditions, rituals, and a history that formed a cohesive and complex culture that was the source of a full sense of identity.

If Wright's protest literature was a natural outcome of a brutal childhood spent in the deep South, Ellison's more affirming approach came out of a very different background in Oklahoma. A "frontier" state with no legacy of slavery, Oklahoma in the 1910s created the possibility of exploring a fluidity between the races not possible even in the North. Although a contemporary recalled that the Ellisons were "among the poorest" in Oklahoma City, Ralph still had the mobility to go to a good school, and the motivation to find mentors, both black and white, from among the most accomplished people in the city. Ellison would later say that as a child he observed that there were two kinds of people, those "who wore their everyday clothes on Sunday, and those who wore their Sunday clothes every day. I wanted to wear Sunday clothes every day."

Ellison's life-long receptivity to the variegated culture that surrounded him, beginning in Oklahoma City, served him

well in creating a new take on literary modernism in *Invisible Man*. The novel references African-American folktales, songs, the blues, jazz, and black traditions like playing the dozens.¹ An added difference for Ellison was that his modernist narrative was also a vehicle for inscribing his own and the black identity—as well as a roadmap for anyone experiencing themselves as "invisible," unseen.

For Ellison, America offered a context for discovering authentic personal identity; it also created a space for African-Americans to invent their own culture. And in Ellison's view, black and white culture were inextricably linked, with almost every facet of American life influenced and impacted by the African-American presence—including music, language, folk mythology, clothing styles and sports. Moreover, he felt that the task of the writer is to "tell us about the unity of American experience beyond all considerations of class, of race, of religion." In this Ellison was ahead of his time.

Invisible Man was transitional in our thinking about race, identity, and what it means to be American. Ellison both accelerated America's literary project and helped define and clarify arguments about race in this country. Ellison's outlook was universal: he saw the predicament of blacks in America as a metaphor for the universal human challenge of finding a viable identity in a chaotic and sometimes indifferent world.

¹ A game of competitive insults

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