



Lesson 3: Ralph Ellison

Ralph Waldo Ellison was born in Oklahoma City in 1914. He attended Douglass High School and went on to start at the Tuskegee Institute in Alabama in 1933. He did not graduate, but moved to New York in 1936, where he was immersed in Harlem Renaissance culture.

In 1936, Ellison began writing under the Federal Writers' Project, which allowed him to support himself. When World War II came on to the scene in 1941, Ellison served as a Merchant Marine to avoid having to enlist in the segregated military.

After the war, he began writing his first and most famous novel, *Invisible Man*. It was published in 1952, and won the National Book Award for Fiction that year. Ellison went on to write two volumes of essays. His second novel, titled *Juneteenth*, was discovered as an unfinished manuscript after his death in 1994. It was edited and published several years later.

Ellison was a celebrated novelist, literary critic, and scholar. He had a prestigious career as a professor, teaching at Bard College, Rutgers University, Yale University, and New York University. In 1969, he was awarded the Presidential Medal of Freedom. In 1975, Oklahoma City honored him with the opening of the Ralph Ellison Library. That same year, he was elected to the American Academy of Arts and Letters. In 1985, Ellison was awarded the National Medal of Arts.

The Invisible Royalty, a sculpture that pays tribute to the late author, was created by Oklahoma artist David Phelps. It is located at the Ralph Ellison Library in Oklahoma City. The books represent the complete Ellison collection, while the typewriter is a replica of the same one the author used. A piece of paper is rising from the machine, and it bears both written word (the first page of *Invisible Man*) and the bust of a young Ralph Ellison. Above, as if they just emerged from the typewriter, are two more pieces of paper. One piece features the biography of Ralph Ellison while the other lists Jim Crow laws that would have affected the author. Due to the relief nature of the sculpture, it appears that Ellison watches you from any perspective.



Ralph Ellison: The Invisible Royalty
by David Phelps

Courtesy of the Ralph Ellison
Library, Oklahoma Art in Public
Places, and the artist

ACTIVITIES:

Explore Optical Illusions

The bust sculpture of Ralph Ellison relies on optical illusion. By doing the bust in reverse, Phelps created a work that not only appears to extend towards the viewer, but also follows the viewer as they look at the art from different angles. This technique, creating something that is visually perceived differently from objective reality, is called optical illusion. Find examples of optical illusions on the internet or at the library and see if you can discriminate perception from reality.

Thoughts on 'Invisible People'

"I am invisible, understand, simply because people refuse to see me." -Ralph Ellison, *Invisible Man*

In *Invisible Man*, Ellison describes the African-American experience during a time defined by racism, discrimination, and stereotypes. While our society has become more and more accepting of diversity, 'invisible' people still exist.

What are some examples of invisible people today?

How can we make them visible?

Write a journal entry responding to this quote by Ralph Ellison:

"You often doubt if you really exist. You wonder whether you aren't simply a phantom in other people's minds... You ache with the need to convince yourself that you do exist in the real world..."

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