

RALPH ELLISON: THE SELF-TAUGHT WRITER



#3505

OPEN-CAPTIONED
HISTORY ON VIDEO

1995

Grade Levels: 7-12

25 minutes

2 Instructional Graphics Enclosed

DESCRIPTION

Old photographs and quotes from Ellison's writings help present his life as a writer and his views on civil rights. Influenced by Emerson, he believed that an individual is responsible for his destiny. In his novel *Invisible Man*, he related the struggle African Americans faced living in a racially divided society. This work brought him literary recognition and respect, and Ellison received many honors before his death in 1994.

ACADEMIC STANDARDS

Subject Area: Language Arts

- Standard: Demonstrates competence in the general skills and strategies for reading a variety of literary texts
 - Benchmark: Understands historical and cultural influences on literary works (See Instructional Goals #1, #2, and #3)

INSTRUCTIONAL GOALS

1. To present the historical, cultural, and personal influences on the career and works of African American author Ralph Ellison.
2. To identify the significant published work by African American author Ralph Ellison.
3. To contrast the early struggles of African American author Ralph Ellison with the recognition he received later in his lifetime.
4. To provide historical commentary on Ellison's literary and social status in a changing America.

VOCABULARY

1. Jim Crow laws
2. Harlem Renaissance

BEFORE SHOWING

1. Introduce the novel *Invisible Man*.
 - a. Briefly discuss the subject matter and the author in terms of the African American experience.
 - b. Introduce some printed excerpts that represent the flavor of the book, including the writer's point of view, subject matter, and style of writing.
2. Provide a list of individuals who influenced Ellison. (See INSTRUCTIONAL GRAPHICS.)
 - a. Watch for these names, as the video progresses, to learn how these people influenced Ellison.
 - b. Consider choosing one of these people as the subject of a report.
3. Write the vocabulary words on the board, without explanation. Be prepared to discuss their meaning after viewing the video.

AFTER SHOWING

Discussion Items and Questions

1. In what city and state was Ralph Ellison born?
2. What were Jim Crow laws? How would they have affected Ellison's parents?
3. What kind of work did Ellison's parents do? How did his mother's job help young Ellison?
4. Why did Ellison's father name him Ralph? What was his ambition for his son?

5. When Ellison was older, he read an essay by the author for whom he was named. Identify the name of that essay. Determine why it was important to Ellison.
6. Where did Ellison attend college and what did he study? While a student, where did he work part-time?
7. At the age of 20, Ellison read a poem that inspired him to write. Name the poem and its author. Describe how this poem appealed to Ellison's interest in music.
8. How many years of college did Ellison complete? Why did he not finish college?
9. Compare the Harlem of the 1920s with the Harlem of 1936. Discern why the 1920s were called the "Harlem Renaissance"?
10. Identify the two talented writers Ellison met on the steps of the YMCA. Discuss the writers' literary significance.
11. One of these writers introduced Ellison to an African American novelist who encouraged Ellison to write fiction. Name that novelist.
12. In the late '30s, this same novelist helped Ellison and other African Americans to get jobs with what project?
13. Describe two jobs held by Ellison before he started work on his novel *Invisible Man*.
14. How many years did it take for Ellison to finish *Invisible Man*?
15. Describe the attitude of Ellison's wife toward her husband during these years. Discuss who provided most of the financial support while Ellison wrote.
16. List some of the themes of Ellison's work.
17. In 1967, Ellison purchased a spacious country home in what state? What happened to that home? What did Ellison lose in addition to the house?
18. What did the radicals of the '60s and the '70s say in criticism of Ellison? How did he defend himself from this criticism?
19. In 1975, Ellison's hometown named a building in his honor. Explain the purpose of that building.
20. Discuss the meaning of several Ellison quotes from the video. (See INSTRUCTIONAL GRAPHICS.)

Applications and Activities

1. Complete a matching exercise focusing on influential people in Ellison's life. (See INSTRUCTIONAL GRAPHICS.)
2. Choose an individual who influenced Ellison and write a short report about that person's life and achievements, including significance to Ellison. (See RELATED RESOURCES.)
3. Research and report on Ellison's literary career, including a chronology of his works, some critical commentary, prizes and awards, and major themes.
4. Report on Ellison. Rewrite the report using a first person point of view. Compare the grammatical structures in each report.

INSTRUCTIONAL GRAPHICS

- WHO'S WHO IN THE LIFE OF RALPH ELLISON?
- RALPH ELLISON QUOTES

RELATED RESOURCES

Captioned Media Program

- We Shall Overcome: A History of the Civil Rights Movement #2695

World Wide Web

The following Web sites complement the contents of this guide; they were selected by professionals who have experience in teaching deaf and hard of hearing students. Every effort was made to select accurate, educationally relevant, and “kid-safe” sites. However, teachers should preview them before use. The U.S. Department of Education, the National Association of the Deaf, and the Captioned Media Program do not endorse the sites and are not responsible for their content.

- ENTERTAINMENT WEEKLY BOOK REVIEW
<http://cgi.pathfinder.com/ew/review/book/0,1683,669,juneteenth.html>

Review of *Juneteenth*, a posthumous Ralph Ellison novel assembled by literary executor John F. Callahan. Review published at EW Online on Wednesday, June 16, 1999.

- CHAPTER 22 OF RALPH ELLISON’S INVISIBLE MAN
<http://www.imsa.edu/~ravi/english/project.html>

A storybook version produced in May 1996 as a supplement to the Junior English class final at the Illinois Math and Science Academy. Ten pages, illustrated, concise language. Links to other helpful sites.

- ELLISON, RALPH (WALDO) http://search.biography.com/print_record.pl?id=14573

Concise biographical information.

- EMERSON, RALPH WALDO http://search.biography.com/print_record.pl?id=14582

Concise biographical information.

- ELLINGTON, (EDWARD KENNEDY) DUKE http://search.biography.com/print_record.pl?id=14563

Concise biographical information.

- ARMSTRONG, LOUIS (DANIEL) http://search.biography.com/print_record.pl?id=12367

Concise biographical information.

- ELIOT, T. S. (THOMAS STEARNS) http://search.biography.com/print_record.pl?id=14558

Concise biographical information.

- HUGHES, (JAMES MERCER) LANGSTON http://search.biography.com/print_record.pl?id=16052

Concise biographical information.

- LOCKE, ALAIN LE ROY http://search.biography.com/print_record.pl?id=17067

Concise biographical information.

- WRIGHT, RICHARD (NATHANIEL) http://search.biography.com/print_record.pl?id=20975

Concise biographical information.

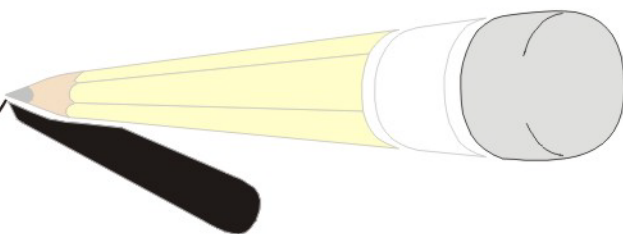
Who's Who in the Life of Ralph Ellison

(A Matching Exercise)



- ___ 1. Ralph Waldo Emerson
- ___ 2. Duke Ellington
- ___ 3. Louis Armstrong
- ___ 4. T. S. Eliot
- ___ 5. Langston Hughes
- ___ 6. Alain Locke
- ___ 7. Richard Wright

Ralph Ellison



- a. Jazz musician admired by Ellison.
- b. Novelist who encouraged Ellison to write fiction.
- c. Poet whose poem *The Waste Land* inspired Ellison to become a writer.
- d. Jazz musician admired by Ellison.
- e. Essayist for whom Ellison was named.
- f. Writer who introduced Ellison to Richard Wright.
- g. One of two writers Ellison met on the steps of the YMCA.

Ralph Ellison Quotes

- A. "The search for identity is the American theme."
- B. "But if you would tell me who I am, at least take the trouble to discover what I have been."
- C. "*The Waste Land* seized my mind. I was intrigued by its power to move me while eluding my understanding. Somehow its rhythms were often closer to those of jazz than were those of the Negro poets. . ."
- D. "For no group within the United States achieves anything without asserting its claims against the counterclaims of other groups. Thus, as Americans, we have accepted this conscious and ceaseless struggle as a condition of our freedom, and we are aware that each of our victories increases the area of freedom for all Americans, regardless of color."
- E. "Freedom must be won again and again."
- F. "The library is a place where we are able to free ourselves from the limitations of today by becoming acquainted with what went on in the past--and thus project ourselves into the future."



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