

English 337: Study of a Major Author—Ralph Ellison

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Section 001: 10:30-11:20 MWF G21 Woodburn Hall

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Introduction:

This course traces Ralph Ellison's literary career from its early beginnings in leftist periodicals like *New Masses* to its end in 1994 when Ellison died, leaving behind a sprawling unfinished novel that took until 2010 to cobble together and publish. Along the way we will read Ellison's masterpiece *Invisible Man*, which won him the National Book Award in 1953, a collection of short stories spanning the author's career, pertinent critical essays he published from the early 60s to the mid 80s, a handful of his incisive music reviews, and significant parts of his incomplete tome *Three Days Before the Shooting...*, which he started writing in the early 50s but never finished. Providing counterpoint will be additional selections written by Ellison's influences and peers, from Richard Wright, who gave Ellison his first writing gig, to Percival Everett, a contemporary novelist who has brought Ellison's literary themes into the twenty-first century.

Required Materials:

- Ralph Ellison, *Flying Home and Other Stories*
- Ralph Ellison, *Invisible Man*
- Ralph Ellison, *Three Days Before the Shooting...*
- Percival Everett, *Erasure*

All of the above texts can be purchased at the WVU Bookstore.

The remaining course reading will be available in .PDF form through eReserves. When you see "eReserves" next to an assigned reading, follow these steps:

- 1) Visit the University Libraries eReserves page at <https://reserves.lib.wvu.edu>
- 2) Click "Log In" on the menu list to the left
- 3) Log in using your MyID username and password
- 4) Select our course from the list
- 5) Select the assigned reading. Readings will appear in the order we will cover them.

Course Objectives:

- To explore the primary influences, formal characteristics, major themes, and socio-cultural significance of Ralph Ellison’s fiction
- To practice finding, evaluating, incorporating, and responding critically to scholarly sources on the life and work of Ralph Ellison
- To become familiar with the argumentative threads that shape Ellison Studies
- To construct incisive arguments about Ellison’s writing that engage with this critical discourse, and to respond creatively to Ellison’s imaginative work in a way that is informed by this criticism

English Major Program Goals

Upon completing a B.A. in English, a student should be able to:

1. Interpret texts within diverse literary, cultural, and historical contexts.
2. Demonstrate a general knowledge of the social and structural aspects of the English language.
3. Demonstrate a range of contextually effective writing strategies.

Four aspects of Goal 1 are especially important. A student should be able to:

- Identify genre conventions and analyze their effects
- Identify and analyze effects of complexity or ambiguity
- Locate texts in social, economic, political, and literary history
- Connect a text to other literary or cultural texts

Not all English courses will address all three goals; some will focus particularly on one goal. However, the English major curriculum as a whole will provide multiple opportunities to address all of the goals.

Assignments:

Overview:

Each student enrolled in this course will complete three “*précis and response*” papers of approximately 1000 words in response to self-selected essays by Ellison scholars, and compile a final portfolio that consists of: a) revised versions of all three “*précis and response*” papers, b) a substantial creative project that engages with and/or extends any one of Ellison’s “*riffs*,” and c) a ten-page essay that explains how your creative project both responds to Ellison and is informed by recent developments in Ellison Studies. Each student will also complete **all** of the assigned reading and participate in class discussions.

Précis and Response Papers:

During the semester you will complete three “*précis and response*” papers of approximately 1000 words apiece. To complete these papers you must use the MLA bibliography in conjunction with online resources like JSTOR, Project MUSE, and/or EBSCOHost to find, read, summarize, and analyze a single work of substantial, peer-reviewed scholarship **on a topic pertaining to any one of the texts we will have covered since the previous “*précis and response*” paper was**

due (i.e., your third “précis and response” paper cannot be about *Invisible Man*, but must be about either *Three Days Before the Shooting...* or another one of the critical texts we will have read since the second “précis and response” paper was turned in). Nota bene: your “précis and response” papers must summarize and respond critically to **a substantial work of literary criticism**, meaning an article in a peer-reviewed academic journal or an essay in a published collection, not a biographical sketch, encyclopedia entry, or the like.

Your paper should begin with a lucid characterization and summary of the argument made by the scholar or scholars whose work you found. This précis must then be followed by a critical response from you that engages with and responds to the author of the secondary source. Remember, you’re working toward constructing an argument of your own, so trashing the scholar for his or her writing style isn’t going to get you very far. Consider instead how you might respond as a scholar of equal caliber by asking and answering critical questions like: How has this scholar’s argument influenced your reading of the text? What has he or she overlooked, in your opinion? Etc. The goal in the response is to *demonstrate* how the scholarly source influences your interpretation of the primary text. Finally, you must provide a bibliographic citation of the article you found in either MLA or Chicago format. Tentative grades and suggestions for revision and/or further inquiry will be provided in response to each paper.

Possible “précis and response” paper topics include but are by no means limited to:

Ellison and History:

In “An Extravagance of Laughter,” Ellison makes reference to “the time warp of history, that man-made ‘fourth dimension’ which always confounds our American grasp of ‘real’ or *actual* time or duration” (621). Ellison’s views of history and historians have long been the subject of scholarly inquiry. For example, in his excellent essay “Chaos, Complexity, and Possibility: The Historical Frequencies of Ralph Waldo Ellison” (which can be found in Kimberly Benston’s edited collection *Speaking for You: The Vision of Ralph Ellison*), John Callahan argues that, in Ellison’s view, “time and chronology offer cover to the historian” who “impos[es] too false an order on American life” (130). What is history to Ralph Ellison? Many critics like Marc Connor and Lucas Morel have pondered this question. You may find them excellent conversation partners as you pursue your own answer to this question.

Ellison and the Visual Arts:

As the title of his masterpiece *Invisible Man* suggests, Ellison was preoccupied with the politics of vision and the ways visual culture shapes human perception. In her essay “The Visual Art of *Invisible Man*: Ellison’s Portrait of Blackness” (*American Literature* 81.4 (2009)), Lena Hill explores how Ellison, through his many references to painting and portraiture in *Invisible Man*, sought a painterly means to “escape a legacy of visual derogation” (791). Ellison’s ekphrastic references to visual media go beyond the painterly, encompassing photography, cinema, and even stereoscopic technologies. For a particularly insightful reading of Ellison’s photographic vision and its development in *Invisible Man*, see Sara Blair’s essay “Photography and the Origins of Invisibility” in *The Cambridge Companion to Ralph Ellison*.

Ellison and the Sonic Arts:

Just as Hill, Blair, and others have examined Ellison's interrogation of visual culture, so too has Alexander Weheliye investigated Ellison's understanding of sound and its role in the development of new forms of American identity. In his essay " 'I Am I Be': The Subject of Sonic Afro-modernity," Weheliye outlines the particular significance of the phonograph for African American artists, who found in sound recording technologies a means to disarticulate black culture from the black body, the sound from the source. You might consider how this sonic history acts as a subtext for key scenes within Ellison's fiction, like when the narrator-protagonist of *Invisible Man* sits in his "hole" and listens to a phonographic recording of Louis Armstrong while musing upon his invisibility, or when reporter Welborn McIntyre relies upon a tape recording of Lee Willie Minifees burning his Cadillac on Senator Sunraider's lawn to "objectively" reconstruct the scene in *Three Days Before the Shooting...*

Ellison and the Politics of Biography:

(Or, why the Ralph Ellison Society loves Lawrence Jackson but does not approve of Arnold Rampersad.) Two exhaustive biographies have been written about Ralph Ellison. Lawrence Jackson's *Ralph Ellison: Emergence of Genius* portrays Ellison as an intellectual and an artist who transformed the traditions from which his artistic vision emerged. By contrast, Arnold Rampersad's *Ralph Ellison: A Biography*, published five years later, paints a portrait of a failed artist, a man who could not live up to his own expectations, who was generally an elitist snob who preferred smoking cigars at the Century Club to working on his ultimately unfinished novel, and who shed a tear of regret (for himself, presumably) as he passed away on April 16, 1994. How can such radically different portraits of the same man be drawn by two biographers examining the same subject and working with the same archive at virtually the same time?

Ellison's Post-*Invisible Man* Career:

Integral to the debate over which of Ellison's two biographers is truer to the man and his literary legacy is a discussion about Ellison's career following the publication of *Invisible Man*. How, ask critics and admirers alike, could Ellison win the National Book Award in 1953 for his first novel and then spend forty years laboring on a second novel without ever publishing it? Two recent book-length studies examine Ellison's post-*Invisible Man* career to draw new conclusions about the author's later work: Adam Bradley's *Ralph Ellison in Progress* (2010), and Timothy Parrish's *Ralph Ellison and the Genius of America* (2012). Of especial interest to you might be Bradley's observations about Ellison's adoption of the personal computer (he owned one of the first PCs, the Osborne 1, before purchasing an IBM PC) and Parrish's consideration that Ellison was writing a text that never *could* be finished.

Ellison and the Political Left:

Ellison began his literary career writing book reviews for his mentor, fellow author, and one-time Communist Party member Richard Wright (who would eventually denounce the Party). He went on to publish in Leftist periodicals like *New Masses*, and associated himself with the authors who published in them. However, while Ellison may have publicly toed the Party line in his dogmatic reviews and agitprop fiction, privately he felt an increasing ambivalence and later outright disdain for Communist ideology and its adherents—a perspective that is perhaps most clearly articulated by Ellison's send-up of the Communist Party in *Invisible Man*. Barbara Foley traces Ellison's early career and fraught relationship with the Left in her recent book, *Wrestling with the Left: The Making of Ralph Ellison's Invisible Man* (2010).

Final Portfolio: Creative Component:

Ralph Waldo Ellison was a profoundly creative individual. He studied music (trumpet) at Tuskegee, briefly studied sculpture as a protégé of Richmond Barthé, distinguished himself as an accomplished photographer (he even had letterhead printed while working on *Invisible Man* that read “Ralph Ellison: Photographer”), and made money on the side by designing, building, and installing high-end “hi-fi” stereo equipment. He was also a great American author—a man that scholar Timothy Parrish describes as “the essential poet, historian, and, arguably, prophet of [a] fundamentally American drama” (41).

Like T. S. Eliot, one of his major literary influences, Ellison was preoccupied with American cultural traditions and the role of individual artists within them. More to the point, he, like Eliot, did much to theorize and exemplify the relationship between the development of artistic technique and the evolution of a tradition. In *Living with Music*, a study of Ellison’s writing about jazz and the blues, Robert O’Meally observes that, for Ellison, mastery of technique is the means by which an artist moves toward freedom (*xviii*). Restated in more Ellisonian terms, technique is what enables an artist to reduce the chaos of living to form. But technique alone is insufficient. One must also have an understanding of and appreciation for *the tradition* within which and against which an artist attempts to define him- or herself. As Ellison writes in “The Golden Age: Time Past,” only through development of technique and respect for tradition can an artist “express his own unique ideas and his own unique voice” and “achieve...his self-determined identity” (245).

Your primary goal in assembling the final portfolio is to create something—a collection of poems, a short story, a photo essay, a music video, etc.—that extends and elaborates upon one or more of Ellison’s major themes. In short, **you need to choose your medium and hone your technique so that you can express yourself as an individual, yet do so in a way that reveals something about Ellison’s contributions to the tradition you are extending.** Think of this like the jam sessions Ellison describes in “Golden Age,” where a jazz musician “learns tradition, group techniques and style” en route to finding “his own unique voice” (245). We’ll be looking a few examples of how other artists have done this with Ellison’s work, from photographs taken by Gordon Parks to the novel *Erasure* written by Percival Everett, from which you may draw inspiration. You obviously won’t have the time to produce a work of such scope as Everett’s novel, but you do need to spend a significant amount of time and effort on this. It is the cornerstone of the portfolio!

Note: you must include a tangible form of your project in your portfolio, be it a DVD or a stack of prints. Your project can be online, but I need a reliable way to access it.

Final Portfolio: Critical Component:

In this document you will explain how your understanding of Ellison’s contributions to the tradition inform your creative project. I’m being intentionally ambiguous in my reference to “the tradition” because Ellison drew from and put his mark on more than one tradition. It will be up to you to identify and describe what this tradition is, how Ellison inflected it, and how you are providing the antiphonal “response” to Ellison’s “call.” Thus, while you will want to tell your reader what inspired you to do the work you did, etc., you will also want to show how your

creative project engages critical ideas that Ellison grapples with in his fiction and criticism. The research you did for the “précis and response” papers will be indispensable here, for it will enable you to quickly and authoritatively refer to the scholarly conversation around Ellison’s work while illustrating how your work addresses the same issues, themes, subjects, etc., only through a creative lens. Don’t feel guilty about quoting your own “précis and response” papers when completing this part of the portfolio. This is the whole reason one conducts research: to build a usable archive.

Portfolio Contents and Grading:

Final grades will be primarily determined by portfolio. The portfolio you hand in at the end of the semester will contain **revised** copies of the three “précis and response” papers, a tangible form of your creative project, and the final draft of the required ten-page critical appraisal and explanation of your creative project.

What matters most, in the end, is the quality of the work contained in the portfolio. In other words, if you received a tentative grade of 75% on one of your “précis and response” papers, but you then clearly revised and improved upon the content and delivery of this essay in your portfolio, then your portfolio grade will reflect the improvement. **Note: you are strongly advised to make revisions to your “précis and response” papers as the semester progresses.** It is much easier to make minor changes along the way than wait until the last minute to make major changes at that time.

Participation:

You are expected and required to keep up with the reading and come to class prepared to discuss the reading due for each class meeting. To make it through all the course material we have to maintain a steady but not unreasonable average of 50 pages of reading per class meeting or 150 pages a week. Be sure to give yourself enough time to wade through the material before coming to class.

Inasmuch as class discussion is concerned, venturesome claims and critical observations about Ellison’s writing are always welcome, but participation in the class discussions may also mean asking questions about the form, content, or significance of what you’ve read on any given day. If you found a passage confusing or a narrative technique obfuscating, undoubtedly others will have shared your experience and will appreciate any questions you ask about them.

Grading System:

Final Portfolio: 80%
 Participation: 20%

All assignments will be graded on a 100-point scale with grade ranges as follows:

+	100-98	+	89-88	+	79-78	+	69-68		
A	97-92	B	87-82	C	77-72	D	67-62	F	59-0
-	91-90	-	81-80	-	71-70	-	61-60		

Evaluation Criteria for Portfolio:

A (90-100): Each of the documents contained in the portfolio demonstrates perceptive and thoughtful responses to the assignments. They are well organized with excellent development of ideas, and they reflect the writer's command of appropriate rhetorical strategies. The prose is vigorous and fresh, and the writer is clearly in control of the standard conventions of academic writing. Creative component is clearly original, professionally executed, and critically informed.

B (80-89): Each of the documents contained in the portfolio fulfills the assignment and shows evidence of clear thought and good planning. Each essay is well organized with good supporting details. The writing is fluent, and there are only minor errors in the mechanics that do not interfere with reading. Creative component is somewhat derivative, yet still professionally executed and critically informed.

C (70-79): Each of the documents contained in the portfolio fulfills the assignment. The writing of each essay is adequately developed, clear, and coherent with relatively few errors in usage and mechanics, but the writer fails to demonstrate any particular strength which would distinguish above-average work. Creative component lacks originality, is adequately executed and/or critically informed.

D (60-69): Each of the documents contained in the portfolio fulfills its respective assignment but exhibits major problems in writing. Each essay may have difficulty with the presentation of ideas (e.g., lack of a clear thesis, weak organization, poor development of ideas, or inappropriate diction, poor spelling) or be marred by enough errors in the mechanics of writing to seriously distract the reader. Creative component is predictable and clichéd, and is neither well executed nor critically informed.

F (59 or below): Each of the documents contained in the portfolio is so poorly presented that it fails to fulfill the assignment. Each essay fails to present basic ideas, either because of poor organization and lack of clarity or because the writing reflects a lack of control over the basic conventions of standard academic usage. Creative component lacks creativity altogether, is incomplete, and/or fails to engage the critical component in any meaningful way.

0: Any one of the documents contained in the portfolio represents dishonest work by the student, principally the use of ideas or writing that are clearly not one's own work. Refer to the West Virginia University Undergraduate Catalog for the University policy on Academic Dishonesty.

Attendance Policy:

Because participation counts for 20% of your grade you have to show up and contribute. After all, you can't participate in the discussion if you aren't here. Also bear in mind that some days (e.g., workshop days) count more than other days since your classmates will depend on you more to help them fulfill their assignments. You can miss up to five non-workshop, non-assignment-due dates without penalty. Choose your five days judiciously. Subsequent absences will drop

your attendance and participation grade one letter grade per day. A failing grade for the course will be recorded for any student with ten or more absences.

If you are more than five minutes late for class, you will be counted absent.

Plagiarism:

Plagiarism is the (mis)representation of someone else's work as your own. It may be direct (e.g., not documenting a quoted source) or indirect (paraphrasing ideas, thoughts, etc. without due credit). In either case, neglecting to acknowledge sources for outside material is a serious offence and may result in failure for the assignment and possibly the course. Please see me if you are not sure about how to use or acknowledge certain materials.

Social Justice Statement:

West Virginia University is committed to social justice. I concur with that commitment and expect to maintain a positive learning environment based upon open communication, mutual respect, and non-discrimination. Our University does not discriminate on the basis of race, sex, age, disability, veterans' status, religion, sexual orientation, color or national origin. Any suggestions as to how to further such a positive and open environment in this class will be appreciated and given serious consideration.

If you are a person with a disability and anticipate needing any type of accommodation in order to participate in this class, please advise me and make appropriate arrangements with the Office of Disability Services (293-6700).

Additional Resources:

The WVU Writing Center is committed to helping students become better writers. For more information about the Writing Center, including its hours, how to make appointments, and additional resources, visit their webpage at <http://english.wvu.edu/centers-projects/writing-center>. You can also follow them on Twitter @wvwritingcenter

The Downtown Library also hosts a term paper clinic throughout the semester. Scheduling details TBA.

Contact Information:

If you have questions about the course or concerns you would like to share privately with me, please contact me via email at Michael.Germana@mail.wvu.edu. **But please do not write to ask me for lecture notes or to request a summary of what you missed on any given day.** If you miss class and need class notes, ask one of your classmates.

You are also invited and encouraged—but not required—to follow me on Twitter at @michael_germana. **When I tweet about or retweet something relevant to this course, I will use the hashtag #ENGL337. You can and should do likewise if you would like to share something with the class.** A promise: if you follow me, I won't follow you back or even look at your account—your privacy is sacred to me. The only tweets of yours I will see will be those that feature the designated hashtag. You may also message me through Twitter at your convenience.

Course Calendar:

January:

- 8 W Introduction/s
- 10 F “The Little Man at Chehaw Station” *The American Scholar*, Winter 1977/78 (eReserves) + assignment overview
- 13 M “A Congress Jim Crow Didn't Attend” *New Masses*, May 14, 1940 (eReserves) + “A Party Down at the Square” (*Flying Home* pp. 3-11)
- 15 W “Mister Toussan” (*Flying Home* pp. 22-32) + “King of the Bingo Game” (*Flying Home* pp. 123-136)
- 17 F **library instruction session—class meets in room 136 of the Downtown Library**
- 22 W Richard Wright, “The Man Who Lived Underground” (eReserves)
- 24 F **précis and response one due**
- 27 M *Invisible Man*, Prologue-Chapter 1
- 29 W *Invisible Man*, Chapters 2-3
- 31 F *Invisible Man*, Chapters 4-7

February:

- 3 M *Invisible Man*, Chapters 8-13
- 5 W *Invisible Man*, Chapters 14-17
- 7 F *Invisible Man*, Chapters 18-21
- 10 M *Invisible Man*, Chapters 22-24
- 12 W *Invisible Man*, Chapters 25-Epilogue
- 14 F **précis and response two due**
- 17 M “Brave Words for a Startling Occasion” Ellison's National Book Award Presentation Address, January 27, 1953 (eReserves) + excerpted letters by Ellison to Morteza Sprague and Albert Murray re: *Brown v. Board of Education* decision (handout)
- 19 W LeRoi Jones (Amiri Baraka), excerpt from *Blues People* (handout) + “Blues People” *The New York Review*, February 6, 1964 (eReserves)
- 21 F *Three Days Before the Shooting...* Prologue + Book I, Chapters 1, 2, & 4
- 24 M *Three Days Before the Shooting...* Book I, Chapters 6, 9, 11
- 26 W *Three Days Before the Shooting...* Book I, Chapter 12
- 28 F *Three Days Before the Shooting...* Book II, pp. 235-264

March:

- 3 M *Three Days Before the Shooting...* Book II, pp. 264-299
 - 5 W *Three Days Before the Shooting...* Book II, pp. 299-337
 - 7 F *Three Days Before the Shooting...* Book II, pp. 337-381
- Spring Recess---

- 17 M *Three Days Before the Shooting...* Book II, pp. 381-393 + “Bliss’s Birth,” pp. 459-481
19 W **précis and response three due**
21 F Percival Everett, *Erasure* Chapters 1-6
24 M Percival Everett, *Erasure* “My Pafology” (Chapters “Won”-“Tin”)
26 W Percival Everett, *Erasure* Chapters 7-12
28 F Percival Everett, *Erasure* Chapters 13-18
31 M **peer workshop #1—bring two copies of your proposal to class**

April:

- 2 W **student conferences—class does not meet**
4 F **student conferences—class does not meet**
7 M **student conferences—class does not meet**
9 W **peer workshop #2—bring one copy of your creative work-in-progress to class**
11 F **peer workshop #3—bring one copy of your critical work-in-progress to class**
14 M **project presentations day #1**
16 W **project presentations day #2**
21 M **project presentations day #3**
23 W **project presentations day #4**
25 F **course evaluations administered**

Final portfolios will be collected at the beginning of our scheduled final exam time-slot (3:00pm on Tuesday, April 29) in G21 Woodburn.