

UNIVERSIDADE DE BRASÍLIA

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AFRICAN AMERICAN LITERATURE  
AN OVERVIEW ON ELLISON'S *INVISIBLE MAN*

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AN OVERVIEW ON ELLISON'S INVISIBLE MAN

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### ABSTRACT

In the beginning of this research one main problem was found: in Brazil there are few studies about African American Literature. The significant pieces of information present in this paper were found on reliable websites or academic articles written by people from Universities abroad. Since the topic is very specific, it is a problem to be understood. The lack of sources, however, just emphasized the necessity of available researches on the field in the country. One of the main goals of this research is to provide Brazilian scholars and English teachers with a source of information and a starting point on the subject. The second one is to motivate the reading, studying and teaching African American Literature in Brazilian schools, even though few teachers seem to be interested in it. Teaching black literature in schools is important for a simple and clear reason: to show the students that not only in Brazil racism is a problem unsolved, but also in other (and First World) countries. For this reason, this research was divided in two parts: the first one is meant to provide information about the history and developing of this literature, as well as the most important authors of each historical period. The second part is an analysis on Ralph Ellison's best seller *Invisible Man*, not only the historical context in which the book was released is included in this section, but also its reception and study. Ellison's book was chosen for its importance in the history of this literature and symbolism.

Keywords: Literature, African American Literature, Ralph Ellison.

## INTRODUCTION

African American Literature is defined by William L. Andrews as a “body of literature written by Americans of African descent”.<sup>1</sup> African American Literature started to be written long before the American civil war, but started to gain visibility and space in schools and Universities only in the 1960s, with the increasing of civil rights movements. In the same period, prominent African American leaders, such as Malcolm-X, Booker T. Washington and Martin Luther King, all of them civil rights activists, raised their voices demanding from society racial equality. It caused the schools and the editors to give room for Black Literature, and until nowadays there are plenty of well-known and celebrated African American Writers. They sought, in the past years, to think, study and reflect about their own culture. Amiri Baraka (1980) says: “I understand that Afro-American culture has absorbed all the elements it came in contact with, but it is still a specific entity itself. It is particular, yet interrelated with the whole of U.S. culture.”

However, in Brazil, most English language courses – notably in public schools – include few literature in their syllabus, and when it is included, hardly ever there are African American writers to be studied. Representative Literature is important to be studied and taught, though, only because Literature is a tool to give voice for the voiceless, and to expose the invisibility of those who should be seen.

Racism both in United States and in Brazil is an up-to-date issue, which can be exposed and fought educating our kids, teens and adults its characteristics and impacts. The discussion about the minorities in Brazil was never so loud, motivated by the increasing of Education and spreading of internet and information access. Teachers and educational professionals are searching ways to adapt and include these discussions in their lesson plans although there are still much work to be done: including African American writers in their English courses curricula, for example. As a result, the goal of this research is to provide Brazilian teachers and scholars with an overview on African American Literature and to motivate its teaching and studying.

1. Web Source: Encyclopedia Britannica: ANDREWS, William L. *African American Literature*. Available in: <https://www.britannica.com/art/African-American-literature#ref793490>; accessed on: 11/30/2017

## **PART I – AFRICAN AMERICAN LITERATURE**

“We black people tried to write ourselves out of slavery, a slavery even more profound than mere physical bondage. Accepting the challenge of the great white Western tradition, black writers wrote as if their lives depended upon it [...]” (GATES, 1985).



## **1. An Overlook on the History;**

Despite the fact that Afro-American People have undeniably played an important role in the United States History and building, for a long time, their literature was left out from the schools and textbooks. According to Barbara Dodds Stanford (1978):

“In 1966, a survey of thirty-seven literature textbooks showed that twenty did not have a single selection either by or about black people [...]. Quite clearly, the books used in American schools were primarily by and about white, Anglo-Saxon, middle class people”.

It does not mean, however, that Afro American Literature was lacking. Some Afro American authors started writing long before the American Civil War. Nevertheless, only after the War “that black writers had the leisure to write for entertainment or the freedom to incorporate styles and ideas from the black oral tradition. (STANFORD, 1978, p. 18).

The schools started to pay attention to Afro American Literature by the late 60's: because of the increasing movements of civil rights, people got interested about this Literature, and schools started to answer their student's interest on black authors.

Thus, the purpose of this short and summarized survey is to show some of the important authors through the History of this Literature, before and after Civil War.

In order to facilitate the study and the analyses of each historical period and its particularities, this survey is divided in two parts: Pre-Civil War Writers and Post-Civil War Writers.

### 1.1. Pre-Civil War Writers;

*“The earliest African American writers sought to demonstrate that the preposition ‘all men are created equal’ in the Declaration of Independence requires that black American be extended the same human rights as those claimed by white Americans”.<sup>2</sup>*

Part of what is Pre-War Literature is lost and unknown. According to Barbara Dodds Stanford (1978, p. 20): “Before the Civil War, most black literature was oral literature: songs, poems, and tales produced by slaves to help them cope with plantation life”.

Introduced to Christianity, the slaves identified themselves with the stories of the Bible, for some of them are about slavery and freedom. Although they adopted a new faith, their worship behaviors were not the same as their white countrymen, the latter ones used to get scared or horrified by the slaves manners: as a result, religious meetings were often forbidden. Then, while working in plantations, slaves used to utter songs known as “negro spirituals”, or simply “spirituals”. According to an article published by the Library of Congress<sup>3</sup>, “A spiritual is a type of religious folksong that is most closely associated with the enslavement of African American people in the American South”.

In 1917, while composing an arrangement for “Go Down Moses”, Harry T. Burleigh wrote:

“Their [songs] worth is weakened unless they are done impressively, for through these songs breathes a hope, a faith, in the ultimate justice and brotherhood of man. The cadences of the sorrow invariably turn the joy, and the message is ever manifest that eventually deliverance from all that hinders and oppresses the soul will come, and man – every man – will be free”.

2. Web Source: Encyclopedia Britannica: *African American Literature: Antebellum Literature*. Available in: <https://www.britannica.com/art/African-American-literature>; accessed on 11/06/2017.

3. Web Source: Library of Congress: *African American Spirituals*. Available in: <https://www.loc.gov/item/ihas.200197495/>; accessed on 11/06/2017.

Some of these spirituals are said to have secret codes giving instructions of escaping routes for slaves: “Songs liKe ‘Go Down Moses’ or ‘Steal Away to Jesus’ might signal that Harriet Tubman or another conductor on the Underground Railroad was near, or might mean that a secret meeting was to be held in a swamp or graveyard” (STANFORD, 1978, p. 20).

Despite the richness of the early Afro American oral tradition, the written literature produced at the time is of small amount.

Perhaps the most known pre-civil Afro American writer is Phillis Wheatley. She was born in Senegal, in 1793, and brought to America when she was about seven years old. She was purchased by the Wheatleys, who taught her at home. After learning to write and read, she was introduced to Greek and Latin; she also studied British poets, such as John Milton and Alexander Pope. She accomplished to publish the “first volume of poetry by an American Negro in modern times”<sup>4</sup> entitled *Poems on Various Subjects, Religious and Moral*, in 1773. Later, when her owners, the Wheatleys, died, and she got married with John Peters, a grocery store owner, she tried to publish a second collection, but she did not accomplish to raise the funds. The Poetry Foundation writes about her writings: “Recent scholarship shows that Wheatley wrote perhaps 145 poems (most of which would have been published if the encouragers she begged for had come forth to support the second volume), but thus artistic heritage is now lost [...]”<sup>3</sup>.

Because Phillis Wheatley was obviously in a privileged position in relation to the slaves of the same period, some critics claim that in her poetry she did not approach slavery. However, some scholars today argue that she was extremely opposed to slavery, and made her claim against it for the church: “[...] until fairly recently Wheatley’s critics did not consider her use of biblical allusion not its symbolic application as a statement against slavery. She often spoke in explicit biblical language designed to move church members to decisive action”<sup>3</sup>.

Phillis Wheatley, who is considered “the black tradition's first poet in English” (GATES, 1985), died on December 5<sup>th</sup>, 1784, alone, on a boarding house.

4. Web Source: Poetry Foundation: *Phillis Wheatley*. Available in: <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poets/phillis-wheatley>; accessed on: 11/26/2017

Also in this period, some authors called people's attention writing *salve narratives*:

“Typically, the American slave narrative centres on the narrator's rite of passage from slavery in the South to freedom in the North. Slavery is documented as a condition of extreme deprivation, necessitating increasingly forceful resistance. After a harrowing and suspenseful escape, the slave's attainment of freedom is signaled not simply by reaching the ‘free states’ of the North but by taking a new name and dedication to antislavery activism.”<sup>5</sup>

Three of the most known slave narratives writers are Harriet Jacobs, Olaudah Equiano and Frederick Douglass.

Harriet Ann Jacobs was born a slave in North Carolina, in 1813. She was taught to read by her mistress. Having lost her mother in early age, she had attached herself to her grandmother, a former slave who had her own house. When her mistress, Margaret Horniblow, died, in 1825, Harriet was given to Margaret's niece, who was only 3 years old. As a result, the baby's father, Dr. James Norcom, became Harriet's de facto master <sup>6</sup>. She then learned the cruel reality of enslaved women who deal with sexual harassment. After spending seven years hidden, she escaped slavery going to the North, by boat, in 1842.

She worked in New York as a nursemaid, and then “moved to Rochester, New York, to work in the antislavery reading room above abolitionist Frederick Douglass's newspaper, the *North Star*”. <sup>7</sup> Also in New York she was influenced to write about her life. Eventually, in 1861, she published *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*, a remarkable slave narrative, because “unlike the thousands of male ex-slave narrators, Jacobs reveals the endemic sexual exploitation and abuse of enslaved girls and women and documents the suffering of enslaved mothers” (BERRY, 2013).

Unfortunately, her book was soon to be forgotten. It was only reprinted in 1973, because of the increasing movement for Civil Rights, in the 60's and the 70's.

5. Web Source: Britannica Academic: *Slave narrative*. Available in: <http://academic-eb-britannica.ez54.periodicos.capes.gov.br/levels/collegiate/article/slave-narrative/68166>; accessed on: 11/27/2017.

6. Web Source: Documenting the American South: *Harriet A. Jacobs (Harriet Ann), 1813-1897*. Available in: <http://docsouth.unc.edu/fpn/jacobs/bio.html> ; accessed on: 11/26/2017.

7. Web Source: Encyclopedia Britannica: *Harriet Jacobs: American Abolitionist and Author*. Available in: <https://www.britannica.com/biography/Harriet-Jacobs>; accessed on: 11/26/2017.

Likewise, the *Interesting Narrative of the Life of Olaudah Equiano, or Gustavus Vassa, the African* (1789), is one of the most known and celebrated slave narrative, and perhaps the earliest one. Olaudah Equiano is said to have born in 1745, in Essaka, where today is Nigeria (in the turn of 21<sup>st</sup> Century some documents suggested that Equiano was born in North America, though). He narrates that he was kidnapped when he was 11 years-old. Later, he was brought to Virginia and sold as a slave to a sea captain, Michel Henry Pascal, who named him *Gustavus Vassa*. Olaudah Equiano sailed with him for 8 years; in the period, he was baptized and taught to read and write.<sup>8</sup> After buying his own freedom, in 1766, he headed to England, where he lived and fought for the Abolitionist cause. It was also in England that he published his book, which was so popular that “in his lifetime it ran through nine English editions, and one U.S. printing and was translated into Dutch, German, and Russian”<sup>9</sup>.

Frederick Douglass is also an important author in this historical period. He was born a slave in Maryland, in February of 1818. He was separated from his mother when he was still a baby and saw her very few times later. Also, he was never sure about the identity of his father. He taught himself to read and write. After meeting with a free black woman called Anna Murray, who helped him to escape, Frederick went to the North, to New York, in 1838. After escaping slavery, he adopted the name *Douglass* and married Anna.

Frederick Douglass was an important personality of his time. He became known for his speeches on various subjects, but also because of his autobiographies: *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass* (1845), *My Bondage and My Freedom* (1855) and *Life and Times of Frederick Douglass* (1881) the latter one being a retrospective of his whole life. His first biography is a detailed narrative of his early years of slavery. After its publishing, he went to Europe, fearing to be enslaved again. However, abolitionists bought his freedom, and he returned to North America, where he started to run his own newspaper, *The Star*.

8. Web Source: BBC: History: Historic Figures: *Olaudah Equiano (c. 1745 – 1797)*. Available in: [http://www.bbc.co.uk/history/historic\\_figures/equiano\\_olaudah.shtml](http://www.bbc.co.uk/history/historic_figures/equiano_olaudah.shtml); accessed on 11/27/2017.

9. Web Source: Encyclopedia Britannica: *Olaudah Equiano: Abolitionist and Writer*. Available in: <https://www.britannica.com/biography/Olaudah-Equiano>; accessed on: 11/27/2017.

He fought his whole life for the rights of black people. After civil war, he kept fighting and lecturing for “racial equality and women’s rights”<sup>10</sup> Chesnutt (2004) says: “Douglass's fame as an orator has long been secure. His position as the champion of an oppressed race, and at the same time an example of its possibilities, was, in his own generation, as picturesque as it was unique”. Douglass’ abolitionist voice is also mentioned as being important in the whole process of civil war and abolition:

“Torn between the economic benefits of slavery and the moral and constitutional issues it raised, white Southerners grew more and more defensive of the institution. They argued that black people, like children, were incapable of caring for themselves and that slavery was a benevolent institution that kept them fed, clothed, and occupied. Most Northerners did not doubt that black people were inferior to whites, but they did doubt the benevolence of slavery. The voices of Northern abolitionists, such as Boston editor and publisher William Lloyd Garrison, became increasingly violent. Educated blacks such as escaped-slave Frederick Douglass wrote eloquent and heartfelt attacks on the institution.”<sup>11</sup>

The American Civil War (1861-1865) would bring a new perspective for black lives and new goals for black writers.

10. Web Source: National Historic Site (U.S. National Park Service): *Frederick Douglass*. Available in: <https://www.nps.gov/frdo/learn/historyculture/frederickdouglass.htm> ; accessed on: 11/28/2017

11. Web Source: Civil War Trust: *Overview: Slavery in the United States*. Available in: <https://www.civilwar.org/learn/articles/slavery-united-states>; accessed on: 11/28/2017

## 1.2. Post-Civil War Writers;

*“The Civil War removed the most oppressive restrictions upon black thought. Learning to read was no longer considered inappropriate for former slaves, and a black possessed of almost superhuman drive could get an education. But the black writer still faced many obstacles including the prejudice of publishers, restrictions upon subject matter, and the problem of making a living”* (AMIN & STANFORD, 1978).

After Civil War, African American people found themselves freed from slavery. However, they soon discovered that there were plenty of rights they still had to fight for. The Jim Crow Laws are just an example of some problems that black population had to face in the end of the Reconstruction (1865-1877). These laws are defined as: “any of the laws that enforced racial segregation in the South between the end of Reconstruction in 1877 and the beginning of the civil rights movement in the 1950s.”<sup>12</sup>. The laws were supposed to guarantee “separate but equal treatment”, but in practice, it just kept black people away from white people: “Jim Crow Laws condemned black citizens to inferior treatment and facilities. Education was segregated as were public facilities such as hotels and restaurants under Jim Crow Laws.”<sup>13</sup>.

In December, 1955, a black woman called Rosa Parks became a national symbol of fighting for civil rights for simply refusing herself to surrender her bus seat to a white male passenger in an Alabama bus. It was the beginning of the civil rights movements. “Her quiet courageous act changed America, its view of black people and redirected the course of history.”<sup>14</sup>

Likewise, some of the Afro American writers of this period were intensely active in the movements for civil rights and racial equality, such as W.E.B. Du Bois.

12. Web Source: UROFSKY, Melvin I; Encyclopedia Britannica. *Jim Crow Law*. Available in: <https://www.britannica.com/event/Jim-Crow-law>; accessed on: 11/28/2017

13. Web Source: United States History: *Jim Crow Laws*. Available in: <http://www.u-s-history.com/pages/h1559.html>; accessed on: 11/28/2017

14. Web Source: Rosa and Raymond Parks. *Rosa Louise Parks Biography*. Available in: <http://www.rosaparks.org/biography/>; accessed on 11/28/2017

William Edward Burghardt Du Bois was born in Massachusetts, on February 23<sup>rd</sup>, 1868, to live for almost a century. He “was an American civil rights activist, leader, Pan-Africanist, sociologist, educator, historian, writer, editor, poet, and scholar.”<sup>15</sup> After graduating in high school in 1884, he went to Fisk University, a black institution at Nashville, and got his bachelor in Arts. In 1895, he became the first black person to earn a Ph.D. at Harvard University.<sup>16</sup> In 1896 he published his doctoral dissertation, *The Suppression of the African Slave-Trade to the United States of America, 1638-1870*. Because of his academic accomplishments, he soon became an important person in his time. He is also considered a philosopher:

“[...] Du Bois (1868–1963) believed that his life acquired its only deep significance through its participation in what he called ‘the Negro problem,’ or, later, ‘the race problem.’ Whether that is true or not, it is difficult to think of anyone, at any time, who examined the race problem in its many aspects more profoundly, extensively, and subtly than W.E.B. Du Bois. Du Bois was an activist and a journalist, a historian and a sociologist, a novelist, a critic, and a philosopher—but it is the race problem that unifies his work in these many domains.”<sup>17</sup>

Du Bois was one of the founders of the NAACP – National Association for the Advancement of Colored People – in 1909, and became editor of its magazine, *The Crisis*. During his life time he wrote a vast number of works, the most famous one being *The Souls of Black Folk: Essays and Sketches* (1903). He also wrote “one outstanding poem that is included in most collections of black poetry” (AMIN & STANFORD, 1978, p. 25): *A Litany of Atlanta*. He also wrote *The Autobiography of W.E.B. Du Bois: A Soliloquy on Viewing My Life from the Last Decade of Its First Century* (1968), where he clearly shows himself favorable to communism – years later he joined the communist party. Du Bois died one day before Martin Luther King’s speech “I Have a Dream”, on August 27, 1963.

15. Web Source: NAACP. *NAACP HISTORY: W.E.B. DUBOIS*. Available in: <http://www.naACP.org/oldest-and-boldest/naACP-history-w-e-b-dubois/>; accessed on: 11/28/2017

16. Web Source: Harvard University Press. *The W.E.B. Du Bois Lectures*. Available in: <http://www.hup.harvard.edu/collection.php?cpk=1011>; accessed on: 11/28/2017

17. Web Source: Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy. *W.E.B. Du Bois*. Available in: <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/dubois/>; accessed on: 11/28/2017



Another important writer in this period is James Weldon Johnson, writer, lawyer and civil rights leader. He was born in Jacksonville, Florida, on June, 17, 1871. His mother, a school teacher, encouraged him to study, and since childhood he showed interest in Arts. He was educated at the Universities of Atlanta and Columbia. He wrote, in 1900, the song which is considered “The Negro National Anthem”, *Lift Every Voice and Sing*. Johnson is also very famous for having written a short collection of poems entitled *God’s Trombones: Seven Negro Sermons in Verse* (1927), where is published his most famous poem, *The Creation*. In addition, he wrote a fictional work, a novel entitled *The Autobiography of an Ex-Coloured Man* (1912) which some years later caused him to publish his real biography to avoid misunderstandings, *Along This Way* (1933).<sup>18</sup>

After the Civil War and the Reconstruction, an important artistic movement for African American writers took place in Harlem in the 1920s. It is called the Harlem Renaissance.

The Harlem Renaissance is historical moment in the Black Arts which revealed great African American talents, not only in literature, but also in theater, music and visual arts. It is described as:

“a cultural phenomenon in which the high level of black artistic and cultural production demanded and received mainstream recognition, where racial solidarity was equated with social progress, and where the idea of blackness became a commodity in its own right. As a result, the New Negro Renaissance is the most widely discussed period of African-American literary history not only because of ongoing scholarly debates over its origins, beginning, and end, but also because of its fundamental importance to twentieth-century thought and culture. The Renaissance coincided with the Jazz Age, the Roaring Twenties, and the Lost Generation, and its impact was keenly felt on an individual and collective level within the African-American community as well as on America's robust cultural industries, music, film, theater—all of which fully benefited from the creativity and newly discovered contributions of African Americans.”<sup>19</sup>

The authors Karina Amin and Barbara Dodds (1978, p. 30) write about the period:

18. Web Source: Poetry Foundation: *James Weldon Johnson*. Available in: <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poets/james-weldon-johnson>; accessed on: 11/29/2017

19. Web Source: GRAHAM, Maryemma. *Africana Age: The New Negro Renaissance*. Available in: <http://exhibitions.nypl.org/africanaage/essay-renaissance.html>; accessed on: 11/29/2017

“By the 1920s the black writers were able to assume a more mature attitude toward white culture. They had attained enough freedom to be themselves, however, they had also experienced enough discrimination to know that assimilation was not possible, so they turned in the other direction, toward self-assertion. Earlier black writings had attacked the cruelties of white society; the writers of the Renaissance revolted against culture itself.”

Some of the well-celebrated Renaissance writers are Countee Cullen, Arna Bontemps and Langston Hughes.

Countee Cullen, “American Poet, one of the finest of the Harlem Renaissance”<sup>20</sup>, was born in Kentucky (?), on May, 30, 1903, and grew up in New York. His talent was shown and celebrated both by black and white people in his poetry books: *Color* (1925), *The Ballad of the Brown Girl* (1928), *The Medea and Some Poems* (1935). He is also the author of the novel entitled *Only Way To Heaven* (1932).

Likewise, Arna Bontemps is also considered an important poet of the period. He was born in Louisiana, in October 1902, and worked as a teacher in Harlem, in 1924. As a result, he became involved with the Harlem Renaissance and the famous artists of the time, such as James Weldon Johnson and Du Bois. His poems were first published in the magazines *The Crises* and *Opportunity*, both of them targeted for black people; the poems were to be awarded in 1926 and 1927, when he won “three prizes for his poetry”<sup>21</sup>. He wrote not only poetry, but also biographies, short-stories, children’s books and novels. One of his finest work is the novel *Black Thunder* (1936), a book about a slave revolt.

However, the most representative author of the movement is Langston Hughes. Hughes was born in February, 1902, in Missouri. He studied at Columbia University and after moved to Harlem. “Langston Hughes is difficult to classify as a writer. He was among the leaders of the Harlem Renaissance, but he continued to write later than most writers of this period. He wrote poetry, short-stories, novels, essays and edited many collections of black literature”. (AMIN & STANFORD, 1978, p. 35). His first poetry book was published in 1926, *The Weary Blue*, and some years later, when he graduated at Lincoln University of

20. Web Source: Encyclopedia Britannica: *Countee Cullen: American Poet*. Available in: <https://www.britannica.com/biography/Countee-Cullen>; accessed on: 11/29/2017

21. Web Source: Poets.org. *Arna Bontemps*. Available in: <https://www.poets.org/poetsorg/poet/arna-bontemps>; accessed on: 11/29/2017

Pennsylvania, he published his first novel, *Not Without Laughter* (1930)., with which he “won the Harmon gold medal for literature”<sup>22</sup>

In the 1930s, The Great Depression put an end in the Harlem Renaissance and changed dramatically the topics and styles of African American writers. The two or three decades which followed the 1920s where not so productive as the Renaissance. The most celebrated author of this period is Richard Wright.

Wright was born in Mississippi, in 1908. He was a short-story writer and novelist, became famous after publishing *Uncle Tom's Children*, in 1938. “Even as a boy, Wright had seen and experienced the painful pangs of hatred, racism and oppression in his house and in the society” (ANNADURAI, 2017). In his writings, he protested over the way black people were treated. According to Alan Wald (apud ANNADURAI 2017):

“much of his literature concerns racial theme, especially those involving the plight of African Americans during the late 19<sup>th</sup> to mid-20th centuries. Literary critics believe his work helped change race relations in the United States in the mid-20th century”.

He published *Native Son*, in 1940, a novel whose protagonist unintentionally kills a white girl. It is “a harsh, realistic, brutal, angry novel [...] Th novel won almost universal acclaim from reviewers. Charles Poore in The New York Times said that it was ‘enormously stirring,’ and Peter Monro Jack, writing in The Sunday Times Book Review, called it the ‘Negro American tragedy’.”<sup>23</sup>

Amin and Stanford (1978) says about Richard Wright's novels: “[they] are tough and relentless. He said about *Native Son* that he wanted to create a novel which ‘would be so hard and deep that they [the white readers] would have to face it without the consolation of tears’.”

22. See number 20.

23. Web Source: The New York Times on the Web: Learning Network. On this Day. *Richard Wright, Writer, 52, dies*. Available in: <http://www.nytimes.com/learning/general/onthisday/bday/0904.html>; accessed on: 11/29/2017.

*Black Boy* (1945), Wright's autobiography, "explored the background to *Native Son*, but was also a visceral and unforgettable account of a young black man's coming of age in the American south in the bitter decades before the civil rights movement."<sup>24</sup>

In the beginning of the 1950s, Ralph Ellison published his novel, *Invisible Man* (1952), and immediately became acclaimed by the critics. Ellison, born in 1914, in Oklahoma, was raised by his mother, for his father died when he was only three years old. Since childhood he showed himself interested in music, and later went to Tuskegee Institute to study music. Unfortunately, he never finished his studies in the Institute because of financial reasons. In his novel, Ellison's unnamed narrator also quit college, willing to come back, but never accomplishing it. When *Invisible Man* was published, in 1952, it was "on the best-seller list for 16 weeks, in 1953 the novel won the National Book Award. And more than 40 years later, Nobel Prize winner Saul Bellow declared, 'This book holds its own among the best novels of the century'"<sup>25</sup>.

Ellison shared the literary fame in his time with his contemporary, James Baldwin.

James Baldwin, born in 1924, in New York City, was encouraged by Countee Cullen – an African American writer, who was his teacher at that time – to become an editor of his school's literary magazine. He met with Richard Wright in 1944, who read his works and recommended him to his editors.<sup>26</sup>

Baldwin moved to Paris in 1948, where he wrote his famous novel *Go Tell It on a Mountain* (1953), and lived until his death, in December 1987.

24. Web Source: The Guardian. *100 best nonfiction books: No. 36 – Black Boy: A Record of Childhood and Youth by Richard Wright (1945)*. Available in: <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2016/oct/03/black-boy-richard-wright-100-best-nonfiction-books-civil-rights-us>; accessed on: 11/29/2017.

25. Web Source: Library of Congress: *Ralph Ellison*. Available in: <http://www.read.gov/fiction/ellison.html>; accessed on: 11/29/2017.

26. Web Source: Library of Congress Blog; MALONEY, Wendi. *This Day in History: James Baldwin*. Available in: <https://blogs.loc.gov/loc/2017/08/this-day-in-history-james-baldwin/>; accessed on: 11/29/2017.

“Although he lived outside the U.S. for much of his life, Baldwin’s writing remained focused intently on the American experience. He became a leader of the U.S. civil rights movement and on May 17, 1963, Time magazine featured Baldwin on its cover, stating, ‘There is not another writer who expresses with such poignancy and abrasiveness the dark realities of the racial ferment in North and South.’”<sup>27</sup>

In the late 1960s, Maya Angelou, an African American woman became a famous writer and acclaimed poet, after publishing her autobiography *I know Why The Caged Bird Sings* (1969). Her name was Maya Angelou.

She was born Marguerite Johnson, in St. Louis, Missouri, in 1928. She narrates all her experiences as a child being raised by her grandmother, a former slave, in the South, until her adolescence, when she gives birth to a boy.

“[...] I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings received international acclaim made the bestseller list. The book was also banned in many schools during that time as Maya Angelou’s honesty about having been sexually abused opened a subject matter that had long been taboo in the culture. Later, I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings would become a course adoption at college campuses around the world. With more than 30 bestselling titles, Maya Angelou has written 36 books.”<sup>28</sup>

Angelou wrote a series of autobiographies, after the first and most famous one: *Gather Together in My Name* (1974), *Singin’ and Swingin’ an Gettin’ Merry Little Christmas* (1976), *The Heart of a Woman* (1981), *All God’s Children Need Traveling Shoes* (1986), *A Song Flung Up To Heaven* (2002). She says:

“I like everybody to think of a statement by Terence. The statement is ‘I am a human being. Nothing human can be alien to me.’ If you can internalize at least portion of that, you will never be able to say of an act, a criminal act, ‘I couldn’t do that’. No matter how heinous crime, if a human being did it, you have to say ‘I have in me all the components that are in her or in him. I intend to use my energies constructively, as opposed to destructively.’ If you can do that about the negative, just think what you can do about the positive. If a human being dreamed a great dream, dares to love somebody. If a human being dares to be Martin King, or Mahatma Gandhi, or Mother Teresa, or Malcolm X. If a human being dares to be bigger than the condition into which she or he was born, it means so can you.”<sup>29</sup>

27. See number 25.

28. Web Source: Maya Angelou: *Biography*. Available in: <https://www.mayaangelou.com/biography/>; accessed on: 11/29/2017.

Another African American woman who became famous as a writer about this period is Toni Morrison, who is also a contemporary writer and Nobel Prize winner for Literature.<sup>30</sup> She was born in 1931, in Ohio, and won a Pulitzer Prize for fiction, with her novel *Beloved* (1987). She also wrote *The Bluest Eye* (1970), which was the first of many novels. In addition, like Maya Angelou, Morrison also wrote many books for children. She is a novelist, editor, professor and essayist.

In the 1980s, the book the author Alice Walker published her most famous novel, *The Color Purple* (1982), with which she won a Pulitzer Prize. Despite the fact that *The Color Purple* is her most popular novel – the story was even adapted into a film, by Steve Spielberg –, she wrote many other novels, before and after it, the first one being *The Third Life of Grange Copeland* (1970). He also wrote some poetry books, essays and short-stories. Like Morrison, she is a contemporary writer.

29. Web Source: YouTube: *Dr. Maya Angelou – I am Human*. Available in: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ePodNjrVSsk>; accessed on: 11/29/2017.

30. Web Source: Encyclopedia Britannica. *Toni Morrison, American Author*. Available in: <https://www.britannica.com/biography/Toni-Morrison>; accessed on: 11/29/2017.

**PART II – AN OVERVIEW ON ELLISON’S *INVISIBLE MAN***

“‘To Whom It May Concern’ I intoned. ‘Keep This Nigger-Boy Running.’”

*Invisible Man*, Ralph Ellison.



### 1. Historical Context and Criticism;

Ralph Ellison's first and only novel – he died before finishing the second one, which were published anyways under the title *Juneteenth* (1999) –, *Invisible Man*, published in 1952, hit the society in the beginning of the civil rights movements. It came out only three years before Rosa Parks became part of the U.S. History forever, and 11 years before King's "I have a Dream".

Black people were under Jim Crow Laws, which stated where black people could or could not enter. Some places in United States were so divided into black's and white's that little symbols of resistance, such as Rosa Parks or Ruby Bridges, became remarkable. A picture of Bridges as little girl being escorted in her first day of school is at least symbolic. She was the first black child to enroll in the all-white William Frantz Elementary School, and in her first day at the school she "spent the entire day in the principal's office as irate parents marched into the school to remove their children"<sup>31</sup>. For almost a year she attended the school to watch classes alone.

Soon the black community would be divided – in the 1960s two prominent black leaders defended different ideas on how to solve the racism problem in the U.S.A. In one side, Martin Luther King would preach a non-violent solution for black community, while Malcolm X, in the other side, would criticize his view, defending the Black Nationalism and urging "his followers to defend themselves 'by any means necessary'".<sup>32</sup>

The scenario of United States to receive Ellison's book were set. His unnamed narrator unwillingly drawn into unexpected situations while searching for his identity earned the sympathy of both the public and the critics.

31. Web Source: Encyclopedia Britannica: *Ruby Bridges, American Civil Rights Activist*. Available in: <https://www.britannica.com/biography/Ruby-Bridges>; accessed on: 11/30/2017.

32. Web Source: Encyclopedia Britannica: *Malcolm X, American Muslim Leader*. Available in: <https://www.britannica.com/biography/Malcolm-X>; accessed on: 11/30/2017.

Orville Prescott wrote to The New York Times: “Ralph Ellison’s first novel, ‘The Invisible Man’, is the most impressive work of fiction by an American Negro which I have ever read.”<sup>33</sup>. In 1953, Ellison’s *Invisible Man* won the National Book Award.

33. Web Source: The New York Times on The Web. Books. *PRESCOTT, Orville: Books of the Times*. Available in: <http://www.nytimes.com/books/99/06/20/specials/ellison-invisible2.html>; accessed on: 11/30/2017

## 2. The Anti-Heroism in Ellison's Unnamed Narrator;

*Invisible Man*'s narrator starts his speech saying he is invisible. "I am invisible, understand, simply because people refuse to see me" he says. He tells the reader that he lives in a hole, under lots of bulb lights powered by stolen energy. His narrative soon progresses to explain how he has got to that point: and he starts to explain how he accomplished to get a scholarship to go to the college, how his dream of studying suddenly ends when he goes North seeking for a job. Soon, after finding out he had been fooled by Dr. Bledsoe, and living for some time under the charity of an old black woman, he is found by the Brotherhood, but later he discovers that not even there his life is valuable.

Although many events in the narration are violent and sad, perhaps the most appealing detail in Ellison's novel is the fact that his narrator is nameless. A young black man, who does not reveal his name. The name is intimately related with who we are. A nameless protagonist who spends the whole narrative in search for himself, not for his name, represents his seeking for finding his place in a society which does not give room for him. Even when the protagonist seek shelter among his people – when he goes to a black institution, or when he enters in the Brotherhood – he soon finds out that he has no voice among them.

Indeed, he is manipulated throughout the narrative, either by the other characters – black or white – or by the events. His narrative seem to be a relentlessly inescapable. He is drawn by happenings which he has no control upon although in the beginning he faces everything with an almost blind innocence and optimism. It is never so visible as when he is sent to North, by Dr. Bledsoe, telling himself – and truly believing in the self-lie – that he would spend just some months there, and soon would come back to finish his studies at the institute.

Ellison's protagonist spends the story being thrown into different – sometimes bizarre – situations. He is not properly active. He does not seem to be the protagonist of his life, the person who writes his own story and fate, which is exactly what is expected of a hero. He is not given the opportunity to choose his paths, which represents what was the feeling of being a black person in the end of the Reconstruction. He can be compared as a man who tries to get

out of a quicksand and, the harder he tries to move out, the deeper and faster he is swallowed: Ellison's protagonist seems to take a decision and move towards a goal, he is unwillingly thrown in other directions. The fact that he embraces his invisibility is also very symbolic, as it is analyzed by Shelly Jarenski (2010):

“Although Ellison’s narrator initially has invisibility imposed upon him, as he tells his story, he comes to embrace that invisibility and claim it is a site of power. Because Ellison receives the marginalized position of invisibility as powerful, he raises questions about which cultural forces make invisibility a viable, even desirable, choice.”

Additionally, Nidhiya and Mythreyi (2017) states about it:

“It is clear that the protagonist tries to find a refuge in the mask that makes him invisible in this community. After the narrator’s psychological growth, he realizes to what extent the social roles hinder him from discovering his individual identity.”

In the end of his narrative he expresses his wish to get out of the role: “I’m shaking off the old skin and I’ll leave it here in the hole. I’m coming out, no less invisible without it, but coming out nevertheless.” (*Invisible Man*, 450). However, the reader never come to know if the narrator fulfill his intentions:

“Of *Invisible Man* Ellison said with a tone of indisputability in 1972, ‘After all, that novel is a man’s memoir. He gets out of there The fact that you can read the narrator’s memoirs means that he has come out of that hole’ [...]. All the same, critics debating the point effectively rejoin that there is nothing obvious about such an emergence. [...] And Rice stubbornly writes, ‘Ellison speaks in these quotation of an event that never occurs in the novel. In actuality, the narrator never leaves the underground... In the text of the novel he never separates himself from the underground.’” (RICE, 2003, 12 apud ALISON, 2017).

Ellison’s masterpiece is centered in a non-hero nameless black young boy, which speaks a lot about the society he grew in. After being thrown in so many different and surprising situations, the protagonist leaves the reader, by the end of the novel, the unsolved puzzle of whether he went out of the hole to face society with his newest discovered self.

## CONCLUSION

In December 2016, the same year when Donald Trump was elected the president of the United States of America, Clint Smith wrote to *The New Yorker*: “I revisit the final pages of ‘Invisible Man’ and think of how many things that once existed above ground in our country might now become trapped beneath the surface.”<sup>34</sup> The statement is in the end of Smith’s report of his experiences as an English teacher in a school of black and brown immigrant students. He says that, for illegal immigrant students, the unnamed narrator’s invisibility in Ellison’s book is seen as a necessity for protection, rather than exclusion by society. It is symbolic because, after an aggressive campaign against immigrants in the United States, Trump won the elections for presidency, causing – in the first days of his government – the American society to break in two opposite sides: his supporters and the fearful immigrant, their families, and their supporters.

Ellison’s novel, written in 1952, still speaks to our society, not only protesting against racism, but the exclusion and voluntary blindness against the minorities, such as the immigrants in North America. His book was released in the same decade when the African Americans started his intense fight for civil rights, recognition and equality. One of the results of the increasing civil rights movement, was to make African American Literature visible and popular: a decade after *Invisible Man*, black literature started to be intensely studied in the American schools, causing the press to publish new African American writers and republish the old ones.

Their fight for visibility strengthened their literature, arts, and culture.

As a result, it is understood that African American Literature holds richness in every period here studied and analyzed,. Its vast number of books go back in time even before the American Civil war, survive and develop until nowadays. It is worthy to be studied, for it document the struggle of black people for recognition, dignity and respect. Their books

34. Web Source: *The New Yorker*: SMITH, Clint. *Ralph Ellison’s “Invisible Man” as a Parable of Our Time*. Available in: <https://www.newyorker.com/books/page-turner/ralph-ellisons-invisible-man-as-a-parable-of-our-time>; accessed on: 11/30/2017.

provide the reader with a new perspective of the United States History, preventing him or her from “the danger of a single story”.<sup>35</sup>

35. Web Source: YouTube. *The danger of a single story* / Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie. Available in: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=D9Ihs241zeg>; accessed on: 11/30/2017

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