Flying Home and Other Stories Short Guide

Flying Home and Other Stories by Ralph Ellison

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Contents

Characters

The most complex character in this collection undoubtedly is Todd ("Flying Home"). He resembles the mythic Icarus in his obsessive love of flying, and like Icarus, he twice falls to earth—when he climbs to the housetop to catch a lowflying plane, and again when a buzzard flies into the front of his airplane. In the first instance, his mother worries about his "crazy" ambition to fly; the second time he sees the crash as further proof of his failure to be good enough to fly in combat. In fact, he almost accepts the evaluation of white society, as expressed by Dabney Graves. At the same time, Flying Home and Other Stories Todd's ambition and his training have separated him from men like Jefferson; yet he believes Jefferson secretly ridicules him for trying to break out of his role as a black man, especially when Jefferson tells his folktale about flying around heaven with one wing. Todd has to experience Graves's insults and physical abuse before he can recognize that Jefferson is attempting to protect him. Once the young airman embraces his racial identity, he can see the buzzard as a golden bird and himself as a successful aviator.

Slightly less complex is Mr. Parker ("In a Strange Country"), the black seaman ashore in Wales. Hearing American accents, he was eager to meet some of his countrymen, but the group of American soldiers beat him severely. Rescued by a Welshman, he is not only admitted to a local singing club but treated as an honored guest. He learns that for these men, music erases all social and economic distinctions, uniting them in a common Welsh identity, and he recalls instances when jazz has similarly linked American musicians. Because his hosts regard him as completely American, they sing "The Star-Spangled Banner" in his honor, and to his surprise, he joins in, seeing the possibility of a common American identity.

Among Ellison's characters, the most appealing are children, generally portrayed as they move from innocence toward awareness of the dangers associated with their world. The most innocent is John's four-year-old son ("The Black Ball"), who still does not realize what it means to be black. John acknowledges that he must teach his son "the rules," but he resolves to delay those lessons as long as possible. On the other hand, James Weaver ("Boy on a Train") has begun to perceive that white people and black people are treated differently, though he still does not quite understand why the distinctions exist. Buster and Riley, two young boys who appear in three of these stories, are still young enough to disregard the cautions of their elders but old enough that their exuberance and imagination are a source of worry to those elders. Like the young male protagonists of contemporary popular fiction, their exploits are amusing, but for them the consequences could be serious, if not deadly.

Ellison's adult characters differ in gender, education, and economic status, but all are struggling with disillusionment. For example, Mrs. Weaver ("Boy on a Train") has a job that will support her family, but now that her husband is dead, she feels little of the hope with which they came west fourteen years earlier. Likewise, by hard work and a self-effacing attitude, John ("The Black Ball") has managed to keep his janitorial job, even when other black workers are being replaced by less educated whites, but he too

recognizes the need to "make things better" for his son. The two waiters ("A Hard Time Keeping Up") are aware of the racial code, even in Chicago, but they can laugh when they learn that Charlie and Big Ike have created an elaborate joke on the authorities, enacting a parody of the behavior expected by the police—and the waiters, for that matter. The hobo narrators of "Hymie's Bull" and "I Did Not Learn Their Names" have few illusions about the treatment they will receive from the railroad detectives, or even from their fellow hobos once the train is in the South; yet there is a sense of community among the hobos in the first of these stories, and the narrator in the latter is actually befriended by white hobos.

Even the most desperate of Ellison's characters, the "King of the Bingo Game," retains one illusion. He knows he is totally isolated from the other theater patrons; he understands his financial situation is hopeless; but he comes to believe he can freeze time by continuing to press the button that keeps the wheel spinning. When the wheel finally stops on the winning number, he is not cynical enough to anticipate the blow to his skull.

Social Concerns

A dominant theme in Flying Home and Other Stories is racial prejudice and its effects. Regardless of their economic status, the adult characters are always aware of the separation between black and white Americans, and the case of the so-called "Scottsboro boys" becomes a backdrop for the action in several stories.

For example, the unnamed narrators of "Hymie's Bull" and "I Did Not Learn Their Names" point out that even the boxcars become segregated once the train crosses the Mason-Dixon line, and everywhere the railroad detectives punish black hobos more severely than white, regardless of who actually causes trouble. In Northern cities like Chicago, the racial tension is only slightly less overt: The narrator in "A Hard Time Keeping Up" knows that he and his friend must make their way to the "Negro section" of town as quickly as possible, and the hungry "King of the Bingo Game" reflects that were he in the South he could ask someone to give him something to eat or drink.

Racially motivated violence is a significant theme in several stories. The "King of the Bingo Game" is struck down just as he finally wins the prize. Mr. Parker, a seaman ashore "In a Strange Country," has been beaten by a gang of white American soldiers. Todd, the downed pilot in "Flying Home," is first confined to a straightjacket and then kicked by white landowner Dabney Graves. The most graphic portrayal of racial violence, though, occurs in the opening story, the ironically titled "A Party down at the Square." Here the narrator, an unnamed young white man, describes his first—and last—lynching. This young man does not know why his relatives and neighbors are literally burning a local black man at the stake, but he is sickened by the spectacle and he feels a grudgingly admiration for the victim.

Several stories deal with the older characters' attempts to prepare young boys for the prejudice they will encounter. In "The Black Ball," John is still trying to protect his four-year-old son from the blighting effects of racism, but the bullying actions of a slightly older white boy and the threats of the white building manager prove that the child's innocence must soon be shattered. For young James Weaver ("Boy on a Train"), that innocence has already been lost, but he is still too young to understand the full meaning of his mother's insistence that he always remember this day. He realizes only that "something" is making his mother cry and he wishes that he could "kill it." Riley and Buster, the two young protagonists of several stories ("Mister Toussan," "Afternoon," "That I Had the Wings," and "A Couple of Scalped Indians") have already been taught some of the "rules" for survival in a white-dominated world, but still their elders must remind them repeatedly of the dangers in overstepping the bounds society has apparently set for them. Even though he grew up in the North, Todd ("Flying Home") received a similar education; his mother tried to discourage his dream of being an aviator, and when he became one of the Tuskeegee airmen, he soon discovered that he had little chance of being allowed to fly in combat.

Related to the issue of racism is the issue of poverty. Ellison's characters work at menial jobs, if they have any job at all. For example, Buster's mother does washing for white

people, and the narrator of "A Hard Time Keeping Up" is a railroad dining car waiter. There are no jobs for the unnamed narrators of "Hymie's Bull" and "I Did Not Learn their Names"; like many Americans at the height of the Great Depression, these characters travel the country in railroad boxcars, looking for work. The "King of the Bingo Game" cannot find a job because he has no birth certificate; as a Flying Home and Other Stories result, he is almost starving and his wife may die because they cannot afford medical attention for her. John ("The Black Ball") can find work only as a janitor, and he fears losing his job to a less educated white man. Poverty is not limited to the African-American characters, however; the elderly white couple in "I Did Not Learn Their Names" claim to have lost everything in the Depression. Likewise, the cropper in "A Party down at the Square" remarks that killing two black men has in no way improved the status of the poor whites.

A number of these stories reveal the philosophical influence of Ellison's friend Richard Wright. Most of the adult black characters are to some degree alienated from American society. The narrator of "I Did Not Learn Their Names" remarks that he "was trying not to hate." John ("The Black Ball") does not trust the white union organizer, though the end of the story suggests that he realizes some kind of united action provides the only hope his son can have a better life than his. Even characters like Todd ("Flying Home") and Mr. Porter ("In a Strange Country") remain social outsiders, though both are serving in the nation's armed forces during World War II. Todd breaks out of his isolation only when he rejects the dominant white society and literally places his life in the hands of Jefferson and Teddy, an elderly black man and his young grandson. In contrast, though, Mr. Porter feels like an American for the first time when he adopts his Welsh hosts' belief in the unifying force of music and so—at first without conscious thought— joins enthusiastically in singing "The StarSpangled Banner."

Techniques

From his reading of Ernest Hemingway, Ellison learned the importance of detailed physical descriptions. For example, the much of the drama in "A Party down at the Square" is derived from the young narrator's detailed perception of the woman electrocuted by the downed power line and the black man burned alive by the lynch mob. Likewise, James Weaver's trip to McAlester consists of a series of impressions—the river, the bridge, the oil fields, and even the cow he sees out the plane window. Also Mr. Porter's multiple sensory impressions of the Welsh club help him to understand both that "strange country" and, indirectly, America, where he has often considered himself a stranger. Without the vivid description of the turning bingo wheel, the reader would experience less directly the desperation with which "the King" holds on to the control button, Flying Home and Other Stories and the distortion in Todd's relationship to various elements of American culture is most intensely seen when he focuses upon his airplane, the buzzard, and Jefferson.

Many of Ellison's physical details are, in fact, used symbolically. For instance, the airplanes in "A Party" and "Flying Home" serve to mark the separation between black and white society; thus, the lynching in "A Party" precipitates a fatal plane crash, and a similar crash in "Flying Home" ultimately shows Todd that ambition and advancement need not isolate him permanently from his cultural past (Jefferson) or future (Teddy). Likewise, birds frequently become symbols: The two baby chicks ("That I Had the Wings") are obviously associated with Riley and Buster, whose extended families try to protect them from the deadly effects of trying their wings too soon; and certainly the buzzard, or jimcrow, reflects the obstacles the Tuskeegee airmen must overcome to be accepted as combat pilots. The bingo wheel is equally vivid as a symbol of "the King's" life, which also moves in an endless circle, more or less beyond his control. In the same way, the multicolored ball ("The Black Ball") becomes identified with the "rules" and the "game" which he must teach his son.

In dealing with the rhetorical problem of how to express what he felt as a member of a minority, Ellison employs various elements of the folk culture including tall tales, African-American history, and black historical figures. When Jefferson describes the reckless flying that gets him expelled from heaven, he is using a folk tale to assert his personal worth and the repression he has faced from white sociFlying Home and Other Stories ety. Buster and Riley combine tall tales and African-American history in their stories of Toussaint L'Ouverture as he defeats Napoleon. Jack Johnson and Joe Louis are similar sources of pride and exemplars of the power black men can wield. In contrast, stories such as the "Scottsboro boys" serve to warn black hobos of the dangers they face.

Probably because Ellison originally intended to become a professional musician, several kinds of music play significant roles in his stories, and musical techniques are subtly employed in his manipulation of syntax and symbol. Spirituals and folk songs provide thematic underlining for the Riley and Buster stories, but they are also important in supplying Mr. Parker with links to both the Welsh singers and his own countrymen. In this story Ellison seems to assert that, just as familiar national songs unite the Welsh

singer, so American jazz can bridge the cultural and racial differences among Americans.

Moreover, as John Callahan has pointed out, Ellison employs the techniques and the discipline derived from his training in music. Instead of writing symphonies, he adapts symphonic form to fiction, where the rhythm of his language displays the beat and riffs of jazz. Further, he never forgets the admonition of his music mentors, that mere technical skill is no substitute for "intelligent and artistic structuring of emotion."

Themes

The stories that frame this volume ("A Party down at the Square" and "Flying Home") develop the theme of the individual person's separation from his society. The young white narrator of the first story is initially fascinated by the social ritual of the lynching, but he sees its destructive effects: a plane crash, the electrocution of a bystander, a fire that destroys much of the town, and a second lynching. Although he does not articulate his disenchantment as the white sharecropper does, his physical and emotional reactions indicate that he no longer shares the attitudes of his neighbors.

Todd ("Flying Home") has refused to accept the limitations imposed upon him by both Caucasians and African-Americans, becoming a Tuskeegee airman. His accomplishments have made him feel superior to black men like Jefferson but have not earned him acceptance from the army, much less from men like Dabney Graves. For Todd, however, there is reconciliation, when he finally realizes that Jefferson is attempting to console and nurture him, not to ridicule him.

Once he places his trust in Jefferson and Teddy, instead of the white pilot and ambulance attendants, he sees the buzzard—or, jimcrow—transformed into a golden bird.

The theme of the outsider appears in a slightly different context in "A Hard Time Keeping Up." Here Al, the narrator, and his friend Joe totally misinterpret the action at Tom's bar and restaurant, where a patron named Charlie is flirting with a pretty young woman who is likely to be mistaken for white. From a nearby boarding house, these two outsiders watch an apparent attack on Charlie by Big Ike, who controls all the clubs in the area. When they and the police arrive to intervene, the "joke" is revealed: Charlie and Big Ike are lifelong friends who stage this "show" as part of a long-standing bet. Al and Joe realize that the joke is on them as much as on the police, and that they know less about Chicago's black community than they had thought.

On the other hand, Ellison repeatedly develops the theme of family, especially as it affects the male child's preparation to survive in the dominant white society.

Mrs. Weaver ("Boy on a Train") explains to James that they are moving from Oklahoma City to McAlester for the same reason she and her husband moved from Georgia to Oklahoma fourteen years earlier—to make a better life and especially to give their children a chance for advancement. Family is also the stabilizing force in the Buster and Riley stories, where the extended family is as important as the boys' parents, and the AfricanAmerican community attempts to protect them just as Old Bill guards the baby chicks. Likewise, John ("The Black Ball") tries to placate his boss because he needs the janitorial job and the living quarters in order to provide for his son; yet it is concern for his son's future that causes him to consider the proposal of the white organizer.

The coming of age theme is central to the Buster and Riley stories ("Mister Toussan," "Afternoon," "That I Had the Wings,"and "A Coupla Scalped Indians").

Here young boys develop personal and racial identity. For example, the two tales of "Mister Toussan" contradict the steFlying Home and Other Stories reotype of the lazy African and demonstrate that an African-American man need not be completely powerless. The boys delight in both tales—whether Toussaint L'Ouverture was initially conciliatory or reacted with violence from the beginning. Similarly, when the boys discuss the relative merits of Jack Johnson and Joe Louis ("Afternoon"), they are becoming aware of their connection to the African-American popular culture.

Nevertheless they must learn the limits of their influence, as they do when they attempt to teach the baby chicks to fly.

Likewise, in "A Coupla Scalped Indians," not only have the boys experienced the ritual of circumcision, but Riley is initiated into adult sexual mysteries as he sees Aunt Mackie dancing naked and later receives his first adult kiss from this woman who appears to combine the ugliness of great age with the appeal of eternal youth.

Key Questions

The stories in this collection were written between 1937 and 1954, many of them influenced by Ellison's friend Richard Wright. In theme, some parallel stories were written by Wright and published in volumes such as Uncle Tom's Children (1938; see separate entry); yet Wright's stories seem to reflect a more bitter view of American society. These differences in tone may be explained by the two writers' differences in age, geographical background, intended audience, and rhetorical purpose. Nevertheless, while several were published in magazines of that era, others were filed away in a leather folder until Mrs. Ellison showed them to John F. Callahan after her husband's death. Callahan explains that Ellison repeatedly mentioned his intention to publish a short story collection. Readers may profitably consider why Ellison had not issued such a collection and what changes he might have made in the volume's overall content. These stories reflect Ellison's literary apprenticeship—often demonstrating the influence of his reading—and each such influence deserves exploration. The breadth of Ellison's reading is also reflected in the variety of literary styles included in this collection. For example, the first story uses a unique point of view, and readers should explore the ways the story's effect is heightened by that point of view. Likewise, Ellison is a master at effective use of symbols, both conventional and unique. Clearly Ellison believed that the final story, "Flying Home," represented the culmination of his symbolism.

1. Whenever a writer uses first-person point of view, readers have a tendency to speculate about autobiographical elements in the work. How did Ellison's life shape his fiction? What parallels and differences can be seen in these stories?

2. In Flying Home and Other Stories, Ellison introduces many of the themes he would later develop in Invisible Man. Using both the novel and these stories, show how he develops a theme such as the process by which a young person becomes aware of the racial injustices in American society.

3. Several stories in this volume portray young boys coming of age, either socially or sexually. How does Ellison make these characters credible? How does he use them to demonstrate the problems faced by black people, especially in the 1930s and 1940s?

4. Like his friend Richard Wright, Ellison was concerned about America's social problems, especially as these affected African-Americans. Discuss specific examples of social criticism in these stories. What hope does Ellison appear to see; what solutions do the various characters seem to propose?

5. In many of these stories, the point of view is first-person. What does the reader learn about each of these narrators? How does the choice of narrator affect the development of the story's theme? Why is the narrator of "A Party down at the Square" uniquely suited to increase the impact of that story?

6. Central to a number of these stories are various elements of the folk culture: songs, tales, and myths. How does Ellison use these to underscore his basic themes? For example, what is the relationship between Jefferson's tale of flying around heaven and Todd's frustration as a Tuskeegee airman? Why are the stories of "Mister Toussan" and Jack Johnson important to Riley and Buster? What is the "dangerous" meaning of the boys' song parodies in "That I Had the Wings"?

7. Ellison was an accomplished musician as well as an outstanding writer. John Callahan insists that Ellison's musical training and especially his experience as a jazz musician, influenced his fictional technique, which Callahan describes as a "progression of jazz breaks taking off from and returning to the bass line" of theme. Demonstrate this technique, particularly in the stories that frame this collection—"A Party Down at the Square" and "Flying Home."

8. A number of these stories are developed around one or more key symbols— for example, the white ball and the scarred hands ("The Black Ball"), the baby chicks ("That I Had the Wings"), or the buzzard and eagle ("Flying Home").

Show how Ellison makes these symbols an integral element in his development of theme.

Literary Precedents

As a student at Tuskeegee University, Ellison read the works of those writers who most influenced young writers of the 1930s: T. S. Eliot, Ernest Hemingway, James Joyce, Ezra Pound, W. B. Yeats, Joseph Conrad, and Gertrude Stein. For Ellison, The Waste Land (T. S. Eliot, 1922) was an impetus to write, and he later described reading Hemingway's Spanish Civil War dispatches, which he admired for their style, especially their vivid descriptions of scene and action. John Callahan observes that "A Hard Time Keeping Up" is almost a reversal of the action in Hemingway's "The Killers" (introduction to Flying Home and Other Stories). The influence of Joyce can be seen most directly in the unpublished story "A Storm of Blizzard Proportions."

The most important philosophical influences, though, were Richard Wright and Edmund Wilson. In fact, Wright not only was Ellison's longtime friend and literary advisor, but he gave Ellison his first writing assignments.

Related Titles

As Ellison's literary executor, John F. Callahan, notes in his introductory essay, the stories in this volume date from the period between 1937 and 1954, and most were written before Ellison published his novel Invisible Man (1952; see separate entry). Callahan believes that Ellison was developing the themes and experimenting with the techniques he would use in that novel. In describing his selection process, Callahan also remarks that he excluded stories which were part of Ellison's abandoned novel Slick or of the long-awaited but still unpublished novel in progress.

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