

# **“I Did Not Learn Their Name”: Female Characters in the Short Fiction of Ralph Ellison**

**Keith Byerman**

Discussion of the status of women in Ralph Ellison’s fiction has been limited to the representations in *Invisible Man*. A number of critics have examined these roles, and a kind of consensus has emerged that such characters are consistently subordinate to the male figures. They serve primarily as maternal images or sexual objects. The commentaries often focus on subtle differences among the stereotypes. Thus, Carolyn Sylvander and Janet Overmyer point to Ellison’s tendency to make the white female figures highly sexualized, while Yolanda Pierce and Ann Folwell Stanford note the function of Mary Rambo, who is a desexualized maternal image that must eventually be escaped; Stanford and Claudia Tate examine an excised narrative of Mary that is much more elaborate in showing her as an active figure. Finally, Tate interprets the characters as useful helpers despite their one-dimensionality, and she demonstrates that both white and black women aid the narrator in his search for identity. Mary Rohrberger labels all of the women as “automatons,” a term that is consistent with the critical agreement that they are “invisible” in the text.<sup>1</sup>

However, no comparable analysis has been made of the female figures in the short stories; in fact, very little has been published on the stories at all in the last ten years.<sup>2</sup> In these fictions, the overall representation of women is more complex than it is in the novel. These characters serve as stern mother figures reminding black boys of the rules of a racialized society, as initiators into the mysteries of sexuality and performance of gender, or as guides encouraging

the development of responsible black manhood. In several cases, ambiguity or ambivalence is introduced that suggests the limits of male knowledge about the world, relationships, and identity. This essay focuses on several stories from the posthumously published collection *Flying Home* and examines the range of representations and their functions within the stories. Some of the works are the Buster and Riley narratives from Ellison's early career, in which two boys interact with adult women. In these stories, father figures are largely absent, so mothers and teachers are essential to shaping racial and gender identity. Other works take up romantic relationships in which the women, while having small roles in the story, are nonetheless key to the narrative. Still others have women provide historical perspectives. The argument I want to make is not that Ellison makes female characters the central figures in any of his stories but rather that these characters are crucial to the storytelling. This difference from the novel may well be the result of the brevity of the short story form and its usual focus on a particular set of circumstances and a limited number of characters. These conditions can intensify the nature of relationships in ways that a novel, especially one of the breadth of *Invisible Man*, does not need to do. Ellison's stories are about moments in the lives of his protagonists that produce, whether the main characters fully realize it or not, some change in their lives.

In two of the Buster and Riley stories, "Afternoon" (1940) and "That I Had the Wings" (1943), the mother figures are disciplinarians who allow their concerns with white people to determine their treatment of the boys. In the first of these narratives, Buster's mother (the women are seldom given names) berates him for failing to assist her in her work. He is made to feel ashamed and silently accepts his humiliation:

"Buster, where you been, you lazy rascal! You knowed I wanted you here to help me with them tubs!"

"I was over at Riley's, Ma. I didn't know you wanted me."

"You didn't know! Lawd, I don't know why I had to have a chile like you. I work my fingers to the bone to keep you looking decent and that's the way you 'preciates it. You didn't know!"<sup>3</sup>

Buster explicitly relates her verbal attack to her difficulties with whites: "She was like this whenever something went wrong with her and the white folks."<sup>4</sup> A behavior that has often been attributed to black male treatment of black women in response to their experiences with white men<sup>5</sup> here is given to a black mother. Her references to his laziness, unkempt appearance, and ingratitude are frequently associated with racial stereotyping. She even seems to wish that he had never been born.

His response to her explosion reveals his shame: "Buster was silent. It was always this way. He had meant to help; he always meant to do the right thing, but something always got in the way." In effect, he accepts his failure; his ab-

jection is apparent in the mother's next words: "'Well what you standing there looking like a dying calf for? Go on out and play.'"<sup>6</sup> She has succeeded in both humiliating him and depriving him of the pleasure of play. This is crucial, since the "something" that gets in the way is childhood itself. In many respects, the child's nature is to be self-absorbed, inattentive to adult concerns, and irresponsible. What she seeks is not merely that he perform chores around the house but that he share in her menial labor for whites. She is, in effect, training him to be a certain kind of black man, one who is domesticated in the sense that he defines himself as one who has no ambition beyond doing what whites desire and who is accustomed to insults and humiliation.

Riley's comment on the situation reinforces the point; he claims that Buster is lucky not to have a father to reinforce the behavior of the mother. In doing so, he implicates the father's mother:

"My ole man says we don't git enough beatings these days. He said Gramma useta tie 'em up in a gunny sack and smoke 'em, like they do hams. He was gonna do that to me. But Ma stopped 'im. She said, 'Don't you come treating no chile of mine like no slave. Your Ma mighta raised you like a slave, but I ain't raising him like that and you bet' not harm a hair of his head!'"<sup>7</sup>

The example complicates the parental role. On the one hand, the mother is protective of her son in that she associates the father's experiences with the cruelties of slavery and rejects the idea that a black parent would voluntarily treat a child this way. On the other hand, she assigns responsibility for the father's actions to his *mother* rather than to him. And since Riley has already reported that both parents treat him badly ("They think all a man wants to do is what they want him to"),<sup>8</sup> the mother is clearly part of the problem. Her actions may well involve a power struggle with her husband (and perhaps *his* mother) over control of the son. She has a more modern notion of childrearing and denigrates the man's approach as a remnant of slavery. We also do not see her in any of the stories considered here and thus have no evidence of her behaving in the manner Riley claims. While we can question Riley's perspective—after all, he is a ten-year-old claiming he is a man—Ellison does not offer readers any reason to challenge the accuracy of the boy's reporting of events.

In this early work, then, Ellison would appear to project mothers as domineering and as disruptive of the development of a black manhood involving a strong autonomous self. The point is reinforced in another Buster and Riley story published just a few years later. Here it is a mother-surrogate who performs the role of disciplinarian. "That I Had the Wings" has the mother working outside the home for a white family. In her place is Aunt Kate, an older woman exceedingly concerned with the views of white people. From her perspective, life is a blending of religion and racial attitudes. After Riley makes up a verse

that borders on the sacrilegious, Aunt Kate rebukes him: “‘The Lawd don’t like it and the white folks wouldn’t neither.’”<sup>9</sup> His response is similar to that of Buster in the earlier story: “Riley looked at her from beneath lowered lids. It was always God, or the white folks. She always made him feel guilty, as though he had done something wrong he could never remember, for which he would never be forgiven. Like when the white folks stared at you on the street.”<sup>10</sup>

Aunt Kate argues that she is simply trying to train the boys in proper behavior so that they will not have trouble with whites later. Instead, Riley experiences something like the guilt for original sin, something he cannot remember and for which he cannot be forgiven. But the real issue here is not religious but racial; his “sin” is being black and male.<sup>11</sup> Her religion encourages submission, rather than resistance, to the existing racist order. In both stories, there is no need for actual white characters because it is whiteness itself that concerns the mother figures.

Riley’s behavior in the story serves to strengthen the case against Aunt Kate. Having watched a mother bird get its young to fly, he suddenly desires to do the same with chicks. He reasons that they have wings like robins, so it is only lack of opportunity that holds them back. Once he and Buster realize that the wings of a chicken are too short, he devises a scheme to provide them with a parachute made of cloth from his own shirt. Buster then climbs on the shed and drops them, with Riley in the chicken yard to catch them if necessary. At the moment they are dropped, Aunt Kate comes running and yelling across the yard. Riley turns toward her, and the chicks fall to the ground, dead. While she blames him for killing his mother’s chickens in such a foolish escapade, he reverses the accusation: “If only he hadn’t looked when she called, he might have caught the li’l chicks. Suddenly the words rushed out, scalding: ‘I hate yuh,’ he screamed. ‘I wish yuh had died back in slavery times.’” This is an especially effective attack, since “she was proud of being old.” All she can do is put a curse on him: “‘The Lord’s gonna punish yuh in hellfire for that,’ she said brokenly. ‘Someday yuh remember them words an’ moan an’ cry.’”<sup>12</sup> What bothers him is not her anger or even the threat of punishment by his mother; rather it is his failure to teach the chicks to fly.

Symbolically, Riley and Buster are the young whose mothers refuse to let them fly, believing that their race requires that they stay firmly on the ground. They are to do what white people want and what is taught by older black people locked into a system of white supremacy that strictly limits possibilities. To experiment, in words or actions, is to invite disaster. The point Ellison is arguing is not that Riley is foolish, in trying to get chickens to fly, because the same kind of inability is said to be inherent in young black men. The point is to believe in the impossible: “‘We almost had ‘em flyin’,” Riley said. ‘We almost ...’”<sup>13</sup> Those closing words imply a kind of faith distinct from Aunt Kate’s; it is based on hope rather than fear. Thus, as in the earlier story, the mother figure seeks to control black male development based on her perception that it is important for survival to accept the limitations imposed by the surrounding racist environ-

ment. Even when her parental stance is more modern and in fact resistant to the harsher aspects of their world, she still is assigned blame within the story, much as Mary Rambo was in *Invisible Man*.

A very different kind of female figure is encountered by the boys in "A Coupla Scalped Indians" (1956). P. L. Thomas calls the tale "an odd take on a rite of passage story."<sup>14</sup> Here Buster and Riley have just been circumcised; in the present time of the story, they are engaged in a self-generated ritual mixing Boy Scout and Native American practices. They must do it this way because there is no troop or tribe for them to belong to. At some point, they remember that there is a carnival in town they want to visit. Thus, Ellison overdetermines ritual and specifically that of coming-of-age. As the boys run toward the town and its festival, it is becoming dark and they arrive at Aunt Mackie's cabin. She is known and feared in the community as a "talker-with-spirits" and a conjure woman. It is necessary to get around her yard and the fierce dog chained there. Buster manages to trick the beast, but Riley stumbles as he attempts to follow. As is so often the case with Ellison's protagonists, he ends up exactly in the place he is trying to avoid. Instead of being past the yard, he is next to the shack, with no means of escape. He peers in the window and experiences an erotic vision:

A brown naked woman, whose black hair hung beneath her shoulders. I could see the long graceful curve of her back as she moved in some sort of slow dance, bending forward and back. Her arms and body moving as though gathering in something which I couldn't see but which she drew to her with pleasure; a young, girlish body with slender, well-rounded hips.<sup>15</sup>

Buster calls to him, but he is fixed in place, for the woman turns at that moment and picks up a glass of wine. He stands "erect" and fixated, for at the top of the beautiful body is "The wrinkled face of old Aunt Mackie."<sup>16</sup> He wishes to escape, fearing punishment for window-peeping, especially on such a powerful person. But he is stuck in place, both by his first sight of a naked woman and the mystery of her young body and old face. He accidentally makes noise, and she sees and catches him and drags him into the shack. In this tale involving ritual excess, we now are introduced to sexual initiation. He must pass a series of tests that would seem to move in the opposite direction from sexuality; she asks him about his drinking, his church attendance, and his spiritual condition. When he answers them all to her satisfaction, she tells him that he must kiss her. When he hesitates, she threatens to "fix" him if he does not obey. She embraces him for a second kiss, and he realizes that his hand is on her breast. Embarrassed, he jerks it away, but she does not appear to notice.

This act of seduction is disrupted when he experiences physical discomfort. He begins crying, because of the pain of his medical procedure. She demands

to see it, because “you know I’m a healer.” She then examines his bandage and the blood on and around it, all the while making humorous comments, about his “fishing worm” and how he has been “pruned”: “I’m a doctor but no tree surgeon.” As in the earlier stories, he feels humiliated: “I stared at her out of a quick resentment and a defiant pride. ‘I’m a man, I said within myself. *Just the same I am a man!*’”<sup>17</sup> At the same time, he notes the gentleness of her touch and has the very adult insight that “[n]akedness was nothing more than another veil; much like the old baggy dresses she always wore.”<sup>18</sup>

Riley’s claim of manhood would seem to be linked to the circumcision that he has just experienced and that is the source of the pain. One of the surface oddities of the story is that the two boys are eleven when they undergo the procedure; it is almost universally the case that the operation occurs in early infancy. The exception is parts of sub-Saharan Africa, where it is part of manhood initiation rituals.<sup>19</sup> Moreover, while circumcision was commonly imposed on male slaves, following biblical commands, it was not usually practiced by white men, since it was not common among Christians at the time.<sup>20</sup> Mackie is shocked when she learns his age while examining his operation:

“Eleven,” I said. And it was as though I had fired a shot.  
 “Eleven! Git out of here,” she screamed, stumbling backward, her eyes wide upon me as she felt for the glass on the table to drink. Then she snatched an old gray robe from a chair, fumbling for the tie cord which wasn’t there. “You go now, you little rascal,” she said.<sup>21</sup>

Whether she is offended because he is too old or too young for the ritual is not clear. Her language (“little rascal”) is similar to Aunt Kate’s in “That I Had the Wings,” and, like Kate, Mackie puts a curse on him: “‘And if I ever hear of you saying anything about me I’ll fix your daddy and your mammy too.’”<sup>22</sup> The language in both cases suggests that his misbehavior is deliberate. In this instance, he has somehow deceived her in seeming to be a man. Her embarrassment at her nakedness implies that she has been toying with an adult, not a child. She must denigrate and threaten him so that she can retain her own power. Ironically, her negative statements and behavior at this point affirm his manhood, the very thing about which he is so uncertain. As he heads down the hill toward the carnival, he has a realization: “And for a moment I felt much older, as though I had lived swiftly long years into the future and had been as swiftly pushed back again.”<sup>23</sup> Like the women of the earlier stories, Mackie humbles him, trying to keep him a child under female authority. But in this instance, he has a vision of manhood, as though her conjuring power had reversed itself. The story introduces an element of ambiguity not apparent in the earlier works; Mackie unintentionally has positively contributed to Riley’s initiation into manhood.

While these female roles are somewhat different from those in *Invisible Man*, where we have the nurturing mother Mary Rambo and the white seductress Sybil, the stories’ women share a desire to limit and define black manhood with the novel’s women. In another set of stories, however, the effect of such characters is to expand the possibilities of black masculinity. They do this by reducing the emphasis on race and gender and by increasing a sense of positive personal responsibility. In two cases, the women have minor roles, but ones that go to the heart of the story. In the frequently discussed “King of the Bingo Game” (1944), the only named character is Laura, the protagonist’s very sick wife.<sup>24</sup> His effort to win the jackpot is linked to the need to get her medical care. Because the story is set in the Great Depression, he has no other means of getting help for her. The entire surreal sequence, in which he refuses to let go of the button controlling the wheel, is based not so much on his desire for control in a world where he is insignificant as on his fear that he will fail his wife:

“Live!” he shouted.

The audience quieted like the dying of a huge fan. “Live, Laura, baby. I got holt of it now, sugar. Live!” He screamed it, tears streaming down his face. “I got nobody but YOU!”<sup>25</sup>

In effect, he wants to transfer the power of the electric board through himself to energize her. Not surprisingly, he fails. The management wrests the button from him and beats him. He is sacrificed, but not simply as a figure in a leftist fairy tale, as Barbara Foley reads Ellison’s early stories. Rather, it is at least as importantly a sacrifice for love. “Laura” is, of course, also the name of the ideal chosen by Petrarch for his series of poems, *Il Canzoniere*; she serves as an emblem of pure love. Just as she has a minimal physical presence in the series, so the Laura of the story is only a name, an enabling force that produces noble effort.

A similar call to a better self is apparent in a group of later stories. “I Did Not Learn Their Names” (1996), though published much later, is clearly set around the same time. The narrator is a black hobo riding the rails, a young man caught in racial bitterness: “I was nasty sometimes, because to be decent was to appear afraid and aware of a ‘place.’ And since when you were decent they thought you were afraid, and that you were expressing those qualities that even their schoolbooks said your race possessed, I was almost always nasty.”<sup>26</sup> His attitude is challenged when he meets an old white couple riding in the boxcar. At first, he tries to leave quietly, so as not to cause a scene, but then they offer him a sandwich, which he reluctantly accepts. On the one hand, he is sympathetic because of their age; on the other, he is alert to insult or condescension. But even when the old man slips into stereotype (“Negroes make fine musicians”), he does not withdraw, in part because the woman is not engaged in this conversation. The reason is that the narrator reminds her of the son whom they



are going to see and who has just been released from prison in Missouri. She is simply a mother concerned to get back her son.

The encounter ends at this point, with the old man encouraging him to be careful: “We need more musicians, like Roland Hayes.”<sup>27</sup> This comment tempers the earlier stereotype, since the man is culturally aware enough to know that Hayes was an internationally known black tenor and composer of the time. To suggest him as a model for the narrator is a great compliment. Later, the narrator is caught by the “bulls” in the rail yard and thrown in jail. His white traveling companion, who is not jailed, manages to get to the Alabama school where the narrator intends to study music, and the officials there arrange for his release. While imprisoned, he thinks about the old couple and regrets that he did not learn their names. In other words, he regrets having not acknowledged their humanity, when they, and especially the woman, recognized his. He has become, in a sense, one of her sons through shared experience. The “nastiness” that shaped his interactions with others at the beginning can no longer be so easily sustained.

In two other posthumously published stories, women have more significant roles in positively shaping black masculinity. “Boy on a Train” (1996) tells of a mother and her two young sons traveling across Oklahoma on a Jim Crow train. The focal character is the older of the sons. His father has died, though we are not told how; there are some indications that he may have been lynched. Already the boy imagines being bigger and taking his mother and his brother Lewis back to Oklahoma City in style:

Well, just wait; when he got big and carried Mama and Lewis back to Oklahoma City everybody would see how well he took care of Mama, and she would say, “See, these are my two boys,” and would be very proud. And everybody would say, “See, aren’t Mrs. Weaver’s boys two fine men?” That was the way it would be.<sup>28</sup>

However, at the same time, the boy realizes that he and his family might never return. Already he demonstrates a maturity that we do not see in Buster and Riley, and this makes his relationship with his mother different. She does not spend time correcting behavior; she instead seeks to enable him to move forward in their new life. Ironically, she begins this process by giving him a sense of history. When they see an old stone silo, she recalls that they are reversing the route she and her husband had taken fourteen years earlier. They were part of the black migration that assumed that the West was a place of opportunity for “colored people.” James had heard her tell stories of her experiences in the South and always enjoyed them. When she starts talking this time, though, he notes a change: “Yet he felt that this was to be something different. Something in Mama’s voice was vast and high, like a rainbow; yet something sad and deep, like when the organ played in church, was around Mama’s words.”<sup>29</sup> She speaks



in prophetic tones, like a medium for divine truth. She commands her son to remember this journey, because it is tied to the family's quest for a better life. She reminds him that there are only the three of them now, and that he must be the man of the household: "'Things is hard, and we have to fight. . . . O Lord, we have to fight!'"<sup>30</sup>

He struggles to understand her meaning: "He could not get it all, but yet he understood. It was like understanding what music without words said."<sup>31</sup> Just as her words carry a message beyond themselves, so his grasp of that message is beyond words. In another irony, as she prays with them for God's aid and protection, his attitude becomes combative:

James wanted to cry but, vaguely, he felt *something* should be punished for making Mama cry. Something cruel had made her cry. He felt the tightness in his throat becoming anger. If he only knew what it was, he would fix it; he would kill this mean thing that made Mama feel so bad. It must have been awful because Mama was strong and brave. . . . If only he knew what it was . . . Was it God?<sup>32</sup>

In this case, there is no one insisting on the folk admonition so often used in Ellison's work: "Your arms too short to box with God." It is precisely fighting that he believes his mother is calling for.

The linkage of sorrow, resistance, and memory that James cannot quite understand may well suggest Ellison's subtle use of the Tulsa race riot of 1921 as a historical reference. Ellison would have been seven at the time and living in Oklahoma City; his father had died when Ralph was three. Moreover, Ellison's mother, Ida, with her two sons, stopped in Tulsa to visit family on their way to find work in Gary, Indiana; they were there just a short time before the riot. When work failed to materialize in Gary, they returned to Oklahoma a few weeks later. What they saw was the devastation that the white attack on the community of Greenwood had brought about.<sup>33</sup> The riot apparently involved a misunderstanding between a black man and a white woman. After he was arrested, a group of armed black men, many of whom had served in World War I, offered to protect the prisoner from the threat of lynching. Arguments ensued, and racial violence followed. Perhaps as many as three hundred people, mostly African American, were killed.<sup>34</sup> Many black people left the city as a result.

"Boy on a Train" is specifically identified as taking place in 1924, thus displacing it from any direct connection to the events of 1921. Nonetheless, by placing it in this context, the mother's attitude is clarified. She asks in her prayer that her sons be fighters and thus suggests that her husband did not die a natural death. What she seeks and wants James to understand is the need for justice, not accommodation. She is unlike the mother figures in the other stories in that she is not submissive to either whites or God, and she communicates this to her son:

he wondered why his mother cried. It wasn't just that Daddy was gone; it didn't sound just that way. It was something else. I'll kill it when I get big, he thought. I'll make it cry like it's making Mama cry! . . . Even if it's God. I'll make God cry, he thought. I'll kill Him; I'll kill God and not be sorry!<sup>35</sup>

While we can dismiss the son's blasphemous response to his mother's suffering as childish bravado, this response tells us something important about the mother. In the family she heads, justice is more than appealing to the divine for aid; it is human action taken against the source of suffering—the sort of action that the black men of Tulsa took when they refused to surrender to white authority. Her direct and indirect (through the overheard prayer) admonition to her son calls for following this confident, racially proud, assertive model of manhood.

The only story that focuses on an adult relationship is “A Storm of Blizzard Proportions” (2011). In it, an African American sailor is waiting in Wales for the ship that will return him home from World War II. During the weeks he has been there, he has met and fallen in love with a Welsh Red Cross worker, Joan. On the day the story is set, he is thinking of the boxer Jack Johnson, who not only defeated all the white boxers he fought until late in his career but also had a string of relationships with white women, thus scandalizing the country. He was even charged with violating the Mann Act, which prohibited transporting women across state lines for immoral purposes.

The protagonist focuses on Johnson because of his relationship with Joan and because of his sense of racial isolation in the military:

I'll never sail again and me the only one of us. Fellows are all right too, not like in Old Jack Johnson's time. Sailors the most democratic bunch of wild sonofabitching Americans in the world. . . . But even with them you miss something when you're the only one. Seems like a man's not completely himself without others along who've passed through what he's lived.<sup>36</sup>

Johnson turns that aloneness into an assertion of self; the narrator seems incapable of such aggressive behavior.

Joan, who seems willing to accept him on whatever terms he requires, cannot convince him either to stay in Great Britain or to take her back with him to Ohio. She is willing to marry him at this moment of their parting, in the hope that he will return and create with her whatever life they can. He gives her false hope; when she asks when he will come back, he responds, ““Always . . . Through water, through fire, through snow, through—always, always.””<sup>37</sup> But he has already thought that Wales would live in his memory “should he never return.”<sup>38</sup> He has also not told her that he is leaving the next day. All he can think of at the end of the story, after her passionate declaration of love, is the

voyage home and the snowstorm that is covering Ohio. He turns away from the passion for life found in Joan and Jack Johnson and can think only of the snow “covering all.”<sup>39</sup> In place of their warmth, he can only think of the white chill of death.

His inability to embrace either love or defiance would appear to be his fear of the implications of an interracial relationship. While this point is never explicitly made, it is the one thing that links together the black boxer Johnson and the white woman Joan. Even the names suggest a doubling of characters. Both reject skin color as a primary determinant of identity and social role. The narrator feels compelled to reject the options they offer, choosing instead to return to the snow-covered Ohio where his mother is buried. It is, then, partly through her that the narrator is exposed as failing to achieve his manhood.<sup>40</sup>

The power of whiteness is also the theme of “Flying Home” (1944). Most of the commentary on this work focuses on Todd’s obsession with planes and with the approval of white officers, often placed in the context of Jefferson’s folk wisdom.<sup>41</sup> Lacking in this line of criticism are the key roles of two women, Todd’s mother and his girlfriend. Between them, they embody most of the ways female characters engage male protagonists in the short fiction.

The mother serves as the reality principle in the text. While she is the one who takes Todd to the fair at which he sees his first model plane, she is also the one who steadily questions his obsession with flying. She tries to explain to him that real planes are very large and expensive, but he will not listen. Then, one day, he is outside when a plane flies over. It is so high that it is barely visible. In his excitement, he believes that it is only another toy that he can have if he catches it. He climbs the screen door, but of course cannot reach it. He falls, his mother comes running, and, when she learns what happened, she repeatedly calls him a “fool.”<sup>42</sup> She then calls in the doctor and asks “if anything was wrong with [his] mind.”<sup>43</sup> Thus, like the women of the Buster and Riley stories, she sees her role as keeping her son from what she considers to be inappropriate behavior in a white-dominated world. For Todd even to dream of having a plane is to place himself in the white realm, with all the attendant risks. Interestingly, the young adult Todd has both defied and incorporated her racialized worldview. He has, in fact, become a pilot, though only in training, with little chance of ever seeing combat. At the same time, his greatest concern is no longer the plane but the white officers whom he has come to believe are the arbiters of his skill and the only ones to whom he must listen.

In adopting this position, he works against the second woman in the story. His obsession with white authority is challenged in a letter from his girlfriend. Like Joan and the mother in “Boy on a Train,” she expects something more than accommodation to racial rules. Her only presence is his memory of a letter that she had sent him:

“I don’t need the papers to tell me that you had the intelligence to fly. And I have always known you to be as brave as

anyone else. The papers annoy me. Don't you be contented to prove over and over again that you're brave or skillful just because you're black, Todd. I think they keep beating that dead horse because they don't want to say why you boys are not yet fighting. I'm really disappointed, Todd. Anyone with brains can learn to fly, but then what. What about using it, and who will you use it for? I wish, dear, you'd write about this. I sometimes think they're playing a trick on us. It's very humiliating."<sup>44</sup>

Like Jefferson, whose folktale follows this letter, she is convinced that race has nothing to do with human qualities and abilities. Neither of them questions Todd's ability, even though, with his inferiority complex, he believes they do. So, instead of acknowledging the accuracy of their assessment of the situation, he turns against them. Just as he considers Jefferson to be a foolish old black man whose story is a disguised criticism of his ambition, so he wonders what she can possibly know of humiliation, having never lived in the South.<sup>45</sup> He believes that, in fact, he does have to prove himself over and over and that the end result may still be humiliation, especially if something goes wrong, as in the crash. Like the narrator of *Invisible Man*, he is so deeply committed to achievement through the approval of whites that he has to be taught the same lesson over and over. And, as in the novel, Ellison wants us to believe that the lesson has finally been learned. In both works, however, the women involved get no credit: "And it was as though he had been lifted out of his isolation, back into the world of men. A new current of communication flowed between the man and the boy and himself."<sup>46</sup>

From the analyses above, it should be clear that female characters play key roles in the stories. What should also be clear is that they can serve only secondary roles in the development of the central characters, who are always male. They can undertake to keep the protagonists grounded in the fixed reality of a world in which black men can be men only in the context of white male authority, which means that they can never truly be men at all. Moreover, while it is clear that these women seek to keep their sons safe in a profoundly unsafe world shaped by principles of white supremacy, the protagonists see this emphasis on survival as a restriction of their manhood. Alternately, the women can undertake to teach the meaning of responsible black adulthood, which may mean challenging racial authority. What these women can never be is fully realized characters in their own right. There is no space in Ellison's fiction for the exploration of womanhood, whether black or white. Though the women of the stories have different functions than those in the novel, they never get to have their own stories.

## Notes

1. The critics also use the terms "gender erasure," victims, and "smothering mothers." See Carolyn W. Sylvander, "Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man* and Female Stereotypes," *Negro American Literature Forum* 9, no. 3 (1975): 77–78; Janet Overmyer, "The Invisible Man and White Women," *Notes on Contemporary Literature* 6, no. 3 (1976): 13–15; Yolanda Pierce, "The Invisible Women in Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man* (1952)," in *Women in Literature: Reading through the Lens of Gender*, ed. Jerilyn Fisher and Ellen S. Silber (Westport, CT: Greenwood, 2003), 158; Ann Folwell Stanford, "He Speaks for Whom? Inscription and Reinscription of Women in *Invisible Man* and *The Salt Eaters*," *MELUS* 18, no. 2 (1993): 21–24; Claudia Tate, "Notes on the Invisible Woman in Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man*," in *Ralph Ellison's Invisible Man: A Casebook*, ed. John F. Callahan (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), 263; Lisa Maria Hogeland, "*Invisible Man* and Invisible Women: The Sex/Race Analogy of the 1970s," *Women's History Review* 5, no. 1 (1996): 31–53; and Mary Rohrberger, "'Ball the Jack': Surreality, Sexuality, and the Role of Women in *Invisible Man*," in *Approaches to Teaching Ellison's Invisible Man*, ed. Susan Resneck Parr and Pancho Savery (New York: MLA, 1989), 130.
2. Of the four articles published since 2006, two have been on "A Party Down at the Square" (Anderton and Stewart), one on "Flying Home" (Lucy), and one on "A Storm of Blizzard Proportions" (Williams). None discuss female characters. See May Anderton, "Fire and Water: Opposites and Pairings in 'A Party Down at the Square,'" *Explicator* 70, no. 2 (2012): 104–7; Anthony Stewart, "The Role of Violence and the Idea of America in Ralph Ellison's 'A Party Down at the Square,'" *Canadian Review of American Studies* 39, no. 1 (2009): 1–19; Robin Lucy, "'Flying Home': Ralph Ellison, Richard Wright, and the Black Folk during World War II," *Journal of American Folklore* 120, no. 477 (2007): 257–83; and Daniel G. Williams, "If Only We Had Some of What They Have': Ralph Ellison in Wales," *Comparative American Studies* 4, no. 1 (2006): 25–48.
3. Ralph Ellison, *Flying Home and Other Stories* (New York: Vintage, 1996), 41. This edition was chosen because it includes "A Storm of Blizzard Proportions," which was not in the hardcover edition.
4. *Ibid.*, 42.
5. See Feminista Jones, "Why Black Women Struggle More with Domestic Violence," *Time*, September 9, 2014, [time.com/3313343/ray-price-black-women-domestic-violence](http://time.com/3313343/ray-price-black-women-domestic-violence), and Natalie J. Sokoloff and Ida Pace, "Domestic Violence at the Intersections of Race, Class, and Gender," *Violence Against Women* 11, no. 1 (2005): 38–64, for discussions of the relationship between race and domestic conflict.
6. Ellison, *Flying Home*, 41.
7. *Ibid.*, 43.
8. *Ibid.*, 42.
9. *Ibid.*, 47.
10. *Ibid.*, 48.
11. In the light of recent episodes of white-on-black violence and the attendant media responses, it would be easy to read the story as prophetic. A more relevant historical observation, however, would focus on the persistence of the racial gaze. See George Yancy, *Black Bodies, White Gazes: The Continuing Significance of Race* (New York: Rowan and Littlefield, 2008).
12. Ellison, *Flying Home*, 61.
13. *Ibid.*, 62.
14. P. L. Thomas, *Reading, Learning, Teaching Ralph Ellison* (New York: Peter Lang, 2008), 96. See also Karl Dietz, "Ralph Ellison: A Coupla Scalped Indians," in *Amerikanische Erzählliteratur 1950–1970*, ed. Frieder Busch and Renate Schmidt-von Bardeleben (Munich: Fink, 1975), 197–206.
15. Ellison, *Flying Home*, 73.
16. *Ibid.*, 74.
17. *Ibid.*, 78.
18. *Ibid.*, 79.
19. See Michael Glass, "The New Testament and Circumcision," [www.cirp.org/pages/cultural/glass1/](http://www.cirp.org/pages/cultural/glass1/); "Circumcision (Male)," <http://www.mayoclinic.org/testsprocedures/circumcision/basics/definition/prec-20013585>; and Andrea Wilcken, Thomas Keil, and Bruce Dick, "Traditional Male Circumcision in Eastern and Southern Africa: A Systematic Review of Prevalence and Complications," <http://www.who.int/bulletin/volumes/88/12/09-072975/en/>.
20. See [www.d.umn.edu/~mcco0322/history.htm](http://www.d.umn.edu/~mcco0322/history.htm) and <http://www.eurweb.com/2011/03/the-great-circumcision-debate-where-do-african-americans-stand-on-the-cut-or-not-to-cut-controversy/>.
21. Ellison, *Flying Home*, 79.
22. *Ibid.*
23. *Ibid.*, 80.
24. Patricia Chaffee, "Slippery Ground: Ralph Ellison's Bingo Player," *Negro American Literature Forum* 10, no. 1 (1976): 23–24; Edward Gvereschi, "Anticipations of *Invisible Man*: Ralph Ellison's 'King of the Bingo Game,'" *Negro American Literature Forum* 6, no. 4 (1972): 122–24; David J. Herman, "Ellison's 'King of the Bingo Game': Finding Naturalism's Trapdoor," *English*

*Language Notes* 29, no. 1 (1991): 71–74; and Pearl I. Saunders, “Symbolism in Ralph Ellison’s ‘King of the Bingo Game,’” *College Language Association Journal* 20 (1976): 35–39 are among the critical studies of this story.

25. Ellison, *Flying Home*, 133.

26. *Ibid.*, 92.

27. *Ibid.*, 95.

28. *Ibid.*, 15; italics in original.

29. *Ibid.*, 17.

30. *Ibid.*, 18.

31. *Ibid.*

32. *Ibid.*, 19; italics in original.

33. Arnold Rampersad, *Ralph Ellison: A Biography* (New York: Vintage, 2008), 21–22.

34. “Tulsa Race Riot: A Report by the Oklahoma Commission to Study the Tulsa Race Riot of 1921,” <http://www.okhistory.org/research/forms/freport.pdf>.

35. Ellison, *Flying Home*, 20.

36. *Ibid.*, 149.

37. *Ibid.*, 155.

38. *Ibid.*, 153.

39. *Ibid.*, 155.

40. Though it is outside the parameters of this essay, a Freudian analysis of the story—incorporating the failure to rise to the level of the father figure, the association of the return to the mother with death, and the inability of the son-narrator to enter an adult relationship—could open up new ways to think about Ellison’s work.

41. See Lucy, “‘Flying Home’”; Bernhard Ostendorf, “Ralph Ellison’s ‘Flying Home’: From Folk Tale to Short Story,” *Journal of the Folklore Institute* 13 (1976): 185–99; and Joseph F. Trimmer, “Ralph Ellison’s ‘Flying Home,’” *Studies in Short Fiction* 9 (1972): 175–82.

42. Ellison, *Flying Home*, 173, 175.

43. *Ibid.*, 175.

44. *Ibid.*, 159.

45. *Ibid.*

46. *Ibid.*, 181.