

# from Hidden Name and Complex Fate

Ralph Ellison

Once while listening to the play of a two-year-old girl who did not know she was under observation, I heard her saying over and over again, at first with questioning and then with sounds of growing satisfaction, "I am Mimi Livisay? . . . I am Mimi Livisay. I am Mimi Livisay . . . I am Mimi Li-vi-say! I am Mimi . . ."

And in deed and in fact she was—or became so soon thereafter, by working playfully to establish the unity between herself and her name.

For many of us this is far from easy. We must learn to wear our names within all the noise and confusion of the environment in which we find ourselves: make them the center of all of our associations with the world, with man and with nature. We must charge them with all our emotions, our hopes, hates, loves, aspirations. They must become our masks and our shields and the containers of all those values and traditions which we learn and/or imagine as being the meaning of our familial past.

And when we are reminded so constantly that we bear, as Negroes, names originally possessed by those who owned our enslaved grandparents, we are apt, especially if we are potential writers, to be more than ordinarily concerned with the veiled and mysterious events, the fusions of blood, the furtive couplings, the business transactions, the violations of faith and loyalty, the assaults: yes, and the unrecognized and unrecognizable

loves through which our names were handed down unto us. . . .

Perhaps, taken in aggregate, these European names which (sometimes with irony, sometimes with pride, but always with personal investment) represent a certain triumph of the spirit, speaking to us of those who rallied, reassembled and transformed themselves and who under dismembering pressures refused to die. "Brothers and sisters," I once heard a Negro preacher exhort, "let us make up our faces before the world, and our names shall sound throughout the land with honor! For we ourselves are our true names, not their epithets! So let us, I say, Make Up Our Faces and Our Minds!"

Perhaps my preacher had read T. S. Eliot, although I doubt it. And in actuality, it was unnecessary that he do so, for a concern with names and naming was very much a part of that special area of American culture from which I come, and it is precisely for this reason that this example should come to mind in a discussion of my own experience as a writer.

Undoubtedly, writers begin their conditioning as manipulators of words long before they become aware of literature—certain Freudians<sup>1</sup> would say at the breast.<sup>2</sup> Per-

1. **Freudians:** People who believe in the theories and methods of Sigmund Freud (1856–1939), the founder of psychoanalysis.

2. **at the breast:** In infancy.



haps. But if so, that is far too early to be of use at this moment. Of this, though, I am certain: that despite the misconceptions of those educators who trace the reading difficulties experienced by large numbers of Negro children in Northern schools to their Southern background, these children are, in their familiar South, facile manipulators of words. I know, too, that the Negro community is deadly in its ability to create nicknames and to spot all that is ludicrous in an unlikely name or that which is incongruous in conduct. Names are not qualities; nor are words, in this particular sense, actions. To assume that they are could cost one his life many times a day. Language skills depend to a large extent upon a knowledge of the details, the manners, the objects, the folkways, the psychological patterns, of a given environment. Humor and wit depend upon much the same awareness, and so does the suggestive power of names.

"A small brown bowlegged Negro with the name 'Franklin D. Roosevelt Jones' might sound like a clown to someone who looks at him from the outside," said my friend Albert Murray, "but on the other hand he just might turn out to be a fireside operator. He might just lie back in all of that comic juxtaposition of names and manipulate you deaf, dumb and blind—and you not even suspecting it, because you're thrown out of stance by his name! There you are, so dazzled by the F.D.R. image—which you know you can't see—and so delighted with your own superior position that you don't realize that it's Jones who must be confronted."

Well, as you must suspect, all of this speculation on the matter of names has a purpose, and now, because it is tied up so ironically with my own experience as a writer, I must turn to my own name.

For in the dim beginnings, before I ever thought consciously of writing, there was my own name, and there was, doubtless, a certain magic in it. From the start I was uncomfortable with it, and in my earliest years it

caused me much puzzlement. Neither could I understand what a poet was nor why, exactly, my father had chosen to name me after one. Perhaps I could have understood it perfectly well had he named me after his own father, but that name had been given to an older brother who died and thus was out of the question. But why hadn't he named me after a hero, such as Jack Johnson,<sup>3</sup> or a soldier like Colonel Charles Young, or a great seaman like Admiral Dewey, or an educator like Booker T. Washington, or a great orator and abolitionist like Frederick Douglass? Or again, why hadn't he named me (as so many Negro parents had done) after President Teddy Roosevelt?

Instead, he named me after someone called Ralph Waldo Emerson, and then, when I was three, he died. It was too early for me to have understood his choice, although I'm sure he must have explained it many times, and it was also too soon for me to have made the connection between my name and my father's love for reading. Much later, after I began to write and work with words, I came to suspect that he was aware of the suggestive powers of names and of the magic involved in naming.

I recall an odd conversation with my mother during my early teens in which she mentioned their interest in, of all things, prenatal culture! But for a long time I actually knew only that my father read a lot, and that he admired this remote Mr. Emerson, who was something called a "poet and philosopher"—so much so that he named his second son after him.

I knew, also, that whatever his motives, the combination of names he'd given me caused me no end of trouble from the moment when I could talk well enough to respond to the ritualized question which grownups put to very young children. Emerson's name was quite familiar to Negroes in Oklahoma during those days when World

**3. Jack Johnson** (1878–1946): The world heavyweight boxing champion from 1908 through 1915.



War I was brewing, and adults, eager to show off their knowledge of literary figures, and obviously amused by the joke implicit in such a small brown nubbin<sup>4</sup> of a boy carrying around such a heavy moniker,<sup>5</sup> would invariably repeat my first two names and then to my great annoyance, they'd add "Emerson."

And I, in my confusion, would reply, "No, no, I'm not Emerson; he's the little boy who lives next door." Which only made them laugh all the louder. "Oh no," they'd say, "you're Ralph Waldo Emerson," while I had fantasies of blue murder.

For a while the presence next door of my little friend, Emerson, made it unnecessary for me to puzzle too often over this peculiar adult confusion. And since there were other Negro boys named Ralph in the city, I came to suspect that there was something about the combination of names which produced their laughter. Even today I know of only one other Ralph who had as much comedy made out of his name, a campus politician and deep-voiced orator whom I knew at Tuskegee,<sup>6</sup> who was called in friendly ribbing, *Ralph Waldo Emerson Edgar Allan Poe*, spelled Powe. This must have been quite a trial for him, but I had been initiated much earlier.

During my early school years the name continued to puzzle me, for it constantly evoked in the faces of others some secret. It was as though I possessed some treasure or some defect, which was invisible to my own eyes and ears: something which I had but did not possess, like a piece of property in South Carolina, which was mine but which I could not have until some future time. I recall finding, about this time, while seeking adventure in back alleys—which possess for boys a superiority over playgrounds like that

which kitchen utensils possess over toys designed for infants—a large photographic lens. I remember nothing of its optical qualities, of its speed or color correction, but it gleamed with crystal mystery and it was beautiful.

Mounted handsomely in a tube of shiny brass, it spoke to me of distant worlds of possibility. I played with it, looking through it with squinted eyes, holding it in shafts of sunlight, and tried to use it for a magic lantern. But most of this was as unrewarding as my attempts to make the music come from a phonograph record by holding the needle in my fingers.

I could burn holes through newspapers with it, or I could pretend that it was a telescope, the barrel of a cannon, or the third eye of a monster—I being the monster—but I could do nothing at all about its proper function of making images: nothing to make it yield its secret. But I could not discard it.

Older boys sought to get it away from me by offering knives or tops, agate marbles or whole zoos of grass snakes and horned toads in trade, but I held on to it. No one, not even the white boys I knew, had such a lens, and it was my own good luck to have found it. Thus I would hold on to it until such time as I could acquire the parts needed to make it function. Finally I put it aside and it remained buried in my box of treasures, dusty and dull, to be lost and forgotten as I grew older and became interested in music.

I had reached by now the grades where it was necessary to learn something about Mr. Emerson and what he had written, such as the "Concord Hymn" and the essay "Self-Reliance," and in following his advice, I reduced the "Waldo" to a simple and, I hoped, mysterious "W," and in my own reading I avoided his works like the plague. I could no more deal with my name—I shall never really master it—than I could find a creative use for my lens. . . .

If all this sounds a bit heady, remember that I did not destroy that troublesome mid-

4. **nubbin** *n.*: Anything small and undeveloped.

5. **moniker** *n.*: Slang for a person's name or nickname.

6. **Tuskegee** (*tus kē' gē*): Tuskegee Institute, the Alabama college which Ellison attended.



dle name of mine. I only suppressed it. Sometimes it reminds me of my obligations to the man who named me.

It is our fate as human beings always to give up some good things for other good things, to throw off certain bad circumstances only to create others. Thus there is a value for the writer in trying to give as thorough a report of social reality as possible. Only by doing so may we grasp and convey the cost of change. Only by considering the broadest accumulation of data may we make choices that are based upon our own hard-earned sense of reality. Speaking from my own special area of American culture, I feel that to embrace uncritically values which are extended to us by others is to reject the validity, even the sacredness, of our own experience.

It is also to forget that the small share of reality which each of our diverse groups is able to snatch from the whirling chaos of history belongs not to the group alone, but to all of us. It is a property and a witness which can be ignored only to the danger of the entire nation.

I could suppress the name of my namesake out of respect for the achievements of its original bearer but I cannot escape the obligation of attempting to achieve some of the things which he asked of the American writer. As Henry James<sup>7</sup> suggested, being an American is an arduous task, and for most of us, I suspect, the difficulty begins with the name.

**7. Henry James:** An American novelist (1843–1916).

#### Primary Source

Consciously or unconsciously, we all have private pictures of the people who answer to certain names. For their book *The Best Baby Name Book in the Whole Wide World*, Bruce and Vicki Lansky and their researchers have developed a list of names and their stereotypes. Try guessing the stereotypes before you look at them.

Amanda	cultured
Amy	active
Angela	pleasant-looking, somewhat wistful
Ann	ladylike and honest, but not pretty
Elizabeth	seductive
Emily	a sideline-sitter
Jennifer	youthful, yet old-fashioned
Jessica	ambitious and beautiful
Linda	utterly feminine, popular and energetic
Lisa	very frail, well-liked
Margaret	a bit dowdy
Mary	wholesome, womanly, active
Melissa	passive but graceful
Nicole	average on all counts
Patricia	plain

Peggy	spirited, cute
Vicky	very sexy, exceedingly well-liked and frisky
Anthony	tall, wiry, elegant
Benjamin	dishonest
Brian	superstar—macho, dynamic
Charles	masculine, popular, but not overly active
Christopher	diligent, intelligent
David	not quite as terrific as Dave, but still a winner
Eric	a big winner—very strong
Francis	passive, neuter
James	a big winner in all categories
Jason	hugely popular
John	trustworthy, surprisingly passive but manly
Justin	vigorous
Kevin	very popular, virile
Mark	spoiled
Michael	very, very popular
Nicholas	very strong
Richard	very good-looking
Stephen	a winner in all areas
Thomas	large, soft and cuddly
William	kind but not aggressive

#### Composition:

On your own paper, explore your feelings about the “unity between [your]self and [your] name.” Consider Ellison’s essay as a model in format if not in length.





## Ralph Ellison from *Hidden Name and Complex Fate*

### SELECTION TEST

**Directions:** Select the letter of the answer that best completes each numbered item.

1. When he says that our names "must be made our own," Ellison means that
  - a. a person must work to establish his or her own identity
  - b. we should not accept the names our parents give us but instead should choose our own names
  - c. children must learn to deal with taunts about their names
  - d. a writer must work hard to become famous
2. Which names does Ellison imply are the "gift of others"?
  - a. first names only
  - b. first and middle names only
  - c. only those first and middle names that honor specific people
  - d. first, middle, and last names
3. The "European names" that Ellison says "represent a certain triumph of the spirit" are
  - a. the first names of most Americans, which have European origins
  - b. ancient names, like Hercules and Portia
  - c. names that honor famous people of European background, like the Franklin D. Roosevelt in Franklin D. Roosevelt Jones
  - d. initials, like the T. S. in T. S. Eliot
4. What does Ellison mean by names representing "a certain triumph of the spirit"?
  - a. The names, though old, are still in use and have fascinating etymologies.
  - b. The great people who bore these names triumphed as individuals and achieved the immortality of being famous.
  - c. The great people who bore these names were all self-sacrificing individuals who were rewarded in the afterlife.
  - d. Anyone bearing these names today must triumph over the taunts of others.
5. What group does Ellison imply has a traditional understanding of the suggestive power of names?
  - a. philosophers
  - b. New England Transcendentalists
  - c. black Americans
  - d. parents
6. Ellison attributes this understanding of the suggestive power of names to
  - a. religious faith
  - b. facility with language
  - c. introspection
  - d. family pride
7. As a child, what were Ellison's earliest feelings about being named after Ralph Waldo Emerson?
  - a. He found his name magical and also uncomfortable.
  - b. He knew that he would one day be a famous writer.
  - c. He was inspired to be self-reliant and love nature.
  - d. He had no intimation that his name was at all unusual.
8. The boy felt that his name contained a treasure that he could not possess until he was
  - a. worthy of it
  - b. older
  - c. married
  - d. a writer
9. According to Ellison, our names must become \_\_\_\_\_ as well as shields for us.
  - a. symbols
  - b. initials
  - c. masks
  - d. clothing

### Answers

1. A
2. D
3. A
4. B
5. C
6. B
7. A
8. A
9. C

10. In speaking of "the magic involved in naming," the author implies that one's name can possibly affect one's
- a. thinking about life
  - b. self-image
  - c. ability to acquire friends
  - d. understanding of abstract terms
11. What does Ellison now believe were his father's reasons for choosing to name his son after Ralph Waldo Emerson?
- a. His father had no idea of the suggestive power of names and simply chose a name he had come across in his reading.
  - b. His father admired Emerson's ideas and was aware of the suggestive power of names.
  - c. His father was originally from New England and wanted his son always to remember the family's New England roots.
  - d. His father was distantly related to Emerson and wanted to impress others with this famous family connection.
12. What, in general, has been the effect on the adult Ellison of being named for Ralph Waldo Emerson?
- a. The name has inspired and obliged him to achieve literary greatness.
  - b. The name has obstructed his talent by making him feel humble and inadequate.
  - c. The name has come to be meaningless and insignificant to him.
  - d. The name has given him literary clout with critics.
13. Ellison first considered the photographic lens he found as a boy to be
- a. unusual and wonderful
  - b. peculiar and worthless
  - c. commonplace but interesting
  - d. symbolic of something about his life
14. Ellison compares his boyhood failure to "master" his name to
- a. the experience of Mimi Livisay
  - b. the experience of Franklin D. Roosevelt Jones
  - c. his boyhood experience with the photographic lens
  - d. his father's experience with the writings of Ralph Waldo Emerson
15. Ellison's chief reason for describing Mimi Livisay's and Franklin D. Roosevelt Jones's experiences with their names is to
- a. make an analogy between Mimi Livisay and Franklin D. Roosevelt Jones
  - b. support his main idea with examples
  - c. support his main idea with statistics
  - d. amuse readers with interesting anecdotes
16. In drawing an analogy between his given name and a prized photographic lens, Ellison makes the point that both had an elusive
- a. explanation
  - b. value
  - c. origin
  - d. function

## Answers

- 10. B
- 11. B
- 12. A
- 13. A
- 14. C
- 15. B
- 16. B

## Composition:

On your own paper, explore your feelings about the "unity between [your]self and [your] name." Consider Ellison's essay as a model in format if not in length.

Name: \_\_\_\_\_ Class Period: \_\_\_\_\_ Date: \_\_\_\_\_

## NAME POSTER

### An Introduction to "Personal Voice"

To be Used with Ellison's Essay "Hidden Name and Complex Fate"

On a piece of colored paper that you have received, create a NAME POSTER by following these instructions:

1. Measure the same distance from each side and draw a rectangle in the middle of the page.
2. Display your first name, your last name, OR another name which people call you at school inside the rectangle. Be creative in your display, using an image that says something distinctive about your personality. You can fashion the letters of your name in any way that you choose, as long as they are readable and school appropriate, but write only ONE of your names in the rectangle.  
Suggestions for the name display: comic strip paper, glitter, foil, fabric, wrapping paper, point, colored markers or pencils, crayons, pictures, etc.
3. In the space around your name display, write an explanation, a story, or a description which addresses ONE OR ALL of the following:
  - a. The origin or meaning of your name
  - b. Why you have this name
  - c. Why you have chosen this particular material to display your name
  - d. Why you like or do not like your name
  - e. Other writing connected to your name in the rectangle

Fill up the entire space around the name display. You can divided it up into four sections, you can wind your words around and around the page, or you can place the words in another way—just be sure to fill up the space.

Be prepared to briefly tell the class about your poster on the due date. The posters will then be hung up in the room for a few weeks. Your grade will be based on effort, creativity, and following directions.

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Scoring Rubric	
Following Directions	30 ____
Creativity	30 ____
Neatness	10 ____
Effort for Desc./Narrative	20 ____
Presentation	10 ____
Total	100 ____
Comments:	

THIS IS THE SPACE TO WRITE YOUR DESCRIPTION AND NARRATIVE.

NAME

THIS IS THE SPACE TO WRITE YOUR DESCRIPTION AND NARRATIVE.