**Ralph Ellison – “Flying Home”**

Ralph Waldo Ellison is one of the most celebrated authors in American literature. He is best known for his novel, *Invisible Man*. His short story “Flying Home” revolves around a Tuskegee airman named Todd. The Tuskegee school opened in 1941 as a separate training facility for African Americans who wished to become pilots in the armed forces. While the school was initially seen as a great opportunity, by 1943 Ellison felt the entire endeavor was “window dressing” that had been “palmed off on the American people as the real thing.”

This story deals with issues of identity. Consider both the cultural identity and the individual identity of the protagonist as you read. Todd is conflicted about his place in the African American community and the armed forces. His sense of self gives readers insight into Ellison’s understanding of the African American experience.

**Respond to the following questions and quotations as you read.**

1. What is Todd’s first concern when he regains consciousness in the field? Why is this significant?

2. What are Todd’s feelings toward Jefferson in the beginning of the story? Provide a quote that supports your response.

3. On page 150 Todd remembers a letter he received from his girlfriend. Explain what Todd sees as true humiliation.

4. On page 151, Todd says that his plane is “the only dignity I have”. Where does Todd’s sense of self come from?

5. “He felt cut off from them by age, by understanding, by sensibility, by technology, and by his need to measure himself against the mirror of other men’s appreciation” (152). How does Todd compare himself to other African Americans? List some of the distinctions he makes between himself and Jefferson.

6. Note the reference to buzzards as “jimcrows” on page 155. Critic Busby says that, “Like the jim crow laws that institutionalized segregation and forced black people to accept separate and unequal treatment, Todd is a ‘jimcrow’ pilot, allowed only to fly an ‘advanced trainer’ in a separate and unequal air force”. Do you agree or disagree with this assertion? Explain.

7. How does Todd interpret Jefferson’s story about flying? Hint: “Todd felt uneasy. He wanted to laugh at the joke, but his body refused, as of an independent will. He felt as he has as a child when after he had chewed a sugar-coated pill which his mother had given him, she had laughed at his efforts to remove the terrible taste” (158).

8. Describe Todd’s memory (the italicized portion on pp. 162-166). How does this memory help him forge a connection with Jefferson?

9. What does Graves plan to do with Todd? What is his opinion of African Americans as pilots?

10. Who helps Todd? What does he learn at the end of the story? How has his sense of identity changed? Consider the following critical responses to the ending:

He “flies ‘home,’ not to a place but to an understanding of himself and his

identity” (Mintz 67).

Ellison’s “Flying Home” introduces “the theme of the young, ignorant, and

educated African-American (Todd) who considers himself above the wise,

knowing, but apparently ignorant older working class man (Jefferson), whose

knowledge comes from familiarity with life as interpreted in the African-

American vernacular” (Mazurek 20). By the end of the story, Todd

understands that while he is an ambitious individual with lofty goals, he

needs to maintain a firm connection with his ancestry.

As Todd is carried away, he finally “realizes his own pride has estranged him

from his roots” (Busby 35).