CHAPTER III

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Ralph Ellison once observed:

For the racial situation has become like an irrational sea in which Americans flounder like convoyed ships in a gale. The phrase rotates like a gyroscope of irony of which the Negro maintains a hazardous stability as the sea tossed ship of his emotions whirls him willy-nilly along; lunging him toward the shoals of bitter rejection (of the ideology that makes him the sole sacrifice of America's tragedy); now away towards the mine strewn shores of hopelessness (that despite the war democracy is still discussed on an infantile level and himself in pre-adult terms); now smashing him flush against waves of anger that threaten to burst his seams in revolt (that his condition is so outrageously flagrant); now teetering him clean on a brief, calm, sunlit swell of self-amusement (that he must cling to the convoy though he doubts its direction); now knocking him erect, like a whale on its tail, before plunging again into the still dark night of the one lone "rational" thing - the pounding irrational sea. (SA, 96)

This is a poetic, poignant, bitter, eloquent statement of the state of the blacks in America. The experiences of the blacks in America, in a complex, race ridden country, are terrible. It is a nightmarish situation that shuns explanation due to its absurdity. Negroes have fought long to make their tale known. They crave that the world knows how they have been humiliated, insulted and injured.

Negroes are ignored and neglected to such an extent that they begin to feel that they are invisible. Through the writings of Ralph Ellison, we become aware of the terrible experiences of the blacks in America - the humiliations and shame they have to tolerate. The blacks are suppressed in America and it is a painful situation because
they had made many sacrifices for the nation to come into its own. The nation, United States of America was formed, the Constitution made, democracy declared - and then began the sufferings of the blacks. Slavery was abolished after the Civil War due to the efforts of Abraham Lincoln, but the stigma of slavery and colour continued to haunt the blacks. Segregation was unjust and painful.

The blacks are poor and suffer. Their life in the slums and ghettos is wretched. They work hard the whole day and live miserably in spite of it. There is no reward, no joy, no success in their lives. They carve out their joys from their sorrows taking shelter in their centuries old culture. Their folk traditions and rituals provide them with some sustenance. Myths, folktales and their jam-sessions where they talk freely, give them a sense of their humanity. Music, jazz and the blues, are other sources of joy and a means to transcend their condition.

The whites are irrationally prejudiced against the blacks - they treat them as animals, lacking humanity. The blacks, according to the whites are fools, immoral and sex symbols. The blacks have to live in a white dominated society. They are a minority, and it is difficult living in such a prejudiced world. They are looked upon as uncivilized and primitive. Apart from these humiliating ideas about them, the whites also inflict violence on the blacks. The hatred the whites feel is expressed in the lynching, bashing and castration that the blacks have to suffer. There is no law to which they can go seeking refuge - even the police are prejudiced against them. Thus, the experience of the blacks in America is terrible. We shall now endeavour to go deep into the psyche of the black and understand and express their experience. The tools we shall use in this task are the works of Ralph Ellison, who has very sensitively spoken of his people in his works. We shall be relying heavily on his
essays and texts to bring out the experiences of the blacks in America, as seen through the works of Ralph Ellison.

Ralph Ellison begins his novel with:

I am an invisible man ...... I am a man of substance, of flesh and bone, fiber and liquids ...... when they approach me they see only my surroundings, themselves, or figments of their imagination - indeed everything and anything except me. (IM, 3)

These lines bring us to the core of the problems of the Negroes. They live in this world, but are constantly made to feel as though they do not exist. Their pain begins from here. This feeling of not being real for others gives rise to a quest for identity and visibility. At times as the invisible man says,

Or again, you often doubt if you really exist. You wonder whether you aren't simply a phantom in other people's minds. Say, a figure in a nightmare which a sleeper tries with all his strength to destroy. It's when you feel like this that, out of resentment you begin to bump people back. And let me confess, you feel that way most of the time. You ache with the need to convince yourself that you do exist in the real world, that you're part of all the sound and anguish, and you strike out with your fists, you curse and you swear to make them recognize you. And alas, it's seldom successful. (IM, 3)

This is the bitter truth. What is happening in America is that one has to recognize the irrepressible moral reality of the Negro. Instead of the single democratic ethic for all men, there were two: One, the idealized ethic of the Constitution and the Declaration of Independence reserved for white men, and, the other, the practical and pragmatic ethic designed for Negroes and such humanities, which took the form of discrimination. Discrimination on the grounds of race stole the humanity of the Negro - and that is the basic truth of the Negro experience.
It is the task of the creative artist to arouse the conscience and consciousness of man to this humanity not only of self, but of other humans, too. Mark Twain, and his Huckleberry Finn knew that their Jim, was a human first, a slave later. As Ellison says of Jim:

a man who in some ways was to be envied and who expressed his essential humanity in his desire for freedom, his will to possess his own labor, in his loyalty and capacity for friendship, and in his love for his wife and child. Jim is drawn in all his ignorance and superstition, with his good traits and his bad. He, like all men, is ambiguous; limited in circumstance but not in possibility. (SA, 31)

Thus, the Negro is like any other human being, but for the fact that he has had to continually fight for equality since Emancipation. They have had to tolerate the stigma of color and forced alienation, which outrages their natural identification with their country. The Negroes passionately believe in the democratic ideal. The truth is that their reality and experience of America are much deeper and profound than the white Americans. Their experience is broader, varied, diverse and makes for the firm belief and faith in democracy and their right to have it, in spite of all the white prejudice and actions and reactions against them. Ralph Ellison's experiences in his childhood give an explanation of the above line. In spite of the world, each Negro had faith:

Like Huck, we observed, we judged, we imitated and evaded as we could the dullness, corruption and blindness of "civilization." We were undoubtedly comic because as the saying goes, we weren't supposed to know what it was all about. But, to ourselves, we were "boys", members of a wild, free outlaw tribe which transcended the category of race. Rather we were Americans born into the forty sixth state, and thus, into the context of the Negro-American post Civil War history, "frontiers men". (SA, XV)

It is this sense of faith in one's humanity and reality, unlike the defensive, self-
hating attitude of some Negroes, that can make one transcend his condition and explore the unlimited possibilities thereby available to him. These are as it should be, in reality, the Negro is lost, fumbling, searching, in a quest for identity. As Ellison has his hero of *Invisible Man* running from home to College, to New York, Harlem, Liberty Paints, the Brotherhood, and so on. He is in a quest and this arises out of the fact that America has kept no place for the Negroes - they have to fight and achieve it. Though the American whites know it, they refuse to accept the Negro. As William Lyne quotes Spike Leeds:

> Black people are the greatest artists on this earth, probably because we are the finest people on this earth. White people know that ..... (but) I still can't catch a cab. Ask any black man. Bill Cosby couldn't catch a cab if he wanted to. They ain't stopping for him. ¹

The black is always running, trying to achieve that which constantly slips out of his hands. The most dominant theme in the works of Ellison is the search for cultural identity. The protagonist of *Invisible Man* seeks identity not for himself alone, not as an individual but as a black man in a white society. He searches for self definition in terms of the values of life as gained from his unique black American experiences. One way that Ellison jumps over the gap between the uniqueness and the universality of the black experience is through folklore. All his works are full of folktales, tellers, trinkets, toasts, songs, sermons, jazz, jive and jokes. For the blacks to define themselves and their experience, Ellison singles out black folklore. He says that through folklore, the Negro backs away from his dreadful chaotic experience, and moves back from himself and then depicts the horrifying as well as the humorous aspects of his experience. The projection of his experience is then metaphysical and his complex vision gets clearly described in his folklore. In Ellison's own words:
Negro folklore, evolving within a larger culture which regarded it as inferior was an especially courageous expression. It announced the Negro's willingness to trust his own experience, his own sensibilities as to the definition of reality, rather than allow his masters to define these crucial matters for him. His experience is that of America and the West, and is as rich a body of experience as one would find anywhere. (SA, 172)

Ellison, however, insists that the black experience is "on its profoundest level an American experience." So when he uses black folklore in his fiction, he adapts it to the myths of the larger American and Western cultures:

For example, there is the old saying amongst Negroes: if you're black, stay back; if you're brown, stick around; if you're white, you're right. And there is the joke Negroes tell on themselves about being so black they can't be seen in the dark. In my book this sort of thing was merged with the meanings which blackness and light have long had in Western mythology: evil and goodness, ignorance and knowledge and so on. In my novel, the narrator's development is one through blackness to light; that is, from ignorance to enlightenment: invisibility to visibility. He leaves the South and goes North: this as you will notice in reading Negro folktales, is always the road to freedom, the movement upward. You have the same thing again when he leaves his underground cave for the open. (SA, 173)

This movement from South to North is another very important part of the black experience. There is a hope in the blacks that the North is different and shall free them from their troubles. The hero of Invisible Man also follows on the same track, realizing later that cultural roots and identity are most important to attain one's freedom, within one's unique experience.

The rituals adopted by blacks and expressed in Ellison's works come from
myth and folk wisdom. As Susan L. Blake has said:

Ritual is the repetition of action for symbolic purpose. It abstracts experience from history by extending it over time and emphasizing form over context. Ritual terms social experience into the symbol of mythic experience. When Ellison puts elements of black American folk experience into series with similar elements of American or Western mythology, he is ritualizing them, making each experience a repetition of the other. He is removing the black experience from its historical time and place and replacing it in the long run of time, erasing its distinctiveness, heightening its similarity to other experience. He is translating an expression of the way things work in a particular, man-made social world to an expression of the way they work in a larger, uncontrollable, cosmic world.²

The ritual described in the Battle Royal scene implies and explains the black experience. It speaks of the initiation of the blacks into the white society. Through the nude belly dancer, the battle, the scramble for gold coins, the black young boys are initiated into their limitations and a knowledge of the white world, with its culture dominated by sex, power and money. The other message for the black boys is that these things are taboo for them. The whites enjoy the full degeneration of the blacks. The blacks are helpless in the situation, they feel awful but can neither fight nor escape.

The black man finds himself in such a situation many times. To quote Susan L. Blake:

The Battle Royal is rooted in the slave experience. It goes back to the many-versioned folk-tale "The Fight", in which Old Marster and his neighbour put their two strongest slaves against each other and stake their plantations on the outcome. It has been used by Wright in Black Boy, Faulkner in Absalom, Absalom, and Killens in Youngblood to dramatize social relations between whites and blacks. It encapsulates the physical, economic, psychological, and sexual exploitation of slavery (and dramatizes the slaves'
comprehension of it) by identifying this ritual of a slave society as a "keeping of taboo to appease the gods" and an initiation ritual to which all green horns are subjected.³

The 'battle royal' is a rite that enforces white seniority, and debases black humanity.

Ellison proposes that Negro folk culture is an indestructible monument to the national past, as it is made up of three centuries of American history. The experience of the Negroes in this complex society is a complicated interplay of culture, history, and personality, race and social classes. Each American Negro responds to two diametrically opposite cultural traditions, and being so suspected he is caught on the horns of a dilemma. If one identifies too closely with folk culture, he rejects the dominant American civilization and when he goes closer to the life style of the whites, he is to reject his Negro culture. The educated Negro often attempts to bury his past which stinks of poverty and is reminiscent of his earlier degradation, shame and pain. He attempts to wipe out all Negritude from his behaviour so that he can be accepted by the whites. He feels different from the Negro masses by virtue of his education, income and social status. Slavery was a reality and happened on American soil - it cannot be forgotten and it shapes and moulds the minds of both the whites and the blacks. The white prejudices have their roots in the slavery days; the black hatred of whites has the same root (slavery).

In his Shadow and Act, Ellison says that the purpose of novelistic writing is "converting experience into symbolic action." In Invisible Man, he creates a nameless narrator whose adventures, always approximate and unspecific in time and place, represent in symbolic form the overall historic experience of the most politically active element of the American Negro people. It is through his artistic form that any writer gives meaning to the experience of his group - this is Ellison's
view and it is echoed very clearly by Stephen Dedalus' ambition in James Joyce's *Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, "to forge in the smithy of my soul the uncreated conscience of my race." As Richard Kostelanetz says,

In the major sequences of *Invisible Man*, the narrator confronts a succession of possible individual choices which, as they imply changes in group behaviour, have a symbolic political dimension for Negro people. When an alternative seems adequate enough to win the narrator's favour, his acceptance becomes, in effect, a pragmatic test of its viability. After he discovers the posited solution is inadequate to his needs, as all of them are, he samples another. Although Ellison does not have his narrator confront every known political possibility, the novel is still the most comprehensive one-volume-fictional-symbolic treatment of the history of the American Negro in the twentieth century. 4

The narrator of *Invisible Man* eagerly tries to find and test all the opportunities for Negro existence in the Southern system, and like all young Negroes in the twentieth century assumes the ideas of Booker T. Washington. The narrator is also seen to remember that as a young man, "I visualized myself as a potential Booker T. Washington." He believed that the most successful Negroes were those who proved themselves necessary to the white society, either because of their trade/profession or because they maintained order with the Negroes. The Negroes had to use their intelligence and skill, character and behaviour to make it of value to the whites. This was Washington's wisdom. The Negro was to please the white by being respectful, hard working, clean and responsible for himself and his group. Again, if the Negro wanted to be successful, he must not defy and challenge in any manner, the system of white supremacy. The Negro must campaign for "social responsibility" and not "social equality". The fear, Washington felt, was that if the Negro craved equality, he would disrupt the stability, and, at the same time such a revolt would have no chance of success as the Negroes were a minority. The cost to Negro lives
would be too exorbitant to be worthwhile.

The Negro of the twentieth century America has to learn that his success is in the recognition he receives from the white society, rather than the respect of his own people. This was one of the major lessons Washington got from his life; in his autobiography is a catalogue of honours bestowed upon him by the whites. Washington enjoyed lecturing to white southerners and racially mixed groups. What a Negro's peers thought of him was not as important as what the white folks judged. Washington was sure that the Negroes could be successful in America if they obeyed the prescriptions entrenched in white authority. Doctor Bledsoe, in *Invisible Man* is formed on the image of Washington. The narrator is seen at a time to crave to be like Bledsoe. Through the narrator's aspirations and experiences, Ellison reveals the experiences of the blacks in America,

The key stone of Washington's programme was that Negroes must renounce social equality as a goal, accept white supremacy as a precondition of their attaining an improved economic position which would result from humble and industrious living within the framework of southern segregation. Together with industry, education was the key to Negro improvement.  

Doctor Bledsoe's behaviour is downright flattering in front of the whites. The narrator is confused with the words of Dr. Bledsoe about whites and his behaviour towards them. May be that was the way to exist in this world. The blacks in America had to experience the need to fawn the whites. The narrator recalls Dr. Bledsoe's words,

I had to be strong and purposeful to get where I am. I had to wait and plan and lick around..... Yes I had to act the nigger! (*IM*, 110)

and again, of Bledsoe's behaviour,
Hadn't I seen him approach white visitors too often with his hat in his hand, bowing humbly and respectfully? Hadn't he refused to eat in the dining hall with the white guests of the school, entering only after they had finished and then refusing to sit down, but remaining standing, his hat in hand, while he addressed them eloquently, then leaving with a humble bow? (IM, 82)

Dr. Bledsoe's attitude to life, ambition and the way to tackle whites again encapsulates the experience of many blacks in America. For ambitious blacks, flattery was a way of life and means of survival. They had to achieve what they yearned for, a life like the one led by whites with power, wealth, status. Dr. Bledsoe had got it all. The narrator recalls, aspiring to be like Bledsoe, he was the example of everything I hoped to be; influential with wealthy men all over the country; consulted in matters concerning the race; a leader of his people. What was more, while black and bald and everything the whites poked fun at, he had achieved power and authority; had, while black and wrinkle headed, made himself more important in the world than most southern white men. They could laugh at him but they could not ignore him. (IM, 78)

This hoping craving wistfulness is also a part of the black experience. The blacks find all they desire fading away on the horizon and they run after it, to catch it, hold it and make it their own. It is this yearning that makes them a scapegoat for the cruel joke of the whites, "Keep this nigger boy running".

The blacks are constantly misled by the whites. The whites hold out prospective proposals for them, and once they fall for their schemes, they keep them running. The narrator is kept running after he receives the scholarship in his briefcase. That night he dreams of his grandfather smiling at him and ordering him to open his briefcase and read what was inside,
finding an official envelope with a State seal; and inside the
envelope I found another and another, endlessly, and I thought I
would fall of weariness. "Them's years", he said, "now open that
one". And I did and in it I found an engraved document containing
a short message in letters of gold "Read it", my grandfather said,
"Out loud!", "To Whom It May Concern", I intoned, "Keep This
Nigger Boy Running". I awoke with the old man's laughter ringing
in my ears. (IM, 26)

This is Ellison's master stroke - within the above few lines, he underlines the
black experience with irony and pathos, giving the bitter truth of reality and the
mocking truth of this knowledge. The letter has the State seal in it - the envelope
is official looking, the message is written in gold - the black boy has to run, run
and run. The scheme of torturing the black is deep, made by the whites in
power, official. The blacks feel that the whole system, from top to bottom is
against them, and conspiring to torment them. Their torture is endless and
incessant, as, seen in the above picture. The narrator gets tired of opening the
envelopes - "Them's years" says his grandfather. The suffering of the blacks, the
constant struggle will go on for years and years. This nigger boy like millions of
others shall keep running for years. The narrator runs from the south to the college;
from the college after a taste of the real Bledsoe and a nightmarish experience with
Norton, when he is expelled from college and sent to New York, where he hopes
that everything will be all right. At New York he goes from one benefactor to the
other and has to face dismissal everywhere. Emerson Jr. sends him to Liberty Paints
factory, where he is rejected and hurt badly by Lucius Brockway. He runs to Mary
Rambo; then on to the Brotherhood. Jack with the glass eye sends him from one area
and assignment to another, from Harlem to speaking on the woman question. He is
constantly on the move and gets no sustenance anywhere. This experience of the
narrator mirrors the reality of the black experience.
Another aspect of the black experience in America is the move upward, from South to North. All blacks dream of moving to the North where they feel they will be better off. The protagonist of *Invisible Man* is disillusioned when he makes this move. The short story "Slick Gonna Learn" deals with the harshness of black life in the segregated South. In "The Birthmark", a lynching story, the violence and racism is stark and biting. The black characters in both the stories are terrorised by a viciously racist society.

Through these two stories, Ellison gives a very vivid picture of the black experience in America. As said by Robert G. O'Meally,

Ellison portrays black Americans as the hapless, angry victims of social abuse, tracked in the cul-de-sacs of their environment; their birthmark like Willie's is a scar of castration. It is also the mark of blackness, which covers their bodies and limits their freedom in the New World. Ritually, the lynching of Willie signifies white society's deadly attempt to remove America's black blemish, to get shut of the Negro. According to young Ellison, the solution, if one exists, is to channel black rage into clearly defined political action.6

Clara, in "The Birthmark", feels that if the blacks had been outspoken and expressed their anger, their little brother's fate would not have been as it has been. In the Buster and Riley stories, we get a picture of the black experience through the young boys. The boys discuss their parents' rage and frustration when they are dealt a wry hand by the whites. Their anger finds a vent in the bitter violent scoldings and lashings which the two boys have to suffer. Their parents work hard for the whites but come back humiliated and unhappy. The boys dream of having wings and flying to Chicago and New York, where they will live a better life. The mother figures in Ellison's fiction behave harshly to the young ones, though there is a strain of
tenderness beneath their hard words. These mother figures are aware of the difficult world their children have to face as young men and so prepare them for that world by their harshness, strictness and conservative values.

The Negro's life in a racist white dominated society is relentlessly unreal: unreal in the sense that the Negro as a group is loved, hated, persecuted, feared, and envied, while as an individual he is unfelt, unheard, unseen - to all intents and purposes he is invisible. The narrator in *Invisible Man* is throughout a nameless "I". His struggle for identity goes on, he thirstily grabs each opportunity given by others to look for a name and identity. Sadly, he is disillusioned again and again. His final loss of identity comes with his fall into an underground hole - coffin, cradle or what you will.

Ralph Ellison's concern with the Negro is both subjective and objective. He is one who has made his place in the white world. His anxiety about the past, present and future of his people is deep. In *Shadow and Act*, he gives a detailed and compelling definition of the life of the Afro-American in America.

It is not skin colour which makes a Negro American but cultural heritage as shaped by the American experience, the social and political predicament; a sharing of that "concord of sensibilities" which the group expresses through historical circumstance... being a Negro American has to do with the memory of slavery and the hope of emancipation and the betrayal by allies and the revenge and contempt inflicted by our former masters after Reconstruction, and the myths, both Northern and Southern, which are propagated in justification of that betrayal... it has to do with a special perspective on the national ideals and the national conduct, and with a tragi-comic attitude towards the universe. It has to do with special emotions evoked by the details of cities and country sides, with forms of labour and with forms of pleasure; with sex and with love, with food and with drink, with machines and with
animals; with climates and with dwelling, with places of worship and places of entertainment; with garments and dreams and idioms of speech; with manners and customs, with religion and art, with life styles and hoping, and with that special sense of predicament and fate which gives direction and resonance to the freedom movement. (SA, 131)

Ralph Ellison wrote *Shadow and Act*, a compilation with a single intention - the definition of Afro-American life. In it, Ellison sometimes:

gently punctures, sometimes wields an ax, against inadequate definitions of black experience. In place of what he detects as false prophesies, usually uttered by social scientists, Ellison chooses as broad a frame of reference as possible to interpret black experience in richly optimistic terms, "Who wills to be a Negro?" he asks rhetorically. "I do!" 8

Ellison speaks of the prejudices of the whites against the blacks. The whites suffer from a guilty conscience, which is a very personal problem, and, which though white Americans' are very aware of, they choose to deny and ignore. This prejudiced attitude of the whites makes for the terribleness of the black experience. The conjured up images and characters appear darkly in the white mind:

It is practically impossible for the white American to think of sex, of economics, his children or women folk, or of sweeping socio-political changes, without summoning into consciousness fear flecked images of black men. Indeed it seems that the Negro has become identified with those unpleasant aspects of conscience and consciousness which it is part of the American character to avoid. Thus when a literary artist attempts to tap the charged springs issuing from his inner world, up float his mis-shapen and bloated images of the Negro, like the fetid bodies of the drowned, and he turns away, discarding an ambiguous substance which the artists of other cultures would confront boldly and humanise into the stuff of tragic art. (SA, 100)

The passage expresses the depth of the whites' prejudice against and hatred of
the blacks. Ellison says that just as he has done most blacks have disciplined themselves to live sanely as humans in a very hostile America. His novel is not the result of the struggle that is political, but one that is a disciplined literary struggle. The purpose of art and literature according to Ellison was to highlight all the humanity that was there even in the most inhuman conditions in which man found himself in this chaotic world:

Wright believed in the much abused notion that novels are "weapons" - the counterpart of the dreary notion, common among most minority groups, that novels are instruments of good social relations. But I believe that true novels, even when most pessimistic and bitter, arise out of an impulse to celebrate human life and therefore are ritualistic and ceremonial at their core. Thus they would preserve as they destroy, affirm as they reject. (SA, 114)

Thus it defines one aspect of the novel form - the form chosen by Ellison to speak of the black experience. Even in his short stories we see the pessimism and optimism struggling to transcend the social, psychological situation in which his characters find themselves.

In the three Buster and Riley stories and in "Flying Home" and "King of the Bingo Game", the black characters are struggling to take to flight and overcome their gruelling wretched conditions. In the "King of the Bingo Game", the un-named hero realises that his battle for freedom and identity must be waged not against individuals or even groups but against history and fate. For a while he feels that in the bingo wheel lies his future and fortune. He forgets his name..... "Who am I?" he screamed. Then he was reborn. For as long as he pressed the button he was The man - who - pressed - the button - who - held - the prize - who - was - the - king - of Bingo. Like the protagonist of *Invisible Man*, the king becomes free when he
realises that he has been a sleep walker, a fool, naive enough to accept without a question the decisions and judgements given out by an indifferent bingo wheel of fate, circumstance and of history. He becomes aware of the cruelty of the culture and society in which he has grown up that has shaped his personality and docility. The moment he is aware, he becomes free and is in control of his situation and life.

In "Flying Home", when Todd realises the cultural affinity he shares with old Jefferson, he gets an insight into his sense of freedom and reality. Jefferson's folk art teaches him to distance himself from his predicament, and thus transcend it, maintaining his humanity in the inhuman world he lives in. Todd is released from his false sense of values, and, looking at old Jefferson feels his values are redemptive. Todd knows that "Some how he had been his sole salvation in an insane world of outrage and humiliation." Ellison's characters suffer the atrocities of a white dominated racist society, and, manage to come out triumphant. As Robert Penn Warren has said of Ralph Ellison,

He is fully aware of the blankness of the fate of many Negroes, and the last thing to be found in him is any trace of that cruel complacency of some, who have, they think, mastered fate. If he emphasises the values of challenge in the plight of the Negro, he would not use this to justify that plight; and if he applauds the disciplines induced by that plight, he does so in no spirit of self congratulation, but in a spirit of pride in being numbered with these people.

No one has made more unrelenting statements of the dehumanising pressures that have been put upon the Negro. And Invisible Man is, I should say, the most powerful artistic representation we have of the Negro under these dehumanising conditions; and at the same time, a statement of the human triumph over those conditions. 9

The important metaphor of the "melting pot" was denied and it was denied by
those who have "made it" for, being reborn into a higher hierarchical status they view those who have not made it as a threat to their new status. Thus the whites show their opportunism and their short memory, by the way in which they quickly forget all the promises that have been made.

Ralph Ellison was concerned about Negro leadership as he read Lord Raglan's *The Hero*. The nature of leadership perplexed him. What hurt Ellison as he wrote *Invisible Man* was the fact that the blacks were not allowed to participate in the war as combat personnel in the armed forces in an equal manner. The blacks were caught in a quarrel with the federal government over this issue. This issue is reflected in Todd's adamant, ambitious attitude in "Flying Home". Even the hero of *Invisible Man* struggles through many situations just to prove that he can be an effective leader.

Another important aspect of the black experience is the life of the Negro child, the society he has to constantly confront, the education he receives, his faith in America, and, at the same time, his distrust in the American world. When a Negro child has no idea of how to relate and fit into his world into the cultural traditions of his parents and to the diversity of cultural forces in a pluralistic society, he is a culturally deprived child. The American society is full of diversity. The Negro child is not only educated in the class room, but on the street, where reality hits him full blast. He is taught not to try to get certain things and not try to do certain things because he would get frustrated and the outside world would not accommodate him. However poor and wretched the child may be, he is aware of the larger society in which he lives. It is through the street education that these children learn of music, the stock exchange, the electronic media, the world of words and music and the
electronic manipulation in music.

The environment in America keeps bouncing every one and every thing off each other. Education makes the bridges of communication. Communication is through words and the Negroes are rich in the ingenuity and diversity with which they use language. As Ralph Ellison has said, the Negroes possess a great virtuosity with music and the poetry of words. This is most visible in the Negro church.

When a Negro youngster comes North, he is in a dilemma - he feels dispossessed; the surroundings are alien and hostile; the environment is unapproachable due to his poverty, race and customs - this is part of the street education a Negro child receives. This education stems from a culture and forms a culture. It helps the Negro child to adjust into the strange world around him that gives him a sense of identity. As Ellison says, the larger society needs to imbibe a lot of the culture of the Negro;

the nation needs some of the very traits which they bring with them: the group discipline, the patience, the ability to withstand ceaseless provocation without breaking down or losing sight of their ultimate objective. We need aggressiveness. We need daring. We even need the little guy, who in order to prove himself, goes out to conquer the world.10

American society is so versatile that language, patterns, dress, food habits, life styles and even values keep changing. People then tend to forget the past and assume a phony self. As Ellison says:

Because the great mystery of identity in this country - really on the level of a religious mystery - and one of our greatest challenges, is that everybody here is an American and yet he is a member of
some unique minority. (GT, 69)

So the education needed is one that can teach an understanding and appreciation of the past and a respect for one's own and other's humanity. Ralph Ellison says personally that the discrimination against Negro youth was painful and loathed by them:

At Tuskegee during the thirties, most of the teachers would not speak to a student outside the classroom. The students resented it, I resented it - I'll speak personally - I could never take them very seriously as teachers. Something was in the way. A fatal noise had been introduced into the communication. (GT, 70-71)

This is again a part of black experience in America - a subtle humiliation; a violent hatred as a reaction.

The Negro child lives in poverty, and the ailments of poverty which are feared by people - the tuberculosis, crime, prostitution, illnesses, bootlegging. The toughest struggle was of this basically rural people fighting against an urban culture. The slums in which these children grew up were miserable to the eye, yet, the spark of imagination was always alive:

Here imagination was freely exercised by the kids. They made toys. They made and taught themselves to play musical instruments. They lived near the city dump, and they converted the treasures they found there to their own uses. This was an alive community in which the harshness of slum life was inescapable, but in which the strength, the imagination of the people, was much in evidence. (GT, 72)

White Americans had been dreaming of a lily - white fantastic America since 1713. In 1777, Thomas Jefferson began drafting a plan to free the Negroes and send them back to America. In 1815, Paul Cuffe shipped and settled at his own expense
thirty-eight fellow Negroes. This was followed by the American Colonization Society which aimed to establish in 1821 the colony of Liberia. Motives and cash flowed into the venture. The slave owners wanted to free America of the militant free Negroes who were protesting against slavery. The abolitionists initially went along with the scheme hoping to set right a great wrong. Some blacks also supported the scheme as they were tired and weary of the black and white mess in which they lived and hoped for some peace in their ancestral land. The purposes of different people were different and so the whole scheme fell flat. But the most surprising part was the fact that one could have thought that it could have been a success. At that time the slaves and free Negroes together made up eighteen percent of the population. The black had been in the new world for aeons and had been slowly transforming it and themselves being Americanized by it. The scheme was a result of "free floating irrationality". (GT, 105-106)

The Americans themselves do not know who they are, so they have not been able to resist the thousands of experiences of the black popular culture. Specially the children find ethnic resistance difficult. In the world of jazz, television, radio commercials, football and baseball, comic strips, book clubs, soap operas, slangs and drums, the melting pot did melt:

creating such deceptive metamorphosis and blending of identities, values and life styles that most American whites are culturally part Negro American without even realizing it. (GT, 108)

One group of the diverse groups living in America had to suffer and it was the Negroes who had to face the harsh realities of living in a democracy without freedom. As Ralph Ellison has said:
In the South of that day the bottom rung of the social ladder was reserved for that class of whites who were looked down upon as "poor white trash", and the area immediately beneath them and below the threshold of upward social mobility was assigned to Negroes, whether educated or ignorant, prosperous or poor. But although they were barely below the poor whites in economic status (and were sometimes better off), it was the Negroes who were designated the South's untouchable caste. As such they were perceived as barely uncontrollable creatures of untamed instincts and a group against whom all whites were obligated to join in the effort required for keeping them within their assigned place. This mindless but widely held perception was given doctrinal credibility through oppressive laws and an endless rhetorical reiteration of anti-Negro stereotypes. Negroes were seen as ignorant, cowardly, thieving, lying, hypocritical and superstitious in their religious beliefs and practices, morally loose, drunken, filthy of personal habit, sexually animalistic, rude, crude, and disgusting in their public conduct, and aesthetically just plain unpleasant. (GT, 174)

Such is the hatred and prejudice that the Negro has to experience in America. They are looked down upon, ignored and treated as less than human beings. What is most painful is to continue living in and facing this treatment. The Negro experience is material for rich literature. The Negro, sensitive and of a versatile cultural ability and experience, suffers. He struggles to fulfill his aspirations and to feel that he is a human being. The Negroes had to learn to live under pressure. They were forced into segregation, but so could live close to the larger American society. In this situation they were able to abstract from the other society many of their values, hopes, art and religion. By imbibing the other white culture, Negroes learnt to understand, endure and impose their own idea of the way the world should be, what a creature is man, and what would be the best American society. Negroes, living close to the whites, learnt to have a vision, dreams, values and a will to live and fight for what they felt was right.
Ralph Ellison felt that the unique black experience had to be used in literature, but, here there were many hurdles:

What is missing today is a corps of artistes and intellectuals who would evaluate Negro American experience from the inside, and out of a broad knowledge of how people of other cultures live, deal with experience, and give significance to their experience. We do too little of this .......... we depend upon sociologists to interpret our lives for us. It does not seem to occur to us that our interpreters might well be not so much prejudiced as ignorant, insensitive and arrogant. It doesn't occur to us that they might be of shallow personal culture, or innocent of the complexities of actual living. (GT, 300)

Again describing the state of the Negroes in the South, Ellison says:

There is no point in complaining over the past or apologising for one's fate. But for blacks, there are no hiding places down here, not in suburbia or in pent houses, neither in country nor in city. They are an American people who are geared to what is and who yet are driven by a sense of what it is possible for human life to be in this society. The nation could not survive being deprived of their pressure because, by the irony implicit in the dynamics of American democracy, they symbolize both its most stringent testing and the possibility of its greatest human freedom. (GT, 112)

The Negro is human and his experiences in white dominated America tend to prove him inhuman. The black constantly struggles against this. Ellison himself felt and lived through most of the black experiences, and, so his expression of it is very real and poignant. His essays both in Shadow and Act and in Going to the Territory reflect the experiences of the blacks. His novel is an account of an identityless Negro. All his stories show the suffering and torments of the Negro, but at the same time his works show the simple joys of his people and also their attempts to transcend their situation. His works show the humanity of the Negro.
A: STRATEGY OF SURVIVAL

Life is terrible if you are black and in America. Racial prejudice is the reason for the wretchedness faced by the Negroes in America. Slavery that had set its roots very deep in the American soil, continues to affect American society though it was abolished long ago. On paper, America got democracy but the true meaning of democracy has not been realized. In fact the ineffectiveness of the constitution to do justice by the blacks, has put the Negro question as an acid test and a question mark on the principles and ideals of democracy. The Negro keeps struggling to survive in this world, where he has lived for ages, yet which appears alien to him. For Negroes have been on the American soil as long as all the other people who inhabit this vast landmass. So it is a peculiar situation when the Negro finds himself an outcaste, a stranger in the larger society.

To survive in this white dominated racial society the Negro resorts to various strategies of survival. In this section, we shall endeavour to delineate all these strategies employed by the blacks in America. Ralph Ellison through his fiction and his essays has attempted to show this struggle for survival, and the means used for survival. His one and only novel, *Invisible Man* that reached a pinnacle of success in the literary world, outlines the theme of invisibility and how this is used for survival. The black humour and assuming the role of a buffoon is other tactics. The culture of the blacks and their artistic activities in the fields of literature, music and art gives them some respite in this cruel world. Some blacks find it convenient to flatter and fawn over the whites to survive. There are others who are ready to use violence and militancy to live. The more educated, senior Negroes know that self-reliance and independence are the ways of survival. Yet other Negroes take shelter
in religion and God. Folklore and folk culture and drowning themselves in these is
the means of survival for yet another group of blacks. Some mask themselves
completely in humour and invisibility and find life easier to tackle from behind the
mask. All these various tactics employed by the blacks find rich expression in the
works of Ralph Ellison. His characters are life like and their vibrancy brings out the
joys, pains, disillusionments and achievements of the blacks in America.

Invisibility is a means to survive. The nameless protagonist in Ellison's
*Invisible Man* discovers on the journey from childhood to manhood that his
blackness renders him invisible to most people. Invisibility is a recurrent theme in
the literature of black people. It stands both as a symbol of the modern concern with
identity and more simply as an ironic comment on the effect of the high visibility of
black people in a society that is predominantly white.

The visions of the blacks that Americans see are the familiar stereotypes: the
devoted servant, the victim, the exotic primitive, the savage beast and so on. Some
of these stereotypes wear masks to fool the white American. Masks are used both to
conceal and to disguise what is hidden from view. As a cover a mask shields only
the one who wears it; as a disguise, it serves to fool the viewer, to transform the
wearer into something he is not. In American culture, a mask is successful if it does
not resemble a real person; one hopes for a lack of recognition. One disadvantage
of the mask wearer is that one cannot always control the effect of the mask upon
one's own identity. Too often, there is the risk that one takes on the characteristics
one purports to be mocking or loses touch with the real self behind the mask. The
mask defends the blacks against known enemies, the whites, who inflict pain either
directly by oppressing the black or indirectly by refusing to see them. The true
nature of the blacks is hidden behind a mask. Stereotypes when they appear in black fiction, are often used as deliberate masquerades; Ralph Ellison says in his essay "Change the Joke and Slip the Yoke",

> Very often however the Negro's masking is motivated not so much by fear as by a profound rejection of the image created to usurp his identity. Sometimes, it is for the sheer joy of the joke; sometimes to challenge those who presume to know his identity. Nonetheless it is in the American grain. Benjamin Franklin, the practical scientist, skilled statesman and sophisticated lover, allowed the French to mistake him for Rousseau's natural man; Hemingway poses as a non literary sportsman, Faulkner as a farmer; Abraham Lincoln allowed himself to be taken for a simple country lawyer - until the chips were down. Here the "darky act" makes brothers of us all. America is a land of masking jokers. We wear the mask for purpose of aggression as well as for defense; when we are projecting the future and preserving the past. In short, the motives hidden behind the mask are as numerous as the ambiguities the mask conceals. (SA, 55)

Apart from the mask, the Negro community is one that suffers pain in silence:

> ...... an American Negro tradition which teaches one to deflect racial provocation and to master and contain pain. It is a tradition which abhors as obscene any trading on one's own anguish for gain or sympathy; which springs not from a desire to deny the harshness of existence but from a will to deal with it as men at their best have always done. It takes fortitude to be a man and no less to be an artist. Perhaps it takes even more if the black man would be an artist. (SA, 111)

So, this is the Negro man and the Negro spirit. Through the ages, man has fought his situation and sought to transcend it. To quote from Ellison's essay, "Richard Wright's Blues -":

> What were the ways by which other Negroes confronted their destiny? In the South of Wright's childhood there were three general ways: They could accept the role created for them by the whites and perpetually resolve the resulting conflicts through the
hope and emotional catharsis of Negro religion; they could repress their dislike of Jim Crow social relations while striving for a middle way of respectability, becoming - consciously or unconsciously - the accomplices of the whites in oppressing their brothers; or they could reject the situation, adopt a criminal attitude, and carry on an unceasing psychological scrimmage with the whites, which often flared forth into physical violence. (SA, 83)

The above quote sums up all the ways and means adopted by the Negroes to survive in America. In Ralph Ellison's novel, *Invisible Man*, we have a wonderful display of Negro characters, who portray the above three strategies of survival. Mary Rambo to an extent is a picture of the first class. She lives in Harlem and adapts to her surroundings; she remains at peace because of her faith in Negro religion and culture. The rich folklore of the blacks and music, jazz and spirituals give her respite and soothe her aching heart. When she helps the protagonist, she also encourages him to go ahead and do something for their people, as he is young and energetic. She wanted him to be a type of "race leader". The narrator recalls Mary with wistfulness and a bit of confusion, for though he believed in what she said but he could not have the faith and confidence she seemed to have in him:

*He found living with her pleasant except for her constant talk about leadership and responsibility* (IM, 196)

and again,

*Nor did I think of Mary as a "friend" she was something more-a force, a stable familiar force like something out of my past which kept me from whirling off into some unknown which I dared not face. It was a most painful position, for at the same time, Mary reminded me constantly that something was expected of me, some act of leadership, some newsworthy achievement; and I was torn between resenting her for it and loving her for the nebulous hope she kept alive.* (IM, 196-7)
The character of Mary Rambo reveals the strategy of survival adopted by one fraction of the Negro populace. In the Buster and Riley stories also we have the mother figures who have a deep faith in religion and God. In the short story "Afternoon" Riley's mother sits stitching for the white folk. As she works, she sings a spiritual song,

I got wings, you got wings.
All God's chillun got a-wings.
When I get to heaven gonna put on my wings.
Gonna shout all over God's heaven.
Heab'n, Heab'n.
Everybody talking about - heab'n aint going there.
Heab'n, Ah'm gonna fly all over God's heab'n. ("Afternoon")

and has faith in God, her religion and her identity as "Gods chillun". As Edith Schor says:

She brings into the machine age the hope of heavenly reward-wings in a future life-as recompense for bondage on earth. The spiritual that once served to make the condition of forced submission bearable is not part of the social pattern of voluntary submission.\(^\text{11}\)

Submission too has its hopes and aspirations and God's helping hand, these Negroes feel, reaches out to them. In "Flying Home", Jefferson relates a tale where he has reached heaven and is given a pair of wings, with a harness to fly around. He flies around heaven forgetting the warnings of St.Peter, who finally loses patience and sends him back to Alabama. Here again Jefferson, who has a moral sturdiness which helps him to survive, has the last word:

"While I was up here I was the flyingest sonofabitch that ever hit heaven".\(^\text{12}\)

His confidence in himself, his faith in his future, his faith in his Negro identity and culture make up Jefferson's strategy of survival.
In the Hickman stories, we have Reverend Hickman who preaches and teaches religion. As Robert G. O’Meally says, of one of these stories 'And Hickman Arrives' which is the first and the best of the Hickman stories:

"And Hickman Arrives" celebrates some of those Afro-American styles and values that historically have provided the means for confronting social chaos and that in particular characterized the freedom movement of the fifties. Hickman and the other elderly blacks relentlessly pursue their goal of seeing the Senator, but they maintain their severe composure without courting unnecessary white violence, without inviting death. With the Senator’s secretary, the old blacks are so 'solemn uncommunicative and quietly insistent' that they violate the woman's sense of the real....... what is the source of this close mouthed severe, "oriental" strength? The forty-four blacks here "seemed bound by some secret discipline", born of watchful experience and religious patience. And it is a practical style of life ritualized in their Church........ "These here folks don't understand nothing.... if we had been the kind to depend on the sword instead of on the Lord we'd been in our graves long ago." "You said it", another woman comments. "In the grave and done long finished molding!" These elderly blacks have been disciplined to pursue their lives honestly and robustly in a land where black carelessness serves as an invitation to white violence.13

So here are a set of characters that show that the Lord is the only solace available to the black. The black believed that human beings were born to suffer and die for other men. Those who believed in this were ready, even at the cost of their lives to do what was right:

"This attitude was characteristic of the nonviolent movement of the fifties. As Martin Luther King said of his threatened death, "It really doesn't matter with me now.... Mine eyes have seen the glory of the coming of the Lord."14

This invisible faith in God gives the blacks a strong shield which helps them to protect themselves. Behind this shield, the black grows as a human being, his
courage becomes indomitable and he learns to fight the situations he has to face in this world.

For Negroes, words, speech, expressions are very important— they give him a sense of his identity and his freedom. In the short story, "Juneteenth" another of the Hickman stories we see a celebration of this. In the story, Senator Sunraider recalls the part and sermon played by him as Bliss, the young boy in the June nineteenth celebrations, the annual black celebration commemorating Emancipation Day, June 19th 1865. In this story, like the Barbee and Trueblood episodes of Invisible Man, the spoken word achieves an almost poetic eloquence. As usual in Ellison's fictional world folklore and rituals play important roles in "Juneteenth". The dialogue sermon is distinctively Afro-American in its form, its ideas and its allusion to folklore, spirituals and biblical tales. Hickman and Bliss talk of the Afro-American history of which the two main movers were language and music. African languages were discouraged in the New World: Whites "divided and divided and divided us again like a gambler shuffling and cutting a deck of cards", says Hickman, until the memory of Africa was "ground down into powder and blown on the winds of foggy forgetfulness". They left the blacks without words and without their talking drums. The talking drums of the African Negroes helped them to communicate over time, place and group. The drum reverberated the conscience and hopes and aspirations of the blacks. Without language and music (thus without the traditional means of communication, celebration and ritual) Africans in America did not know who they were. They were dead, culturally like the valley of dry bones. Despite being treated wretchedly the Africans were reborn in America as Afro-Americans when they discovered that America and Africa were basically alike: "the earth was red and black like the earth of Africa." Hickman proclaimed to his listeners that the Africans
were reborn in America after they heard the word from God; they woke up clapping, dancing and singing. Through the power of language, Negroes have clung to a sense of tradition, and have achieved a secure sense of identity and strength:

We know who we are because we hear a different tune in our minds and in our hearts. We know who we are because when we make the beat of our rhythm to shape our day the whole land says, "Amen". Continue! Remember! Believe! Trust the inner heart that tells us who we are.15

The music lifts the soul and spirit of the blacks and gives a better perspective from which to view the racial oppression as well as the difficulties and hardships of life in general:

Learn from what we’ve lived. Remember that when the labour’s backbreaking and the boss man’s mean our singing can lift us up. Keep to the rhythm and you won’t get weary. Keep to the rhythm and you won’t get lost.16

Hickman explains the wretchedness blacks have faced in America. He looks at it from a different point of view. The misery and tribulation to which they were subjected have developed in the blacks a sense of discipline, which saves them. Toughened by a miserable life, blacks have become resilient. They have learnt to depend on the basic rhythms of the seasons, the word and dance and music. Fired with faith, they are confident that a better life awaits them. God is toughening them to make them fit to carry out His will:

Oh God hasn’t been easy with us because he always plans for the loooong haul. He’s looking far ahead and this time he wants a well-tested people to work his will. He wants some sharp eyed, quick-minded, generous hearted people to give names to the things of the world and to its values. He’s tired of untempered tools and half blind masons! 17

They, the Negroes are God’s chosen people chosen to carry out His will, do his
works of art in this world. In "Juneteenth", the main character Bliss turned-Sunraider recalls the promise made in an old sermon, which gives the blacks a hope and faith that better days await them:

   Let those who will despise you... Time will come round when we'll have to be their eyes; time will swing and turn back around.18

Ralph Ellison, through this mature powerful story gives a very positive insightful strategy of survival and existence to the blacks. Blacks, rooted in their folklore and religion have a constant source of energy in God. They face the ups and downs in life, transcend it and thus fight it. Not only this, they derive positive gains from it in the form of disciplining and hardening themselves.

The next strategy adopted by the blacks to adapt to their situation is to forget their loathing of Jim Crow social relations and try to strike a middle path of respectability, becoming in the process, consciously or unconsciously allies in oppressing their black brothers. They could flatter and fawn the whites, though most blacks hate this social relationship as it bitterly reminds them of the stigma left from the slavery days. By "yessing" the whites, blacks could live in this world with some degree of dignity, gain some important position. They would, of course, in the process stamp down other fellow blacks. They were used by whites to torture their black brothers. In *Invisible Man*, Bledsoe stands out as a black character who got what he wanted and lived as he wished by adopting the path of flattery. After the Golden Day disaster, the hero goes to meet Bledsoe in his office. He had before this day of reckoning, regarded Bledsoe as "the example of everything I hoped to be". But, now seeing him in a very different gait, he thinks back and many earlier notations fall in place. He recalls that before meeting a white benefactor, Bledsoe composes his features in a mirror until his face becomes a bland mask; he refuses to
eat in the dining hall with visiting whites and stands hat in hand when he addresses them after dinner; he has the knack of looking humble even in formal dress—those baggy trousers, and ill-fitting coat; and he has the trick of making himself seem smaller than his white guests even though he is physically larger. Bledsoe knows very well how "to act the nigger".

What the protagonist of *Invisible Man* learns during his long eye opening interview is that behind this subservient mask, Bledsoe is actually manipulating the white benefactors for his own advantage. The College and its ideals, like the myth of the Founder, are so much eyewash, and no black with any brains would believe in them for a moment: "Why, the dumbest black bastard in the cotton patch knows that the only way to please a white man is to tell him a lie! What kind of education are you getting around here.... you don't even know the difference between the way things are and the way they're supposed to be. My God what is the race coming to?" (*IM*, 107)

Bledsoe shocks the hero as he goes on to explain that the whole matter is about power, and, to get power and position, the blacks had to tell the white the types of lies they wanted to hear:

> Dammit, white folk are always giving orders, its a habit with them. Why didn't you make an excuse?..... You're black and living in the South - did you forget how to lie? (*IM*, 107)

This is also part of the strategy of survival adopted by the blacks in America. He goes on to rant about power:

> Negroes don't control this or much of anything else-haven't you learned even that? No, Sir, they don't control this school, not white folk either. True they *support* it, but *I* control it. It's big and
black and I say "Yes, suh" as loudly as any burrhead when its convenient, but I'm still the king down here.... Power doesn't have to show off. Power is confident, self assuring, self starting and self stopping, self warming and self-justifying......Let the Negroes snicker and the crackers laugh!... The only ones I ever pretend to please are big white folk and even those I control more than they control me. This is a power set up, son, and I'm at the controls.... When you buck against me you're bucking against power, rich white folks power, the nation's power - which means government power! (IM, 109-10)

Bledsoe is basking in power and wealth and accepts that he had to use certain means to get where he is now:

I had to be strong and purposeful to get where I am. I had to wait and plan and lick around ..... (IM, 110)

After reaching this position, Bledsoe is not ready to let it go. He shall make no compromises for his black brother. Bledsoe belongs to that class of Negroes who are selfish and unscrupulous and harsh:

But I've made my place in it and I'll have every Negro in the country hanging on tree limbs by morning if it means staying where I am. (IM, 110)

When the hero tells him about the vet, who had spoken so boldly and outrageously, Bledsoe's reply is:

A Negro like that should be under lock and key. (IM, 108)

Inspite of all his power, Bledsoe does not forgive the hero, but expels him from school. Blacks who reach a certain position cannot jeopardize it by helping a fellow black. This attitude helps Bledsoe to survive. He gives reasons for the hero's expulsion from College and a piece of practical advice. Bledsoe has also lived through terrible times. His words are therefore insightful though harsh and
I like your spirit, Son. You're a fighter, ... you just lack judgement, though lack of judgement can ruin you. That's why I have to penalize you, Son. I know how you feel, too. You don't want to go home to be humiliated. I understand that, because you have some vague notions about dignity. In spite of me, such notions seep in along with the gimcrack teachers and northern-trained idealists. Yes, and you have some white folk backing you and you don't want to face them because nothing is worse for a black man than to be humiliated by white folk. I know about all that too; ole doc's been 'bucked and scorned and all of that. I don't just sing about it in chapel, I know about it. But you'll get over it; its foolish and expensive and a lot of dead weight. You let the white folk worry about pride and dignity-you learn where you are and get yourself power, influence, contacts with powerful and influential people-then stay in the dark and use it! (IM, 111)

To survive in a white dominated society blacks had to forgo pride and dignity; they had to achieve position by hook or crook and then staying behind the scene in the dark, cleverly and slyly use this power. One who could do this would survive. As the protagonist leaves Bledsoe's office after this eye-opening interview, he feels the presence of his grandfather:

my grandfather was hovering over me, grinning triumphantly out of the dark. (IM, 113)

With a shock, the reader realizes that the college and Bledsoe are just an institutionalization of the death bed advice of the hero's grandfather:

Son, after I'm gone I want you to keep up the good fight. I never told you but our life is a war and I have been a traitor all my born days, a spy in the enemy's country ever since I gave up my gun back in the Reconstruction. Live with your head in the lion's mouth. I want you to overcome 'em with yesses, undermine 'em with grins, agree 'em to death and destruction, let 'em swoller you till they vomit or bust wide open ..... "Learn it to the young 'uns" he whispered fiercely; then he died (IM, 13-14)
The young hero is haunted by these words, though he had been warned not to pay heed to or remember these words. He was loved and appreciated by people and at once felt uncomfortable:

I was praised by the most lily-white men of the town. I was considered an example of desirable conduct—just as my grandfather had been. And what puzzled me was that the old man had defined it as treachery. When I was praised for my conduct, I felt a guilt that in some way I was doing something that was really against the wishes of the white folks, that if they had understood they would have desired me to act just the opposite, that I should have been sulky and mean and that they really would have been what they wanted, even though they were fooled and thought they wanted me to act as I did. It made me afraid that some day they would look upon me as a traitor and I would be lost. (IM, 14)

So, this strategy of survival had its loopholes: there was the fear of discovery: the constant pressure to act as wanted by whites while knowing it was not what they wanted. The grand father's advice helps the protagonist in his life, in his speech making his fawning and flattering helps him in getting a scholarship to the college for Negroes. In the closing chapters of the novel the grandfather's advise is put to the test. His confusion as to his behaviour and his guilt is solved, illuminated and dramatized through Jim Trueblood's account of his relation with both the black and white parts of his southern community.

Ralph Ellison's comments on the grandfather are revealing:

There is a good deal of spite in the old man as there comes to be in his grandson, and the strategy he advises is a kind of jujitsu of the spirit, a denial and rejection through agreement. Samson, eyeless in Gaza, pulls the building down when his strength returns; politically weak, the grandfather has learned that conformity leads to a similar end, and so he advises his children. Thus his mask of meekness conceals the wisdom of one who has learned the secret of saying the "yes" which accomplishes the expressive "no". Here,
too is a rejection of a current code and a denial become metaphysical. More important to the novel is the fact that he represents the ambiguity of the past for the hero, for whom his sphinx like death bed advice poses a riddle which points the plot in the dual direction which the hero will follow throughout the novel. (SA, 56)

Somewhat similar to the grandfather's advice is the advice given by the vet in the Golden Day Chapter. The Chapter is a:

rollicking madcap comedy,... in which the team is a group of mentally disturbed veterans who are masters of the put-on, players of "some vast and complicated game,... whose goal was laughter and whose rules and subtleties, I (the hero of IM) could never grasp",... and the ensuing carnival atmosphere of misrule in which the anarchic energies of the vets finds flamboyant expression as social interdictions are transgressed. Mr. Norton's face is slapped by a black hand and he is spoken to in a way that the invisible man knows can only bring trouble when order is restored, but which nevertheless gives him "a fearful satisfaction".19

The words of the vet sound crazy to the young hero. The vet laughs at him and ridicules him calling him a "walking zombie", "the mechanical man", "automaton". The hero is expelled from College as he had taken Mr. Norton, an important white trustee to the Golden Day and to Trueblood's log cabin. On his way to New York, in the bus, he has a second encounter with the vet. His words herewith suggest to the young hero a strategy and scheme of survival, which is akin to his grandfather's death bed advice:

Play the game, but don't believe in it - that much you owe yourself. Even if it lands you in a strait jacket or a padded cell. Play the game, but play it your own way - part of the time at least...... Learn how it operates, learn how you operate. ........ You're hidden right out in the open - that is you would be if only you realized it. They wouldn't see you because they don't expect you to know anything, since they believe they've taken care of it..... They? Why the same they we always mean, the white folks, authority, the gods, fate,
circumstances - the force that pulls your strings until you refuse to be pulled any more. The big man who's never there, where you think he is...... Be your own father, ...... and remember the world is possibility if only you'll discover it. \textit{(IM, 118-120)}

The vet's advice is sensible and the young hero listens in awe. The words of the vet echo the words of Dr.Bledsoe and his grandfather. Through these characters, Ellison very cleverly picturises the struggling blacks, fighting to exist in this world that refuses to acknowledge and accept them. The vet's advice is different in the sense that he does not advocate flattery. He teaches to be oneself freely. If one lives according to his own values and codes of behaviour he can survive and live as he desires.

To confront their situation some blacks, as reported by Ralph Ellison, "reject their situation, adopt a criminal attitude, and carry on an unceasing psychological Scrimmage with the whites, which often flared forth into physical violence". In \textit{Invisible Man}, Ras is the character who shows the above strategy of survival. Ras leads the race riots. He calls himself Ras the Exhorter and later changes it to Ras the Destroyer. He dresses up as an Indian and rides on a black horse, instigating the blacks to react against the whites. He orders his men to indulge in vicious violent killings. Ras is very annoyed with the hero for he is a traitor of the blacks as he serves under the white Brotherhood:

That man is a paid stooge of the white enslaver \textit{(IM, 363)}

Ras foreshadows the black power militants of the 1960's. Ras, the protagonist feels is "wrong but justified, crazy and yet coldly sane...., but dangerous as well." Ras was a black leader, attempting to unite the blacks against the whites. He was
constantly struggling against the whites and was ready to use black violence. Unity and realization were important for Ras:

You my brother, mahn, Brothers are the same colour; How the hell you call these white men brother?.... We sons of Mama Africa, you done forgot? You black, BLACK! ....... They say you stink. They hate you mahn .... They sell you out.... they enslave us-you forgot that? How can they mean a black mahn any good? How they going to be your brother?....... come in with us, mahn. We build a glorious movement of black people. Black People! what they do, give you money? Their money bleed black blood, mahn..... Money without dignity. (IM, 280)

Ras as the black leader can derive strength from number. He survives due to his courage and his dare to live as he desires. He hates the whites and does not feel the need to mask his hatred. He is one who lives with his dignity and self respect intact. He hates the blacks who are educated and enslaved by the whites. In a confrontation with the hero and Tod Clifton, Ras says -

Look at you and look at me - is this sanity? Standing here in three shades of blackness! Three black men fighting in the street because of the white enslaver? Is that sanity? Is that consciousness, scientific understanding? Is that the modern black man of the twentieth century? Hell, mahn! Is it self respect - black against black? What they give you to betray - their women? You fall for that? (IM, 281)

Ras is proud of his heritage and of himself:

You six foot tall, mahn. You young and intelligent. You black and beautiful - don't let 'em tell you different. (IM, 280)

Ras cannot be fooled and taken in by white logic and white ways and means of solving black problems:

I ahm no fool! I ahm no black educated fool who tinks everything between black mahn and white mahn can be settled with some blahsted lies in some bloody books written by the white mahn in
the first place? It's three hundred years of black blood to build this white mahn's civilization and wahn't be wiped out in a minute.
Blood calls for blood! You remember that. And remember that I am not like you. Ras recognizes the true issues and he is not afraid to be black. Nor is he a traitor for white men. (IM, 284)

Ras lives a life of dignity and has pride in being black. He can resort to any means to do justice for the blacks. His use of violence shocks the blacks. Ras symbolizes the black militant groups that rose and fought in America. He is the fearless, frank, bold black man. He loves his Africa, his roots. His strategy of confronting his situation is therefore a constant struggle against the whites.

A character similar to Ras is found in "Cadillac Flambe', a short story. The relationship between black and white is outlined in the story and in another short story,"It Always Breaks Out." The assassination of Senator Sunraider is parodied by the sacrifice of a gleaming white Cadillac. The two stories are a chain of reactions to the Senators half facetious but characteristic public statement that the Cadillac has become so popular with blacks that it ought to be renamed the "Coon Cage Eight".

Lee Willie Minifees, who immolates his Cadillac on the Senator's front lawn is the Black Militant and literary Badman. He acts in the tradition of a decade of ghetto rioters draft-card burners, and self immolating Buddhist monks; He speaks with style and defiance:

"You have taken the best", he boomed,"so dammit take all the rest! Take all the rest! In fact, now I don't want anything you think is too good for me and my people. Because just as the old man and the rule said, if a man in your position is against our having then there must be something wrong in our wanting them. So, to keep you happy, I, me, Lee Willie Minifees, am
prepared to WALK.... And thank you kindly for freeing me from the Coon Cage. Because before I'd be in a cage, I'll be buried in my grave- Oh! Oh! 20

Like the motives of the black rioters in the 1960's Minifees reason for touching his car are mixed. As the narrator tells us, the immolation is:

an extreme gesture springing from the frustration of having no adequate means of replying or making himself heard above the majestic roar of the Senator.21

As flames engulf his car, he tells the crowd to ignore the railing Senator for a moment:

Never mind that joker up there on top of the hill...... You can listen to him when I get through. He's had too much free speech anyway. Now its my turn.22

The whole episode rings with personal threats, political waves and rituals. Lee Willie Minifees knew how to and had coined his own respectworthy strategy of confronting white humiliation. As Robert G.O'Meally states:

Like Jefferson in "Flying Home" and like Trueblood and Mary in Invisible Man, Minifees is a seasoned man of the people, a jazz musician who lives in Harlem...... but when the occasion demands, he rises to a certain eloquence stating the case for simple respect and freedom.23

Rinehart, of Invisible Man is one who has evolved his own scheme of survival and confrontation. He keeps changing identities. He is once one man and then another. He is forever doing something and is known through his works. He can be compared to Beckett's Godot. The hero of Invisible Man becomes aware of the existence of a look alike who is, after Beckett's Godot, probably the best known non-appearing character in contemporary literature.24
Ralph Ellison has given two important comments on Rinehart:

Rinehart's role in the formal structure of the narrative is to suggest to the hero a mode of escape from Ras, and a means of applying, in yet another form, his grandfather's cryptic advice to his own situation (SA, 56-57)

and again

Rinehart is my name for chaos. He is also intended to represent America and change. He has lived so long with chaos that he knows how to manipulate it. It is the old theme of (Melville) *Confidence Man.* He is a figure in a country with no solid past or stable class lines; therefore he is able to move easily from one to the other. (SA, 181-82)

The protagonist is mistaken many a times for Rinehart. First a woman with a strong perfume mistakes him, leaving the impression that Rinehart is a pimp; the comment of two groups of men who mistake the Invisible Man for Rinehart suggest that he is a stud. In another encounter, the narrator is mistaken for "Rinehart the numbers man", the impression that he is involved in illegal activities is confirmed by the policeman who demands his payoff. One group of men who do not mistake Invisible Man's identity tell him that to act like Rinehart "you got to have a smooth tongue, a heartless heart and be ready to do anything". The final shape assumed by this protean force is "Rev.B.R.Rinehart, Spiritual Technologist", the handbill of whose stone front church holds out the hope of a more transcendent lift out of the ordinary than even winning the numbers or sexual bliss can provide.

As these encounters take place the narrator begins to see and tries "to place Rinehart in the scheme of things. He's been around all the while I have been looking in another direction"(IM, 373)..... "What on earth was hiding behind the face of things? If dark glasses and a white hat could block out my identity so quickly, who
actually was who? "(IM, 373). The narrator is surprised and allured by the personality of Rinehart. He was one who could do whatever he wished in whatever way he desired; no one controlled him, he controlled himself; this was unlike the protagonist, the Invisible Man who was controlled and had been controlled throughout by various outward forces. He was always trying to do as others wished, was used by others for their beliefs and ideals. He realized that Rinehart could assume so many avatars at the same time as his world was full of possibilities; he had learnt to manipulate the world around him; the realization of possibilities was actually liberty and freedom. These facts dawn upon the Invisible Man as he contemplated about Rinehart:

Still, could he be all of them: Rine the runner and Rine the gambler and Rine the briber and Rine the lover and Rinehart the reverend? Could he himself be both rind and heart? What is real anyway? But how could I doubt it? He was a broad man, a man of parts who got around. Rinehart, the rounder. It was true as I was true. His world was possibility and he knew it. He was years ahead of me and I was a fool. I must have been crazy and blind. The world in which we lived was without boundaries. A vast seething, hot world of fluidity and Rine the rascal was at home. Perhaps only Rine the rascal was at home in it. It was unbelievable, but perhaps only the unbelievable could be believed. Perhaps the truth was always a lie. (IM, 376)

To be at home in this world and find it full of possibility, full of freedom, is indeed utopia. It cures men any where - Rinehart had discovered this world and lived uninhibited in it, changing his identity, masquerading as whatever and whoever he wished, manipulating the chaos of the society and the world to his own convenience and gain. This was the strategy of survival adopted by Rinehart. It is a strategy adopted by many blacks in America. Ralph Ellison's works mirrors American society and specially highlights the Negro predicament, their struggle and survival. Ralph
Ellison personally rejects Rinehartism. As Douglas Robinson says:

Chaos or imagination. Chaos is what remains when one rejects the prevailing ideological fiction and has nothing to offer in its place - an ironic formlessness that Rinehart, the great swindler represents and exploits. Rinehart is free, but for Ellison freedom in a surrealist world of shifting images is meaningless, and the narrator rejects it. What is needed is imagination, the recreation of reality in a more human form..... the form of his metonymical compromise will be.... my guess is that he intends to publish his novel; the novel that he has been writing in his underground haunt: the novel that has guided him to insight by the very act of writing and that may guide others as well. 25

This imagination, this creative force that Ellison talks about is another means of survival for the black. He seeks refuge in the cultivation of artistic and creative pursuits, which are neither political nor reformist. Imagination and creativity lend wings to the blacks so they can transcend their wretched existence. Jazz, the blues, are all forms of the artistic expression of the blacks - they find solace in it. Again, since direct political confrontation is not possible the black enters the fields of music, sports or literature. When he has earned distinction in his particular field, he becomes a respected individual in the American society. By cultivating music, sports and other arts, the blacks prove their superiority to the whites. This survival strategy is based on genuine talent.

Throughout Invisible Man we have strains of music ensuing from different characters. Louis Armstrong's. "What did I do to be so Black and Blue?" rings through. Peter Wheatstraw is cheerful singing about his girls. Trueblood ultimately escapes his dilemma by looking at the skies and singing the blues. The college choir reverberates with music that reaches heights of sensitivity and perfection. There is music in the short stories too. In the Buster and Riley stories, in "Flying Home", in
the Hickman stories, music offers a means of survival to the blacks.

One important aspect of the black man's behaviour is that in which blacks use masks to hide their discontent against whites, as the most effective means to combat white aggression. This wearing of a mask to disguise what one actually is, is a powerful tool. The blacks use the mask in many ways. First, by assuming the role of the buffoon or the fool in which the black presents himself as a simpleton for his own survival. He plays the white man's own game and by being guilty of deceit, he has partly achieved his objectives. Secondly, invisibility itself is a mask, a type of cover or camouflage to make oneself inconsequential. By remaining inconsequential and invisible, by not coming into direct confrontation with the white, the black has achieved his aim. Thirdly, we have the use of black humour as a face saving device.

One of the most characteristic expressions of Negro culture for the outside world, a carry over from slavery days is the grinning minstrel mask. The Negro has had to intuitively guess the role the white man expected him to play and then to play it. In his own prose, Ellison employs various masking devices including understatement, irony, double entendre, and calculated ambiguity. There is something deliberately elusive in his style, something secret and taunting, some instinctive avoidance of explicit statement which is close in spirit to the blues. His fascination with masquerade gives us two memorable characters in Invisible Man: the narrator's grandfather, whose mask of weakness conceals a stubborn resistance to white supremacy, and Rinehart, whom Ellison describes as an American master of identity and change.

The central device by which Ellison educates his character to the self
consciousness that defines the novel's reality is the image and idea of the mask. The invisible man dons masks throughout the novel merely exchanging one mask for another as his affiliation shifts:

Essentially invisible, the narrator undergoes a succession of superficial change of identity - in a sense, a change of mask each entailing a symbolic though illusory death and rebirth.27

The grandfather strips away his mask on his death bed. In a sense the old man's code of acquiescent resistance is an involved justification of his non resistance. It is a parody of itself, yet the possibility always remains that it is in some profound, mysterious way, a meaningful ethic.

Ellison begins the orchestration of the ironic union of power and sex in Chapter I of the novel where the invisible man is forced to watch a nude dancer, whose "hair was yellow like that of a circus kewpie doll" and whose face was "heavily powdered and rouged, as though to form an abstract mask". She excites opposing emotion in the young man ("I wanted to ..... caress her and destroy her, to love her and murder her"), and these emotions are matched by opposing similes. This is because her "Kewpie doll" aspect competes with another interpretation that occurs to the invisible hero: "She seems like a fair bird girl girdled in veils calling to me from the angry surface of some grey and threatening sea."(IM, 16)

The veteran from the Golden Day recognizes the world's deceptions. He tells the protagonist to recognize pretense and learn duplicity:

Learn to look beneath the surface .... Play the game but don't believe in it .... (IM, 118)

These words remind us of the "doll's mask" of the nude dancer, the first of the
novel's puppets. Brother Jack behaves as though he is playing a part. He turns out to be a disguised father masquerading as a brother. The invisible man discovers, almost too late, that the Brotherhood's ideal of reaching people through their intelligence "is the mask for a sinister paternalistic policy of taking advantage of people" in their own best interest.28

The Brotherhood is not brotherly. It uses the hero to manipulate other Negroes to its own ends of sabotage and disruption. The doctrinaire idealism of the Brotherhood is just its mask. The hero thinks that by feigning compliance he will protect himself from further deception and acquire some authority over his own life. He tells the Brotherhood leaders only what they desire to hear and generally affects a submissive demeanour. This strategy of survival works for some time.

Ellison has a specific notion of masking on of the second self. In order to enter into different styles, codes, and world views, one must be an actor, a changer of roles, a wearer of masks. The theme of masking has two angles: one must be able to wear the masks in order to assume the second self and tolerate the other; one must be able to manipulate the mask for survival. Ellison has urged us all to join his hero and "make up our faces and our minds". (SA, 156) A major motif throughout Invisible Man and his initial works is the metaphor of masking implicit in this appeal, a metaphor that can be highlighted as an emblem of Ellison's vision per se. For Ellison, "masking is a play upon possibility" that gives man "an ironic awareness of the joke that always lies between appearance and reality, between the discontinuity of social tradition and that sense of the past which clings to the mind." (SA, 53) Thus mask and masking are strategies of survival.
Another character type that employs the mask image for survival is the trickster. The trickster, the potential victim with no power but his cunning, who plays on the vanity and weaknesses of his physical masters has an ancient and venerable tradition. The narrator's connections with this tradition and its implication for his freedom become increasingly undesirable as the book progresses, even as he fights the consequences of his illusion.

Ellison's ultimate mask is that of the writer, and Trueblood, Barbee, Rine, Ras, Tod and all other variously disguised performers in the masquerade of *Invisible Man* are the many figures through which he can occupy all possible positions of creator and critique: his esteem for craftsmanship, style, discipline and intellectual sophistication is but one version of the mask; his celebration of human wilfulness and the comic unpredictability of experience yet another. Ellison affirms not so much one guise or another but the freedom and compulsion to choose our "selves" endlessly. It is in this sense, finally, that he offers himself and his art as a mask in dialectical relation to the American emergent identities, a ritual persona of the American grand and complex culture. 29

Ellison comments:

This mask, this wilful stylization and modification of the natural face and hands, was imperative for the evocation of that atmosphere in which the fascination of blackness could be enjoyed, the comic catharsis achieved. The racial identity of the performer was unimportant. The mask was the thing (the thing in more ways than one) and its function was to veil the humanity of Negroes thus reduced to a sign, and to repress the white audience's awareness of its moral identification with its own acts and with the human ambiguities pushed behind the mask. (*SA*, 49)
He continues to say that very often, the Negro's masking is motivated not so much by fear as by a profound rejection of the image created to usurp his identity. Sometimes it is for the sheer joy of the joke; sometimes to challenge those who presume, across the psychological distance created by race manners, to know his identity. Thus, masking is a device of survival with manifold manifestations.

As Susan L. Blake opines in "Ritual and Rationalization: Black Folklore in the works of Ralph Ellison" PMLA (94,1,1979) The novel Invisible Man chronicles three stages in the protagonist's life - education, employment and political activity. He enters society through his high school graduation, starry eyed, confident and expectant and leaves it with disillusionment with political organization. Each stage in the hero's personal history corresponds to an era in the social history of black Americans. His days in a Southern black college correspond to the Reconstruction; he enters on a scholarship presented in a parody of Emancipation and leaves it under compulsion, in the company of a disillusioned World War I veteran in a manner representative of the Great Migration. His first few weeks in New York-job hunting, paint factory, facing unionism electric shock treatment-contains elements of the hopeful twenties; when industry was God, self reliance its gospel and unionism an existing heresy; when timely rebellious young heirs like Emerson, Jr. frolicked in Harlem and psychology was the newest toy. His experience in the Brotherhood represents the Great Depression, when dispassion was a common complaint and communism the intellectual's cure; his disillusionment with the brotherhood parallels the general post Depression retreat from Communism. And the riot in which he drops out - of sight, of history, of the novel - suggests the Harlem riots of 1943.

What is important here is the taste of all the strategies tried by the black
protagonist to confront his blackness and the white society that loathes blacks. Each step of his life is entered by the protagonist with a lot of faith and hope, but from each stage he is expelled forcibly, painfully and very disillusioned. The novel mirrors the scrimmage of the blacks as a minority in a white society. The hero's faith is based on the word or belief or method that each historical age has had to offer as a solution to the difficulties blackness has always presented. In school and college it is accommodation - the principles of Booker T. Washington, Homer, Barbee and Dr. Bledsoe in running the college. In the business world, it is capitalism, individualism and Emersonian self reliance. In politics, it is "brotherhood" - whether of class as maintained by the Brotherhood, or of race, as insisted by its chief competitor, Ras, the Exhorter turned Destroyer. All the recommended solutions to the problems of blackness - accommodation; capitalism, corrective unionism, communion; nationalism - prove false. Reliance on these leads the hero not to security but to chaos that takes him from one stage to the next from the Battle Royal, to the melee at the Golden Day, to the Paint factory explosion, to the Harlem riot. And the proponents of these principles - Jack, Norton, Emerson - merge in the protagonist's mind by the end of the novel "into a single white figure".

Opposed to the conventional and apparently national doctrines of the white world are the wisdom and experience of the black folk tradition, which exposes the falseness of the white view of reality and offers an alternative vision testified to by the protagonist's grandfather, the pushcart man, the vet and ironically Bledsoe and Emerson, Jr. Each of these characters has some link with the folk past. The grandfather has been a slave; the pushcart man talks of rhymes, fables and blues; the vet though educated is connected in the hero's mind to the pushcart man; Bledsoe is modelled on Booker T. Washington, a legend in himself and a real life reflection
of the traditional trickster; even Emerson, Jr. is a primitive who frequents Harlem night clubs, collects African art and reads *Totem and Taboo*. These characters are also linked - as Bledsoe, Emerson, Norton and Jack are on the other side- by the advice they give the narrator for dealing with blackness. When the protagonist receives his scholarship, he thinks it is his emancipation from the degradation of slavery, but here he has to participate in the battle royal. Folk wisdom would show him that this and each successive emancipation are just variations on the fundamental condition of slavery.

This section thus encapsulates all the strategies of survival employed by the black man in America. We have tried to address the problems of survival of blacks with sympathy and understanding, and, have listed the means used by them as found in Ellison's works. His short stories, essays and novel have provided a detailed insightful look into the psyche of the black.

B: ASPIRATIONS OF THE BLACKS

Ralph Ellison uses the black experience as a commentary upon the plight of humanity- rather than using the plight of the black man as an end in itself. He fuses symbols from black life with symbols from western literary tradition to create a symbolic language which is uniquely personal, yet uniquely universal. Thus, the hopes, dreams and aspirations of the human race and of the black seem strangely and yet very meaningfully fused in Ellison's work. In his fiction we come to see the yearnings of the black community through the hope stained glasses of the common man. The aspirations of his black characters are the aspirations of the modern man, who is caught in a vortex of desires, lures, limitations and an everlasting craving.
Human beings by nature cannot be content; there is always something that beckons to him and makes him run after it with a hope filled heart.

Identity is the main aspiration of all men. The blacks yearn for visibility and recognition. They feel that they have been cheated and crave equality and liberty; they demand the basic right of democracy. To be accepted in society and be respected by the white community is their aspiration. Financial stability and to somehow rise out of the muck of poverty in which they live is their dream. To fulfill this dream he needs education and training. The black man craves a better standard of living, he wants a status and position in society. The blacks are rich artistically and culturally and aspire for the expression of their culture. Music, dance, literature are venues of their excellence. The physical strength the race is blessed with and the skill that is painstakingly cultivated makes the black shine in the field of sports. Another dream of the community is to throw up effective orators and leaders. Visibility and identity are of course the deepest aspirations of the blacks. All these hopes of the blacks are the woof and warp of Ellison's fiction. We shall now deal with them, quoting from the fiction of Ralph Ellison.

Identity is the main theme of Ralph Ellison's fiction, and it is the main aspiration of the black man. The black man constantly feels himself to be lost, unrecognised and invisible. Ellison dives deep into the psyche of the black man and, through his novel, *Invisible Man* checks out and denies the various identities that are put on him. Only when he discovers his own true self does he realize that identity has to be sought inward, introspectively, and not outwardly from outer forces and powers. In this context,

On one level the nameless protagonist of *Invisible Man* is a
modem picaro moving through the realms of southern American black bourgeoisie, Northern industrial society and the radical political movement, learning to survive the bewildering contradictions of racial stereo-types and reality by converting the instability of personal identity, which he feels to be the normal state of a black person in the white world, into a condition for freedom. His triumph is less than the classical picaros for it is conscious knowledge of the absurdity of the situations he has experienced that sustain him after his American progress, rather than a tested capacity to determine his fate. In that fact, however, lies both Ellison's commentary on freedom in the modern world and his understanding of a philosophical role for fiction. The self aware figure of the *Invisible Man* is liberated from external sanctions and in the imagery of Camus, having seen the stage sets collapse knows there is no just authority to support the human inventions of caste crouched in his hole in the ground, mentally journeying through time and space while deliberating a responsible plan for living, he gathers all of his being into potentiality. Only potentiality though, because *Invisible Man*, published in 1952, announces the prerequisite mind set for liberation, not the tactics of the struggle.30

With the assertion that there is no justification for racial discrimination, Ralph Ellison makes his characters fight for equality and liberty. They fight for an identity, that can overpower and overshadow the dominant white world's concept of the black man. From the time of his earliest published works, Ellison has been interested in the universal theme of identity, but he has always conceived it in the context of the black culture. "Did You Ever Dream Lucky?", deftly and sentimentally elaborates the story of Mary Rambo. "Slick Gonna Learn" tells of an aborted beating of a black working man, painting an experience that often occurs in the special circumstances of Afro-American life. Other early stories like "Afternoon", "That I Had the Wings", "A Coupla Scalped Indians" show young black boys being initiated into a real world. They are shown contending with fear and guilt, learning of sex and fantasizing retaliation on whites who despise them. These are tales of adolescence, while the
discovery by a young aviator in "Flying Home" of his kinship to a black peasant employs race and culture as the basic terms of self discovery. The attention to minute details of black life and the aspirations of the blacks in these stories is more marked and developed in *Invisible Man*.

In "Flying Home" Ellison makes the young black come to the realization that only in his closeness with his own roots and culture lies his salvation. Todd hearing old Jefferson's tale of flying in heaven, feels that the world conspires against the black and the black can retaliate and fight back for his own culture, to regain his identity, and a sense of fulfilment.

In *Invisible Man* the protagonist struggles for an identity, he moves from the town, to the college, to the Liberty Paints factory and to the Brotherhood - in his quest for an identity, which keeps evading him. As Jonathan Baumbach says,

> Ellison's hero exists to the reader as a man without an identity, an invisible 'I'. In taking on a succession of identities, the invisible hero undergoes an increasingly intense succession of disillusioning experiences each paralleling and anticipating the one following it. The hero's final loss of illusion forces him underground into the coffin (and womb) of the earth to be either finally buried or finally, reborn.31

In Ellison's short story "King of the Bingo Game", the unnamed protagonist is desperate for money as his wife is sick. He moves the bingo ring and is not ready to leave it. He feels that if he leaves the wheel he will have no identity. As the curtain is rung down on him he hears the taunts and laughter in the theatre but, foreshadowing the steely determination of Jim Trueblood in *Invisible Man*, the king says, "Well, let'em laugh. I'll do what I gotta do". This is the way of courage and dare, to do what one has to, which leads one to the discovery of his identity.

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The narrator of *Invisible Man* remembers his professor teaching him James Joyce in college:

I could hear him: "Stephen's problem, like ours, was not actually one of creating the uncreated conscience of his race, but of creating the uncreated features of his face. Our task is that of making ourselves individuals. The conscience of a race is the gift of its individuals who see, evaluate, record. We create the race by creating ourselves and then to our great astonishment, we will have created something far more important: We will have created a culture... (IM, 268)

The moment a black man becomes an individual, in his own right, he helps in creating his race. His identity and individualism are very important aspirations of the black man. His freedom is also connected with his identity. As the invisible man is put in the machine, after his accident at the paint factory, he is restless and desperately muses that if he could get his name and understand who he was, he would be free.

The blacks aspire for freedom and liberty. They are a class that are tied down and confined within many limitations imposed by the white society. Slavery as a past is a heavy anchor that chains and pulls him down. He is in a strange predicament. He wishes to free himself from his past, and at the same time, he realizes that it is only in his recognizing and accepting his past that he can get true identity and freedom. *Invisible Man* is not a historical novel, but it deals with the past as a burden and as a stepping stone to the future. The invisible man discovers that history does not move like an arrow or an objective straight argument, but like a boomerang: swiftly, cyclically and dangerously. If he forgets his past it is going to circle back and hit him. He realizes that only by accepting his past and evaluating it, he can look into the future and dream of a future:
And now all past humiliations become precious parts of my experience and for the first time... I began to accept my past and, as I accepted it, I felt memories welling up within me. It was as though I’d learned suddenly to look around corners; images of past humiliations flickered through my head and I saw that they were more than experiences and my experiences were me, and no blind men, no matter how powerful they became, even if they conquered the world, could take that, or change one single itch, taunt, laugh, cry, scar, ache, rage or pain of it. (IM, 383)

In a lecture given at a seminar on "Education for Culturally Different Youth" at Dedham Mass., Ralph Ellison gave his opinion of the Negro child and the background of the unique experiences that mould and shape him. The Negro child is one who is deprived and neglected and not encouraged to feel his humanity. Not only is he despised by whites, but he is hated as a burrhead even by Negroes. The education he receives is not so much in the class room, as outside, as he walks in the mixed environment. Yet, the Negro child grew and accomplished his dream and aspirations, though he had to struggle for it. There is a "basic ingenuity" the group develops to stay alive in a highly pressurized society. The Negro kids develop a rich language and a play on words that are poetic. These children have a rich oral culture, which has permeated down many generations; their customs, codes and attitude form a culture through which they project their image of the world and of themselves.

So, we have the Negro whose desired objective is to "conquer the world" - to be free and independent and scale great heights. Ellison opines that people need artistic expression. Ellison himself enjoyed dancing European folk dances. There were people that were prejudiced and found Negroes in European steps a laughable sight - others thought that these Negroes wanted to become white, and were crossing
the lines and limitations set for Negroes. Ellison says that these opinions did not make any difference to them. They knew that their social and racial standing would not be altered by dancing these European folk dances. It was an artistic challenge, an absorption of other cultures and backgrounds and the whole experience was an exercise in democratic education, and, it brought about a psychological closeness. In Ellison's words:

And thanks to Mrs. Breaux,
...We were being introduced to one of the most precious of American freedoms which is our freedom to broaden our personal culture by absorbing the culture of others. Even more important was the fact that we were being taught to discover and exercise those elements of freedom which existed unobserved (at least by outsiders), within our state of social and political unfreedom. (GT, 136)

So, Mrs. Breaux, a woman educator became a symbol of the broader American culture and raised the hopes and aspirations as well as broadened the horizon for Ellison and other Negro youth.

The nature of American society is pluralistic and there is contact and communication over the division of class, religion, caste and race. Culture is therefore democratic. Ellison says in his essay "Going to the Territory" that the cultural achievements of the blacks were ignored in the past. The blacks were considered to be "outside the realm of history" and so even their contributions were used and appropriated by others without due credit to the contributors. Ellison revels in the state of freedom they have reached where "it is no longer possible to take the products of a slave as an illiterate artist without legal consequence." (GT, 142). The black artist now knows his value and position. He is now not recognised or
identified by his colour and race, but by the superiority and excellence of his art. There is no definitive American culture and so the black has yet to feel at home, socially and politically, with the American principle. Thus it is the uphill task of the black to name, define, analyse and understand who he is, what has happened to him and what he aims to be.

The events which wracked the United States during the Civil War period and post-Reconstruction period have left a scar on the national consciousness. They are archetypes of events occurring in many nations. The U.S. failed to cope with it and the problems persist. These racial events have put a moral burden on the national conscience and scarred the image of the U.S.

Ralph Ellison gets very upset about sociological formulas where the Negro is deprived of his humanity. He denies the reports of sociologists on Harlem. As he says:

I simply don't recognize Harlem in them. And I simply don't recognize the people of Harlem whom I know. Which is by no means to deny the ruggedness of life there, nor the hardship, the poverty, the sordidness, the filth. But there is something else in Harlem, something subjective, wilful and completely and compellingly human. It is that "something else" that challenges the sociologists who ignore it, and the society which would deny its existence. It is that "something else" which makes for our strength, which makes for our endurance and our promise. This is the proper subject for the Negro American writer. (GT, 276)

So the aspiration here is that the humanity, the courage and the transcendental forces within the Negro be recognized and accepted. Within all the squalor and poverty ridden life of the average Negro American there resides something that
demands acceptance and respect. The painstaking toil, the tolerance and the faith and hope within the Negro heart is something worthy of appreciation. These qualities of the black are often ignored and it is a terribly lopsided image that emerges. This image is of unending pain to the black and he is forever struggling against it, and aspiring to rise above it; he craves a place of dignity within the society.

Ellison opines that what ever happened to the Negro American was may be more fortunate than what could have been. In his persona we glimpse the ever buoyant, hopeful, positive attitude of the Negro American. There was a good side to living under pressure, otherwise, like the Indians they would have been put on a reservation and gradually removed from the national scene. The Negro Americans were forced into segregation but got the opportunity to live within the larger American society and as Ellison says were allowed to,

...abstract from that society enough combination of values - including the religion and hope and art which allowed us to endure and impose our own idea of what the world should be and of what man should be, and of what American society should be. I am not speaking of power here, but of vision, of values and dreams. Yes, and of will. (GT, 299)

This opportunity to express his own ideals and views of society as it is, and, as it should be is a source of sustenance to the black. The Negro American is a potent force that forces the white to look at society from inside. The picture that then emerges belies all the interpretations of sociologists. The black feels he is a part of America in the core of his heart. He came there before many of the whites. In the prosperity and the flourishing drive of America, blacks have shed life blood. They had played a vital role in the development of America and thus expected returns. The Declaration of Independence held forth alluring possibilities, but ultimately it all
proved false. The discrimination against the blacks continued. They were disregarded and abused and so the protest continues.

One absurd form of discrimination was the strange institution of laughing barrels. The whites were so upset when they saw the open laugh of a black that they insisted that in public places a Negro who felt a surge of laughter had to put his head in the laughing barrels (empty white whisky barrels). Now the sight of a Negro laughing raucously, with his head stuck in a barrel, made the whites laugh in spite of themselves. The whites then felt embarrassed and ashamed. The Negro laughed and laughed at the queer sight of himself laughing in a laughing barrel. If then the whites laughed it felt that somehow the Negro had fooled them and made them appear quite sheepish. As Ellison says in his essay, "An Extravagance of Laughter":

This then was the crux of the Town's dilemma: efforts to control Negro laughter with laughing barrels was as futile as attaining Christian grace by returning to the womb, because a Negro laughing in a laughing barrel turned the world upside down and inside out. And in so doing, he inverted (and thus subverted) tradition and thus the preordained and cherished scheme of Southern racial relationships was blasted asunder. Therefore it was feared that if such unhappy instances of interracial laughter occurred with any frequency it would create a crisis in which social order would be fatally undermined by something as unpolitical as a bunch of Negroes with their laughing heads stuck into white washed whisky barrels. (GT, 192)

Ralph Ellison set out on the path of writing fiction with a sense of commitment. His mother had instilled in him a sense of a mission. She had always insisted that the welfare, the future and the hope of the black community depended not upon the older Negroes, but on the young ones. So, a sense of obligation crept into Ellison's work. His aspiration was "to explore the full range of American Negro
humanity and to affirm those qualities which are of value beyond any question of segregation, economics or previous condition of servitude."(SA, 17) What he felt his people suffered from was that they neither identified as Negroes nor as Americans. The Negroes had not hit upon the correct form of insistence, their means of affirming themselves was inadequate. Ellison sought to express the Negro's sense of life, and his inherent strength of moving slowly and steadily towards his goal, inspite of the social, economic and political obstacles that came in his path.

Ralph Ellison was again worried about the inability of the black community to throw up effective leaders. Most of the Negro leaders did not actually represent their people; they were involved more with white business interests, philanthropy and politics. Ellison sensed that they did not realise a moral responsibility towards the community and were constantly betraying the blacks. Such a leader is painted by Ellison in the character of Dr. Bledsoe of Invisible Man. Most of the characters even in his short stories are constantly trying to prove themselves as leaders. This strain of thought runs through "King of the Bingo Game", "Mister Toussan" and throughout Invisible Man.

Ellison's aspirations as a fiction writer are full of humanity. It is man's predicament and his humanity which are closest to his heart. In Ellison's own words:

I think that the mixture of the marvellous and terrible is a basic condition of human life and that the persistence of human ideals represents the marvellous pulling itself up out of the chaos of the universe..... The terrible represents all that hinders, all that opposes human aspirations, and the marvellous represents the truth of the human spirit over chaos. (SA, 20)

The aim of the fiction writer should be to keep alive the enduring and abiding
human spirit. Ellison is proud of the faith and hope, the consciousness, the ability to laugh at himself, the quality to face the ruggedness of this life, the tenacity and patience with which he sticks to his goal as worthwhile as proud characteristics of the Negro American. His aspiration like the rest of his clan is to achieve this elevated sense of his own humanity, even through the tragicomic confrontations in life, and, the strange twists and turns of fate and of history. This should be the aim of the artist as art is a celebration of life. The misery of human life is the matter for the artist. Of himself, he says,

As for my writer's necessity of cashing in on the pain undergone by my people (and remember I write of the human as well), writing is my way of confronting, often for the hundredth time, that same pain and that same pleasure. It is my way of seeing that it be not in vain. (SA, 23)

Through Ellison's words, we glimpse the aspiration to express themselves uninhibited as the craving of the black. Freedom of expression and the liberty to highlight his experiences, his joys and sorrows, the turmoil in his heart, the daily humiliations he suffers and so on and so forth. The question of what is the form of his humanity, what in the making of a Negro is worth safeguarding and what worth relinquishing, has only one answer. It is to delve into folklore, which is the mainstay of any community, and which preserves the rites and rituals, the hopes and manners of a certain community. Folklore embodies the values by which the group lives and survives.

The blacks in America are largely a socially and economically backward class. The black aspires for economic stability. He dreams of a position, status, a financially secure life. In "Did You Ever Dream Lucky?" Mary weaves dreams out of all the possibilities of the money bag that they suddenly found and which was
hidden in the flush tank. Their dreams are sadly brought to nought. The invisible protagonist of *Invisible Man* is shocked at the miserably poor state of the dispossessed couple. He calls out to the public about the old dispossessed couple, asking for only a little respite for them:

Dispossessed, eighty-seven years and dispossessed of what? They ain't got nothing, they can not get nothing, they never had nothing. So who was dispossessed.... How about it, Mr. Law? Do we get our fifteen minutes worth of Jesus? You got the world, can we have our Jesus? (IM, 211)

Marcus Garvey was the original spearhead of the new Negro movement. He advocated militant politics and a separatist philosophy. In the Dictionary of Literary Biography, Volume 76, he is described so:

Garvey was a flamboyant figure who wore colourful military regalia - braids, plumes, and all - when he appeared in public. Among the three most prominent ideas he espoused were that black is beautiful, that black people in America should return to mother Africa, and that they should be willing to die for their beliefs. 32

Ellison has painted his memorable character Ras, the destroyer in *Invisible Man* on Marcus Garvey. The diction, the fervour, substance and the style of Garvey's speech is seen in Ras's (resembles "race") speech to Tod Clifton.

The vehemence of Ras's words express the strong feelings of the black man who understands the condition of the blacks, and, who has the dare and the courage to fight against the whites. Ras is one who is proud of his blackness, who revels in his black intelligence and beauty. There is sense and eloquence and logic in his speech. He speaks from the guts, uninhibited by any fear or social constraints. Ras embodies the deep yearnings of the black community in America. He suspects the
intentions of the whites. His cry is wrought with emotion:

You young and intelligent. You black and beautiful .......... Ras would not sacrifice his black brother to the white enslaver. Instead he cry .......... what is your past and where are you going? (IM, 282-283)

His love for his people is deep rooted and he cannot tolerate this. He is one who will not surrender and keeps fighting back. The aspiration of the likes of Ras are for a militant struggle and freedom. Ras advocates black pride, solidarity and autonomy. He hates white tyranny.

Ralph Ellison stressed the use of folklore in fiction. He emphasised that an identification of one with his tradition was necessary for a man to adapt to his social group. In Invisible Man, he makes extensive use of folk songs and the blues. The invisible protagonist time and again hears folk songs. Louis Armstrong's "What Did I Do To Be So Black and Blue?" reverberates through the novel. Other songs also provide transcendence over this situation. Trueblood sings the blues and ultimately comes to terms with his act and its consequences. He discovers courage and discipline in the blues. He goes back to his family to look after them as he is a "Man". The junk man is heard singing "She's got feet like a monkey/legs like a frog/lawd lawd/...... Cause I love my baby better than myself". Music provides the necessary effect. The black relies greatly on his music and folk tradition. Free cultural expression is one of his aspirations. According to Bernard W. Bell, on the Trueblood and the junk man episode:

Ellison sees the blues singer and Jazz musician as paradigms of the American experience. Both are products of interaction between the limitations and possibilities of the American experience. Both are creators of an indigenous form of American culture, Afro-American music. Most important,
both achieve their personal identities against the background of tradition.  

The black Jazz musician can assert his individuality through mastering traditional conventions. Jazz teaches him a discipline which is a step towards self improvement and self reliance. Of the musicians with whom Ellison lived, the driving force was not to earn money or become famous but "the will to achieve the most eloquent expression of ideas and emotions through the technical mastery of their instruments." Ralph Ellison enjoyed the beauty of the harmonious blending of strong individual personalities in the group. It was an example of a wonderful social organization:

I had learned too that the end of all this discipline and technical mastery was the desire to express an affirmative way of life through its musical tradition and that this tradition insisted that each artist achieve his creativity within its frame. He must learn the best of the past, and add to it his personal vision. Life could be harsh, loud and wrong, if it wished, but they lived it fully, and when they expressed their attitude towards the world it was with a fluid style that reduced the chaos of living to form.  

Ellison's short stories are vibrant with the hopes of black people. In the Buster and Riley stories, we feel an infectious exuberance of spirit that defies all external social control and restraints. In "Afternoon" the boys identified themselves with certain mighty figures from fact, folklore and fiction. They dream of Jack Johnson who could conquer the whole wide world, not only fathers but white folks too. The boys get fortified with hope and conviction that they can get all they aspire for.

In the short story "That I Had The Wings", Aunt Kate suggests a church song to Riley, "If I had the wing of a dove". Riley instantly sings a parody that expresses his indignation "If I had the wings of a Dove....An tear down the White House gate".

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This parody expresses Riley's feelings and helps to strengthen his belief. Ironically, the parody voices the truly aggressive optimistic spirit of the Church song it seems to deride. In "That I Had The Wings", the central metaphor is of flying. The boys try to make the chicks fly. Their plan ends in disaster, yet the message of the tale is clear. The experiment shows the aspiration of freedom of the boys. The failure of the experiment shows that freedom can not be forced upon one. Flight and freedom could not be forced upon the little chicks. So, the blacks aspirations have to be coupled with action.

Flying dominates another of Ellison's short stories, "Flying Home". The aspirations of the young flier Todd are described in it. To rise high is the aim and objectives of the black; to serve in the forces like a true American, and not be discriminated on the ground of skin colour, is his aim.

In *Invisible Man*, Ellison paints a surrealistic scene in which the protagonist is under the spell of a reefer. He sees a woman who poisons her husband and kills him. It is a strange love hate relationship. She says that she loved her husband but loved her freedom even more. When asked what was freedom, she implies, "I guess now it ain't nothing but knowing how to say what I got up in my head". (*IM*, 9). Thus freedom of thought and expression are vital necessities of the human heart.

Thus, we can say that through his main work *Invisible Man* and his short stories, Ellison reveals the aspirations of the black man. Through his two collections of essays, *Shadow and Act* and *Going to the Territory*, Ralph Ellison expresses freely and at times very poignantly his own experiences of growing up as a black boy in a white dominated and racially discriminate society. He was a sensitive young boy,
very alert and conscious of his environment. As a youth he flowered into an independent bold boy who with his black friends aspired to be "Renaissance men" and boldly and fearlessly explored all the possibilities that were available to them. He was a creative, restless youth. Be it at sculpture, music or fiction, Ellison was at heart a romantic and an artist. In his persona, one can glimpse an average black man. He himself has scaled great heights in the literary world due to sheer hard work. So much so that his work is compared to the great masterpieces of our time:

Like Johnson's *Autobiography of an Ex Coloured Man*, Toomer's *Cane*, and Wright's *Native Son*, *Invisible Man* is a spiritual odyssey, but in imaginative scale and epic power it surpasses these earlier works. In fact, more than any other black novel *Invisible Man* has just claimed to being considered an incomparable modern black epic.35

So we end the section dealing with the aspirations of the blacks in America, with the hopes and aspirations of Ellison, who symbolically represents his community. Through him also we feel our own aspirations. In his sensitive portrayal of characters we feel a kinship that cannot be discarded, but that clings to us like a cloak as we go through his works.

C: THE EVILS OF THE BLACKS

Ralph Ellison is honest and accepts and recognizes the weaknesses of the Negro and he ruefully understands the various ills rampant in the black society. He paints a true, realistic picture of life. He has created black characters that reveal the major failings of the blacks. Ellison tries to unknot and unravel the complexity of the blacks. In dealing with the black persona, he comes upon the various evils of the blacks. He unashamedly recognizes these weaknesses and craves correction.
According to Ralph Ellison, the major drawback of his race is the inferiority complex they suffer from. This is the root of the problem. The blacks find it difficult to throw off the shackles of slavery. Instead of directing their anger against the whites' dominance and exploitation of their forefathers, the blacks often view their history with a sense of shame. Their anger should be against the whites but often it is against their forefathers who suffered slavery silently. It is a stigma they cannot free themselves from and thus it inhibits their progress.

Often the black is ready to ditch his fellow brother for the sake of white appreciation. Treachery is a common evil. Within the social infrastructure, Ellison shows such blacks who are always flattering the whites. Many blacks hate their fellow blacks. Instead of sympathetically dealing with their problems, they expose them and put them in a tight spot with the whites. This disunity among the blacks is one of the evils of the black society. Poverty leads the blacks to live in a state of squalor, dirt and grime. The filth of the environment sometimes permeates into the heart and values of the black. Immorality, sexual abuse and incest are some effects. Ellison does not hesitate in highlighting even these weaknesses.

The black always measures himself through the eyes of the whites. This habit originates in their lack of confidence and their inferiority complex. Yessing the whites, agreeing with them and going beyond themselves to please the whites is another major reason for the suppression of the blacks, and their backwardness in society. Thus the above mentioned and yet other evils of the black race are uninhibitedly, and artistically treated by Ellison in his fiction.

The idea of black being evil is often found in literature. The image of the black
casting a shadow on American life, or being the shadow which makes their life so difficult is common in American literature and thought. Though the history of the black people and the history of America are closely intertwined, white America does not accept this fact. They consider blacks a dark blot on their society. It is because of this that normal relationship between whites and blacks cannot exist.

There is a natural connection between white and black and white and light. Scientifically one can say that black absorbs light. On the symbolic level it means the attempts of the blacks to gain knowledge and rise above prejudice and ignorance. The invisible hero of Invisible Man loves light and illumination,

And I love light .......light confirms my reality, gives birth to my form......The truth is the light and light is the truth. (IM, 5-6)

The darkness of the skin colour is considered evil by the white society. A nigger in a coal pile, a black cannot be seen in the dark, are common jokes in American society. Ellison jokes in Invisible Man, that people keep bumping into the protagonist because he is too dark to be seen. Conversely, blacks were considered to be "perfect slaves" because their dark skin colour made for "high visibility". Dark skin colour's association with evil is seen in many literary works. Satirically, Ellison makes a comment on the symbols of America's prosperity, Broadway, and Empire State building, as the darkest spots in American civilization as they were raised on the blood and sweat of blacks. He says:

....... I doubt if there is a darker spot in all New York than this hole of mine, and I do not exclude Broadway or the Empire State Building on a photographer's dream night. But that is taking advantage of you. Those two spots are the darkest of our whole civilization, pardon me, our whole culture. (IM, 5)
The invisible hero's hole is full of the warmth of the negro culture. He loves light, culture, knowledge and freedom; he loves to rise above the darkness into which he has been dumped by the dominating white society. Intellectuals consider slavery and racial discrimination as black spots on American history. This fact was recognized by Lincoln, Whitman and Faulkner, to name only a few. Ironically, America's founders asserted the noble objective of creating a free society while retaining slavery, a system in direct contradiction to their rhetorically inclusive concept of freedom. Thus from the beginning, racism has mocked the futuristic dream of freedom.36

The first chapter of *Invisible Man*, the Battle Royal is rooted in the slave experience. It goes back to the folk tale, "The Fight", which has been used by Wright, Faulkner and Killens to dramatize social relations between blacks and whites.37 It speaks of the physical, psychological, social, sexual and economic situations the slaves had to face and dramatizes the blacks comprehension of their conditions. Considering the whites relentless drive and ambition for material prosperity, the enslavement of Negroes like the invisible man's grandfather was a natural consequence. The drawback of the blacks is that they are ashamed of their forefathers enslavement, when, it is the whites who should be ashamed as slavery was a blot on their democratic ideals. Blacks carry their embarrassment and shame as a mantle and it further subdues them and suppresses them. This shame retards their growth and development. It also causes a degeneration in their moral values and self pride.

One evil of the Negroes, as represented by the narrator of *Invisible Man* is their inability to translate experience into knowledge. Their intellects are so fogged by the whites that they suffer and are exploited, but learn nothing from it. The Battle
Royal chapter highlights the sexuality of the Negroes and their imposed invisibility. The narrator is left confused by his own conflicting emotions in the scene - fear and desire, hatred and guilt, which leave him impotent. He is shocked and amazed at the frenzied reactions of the whites (respectable men of the town) to the combination of blonde sexuality and black humiliation. The next episode in the novel explores more horrifying angles to the relationship between black and white sexuality. In a Freudian episode, the invisible hero observes Mr Norton, a millionaire Bostonian, as he listens fervently to Trueblood, a black sharecropper, tell in detail of how a dream in which he fled from sexual contact with an inviting white lady, led to an actual incestuous union with his own black daughter. Mr Norton rewards him with a hundred-dollar bill. As in the Battle Royal, the white pays and the black accepts money for his own humiliation and for inflicting violence and shame on his own black brethren. This is one major evil of black society. The young black boys fight among themselves, for the gold coins on the electrified rug. The shame of Trueblood is not ostracised by whites, but it is highlighted. The whites derive a picaresque pleasure in it. The black Trueblood foolishly accepts his shame and accepts monetary benefits from the whites at the cost of his own humiliation.

Mr Norton's visit, in *Invisible Man*, to the Negro locality and what he saw and experienced at the Golden Day are presented in vivid terms by Ellison. The meaning of Trueblood's sin and madness, the violence and corruption at the Golden Day are quite complex and involve both the blacks and whites in its formidable shadow. The Negroes live a life of degradation and they relish it; conditions of poverty and animality drive them to subhuman behaviour; the young prostitutes run after white men shamelessly. Although slavery is a thing of the past, the mentality of defeatism, inferiority and slavishness still persists. One undertone that runs throughout this
account is that the educated blacks themselves hate and keep away from their own community - they feel a superior class like the whites.

At the first party the narrator attends as speaker for the Brotherhood, he thinks,

....white folks seemed always to expect you to know those things which they'd done everything they could think of to prevent you from knowing. The thing to do was to be prepared - as my grandfather had been when it was demanded that he quote the entire United States constitution as a test of his fitness to vote. He had confounded them all by passing the test, although they still refused him the ballot. Anyway these were different.(IM, 239)

This passage reveals that slaves did not have even the fundamental right to exercise their franchise, which is the basis of democracy. The hero's opinion that the Brotherhood whites were different turns out to be false, as his experiences show him in the course of his association with it. One of the weaknesses of the blacks is their gullibility and docile mentality which makes them believe whatever the whites tell them. They foolishly go along the path shown by the whites, without realizing that they are on a wild goose chase, and will never ultimately reach their goal.

At a Brotherhood organized street corner meeting against forced eviction, the invisible hero and brother Tod Clifton are attacked by the black nationalist, Ras, the exhorter. Ras screams at the two of them when the invisible narrator calls him crazy. Ras says that it was because of the whites that they were fighting. The invisible man trembles at the memory of the Battle Royal: blacks fighting against blacks, flashes across his mind. Ras has struck the right chord in these two blacks he addresses - slavery, a common ancestry of which they should be ashamed. Ras's angry outburst continues. He talks of blacks having been bought to America as slaves three centuries
ago. The black man has a major role in building up and constructing American civilization. The whites do not give significance to this. The whites easily dominate over and exploit the blacks as there is no unity among the blacks. Disunity and jealousy among the Negroes are a potent evil in the black society.

The black protagonist of *Invisible Man* considers himself better than his fellow blacks and resents being herded with nine of them as they are led into the ring for the Battle Royal. He feels fighting a Battle Royal would lessen the dignity of the speech he was to deliver. He feels superior to the other boys. Even the others did not want him as by taking part in the fight, he had knocked one of their friends out of a night's work. This reveals the jealousy and disunity among the blacks themselves. Ellison says that he understands the psychological dynamics of this:

> Booker T. Washington gave it the "crabs in the basket" metaphor; if a Negro threatens to succeed in a field outside the usual areas of Negro professionals, others feel challenged. It's a protective reaction, a heritage from slavery. We feel, "Well, my God, he has the nerve to do that-I don't have the nerve to do that; what does he think he is doing, endangering the whole group? (GT, 297)

During the prize fight, the narrator discovers that at the end only Tatlock, the biggest of the gang and he remain in the ring. He tries to bribe Tatlock by offering him money to pretend that he has been knocked out. Tatlock refuses. This episode shows that blacks can stoop to the level of bribing a fellow black just for the sake of winning white appreciation.

Another example of this disunity is seen in *Invisible Man*. In his first job up North at the Liberty Paints factory, the hero is assigned to work under Lucius Brockway, the black foreman. Lucius prides himself as being the most reliable worker there. The factory could not do without him. He had been with it from its inception and had worked towards
its progress. He had coined the factory motto, "If it's Optic White, it's the Right White",Lucius Brockway represents the slavish black. From the beginning Lucius takes a sharp dislike for the black hero, who also feels and realizes this. Though they belong to the same mother stock, these two blacks do not trust each other. Soon after they have a quarrel due to Lucius' suspicion that the hero is collaborating with the union though there is nothing of the sort. The two quarrelling blacks become aware of a shrill hissing sound from the boiler. Brockway tells the narrator to turn the white valve wheel, but on doing so, the noise increases and a violent explosion occurs. The narrator is trapped. He hears Brockway laugh madly and runs towards the door. Brockway's hand was clasping the back of his head and his neck was pulled in close, like a small boy who has thrown a brick into the air. This episode proves that Brockway, a black leaves a fellow black to die, while himself running away to safety. This disunity weakens the blacks and makes it easier for the whites to manipulate the blacks to harm the blacks themselves. The Brotherhood's manipulation of the hero, Tod Clifton and other blacks is a glaring example of this fact. The Brotherhood in the name of social improvement uses black power to destroy the blacks. This exploitation of the blacks is possible only due to the lack of unity amongst the blacks.

Towards the end of the novel, Invisible Man, the protagonist adopts the role of Mr Rinehart in order to escape from the Brotherhood members and also from Ras, the Exhorter turned Destroyer, who were hounding him. According to Wilman,

Rinehart is the exploiter, the black capitalist who hustles the ghetto, who like Bledsoe, uses his manipulative skills to bleed his own people.38

Rinehart is an unscrupulous character who is "at home" in the chaos of the universe. For him, everything is possible as he has no morals and faith to guide him. He exists for himself. He dupes people in all the ways he can, even if they are his own people. Such blacks malign and sabotage the drive for freedom, equality and respectability which galvanises other spirited intellectual blacks.
Dr. Bledsoe of *Invisible Man* is another complex black character who is the epitome of selfish self interest. He stands for blacks who are unscrupulously ambitious and opportunistic. For them the end justifies the means. He used sycophancy to become powerful, though in the process he lost his manliness and pride. He cared not for it. He wanted money, power and position. His attitude towards fellow blacks is unsympathetic and ruthless. Dr Bledsoe advocates playing the humble role in front of the whites. He teaches the invisible hero some terribly shocking lessons which the narrator listens in numbed stunned silence. He gives the narrator some letters to influential people in New York. The sad tragic enlightenment dawns upon the narrator when he comes to know what is written in the letter:

I beg of you, sir, to help him continue in the direction of that promise which, like the horizon, recedes ever brightly and distantly beyond the hopeful traveler. (*IM, 145*)

It is with a shock he remembers the dream (after the Battle Royal), his grandfather laughing and the letter in his briefcase which read "Keep This Nigger Boy Running." Here is one of his own kin meting out this terrible hand to the young hero. This whole episode and the character of Dr Bledsoe (who bled so his own people) reveals this shocking and degenerating evil of the black people. It is people such as Dr Bledsoe that mar the image of and drain hollow all the pride of the black community.

Ellison refers to slavery as an impediment to the progress of American culture in his essay:

In the Anglo-Saxon branch of American folklore and in the entertainment industry (which thrives on the exploitation and debasement of all folk material), the Negro is reduced to a negative sign that usually appears in a comedy of the grotesque and the unacceptable. (*SA, 48*)
He is of the opinion that the white man seeks to resolve the dilemma arising between his democratic beliefs and certain anti-democratic practices, between his acceptance of the sacred democratic belief that all men are created equal and his treatment of every tenth man as though he were not. The whites also hold the narrow-minded view that blacks are evil and a threat to society. Ellison points out in his essay, "Twentieth Century Fiction and the Black Mask of Humanity," that the Negro and black colour were associated with evil and ugliness quite early, near the beginning of the Christian era. The attitude changed only with the advent of Rationalism and then Romanticism. (SA, 32) In Ellison's fiction there are certain characters or situations involving white characters that show that the black man's activities are a threat to society.

A major drawback of the black community is that they themselves consider themselves evil. The black always assesses himself through the eyes of the white. He becomes more conscious of his failings when he thinks of what the white is going to think. This stigma is a burden that inhibits the growth of the black. Ellison's short story "Flying Home," opens with a young black pilot, Todd, returning to consciousness after a crash landing accident in his plane. What immediately preoccupies Todd, even more than the physical pain is his anxiety over his failure as a pilot. His white officers will see the accident as a confirmation that blacks are not capable of flying or aerial combat. Jefferson an old black and his son, Teddy are the first ones to come upon the wounded Todd. Jefferson questions him:

By the way, the white folks round here don't like to see you boys up there in the sky. They ever bother you? ("Flying Home")

Todd, in his pain-filled delirium recalls a childhood moment. He was walking down
a street during election time. Black faces peered fearfully from the houses, and one face seemed to be begging for his aid or perhaps warning him of danger. He saw a shower of leaflets descend from a plane high against the sun. When he picked up one of them, his mother took it up and read a warning from the Ku Klux Klan - "Niggers Stay From the Polls". Thus the blacks were considered a threat by the whites and they themselves were terrified of this thought in the whites. The whites strong hatred and discrimination against the blacks is voiced in the words of Dabney Graves, the white man in whose field Todd has crash landed:

This nigguh belongs in a strait jacket, too, boys. I knewed the minit Jeff's kid said something 'bout a nigguh flyer. You all know you can't let a nigguh git up that high without his going crazy. The nigguh brain ain't built for high altitudes......("Flying Home")

The blacks silent acceptance of such opinions weakens them. As the hero of Invisible Man enters the office of Mr Bates, with Dr Bledsoe's letter, he shrinks within himself, thinking:

White folks were funny; Mr Bates might not wish to see a Negro the first thing in the morning. (IM, 126)

The black himself considers himself inauspicious. This inferiority complex makes a black over-sensitive and dwarfs the growth of his personality and calibre. In the short story, "Flying Home", the old black farmer, Jefferson, tries to take the wounded aviator's mind off his pain by telling him a brief anecdote, while his son Teddy goes for help. Jefferson tells a tale of his past life when, as he puts it, he was in Heaven. Todd interprets the tales according to his own egotistical fears and accuses him of mockery. He takes the buzzard and the flying black angel in Jefferson's stories to be satiric representations of himself. Jefferson had no such intentions and can only express his regret and sympathy for Todd's painful
situation. The sense of defeatism among the blacks comes to the fore as Todd thinks of Jefferson:

This grinning, gray haired clown who made him feel as he felt when watched by the white officers at the field. And yet this old man had neither power, rank nor technique. ("Flying Home")

What the whites think of them causes a constant tension in the minds of the blacks. It leaves them in a state of turmoil and trauma. In his essay, "Beating that Boy", Ellison writes of the general American view that the black is considered an evil in society and the white cannot think of him without fearful, ugly images coming up in his mind. Yet in the same essay Ellison says that only the negative aspect should not be recorded, the human aspect of the Negro's life and experience must be highlighted. He praises the 19th century novelists who understood that the Negro also symbolized "the mysterious underground aspect of human personality" (SA,104)

As Roy Ottley says,

I doubt that every Negro's life is only an endless series of defeats and frustrations.49

These so called defeats and frustrations of the blacks mainly have their roots in the terrible inferiority complex the blacks suffer from. A black easily shuns his brother if he displays any of those qualities that are maybe a part of him through generations. In Chapter Two of Invisible Man, the narrator records his blunder of bringing about the meeting of Mr Norton and Trueblood because he explains:

How all of us at the college hated the black belt people, the "peasants" during those days! We were trying to lift them up and they, like Trueblood did everything it seemed to pull us down. (IM,37)

and again, he is shocked at the vivid account that Trueblood uninhibitedly and
unashamedly gives of his sin of incest:

How can he tell this to white men, I thought, when he knows
they'll say that all Negroes do such things? (IM,45)

Mr Norton derives pleasure from listening to the account as he feels that Trueblood
has behaved as Norton himself secretly wants to behave. Norton does not hesitate
to imply that incest and immoral behaviour are a common phenomenon amongst
blacks. He says:

But that shouldn't be so strange. I understand that your people -
Never mind! Is that all? (IM, 38)

Thus the prejudice and discrimination in the minds of the whites and the distrust and
suspicion and shirking in the hearts of the blacks makes for a very unpleasant
complex social fabric

_Invisible Man_ begins in an act of senseless violence, which appears as an act
of anonymous violence to the other man, for the hero realizes that "the man had not
seen me, actually" The professor in Robert Henderson's story, "The Intruder," is
haunted by dreams of anonymous violence. In the Prologue to _Invisible Man_, this
same kind of violence is used:

Oppositely to show just how brutalizing is the realization of his
own invisibility - of being "a figure in a nightmare ... a phantom
in other people's mind." 41

This violent incident (the invisible man bumping into and hitting out hard at the man
who had bumped into him and cursed him; only to realize that as far as that man
knew he had been hit by a phantom, since he had not even seen him) shows how
frightening the recognition of his own anonymity can be to a flesh and blood man.

In two of the Hickman stories, "It Always Breaks Out" and "Backwacking: a Plea to the Senator," Ellison mocks and makes fun of the stupidity of taking too seriously the American stereotype - black sexual deviancy, promiscuity and supremacy. The social function of these tales is to justify the suppression of blacks as these tales prove their bestiality. Strangely, the blacks themselves also create tales of black sexual supereminence. Sexual prowess, sexual powers and amorous powers are frequent repetitive themes in black folksongs and folk tales. The black celebrates and revels in this power. Through these two stories and in the tension seen in the character of Mauler, a white supremacist Alabanan, Ellison raises a new angle and dangerous politico-social dimensions to the black sexuality question.

The black homes are often filled with a lot of tension, stress and frustration. In the short story, "Afternoon", Buster's mother screams at him, and, he understands, "she was like this whenever something went wrong with her and the white folks .... let them white folks make her mad ...... and I catch hell." His friend Riley, too has a terrible home life. His father is ready to hit Riley with a wire and worse still fill him in a gunny sack and roast him like a ham. Riley knows this is due to the pent-up violent rage inside him.

In Ellison's short story, "That I Had the Wings," Riley's Aunt Kate is aghast at his singing a "wicked verse", "If I was the President of these United States". It is sacriligious and profane in Aunt Kate's view that a Negro child have such ambitions. She is fearful and warns him,"The Lawd don't like it an white folks wouldn't either." This very conservative and timid attitude of the black family members is a failing
of the black culture. The young boys are daring, bold and reckless and ready to face risks; they are inspired by a deep longing for freedom and the desire to better their condition. This spirit of the youth is often curbed by the old ex-slaves because of their narrow mentality. It is this mentality that keeps the black cribbed and confined in their wretched inhuman conditions. The grownups, who could not break free from their condition try to monitor their children, and, brainwash their children to believe that as blacks they cannot hope for or aspire to better their condition. It is this basic weakness of the older Negroes that inhibits the blacks progress and struggle for freedom. One has to decide what in the Negro background can and should be preserved and what should be abandoned or given up and forgotten. To this Ellison replies:

The clue to this can be found in folklore, which offers the first drawing of any group's character ......It projects the wisdom in symbols which expresses the group's will to survive; it embodies those values by which the group lives and dies. (SA, 171)

The wish to please whites makes itself manifest in the wish of the blacks to become white. Most white people do not see and recognize the blacks as people, as flesh and blood sensitive human beings. It is a paradox that blacks who want to be seen by whites often have to turn white or colourless, in order to be seen, thereby performing a disappearing act of their own accord. This is a major flaw of the black psyche.

Ellison's fiction thus covers the black experience in all its dimensions. His works portray the black individual as a human being, buffeted by the social, political, economic environment of his homeland. How he comes into his own, the various means and methods employed by him to transcend his situation are dealt with.
candidly in Ellison's works. Ellison also paints in vivid hues and colours the various hopes and ideals of the black people. Each person has their own drawbacks. No human being is perfect. Each man is made up of strengths and weaknesses, virtues and vices. Ellison looks at man in his honest, open, vulnerable state and colours his picture of him with varied hues that blend with each other to create a beautiful picture of truth and reality. No other writer in modern times has written so eloquently about the black experience. Strangely and therefore magnetically the vehicle Ellison chooses is that of an invisible man, who is a non-entity. Ellison creates music out of invisibility. Ellison speaks volumes on his condition. His literary genius makes art out of experience; it robs the bitterness out of life and makes life seem liveable and acceptable. We give a resounding applause to this literary genius and intellectual giant.
CHAPTER - III : REFERENCES


3. Ibid, 80.


175
17. Ibid, 273.
18. Ibid, 276.
22. Ibid, 257.
24. Kerry McSweeney, 106.

34. Ibid, 205.

35. Ibid, 194

36. Kimberley W. Benston, 56.


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