CHAPTER II

THEMES AND THEIR TREATMENT AND DEVELOPMENT
CHAPTER II

THEMES AND THEIR TREATMENT AND DEVELOPMENT

For Ralph Ellison, the commitment to fiction, which he made in 1937, meant taking on the responsibility of describing that fragment of American experience which he knew best. Ellison felt obliged to two things - to the growth of literature and to shape the culture as he would like it to be. He was fascinated by the vast diversity in America, the expanse of space and cultural variety - the North, South, East, West - so far, so divergent and yet one. For Ellison geographical factors were very important and could not be ignored. Moving North, or South had many resonances and deep connotation.

Ellison felt that a writer had three responsibilities - one to himself, second to his immediate group and third to his region. From specifically outlined imaginary individuals a writer sought to express the group, the nation and then the universe. The objective of literature was to make readers aware of the complex unity and diversity not only of Americans but of all human life. Ellison was always very conscious about the role of literature in society. The social function of literature was to look back on our own traditions and culture and redefine it to the contemporary situation. These values had to be reverified lest they were forgotten. Ellison believed deeply that traditions, rites, rituals and folklore shaped men and women, sharpened their sensibilities, made them more conscious of the seething humanity around them, and over and above all, made it easy for them to adapt into this incessantly changing, enigmatic and difficult world.
Being a Negro writer, Ellison's task and the burden of literature seemed tremendous. He was always worried about the lack of good black writers:

I realized fighting for a certain orientation, as a Negro writer, who was taking on the burden of the American literary tradition, that I would have to master or at least make myself familiar with the major motives of American literature - even when written by people who philosophically would reject me as a member of the American community. How would I do that without being in my own eyes, something of a slave, something less than a man? I am going to write a novel: I will not ignore the racial dimensions at all, but I will try to put them into a human perspective. (GT, 47-49)

Ellison felt that the novelist's job was to dramatize and make eloquent his human situation so that it gave a sense of transcendence over the life lead by each man. The novelist's objection to the structure of society and the world become human, significant and universal. Ellison is a painstaking writer. He defined clearly what literature should be. His preparation included reading a lot of criticism, into which he was drawn by the footnotes in T.S. Eliot's The Wasteland. Ellison has said,

I could not violate the reader's sense of reality, his sense of the way things were done, at least on the surface and then try to take him below the level of racial structuring and down into those areas where we are simply men and women, human beings living on this blue orb, and not always living so well. This is what I tried to do. (GT, 53)

Ellison realised that his task was enormous and he had to rise from the particular to the universal, and at the same time from the universally felt to the rudimentary basic sensitivity of each human heart and only then could he touch the mind of each reader.

From the aims and objectives of a novelist, arise the themes that are most dear
to him. A writer expresses his own vision, his sense of life, his experience and expresses them in such a way that they touch a deep chord in the heart of the reader. How this is done is again a monumental task, which Ellison performed to perfection. He relied on various techniques to bring out with clarity the purpose of his works and the themes of his writings.

In this chapter we propose to bring out the themes that are found in Ellison's fiction such as the experience of the blacks, the hopes and aspirations of the blacks, the evils of the black community, the pains and agonies of all human beings in the Modern Age, the adaptation and transcendence of a man to the situation in which he is placed. These themes recur in Ellison's short stories and in his one and only novel, *Invisible Man*. We also plan to bring to light the way in which Ellison develops and treats his themes. His treatment varies from the comic to the tragic, from realistic to surrealistic and from ironic to deeply symbolic. He uses imagery, metaphor, symbolism and motifs expansively to bring out the depth of his themes. Here we plan to deal first with his short stories which were apprentice works that show the later major themes. In the short stories, Ellison is seen toying with the idea of developing the themes, using folklore and other symbolic techniques. From dealing with the themes, treatment and development in the short stories, we shall dive deep into his great novel, *Invisible Man*.

The years 1939 to 1944 were an apprenticeship period for Ellison who was then just a short story writer, who tried to jot down themes and then develop them into plots, scenes, images and characters. His first short stories, "Slick Gonna Learn" and "The Birthmark" are in the naturalistic mould and speak of the "jagged edges" of the black American environment. The pre- *Invisible Man* stories are increasingly
engaging and multi dimensional as the author's interest broadens and shifts: the power of the environment to maim the politically unaware black American gives way to the power of the black American, once aware of his black and American traditions and values, to overcome. These early stories bear the definite influence of Hemingway and Richard Wright.

"Slick Gonna Learn" is placed in the deep South where Slick the black protagonist finds himself laid off a job in a factory just when his pregnant wife is about to deliver and needs the care of a doctor urgently. He plays a crap game and when he loses begs for a loan from Bostic, a local pimp, who makes a very suggestive and derogatory remark about his wife. Slick loses his temper and hits Bostic and later also hits a white policeman. For striking a white man, Slick finds himself in court. The judge blandly assaults Slick with a chain of racial taunts, but releases him when he hears of his pregnant wife. "Leave it to the niggers to have kids", he says insultingly.

The protagonist in this story gets a sense of power by using violence and then feels proud that he has been released from the courtroom a free man, despite his taboo crime. The policeman however takes matters into his own hands and attacks Slick on his way home. But suddenly a police car gets the message and reaches the place. The policeman kicks Slick and leaves him in a ditch. At the end a white truck driver comes and gives him a lift home. Slick perceives that his task is to learn the connections between his personal rebellions and those of his white and black working class brothers. Class revolution is the theme of this story. Using violence and expressing his anger is a relief from "living Jim Crow" and it gives a temporary psychological solution to the hero to rise above his suppressed humanity. Ellison here
also hoped that a concentrated struggle would lead to a revolution.

"The Birthmark", Ellison's second published story was listed by John O'Brien as one of the best stories of 1940. It was first published in *New Masses* and then repeated in *Negro World Digest*. The story deals with the harsh, miserable life of the blacks. It raises questions that Southern blacks had to face daily:

How do you receive your inevitable dose of injustice? Passively? At what cost to your pride and humanity? Violently? At what cost to your health? And, taking its title from a tale by Hawthorn, this story also causes us to wonder what the birthmark is. What is the cost of its removal?

Willie, a black young boy has been lynched and his brother Matt and sister Clara are called to identify the body. The police inform them that he has been accidently hit by a car. Looking at Willie and searching for the birthmark on his stomach, Matt realizes that his little brother has been castrated. Clara loses herself and screams, "They dare lynch our little brother .... I know what I'm saying. I ain't gonna be the same after this, Matt and I want to see it all so's I'll never forget why."

The policeman smashes Matt with his gun barrel saying that there are no more lynchings in the state, and threatens, that he and his sister may also be hit by a car. Matt seethes from within but is helpless against the armed policeman and the fear of his own and Clara's death if he reacts.

Ellison's style is natural and direct. He describes in detail the gruesome murder. He portrays the helplessness of the black Americans, who are victims of social abuse. Their birthmark is a scar of castration, also a mark of their blackness, which covers their body and limits their freedom. The description is stark and bloody: "The flesh was bruised and torn .... Below his navel .... was only a bloody
mound of torn flesh and hair," The significance is ugly, direct and provoking. The lynching of Willie shows the attempt of the white to remove America's blackness by getting rid of the Negro and his progeny. The solution that Ellison offers is that black rage must not be suppressed but should be channelised into clear political action. The treatment is naturalistic.

Next, Ellison wrote his famous Buster - Riley stories that are called off shoots or forerunners of his novel. The Buster -Riley stories are about two nine/ten years old boys and their escapades. The first three stories were "Afternoon" (1940), "Mister Toussan" (1941) and "That I Had the Wings" (1943). Buster again appears in "A Coupla Scalped Indians" (1956) and again in 1970 in "A Story of Innocence". Buster and Riley are curious , mischievous boys who are scolded and controlled by their parents. Like all boys that age they obey and accept the values and lectures given to them to some extent. At the same time they are adventurous and one finds them investigating the social situation, trying to comprehend it and also exploring new reckless possibilities which their parents, vested in their old beliefs and fears could never have thought of. The stories are brief, fast moving, thought provoking, realistic and freshening in their youthful approach and exuberance.

In "Afternoon",^2^ Buster and Riley discuss their homes and the ill-temper of their parents. They are alert to their surroundings and resist their family's attempt to control them. Both realize that their fathers are ill tempered and treat the kids badly after they themselves have been insulted by the whites. The children resent the ill meted out to them second hand by the white society. "Afternoon" shows a clear influence of Mark Twain, in the conversation of the two boys. Like Huck Finn's vagabond father, Riley's father is so mean that Riley feels he even hated himself. He
is violent and in his rage and fury could even kill Riley. Riley understands that this mad insane violence is due to his slave mentality. Riley's mother intervenes and saves Riley saying, "Don't you come treating no child of mine like no slave. Your Ma mighta raised you like a slave, but, but I ain't raising him like that an you bit not harm a hair of his head."

Buster and Riley, unlike Matt and Clara, who were too terrified of their predicament, are aware of their situation, of the social injustice, and, in their high spirited zeal are ready to strike out and face the tough life held out to them. Through their identification with heroes from folklore and fiction they derive the confidence to feel able to overcome all their enemies. Their hero is "Jack Johnson, first coloured heavy weight champion of the world" and Riley intends to be like him when he grows up. Ellison raises in this story the question of Afro-American identity. The solution offered seems deceptively simple. Ellison shows the two boys as fearless and intelligent and daring. Hopefully the new generation that has shed its fear of the devil and has black folk heroes, and is proud of being black will transcend the limitations set up by white society. They will, perhaps shamelessly and proudly be themselves, black and natural. The innocence of the story sets no limits - but innocence carried further must become experience. The story is full of foreboding.

The second Buster-Riley story, "Mr Toussan" (1941) is powerful and has a tight plot. It concerns a white man, Mr. Rogan, who refuses to allow the black boys to eat cherries from his trees. A character from old times is discussed by the boys and it takes them on the wings of fancy to freedom and deliverance from their situation. The boys are chased away from Mr. Rogan's yard, and they watch from afar the mocking birds pecking at and destroying the cherries. The boys are sure that "White
folks ain't got no sense" and Mr. Rogan's refusal to share the cherries only results in waste, benefitting none. The boys' opinion is on its own scale, a forerunner of *Invisible Man's* realization that the white man's refusal to share the fruit of democracy is not merely a denial to others but essentially and ultimately self-destructive. The boys go back and sit and talk. Riley's mother is sewing at her machine, singing a spiritual, "I got wings .... Ah'm going to fly all ovah god's heab'n."

The boys listen and begin to wish for wings. As they see a butterfly fly by, their imagination makes them "zoom" to Chicago, New York, Detroit, and to Africa - all places where "coloured is free".

The boy's dream world next takes them backward through time to tell the tale of Mr. Toussan, inflating the Haitian Revolution of 1781 and Toussan L'Ouvertures' part in it to gigantic proportions. This expanded version of the tale reminds us of how the tale of the black revolutionary had actually grown into a kind of folktale and spread like wild fire among American slaves. The boys derive a lot of joy in narrating and acting out the story of Toussan. They rhythmically chant out the story of Toussan, the African who defeated Napoleon because he realized that the white general was "nothing but a man". The chant and account of Toussan is what Ellison has called a verbal jam session. Over and over again Ellison writes about the importance of these:

> When we find bunches of Negroes enjoying themselves when they're feeling good in a mood of communion they sit around and marvel at what a damnable marvellous human being, what a confounding human type the Negro American really is. This is the underlying significance of so many of our bull sessions. We exchange accounts of what happened to someone who the group once knew. "You know what that so and so-did, we say, and then his story is told. His crimes, his loves, his outrages, his adventures, his transformation, his moments of courage, his heroism,
buffooneries, defeats and triumphs are recited with each participant joining in. And the catalogue soon becomes a brag, a very exciting chant celebrating the metamorphosis which this individual in question underwent within the limited circumstances available to us.

This is wonderful stuff, in the process the individual is enlarged. It's as though a transparent overlay of archetypal myth is being placed over the life of an individual, and through him we see ourselves. This of course, is what literature does with life; these verbal jam sessions are indeed a form of folk literature and they help us to define our own experience. (GT, 299-300)

The antiphonal chant is also an expression of faith. The effect of folklore is strongly expressed in Ellison's story. To increase the folklore treatment of "Mister Toussan", this story begins and ends with rhymes. Just before the final rhyme, Buster suggests they go and steal some cherries from Mr. Rogan's tree. The boys identification with Toussan, Africa and angels moves them to action. They feel they have the right to break away from societal restriction; to assert their human right over Rogan's property rights. Toussan's tale of black victory over white had fired their imagination and they were ready to be free, steal freedom if the need arose.

The use of wings as the central symbol of the story gives it an underlying irony. It is embodied in the song of Riley's mother. She does not have wings and her method of attaining them guarantees their denial. By accepting her situation as God-given, she has clipped her wings. She is bound to her myth, to her machine and in the process she has tied herself away from freedom. The real wings are the wings of the imagination on which the boys soar away and above and out of reach of Rogan.

The theme is dealt with artistically. The opposition of the spiritual and the jam session is the opposition of god and man, more specifically, it implies that nature of
reality is not an imposed absolute but man-made. The boys in their jam session create a story that humanizes the world, brings it down to man's size, bringing it within man's reach:

In making a hero of Toussain L'Ouverture, the boys create a familiar, even grand fatherly figure - "Sweet Papa Toussan" - the antithesis of the white man's concept of the hero as an untouchable distant repository of abstract virtues. Further the jam session can be seen not only as an early presentation of this theme but also as one of Ellison's experiments, presenting in a folklore a complex comment on a surface situation, a technique that becomes characteristic, and that reaches artistic virtuosity in the Trueblood episode of *Invisible Man.*

Ellison continues to improve himself and in the third of the Buster and Riley stories,"That I Had the Wings" (1943) it is evident that he has mastered his craft. It is a sensitive and dramatic perception of childhood and the style of narration is thoroughly developed. The treatment of the main theme - search for freedom is naturalistic and comic and tragic. In it the writer reaches a perfection where theme cannot be separated from technique-it is a perfect blend. Though the socio-historical dimensions are specific to the black American experience, they are at the base, the background of complex human beings and the human condition. The story though it is about the generation gap and the conflict between the young and the mature, is an internal psychological drama of youth. It is a search for freedom from the necessary and the unnecessary limitations put on one. It is initiation into manhood, a conflict between imagination and reality, a very obvious step towards *Invisible Man.* One has to see, comprehend and achieve reality and it has to be done consciously and by oneself - no outer force can achieve it for man.
At the beginning of "That I Had the Wings". Buster is taking a nap and Riley watches a "mama robin" teach its little robin to fly. Though the bird tries, the little one does not budge an inch. The moment the mother robin flies away, the little one flutters its wings, hops around and then flies away. Riley who had been watching keenly is happy. "Yuh wern't really scaird", he says, "Yuh just didn't want no ole folks messing with yuh". Riley realises the parental limitation and craves to test himself on his own.

Buster and Riley then play a word game, with a familiar rhyme, "When I am President". Aunt Kate comes out of the house and scolds him. She is scared that the white would punish her if they saw her bringing up her children dreaming of becoming President. She is of the opinion that they have to be taught right or they'll suffer in their old age as they shall be constantly getting into conflicts with the cold white man. She forces them to sing "That I Had the Wings of a Dove", which they refuse. The song is a spiritual. Riley has an eye on the bird's wings, but his ambition is not heaven, it is the freedom to fly.

Riley and Buster next go to the backyard where they see the chicken who are all doting on and are all admiration for Ole Bill, "the fightenest, crowinest rooster in the whole wide world !...... the Louis Armstrong of the chickens!" Riley wants to teach Ole Bill to fly but the old cock refuses - Ole Bill knows his limits and will stay within it - Aunt Kate of the boys - it knows that fighting and crowing make up his identity - he shall not venture more. Riley next snatches up two baby chicks, puts them in a crudely made parachute and throws them from the roof of the barn. Buster has to catch them if they fall. Aunt Kate interrupts their play; the chicks land hard and are killed.
Riley's attempt to make the chicks fly is testing the limitations of reality. What he does not understand is that for challenging reality, the inspiration has to come from within. The little chicks had to be ready to determine their own strength. Though Riley was seeking to free the chicks from limitation by teaching them to fly, he was actually constraining them by imposing his view on them. Any imposition on another, denies identity. Seeing the dead chicks, Riley is sad and accepts his failure and the responsibility for what he has done. The folklore of the rooster is not a frame but is integrated into the story. The homely, folkloric figure of the rooster is central to both the surface fable and the thematic implications. It carries the burden of psychological insight, self knowledge and pride. The use of symbol and allusion universalizes the theme. Flying on wings grows from the title, and the story, until it symbolises the human aspiration and the struggle to realize oneself, one's capacities and the meaning and reality of life. This self realization shows that within the limitation of life there is still possibility, and, it is contained within the self - it is not outward.

Ellison's treatment of the theme is comic. At the climax when the chicks fall and Riley fails to catch them, the failure and the apparent tragedy is treated comically. Aunt Kate's presence is announced in the biblical tone of impending judgement and doom: "A shadow fell across the earth and grew". This is immediately cut by humour when Riley sees "two huge bunion shaped shoes". The surface humour underlines the truth - reality is not God sent but man made. This is the theme. As Edith Schor observes:

In this last story of Buster and Riley, Ellison's relationship to his craft has changed from apprenticeship to mastery, and he has touched upon all the implications of his identity theme. Reality is not just handed down but in the creative province of the
protagonist; with self conscious awareness, he must be the doer, the maker. Fittingly, Ellison's next stories have, as their protagonists, not boys but men.5

In 1943, Ellison joined the Merchant Marine. While still in service he was awarded the Rosenwald Fellowship to write a novel. The outline of the novel was one in which a black pilot was shot down, captured by the Nazis and placed in a detention camp where he is the highest ranking officer: the Nazi guards try to take advantage of the situation by putting the white Americans against their black commander. Part of this story was published as "Flying Home" (1944). And another offshoot of the novel was "In a Strange Country" (1944). Ellison's first mature character is Parker, the protagonist of this story. Parker is a black who has knowledge of Shakespeare and Russian folk music. Being a black can be dangerous, this is realised by him as a GI away from home. The Americans call him "nigger" and beat him brutally, giving him a black eye. The world in which he dwells is therefore harsh, ugly and miserable. Music here gives him an answer to his predicament. He remembers the jam sessions where white and black jazz musicians played together. In this camp, he loves Welsh folk music:

And this is a unity of music, a "gut language" the food of love. Dear Wales, I salute thee. I kiss the lips of thy proud spirit through the fair sounds of thy songs....... I believe in music ! Well ! And in what's happening here tonight.6

Ellison uses music as a metaphor for democracy and love. He sings the American National anthem and realizes that for the first time the words were not ironic. There was a sense of belonging, and at the same time, his identity as a black did not seem ugly and wretched. Music provided a unity and a tranquillity within him. The theme is identity. As Robert G.O'Meally comments:

Through music and the realization that jazz reflects not just
American style but American ideals, he is purged of alienation from himself and his country. He is shocked into realizing that despite his disgust at the whites who jump him - despite the burdensome reality of racism - his identity is that of "Jamocrat" and "black Yank" Through music he solves the problem of his identity at least for the moment; 'I am a Jamocrat!'

The theme of identity in an alien world is dealt with in this story. The treatment in naturalistic. The nightmarish life of a Negro is described clearly. The wretchedness of his existence is highlighted. The predicament of an individual and his sudden perception as to his condition, is developed well.

The next story by Ellison was the excellent piece, "Flying Home". It has a tight knitted compressed plot. The technique of story - within a story, a technique used in "Mister Tousson' is used here again. "Flying Home" deals with two thwarted flights: that of the black pilot Todd, whose plane collides with a buzzard and crashes in a field in Macon country; and that of Jefferson who comes to Todd's rescue and who tells a "tale told for true" in which he sails from Heaven back to the Hills of Alabama. In this story Todd, a black flier crashes down into the territory of the racist white Graves. Luckily Jefferson is there to help him. Jefferson relates a folktale to young Todd, in which he himself is the created hero. He had got wings and flew to heaven and raised a ruckus. He sped by so fast that he scared many angels and even "knocked the tips off some stars". Jefferson was flying with one wing and he stirred up such a storm there that it caused some lynchings in Alabama. Ultimately St. Peter lost his patience and sent him back to Alabama.

Todd, the young black pilot feels that Jefferson is mocking him for aiming so high and trying to fly. That is not true. Jefferson has the last word in his tale.
"Well, he says, "You done took my wings and you put me out. You got charge of things so's I can't do nothing about it. But you got to admit just this: While I was up here I was the flyingest sonofabitch what ever hit heaven". 8

Far from expressing self hatred, this tale turns the black stereotype of the unmanageable, forgetful, smart mouthing black man inside out. Jefferson also notices that the black angels in Z'en do not fly because they are required to wear heavy harnesses. But Jefferson, unencumbered flies smoothly with one wing, though he is ultimately sent back to Alabama. There is a historical perspective to the tale. For, not only were blacks burdened with the heavy harness of slavery but at the end of the Reconstruction, the political freedom tentatively offered was snatched back. Blacks were returned to a society full of restrictions based on race. Though the blacks were trained as pilots they were not sent on combat duty. Todd the pilot has to understand the old survival technique of laughing at - or somehow distancing himself from a situation with gnarled historical roots.

Todd initially feels angry with Jefferson and hates him. But as he relaxes he realises that he has symbolically been knocked down from the heaven of his fantasies. He becomes free of illusions and becomes clever and shrewd and alert. He goes into maturity and adulthood. As he is carried from the field by Jefferson and his son, he feels,

a new current of communication flowed between the man and boy and himself .... and it was as though he had been lifted out of his isolation, back into the world of man. 9

Graves asks him to be kicked and tied but Todd laughs hysterically. He has learnt how Jefferson has managed to live through previous encounters and brutality. In this story, the folk tale saves the day. As Kenneth Burke has observed,
the comic frame should enable people to be observers of themselves while acting. Its ultimate would not be passiveness but maximum consciousness. One would transcend himself by noting his foibles. 19

The last sentence in the story is affirmative with the buzzard visibly transformed, "Then like a song within his head he heard the boys soft humming and saw the dark bird, glide into the Sun and glow like a bird of flaming gold". ("Flying Home") The story ends on a positive note. Todd is changed from a destructive creature with decadent ideas to one majestic to behold and hopefully imperial in thought and action. This is the optimism that underlines the story, and, the prize that Ellison holds out for the black race through the new, black son. The theme is one of self realization, of shedding the skin of white beliefs, of folklore, and of going back to one's roots.

The last story that Ellison wrote before working full time on Invisible Man was "King of the Bingo Game."(1944) This is a forceful story in which Ellison's fictional voice comes into its own. The story foreshadows some of Invisible Man's themes and form. The first similarity is that the hero here is nameless - his invisibility also seems obvious and clear. The unnamed hero realizes that his battle for freedom and identity must be waged not against individuals or even groups, but against history and fate. The hero here senses the frightening absurdity of everyday American life.

The unnamed hero fights against the stultifying aspects of his victimized lifestyle. At home his wife is dying and in need of medical attention. He does not have money for medical expenses so he engages in a bingo game held at a movie house hoping to win money to meet the medical expenses. Subsequently he receives the
winning bingo card. However in order to win the jackpot of $36.90, the bingo wheel must stop at double zero, symbolic of his invisibility. The wheel becomes the interpreter of his destiny. He deliriously revolts against his fate that has made him a scapegoat. He feels that for the first time in his life he has power to control his fate. He does not leave the button, but keeps pressing it. The cord is extricated and the wheel ironically registers a double zero. However the unlucky man does not win the game nor the jackpot. At the end he is given a blow and falls, pain exploding in his skull. He realises that his luck had ended there on the stage. The protagonist is desperate due to the illness of his wife Laura. He has a defeatist attitude as life has never treated him well. Being in charge of the wheel for a time, he declares he is the King of the Bingo, and, feels that now he is going to be repaid for all that he has suffered in his life.

To explain and picture the complex struggle of the blacks for identity and recognition, Ellison employs the bingo game to depict life as a risk and a gamble; the nameless protagonist to reflect the social invisibility blacks experience daily; and the bingo wheel to exemplify the powerlessness of Blacks in America. The protagonist is full of self hatred and depression at his own inadequacies. He wants to save Laura. He has some faith. But his vulnerability is illustrated in the dream of his childhood:

He is a boy again walking along a railroad trestle down South, and seeing the train coming, and running back as fast as he can go, and hearing the whistle blowing, and getting off the trestle to solid ground ......... looking back and seeing with terror that the train has left the track and is following him right down the middle of the street, and all the white people laughing as he runs screaming. 11

This dream reveals the humility and alienation he feels because of which he
has a defeatist attitude towards life. The turn in the bingo game fills him with hope and he revolts against the absurdity of his existence and is ready to fight towards a life that is authentic and real. He is full of positive feelings - maybe he shall gain an individual identity, love, self respect and pride.

The bingo game is symbolic of the black experience in America - the blacks have to face a lot of risk in white America. Even with many advantages the chances of obtaining visibility are rare. The protagonist says: "Well, not everyone plays the bingo; and even with five cards he doesn't have much of a chance". In his crazy frenzied pressing of the button, the Bingo king, self declared, releases the cord and the wheel registers a double zero, symbolically stating the bitter truth that the efforts of the blacks in white America always comes to nil, nothing, zero. The unnamed protagonist also symbolically represents the invisibility, namelessness and identitylessness of the blacks.

The darkened theatre is like a "confessional" where he can honestly speak of himself and of others, "Well, I ain't crazy. I'm just broke 'cause I got no birth certificate to get a job, and Laura 'bout to die 'cause we got no money for a doctor. But I ain't crazy." He keeps assuring himself of his sanity. It shows that he is stifled from within due to his own weaknesses and overpowering circumstances. This talking in the dark helps him to rationalize his relationship with the world.

As he looks around and finds people eating and drinking, he feels his stomach gurgle and rumble with hunger. He is so poor that a proper meal is not his daily due. No one around him can understand his situation. He feels a stranger in an alien land
and nostalgically thinks of down South:

If this was down South ... all I'd have to do is to learn over and say, "Lady, gimme a few of those peanuts, please ma'am," and she'd pass me the bag and never think of it. Or he could ask his fellows for a drink in the same way. Folks down south stuck together that way; they didn't even have to know you. But up here it is different. Ask somebody for something, and they'll think you are crazy. ("King of the Bingo Game")

It is a perplexed, anxious and unhappy existence. Life has not treated him well, so the moment he has control of the bingo wheel he loses his sense of hopelessness and powerlessness. He is rejuvenated with the elixir of having things in his control. He feels powerful, as he has never felt before. He assumes the role of a metaphysical rebel; he felt exalted at the sight of the wheel whirling past the numbers. "This is God!" he cried out. And again as he pressed the button feverishly he cried out, "I'll show you how to win. I mean to show the whole world how its got to be done." He tingled and shivered with nervous energy and looked at the crowd screaming around. He thought of Laura and tears streamed down his face as he yelled that she would live—all his desperation mounting as he felt the vague suspicion that something was going wrong. It was a strange situation and suddenly he felt lost and lonely:

Then someone was laughing inside him and he realized that somehow he had forgotten his own name. It was a sad, lost feeling to lose your name, and a crazy thing to do. That name had been given him by the white man who had owned his grandfather a long lost time ago down south. But may be those wise guys knew his name. "Who am I?" he screamed. ("King of the Bingo Game")

He did not know who he was—it was a frightening feeling. Repressed by society, he had throughout been a pessimist and guided by negative feelings—negative thoughts about himself, his people and his situation. These feelings were
fuelled into a strange angry fire by the dominant white society:

Let them yell. All the Negroes down there were just ashamed because he was black like them. He smiled inwardly knowing how it was. Most of the time he was ashamed of what Negroes did himself. ("King of the Bingo Game")

What ever the public screamed the protagonist could not leave the wheel. The wheel was a symbol of life's destiny and the "System" that determines the fate of men. Here the wheel would decide whether Laura lived or died. Likewise if blacks could not influence the system so that it worked to their advantage, they would also metaphorically die.

The bingo wheel is the wheel of fortune. By holding on to his destiny he controls the universal need for identity and self-reliance. The wheel is also a symbol of psychic enlightenment. The bingo wheel shows the blacks suppression by white society. Ellison criticizes through this story, the reliance on luck and fate. The poor blacks lost their money in these games, just in the hope of earning more. Ellison's theme of the black experience is highlighted in this story. Ellison also shows his disapproval of blacks depending on luck. One has to fight for and make his destiny. Man is the architect of his own future and depending on luck, or others cannot help man. The story "King of the Bingo Game" thus outlines many of Ellison's themes and through this story he develops and explores the idea of invisibility as the hero of this story is his first unnamed protagonist. The treatment is symbolic tragic and realistic. At times, the experience of the protagonist assumes surrealistic dimensions.

Ralph Ellison has said in Shadow and Act:

In our society it is not unusual for a Negro to experience a sensation that he does not exist in the real world at all. He seems
rather to exist in the nightmarish fantasy of the white American mind as a phantom that the white mind seeks unceasingly, by means both crude and subtle, to lay. (SA, 304)

And, James Baldwin has said:

It is still time, alas, that to be an American Negro male is also to be a kind of walking phallic symbol: which means that one pays in one's own personality, for the sexual insecurity of others. 12

All the sexual encounters in Ellison's Invisible Man are linked in some measure to a theme of the imprisonment of the natural sexual individuality of the black male within the confines of the white stereotype - the black here serves as a tool for the ritual breaking of taboos based upon that very stereotype. Any black writer is forced and compelled to use his art for vindication and to avenge what his people have suffered. This is so because he is puzzled and trapped between the historical truth of the violation of the black woman by the white male and the modern prevailing fiction of the black male's violation of the white woman. It is natural for the black writer to write on the theme as it is essential for his ego - he has to maintain the flattering image of his potency and at the same time deny the animal image. In Ellison's case the unusual success of his novel as a whole is to a great extent a reflection of the uneven success of his treatment of the sexual theme.

Throughout the novel Invisible Man, there are parallel drives towards social and sexual castration. The sexual castration reaches its climax in the Sybil episode - the narrator is completely absorbed in the white stereotype. The myth of the black male, causes a feeling of sexual inadequacy in the white and this Freud ridden fear expresses itself in the hospital scene, where the narrator hears an unseen white voice asking, "Why not castration, doctor?" The social castration reaches its climax in the narrator's relationship with the Brotherhood, in the symbolic emasculation of political
power by the white brothers. From the opening dream of the slave woman's love-hate for her white master-rapist to the closing dream of explicit castration, the social, political and educational relationship between the races are inseparable from the sexual fear-hate-love complex built upon white myth and black counter myth.

The sexual theme is dealt with in an artistic manner in the Battle Royal scene. The white anti-black brutality is here expressed with deeper, wider connotations than if Ellison had chosen to write about a lynching. A new dimension has been added to the sexual theme, this dimension brings out the feigning white, and shows us his dual dealing with the blacks. The sexual theme is dealt with in a sharp satiric manner. The biting irony of the battle royal episode is in the stark, sharp contrast between the assumed claim of the whites to moral superiority and their observed actions here as they use the natural sexual responses of adolescent boys to intensify the illicit pleasure of the vicarious orgasm epitomized in the response of the fat merchant who, like "an intoxicated panda, wound his belly in a slow and obscene grind." The experience of the narrator being invited to the smoker to deliver his speech to the leading white citizens of the community turns out to be a nightmarish rite. With nine other black boys the narrator is made to watch a naked white blonde dancing sensuously in the middle of the dance floor. Some of the tipsy, aroused white citizens threaten the boys if they look and others, if they don't look. The narrator is shocked at the discovery of his own strong libidinal drives. At the same time he is disgusted and frightened by the whole spectacle: "I felt a wave of irrational guilt and fear" (IM, 16). The young hero is in a fix and cannot analyze his own mixed feelings: "I felt at the same time to run from the room, to sink through the floor or go to her....to destroy her, to love her, to murder her, to hide from her and yet to stroke," (IM, 16) The whole scene was crazy and mad and the hero is left bewildered and at the same
time full of revulsion. Next the black boys are blind folded and made to fight and box each other. It is painful for the boys, and, hilarious for the white audience. After this, the next program is announced. The boys can go for the money, "good American cash" that is lying on a rug. The gold coins lure and in between lie many bills. As the order is given, the boys jump on the rug and are thrown back instantly - the rug is electrified. The white audience goads them on and the boys scramble for the coins. The scene is bizarre - the hero also tries to get some of the coins that have fallen outside the rug, he is caught by a white who pushes him on to the ring to the other end, from where he is pushed back by the viewers on the other side. It is a painful activity, this collecting of coins.

This is sadism - the boxing ring and the electrified rug where what the whites are doing is virtually punishing the black boys for observing a white woman. This episode shows the collapse of the white self-image. The whites have introduced a white woman and then abused the blacks - the morality of these whites thus becomes questionable. The protagonist is asked to deliver a speech and in a kind of Freudian slip he substitutes "social equality" for "social responsibility", causing an uproar. He is forced into correcting himself and then awarded a scholarship to a Negro college. He is given a briefcase which, he is told will someday be filled with important papers that will help shape "the destiny of your people," if he continues to go along the right lines. He is awarded a scholarship, but leaves the smoker frightened and confused.

The Battle Royal scene is a master stroke. Instead of dealing with a lynching, Ellison has shown the white anti-black brutality in the South through this battle royal scene. He is thus able to add to anger the probe of savage humour in exploring the abnormal psychology of black white sexual relationship including the intimate bond
between white paternalism (the scholarship given to the hero) and white brutality (battle royal). The presenting of the scholarship is a succulent comment on the white education of the Negro. The whole scene is a vivid depiction of the theme of black sexual identity.

Next, we come to the Trueblood - Norton episode where the exploitation of black sexual identity is more subtle and inhibited. Trueblood's incest, as painted by Ellison is as involuntary and innocent as the sexual responses of the black boys in the battle royal scene. The voyeurism and greed with which Norton listens to the tale steals the scene of its innocence, just as the watching whites had perverted the natural sexuality of the black boys in the battle royal scene. Trueblood speaks of his deed "with a kind of satisfaction and no trace of hesitancy and shame," (IM, 41) as he has acknowledged his terrible sin and is ready to be punished for it, and face the consequences of his deed. Norton, the white man uses the black man's experience vicariously to violate his own most rigid taboo, and listens avidly to Trueblood's narration, questioning him as to minute details with "something like envy and indignation" (IM, 40). As Frederick L. Radford has said:

The success of both these episodes (Battle Royal and Trueblood) is not merely in the unhackneyed and convincing presentation of the conventional theme of white sexual hypocrisy and black sexual honesty, but in the effectiveness with which Ellison has passed beyond the surface immediacies of black-white conflict to the universal psychological basis of taboo and desire of which Freud has said, "The basis of taboo is a prohibited action, for performing which a strong inclination exists in the unconscious."  

The whole Trueblood episode is in a dream state and so the psychological aspect becomes broader - the freedom in a dream of expressing repressed sexual truths becomes very real and tangible. The treatment of the scene is surrealistic as
the road, the house, the scene and the words all appear outlandish, strange and quite unnatural. Ellison's treatment of incest rises above the racial to the universal. Norton's reaction is a universal natural reaction to a taboo breaker. Any taboo breaker becomes taboo himself because others feel that why has that person done something that is forbidden for others? Such a reaction is dangerous as many times it promotes imitation. Norton's reaction to Trueblood's tale gets a new understanding here.

What Ellison has actually done is that he has defended the black male by using universal elements in sexual prohibitions, and at the same time attacked the white man who has created stereotypes; he also proves (by making the theme universal) that the white man looks absurd in the role he has chosen for himself as a judge on sexual moves - he cannot defend himself so he cannot attack blacks, too.

The invisible hero's first sexual encounter after he gains maturity is with the rich white seductress who is the counter part in black folklore of the raping black man of white folklore. The seductress, Hubert's wife is nameless and by this namelessness Ellison strives to gain symbolic dimension for the scene and theme. The scene becomes stereotype and ritual like. The protagonist thinks of the seductress as "the kind of woman who glows as though consciously acting a symbolic role of life and feminine fertility" and the white woman's response is again a natural, universal craving for the most primitive impulses: "Yes, primitive; no one has told you, Brother, that at times you have tom-toms beating in your voice?" The entire scene is rigid, clichéd and flat. At the same time it shows the universal element in such encounters, that grow and develop beyond the lines of race: they rise out of the inner psyche.
In the last sexual encounter of the book, the encounter with Sybil, Ellison's treatment is very natural and Sybil is shown to be very earthy. This earthiness allows comedy, at the expense of both black and white, tying them both in the absurdity of believed biological fiction. Sybil's demands are grotesque to the hero. At the same time as the protagonist acts out the poignant comedy of failure to use her for political advantages, he becomes enmeshed in a bitter parody of the white's stereotype of the black male. He is thrust into social, sexual anonymity, not by some wild primitive force within him, but by the sexual expectation of the whites who have control over his existence. The Sybil episode communicates genuine feelings. It shows the bitter reality of the black man's triumph over the white woman, but then this only proves his role "as a kind of walking phallic symbol" in the white world. There is power and depth in Ellison's treatment of this difficult and troublesome, yet important theme.

There is a psychological urgency to cope with the vicious, racial sexual stereotype. As James Baldwin says in *Nobody Knows My Name* there is an imperative need for the theme as the "great space where sex ought to be" in the Negro novel. This lack in the Negro novel is successfully covered by Ellison. By using the discipline of comedy he checks himself from the need of expressing overt anger. Ellison has probed deeply and richly into the psychological roots of the sexual myths in the best parts of *Invisible Man*. His treatment is cool, not hot and angry. He explains the psychological aspects of these myths and to an extent frees them from racial dimension by giving them a universal image.

The theme of a man feeling alien to his surroundings and isolated in spite of living within society are common in literature - in many a place does the protagonist
feel an outsider, a stranger, a lonely and lost being. Ralph Ellison has gone above the themes of alienation and isolation when he spoke of the theme of invisibility. The premise here is that a man can stand in such a relationship with the world that his fellow human beings utterly refuse to see him. This new idea is explored in Ralph Ellison's novel, *Invisible Man*. Ellison creates a scenario in which the protagonist lives in this state of invisibility and is aware of it. This realization is excruciatingly painful and drives the protagonist into a hole. It is from his cozy, warm, well lighted hole that he expresses the whole process through which he becomes aware of this basic fact about himself and the world.

I am an invisible man. Thus I have come a long way and returned and boomeranged a long way from the point in society towards which I originally aspired. (*IM*, 433)

and again,

I've come a long way, he says, from those days when full of illusion, I lived a public life and attempted to function under the assumption that the world was solid and all the relations therein. (*IM*, 435).

These three aspects of his mind - identity, aspiration towards a point in society and an illusory formula for getting there, all rooted in the false assumption that "the world is solid and all the relations therein" are central to the narrator's development from illusion to perception. It takes him from illusion to an awareness of his invisibility.

The protagonist escapes from the southern system to the North, a place which is ironically the Negro's path to freedom. Even when he reaches the North he needs a force to which he can get attached; he needs a system which can point out his position in society as well as show him the road to it. He cannot discover his own
identity as he keeps depending on others to shape his existence. It is after a long painful process of disillusionments and betrayals that he asserts himself and realizes that he has been invisible. The process of his development from innocence to self realization takes place in his underground hideout.

As a youth, the narrator imagines himself as a leader of his people, a potential Booker T. Washington. Dr. Bledsoe, at the college becomes his role model. Even after he is dismissed, he believes that Bledsoe was the right man. His pain for success follows an old formula - the one his grand parents had been taught. "They stayed in their place, worked hard and brought up my father to do the same", (IM, 13) he says. His schooling stamps the formula into his personality. On graduation he delivers an oration showing that humility was the essence of progress. At the smoker, while two goals of white society, money and sex, are tantalisingly snatched from him, he is subjected to a brutal beating in the battle royal scene, yet he hopes and wishes that the city's white important audience will like his speech. His mouth bleeding, he delivers his speech which no one listens to. But he actually and symbolically swallows his own blood to speak and to continue with his speech.

He goes to the college for Negroes after receiving the scholarship, but is expelled after the Golden Day episode with Mr.Norton. He is expelled and goes to New York, where none of the trustees of the college meet him. Yet he convinces himself that they are merely testing him and will eventually give him a scholarship to go back to the college.

The protagonist of Invisible Man envisions a social goal and a plan for attaining it, on the belief that the world and all the relations within it are solid. There
is however a strong undercurrent running through the novel that challenges the goal, the formula and the premise on which it is based. The narrator's grand father and the vet represent this counter current. They speak to him one after the other, in alternating scenes, and each time they speak he finds himself in a situation in which, however hard he tries, he cannot avoid them. Both the grandfather and the veteran doctor believe and try to impress upon him that the white man is not a benefactor. The grandfather's curse appears on the first page of the novel and echoes throughout the novel:

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 in the Reconstruction. Live with your head in the lion's mouth, I want you to overcome 'em with yeses 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 (IM, 13-14)

The vet calling life a deadly game, tells the protagonist that the white man is his adversary, his enemy.

"Man, who's this they you talking so much about?" The vet looked annoyed. "They?" he said."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." (IM, 118)

The vet, in this battle, knows his enemy's battle plan very well, and, offers this 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.... Learn how it operates, how you operate..... " (IM, 118)

The grandfather endorses playing a friend to the enemy by appearing a friend
but actually playing the role of a traitor. The narrator hears these valuable pieces of advice, finds it difficult to evade them, yet is both unwilling and unable to understand them. The protagonist seems to suffer from a desperate, almost pathological obsession to win approval within other people's schemes - this obsession itself wipes out all options for individual free responses.

After the so called "triumph" of the smoker the grandfather appears to the boy in a nightmare - and orders him to open the new calf skin briefcase he has been given, and read the engraved document he finds there. It reads, "To whom it May Concern: Keep This Nigger-Boy Running." He wakes up from his dream with the grandfather's laughter ringing in his ears. The dream laughter haunts him throughout the story, but he understands its significance only after a lot of pain.

Later in New York, in the Liberty Paints factory the young hero by striking Lucius Brockway, the Negro foreman, openly rebels against the Southern tradition, which he feels has betrayed him. He is engulfed in a plant explosion and he is shifted to the factory hospital. The hero's separation from his old life is complete in the factory hospital, where he undergoes treatment designed to strip him of his identity and send him forth as a new man. He does not know who he is and realizes that nobody knows him - he is invisible to all, though he has been trying to please all.

The hero begins his new life in Harlem. Here Ellison restates the themes and counter themes with greater intensity. The interlude between the hero's release from the womb coffin in the hospital and his initiation into the new wisdom of the Brotherhood is a modulation from one movement to another. He tells Mary that he is not sure of his goals, direction and identity, but later declares that he is what he is,
that is his identity. He unashamedly eats the yarns at the street corner. The shift from the Southern key to the Northern key is really complete when the hero smashes the cast iron Negro figure at Mary's and runs away from the safety and security of her rooming house. Yet the smashed bank joins the mementos of his rejected identities in his precious brief case, for he cannot discard the figure altogether. In a similar manner, echoes of the old life remain buried in his consciousness throughout the rest of his story, and reverberate in later crucial passages.

In his association with the Brotherhood, first he receives a paper with his new name - the way to achieve his goal is to follow instructions. Again we see the hero engulfed in the vision of others. He is just a material for the Brotherhood. They do not recognize his individuality and so he is invisible for them. The man the Brotherhood deals with is of their creation - it is not him. He is again caught in a pattern of rapid fire, successive betrayals. Each betrayal within the Brotherhood pattern chips away at the narrator's illusions and he realizes his invisibility. The narrator had been accepting the pattern and discipline forced on him by the Brotherhood, until the discipline requires him to accept the betrayal of his people and also contribute to that betrayal. There is a Ras within him that struggles to control him; he has a notion that he is a saviour. Thus when he thinks over the death of Tod Clifton he tries to explain it in terms of the Brotherhood's theory of History, but suddenly realizes that all around him are people - individuals - outside the Brotherhood system, people he has never noticed before. The narrator realizes that by manipulating the other Negroes, Jack (of the Brotherhood) is playing the role of the great white father. And, when Jack's glass eye pops out onto the table, the hero knows that the great wisdom of the Brotherhood, like the great false wisdom of the South, has a blind man for a spokesman.
At this point the hero discovers his invisibility. Confused and angry, he finds himself caught on the horns of a crucial dilemma. "leave the Brotherhood and you must either plunge outside history" into chaos and destruction, or follow Ras; if he follows the Brotherhood, he knows he will betray his people. Then, he suddenly realizes that he is invisible to both Harlem and the Brotherhood. His bitter experience with Jack is proof that he is considered only a "natural resource". What difference does it make if he is inside or outside history? He is invisible either way. In the face of this terrible reality, the terms of his dilemma and confusion come to an end, dissolve. Since he is invisible, he need not fear to betray his people, he need not fear to plunge outside history; he need not follow Ras. Like Rinehart, he exists in a world of possibilities, some place between the fanatic, blind illusion of Ras and the fanatic, blind illusion of the Brotherhood.

Realization of his identity makes him furiously angry with all these people who had kept his eyes closed for years. To avenge, he adopts Rinehartism as a tactic. "For now I saw that I could agree with Jack without agreeing. And now I could tell Harlem to hope when there was no hope" (IM, 383). Ellison weaves the counter theme of the grandfather's curse throughout the first and the second part of the novel. At this point he brings it into the foreground and unites it with the identity theme. The narrator accepts his past for the first time, He understands, though not precisely what his grandfather meant in his admonition: he is not sure whether his grandfather was a Rinehart.

The narrator is in a perplexed state. He realizes that he has not done anything for his people. When he is aware of his illusion, he discovers the absurdity of offering himself as a victim of someone else's illusion. He decides: "better to live
out one's own absurdity than to die for that of others, whether for Ras's or Jacks'."

(IM, 422) Yet, the dilemma does not end so easily. He rejects the Brotherhood and Ras as betrayers and feels that even Rinehartism must be rejected as he feels betrayed by it. These are illusions - he burns the symbols of these illusion but the illusion that he must do something for his people remains and persists. This idea, the base of it, that there is a relation between him and them is torn from him in a dream. Only irresponsibility remains.

That is not the end, his real illumination comes with the idea of casting his life in the form of a book. He is convinced that he cannot remain the "irresponsible bastard" of the Prologue. At last, the hero has made his own decision - the hibernation must end. This decision results from his knowledge and analysis of his invisibility. His recognition of it taught him to fight it: the grandfather and the vet's advice kept echoing in his mind. He had to be true to his own roots, being himself. He had to stop obeying the commands of others. He had to learn to express himself, to please himself and free himself from the world and its varied expectations. The invisibility theme brings out the plight of man in this world. Ellison by choosing this metaphor delves deep into the crisis of invisibility faced by many, thus bringing the theme to a universal level.

Ellison has said,

The hero's invisibility is not a matter of being seen, but a refusal to run the risk of his own humanity, which involves guilt ... It is what the hero refuses to do in each section leads to further action. He must assert and achieve his own humanity.14

and again, when we think of the protagonist suffering in one situation, escaping it only to fall into another similar pitfall, we remember Ellison's words,
Simply to take down a barrier doesn't make a man free. He can only free himself, and, as he learns how to operate within the broader society, he learns how to detect the unwritten rules of the game.15

Thus, one of the main themes of the novel is invisibility - Ellison takes us through the painful realization of the hero's invisibility. He remains invisible to the degree that he can be made to accept a prescribed and static view of the world and his place in it. The main flaw in the hero's character is his willingness to do whatever others tell him to do, thus, making himself invisible. It is obvious that Ellison's main theme is invisibility. All the other themes circle round this central theme. So the title of the novel also is explained. The lack of an article in the title signifies the universal predicament of invisibility. It is the dominant metaphor of the novel.

Ellison's concern about America, the constitution and the fate of the Negroes is very evident in his writing. Ellison argues that what is needed to remedy the social ills of racially prejudiced America is an affirmation of the democratic principles upon which America was built. Upon receiving the National Book Award in 1953 Ellison made the following statement:

If I were asked ... What I considered the chief significance of Invisible Man as a fiction I would reply: its experimental attitude and its attempt to return to the mood of personal moral responsibility for democracy which typified the best of our nineteenth century fiction. (SA, 102)

Ellison was aware of the beginning of the American nation when some men came together and made certain commitments guided by their sense of justice, they also formed a system which would guarantee all American citizens equality of
opportunity. What pains Ellison is that these goals have not been fulfilled and his people have been dealt an unfair hand. One of the purposes and themes of *Invisible Man* is therefore to demonstrate this fact. Ellison as a literary artist had to accept the legacy of his literary ancestors:

I need only to remind you that the contradiction between these noble ideals and the actuality of our conduct generated a guilt, an unease of spirit, from the very beginning, and that the American novel at its best has always been concerned with this basic moral predicament. During Melville's time and Twain's it was an implicit aspect of their themes. (SA, 164)

In his novel *Invisible Man*, Ellison has demonstrated very clearly that the consequences of violating these principles on which America was built, will be grave for the blacks as well as for the moral health of America. The episode with which the novel begins shows this clearly. The hero furiously beats up a white man, a blonde for bumping into him and calling him an insulting name. The hero was about to kill the white man when he realized that he had not seen him. For the experience of the white man, he had nearly been killed by what was just a phantom for him. The treatment of the theme is dramatic. It shows that the victim and the victimizer both suffer. If white Americans treat Negroes as less than human, they themselves run a risk of being destroyed, along with the Blacks. The hero gets an insight in his dream that the people who are castrating him, by keeping him running are in fact castrating themselves. In the dream, he tells Jack who wonders why he laughs, "There hang not only my generations wasting upon the water... But your Sun... And your moon... Your world... " (IM, 440) The victimizers and exploiters become dehumanised in the process of victimization, and this is seen in the portrayal of figures like Norton, Bledsoe, Emerson, Jr., and Brother Jack.
Ellison explains the condition of his people in *Shadow and Act* and this also explains the hero's confusion as he tries to understand the grandfather's advice:

Was it that we of all, we most of all had to affirm the principle, the plan in whose name we had been brutalized and sacrificed .......

(*IM*, 433-34)

Many times, one feels that Ellison and the invisible hero of his novel merge into one. Ellison whose grandparents were slaves and who himself had to face the meaningless consequences of being a Negro, speaks with a strange powerful urgent tone through the hero. Ellison feels that the black American has suffered a lot and has managed to transcend that suffering so he is the real human American. Whatever his people have suffered should not go in vain, it should go into improving the future America for their descendants. Only if the constitution, the principle on which America was built is affirmed will this be possible. Their rich black heritage calls from the past and goads them to fight in the turbulent present for a tranquil future. One is touched by the urgency of Ellison's tone when he says through the hero: "I sell you no phoney forgiveness, I'm a desperate man". (*IM*, 438) The invisible man expresses the "abysmal pain" felt by him. He is full of hate but also realizes that if you have to live you need to love. The character does not seem a man capable of love, but at the same time, the book seems brimming with love: love of black food, love of varieties of black speech, love of a thousand minute details of black everyday life. Ellison's love for the people is seen in the love that he has put in, in the careful and affectionate portrayal of Mary Rambo, Trueblood, Peter Wheatstraw and Brother Tarp. The story is a black story, so through the book, Ellison celebrates black values. One of the important thematic concerns of the novel is to highlight black values and culture. If the sufferings of the blacks comes to an end, only then will America be the perfect America, as visualized by the founding fathers.
Ralph Waldo Ellison once said about Emerson "I could suppress the name of my namesake out of respect for the achievements of its original bearer but I cannot escape the obligation of attempting to achieve some of the things which he asked of the American writer" (SA, 166). Emerson's search was actually for an affirmation of the individual and the democratic ideal that would help bring out a deep cultural awakening. As Leonard Deutsch argues in one article that explains Ellison's debt to Emerson, "the hard earned realization of the Emersonian potential within the protagonist himself is one of the novel's major thematic concerns ". Very similar to "The American Scholar", Ellison's story is also an attempt to show the forces that educate the protagonist, and make him capable of fulfilling the obligation that he has to himself and also that which he has to the society.

Emerson denounces the conformities and cowardice of his times and calls on "all thinking men" to become spokesmen for values and possibilities that had been replaced by materialistic concerns. In Invisible Man, Ellison's protagonist wants to take his place amongst these scholars and leaders and as Emerson said try "to cheer, to raise, and to guide men by showing them facts amidst appearances". The narrator gets the scholarship, but mocked by his grand father, he realizes that his scholarship has become an injunction to "Keep This Nigger Boy Running" (IM, 26). He is himself aware of the betraying of self in following and pursuing the goal and the path set for him. His instinct warns him, he cannot forget his grandfather and his laughter in the dream, but now sees him as an enemy. He runs away from the education that Emerson advocates but, later boomeranged back through a labyrinth he comes to self realization, and that is, home.

The narrator's experience at College establish him as an ironic counterpart
of Emerson's scholar. Committed to an education that cultivates individual potential, this scholar earns the independence of a name and place that are unassailable. The narrator's career in the college is ridiculous and ends in absurdity with the Golden Day episode. He is left without an identity. His defeat again invites Emerson's evaluation. Mr Norton tells the avid listener in the narrator, to read Emerson, a New Englander like himself (Norton) with whom he identifies in his philanthropic concern for the backs. Yet we know that Emerson condemns any such aid as offered by Norton, as debilitating to both benefactor and recipient. This is seen in the narrator's encounter with the wealthy Norton. The narrator promises to learn all about Emerson and decides that "Self reliance is a most worthy virtue" (IM, 84).

Emerson's view is that those who subordinate the integrity of their self to material gains, or, outward authority and power, sacrifice and lose forever the chance to define and discover themselves, as to what they are and what they could have become. Ellison's narrator also makes this sacrifice and is ready in his blind dedication to the Founder, to become "the parrot of other men's thinking."

Emerson accused academic and religious leaders for relinquishing their proper task and leaving the individual to become as he puts it in "The American Scholar", the victim of society. Educators had to stay away from economic advantages and protect those values that were threatened by this pursuit of economic development and material gains. What was needed was vision, wisdom and dare. But modern day educationist like Mr. Bledsoe, chose to conform to society and its multitudinous gains, than to educate in the true sense. They did not risk forfeiting the prize that society reserved for conformity.

62
Where religion was concerned, Emerson had a very different view. Instead of portraying Christ as a reminder of the moral stature mandatory for all human beings, the Church had effectively denied human beings that stature by setting Christ apart as an unattainable ideal. In *Invisible Man*, the hero and his friends are taught to believe in the "Founder and not in themselves". They are taught to forget about the self and their identity, but to substitute for their independence, a "pattern" which they should follow blindly. This education thus did not inspire students to discover their own truths but reduced them to the mass and to ordinary people of no account. Emerson denounced this type of education vehemently.

Emerson again exposes the real reason for man's problem of identity. The blame for man's condition cannot be put on society, but on the dexterity with which all human beings refuse to answer for their own welfare. In *Invisible Man*, Ellison makes the same point. The hero is to be held responsible for his condition. "The hero's invisibility" as Ellison has said, "is not a matter of being seen but a refusal to run the risk of his own humanity." (SA, 179) It is in the vet that the narrator gets valuable advice, "be your own father ..... And remember, the world is possibility if only you'll discover it." (IM, 120) This is exactly what Emerson desires.

Emerson's scholar is one who shapes an increased account of himself as against his society, through his experiences. Sometimes the individual stops this process of self realization by refusing and avoiding the truth that events and situations teach him. The vet describes the tactic to Norton: "he registers with his sense but short circuits his brain. Nothing has meaning. He takes it in but he doesn't digest it." (IM, 72) While Emerson's scholar would look out at the ever expanding knowledge of his experiences, the narrator of *Invisible Man*, short circuits
information that he does not want, he avoids the action that the information may cause and effaces himself to the point of invisibility. This pattern of retreating begins as he arrives in New York, and the cartman hastens him on to meet the influential and wealthy businessman, Emerson. It is appropriate that the narrator meets this young man Emerson who urges Ellison's protagonist to accept the fatality of his predicament and offers only the comfort of pessimism.

At the Liberty Paints factory hospital the hero does not remember his name. As he perplexedly ponders over the cause, he however decides, "when I discover who I am, I'll be free". (IM, 185)

The hero's interference at an eviction scene shows how far he has come as Emerson's scholar. He feels pity for the old couple as he looks at their possessions scattered around. For the first time he feels the pull of his rich heritage. He surveys the goods scattered around only to remember his past, as if "behind a veil that threatened to lift" (IM, 207). He is drawn closer to the moment depicted in the statue of his Founder, who stands with "hands out stretched in the breath taking gesture of lifting or lowering a veil that flutters in hard, metallic folds above the face of a kneeling slave". (IM, 28) One has to see whether he will undertake the independence advocated by Emerson which would free him from self-imposed bondage. The hero is in a dilemma, in a confusion, he is led to face his own unknown self which he prefers to avoid. The resulting speech links him with Emerson, yet he fails. According to Emerson, as quoted by Eleanor Lyons,

The orator distrusts at first the fitness of his frank confession, his want of knowledge of the person he addresses until he finds that he is the complement of his hearers; that they drink his words because he fulfills for them their own nature; the deeper he dives into his
primatest, secretest presentiment, to his wonder he finds this is the most acceptable, most public, and universally true. The people delight in it; the better part of everyman feels, this is my music; this is myself."17

The narrator comes quite close to the Emersonian impact of an orator as he speaks of "our people, your people and mine."(IM, 211) He gets ahead but then gets suddenly frightened and runs away from the eviction scene and also from the first stirrings of visibility.

In the Brotherhood he again decides to "be no one except myself - whoever I was. I would pattern my life on that of the Founder." Again there is the renouncing of the self. The Brotherhood is ready to assume the burden of his identity for him.

It is the recognition of Emerson in Tod Clifton that makes the hero change the course of his life. He recognises the courage and honesty with which Clifton had given a new shape to his defeat to spell out who he is. The narrator speaks of this in his funeral speech, the self actualization of Tod Clifton. As Emerson claims, his hero serves as an inspirational reminder of the stature that man has to reach. The narrator emphasizes Tod Clifton as "our hope". He finds in Clifton's example the motivation to struggle and fight against his own self imposed bondage.

The mysterious "overcome 'em with yeses" and the vets, "the world is possibility" both urge the Emersonian self reliance. Self reliance is the only positive strong step blacks can take in this society which is too lost and involved in its own expectations to notice the blacks. In the middle of the riot, the narrator realizes that
he has betrayed himself and his people. He realizes, "I am what they think I am". (IM, 286). Emersonian education now gets him to run with his briefcase (heavy with Tarp's leg chain and Mary's broken bank) hugging his heritage and ready to create at last, his own response to the present situation. He is driven underground and is now ready to delve deep into the dark unexplored regions of his own being. He is ready to face the question of who he actually is. In the Emersonian sense he is now "fully awake" after undergoing the castration by those who would want him running still. He is through with them at last and is ready to cast off his bondage to insist, whatever be the cost, on a manhood, on a sense of self only he can violate. In the dark underground hole with the matches thrown down to him he realizes that man, in losing himself by being ruled by others, loses the light that can lead him back to his prerogatives.

Despite society and his own past weaknesses the protagonist is now ready to think over his past which is "the raw material out of which the intellect moulds her splendid products." The help of 1,369 bulbs helps him to the meaning of his invisibility. He decides to tell his story, giving a form and shape to his invisibility and at the same time establishing himself as a worthy man. Ellison explains this: "the writing and publishing of his experience is an act of self definition and also an act of some social significance." Emerson provides an interesting insight into "hibernation" a process where experience is translated into thought. Emerson puts it like this as he is quoted by Eleanor Lyons:

In some contemplative hour it detaches itself from the life like a ripe fruit to become a thought of the mind. Instantly it is raised, transfigured; the corruptible has put on incorruption. Henceforth it is an object of beauty, however base its origin and
The narrator feels at home in the underground hole and creates "an object of beauty" from the different painful experiences of his flight.

Next comes the Emersonian action in which the scholar, or the hero can live his own life relying only on the self. He realizes that his grandfather's deathbed advice meant upholding the principle on the democratic ideal. His concept is clear about the vet's self reliance and he says "my world has become one of infinite possibilities". Next the Emersonian focus shifts from the education of the protagonist to the leadership he must provide if the various ills and wrongs of the society are to be put right. He has to inspire changes in attitude, such changes that will lead to reform. The fact is the moral strength and stature which every individual can achieve if he so decides and chooses. The "socially responsible role" has been chosen and Ellison's hero is up to the mark of the Emersonian hero. As Eleanor Lyons puts it, when she objects to critics who denounce the reform theory and Ellison's hero's role as a backslider and one who refuses to take responsibility:

Yet the novel provides compelling grounds for action of just the sort he would pursue, stressing as it does that the struggle for civil rights has at no point brought more fundamental improvements for blacks than could be supported by the interests that have shaped society. The difficulty with the position they share comes, perhaps not from any tendency of Ellison or Emerson to avoid harsh truths but from an insistence on the harshest truth of all, which is what reform requires of the individual.

What is advocated by both Ellison and Emerson is that one admits to himself his own mistake and foibles, and gives up hollow dreams that are of no use and that one chooses a path of "infinite possibilities" and one discovered by himself.
The role of books is to inspire and move the individual to his own efforts, how far it happens depends on the reader. The narrator of *Invisible Man* emphasizes this in the last line of his novel, "who knows but that on the lower frequencies, I speak for you?" (IM, 439) To quote Eleanor Lyons again,

In an effort to launch the reform that he envisions, Emerson concludes *The American Scholar* with a resounding affirmation that his call to self reliance will be met, making this a nation of individuals at last and so realizing the true promise of democracy. Ellison reminds twentieth Century America that blacks and whites both must join the narrator in sustaining that momentum or forfeit any such hope.21

Ellison's major thematic concern is analysis, discovery and development of the individual. It is important for him that his people realize the responsibility they have of fighting for themselves. The society cannot be blamed and made the scapegoat in discussing the plight of the blacks in America. What has to be realized is that the blacks themselves are responsible, to a great extent, for their condition. To accept this blame, and, make it work positively so that the individual grows and develops is of primary concern to Ellison. Tying up with Emerson's view, he finds a parallel intelligence and insight that goes a long way in helping Ellison define his concept. Thus, the Emersonian individual is a guiding light and guardian angel for the struggling Ellisonian hero.

Ellison, like many of the young writers of the 1930's was attracted to communism, so though he did not join the communist party, his attraction towards the theoretical precepts of Marxism was evident. Many intellectuals believed that this was the only ideology which held promise for the exploited and down trodden classes. Ellison had a deep knowledge of the Marxist ideology and this knowledge helped him to get a broader look at the black reality in America. Ellison was not out
to spread propaganda; he was an artist and a humanist and knew where to draw the line between art and propaganda. He was clear in his mind regarding the use of ideology in art. The theme of Marxism as a means of freeing the blacks from their shackles and giving them freedom appealed to him. But, at the same time he was aware that the blacks dependence on Marxism would come to no avail. The hero of *Invisible Man* has a brief association with Marxism but he leaves it in disillusionment.

The Brotherhood is a fictionalized version of the Communist Party of America. He has given the scenes a naturalistic portrayal. Ellison has a deep knowledge of the working of the party and so he has given a very authentic portrayal of the Brotherhood, and through it the Marxist ideology. Through his knowledge of Marxism, Ellison touches upon some important aspects of the black experience and uses the ideology as a weapon to attack American capitalism.

In *Invisible Man*, Ellison shows the innocent protagonist as a victim of the curiosity of the white trustee, Norton. Although, Bledsoe apparently victimizes the hero, it is Norton who emerges as the actual victimizer, causing the hero's expulsion from the college. The protagonist is innocent and naïve and does not understand the complex reality of Norton being a representative of white capitalism.

Ellison attacks white capitalism in his depiction of the eviction scene, in which the hero's speech vociferously conveys the futility of the Negro's struggle in prosperous white America. The blacks have acquired nothing in the eighty seven years of freedom says the hero, except junk. He goes on to explain the attitude of the white exploiter: "Never give a sucker an even break... Dispossess him; evict him, use
his empty head for a spittoon and his back for a door mat." (IM, 334) Ellison's rebellious bent is shown through the fervent declaration of the hero "we'll be dispossessed no more." (IM, 328) Ellison shows that once aware of their situation and aware of their exploiter, the exploited consider militancy as a means of their deliverance. The novel here seems a proletarian novel.

Through the protagonist's relation with the Brotherhood Ellison shows the black Americans attraction to Marxism and then their subsequent disenchantment. His depiction of communism is very realistic. He paints people like Brother Jack who memorize the dictates of communism and impress people with their Marxist jargon. Brother Jack's tone has a peculiar practicality and harshness in his voice when he tells the hero not to waste his passions on an old couple, whom history has passed by. The historical necessity was that responding to the cries of the people, he should become instrumental in causing a revolution. With his cajoling Jack manages to entice the protagonist into the Brotherhood.

Through his hero Ellison has successfully shown the actual experience of the American blacks with communism. The poor black's needs push him into contact with communism which seems to show a way out of their predicament. The moment the blacks become familiar with the party they get disenchanted and disillusioned. The treatment of these two aspects is very realistically done. Invisible Man clearly implies that the blacks are unable to solve their political and social problems: they are instead manipulated by the changing political strategies and policies of communism. They are forced and oppressed by the party. So what concerns Ellison most is that both capitalism and communism fail to solve the black's social problems of finding a social identity and individuality. Instead they exploit the blacks further.
Ellison ultimately reveals the values of his protagonist. Most of these values are based on his desires. As a young boy at college he craved a wonderful wealthy future - He is aware of Dr. Bledsoe "who is influential with men all over the country .... a leader of his people, the possessor of not one, but two cadillacs, a good salary and ....... a creamy coloured wife." (IM, 99)

The hero's envy of Bledsoe shows that he himself cherishes social status, prestige, wealth, power, fame and material comforts. The protagonist suffers due to a dearth of money. He is almost a destitute; so it is quite natural that he should crave for money. He wonders how Mr. Bates, a millionaire, earned his money. The black American fully realizes that money alone can bring him stability and security.

The protagonist has a short successful phase in the Brotherhood; the message is that if he lives long enough and works hard enough, he'll work his way to the top in the party. The protagonist was bitten by the success myth ever since his college days. He craved to be considered an equal in the American society. By depicting and revealing Invisible Man's deepest desires and dreams, Ellison fulfils his major duty as a writer. The theme of Marxism and the peculiar relationship between the blacks and the communists is one of the major thematic concerns of Invisible Man. Ellison's success as a writer is in his revealing adroitly the thoughts and feelings, dreams and desires of his people. In the Prologue, thinking of his comic lot, the protagonist asks the same tragic question of his life that reverberated in Louis Armstrong's song," What did I do / To be so black/ And blue !(IM, 10)

Invisible Man is ranked among the ten greatest novels of the twentieth century, but it might well emerge as the Commedia of its age. Ralph Ellison draws
heavily on the resources of humour available to the black artist through the two
great traditions of Afro American culture: native African and American folk
materials and the Anglo-European conventions of carnivalesque and picaresque
literature. Humour offers the writer an aesthetic perspective through which to view
the nightmare of Afro American history truthfully, but with playfulness. Within the
technique of 'game and play' the writer cleverly attacks the culture and society that
physically and psychologically enslaved a race of people. The great comic writers
like Aristophanes, Shakespeare, Beckett have enjoyed the license of comedy to turn
a world upside down and inside out, to view and comment upon the history of its
institutions from the perspective of its perpetual victims: women, children, racial and
religious minorities and other "inferior" people.

The paradoxical way of the comic hero can be explained thus. The mock
battles are sometimes mistaken as real battles. The hero of *Invisible Man* begins
with a real battle that breaks out over symbolic confusion, when he is attacked by the
white man in the streets at the very beginning of the novel. When the hero learns
later to follow the advice of his grandfather to "overcome 'em with yeses" and
"undermine 'em with grins" (*IM*, 13) he fights symbolically to expose real historical
wrongs.

The writer Ellison and the hero of his novel are alter egos. In modern culture
there are many cruel and insidious pranks that are played, drawing in all the
participants, one being the hero. The joke of the pranks is not on him, but also on his
adversaries in the game. The hero is many roles fused into one, both victim and
aggressor; he is at the same time an intellectual and a pragmatic man, at times very
serious, at others deadly comic.
The hero's dream is a comic theme. The hero comes out victorious through various episodes - the hero loses many battles in the novel; the one against his provincial community, Norton's college, Emerson's Paints company, and Brother Jack's pseudo Brotherhood, but he ultimately wins the war. The hero keeps losing in the short run, only to win in the long run, the long race. The logic of inversion works here.

The films of Charlie Chaplin also show many of Ellison's comic technique. Charlie Chaplin is the little guy, more sinned against than sinning. But then he proves to be a good hero against the rich and their living system, in *The Kid* and *City Lights*. The latter film deals with the ambiguities of "blindness" and "insight" that so intrigue both Chaplin and Ellison. In the film *Modern Times* the hero, a vagabond tackling with the machine causes a short circuit, reminding us of the invisible hero of *Invisible Man* who blows up the Paint factory without really trying to do it. Charlie Chaplin is put behind bars for unknowingly leading a mob down the street just as Ellison's hero becomes a political pawn after he suddenly and publicly shows sympathy for the old evicted couple. In *The Great Dictator*, Chaplin plays both hero and villain, much like the invisible hero who realizes his complicity with Norton, Jack and other tyrants. He says as much to Norton whom he meets again in the subway at the end of the novel: "But I'm your destiny, I made you. Why shouldn't I know you?" (IM, 437) Chaplin finally emerges as a trickster and full confidence man, a Rinehart in *Monsieur Vendonx* and *The King in New York*. The tramp changes into a suave and elegant man, and knows how to tackle women who try to seduce him; he also learns how to take advantage of the system. The comic heroes in Chaplin and Ellison reach a similar solution to their everyday problems; a life underground and a decision to play the confidence game that makes American
culture. The hero who is invisible also has a peculiar Yankee stance.

In his article "Change the Joke and slip the yoke", Ellison says that the Grandfather reminds him more of Ulysses in the cave of Polyphenous than of Brer Rabbit in the briar patch. He did not want his hero to be only a black entertainer. Confidence games were important and so also "smart men playing dumb", which is again Yankee.

Emerson, Ellison's namesake explains the nature of the comic that outlines very clearly Ellison's comic version:

There is no joke so true and deep in actual life as when some pure idealist goes up and down among the institutions of society, attended by a man who knows the world, and who sympathizing with the philosopher's scrutiny, sympathizes also with the confusion and indignation of the detected, skulking institutions. His perception of disparity from the rule to the crooked, lying, thieving fact, makes the eyes run over with laughter.

The invisible hero is a waif who embodies and strives after the ideal. He has on the road "a man who knows the world"- the grandfather, the Vet and Rinehart. As he scrutinizes the world and its institution, he is at times sympathetic at others indignant. There is disparity between the inner ideal and the world; this hypocritical fact drives him mad, like the "moon mad" mocking birds that wave and flip their tails in the faces of the founders of the institution. (IM, 132) To quote James R. Andreas again:

The hero learns the lesson of the grandfather and Rinehart, which is in Emerson's words, "to maintain an honest or well intended halfness" a non performance of what is pretended to be performed, at the same time that one is giving loud pledges of performance (Comic, 160). Ellison's concept of invisibility could not be more fully defined. And Emerson's thought might be as well represented
fictionally in *Invisible Man* as it was in Melville's *Confidence Man* a century before.23

The comic tradition is seen in one form or another in every feature of the novel, as in Richard Wright's *The Man Who Lived Underground* where both serious and humorous sources are equally dealt with. Ellison uses blues music as a thematic as well as structural source for the novel (the blues are essentially comic). The blending of styles - polyphonic and surrealistic makes Ellison's delivery comic at times. The novel's picaresque episodic structure, which takes the hero from "blackness to light.... from ignorance to enlightenment" is again in the comic tradition. The character portrayal of the hero who is a chameleon like trickster and the way he wards off inflexible antagonists is again comic. The episode with the women is hilarious: they try to take advantage of the hero and thus make him understand the world.

There are many other comic means employed by Ellison in his novel; some of the techniques are listed below: the use of colloquial "manners" and folk motif; the focus on local segments and the encyclopaedic range of the world; the slapstick effect of narrative acceleration and violence in a stylized version, the appeal of the narrative seem improvised and therefore comic; the use of pun and other interesting verbal effects, brought in through the dialogues. Alongwith the above we have the mock serious, comic themes of rebellion and accommodation, death and rebirth and survival and triumph. The novel is rich in the comic tradition. Ralph Ellison draws on the grand traditions of world literature for techniques and ideas in the comic genre. The comic theme therefore is one of the main themes of *Invisible Man*. Through the comic, Ellison explores the deeper themes and the tragic and poignant aspects of an individual's difficult struggles through his life and this world.
The quest for identity is a major theme in Ralph Ellison's fiction. Ellison's concern is to discover the roots of the African-American culture, and its contribution to the "melting pot" of American culture. The theme of social pressure and their effects on the consciousness of the blacks is cleverly knitted together with the black man's invisibility, alienation and desperate search for identity. The Afro-American's identity can be discovered through the discovery of his culture. The blacks consciousness and his Americanness are to be put together to realize and understand the fullness of the blacks psyche. Through his protagonist, Ellison tries to trace his quest for identity. Ellison's theme of identity is such that it presents a swift flow of black consciousness under which the vibrations of universal human experiences can be heard. The identity is discovered through a series of initiations.

The term "initiation" was used first by anthropologists to devote the rites of passage from childhood to adolescence to maturity that were practised in many primitive cultures and civilizations. In fiction the "initiation" is very different; it is not a group activity since each hero achieves it on his own through his own intense, personal experience. Initiation is a series of personal existential encounters in life, always painful, during which the young adolescent protagonist learns many things about himself, the world and about the nature of evil. This knowledge is accompanied by a sense of loss of innocence and a sense of isolation. The initiation should have a permanent effect and almost always result in change in behaviour and character. Acquisition of knowledge must cause change. To quote Isaac Sequeira:

Initiation is classified into three kinds (1) Decisive (2) Uncompleted and (3) Tentative. The first is the highest order of initiation. The decisive initiate goes through the whole painful process successfully - gains valuable knowledge about himself, his identity, the nature of evil, and the world. He experiences an initiatory loss of innocence and a sense of isolation, and finally

76
accepts adult society in spite of his disillusionment with it. The second category defines initiates who cross the threshold of initiation but are still confused as to the direction in which they should proceed. The third deals with initiates who go through the process of initiation up to a point. They experience pain and disillusionment and come to the threshold of initiation but are not able to cross it. The three categories are discussed in relation to the three kinds of modern fictional heroes. (1) the Pharmakos (scapegoat or victim) (2) the eiron (ironic protagonist and (3) the alazon (braggart-rebel). 24

*Invisible Man* is a novel that made a rare mark with both readers and critics. This novel is both a bildungsroman (novels of formation and education) and a Kunstlerroman (artist-novel), the story of an apprenticeship process to life and the metamorphosis of an artistic personality from innocence to perception and maturity through a series of shocking and painful initiatory experience. Ralph Ellison himself divides the book into three parts which show the narrator’s movement from "purpose to passion to perception" (Kenneth Burke’s term) Burke also calls the book "a novel about innocence and human error, a struggle through illusion to reality". *(SA, 177)*

The novel begins with a narration of the life the hero has experienced after his adolescence and youth. He states at the very outset:

> I am invisible, understand, simply because people refuse to see me..... when they approach me they see only my surroundings, themselves, or figments of their imagination - indeed, everything and anything except me. *(IM, 3)*

Next follows in flash back the past twenty years of his experience. His graduation leads to him being invited to give an address to leading white citizens at a smoker. The experience at the smoker becomes a terrible initiation rite with the
battle royal scene adding insult to injury. The next initiation occurs when the protagonist is expelled from college (where he had begun to enjoy himself and feel whole) because he had taken the white trustee, Mr Norton and inadvertently exposed the seamier side of black life to him (Trueblood episode). The next initiation is the protagonists movement from South to North, from the rural to the urban, and on the symbolic level, from the darkness of ignorance to the light of knowledge; again it is from blindness to sight.

The painful initiation continues in Harlem; the hero is lost and fumbling to discover who he is. His education is yet only in the initial stages. He gets some sight with his experience with Lucius Brockway, the half - crazy Uncle Tom character he works with at the Liberty Paints Factory. There is some confusion, a great explosion and the hero is "shot forward with sudden acceleration into a wet blast of black emptiness that was somehow a bath of whiteness."(IM, 175) His blackout is described as a fall, the fall of initiation into knowledge, and his coming to is described in terms of an initiatory second birth.

When he is brought back to consciousness with the help of a sophisticated electrical machine, he finds he cannot remember anything. "My mind was blank, as through I had just begun to live." He could not remember his name. This episode reinforces the theme of the quest for identity, which is a very important step of initiation. He realizes that his freedom is tied up with his identity:

I could no more escape than I could think of my identity.
Perhaps, I thought, the two things are involved with each other.
(IM, 184)

Mary Rambo, a surrogate mother looks after him. The question of identity
bothers him even after he leaves the hospital and the doctor tells him he is a new man:

And the obsession with my identity which I had developed in the factory hospital returned with a vengeance. Who was I, how had I come to be? Certainly, I couldn't help being different from when I left campus; but now a new painful contradictory voice had grown up within me, and between its demands for revengeful action and Mary's silent pressure I throbbed with guilt and puzzlement. I wanted peace and quiet, tranquillity but was too much aboil inside. (IM, 197)

The pain and disillusionment had brought insight and a new perception, and rage against the Bledsoes, Nortons and Emersons, whom he could understand better now. He unashamedly decides to accept his black identity. Eating yams he says, "They're my birthmark. I yam what I am."(IM, 201)

A few moments after this realization dawns upon him he sees an old couple being evicted. His heart melts and goes out to them: he gives a passionate speech, tracing the history of blacks. He finds that the narration is too powerful.

This power of oration to move people gets him drawn into the Brotherhood a Marxist organisation based in New York. He is employed by the Brotherhood to make Harlem aware of their plight. He has to fight for this new identity and is again initiated into the Brotherhood by a trial - by ordeal initiation ceremony.

A few years go by when he realizes that he has made a mistake. He learns that the Brotherhood is just using him. They are interested more in the expediency of historical and dialectical materialism than in the problems of the black people. The narrator was under the impression that he had moved from blindness to sight but now
realises that what he had achieved was only half sight. The narrator's last job in the service of the Brotherhood is a vehement funeral speech at the death of Tod Clifton. After this speech, the hero is attacked on both sides: by Ras the Destroyer who thinks he is a traitor, and, by the Brotherhood who think him to be a threatening force to their long term plans.

During the riot that ensues, he is pursued by Ras and his men, and he accidently runs through a burst of water from a burst pipeline. This becomes symbolic of another rebirth. He in his search of identity, now realizes that all his previous identities have brought him nowhere. He understands the chaos of the world and realizes that the terrible position he is in is due to himself; "By pretending to agree I had indeed agreed and made myself responsible."(IM, 418) As he tries to escape from his chasers, he falls into a coal pit. Here ends his tireless running and changing identities. His invisibility is now fait accompli. A black man in a black coal pit is the ultimate in invisibility. He, of course, finds himself and sees himself, which he could not do earlier. He burns all the papers in his brief case to lighten the dark cellar. This is again necessary - a ritual severance from all past identities so he undergoes another symbolic death and rebirth.

He has reached finally a place from where he can think and write about himself. He has got his own identity which is unlike the other identities that had been forced upon him by other people. He illuminates the hole with 1,369 bulbs tapping the electricity from Monopolated Light and Power. This bright light stands for enlightenment. He has discovered himself and so the world is full of infinite possibilities:

So after years of trying to adopt the opinions of others I finally
rebelled. I am an invisible man. Thus I have come a long way and returned and boomeranged a long way from the point in society towards which I originally aspired. (IM, 433)

His initiation is yet uncompleted, but since his face is turned towards society there is positive hope for the future. The act of narrating and writing about his experiences proves that his underground cell is a purgatory and not an inferno. At the beginning, which is also the end, he had said that hibernation is a "covert preparation for a more overt action." The overt action will be possible when the people in the world above accept the black man as he is. The world has to be educated to see the black man. The hero now knows his role in society - that of a literary artist. He has at last made his own decision and that is what gives him his individuality and identity. He has moved painfully from acceptance through humiliation through rebellion to perception.

The main theme of the novel is the protagonist journey from invisibility to visibility. Invisibility is a dominant metaphor in the life of the Afro-American. It shows the dominance of one culture, blasting out the identity of the other. Invisibility suggests the torment of the people who suffer when their fundamental rights and psychological needs are violated. Ralph Ellison makes two uses of invisibility. The first possibility is when society refuses an individual's identity and he feels unreal and untrue. The second possibility is that the individual can wear a mask to change or hide his real identity, deceiving the society itself. Ellison has very cleverly fused both these possibilities, through situations and brilliantly drawn characters. Thus he succeeds in showing the black's search for identity, and at the same time he makes universal the black man's experience.
The themes of identity and invisibility are merged together. Invisibility is the situation in which man finds himself; his struggle in this world is a search for visibility and identity; his self-affirmation is achievement of his identity and the end of his invisibility. With self-affirmation come a horde of possibilities.

We have referred to the themes of all the short stories written by Ellison before *Invisible Man*. Next we dealt with the main themes that haunt Ellison's mind. Lastly, we shall endeavour here to mention the short stories written after *Invisible Man* and discuss their themes.

In 1954, "Did you Ever Dream Lucky?" was published and it is just a further elaboration of one of the themes of *Invisible Man*. The story concerns the innocent wishfulness of young blacks of the South, who come to the North, hoping to discover Heaven there. The focus is on Mary Rambo and Lucy, who witness an accident before Thanksgiving. As they watch, a bag flies off a truck and no one notices it. The two women manage to get the bag and furtively hide it in the flush tank. The bag is full of something that mysteriously sounds like money. The women plan and dream what to do with the money. When the bag is opened it is discovered that there are only two pairs of automobile chains in it. Their dreams are shattered and they feel cold. Mary dreamt lucky but her luck runs cold. Mysterious treasures and their tales abound in African folklore. The failure of the high hopes of the characters also indicates the likelihood of disappointment in America. The story and its bitter humour is callous but it prepares the Afro-American for the worst. The dreamers may dream lucky, but will wake up cold.

"A Coupla Scalped Indians" appeared in 1956 and Ellison said it was an off
shoot of a novel in progress. Buster and his nameless friend are moving through the wood after circumcision by an operation. This operation is again a boy's sacrifice for going into sexually virile manhood. Buster attracts him to more adventures and his friend is drawn on. They peep in through a window, hearing music from it; they see a woman dancing, they are aroused seeing her supple body, but when she turns they see that it is Aunt Mackie, a herb doctor with snaky hair. She is presented awash in lamp light and moonlight. She is at the same time a dream lady and a weird lady. Looking at Aunt Mackie's hard and wrinkled face is a shock for the boys. Aunt Mackie invites the boys inside and what follows is a strange, frightening and mysterious experience for the boys. The theme of this story is again one of trial and initiation.

The second novel by Ellison was in progress but parts of it were published. The design of the novel emerges. It is set in the South, during the period from 1920-1960. The main characters are Rev. Alonzo Zuber Hickman, reformed jazz trombonist, and the light skinned orphan boy Bliss, whom Hickman adopts and rears to be a revival circuit evangelist. Bliss, boy minister in training, raises the lid of a coffin during Hickman's sermon on resurrection. Ultimately Bliss, (a devilish trickster like Rinehart) disappears into the white community, passing for white. Years later he appears again as Senator Sunraider, a bitter and eloquent spokesman for white supremacy who, to compound the mystery, retains certain distinctively Afro-American ways of gesturing and talking. Rev. Hickman has come to warn Bliss (Senator Sunraider) of an assassination plan against him. The warning is not received and Bliss is shot at, though he is saved. The anger against Senator Sunraider is mainly because of his mocking blacks who bought Cadillacs, and his sarcastic advice that the Cadillac should be renamed Coon Cage Eight. The black Minifees is so wild
and furious that he goes and sets fire to his Cadillac on the lawns of Senator Sunraider. Senator Sunraider is frightened by this violent demonstrative behaviour and believes that such a black can rise to anything. This particular episode of the novel appeared as a short story "Cadillac Flambé" in 1973.

The second of the Hickman stories, "The Roof, The Steeple and the People" (1960) takes its title from a child's rhyme game. Bliss, the boy preacher is about eight years old and begs Rev. Hickman to allow him to go to the movies. Rev. Hickman has been refusing this request as he feels that the movies are the devil's hangouts. Yet Rev. Hickman finally yields to the boys request and accompanies him to the theatre. His argument is that the movie shows the world - both its good and its evil. What is important is to have the correct perspective. The world is puzzling but it has to be lived in and understood. As Hickman says, the preacher's main task is to "help folks find themselves and to remember who they are."

Ellison has identified the same task as the task of the novelist in America. Through Hickman preaching Bliss about the responsibilities and craft of the preacher, Ellison is voicing his opinion of the writer's responsibilities and techniques. Ellison's enduring theme is about the morality of the writer's craft, the rituals upon which universal, permanent art is based and the sacred function of art in society. The development is through symbols and the use of metaphors.

"It Always Breaks Out" is a story that has been treated comically and humorously. It is a conversational piece showing a group of journalists chatting and relaxing over drinks. Though the narrator goes unnamed, we assume it is Mc.Intyre,
who was a witness to the Cadillac burning episode. The racial wisecracking by the Southern Mc. Gowan, "Everything the Nigra does is political" goes to the heart of the story. Mc.Intyre finds it painful and disturbing. The humour of the tale is maintained by the descriptions, that are apt and shocking in their imagery. The mock serious tone of conversation is attractive. The juxtaposition of direct statement of fact and absurd metaphor is comic. The outrageous exaggerations are funny and the serious tone of Mc. Gowan's minute observation of Negro politics is humorous. Underlying this mockery is a fear in the white journalist. If the car burning is political, and not mere madness, the boldness and violence, and the self sacrificing attitude of the Negroes is frightening. The journalists wonder if ever there was a Negro assassin. Through the story, Ellison raises deeper questions. As Robert G.O'Meally has said,

"It Always Breaks Out" deals with the innocent Mc.Intyre and with Mc. Gowan, who is haunted by the idea that thwarted black political activity can, like repressed sexuality "break out in a thousand forms". Ironically the Southerners comic monologue, designed to teach and delight its listeners with its Jim Crow wisdom, actually shocks Mc.Intyre into realizing his own more subtle racism. As the story closes Mc.Intyre considers the humanity of blacks as he sees something that even Mc. Gowan has missed: racial humour cuts both ways .... He realizes too, that Minifees act is a political one designed to rattle the cages of hardened racists and well meaning liberals alike. 25

Mr. Intyre realizes the freedom of Mc. Gowan whose discourse was uninhibited and free. Black freedom is mostly won secretly on a symbolic plane. Mc. Gowan's speech of black values and life styles shows that he has a fuller sense of the Negro humanity than Mc. Intyre, who chooses to forget about and ignore the issue. Thus, Ellison through a comic treatment reveals the multifaceted relation between blacks and whites.
"Juneteenth" which appeared in 1965, is Ellison's favourite; it is rich in spoken word, almost poetic, full of folklore and the joy of language and music. The story is a part of the Hickman saga. In it the Bliss - turned - Senator, recalls a sermon recollected from his boy preacher days. The senator now winces to remember the part played by him in Juneteenth, the annual black Celebration commemorating Emancipation Day, June 19, 1865. The sermon is clearly Afro-American in idiom and allusions. References are made to spirituals, folklore and Biblical tales. Rev.Hickman tells young Bliss that God spoke to the blacks as he spoke to the Israelites; "Doo These Dry Bones Live?" The Bible story becomes a beautiful sight of black resurrection in a strange alien land, Hickman recounts black history: how their language was discouraged and they were left without words and drums. Africans were culturally dead in America, like the valley of dry bones and then the Africans were reborn as Afro-Americans. God called and gave them a rebirth. Afro-Americans survive by the power of language, and rhythm which fills them with security, strength and a sense of identity. Rev.Hickman recites black history and says that blacks survived despite tough conditions because they developed hardness and resiliency. The power of music and the word sustains them.

"Juneteeth" is a wonderful and powerful story. It answers basic and important questions of the why and how and the whereafter of black existence. The stress is on music, on knowing oneself. There is an affirmation and positive hope in the blacks. As the wounded Sunraider listens he is reminded of the promise made in a sermon he recited earlier as Bliss, the boy preacher:

Let those who will despise you ..... Time will come round when you'll have to be their eyes; time will swing and turn back around,
I tell you, time shall swing and spiral back around.36
"Night-Talk" (1969) is a stark thought provoking story. It is a part of the Hickman stories. In it the setting is a hospital room where Senator Sunraider / Bliss is passing through periods of alertness and delirium as he recuperates from an assassins shot. Hickman sits by him, tired and exhausted from the mental strain of losing Bliss, whom he brought up rigorously to be good, and found it amazing and shocking to see him now. The two men have been separated for years and gone through changes in values. The story and the situation raise the question that why did the boy who looked white, but was culturally black, abandon his profession of preacher and become the violent anti black, repressor of blacks as Senator Sunraider.

The talk between the two is like going down memory lane for both men as they recount past incidents. Young Bliss is confused as to his identity in this white and black torn America. He seeks his parents, whom he had never known. He is further confused by Hickman's reply that God and America was his father and Mary, his mother. The complicity of the tale stems from the black and white mother and father images that pierce the mind of a boy living on the sharp edge. The black women he has known were good religious Church women. He is excited by the white women, and, a sharp image etched on his psyche is that of the hysterical white woman who had claimed that he was her son. The boy is confused about his skin and parentage.

Bliss goes to see a movie and is attracted and lured into the white world. His confusion haunts him. Seeing the hypocrisy in the world around him, and wanting to escape the complicated truth, which is full of exploitation and hypocrisy, he decided to become a white man. This white world is a dream world of the movies. Once in, he cannot emerge into the real world. Failing to find his parents, he decides to become, as Hickman had advised him, to become his own father. He becomes his
own militant harsh white father - a Senator, a public servant:

I told myself: men and women are baby's device for achieving governments - ergo I'm a politician.27

Afraid of the contradiction in his personal history, he backs away from it and from American history. He does not realize that his true father is Rev. Hickman, who shares love, culture and experience with him. Later, Bliss comes to an awareness which is tragic. He has to accept his guilt along with his blackness and whiteness-only then can he be saved, but what we see of Bliss in this scene - he is weak both physically and spiritually.

Another interesting Hickman story is "A Song of Innocence" (1970), which is made up of flashbacks. The story is about Cliofus, a young boy who is physically obese and therefore nagged by his playmates. He is stupid and clumsy, but also pure and innocent and unspoiled. He stutters and is ridiculed by his friends.

Ellison does not make Cliofus' narrations only a song of complaint. It is as Robert G.O. Meally has said,

A portrait of a potential writer as a young man. Cliofus, who narrates the story is plunged into solitude and anguish by his diseases, but he transcends his physical conditions as he grapples with language. In addition to the portrait of artist in the making in a "A Song of Innocence" Ellison gives us a meditation on the powers and vagaries of the slippery medium of the word.28

Cliofus is lost in words, his identity is wrapped up in words. The words he utters seem to be independent forces that are highly perceptive and active:

It was as though he's asked a question and thus (the words) were out to answer before I had a chance to stop them. They didn't need
me anyway, they were in the waiting to get out and didn't care how they got started. Because they had recognized him long before I did, Smelled him or heard him coming from a long way off like dogs do.  

"A Song of Innocence" is a splendid story, strangely attractive in the pathetic, yet strong boy in Clioifs. The boy has many similarities to Ellison, of course, many differences, too. Clioifs is one of Ellison's rare fictional personae, who deals and struggles with his own private problems - one being race - by using the bluesman's power and the writer's magic wand of the powerful and well turned out word.

One of the last of the Hickman stories is the slight but attractive tale "Back wacking: A Plea to the Senator."(1977) The story is in the form of a letter of complaint to the Senator Sunraider from Norm A Mauler, a white supremacist who is obsessed by the black Americans past and present, his politics, and his sex life. The tale is humorous about the stupidity of taking the American stereotype too seriously. The motif is of black sexual deviancy, promiscuity and supremacy. The statement of and nurturing of these stereotypes gave the whites a reason and justification for the suppression of blacks.

Through his novel *Invisible Man*, his short stories and the Hickman tales, Ellison describes a very topsy-turvy world, in which one loses his grasp of reality and identity. Personal values, goals and objectives all appear hazy in this confused world. The tone and situation change but the theme remains the same. It is a theme very dear to Ellison and very close to his heart. The theme of the sufferings of blacks, their hopes and ideals, their struggles against isolation and alienation, their pathetic cry in a search for identity. Through the blacks, Ellison paints
America, a huge teeming populace with its unities and diversities of culture, language and regional differences. Music, self expression, the artistic struggle to discovery are themes that pulsate through the works of Ellison. His treatment of the themes is magnificent in the sense, that very powerfully and yet subtly he weaves the story of man's predicament in this world, in his fiction. The works of Ellison thus leave the narrow confines of Black - American literature and become the literature of the world - which is universal and lasting.
CHAPTER - II : REFERENCES


5. Ibid,69.

6. Ralph Ellison, "In a Strange Country " *Tomorrow* July 1944: 86.


*************************************************************************

92