Juneteenth Study Guide

Juneteenth by Ralph Ellison

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Introduction

The title comes from an event that occurred on June 19, 1865. On this date in history, General Gordon Granger landed in Galveston, Texas to deliver the news that the Civil War had ended and that Abraham Lincoln had freed the slaves. What is most notable about this event was that Lincoln's Emancipation Proclamation was given on January 1, 1963, nearly two and half years before Granger reached Texas. Hence the vague term "Juneteenth" holds the innuendo of a vague date in history.

Similar to Ellison's other works, most notably his first novel *Invisible Man*, *Juneteenth* questions the cultural fabric of the United States. It digs into the underbelly of America, uncovering the foul history of racism and segregation in America. However, in classic Ellison style, the work does not fester in the negative. *Juneteenth* is an affirming narrative in that the black characters are strong, educated and cognizant. They do not cling their oppression. Instead they yearn for something better and strive to find a way to achieve a better America□not a better *black* America□but a better *overall* America where the segregated races coexist and prosper, where racism is not forgotten, but absolved. Unfortunately, Ellison's dream as it existed in his mind and the minds of his protagonists has yet to be achieved. Nonetheless, his works, like *Juneteenth*, can only help to enable Americans with the knowledge necessary to move our nation closer to Ellison's aspiration.

Author Biography

Ralph Waldo Ellison, a twentieth-century African American writer and scholar, is one of America's most powerful and notable voices into the history of black America. A productive writer of essays and criticism, Ellison only wrote two novels during his lifetime, *Invisible Man* and the posthumously published *Juneteenth*. Although not prolific in the world of fiction, Ellison's writing changed the way Americans thought about race, politics, religion and culture through his essays and teachings.

Ellison was born into segregation on March 1, 1914 in Oklahoma City, Oklahoma. His father died only three years later, leaving his mother alone to raise their poverty stricken family. In 1933, Ellison attended Tuskegee Institute with the intentions to pursue a career in music. However, studying modern literature piqued his interested in writing. After leaving Tuskegee Institute in 1936, Ellison moved to New York City, where he met the author Richard Wright. From this friendship, Ellison was inspired to write and became associated with the Federal Writers' Project and published his first short stories and articles.

In 1945, Ellison began work on his most famous work, *Invisible Man*. Ellison's friendship with Wright helped to develop his most notable character, the nameless black protagonist in *Invisible Man*. Unlike Wright's angry, uneducated and inarticulate character in his powerful novel *Native Son*, Ellison's character was educated, well spoken and self-aware. Although both characters sprung from the consequences of oppression, Ellison focused his attentions on affirming what blacks have achieved as opposed to Wright's protest literature focused on the brutality of racism. In 1946, Ellison married Fanny McConnell who helped support them during the writing of *Invisible Man*. Finally, seven years after he began, Ellison achieved international fame with the publication of *Invisible Man*. In 1953, Ellison became the first black American to win the National Book Award when *Invisible Man* was awarded the coveted prize.

Although his first novel took seven years to complete, it would be a short duration in reference to his second novel. Ellison began work on his second novel in 1955 while in Rome as a fellow of the American Academy of Arts and Letters. In 1958, Ellison accepted a position at Bard College as an instructor in Russian and American literature. In 1962, Ellison took a creative writing position at Rutgers University. Although still unfinished, Ellison continued to work on his second novel. Sadly, in 1967, a substantial portion of the manuscript was destroyed in a fire that burned the Ellison's summer home in the Berkshires. Although the fire was a setback, Ellison continued to garner praise and was appointed Albert Schweitzer Professor of Humanities at New York University in 1970. He served under this position until 1980.

Over the four decades following the publication of *Invisible Man*, Ellison published countless reviews, interviews, essays and critiques of literature, folklore, jazz and other aspects of race and culture. A collection of his work was published in 1964, *Shadow and Act*, and another in 1986, *Going to the Territory*. Yet, during his lifetime he never published a second novel. At the age of eighty, on April 16, 1994, Ellison died in Harlem,

New York. Some five years after the author's death, through keen selections from thousands of pages of Ellison's unfinished magnum opus, John F. Callahan, Ellison's literary executor, helped finally publish Ellison's second novel, *Juneteenth*.

Plot Summary

Chapters 1—3

The novel opens with Reverend Hickman and the members of his parish attempting to see the racist Senator Adam Sunraider. They are denied entry to the senator's office and, eventually, they are thrown out of the lobby by Sunraider's security. The parish moves on to Senate's Visitors' Gallery to watch Sunraider in action. He is giving a riveting speech about black Americans. It is a racist monologue, even containing the demeaning phrase "Coon Cage Eight"□a Cadillac full of "eight or more of our darker brethren crowded together enjoying its beauty, its neo-pagan comfort, while weaving reckless through the streets." While giving his speech the senator is having hallucinatory visions of the emblematic eagle from Great Seal. Alas, as Hickman and his parish watch on from the Visitors' Gallery, an unnamed black man rises up and shoots Sunraider several times. Fleeing the pursuit of security, the assassin falls to his death from the Visitors' Gallery down to the Senate floor. Hickman is distraught. His only son, the adopted white Sunraider, has somehow transformed himself into racist and, now, he has been mortally wounded right before his eyes.

Chapter 4

The unnamed assassin found his mark, but Sunraider is holding on to the last strings of life in a hospital bed. After falling from the assassin's bullets, Sunraider began calling for his adoptive father, Reverend Hickman. From his deathbed, Sunraider, with the help of Hickman, begins a lengthy series of flashbacks and recollections to his past. Before becoming a racist senator, Sunraider was a young, white preacher named Bliss Hickman, raised by a parish of kind, religious black Americans. Bliss is a young boy with a remarkable skill for preaching. Sometimes his skill made him the envy of others. On one such occasion, a young black boy was taunting Bliss about being a preacher. The boy teased Bliss and eventually Bliss hit the boy with a rock. Bliss is an important aspect to Reverend Hickman's revivals. He lies in a coffin and eventually rises up representing the resurrection and the life. Bliss moves the parishioners. He is a great preacher, even at his tender young age.

Chapters 5—7

In the hospital Sunraider again flashes back to his early years, remembering his first love and his years as an unsuccessful filmmaker. A young woman named Laly is accompanying Bliss on a picnic under a tree out in a field. Bliss calls Laly a "Teasing Brown" and she calls him "Mr. Movie-Man." The two enjoy an enormous picnic of sandwiches, fried chicken, Texas hots, boiled eggs, cake and tea with lemon and mint. The two are in love and eventually have sex underneath the tree.

Bliss also recollects his unsuccessful attempts at filmmaking with his partners Lester Donelson and Karp. They have a run-in with unfriendly townspeople, who beat them and pour whiskey on their heads, and forgetful Donelson ruins a remarkable scene when he forgets to load film in the camera.

Senator Sunraider wakes up in the hospital and is pleasantly surprised that Reverend Hickman is still by his side. The unlikely father and son team discuss the past and, eventually, Hickman convinces Sunraider to preach to him. Hickman continues their discussion, redirecting it through his recollections about their teamwork at the revivals. Hickman is using his time by the senator's side to re-educate his son about the struggles of black Americans. The Reverend talks about the history of Juneteenth and how it was not the first, nor the last, step of the black American on his road towards freedom.

Chapters 8—10

Hickman and Sunraider recount a crucial revival in which a deranged white woman, Miss Lorelli, storms through the meeting, claiming that Bliss is her son. She grabs the young white preacher and tries to kidnap him. The women of the parish attack her and try to wrestle Bliss from the crazed woman. The church is in an uproar. Eventually, Sister Bearmasher grabs Miss Lorelli by her hair and drags her out to her carriage. Hickman and Bearmasher take Lorelli to jail, where, subsequently, they are incarcerated for being black.

Knowing that Hickman may meet opposition at the jail, Sister Georgia takes Bliss back to her home for the night. The two share a melon and conversation. Bliss is attracted to Georgia in a way he cannot understand because of his youth. Following a nightmare, Georgia allows Bliss to sleep in her bed, where he sneaks a peak under her nightgown. He catches a glimpse of her womanhood and is ashamed of his immorality. He admits his indiscretion to Georgia, and she condemns his act, calling him a "jackleg" and throwing him crying out of her bed.

After being beaten by the police and released from jail, Hickman returns to Bliss. Bliss asks if Lorelli is his mother. Hickman tells the boy that she is just a crazy woman who comes from lots of money. She has a history of kidnapping children and claiming they are her babies.

Later, Bliss is laying under the porch in the shade when he decides to eavesdrop on Mrs. Proctor and Body's Mother. The two women discuss the episode with crazy Miss Lorelli and some of her other more bizarre habits. However, although both women cannot believe the woman could be Bliss' mother, they both admit that they do not know for sure.

Chapters 11—14

Hickman takes Bliss to his first movie. The Reverend explains that the film must be Bliss's first and last movie because films are of bad shadow worlds that are too sinful to make a common practice in a preacher's life. They attend the film and Bliss is terrified because he believes that the woman in the picture is his mother, the deranged woman from the revival, Miss Lorelli.

From the revival forward, Bliss begins to pull away from Hickman and the parish. Soon he runs away and goes to the all-white movie houses to escape from the searching parishioners. As Hickman recounts these memories, the senator begins experiencing frantic, fragmented recollections of his life□who he was, what he has become□and how his past and his emotions have shaped and morphed him into his present being. Soon both men, Hickman and Sunraider, sleep in the hospital room. Hickman dreams and contemplates freedom, violence, *blackness* in America and his role in it all. It is insightful, but vague.

Chapters 15—16

Hickman recollects how Bliss came to him. Bliss's mother, an unnamed woman, accuses Hickman's brother, Robert, of rape. Although innocent, Robert is murdered by a lynch mob. The woman is shunned from the community for engaging in sex with a black man. Pregnant and needing to give birth, the woman turns to the most unlikely of places, Alonzo Hickman's home. Hickman takes her in and plans to kill her, the child and himself after she gives birth. However, after the child is born, Hickman feels pity for the pathetic woman and begins to love the young boy. He cannot carry out his original plan. The woman abandons the child and leaves Hickman's home. Hickman names the child Bliss "because they say that's what ignorance is." With the birth of Bliss, Hickman experiences his own rebirth, finding God and changing his ways from a partying jazz musician to a powerful preacher. Hickman raised Bliss to the best of his abilities, but the boy grew up, went out on his own, and became a multimillionaire, a racist and senator.

After this final recollection, Sunraider appears to be reaching the last moments of his life. Laying in his deathbed, the senator begins a hallucinatory journey through a landscape composed of people shooting pigeons, foxes that bring men to tears, and a rude boy from a Goya painting. It ends with a massive, ominous black car full of black men. It is no ordinary car□it hovers, screeches and appears to be an amalgamation of random parts. The occupants of the car dislike Sunraider because they know he is a racist. Yet instead of running him over, they load the senator into the car taking him away on his final ride.

Chapters 1, 2 and 3

Chapters 1, 2 and 3 Summary

Juneteenth is Ralph Ellison's novel about civil rights and racism issues in the early to mid-twentieth century. The book's title stems from the June 19, 1865, notification to slaves in Texas concerning the emancipation of slaves. In actuality, Lincoln's Emancipation Proclamation was issued in January of 1863, two and a half years prior to this notification. "Juneteenth" is the slang term assigned by the Negro people of that time to mark the inaccuracy and injustice of the delayed information.

As the novel begins, a group of elderly, southern Negroes arrives in Washington, D.C. on a mission to see Senator Adam Sunraider. The group led my Reverend A.Z. Hickman waits patiently in the Senator's office, while the secretary explains that the Senator is not available and cannot be seen without an appointment. Reverend Hickman tries to impress upon the young woman that the Senator would be glad to know of the arrival of the group, and that any interruption would not be unwelcome.

The group is turned away. Then, they are searched by security guards on their way out to their next destinations of a private hotel suite maintained by the Senator and the editorial department of a newspaper. The Senator is not in town, and the newspaper has no interest in what the elderly Negroes have to say. Reverend Hickman is patient, although he tells the newspaper that soon they will wish they had listened to the group's message.

The next day, the group attends a Senate session to watch Senator Sunraider deliver a speech on racial issues in America. During the speech, the Senator begins to have hallucinations about the eagle from the Great Seal in the Senate swooping down, causing the Senator to almost duck to avoid its talons. The Senator closes his eyes to avoid the visions. However, they do not lessen, but rather intensify with images of the eagle swooping relentlessly with an olive branch in its beak.

The Senator is buoyed by the visions and delivers his speech with rhetoric that is met with whoops, clapping and the Rebel yell. It is this reception that makes the Senator look over the gallery. He sees a lone man standing in the upper level Visitor's Gallery and pointing his arm straight out at the podium. The Senator's impatience with the man's rudeness soon turns to shock, as the man aims and shoots at the Senator on the stage.

The Senator hears the noise of the shot and sees the chandelier crashing. At first, he thinks that his high drama performance has shattered the crystal light fixture. It takes several minutes for the slow-motion events to register with the Senator that he has been shot, and that the man up above continues to empty his gun at the stage.

The Senator has brief glimpses of his past, as he tries to maintain consciousness and ultimately falls to the stage mortally wounded. Reverend Hickman watches in shock as the Senator, his adopted white son, collapses. The young man who has shot the Senator rushes to the edge of the gallery, and Hickman calls him by name, "Severen." He tells him to wait, but the young man lunges head first over the railing to his death.

Hickman is distraught that the Senator has been shot, declaring him as the last hope. Hickman's group is ushered to the Justice Department for questioning, but word reaches the officials that the Senator is calling out for Reverend Hickman. The Reverend rushes to the hospital to be at the Senator's bedside.

Chapters 1, 2 and 3 Analysis

Although it is not defined, there are elements in the story which place the time period as pre-Civil Rights era in America. For example, the Negro group takes a flight into Washington, D.C., and there are people using hand held cameras during sightseeing tours. The position of Negroes in America is still thwarted, but there are strides made in education and the arts to showcase the many talents of this race of people struggling against prejudice in all areas of society.

Ellison's characters are not down-on-their-luck Negroes, but educated and somewhat accomplished individuals who take the reins of civil rights as evidenced by their trip to Washington, D.C. at the beginning of the story. It is important to note that these people refuse to accept the position of victim and are well aware of their rights, despite the denial of those rights that face them every day.

The author begins the first of many interesting literary techniques throughout the novel, by writing part of the Senator's speech, as it would be heard echoing on a public address system; such as, the one used in the Senate hall. For example, the Senator says, "But... but... but... now... now... let let us consider consider consider, the broader broader implication... cations of of our our current state."

Chapter 4

Chapter 4 Summary

The Senator clings to life in his hospital bed and discerns the vague shape of a man at his bedside. Going in and out of consciousness, the Senator lapses into a memory from his childhood spent as a young preacher named Bliss in the care of Reverend Hickman, who would use Bliss in his revivals and sermons to make dramatic points. Bliss remembers the day Hickman introduces him to the coffin in which Bliss will be carried into services and from which he will rise at the appropriate moment for dramatic effect.

Bliss recalls the horror and vulnerability at being forced to lie in the dark coffin, his only demands are that his teddy bear accompany him, and that he receives vanilla ice cream after each performance.

The Senator continues to drift in and out of consciousness and recalls portions of political speeches he has made and can visualize scenes shot during the time he spent making movies.

Chapter 4 Analysis

The author uses the technique of flashbacks to provide the state of the Senator's dazed mental state. The memories take the shape of images, as well as conversations and even lines from children's taunts, which still haunt the Senator. The dialogue is Southern Negro style, which adds to the authenticity of the story line for the mostly rural characters.

The author also uses literary techniques; such as, similes and metaphors to provide even more interesting descriptions of situations. For example, when Bliss is being taunted by some local boys during one of his traveling revivals, he cannot engage in fist fights due to his religious position. He uses the only weapon he has at his disposal. "I reproached him with all the four horses galloping in my eyes." This is a reference to the Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse named in the Bible, representing the bringing of war, pestilence, famine and death. Obviously, there are not horses galloping in Bliss' eyes, but the author wants to emphasize that Bliss is shooting the most ominous looks he can as his only means of fighting.

Chapters 5, 6 and 7

Chapters 5, 6 and 7 Summary

The Senator can hear Reverend Hickman speaking, but is too tired to acknowledge the old man. He lapses once more into memories of his life, this time as a young man with a failing career as a filmmaker.

The Senator (Bliss) remembers a young woman, named "Laly," whom he seduced on a picnic one Sunday afternoon while he and his film partners Donelson and Karp are making their way to California by defrauding citizens in small towns on the way. With the promise of a film role, Bliss sweet talks Laly into making love, as well as hosting fundraising events for the fraudulent movie. Other encounters in other towns are not as pleasant. Bliss and his partners are beaten by townspeople, who discover the fraud in time to recoup their losses.

Reverend Hickman still waits at Bliss' bedside, and finally the wounded man awakens to find the old Black man looking at him. Bliss acknowledges that there is not much time. He wants Hickman to ask what he has come to ask and then leave, because there is nothing Bliss can do for Hickman's people. Hickman reminds Bliss that, although he is white, he grew up with the Negroes and many of them had come to Washington to help him.

Hickman also reminds Bliss of an event years ago at a Juneteenth revival, which initiated Bliss' preaching career, in order to engage Bliss in remembering his religious work with Negroes. Bliss is still conflicted over Hickman's strong encouragement to preach when Bliss was too young to understand the words and the message. Hickman replies that Bliss was simply born into the role and must accept the fact.

Bliss wants to know if Juneteenth is still celebrated. Hickman replies that it is and always will be, so that people will never forget the significance of the day. Bliss remembers the passionate sermons preached to five thousand people on that sweltering hot day and night, so many years ago. Reverend Hickman adds his recollections of his own preaching, which included the performance of little Bliss in the coffin.

Chapters 5, 6 and 7 Analysis

The significance of Juneteenth is discussed in this section, as a reminder to Negro people of the importance of emancipation as it was linked to religious traditions. The revivals of the early twentieth century served as both spiritual and social events with the Juneteenth celebration significant for permanently marking an occasion of insufficient communication for the slaves of the last century.

In terms of the significance of the book's title, Juneteenth is celebrated each year by the Negro community to mark the error in the announcement of emancipation to slaves in Texas. The title also represents the ongoing challenges and misrepresentations blocking the Negro's struggle for freedom.

Reverend Hickman sums it up as "They make life a business of struggle and fret, fret and struggle. See who you can hate; see what you can get. But you just keep on inching along like an old inchworm. If you put one and one together soon they'll make a million too. There's been a heap of Juneteenths before this one and I tell you there'll be a heap more before we're truly free!"

The author very eloquently uses literary techniques to provide visualization of important concepts in the storyline. For example, when Reverend Hickman explains the disintegration of slave families, he says "they chopped us up into little bitty pieces like a farmer when he cuts up a potato. And they scattered us around the land."

When Reverend Hickman explains the two extremes of the nature of men, he says, "Even the church has to have its outhouse, just as it has to have a back door as well as a front door, a basement as well as a steeple. Because man is always going to be man and there's no true road without sides to it." These examples help to illustrate the man's points lyrically and in sync with the preacher's way of speaking.

Throughout the novel, the author uses the dialogue delivered by the ministers, mainly Reverend Hickman, in the style of calling out with statements repeated or affirmed by other ministers, deacons and the congregation. A strong example of this is when Reverend Hickman is speaking to the congregation about the scattering of Negro people by the White slave owners.

Reverend Hickman says that the white men took away the drums that were used by the Negroes to communicate. The reverend continues and the congregation responds.

Chapter 8

Chapter 8 Summary

The story picks up on the night that Reverend Hickman has mentioned, and Bliss remembers the preparations that preceded his coffin performance. Bliss is lifted into the coffin by one of the deacons and takes his place with his stuffed toys in one hand and his little Bible in the other. Bliss can feel the jostling movements of the men who carry the coffin down the aisle toward Reverend Hickman. The Reverend will provide a verbal signal for Bliss to arise from the "dead" in time with the sermon's message.

Bliss can remember the panic and fear that washed over him, as he waited to hear the knocking signal from one of the coffin bearers that Bliss is not alone. Everything is black inside the pink lined box, even his white leather Bible and white suit. Bliss has tried to block out the memories by telling himself that this was not really him trapped inside the coffin.

Bliss remembers breathing heavily on the air tube in the coffin's lid and trying to imagine the night air and all the lights in the outside tent. Waiting for the verbal message from Reverend Hickman, Bliss lies still for what seems like an eternity. He listens to the congregation building to a fever pitch and finally rises up out of the coffin for the most dramatic point in the evening's show.

Before long, the agitated crowd parts to make way for a white woman running up the aisle, claiming that Bliss is her own child named "Cudworth," and she is going to take him home to his proper heritage. Bliss finds himself torn between the clutches of this woman and a tall Negro woman named Sister Bearmasher. The crazed woman is dragged out to a carriage and driven off to jail by Reverend Hickman and Sister Bearmasher.

Chapter 8 Analysis

Ellison uses similes to help Reverend Hickman relate some of his points. For example, this is demonstrated when the Reverend wants to illustrate how it will be when men meet Jesus at the end of the world by saying, "Yes, to come upon the proving ground of the human condition. Vanity dropped like soiled underwear. Pride stripped off like a pair of duckings that've been working all week in the mud. Feet dragging with the gravity of the trial ahead. Legs limp as a pair of worn-out galluses. With eyes dim as a flickering lamp wick!" The Reverend uses terms that are appropriate for his audience, so there will be no mistaking his meaning.

In the midst of this novel, which is filled with ministerial rhetoric, Ellison will also insert some very succinct metaphors to provide a nice contrast. To summarize the frantic behavior that takes over the congregation when the woman lunges for Bliss in the coffin, Bliss thinks, "Then the scene suddenly crumpled like a funny paper in a fireplace."

There is no question that Bliss means that the relative composure of the crowd changes abruptly with contorted faces and bodies moving in all different directions.

Chapters 9 and 10

Chapters 9 and 10 Summary

Bliss is whisked away from the revival by a woman named Sister Georgia, because it is anticipated by the congregation that Reverend Hickman and Sister Bearmasher will be held at the jail for their part in the incident.

Sister Georgia cares for children in her job and feels that she is the appropriate person to take charge of the young Bliss, even though he is a minister and a prophet. Bliss cries to be reunited with Reverend Hickman, but Sister Georgia entices the young boy with the prospect of a cold watermelon which has been chilling down in her well all day.

Sister Georgia is kind to Bliss and hugs him, in spite of his preferred position in the church. Bliss cannot help but be overwhelmed by the womanly smell of his temporary benefactress. He is smitten with her. The unlikely duo rescues the watermelon from the well, and being that he is the minister, Bliss does the honors of cutting into it. Bliss is calm by now, and Sister Georgia readies him for bed on the living room sofa. She cannot help but be moved by his forlorn state, having no one in the world but the Reverend Hickman to care for him.

Bliss awakens with a start not long after, due to a nightmare that the crazy woman at the revival is coming after him again. Sister Georgia consoles him and lets him crawl into her bed so that he will not be alone. Bliss feels some strange thoughts wash over him, as he has never been in bed with a woman before. Bliss wonders if this is what it feels like to have a mother and leans over to kiss Sister Georgia on the cheek. While the woman sleeps, Bliss lifts the hem of her nightgown to view her naked body, and Sister Georgia flies into a rage when she awakens to discover him in the act. Bliss is banished to the living room sofa once more, and the event is never mentioned again.

The next day, Reverend Hickman is released from jail. Bliss drinks lemonade, as the adults hover around the minister and tend to his wounds. Bliss finds the courage to ask Reverend Hickman if the crazy woman really is his mother. Reverend Hickman explains that she is not; that the woman is named "Lorelli," and has a history of taking children who do not belong to her.

Apparently, Lorelli had been abandoned at the altar when she was younger. She lost her mind from grief and spent some time with an aunt in Europe, trying to regain her sanity. When Lorelli returned to the United States, she settled again in her hometown, telling everyone that she was a queen and that all the children belonged to her. Lorelli began to take other people's children. The most famous story is of her abduction of a Chinese baby whom she took to New Orleans, where she opened a Laundromat. Fortunately, a man who was a former Yankee, entered the Laundromat, one day. He saw the baby diapered in the U.S. flag and notified the authorities of his outrage for the desecration of the nation's symbol. This event ultimately led to the Chinese baby being

reunited with his mother, although the woman had a difficult time, because people will tend to believe crazy white people with money over a poor Chinese woman any day. Reverend Hickman advises Bliss to forget Lorelli and her attempts to abduct him. The Reverend promises to take Bliss to a moving picture show the following week, if he is good.

Bliss finds a quiet spot under the porch so that he can take a nap in the shade. However, he cannot help but hear two women up above, discussing the event from last night. Mrs. Proctor and the mother of Blue, Bliss' best friend, fill in even more of the blanks of Lorelli's strange behavior over the years. Bliss listens quietly. Clearly, Lorelli has lost her grasp on reality. The women don't really think that Lorelli is Bliss' mother, but neither woman can say for sure that she isn't, either.

Chapters 9 and 10 Analysis

Poor Bliss begins to suffer the fact that he is an orphan. Lorelli's crazy behavior makes him question his parentage. Plus, the feelings stirred in him by Sister Georgia are confusing, because he has never lived with any women. Reverend Hickman has positioned Bliss as a tiny prophet. That position keeps people at a distance, so the young boy is starved for affection. This emotional neglect, combined with the distress of participating in Reverend Hickman's coffin ritual, plants seeds of trauma in Bliss, which will no doubt exhibit in negative ways into adulthood.

Ellison's visual metaphors continue to make the novel interesting to read. In this section when Bliss sips his lemonade while the adults tend to Reverend Hickman, Bliss studies the kitchen of the house where they are staying. He focuses on the big coal stove in the corner and thinks, "The stove was cold. No fire was showing through the air holes in the door where the wood and coal went, and he thought, it's sleeping too. It's resting, taking a summer vacation. It works hard in the winter though; it goes all day long eating up wood and coal and making ashes."

Ellison provides an element of foreshadowing in Reverend Hickman's promise to take Bliss to a moving picture show, which will be an entrye into Bliss' brief filmmaking career.

Chapters 11, 12, 13 and 14

Chapters 11, 12, 13 and 14 Summary

At last, Bliss gets to go to his first moving picture show, but not before Reverend Hickman warns him of the evils of what he will see. Reverend Hickman tells Bliss that the film world is a shadow of real life, composed of both good and bad elements and people. Reverend Hickman cautions Bliss that he should not get used to going to the movie theatre, because it is not appropriate for ministers to be seen in such places. Bliss is enthralled by the world of darkness inside the theater and is immediately taken by the image of the woman on the screen. Bliss tries to tell Reverend Hickman that the woman is Lorelli, but the Reverend tells him that the woman is the heroine of the film. Although she looks a little like Lorelli, he reminds Bliss that he is safe from any more raving antics.

Not long after this day, Reverend Hickman takes Bliss to the circus for the first time. He points out things like the difference between the African and Asian elephants, and the way the lion tamer has instilled fear into his creatures. Bliss wants to know if Reverend Hickman can tame lions, but the minister wryly states that he is in the business of taming humans. Bliss is in awe of all the swirling lights and colors of all the acts, but becomes distressed at the clowns who continually taunt the smallest clown, who only runs away all the time. Reverend Hickman tries to convince Bliss that this is just an act. However, Bliss is upset that the tiny clown is being hit all the time, without hitting back.

Bliss pushes the issue about the clowns and wants to know if they are black or white. Reverend Hickman tells him that the clowns are white men with burnt cork on their faces to provide the dark color. Bliss continues to watch the act, but soon asks Reverend Hickman for some money so that he can go out to buy an ice cream cone. Outside the big top area, Bliss wanders from tent to tent viewing the other attractions. Finally, Bliss comes upon the small clown behind a tent and hits him in the face. Bliss continues to pummel the small man until Reverend Hickman arrives and removes Bliss from the scene. Bliss can see the burnt cork all over his own hands.

It is soon after these events that Bliss establishes his independence and begins to visit the movie theatres in white neighborhoods. He disappears for days, spending time with his friends. Reverend Hickman engages the parishioners to help him find Bliss, who spends most of his time with white people now knowing that they will not look for Bliss in those neighborhoods.

The action moves continually from past to present and back again, and Bliss can hear Reverend Hickman speak. The Reverend hopes that Bliss is not in any pain, as he lies in his bed. Both men finally surrender to sleep for a short while during this long night.

Chapters 11, 12, 13 and 14 Analysis

Reverend Hickman uses the movies as a metaphor for life in that both good and evil can be found in the light and shadows of the reflected scenes. Just as in life, the minister wants Bliss to understand that "it's not so much a matter of where you *are* as what you *see...*" and that Bliss should always look at the light, but be aware that the shadow sides exist.

Bliss not only has to sort out good vs. evil in his life, but also the conflicts of being a white boy raised to be a minister among black people. This internal conflict is exhibited in the example of Bliss fighting with the little circus clown in blackface. Bliss can relate to the small white man pretending to be black, but does not understand why the small clown would not hit back during the performance. Bliss vents his own rage on the man.

Reverend Hickman apologizes for the violence, but it is Bliss who has the traces of burnt cork residue on his hands from hitting the clown's face. Ellison uses this scene to showcase Bliss' unspoken rage at the duplicity Bliss faces in his life and his conflicted self image as being a white boy, raised among Negroes.

The theme of the search for the maternal is ongoing, as evidenced by Bliss' obsession with the movie actress whom Bliss thinks is his mother. Throughout his life, Bliss will be haunted by the fact that he never knew his own mother and has no information about her. This wound to his soul is another trauma that may play a part in his rejection of the life in which he was raised. It may also account for some of his hatred and racism as an adult.

One of the complications with this book is that it was published after Ellison's death and compiled by another author, using Ellison's manuscripts and notes. It seems as if there are periodically some gaps in the plot line at critical junctures. This segment represents one of those times. The reader understands that Bliss begins to establish his independence and now spends more time with white people. This most likely spawns his anti-Black political positions in later life. Unfortunately, there is not any more information provided. The reader is asked to make the leap from Bliss going to movie theaters in white neighborhoods to being known for his racist tendencies. It would have been beneficial to understand what exactly happened to turn Bliss away from Reverend Hickman, and what motivates Bliss to make the choices he does as an adult.

Chapter 15

Chapter 15 Summary

Reverend Hickman wakes and tries to stay awake in the event that Bliss will wake up and want to talk again. The minister muses about why things have turned out the way they have. He remembers the events that brought Bliss to him in the first place. Hickman thinks that Bliss "wasn't always ours and yet he first was mine." Hickman goes thinks back in time to a night he was sitting in a lamp-lit room with a rifle and guns, waiting for a lynch mob to come after him. The people in town had lynched Hickman's brother, Robert, for raping a white girl, and their mother died from the grief. Hickman is told to leave town, but refuses. Now, he waits for the mob to come take him, as well. A knock at the door brings not a mob, but a woman wrapped in a black shawl. Hickman recognizes her as the woman who accused his brother of rape, which resulted in his torture and murder. The pistol throbs in Hickman's hand, as he stares at the woman. She urgently asks if there is a woman in the house, because her time is near. Hickman can see the woman's pregnant body, and the hideous irony of the situation finally hits him.

The woman apologizes for lying about Robert, and Hickman is outraged at her impudence in coming into his house to say such a thing so soon after Robert's murder. The woman gives Hickman permission to murder her, but advises him that she is not worth the price he will pay for the crime. The woman confesses that she has nowhere else to go with her need, because she is ostracized for having had intimate relations with a black man. It will soon be very clear that the child she carries is white, and that she lied about Robert, causing an innocent man to be murdered.

The woman asks again if there is a woman in the house, and Hickman realizes that she is about to deliver her child. Hickman recalls later that this is the moment that everything started to change. He realized that the woman had absolutely nowhere else to turn, and the process of forgiveness can be speeded up so fast it is impossible to see it coming. Survival instincts led this woman to the house that night, and Hickman realizes that he cannot escape the human drama unfolding before him. Hickman leads the woman to the bedroom, dresses her in one of his dead mother's nightgowns and helps her to the bed. Despising the whole situation and hating the woman for putting him in this situation, Hickman helps to deliver the baby boy. Mother and child sleep, as Hickman rocks during the night, trying to decide how to proceed.

After a few days, the woman tells Hickman that she is leaving the baby with him in an attempt to return Robert to Hickman. The woman says that the baby will be a reminder of Hickman's ability to forgive. Promising to send money and pay for education, the woman leaves the infant in the care of the young Negro man. She walks away into the night. Hickman names the child Bliss, "because that's what ignorance is." Hickman recalls later that it was also the name of the life he just lost, and this event marked the

time of his entrye into adulthood. Hickman knows that he is now destined to a life of bachelorhood, as no woman will ever want him and his white child.

A few days later Hickman and Bliss take a train to Memphis to re-join Hickman's jazz band, but the band does not want Hickman back. The sudden appearance of a white infant and the circumstances surrounding Robert's death will raise too many suspicions, which the other band members cannot risk. Hickman takes janitorial jobs to support Bliss and himself, until Hickman finds a job playing the trombone at some religious tent meetings. Women from the local church tended to Bliss, while Hickman played his music and passed Bliss off as the son of his dead sister. Life for Hickman and Bliss is an itinerant one, with accusations of kidnapping leveled at Hickman periodically. However, this is the life that the odd duo comes to know. Finally, Hickman finds a permanent church home where he can play his music, and no one questions Bliss' parentage.

Reverend Hickman's thoughts return to the present. He wonders how Bliss, now a wealthy Senator, made such a leap from the prodigal son to a racist bigot. Hickman thinks about the letter he received from Sister Janey telling him about a young man who has reappeared from the past and is threatening to make trouble. Janey knows that Hickman will understand who this is. Janey continues to say that she has held this young man at bay as long as she can. She fears for the worst and hopes that Hickman can intercede. It is this letter that prompts Hickman and his parishioners to travel to Washington, D.C. to try to warn the Senator about some imminent danger.

Hickman can only wonder about the fates that did not allow him to reach the Senator in time to share the warning. As Hickman remembers the group's outing to the Lincoln Memorial after they could not see the Senator only yesterday, he remembers thinking that he had wanted Bliss to grow up to be like Lincoln. Now, nothing could be further from that wish.

Perhaps Bliss' role in Hickman's life is that the infant showed the man the meaning of forgiveness and forever changed the course of his life. In spite of the gravity of their relationship, their parting, and now their ill fated reunion, all that Hickman can do is hope that Bliss knows he is there and willing to listen if he has anything more to say.

Chapter 15 Analysis

This chapter is the climax of the book, as it provides the answers to many questions. The most important is the situation surrounding Bliss' being raised by Reverend Hickman. In the early twentieth century, especially in the Southern states, black men were lynched for approaching white women. When Hickman's brother, Robert, is accused of raping a white woman, the punishment is swift and severe. He pays for the wrongful accusation with his life.

In a cruel irony, the woman who has accused Robert ends up on Hickman's doorstep, as she is about to deliver her child. When the woman reveals that she has nowhere else

to go for help, Hickman begins his transition from his former self he calls a "heathen" to a man who exhibits grace in an almost unimaginable situation. The forgiveness Hickman shows to the woman transitions him to a new life. The birth of Bliss serves as a symbol of this transition for Hickman's whole life. Hickman names the child Bliss "because they say that's what ignorance is." The name symbolizes both the child's innocence amid a heinous beginning, as well as Hickman's heathen lifestyle before Bliss enters his life.

Unfortunately, there is another gap in the plot line, exhibited by the letter from Sister Janey. She writes to Reverend Hickman about a young man who has come back to create trouble. The young man is not identified in the letter, but his presence and threats prompt Reverend Hickman and his parishioners to fly immediately to Washington, D.C. to warn the Senator (Bliss) of potential danger.

At the beginning of the book, when the Senator is shot, Reverend Hickman recognizes the assassin and calls out his name, Severen. However, there is never any explanation of who this young man is, and why he has been driven to murder the Senator. This major oversight is a crucial flaw on the part of the man who compiled Ellison's manuscripts to produce this book and does an injustice to the Ellison, the story and the reader.

In another symbolic image, Reverend Hickman recalls his group's outing to the Lincoln Memorial. It was Lincoln's Emancipation Proclamation that freed slaves, and the unfortunate delay in that information to the slaves in Texas that provides the holiday and this novel with its name. Reverend Hickman also muses that he had wanted Bliss to grow up to be like Lincoln. That missed goal is shadowed by the missed opportunity to see Bliss in Washington and warn him of imminent danger.

Chapter 16

Chapter 16 Summary

The Senator can feel a breeze on his face and hear Reverend Hickman's voice in the distance. However, all fades back into memory once more. The actions are experienced in a bizarre sequence of events with memories of Bliss' early childhood colliding with his political career. It is clear that the Senator is in a hallucinatory state. In his mind, Bliss sees wheat fields from which flocks of blackbirds spring, and he then walks down railroad tracks and watches a rabbit chased by dogs in a pasture. This image prompts Bliss' mind to move to a little rhyme told to him by a young woman one day, "Darling, love ain't nothing but a habit - hello, there, Mister Babbitt Rabbit."

Now, Bliss sees an old friend named Choc Charlie drinking a bottle of Chock beer on a back porch in an alley, in some town now long forgotten. Choc Charlie tells Bliss the story of the poor rabbit being pursued by the hounds, which evolves into the story of Brer Rabbit. Suddenly, Bliss' old film business partner, Donelson, appears in the scene to add his input on the Brer Rabbit story. Choc Charlie and Donelson talk about a movie scene where Brer Rabbit wears a holster holding a .45 caliber pistol, threatening a character called Brer Bear. Brer Rabbit takes off, but Brer Bear is in distress thinking that Brer Rabbit's tail is a pearl handle of a gun. Brer Bear laments the fact that this country needs more law and order. Brer Bear tries to locate his gun, but when he catches up to Brer Rabbit, the rabbit is having sex with all the local girl rabbits. Donelson thinks this story line makes for good movie making.

Bliss' mind now moves to the view from on top of a speeding train. From this vantage point, Bliss can see the rolling sunflower fields and trees with sunlight flickering through the leaves. When he sees a clearing, Bliss jumps from the top of the train and lies still to regain his breath. He watches the train disappear into a huge dark void.

Bliss begins to walk and finds himself in an apple orchard, when he spots a covey of quail. They take off at his presence. Bliss walks further, until he sees two foxes trotting along, one with a dead rabbit in its mouth. The foxes sense Bliss' presence and stop and stare for a few long moments before continuing on their way.

Bliss thinks that he must have witnessed all these events but forgotten them in time. Suddenly, the feeling washes over Bliss that none of these things ever existed. He feels completely peaceful with no need to search for anything else or for any more answers. Bliss, however, does move forward in this hallucination and coming to the edge of a pine forest, looks up to see a plane with a banner reading "Niggers Stay Away From The Polls." Bliss can see himself walking uphill toward a clubhouse, where he sees uniformed waiters serving drinks with little umbrellas. Then, Bliss can see the fine, tanned bodies, dressed in expensive hunt clothing.

A little way from the terrace lays a shooting ring, where men have gathered to shoot pigeons. The birds trapped in the dovecotes remind Bliss of tourists crammed into trolley cars, straining their necks to see some site of pressing interest. Bliss continues to watch the scene, as the men take turns shooting the birds. They explode in mid air.

This crop of birds destroyed, the trappers begin to set traps to catch another group of pigeons. Bliss begins to run from the scene, with the sound of gunfire ringing in his ears. Bliss encounters one pigeon in the grass which refuses to fly, in spite of the men urging it from its place in the grass. The men realize that this is a New York pigeon which has been slipped into the midst of the other birds. They feel betrayed. New York pigeons are known for their cavalier attitudes and disregard for convention. A crowd gathers and hurls taunts and objects at the pigeon, which refuses to fly into a hideous fate. Eventually, the pigeon preens self confidently and flies low under the cliff, escaping the gunshots.

Bliss walks back to the clubhouse and sees a little boy with a pageboy haircut. He addresses the child, thinking that he knows him. It occurs to Bliss that this boy is the image from a Goya painting he had seen once in a museum. The boy refuses to speak, and Bliss tells him that a boy who does not say anything must not know anything; not even the boy's own father's and mother's names. The boy's continuing rudeness and obscene gestures prompts Bliss to ask where the boy's mother is. Bliss searches the area for a woman who may be coming to claim the child. Suddenly, the boy's goldfinch explodes, and the boy runs back to the crowd. Bliss thinks that the boy's mother will blame Bliss for the bird's death, even though the mother has probably been in attendance at the pigeon-shooting event. Bliss thinks the whole situation is a crime and walks away.

Now, Bliss finds himself on a city street where all the traffic lights are red and seem to glisten from a late afternoon rain shower. Soon, Bliss sees an old Negro woman walking toward him, threatening to tell people who Bliss is. She says she'll put all the information out into the streets, where the white people will know the truth. Bliss cannot understand who this old mammy is, and why she is on Capitol Hill. The old woman continues to demean Bliss with derogatory comments about his character. Bliss is momentarily comforted with the assurance that he is a Senator, at least for the time being. He then remembers a church revival meeting led by Reverend Hickman.

Bliss now sees himself walking down the steps of the Capitol and onto the street, where he sees a long black car hurling toward him. Bliss feels himself tense for an altercation, as the car approaches and comes to a screeching halt. It flings Bliss onto his back on the sidewalk. Three dapper, Negro men occupy the front seat of the car and yell at the flattened Bliss that he should move faster the next time, or they will run over him. The car starts moving jerkily, and Bliss realizes that the driver is moving back and forth just to scare him. Then, the car suddenly rises in the air like a hovercraft. The car takes off down the street, and Bliss realizes that the three men had been waiting for him to leave the building, so they could intimidate him.

As Bliss tries to move away from the scene, he senses that the car is both down the street and also near him again. Before long, Bliss feels a blast of heat, senses that one of the car's doors is opening and feels himself being pulled inside. All the while, Bliss can hear Reverend Hickman's voice calling from another place.

Chapter 16 Analysis

The novel ends with the Senator's hallucinations in the last moments of his life. He sees things that he must have seen in his life at some point, but had forgotten. Most of the images are rural, as that is the environment in which Bliss grew up.

There is much symbolism in the chapter beginning with the image of the white rabbit, which represents Bliss as a small boy. He's set apart by his color in the Negro community in which he is raised. He's also trapped into a lifestyle of religious theatrics and forced to perform in spite of inherent fears. The rabbit imagery evolves into the story of Brer Rabbit told by Donelson, which signifies the filmmaking years of Bliss' life. It is significant that Brer Rabbit turns into a white pearl gun handle. This signifies the period in Bliss' life when he begins to move away from religion into the worldly realm of films and the associated evils and betrayals.

Bliss emerges from the pine forest and sees the sign warning Negroes to stay away from the polls. This signifies the beginning of his political career. Bliss then finds himself at a country club, an environment where he feels comfortable until the shooting of the birds begins. This sequence symbolizes Bliss' need for the affluence of the people who support him, but also the death of some of his own ideals that are sacrificed in return.

The young boy from the Goya painting represents Bliss himself. He's a child whose mother is not present. Bliss cannot help but think that the boy's abandonment is a crime, which is the core of Bliss' longing for his own mother his entire life.

Bliss' rejection of Negro people comes back to haunt him in the persona of the old mammy who berates him on the street in Washington. Bliss feels some momentary guilt, remembering his early life spent with Reverend Hickman.

Finally, the black car of death approaches Bliss and his muscles tense, probably signaling his body giving in to death at the same moment. Bliss is pulled into the car as Reverend Hickman's voice fades. It is a poignant chapter in that the last memories of the Senator are choreographed almost perfectly by young Bliss, the filmmaker.

Characters

Sister Arter

Sister Arter is one of the members of Reverend Hickman's parish that accompanies him to Washington, D.C. with the hopes of making contact with Senator Sunraider.

Sister Bearmasher

Sister Bearmasher is a member of Reverend Hickman's parish who wrestles Miss Lorelli away from Bliss during a revival. During the revival, an unfamiliar, wild, red-haired white woman rushes through the procession, grabbing the young preacher, Bliss, and rips him from his little coffin. The woman appears insane and is screaming that the boy is her son. Many women from the parish attempt to pull Bliss from Miss Lorelli. However, the woman's craziness makes her incredibly powerful. Finally, Bearmasher pushes her way through the crowd to Miss Lorelli where she winds handfuls of the woman's hair around her arms and pulls the woman free of Bliss. Reverend Hickman loads Miss Lorelli, whose hair is still wound up in Bearmasher's fists and arms, and Bearmasher into Miss Lorelli's buggy. The three speed off through the night to delivery the crazy woman to the police.

Bliss's Mother

Bliss's Mother is an unnamed woman who accused Robert Hickman, Alonzo's brother, of rape. Her false accusation leads to Robert's murder at the hands of a lynch mob and her banishment from the white community. Pregnant and with nowhere to turn, Bliss's mother goes to Alonzo's home to give birth to her son. She admits that the boy could not have been Robert's and Alonzo decides to murder the woman, her child and himself after the child is born. Alonzo finds it impossible to commit the crimes because he begins to pity Bliss's mother and love the young, white boy as his own. Bliss's mother flees his home, leaving her son, never to be heard from again.

Body

Body is a black boy who is one of Bliss's best friends. Bliss often calls Body his "right hand." The two spend all of their time together, except in church where Bliss is too busy preaching. Body often questions Bliss about scripture and preaching, but Bliss does not want to talk of things when he is spending time with Body because preaching is his work. Bliss enjoys playing and being a kid with Body. During one such time, Body and Bliss are on the porch and Body tries to explain Sammy Leaderman's movie projector to Bliss. Unfortunately, since neither child has the vocabulary or understanding to simply talk of a movie projector, they banter back and forth as Body tries to explain the box that has the people in it. Eventually, Bliss ends up frustrated, believing that such a thing

cannot exist. Regardless of the outcome of this conversation, Body and Bliss's friendship represent one of the few opportunities for Bliss to behave like a little boy, thus, Bliss cherishes the moments he is allowed to spend with Body.

Body's Mother

Body's Mother, as the name implies, is the mother of Bliss's friend, Body. Bliss is envious of the love between Body and his mom because Bliss is an orphan. In addition to being an orphan, he has been forced to grow up fast because of Reverend Hickman's efforts to cultivate Bliss's natural preaching talent. Body's Mother was also at the revival when Miss Lorelli came storming in like a mad woman. At one point, Body's Mother and Mrs. Proctor are having a discussion on Body's Mother's front porch. Unbeknownst to the ladies, Bliss is laying silently underneath the porch in the shade. The two discuss Miss Lorelli, her craziness and whether or not she could truly be Bliss's mother. Both agree it is unlikely, but they admit that they cannot say for sure. Eager for any type of maternal love, this overheard conversation confuses Bliss and leaves him wondering whether or not Miss Lorelli is his mother.

Bowlegs

Bowlegs is a black boy who comes to Bliss's defense during an encounter with some young boys. A group of boys are hanging around an empty lot pushing a truck around in the dirt, when Bliss walks through. A young, unnamed boy begins to taunt Bliss, teasing him about being a preacher. Bowlegs steps to Bliss's defense, stating that the young white boy is a real preacher who is capable of delivering salvation. He criticizes the unnamed boy for his rudeness and blasphemy.

The Boy at Waycross

The Boy at Waycross is the nameless black boy who taunts Bliss during an encounter in an empty lot. The unnamed boy mocks Bliss's preaching and insults him. Eventually, Bliss turns the table on the unnamed boy, trapping the boy in an idiom that makes him look foolish. All the taunting angers Bliss, but he tries his best to hold his composure. Yet, in the end, Bliss's verbal jabs back at the boy incite the nameless youth to charge the young preacher. Bliss smashes an egg-sized rock against the boy's forehead and runs from the crowd of young boys.

Lester Donelson

Lester Donelson is Bliss's cinematographer partner during his years as an unsuccessful filmmaker wondering through rural, Midwestern towns. Donelson is a lazy, volatile man who frequently forgets to do important tasks, like load the film into the camera.

Sister Georgia

Sister Georgia is a member of Reverend Hickman's parish who takes Bliss to her home after the meeting when Miss Lorelli attempted to kidnap him. After Sister Bearmasher ripped Miss Lorelli from Bliss, the congregation fussed over what to do with Bliss since Reverend Hickman left to deliver the crazed woman to the police. Eventually, the women decide it was best for Sister Georgia to take him home because she is younger, has no children and lived close by. Sister Georgia scoops up the scared, little preacher and runs through the woods with him to her home. During the run through the woods, Bliss feels a response to her womanly aspects and scents. He feels ashamed. Once home, the two share a melon and talk on the porch. Soon, Sister Georgia puts Bliss to bed on the couch. He wakes Sister Georgia because he tossing and turning with a nightmare. She decides it is best for Bliss to sleep with her that night. Bliss agrees, but succumbs to his temptations and his earlier feelings about Sister Georgia, sneaking a peak at her womanhood underneath her sleeping gown while she sleeps. Ashamed and writhing with sin, Bliss admits his dishonorable act and cringes under his own immorality. However, Bliss also recognizes that the impure glimpse could have been less disreputable if Sister Georgia would have been a little girl of Bliss's own age, again showing that he has been forced into adulthood at too early of an age.

Reverend Alonzo Hickman

Reverend Alonzo Hickman is the man responsible for adopting and raising Bliss. He is the leader of the parish and an accomplished trombone player. Hickman, also called A. Z. and Daddy Hickman, slowly moves towards a life devoted to God after his brother is unjustly lynched for raping a white woman. The woman, pregnant and shunned by her community, goes to Hickman's house as a last resort to give birth. Hickman plans to kill the woman, her child and himself, but cannot complete the task. He begins to feel pity for the woman and love for the child. The woman leaves Hickman with the child, and he names the boy Bliss.

Hickman had wild younger years playing trombone with bands, drinking, dancing and fornicating. However, such behavior becomes too difficult with a young boy and soon his musical talent leads him to play tamer venues, such as churches. Finding God, Hickman begins to not only play music in churches, but also preach the Word. As Bliss gets older, Hickman sees and cultivates a natural talent for preaching in the young, white boy. Soon, Bliss becomes an important part in Hickman's meetings and revivals. Hickman tries his best to teach the young boy about race, religion, politics and sermonizing because he sees that the young boy could be a bridge or a "tie that binds" between the two segregated cultures of America. However, Hickman's eager prodding eventually pushes his white son away and, although Hickman loved the boy, he allows Bliss to become his own person. Watching from a distance, Hickman is saddened by what has become of his son. Eventually, with a letter from Janey Mason outlining the racist Bliss has become, Hickman forces himself to go to Washington, D.C. to confront

and question his confused, beguiling son. Unfortunately, he is too late, and he witnesses Bliss being shot on the Senate floor.

Bliss Hickman

Bliss Hickman is a young, white orphan left in the hands of a black jazz musician, Alonzo Hickman, by his mother. Alonzo raises Bliss the best way he can, trying to make enough money playing trombone in jazz clubs. However, the lifestyle is hardly an acceptable place to raise a child. Soon Alonzo begins playing trombone at churches and eventually finds his own voice as a preacher. At a very early age, Bliss also shows great promise as a preacher. He is incredibly skilled in the understanding and memorization of scripture. Bliss has a voice and delivery enviable of any full-grown preacher. Alonzo sees this gift as an opportunity that could benefit all of America. A young, intelligent, religious white boy raised to love and understand black culture, with the capacity to speak with eloquence beyond his years, could be a bridge that spans the gap between the two segregated American cultures. Unfortunately, this burden is too much for young Bliss to bear and her runs away. The boy grows older, explores filmmaking, falls in love and travels with his friends. All the while Alonzo keeps a close eye on him through the help of his far-reaching constituents. Much to Alonzo's dismay, his young hope eventually turns against his upbringing, becoming a vile, racist: Senator Adam Sunraider.

Robert Hickman

Robert Hickman is Reverend Alonzo Hickman's brother. He is murdered by a lynch mob after being accused of raping a white woman. Robert Hickman is innocent, yet he is still killed for the crime. The woman who accuses him is Bliss's mother.

Karp

Karp is Bliss's production partner during his years as an unsuccessful filmmaker wondering through rural, Midwestern towns. Karp is a kind man who does not seem as driven as Bliss, but is also much more dedicated and adept than their third partner, Donelson.

Laly

Laly is Bliss's "Teasing Brown" love interest from his filmmaking years. The two share a beautiful afternoon together picnicking and making love under a tree. Laly calls Bliss "Mr. Movie-Man" and the couple talk of love and the future. Their relationship is precious in that Bliss finally feels true love for a woman, but it is also short-lived.

Miss Lorelli

Miss Lorelli is the crazed woman who storms into Reverend Hickman's meeting, crashes through the members of the parish and attempts to kidnap Bliss from his coffin. The woman is eventually wrestled away from Bliss by Sister Bearmasher and delivered to the authorities by Bearmasher and Hickman. According to Hickman, Miss Lorelli has a torrid history of kidnapping children and claiming them as her own. She is not so much wicked as she is deranged. Hickman assures Bliss that Miss Lorelli is certainly not his mother, but the boy is left skeptical, both from his yearning for a mother and an overheard conversation between Body's Mother and Mrs. Proctor.

Sister Lucy

Sister Lucy is one of the members of Reverend Hickman's parish that helped care for Bliss after Miss Lorelli attempted to kidnap the young preacher.

Janey Mason

Jane Mason is one of Hickman's many constituents who is instructed to keep an eye on Bliss after he leaves the parish. Mason sends Hickman a letter stating that Bliss has become a horrible, racist Senator and that there is little hope for his recovery. She also fears that the Senator's life may be in danger. Mason's letter prompts Hickman and members of his parish to leave the south and head for Washington, D.C.

Sister Neal

Sister Neal is one of the members of Reverend Hickman's parish that accompanies him to Washington, D.C. with the hopes of making contact with Senator Sunraider. Sitting in the Senate's Visitors Gallery, Sister Neal is horrified at what has become of the once-shining hope the preacher Bliss had been.

Mrs. Proctor

Mrs. Proctor is a friend of Body's Mother and was present during the meeting in which Miss Lorelli attempted to kidnap Bliss. At one point, Body's Mother and Mrs. Proctor are having a discussion on Body's Mother's front porch. Unbeknownst to the ladies, Bliss is laying underneath the porch in the shade. Mrs. Proctor tells a story about one of her former white employers who always had to complain about some aspect of Mrs. Proctor's work. Eventually, the white woman found herself caught in a lie, accusing Mrs. Proctor of doing something impossible, and Mrs. Proctor called her out, stating she was only looking for something to complain about. The altercation led to Mrs. Proctor losing her job.

Senator Sunraider's Secretary

Senator Sunraider's Secretary refuses to contact the Senator when Hickman and the members of his parish arrive at his office in Washington, D.C. Eventually, the secretary has them thrown out and never mentions anything of their visit to Senator Sunraider.

Senator Adam Sunraider

Senator Adam Sunraider is the racist outcome of young Bliss Hickman. After leaving the parish and stumbling through years as a filmmaker, Bliss eventually finds wealth and a desire for politics. Somehow, whether it be through his indoctrination into his culture as a white American or his revolt against his upbringing as a black American, Bliss is morphed into the vicious Sunraider. Sunraider is outspoken about the evils of black America. He uses the skills he learned behind the pulpit in Reverend Hickman's parish to scrutinize and deprecate the very culture that raised him. Sunraider's speeches eventually lead to his tragic demise at the hands of young, black assassin, but not before he spends several days on his deathbed recollecting and recounting what had occurred to drive him to this, his final place in history.

Deacon Wilhite

Deacon Wilhite is a member of Reverend Hickman's parish that helps lead revivals with Bliss, the young preacher. He is an honest man with a powerful voice and message. Wilhite stands tall and proud as a leading member of Hickman's congregation.

Sister Wilhite

Sister Wilhite is one of the members of Reverend Hickman's parish that helps care for Bliss after Miss Lorelli attempted to kidnap the young preacher.

Social Concerns

In Juneteenth, as in most of Ralph Ellison's fiction, the dominant social concerns involve race: racial attitudes, racial tension, and racial identity. Ellison dedicated the novel "To That Vanished Tribe into Which I Was Born: The American Negroes," represented in this novel by Reverend A. Z.

Hickman and the forty-three other elderly black men and women who accompany him on his mission to "save" the man who has become their most outspoken political enemy. Hickman is introduced to Senator Adam Sunraider's secretary as "God's Trombone" and to the reader as "a huge, distinguished-looking old fellow who on the day of the chaotic event was to prove himself, his age notwithstanding, an extraordinarily powerful man."

Nevertheless, the respect Hickman's followers and the novel's readers feel for him is not shared by the white Washingtonians the group encounters. The Senator's secretary dismisses their visit as unimportant; the Capitol guards treat them roughly and contemptuously, searching them for no reason; the hotel staff turn them away from the Senator's secret suite; and even the editors of the opposition newspaper have no time to listen to their message. In short, while the extreme rhetoric of Adam Sunraider has become an embarrassment to his party and his constituents, the white Establishment shares his basic attitude of contempt for people he has come to regard as weak and insignificant.

Ellison clearly demonstrates that this lack of respect is a fatal character flaw—not only in Sunraider, but also in American society as a whole. After Sunraider has been shot and Severen has plunged—apparently fatally—from the visitors' gallery to the Senate floor, Hickman calls out to the surrogate son who has rejected him, "Bliss! You were our last hope, Bliss; now Lord have mercy on this dying land!" If Sunraider, whom Hickman had envisioned as an American racial messiah, could pervert his training from the preaching of Christian love to proclaim instead the doctrines of racial bigotry, Hickman despairs of any hope for racial comity in America.

In the course of his exchanges with the dying Senator and his examination of his own consciousness, though, Hickman eventually decides that he too made a major mistake: he has prayed for Bliss as the minister, leader, even "redeemer" who would bring together African-Americans and Caucasian Americans, but he forgot to pray for "the boy"—for Bliss himself, as a person. In other words, he too has overlooked the person behind the role. To some extent, Hickman may be reflecting a parent's common attempt to assume part of the responsibility for a child gone wrong; however, once again Ellison seems to be emphasizing the existence of an almost universal modern tendency toward stereotyping and depersonalization, differing in form and degree but not in substance.

Ellison certainly does not disregard the issue of racial injustice in America, but he does appear to use patience, and sometimes humor, to lessen the sting of anger and bitterness. When Miss Lorelli (described by Bliss as the tall, redheaded woman) attempts to seize Bliss at the Juneteenth celebration/revival, the deaconesses move as

a group to protect him. Hickman attributes the fierceness of these women to years of bringing up white children, only to lose their respect and affection when those children reach adulthood. Thus, African-American women have become extremely protective of their children, and the prospect of losing a child they regard as one of their own is simply unthinkable. Though Hickman discusses their frustration in the pseudo-comic context of men's difficulty in understanding women, he clearly does not consider their attitudes unjustified. On the other hand, Mrs. Proctor can extract a bit of humorous revenge when her employer, Mrs.

Simmons, insists upon learning "the secret formula" for especially clean clothes. Likewise, Mrs. Proctor and Body's mother can even feel sympathy for "crazy Miss Lorelli," not only for the adult woman who wastes her time shooting clay pigeons, but for the naive young girl who was completely unprepared for her first menstrual period.

Still, there are the recurring instances of terrible racial violence. While Ellison does not specifically mention the men falsely accused and convicted of rape in Scottsboro, as he does in his short stories, that incident and the 1913 race riots in Tulsa, Oklahoma, as well as possibly the more contemporary murder of Emmet Till in Mississippi, seem to be understood as part of the racial background. When Bliss's mother comes to Hickman for help, he suspects her of trickery because her accusations have led to his brother's lynching and castration, followed by his mother's death from grief. Likewise, when he and Sister Bearmasher return Miss Lorelli to her home, Hickman is severely beaten, and he seems to regard himself as lucky that he too has not been killed. In Juneteenth, however, Ellison's emphasis is upon the process by which Hickman and Sunraider come to understand the dynamics of their relationship; so racial violence remains the backdrop against which the primary action takes place.

The relationship between Hickman and Sunraider/Bliss turns upon the mystery of the boy's racial identity. Hickman knows that Bliss's mother is white, but even he does not know who is the boy's biological father. As Mrs. Proctor observes, Bliss "don't show no sign in his skin or hair or features, only in his talking." By choosing not to reveal Bliss's complete background, Ellison makes him the prototypal American. Ellison's notes emphasize that "the question of his having Negro blood isn't important, it is the fact that he himself can't be sure whether he has or not."

During his vigil by the Senator's bedside, Hickman tells him the story of his birth: that his mother appeared at Hickman's cottage, that Hickman himself delivered the baby and—against his better judgment— cared for both mother and child, and that soon the mother left, giving Hickman her son to "replace" the brother he had lost through her lies. Hickman then gradually renounced hatred and began training the boy, whom he named Bliss, to become the minister who would unite all ethnic groups.

When he reached puberty, though, Bliss began to run away, and once he realized the powerlessness of African-Americans, he reinvented himself as a white man, replacing religion with pop culture and politics.

As Ellison notes, years later he continues to run figuratively from his background, a persistent danger to his new position "because his own power depends upon his manipulation of race." Further, he cannot escape Hickman; Sister Neal points out that even his racist speech in the Senate echoes the language and technique of his mentor, as Sunraider himself later admits. Though he has rejected Hickman, and espoused racial bigotry, he still loves the man he once called "Daddy," and Sunraider resents this perceived "weakness" in himself most of all. He knows the underlying corruption of political power, which, in Ellison's words, is "not biological or genetic, but man-made and political, economic ... and immoral as far as the American ideal has a religious component."

While the principal social concerns are racial, Ellison also addresses the concept of family, including the extended family. Obviously Hickman becomes Bliss's surrogate father, and initially Bliss relies upon the power and wisdom of "Daddy Hickman" in the same way that most young children have confidence in their fathers. For Hickman, though, adopting Bliss is a lifechanging experience; this jazz-musician and gambler soon finds himself drawn to the vocation of his own preacher-father. Even though Bliss is still a young boy, he becomes a participant in the religious service.

Lying in a closed white coffin, he is carried into the revival tent, and upon a signal from Hickman, Deacon Wilhite opens the coffin to release him. Bliss then emerges to engage in a dialogue with Hickman, a series of questions from Reverend Bliss and responses/explanations from Reverend Hickman.

Thus, the two are ministerial colleagues as well as father and son.

Eventually Bliss finds this role confining, both literally and psychologically. He fears being closed up too long in the coffin, and he realizes that his role as boy-preacher cuts him off from several of the entertainments enjoyed by his peers. At that point he rejects the destiny Hickman has chosen for him, the racial identity he has known all his life, and —in Hickman's terms—God.

Yet, although he becomes first an itinerant con-man claiming to be an independent filmmaker and, later, a race-baiting politician, nothing he does can completely sever his ties with Hickman and the larger African-American community. Throughout his career, an extended network of railroad waiters, Pullman porters, chauffeurs, hotel maids, ministers, church members, and other friends who travel have tracked Sunraider's career and kept Hickman informed of his activities, and Hickman has prevented any revelation of the Senator's true background, giving him time and opportunity to repent of his betrayal. Now one of this extended family, Janey Mason, has warned Hickman of the impending crisis he futilely tries to forestall.

A third important social concern is religion, especially conservative Christianity. The thematic and structural importance of the Biblical influence becomes obvious early in the novel. When Sunraider realizes he has been shot, his cries echo both the agony of Christ in Gethsemane and his own childhood terror as he waited to be released from his ceremonial coffin: "Lord, LAWD, WHY HAST THOU ... Forsaken ... forsaken ...

forsaken. ..." Hickman's response from the gallery seems almost a divine judgment and response: "For Thou has forsaken ... me." This exchange introduces the theme of Bliss as prodigal son and potential redeemer who somehow has gone astray, and the parallel is subsequently reenforced by both men's memories of the role Bliss feared and came to hate: his symbolic rebirth as the climax of Hickman's revival sermon. The signal for him to emerge from the white coffin was Jesus' admonition, "Suffer the little children to come unto me." Moreover, as "Daddy Hickman" repeatedly sacrificed his son in his revival sermons, he followed the Biblical pattern seen in God's sacrifice of Christ and Abraham's near-sacrifice of Isaac.

The role of religion in both men's lives is further emphasized in the large part sermons play in their dialogues and memories. As Sister Neal recognizes, in the speech Sunraider is delivering when he is shot, he almost parodies Hickman's sermons, as he cynically invokes God, then turns immediately to racial insults. The novel's climax occurs as Hickman and Sunraider recreate their sermon on American history and the evils of slavery and then relive the sermon on the crucifixion, both of which they preached at the fateful Juneteenth celebration and revival. Further, Sunraider recalls that, after he ran away, he once returned to preach at Greater Calvary but no one recognized him. As he remembers the episode with Sister Georgia, he repeats a mini-sermon he used to impress her, and the flashbacks to his conversations with his friend Body reveal that he must have "preached" to his peers rather frequently.

When Hickman asks about an incident in McAlester twenty-five years ago, Sunraider "preaches" again the sermons he used that day, sermons he and Hickman attribute to the Right Reverend John P.

Eatmore. Nevertheless, Sunraider still apparently fails to see the ironic parallel between these sermons—which focus upon man's desire for the sun (heavenly fire) and God's mercy in giving man time to raise himself from the level of the beast—and his own vanity and Hickman's patience with him.

Ellison was also somewhat ahead of his time in his discussions of American popular culture, particularly the movies. Even before Bliss sees his first movie, he is intrigued by the fact, as he later comments, that "most of the action which gives a movie movement lies between the frames, in the dark." These "hidden" sections parallel the hidden portions of Bliss/Sunraider's life, as he turns the showmanship Hickman has used for God to the secular ends of moneymaking and power, first as a traveling "movie-man" and later as a politician.

Movies become for Bliss his link with the white culture. When he enters the theater with Hickman, he enters as an AfricanAmerican, but seeing Mary Pickford on the screen, he becomes obsessed with the idea that she is his true biological mother. In fact, the movies and their illusions soon replace Hickman and the church as his surrogate family. Pursuing his obsession with Mary Pickford, he returns to the theater alone, only to discover that he receives more respect when he is assumed to be Caucasian.

Later, when Bliss travels through the country with his partners, Karp and Donelson, he has already sensed the power of movies to manipulate the naive people of small-town America. In most of these towns, the pretend filmmakers are treated as celebrities, though ironically they miss the only commercially valuable shots because they have no money to buy film. Only in one town does a group of local men appear to see through their con, forcing them to protect themselves from violence by adopting the poses of the three mythic monkeys who saw, heard, and spoke no evil.

Politics too is a part of American popular culture, and Adam Sunraider has taken the step from movie showmanship to political showmanship, though the actual transition remains one of the "hidden" parts of the novel. Managing to eliminate all traces of his Southern/Southwestern background, he has nonetheless realized how he can use the boyhood lessons of racial consciousness to manipulate the American political system.

Aside from a few conservative Southern politicians, he has no allies in the Senate; in fact, he knows he is an embarrassment to his party and his constituents, but he considers his enemies irrelevant because he wields tremendous political power. As his thoughts during his Senate speech reveal, he knows precisely how destructive his influence is, but his arrogance, cynicism, and self-absorption are so complete that he actually seems to enjoy his ability to control others, even to insult and cause them discomfort. Ironically, this same attitude was evident in his treatment of women like Miss Teasing Brown, and it may well have provided a significant motive—personal as well as philosophical—for Severen's attack.

Techniques

Early in his career, Ellison learned the importance of detailed physical descriptions, especially those employing multiple sensory impressions. Thus, Reverend Hickman and his followers come alive in Ellison's description of their encounter with the Capitol guards, and their symbolic role is clear when they assemble to pray at the Lincoln Memorial. Bliss's conversation with his peers shows the growing conflict between his role as the boy-preacher and his desire to be simply an average young boy. The awakening of puberty is vividly portrayed in the episode in which the preadolescent Bliss timidly approaches the sleeping Sister Georgia and carefully lifts her nightgown. Similar wonder and longing are evident as Bliss remembers his first experiences at the movies. Later, Ellison reveals the change in his personality by describing his impressions as he revels in the physical beauty of both the Oklahoma countryside and Miss Teasing Brown.

In fact, Juneteenth is rich in sensory detail. For example, Sunraider's consciousness is filled with the details of his assassination, from the explosion of the chandelier overhead to his confused movements as he struggles to get out of the bullets' range. He also recalls every detail of his fear and impatience while he was enclosed in the white coffin and while the redheaded woman and the deaconesses were struggling over him. Likewise, Hickman remembers every thought and action of the night Bliss was born; and, as they repeat their sermons, both men essentially relive these experiences.

Many of Ellison's physical details are, in fact, used symbolically. For instance, Bliss's white coffin is associated not only with the role Hickman intends for him, as a risen child-savior, but also with his "rebirth" in a new, Caucasian identity. The movies too function as a symbol; just as they project only an illusion of life, so Sunraider too speaks and lives a false, self-delusive image. Similarly, the teenager's photograph of Hickman's group praying before the statue of Lincoln, "a good scale of grays between the whiteness of the marble and the blackness of the shadows," speaks volumes about these characters and their role in contemporary American society.

As in his earlier works, Ellison employs various elements of the African-American culture including sermons, tall tales, folk history, and music. Callahan comments upon the debt Ellison's narrative structure owes to "the antiphonal call-and-response patterns of the black church," as the words and thoughts of Bliss and Hickman alternate and merge. Ellison's notes describe Hickman's sermons as a blend of "folk poetry and religious rhetoric" and a mixture of "the sacred in the profane," as Hickman uses "vernacular terms and phrases" to discuss religious concepts. In fact, Hickman too speaks of the times his enthusiasm caused him to burst into words and music associated with his worldly past, but he always checked himself and quickly switched to a religious song or phrase.

Probably because Ellison originally intended to become a professional musician, music plays a significant role in much of his fiction. Originally he seems to have intended Juneteenth as an American symphony in verbal form, with many movements that

reflected the variety of the American culture. Callahan's description of editing this novel sounds like an analysis of a musical composition in which the composer has created multiple themes and variations: this editor says he "followed the twists and turns of Ellison's plot, and his characters' movements through space and time; traced and retraced their steps as they moved from Washington, D.C., south to Georgia and Alabama, southwest to Oklahoma, back again to the nation's capital, and reached back with them from the novel's present moment of the mid-fifties to spots of time in the twenties and thirties and even farther to the first decade of the new century when the Oklahoma Territory emerged as a state."

Perhaps Ellison, the namesake of Ralph Waldo Emerson, has succeeded in combining Emerson's elegant diction and syntax and Walt Whitman's vision of an American epic with George Gershwin's idea of ah American jazz symphony, and so to bridge the cultural and racial differences among Americans. Certainly, as Callahan has pointed out, the rhythm of Ellison's language displays "the riffs and bass lines of jazz."

Ellison's notes compare "a great religious leader" and a talented jazz artist: "He evokes emotions that move beyond the rational onto the mystical. A jazz musician does something of the same. By his manipulation of sound and rhythm he releases movements and emotions which allow for the transcendence of everyday reality." Further, Ellison never forgets the admonition of his music mentors, that mere technical skill is no substitute for "intelligent and artistic structuring of emotion."

Thematic Overview

In Juneteenth, as in Invisible Man, a major theme is individual identity. Several characters remain only partially identified, and others cut themselves off from their pasts in various ways, with results that are sometimes positive and sometimes negative. In Sunraider's case, the fact that Ellison never reveals the name of either parent intensifies the significance of his quest for a "true" identity.

The most obvious example of multiple identities is character is known variously as Robert, Bliss, Cudworth, Mister Movie-Man, Mister Big-City Man, and Adam Sunraider.

Ellison gives him multiple identities because he apparently intends this character to represent the rootless, isolated, lonely American who cuts himself off from his past, as this man repeatedly does. When his mother gives him to Hickman to "compensate for" the brother whose death she caused, she suggests that he be given that brother's name, Robert. Hickman seems to recognize this gesture as merely another part of the cynicism which has characterized all her actions, and he chooses to call the baby "Bliss." As long as the young boy accepts Hickman's goals for him, he remains Bliss; but, with puberty, he begins to search for an identity of his own. In particular, once Miss Lorelli tries to claim him as her lost son, he begins to realize that his personal and religious lives are exclusively patriarchal, and he feels his lack of a mother figure. Since this awareness happens to coincide with his discovery of the movies, he develops a fantasy that his true mother is the actress Mary Pickford, and he tries to run away from both his surrogate father and the life he has known as Bliss. Apparently Hickman eventually agrees not to force him to remain, and given Bliss's fascination with the movies, it is logical that he next becomes a con-man posing as an itinerant moviemaker.

In this guise he meets and seduces Miss Teasing Brown, who calls him Mister BigCity Man, a name which not only emphasizes her sense that he is more sophisticated than she, but also suggests that he probably is taking advantage of her naivete.

Just as Ellison does not explicitly describe the process by which Bliss becomes Mister Movie-Man, so he does not detail the transformation from Mr. Movie-Man to Adam Sunraider, nor does he reveal the precise point at which this character reinvented himself as Caucasian. Although Hickman's "network" has allowed him to find and keep track of his foster son, Sunraider seems to have concealed his past remarkably well.

Still, Hickman's overwhelming love and Severen's equally obsessive hatred fuel the persistence required to begin to unravel the mystery of Bliss/Sunraider's identity.

The negative identity-shifts of Bliss contrast dramatically with the positive transformation his appearance causes in Hickman's life. The wayward son of a minister, Hickman had chosen the path of a gambler and jazz musician. After the deaths of his brother and mother, he had returned to his family home, apparently hoping for a violent confrontation with those men responsible for their deaths. Delivering this baby began the process of his redemption.

Because he felt responsible for the child, he gradually turned away from his former life and came to believe that—just as the boy had been a redemptive force in his life— Bliss could be a kind of savior of American society.

While the identities of Hickman and Bliss/Sunraider change, there are other characters whose identities appear to remain constant, though partially obscure. Ellison reveals little about Bliss's mother, including her name. Some of the characters seem to believe that she is Miss Lorelli, but others dismiss the idea. Ellison deliberately chooses to keep the reader guessing, just as he does in the case of Severen. Notes for the novel suggest that this assassin is Sunraider's son, and certainly symbolically he is, but again Ellison leaves the literal relationship ambiguous. Further, the relationship between Miss Teasing Brown and Mister MovieMan is sketched with almost nineteenthcentury delicacy, but obviously it is sexual.

Severen is never specifically identified as the child of that relationship, but clearly that relationship, or one very much like it, resulted in his birth. Actually, the fact that Sunraider's flashbacks never include the young woman's name may suggest that he is remembering a composite of several lovers, as well as the fact that names/precise identities are intended to be ambiguous here.

A second major theme is freedom. Ellison's choice of the title Juneteenth seems to suggest the importance of achieving true freedom, a task which he considered both never-ending and impossible without full communion of all races in America. In Texas and the rest of the American Southwest, news of the Emancipation Proclamation did not arrive until June 19, 1865; thus, freedom was delayed two and a half years. During that time the slaves were technically liberated, but because they were unaware of their emancipation, they were not truly free.

This distinction between "true" freedom and apparent or "false" freedom is echoed in Bliss/Sunraider's quest to free himself of his past.

The past, especially the meaning of memory, is another theme important to Ellison. The interrelationship of memory and freedom is emphasized in the quotation from T.S. Eliot's "Little Gidding," with which the novel is prefaced:

This is the use of memory: For liberation—not less of love but expanding Of love beyond desire, and so liberation From thefuture as well as the past.

Hickman and Sunraider must explore their individual and joint memories of the past—including their mutual love—in order to free themselves of both that past and the future it makes seemingly unavoidable.

For American society as a whole, the equivalent of memory is history, which includes but also transcends politics and power.

Sunraider's Senate speech suggests that he at least senses this connection, as history is a significant subtext. Likewise, Ellison's notes reflect his view that an "indivisible" American experience could be achieved only when the entire society was able to

confront its collective past, positive and negative. As Hickman reflects upon his group's prayer vigil at the Lincoln Memorial, he considers his earlier dreams of molding Bliss into a worthy successor of Lincoln, and he comes to terms with the mixture of virtues and flaws that exists in even the best of people.

In all these major themes, an important subtheme is the tension between evil and redemption, hope and despair. For Hickman—who initially considered himself a terrible sinner—the birth of Bliss began a process of personal redemption, and he soon came to believe that, with training, the boy could fill a similar role in unifying American society. Even though Sunraider perverted this training to the pursuit of personal power, Hickman still hoped that his former protegee eventually would repent and become the national savior he had envisioned. Thus, the shooting of Sunraider seems to Hickman another part of the overall evil and a cause for despair.

As the counterpoint of dialogue and memory builds, however, Hickman appears to realize that, like freedom and identity, redemption must remain a very individual and personal thing. Whether as Bliss or as Sunraider, his foster son cannot be the savior of American society; in fact, he probably cannot even save himself.

Themes

Darkness and Light

Darkness and light play an important role in Ellison's *Juneteenth*. The words both represent race, Caucasian and African American, and are personified in the white preacher, Bliss, and his grown-up alter ego, racist senator Sunraider. The term *bliss* means complete happiness or paradise. It is heavenly, full of light and devoid of evil and immorality. On the other hand, the term *Sunraider* carries the implied meaning of an individual that raids the sun, i.e., removes all aspect of light. Sunraider is the personification of darkness, just as Bliss is the personification of light. The importance of light and darkness appears in other places. When Bliss is contained within the coffin at the revivals he is trapped inside the darkness. However, inside the darkness of the box the young, white preacher is dressed in his white satin outfit and upon his cue, he is reborn from the darkness into the light of the parish. His repeated rebirth is a metaphor for the resurrection. The metaphor, in turn, builds Bliss up as an allusion to Jesus. Like the savior, Bliss possesses a remarkable ability to preach salvation. In addition, his rebirth at revivals instills faith in the parishioners. Finally, with Bliss's actual birth, he brought Hickman out of the darkness and into the light of God. If Bliss would not have instilled light in Hickman, the Reverend would have murdered him, his mother and himself in a fit of rage, shrouded in the darkness of his brother's unjust lynching. Ellison uses light and darkness to repeatedly create strong metaphors throughout *Juneteenth*, describing race and religion through a figurative use of language.

Dualism

Dualism is an important theme in Ellison's *Juneteenth*. Bliss is an example of the dualism of flesh and spirit. He is young and although his body is youthful, his spirit is advanced. Thus, with an advanced spirit, he is expected to deny his flesh as it catches up with his mind. He is forced to ignore his physical yearning for swimming, ice cream, playing with his friends, girls and living a carefree, young life. Bliss is forced into a spiritual recognition that most adults never achieve. His identity is built upon his understanding of scripture and his ability to preach salvation. Hickman saw this ability in his young, adopted son and wanted to cultivate it. However, his pressures eventually drove Bliss away, sending him to chase his lost childhood and seek out his physical nature. Unfortunately, Bliss did not achieve a balance between his dual natures. Instead of falling temporarily into the grips of the flesh to again return and tend to his spirit, Bliss continued away from his spiritual upbringing. He tried his best to deny his other side, to squelch it from existence, by becoming his own antithesis: a rich, racist senator.

Memory and Reminiscence

Memory, or reminiscence, is the most central theme of Ellison's work. The device is used both by Hickman and Sunraider to recount feelings, emotions and actions. In fact, there are often memories within memories that create a collage-like narrative. It is very effective in creating a relationship between Hickman and Sunraider, especially since their emotions are presented as collage-like, too. Without the tool of memory, or reminiscence, it would be hard to develop the fabric that binds the two very different men together. They, in many ways, grew up together. Bliss was a mature, spiritual young preacher, just like his adoptive father. Although they ended up standing diametrically opposed to one another, they seemed permanently intertwined, as if their shared memories held them together as a unit even though they grew apart as individuals.

Style

Juxtaposition

Through the use of contrasting images, e.g., light and darkness, and emotions, e.g., bliss and fear, Ellison underscores the impact race has on the characters in the South prior to the Civil Rights movement. In one scene, parishioners are engrossed in the power and vitality of salvation and the Word, and then they are suddenly wrought with fear regarding the backlash they will endure from having to wrestle a deranged, white woman out there revival. Juxtaposing these feelings and images allows Ellison to reveal the heart of race relations in the South. He is able to exemplify the intelligence, integrity and devotion of black Americans in opposition to the oppression and racism imposed on them during this time in history.

Figurative Language

Figurative language is a technique imposed by Ellison in *Juneteenth* to interrupt the order of his storytelling. The novel is composed of the linear story of Bliss, Hickman and Sunraider. However, the literal use of language to explain their history is broken up by dreams and memories that are brought to life through hyperboles, similes and ironic visual constructs. For example, when Sunraider is giving his speech before the Senate, he is hallucinating that the eagle from the Great Seal is attacking him, flapping its wings in front of his face, clutching the olive branch and the arrow. The bird is staring deep into the speaking senator's eyes. All the while, Sunraider is delivering a speech before his fellow senators and those in the Visitors' Gallery. This is one of several examples of a literal description of an event being interrupted by a figurative use of language.

Historical Context

The title of this novel is pulled from a moment in history known as *Juneteenth*. The term refers to June 19, 1865. Although Abraham Lincoln gave the Emancipation Proclamation on January 1, 1863, it took nearly two and a half years for the news to spread. On June 19, 1865, General Gordon Granger rode into Galveston, Texas with news that the Civil War had ended and, along with it, slavery. The enslaved were elated. Many moved north as it symbolized freedom. Others left for the deeper South to try and find relatives and family members. Still others stayed to see what type of employer-employee relationship would develop out of slavery. Much is unknown as to why there was a two-and-a-half year delay in delivering the news of freedom to the slaves in Texas. One story that is often told is that the messenger delivering news of freedom was murdered on his way to Texas. Another is that the plantation and slave owners deliberately withheld the news in order to maintain the labor force. Lastly, it is speculated that federal troops waited for one last cotton harvest to financially benefit the slave owners. Of course, none of these speculations has been proven true. Regardless, what is known is that Texas retained the status quo, enslaving blacks for two years beyond what was lawful.

Although Ellison's book does not take place during this historical time, the term *Juneteenth* acts as metaphor for all of the steps black Americans have taken, and continue to take, towards ending slavery, achieving equality and eliminating racism. Reverend Hickman states, "There's been a heap of Juneteenths before this one and I tell you there'll be a heap more before we're truly free!" The novel takes place in the decades prior to the Civil Rights movement. Although this is not explicit, the time and setting implies this period of history.

In relation to the fifty years following the Emancipation Proclamation, the two decades before the Civil Rights movement, 1935—1955, were a time of relative prosperity and growth for black Americans. Black Americans were being recognized for their work and achievements. Authors, activists, athletes and educators were voicing opinions, spurring change and stirring people of all races to action. However, there were still many who were opposed to the equality march of the black American. Black Americans were still being quickly convicted of crimes they did not commit. Lynch mobs still roamed the South, murdering unsuspecting and innocent black men. Black women were still exploited and demeaned in the homes of rich whites. Yet, black Americans still strived to overcome the oppression of white Americans. Jesse Owens won four gold medals at the 1936 Summer Olympics in Berlin. In 1941, A. Philip Randolph pressured Franklin D. Roosevelt, who eventually issued an executive order to end discrimination in the defense industries. The United Negro College Fund was founded in 1944. In 1954, the first giant step to overturn segregation was completed with the Supreme Court ending legal segregation of all American schools. These are only a few of the many *Juneteenths* paving the way on the African American journey towards equality, true freedom and a better America.

Critical Overview

Ellison's novel *Juneteenth* was only recently published in 1999, thus there is not a great deal of criticism written about the book. It has received a vast amount of praise, but also some reviews critical of the novel construction. Nonetheless, there has not been enough time for concrete reflection to develop a corpus of lengthier criticism. Richard A. King stated in *Journal of American Studies* that Ellison's *Juneteenth* "can be read as an allegory of the history of America. Though nurtured and cared for by long-suffering blacks, white Americans have spent their lives□and the nation its history□denying that originary link of intimacy." King is touching on what has made Ellison one of America's most important and cherished authors. Ellison is capable of creating a story that is rich with history, entrenched with allegories and metaphors, but not hinged to oppression or evil. Ellison's other works, most notably *Invisible Man*, all explore and shed light on the evils of racism, segregation and hatefulness, but they are rooted in the affirmation of *blackness*, not in the literal exploration of the obviously negative, incredulous evils of racism.

Yet, although this book has received much praise in terms of reviews from magazines and newspapers, the academic journals that have delved into the book note several problems with the book. Again, from Richard A. King in *Journal of American Studies*, "In structural terms, too much of *Juneteenth* is made up of the two men's [Hickman and Sunraider] exchanging set speeches about their shared pasts. Upon reflection, none of this is surprising considering Hickman's religious and [Sunraider's] political vocation." Although the sermonizing and speechmaking of both characters helped to develop their relationship and the collage of their intertwining emotions, it is excessive.

Overall, *Juneteenth* is an incredible work. With Ellisonian wit, humor, assumption and evocation the novel explores the ever-changing climate of race in America. Yet, as forthcoming criticism will analyze, this book is the construct of over two thousand pages of work and, albeit far from perfect, a remarkable novel has sprung forth from that formidable collection of thoughts, ideas, allegories and anecdotes.

Criticism

- Critical Essay #1

Critical Essay #1

Martinelli is a Seattle-based freelance writer and editor. In this essay, Martinelli examines the effects of race as personified by the opposing characteristics of Bliss Hickman and his adult self, Senator Adam Sunraider on religion and America during the decades prior to the Civil Rights movement.

In *Juneteenth*, Ralph Ellison tells the story of a young, white orphan, Bliss, who is taken in and adopted by a black musician, Alonzo Hickman. Although completely white in appearance and blood, Bliss developed an incredible understanding of black culture and religion. In fact, he had such a keen knowledge of scripture that it becomes apparent to Hickman that Bliss had a prodigious ability for preaching the Word. Hickman became righteously devoted to cultivating Bliss's abilities because he saw in Bliss the qualities of a savior, not only for individuals but also for America. Unfortunately, Hickman's focus on Bliss's religious development blinded him to a wholly necessary development of his son's being: his physical, flesh side. It was apparent that Bliss had a strong inclination for the spirit and, thus, an ability to be the "the tie that binds" blacks and whites, unifying America through the Word and the light of goodness. However, given such blind one-sidedness, without proper attention given to his duality as a flesh-and-bone human being, it became inevitable that Bliss was doomed to fall victim to himself. Through being denied access to tactile things, e.g., playing with friends, attending movies, flirting with girls, Bliss was forced to revolt against Hickman and his black upbringing in order to pay needed attention to his physical side. He ran from his adoptive father's parish to pursue filmmaking, sleep with women, make millions and eventually turn into an antithesis of his former, younger self: a white, racist Senator named Adam Sunraider. The duality of the protagonist-antagonist character in one single body, i.e., Bliss and Sunraider, is a representation of race and its effect on religion and America.

Bliss came to Hickman through an extraordinary and sad turn of events. Bliss's mother had accused Hickman's brother, Robert, of rape. A lynch mob heard of the accusation, sought out Robert and murdered him. Bliss's mother was, in turn, shunned from the white community. Pregnant with not Robert's but an unnamed white man's child, Bliss's mother turned to the most unlikely of individuals: Alonzo Hickman. Hickman brought the woman into his home and planned to murder the woman, her child and himself once she gave birth. However, upon the child's birth, Hickman, a jazz musician with a lewd and hedonistic past, began to feel pity for the woman and a deep love of the newborn boy. The birth of the small child pulled Hickman from his the darkness of his past and his murderous plan, removing him from his past and future sins, showing him goodness. Recalling holding the newborn Hickman thought, "*I'll call him Bliss, because they say that's what ignorance is*. Yes, and little did I realize that it was the name of the old heathen life I had already lost." Bliss's birth is also a rebirth of Hickman in that he has found a new life and a new beginning, refocusing his life and passion on religion and preaching instead of jazz music, drinking and women.

With Hickman on a religious path and Bliss as his catalyst, it is no wonder that it became important to Hickman to introduce his young, white adopted son to religion and the Word. As the boy grew, Hickman realized that at an early age Bliss possessed a natural talent for preaching salvation. Even though Hickman told Bliss, "I still couldn't tell who your daddy was, or even if you have any of our blood in your veins," Hickman believed the boy possessed an ability that transcended his race. Bliss was a *white* boy bringing salvation to the souls of *black* parishioners in a time of deep segregation and racism in America. Bliss had learned and cultivated so much of the black culture that his race was no detraction from his preaching of the Word. However, for Bliss, black culture, even though he was white, became his integrated pattern of knowledge and belief. He personified an American race battleground□a white-skinned, black-spirited boy. Alan Nadel supports this claim in *American Literary History*:

. . . the problem for Bliss is to remember. He must take himself□and us□to the depths of that American unconscious where the contradictions that undermine democracy can be confronted. Pursuing that search from Bliss's and Hickman's perspectives makes clear that Bliss is not only Christ but also America, both the sacrificial spirit and the historical embodiment of democracy.

Although Nadel takes Bliss to a higher religious standpoint as Christ, his statement supports the concept of Bliss as a personification of the American democratic dream of true equality and understanding, free of racism and violence.

Yet, for all that Bliss was, Hickman's desires pushed Bliss away. In opposition to Nadel's statement, Bliss was not Christ. He was not the Son of God; he was merely man. As to be expected from all youths, Bliss had to revolt against his father to become his own man. He fled from the parish, disappearing into whites-only movie houses to escape the parishioners' attempts to reclaim their prodigy preacher. Films were Bliss's most effective form of rebellion against father, because Hickman told his son that "if they look at those shows too often they'll get all mixed up with so many of those shadows that they'll lose their way. They won't know who they *are* is what I mean." Hickman's lesson proved true. The catalyst for Bliss's transformation into the racist Sunraider was the young preacher's decision to leave the parish, the Word and his culture to wander the Midwest unsuccessfully attempting to make movies.

Upon Bliss's final decision to leave, Hickman decided to no longer attempt to bring the boy back to the parish. Hickman was full of anxiety because he still believed the boy held the key to the future of America. However, he understood that continued pressure would only further drive Bliss from what Hickman believed was his true calling: to bind America and the races together. Unfortunately, Bliss continued to rebel, to the point of complete cessation. No longer Bliss□an individual of enlightenment, happiness and a union of the spirits of the races□the boy preacher was transformed into Sunraider□an individual devoid of light, rooted in wretchedness and the Archfiend of the democratic spirit.

Sunraider is assassinated on the Senate floor. On his deathbed and with Hickman by his side for the first time in decades, Sunraider recounted his youth as Bliss, the white

preacher boy who could have been *the tie that bound* America together. He told Hickman, "I couldn't understand my creation. Didn't you realize that you'd trapped me in the dead-center between flesh and spirit, and that at my age they were both ridiculous?" This was Sunraider's first explication of his own rebellion. He articulated an understanding of where he came from and, more importantly, from what he rebelled. Hickman embraced Sunraider's memories. Yet, as Nadel states in *American Literary History*, "Bliss ought to have destroyed the myth of segregation." Hickman saw this power in Bliss and was thus willing to pressure the boy's growth as the grand unifier of America. Also, Hickman was complacent and eventually willing to let the boy rebel and temporarily flee from his calling. However, he was surprised as to the extent that Bliss was willing to wander from the Word, his culture and, most unbelievable, the community that loved him. Hickman told his son, "Bliss, how after knowing such times as those you could take off for where you went is too much for me to truly understand. At least not to go there and *stay*." Hickman believed that when his adopted son left him, that he would eventually return. He believed he had instilled in his son a true love the Word and of the *blackness* that was imbedded under his white skin, deep within his spirit, and that these concepts would lead Bliss back to his calling.

Unfortunately for Hickman, Sunraider, and America, the savior-son Bliss left , never to return. His solitary position between black and white, racism and democracy, the spirit and the flesh, all created too much anxiety for such a young man. The powerful, unseen force of Bliss's position is clarified in a scary, lengthy passage from Sunraider's memory of being locked in a coffin at Hickman's revival:

. . . Screaming, mute, the Senator thought, Not me but another. Bliss. Resting on his lids, black inside, yet he knew that it was pink, a soft, silky pink blackness around his face, covering even his nostrils. Always the blackness. Inside everything became blackness, even the white Bible and Teddy, even his white suit. Not me! It was black even around his ears, deadening the sound expect for Reverend Hickman's soaring songs; which now noodling up there high above had taken on the softness of the piece of black velvet cloth from which Grandma Wilhite had made a nice full-dress over coat□only better, because it had a wide cape for a collar. *Ayee*, but blackness.

On his deathbed, Sunraider was ravaged by his tumultuous position between the races of America. The passage is riddled with oppositions and references to black and white, religion and rebirth. Sunraider's memory is still vivid, even on his deathbed. Internally, he is violently pulled in multiple directions by everything that he was supposed to bind together. This responsibility was simply too much and, thus, Sunraider gave in, releasing himself from the daunting task that Hickman had lain out before him.

In the final moments as Sunraider fades into death, the American dream of a true freedom and unification of the races slips away with Bliss's life. Hickman called out, "Bliss! You were our last hope, Bliss; now Lord have mercy on this dying land!" Although Ellison does not hold Hickman's opinion, the death of Sunraider-Bliss does represent Ellison understanding that even up to the author's own death in 1994, the American dream was still unrealized. The death of the Sunraider-Bliss character is not one of doom for America, it simply represents that there still exists a chasm between the races,

one that will not disappear until Americans have moved beyond their final Juneteenth, forming a "tie that binds," unifying all Americans under a true democracy.

Source: Anthony Martinelli, Critical Essay on *Juneteenth*, in *Novels for Students*, Thomson Gale, 2005.

Adaptations

Segments of an interview conducted by Elizabeth Farnsworth with Ralph Ellison in the 1960s, followed by an interview in 2000 with John Callahan, the editor of *Juneteenth* and Ralph Ellison's literary executor, is available at http://www.pbs.org/newshour/bb/entertainment/jan-june99/ellison_6-21.html (accessed November 24, 2004) and maintained by The Public Broadcasting Service Web site.

An interview from 1977 is available at http://www.nytimes.com/books/99/06/20/specials/ellison-conversation.html and is conducted at Ellison's home by Ishmael Reed, a novelist and poet.

Topics for Further Study

Ellison's characters express their feelings through speeches and sermons, both political and religious. Describe at least two speeches or sermons, whether they be famous or personal, that have affected your life. Examine the impact and message of these allocutions. Are they of a religious or political nature? Both? Neither? Who are the people addressing you and how do you relate to them and their place in time and history? Write a short essay summarizing the speeches and examining these questions.

Bliss Hickman and Adam Sunraider are effectively the same individual. However, they are polar opposites with regards to their beliefs, understandings and perceptions of race, culture, religion, and politics. This type of juxtaposition is popular in fiction. Try to come up with other characters that share the polarity of Reverend Bliss and Senator Sunraider and compare their differences. What makes the characters change? What are the different personalities of the different characters? To get you started, it may be helpful to think about Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde.

Juneteenth as it is published is only a fragment of the work that Ellison put into developing his second novel. Select two to four aspects from *Juneteenth* that you feel were left underdeveloped and write a short passage that would help to clarify or further explicate the character, scene, setting, or theme that left you unfulfilled and wondering.

Music is an important factor not only in Ellison's life but also in the characters he develops. Jazz music in particular plays an important role in the development of Ellison's writing. As a young man, Ellison was an accomplished trumpeter and as an older, educated scholar, Ellison made many accomplishments writing about jazz music and musicians. Reverend Hickman is also tied to music, as his life before Bliss was dedicated to the trombone. Spend time listening to some jazz music from the 1950s and 1960s, like Charlie Parker, Miles Davis, and Charles Mingus. How does this music feel in relation to the tone established in *Juneteenth*? Do the characters move in a way that mimics jazz music? Do you believe jazz music could be the soundtrack to *Juneteenth*? Why? Would you select a different type of music or different jazz musicians to compose your soundtrack of *Juneteenth*? If so, what would you pick and why?

Compare and Contrast

1930s—1940s: Benjamin Davis Sr. becomes the first black general in the United States Army in American history.

Today: African Americans hold important positions in Congress and all divisions of the armed forces. Colin Powell, an African American, held the prestigious position of Secretary of State under the first term of the George W. Bush presidency.

1930s—1940s: Jackie Robinson becomes the first black to play Major League Baseball.

Today: Players of all ethnicities, races and nationalities play throughout the United States in Major League Baseball, National Basketball Association, National Football League and the National Hockey League.

1930s—1940s: Franklin Roosevelt signs the Social Security Act and the Wealth Tax Act is passed, helping alleviate the unjust concentration of wealth and power.

Today: The United States is enduring a struggling economy. In the last quarter of 2003 the Bureau of Labor Statistics reports nearly 8.8 million people are unemployed. By October 2004 there are still about 8.2 million people without work.

1930s—1940s: Apartheid program is established in South Africa. Racial discrimination is institutionalized in laws that marginalize black Africans, often defining specific areas where they can live and work. Many black Africans are relocated several times to various locations determined by a prejudiced government.

Today: South Africans crushed apartheid in 1994 with the all-race elections and, although the nation still suffers, they are making strides to becoming a safer, democratic state.

What Do I Read Next?

Invisible Man (1952) is Ralph Ellison's first novel. It is about a nameless black man traveling through the perils of American racism and cultural blindness.

The Collected Essays of Ralph Ellison (2003) contains some of the greatest essays, criticisms and interviews, both published and formerly unpublished, from one of the most cogent and vital voices in American race commentary and examination, Ralph Ellison.

Living with Music: Ralph Ellison's Jazz Writings was published as a collection in 2002. Before ever becoming a renowned writer and scholar, Ellison was an accomplished trumpeter. This collection is full of great meditations on jazz classics and profiles of famous jazz musicians. It also offers a window into the lives and culture of black Americans.

Flying Home and Other Stories (1998) is a collection of thirteen previously unpublished works of short fiction that depict Ralph Ellison's interesting development as a writer.

Beloved, by Toni Morrison, won the Pulitzer Prize in 1988. The novel traces the life of a slave woman, Sethe, who decides to kill her infant daughter rather than allow her to be enslaved. The novels explores the atrocities of slavery and the deep struggles of a woman entrapped by a lifetime of unbelievable pain.

Native Son (1940), by Richard Wright, is a powerful novel set in the 1930s about the hopelessness and destitution of black Americans in the inner city. The meditation of the book reflects upon the ever-changing question of what it means to be black in the United States.

The Fire Next Time (1963), by James Baldwin, was a plea to "end the racial nightmare." The book has proven timeless, not only as a galvanizing voice of the Civil Rights movement, but also as a personal and provocative work reflecting upon a changing nation through the eyes of a brilliant black American.

Ideas for Reports and Papers

John F. Callahan, Ralph Ellison's literary executor and the editor of this novel, quotes Ellison's 1969 description of Juneteenth as his "novel-in-progress (very long in progress)." Apparently the planning stages of this novel date from June of 1951, but it remained unfinished at his death in 1994, though parts of it had been published in magazines. New York Times reviewer Michiko Kakutani observes that this novel "has assumed the status of a literary myth." Ellison clearly intended to publish this novel, but perhaps—as Callahan suggests—doing "his duty on national boards and commissions" interfered with the process of writing and editing this novel. Readers may want to consider what other factors may help to explain the long delay in publication.

At Mrs. Ellison's insistence, Callahan agreed to edit and publish Juneteenth posthumously, but his work has been severely criticized. For example, Kakutani says, "Instead of the symphonic work Ellison envisioned, Callahan has given us a single, tentatively rendered melodic line. Instead of a vast modernist epic about the black experience in American, he has given us a flawed linear novel, focused around one man's emotional and political evolution." Obviously an editor always influences a writer's work, but the effect of posthumous editing is more controversial. Readers may profitably compare Juneteenth with Ellison's earlier fiction and consider how he might have edited the novel differently.

Ellison's notes suggest that he was influenced by his reading of Mark Twain, another writer who examined American culture of the South and Southwest. The effect of Ellison's reading generally—and especially his reading of other Southern and Southwestern writers—clearly deserves exploration.

1. John F. Callahan refers to Juneteenth as Ellison's "mythic saga of race and identity, language and kinship in the American experience." In what way(s) is this novel mythic? What characteristics of the saga are present? What other myths and sagas does it resemble? What is the American experience being portrayed? How are these linked to the "Juneteenth" holiday?

2. Callahan's comments suggest that the novel's language and language patterns are especially important to its overall meaning, and several distinctive voices are heard (e.g., Hickman, Sunraider, Bliss, the Oklahoma vigilantes, Miss Teasing Brown). What does each character's choice of words and sentence structure reveal about that character's personality, background, and interests? How does the language of the ministers differ from that of Sunraider the politician or the moviemaker con-man? What is the significance of Sunraider's shifts in dialect, both aloud and within his own consciousness?

3. Callahan describes the way he edited "literally thousands" of notes and manuscript fragments into the novel Juneteenth, as he selected segments of Ellison's projected three-volume "ambitious, extended saga of America." Callahan's editorial work has been both praised and criticized. Is Juneteenth a coherent narrative? Do Ellison's themes in

this novel seem consistent with those he developed in his short stories and in Invisible Man? Is Callahan's role essentially different from that of editors generally?

4. Ralph Ellison began work on his second novel in 1955, and in 1956 he apparently decided to use a political assassination as "the basic situation." Within the next few years, the idea of political assassination lost much of its shock value as the nation reacted to a series of assassinations and attempted assassinations. How did the increased violence of the Sixties and subsequent decades affect the impact of assassination as a symbol and a plot device? Was this atmosphere of violence a likely factor in Ellison's reluctance to complete the novel? Why?

5. In several notes Ralph Ellison describes the narrative as "antiphonal": in their conversations, their narrative/memories, and even their silences—Reverend Hickman and Sunraider/Bliss fall into the pattern of their long-ago sermons. What effect is built by Ellison's choice of this method? Does this narrative technique help to develop the various ironies that the novelist wanted to emphasize—e.g., the intended redeemer who became a persecutor, the sinner who became a minister, the elusive goals of personal identity and freedom?

6. Though Ralph Ellison apparently intended originally to balance Sunraider and Hickman, gradually his focus seemed to shift to the minister/father figure. Why did this shift take place? In one of the published notes, Ellison suggests that Hickman "is tested in every way" by his relationship with Bliss/Sunraider, from the beginning to the end of his surrogate son's life. What specific tests of ideals, maturity, and faith (in his religion, his country, his race, and himself) occur in this novel? Is Hickman, rather than Bliss, the protagonist of the novel?

7. Ellison's notes indicate that Severen, the assassin, is actually Sunraider's rejected son, possibly the child of his apparently brief flirtation with Miss Teasing Brown, the young mulatto woman whose father was part Cherokee. Why does Ellison choose to leave the actual relationships ambiguous; what symbolic effect does he achieve? Regardless of Severen's actual parentage, why is it appropriate that Sunraider should be struck down by him? What more does Ellison reveal and suggest about him? How does Ellison use the relationship between Sunraider and Severen to emphasize the contrast with Hickman's role as surrogate father of Bliss?

8. Although the major characters in this novel are men, women play a significant role in the ways the characters change. In Sunraider's mind several women seem to be linked—most notably Miss Lorelli (who claims to be his mother), Sister Georgia (who is the object of his first sexual curiosity), Mary Pickford (who becomes his mother in his fantasies), and Miss Teasing Brown (whom he later seduces). How does each of these women influence the development of his personality? What is the underlying role of sexuality in this novel? Is Ellison's treatment of his women characters similar to that in his earlier fiction? In the fiction of other African-American writers of his generation? In what way(s) is it different?

9. Critics frequently speculate about the way(s) writers influence their contemporaries and successors. In Ellison's case, these influences range from nineteenthcentury writers like Mark Twain to a wide variety of contemporaries like Wright, Eliot, Faulkner, Hemingway, and Joyce. What parallels exist between Ellison's work and that of these other writers? To what extent is Ellison reflecting the literary theories and techniques of his own and earlier generations?

10. Ellison's musical background suggests that he may have approached the writing of novels in much the same way he would the composition of music. If indeed he did intend to create a verbal American symphony, his work could be compared with that of early twentieth-century American composers such as George Gershwin. Ellison too seems to have blended techniques and themes from blues, jazz, spirituals, and American folk music. Consider the influence of his musical heritage upon this novel specifically.

Literary Precedents

Probably because Christianity is central to this novel, Ellison drew upon Biblical stories. For example, the relationship between Hickman and Bliss seems to reflect that of Abraham and Isaac. Just as Abraham was willing to sacrifice his son to do God's will, so Hickman symbolically sacrifices his foster son each time he places the boy in his white coffin. Moreover, there is a parallel between Bliss and Samuel, the Old Testament judge. Hickman sees Bliss as a similar gift from God but also a child dedicated to God's service.

Certainly the career of Bliss/Sunraider appears to be an inversion of the New Testament account of St. Paul. In contrast to the former persecutor who became an apostle and a major force in early Christian evangelism, Bliss is the preacher turned apostate, a prime example of the destructive force of selfishness, vanity, and the thirst for personal power. Other important New Testament themes are death to sin and rebirth in righteousness—as enacted in Bliss's white coffin—and the echoes of the Sermon on the Mount in Hickman's use of Christ's injunction to "Suffer the little children to come unto me." In fact, Hickman's entire plan for Bliss's life seems to be based upon the idea that this young boy can become a kind of Christ-figure who will help adult society to turn away from racial bias and become as accepting as little children.

Ironically, though, the death of Sunraider will be in no way sacrificial or redemptive.

History serves not only as a major theme, but also as a significant source. The references to Lincoln, Emancipation, and the celebration of Juneteenth emphasize Ellison's fascination with the effect of historical figures and events upon the lives of everyday people. In addition, while the Scottsboro trial is never explicitly mentioned in this novel, Ellison's references to it in his other fiction suggest that he was deeply affected by this injustice. Though he chooses to avoid its detailed description, certainly he was influenced too by other contemporary racial violence such as the 1913 race riots in his native Oklahoma (Tulsa), the death of Emmet Till in the 1950s, and the lynchings that are a shameful part of American history in this century. Moreover, he obviously was aware of the way such violence had been depicted by other writers such as Richard Wright.

As a student at Tuskegee, Ellison became acquainted with the works of those writers who most influenced young writers of the 1930s: T.S. Eliot, Ernest Hemingway, James Joyce, Ezra Pound, W.B. Yeats, Joseph Conrad, and Gertrude Stein. For Ellison, The Waste Land was an impetus to write, and his admiration of Eliot's later work is seen in his use of the quotation from "Little Gidding." He also described reading Hemingway's Spanish Civil War dispatches, which he admired for their vivid descriptions of scene and action, elements which likewise characterize Ellison's style. The influence of Joyce can be seen most directly in the narrative structure of Juneteenth, as the memories and conversations of Hickman and Bliss meld into a stream of consciousness reminiscent of Ulysses.

Ellison's portrait of American society also reflects his reading of other American novelists. His notes suggest the influence of Mark Twain; he refers to Hickman and Sunraider as similar to Jim and Huck, and the portrayal of Sunraider may also owe something to Twain's depiction of Tom Driscoll/Chambers in Pudd'nhead Wilson.

Certainly the question of racial identity is central to that novel, and Ellison seems to have considered the Mississippi River central to the American psyche in much the same way Twain did. Moreover, both writers may have been trying to correct what they considered the inaccurate portrayal of the African-American man as a "devout Christian" in Harriet Beecher Stowe's novel Uncle Tom's Cabin.

The river also links Ellison to William Faulkner, another writer who explored the issue of racial identity in characters such as Charles Bon (Absalom, Absalom!) and Joe Christmas (Light in August). Bon's racial identity is the key to Absalom, but Faulkner once commented that Bon probably was always aware of it and simply did not consider it really important until he realized its significance to the Sutpens. Joe Christmas more nearly resembles Bliss, however: he too is the child of a Caucasian mother and a father whose racial identity is unknown. Like Bliss, Christmas is treated as African-American, but he callously manipulates others—especially a woman—as he tries to escape that identity. The outcome for both men is personal destruction.

The most important philosophical influence, though, was Richard Wright. In fact, Wright not only was Ellison's longtime friend and literary advisor, but he gave Ellison his first writing assignments. Though Juneteenth is not explicitly a novel of social protest, Ellison addresses many of the same issues of racial prejudice delineated in Wright's fiction, his own earlier work, and that of other African-American writers; still, these themes are so pervasive that actual influence is probably impossible to determine.

Further Study

Burke, Bob, and Denyvetta Davis, *Ralph Ellison: A Biography*, Oklahoma Heritage Association, 2003.

This biography spans the entirety of Ellison's life, most notably chronicling his experiences with segregation in his hometown of Oklahoma City.

Eichelberger, Julia, *Prophets of Recognition: Ideology and the Individual in Novels by Ralph Ellison, Toni Morrison, Saul Bellow, and Eudora Welty*, Louisiana State University Press, 1999.

This book explores the treatment of the individual in relation to society through the four of America's greatest literary giants. Questioning more than just race, the novels of Ellison, Toni Morrison, Saul Bellow and Eudora Welty explore ethnicity, gender, class, and religion during the most volatile years of American history.

Ellison, Ralph, Albert Murray, and John F. Callahan, *Trading Twelves: The Selected Letters of Ralph Ellison and Albert Murray*, Vintage Books USA, 2001.

This collection of letters spans a decade of friendship between the remarkable authors Ralph Ellison and Albert Murray. Beginning in 1950, the letters exchanged over the following ten years offers a glimpse into literary history and race in America.

Jackson, Lawrence, *Ralph Ellison: Emergence of Genius*, Wiley, 2001.

This biography recreates the first forty years of Ellison's life, taking us through the publication of his greatest masterpiece, *Invisible Man*.

Tyson, Tim, *Blood Done Sign My Name*, Crown, 2004.

In this incredible personal history, Tyson, a professor of African American studies from University of Wisconsin—Madison, examines with a blunt, precise eye the struggles of black Americans and the Civil Rights movement in the South.

□□□, *Radio Free Dixie*, University of North Carolina Press, 2001.

This biography traces the remarkable life of Robert F. Williams, one of the most influential and powerful black activists in American history. Although his name is often overshadowed by Malcolm X and Martin Luther King Jr., Williams played an integral role in the Civil Rights movement pushing blacks towards "armed self-reliance."

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Introduction

Purpose of the Book

The purpose of Novels for Students (NfS) is to provide readers with a guide to understanding, enjoying, and studying novels by giving them easy access to information about the work. Part of Gale's□For Students□ Literature line, NfS is specifically designed to meet the curricular needs of high school and undergraduate college students and their teachers, as well as the interests of general readers and researchers considering specific novels. While each volume contains entries on □classic□ novels

frequently studied in classrooms, there are also entries containing hard-to-find information on contemporary novels, including works by multicultural, international, and women novelists.

The information covered in each entry includes an introduction to the novel and the novel's author; a plot summary, to help readers unravel and understand the events in a novel; descriptions of important characters, including explanation of a given character's role in the novel as well as discussion about that character's relationship to other characters in the novel; analysis of important themes in the novel; and an explanation of important literary techniques and movements as they are demonstrated in the novel.

In addition to this material, which helps the readers analyze the novel itself, students are also provided with important information on the literary and historical background informing each work. This includes a historical context essay, a box comparing the time or place the novel was written to modern Western culture, a critical overview essay, and excerpts from critical essays on the novel. A unique feature of NfS is a specially commissioned critical essay on each novel, targeted toward the student reader.

To further aid the student in studying and enjoying each novel, information on media adaptations is provided, as well as reading suggestions for works of fiction and nonfiction on similar themes and topics. Classroom aids include ideas for research papers and lists of critical sources that provide additional material on the novel.

Selection Criteria

The titles for each volume of NfS were selected by surveying numerous sources on teaching literature and analyzing course curricula for various school districts. Some of the sources surveyed included: literature anthologies; Reading Lists for College-Bound Students: The Books Most Recommended by America's Top Colleges; textbooks on teaching the novel; a College Board survey of novels commonly studied in high schools; a National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE) survey of novels commonly studied in high schools; the NCTE's Teaching Literature in High School: The Novel;and the Young Adult Library Services Association (YALSA) list of best books for young adults of the past twenty-five years. Input was also solicited from our advisory board, as well as educators from various areas. From these discussions, it was determined that each volume should have a mix of □classic□ novels (those works commonly taught in literature classes) and contemporary novels for which information is often hard to find. Because of the interest in expanding the canon of literature, an emphasis was also placed on including works by international, multicultural, and women authors. Our advisory board members□educational professionals□ helped pare down the list for each volume. If a work was not selected for the present volume, it was often noted as a possibility for a future volume. As always, the editor welcomes suggestions for titles to be included in future volumes.

How Each Entry Is Organized

Each entry, or chapter, in NfS focuses on one novel. Each entry heading lists the full name of the novel, the author's name, and the date of the novel's publication. The following elements are contained in each entry:

- Introduction: a brief overview of the novel which provides information about its first appearance, its literary standing, any controversies surrounding the work, and major conflicts or themes within the work.
- Author Biography: this section includes basic facts about the author's life, and focuses on events and times in the author's life that inspired the novel in question.
- Plot Summary: a factual description of the major events in the novel. Lengthy summaries are broken down with subheads.
- Characters: an alphabetical listing of major characters in the novel. Each character name is followed by a brief to an extensive description of the character's role in the novel, as well as discussion of the character's actions, relationships, and possible motivation. Characters are listed alphabetically by last name. If a character is unnamed□for instance, the narrator in Invisible Man-the character is listed as □The Narrator□ and alphabetized as □Narrator.□ If a character's first name is the only one given, the name will appear alphabetically by that name. □ Variant names are also included for each character. Thus, the full name □Jean Louise Finch□ would head the listing for the narrator of To Kill a Mockingbird, but listed in a separate cross-reference would be the nickname □Scout Finch.□
- Themes: a thorough overview of how the major topics, themes, and issues are addressed within the novel. Each theme discussed appears in a separate subhead, and is easily accessed through the boldface entries in the Subject/Theme Index.
- Style: this section addresses important style elements of the novel, such as setting, point of view, and narration; important literary devices used, such as imagery, foreshadowing, symbolism; and, if applicable, genres to which the work might have belonged, such as Gothicism or Romanticism. Literary terms are explained within the entry, but can also be found in the Glossary.
- Historical Context: This section outlines the social, political, and cultural climate in which the author lived and the novel was created. This section may include descriptions of related historical events, pertinent aspects of daily life in the culture, and the artistic and literary sensibilities of the time in which the work was written. If the novel is a historical work, information regarding the time in which the novel is set is also included. Each section is broken down with helpful subheads.
- Critical Overview: this section provides background on the critical reputation of the novel, including bannings or any other public controversies surrounding the work. For older works, this section includes a history of how the novel was first received and how perceptions of it may have changed over the years; for more recent novels, direct quotes from early reviews may also be included.
- Criticism: an essay commissioned by NfS which specifically deals with the novel and is written specifically for the student audience, as well as excerpts from previously published criticism on the work (if available).

- Sources: an alphabetical list of critical material quoted in the entry, with full bibliographical information.
- Further Reading: an alphabetical list of other critical sources which may prove useful for the student. Includes full bibliographical information and a brief annotation.

In addition, each entry contains the following highlighted sections, set apart from the main text as sidebars:

- Media Adaptations: a list of important film and television adaptations of the novel, including source information. The list also includes stage adaptations, audio recordings, musical adaptations, etc.
- Topics for Further Study: a list of potential study questions or research topics dealing with the novel. This section includes questions related to other disciplines the student may be studying, such as American history, world history, science, math, government, business, geography, economics, psychology, etc.
- Compare and Contrast Box: an □at-a-glance□ comparison of the cultural and historical differences between the author's time and culture and late twentieth century/early twenty-first century Western culture. This box includes pertinent parallels between the major scientific, political, and cultural movements of the time or place the novel was written, the time or place the novel was set (if a historical work), and modern Western culture. Works written after 1990 may not have this box.
- What Do I Read Next?: a list of works that might complement the featured novel or serve as a contrast to it. This includes works by the same author and others, works of fiction and nonfiction, and works from various genres, cultures, and eras.

Other Features

NfS includes □The Informed Dialogue: Interacting with Literature,□ a foreword by Anne Devereaux Jordan, Senior Editor for Teaching and Learning Literature (TALL), and a founder of the Children's Literature Association. This essay provides an enlightening look at how readers interact with literature and how Novels for Students can help teachers show students how to enrich their own reading experiences.

A Cumulative Author/Title Index lists the authors and titles covered in each volume of the NfS series.

A Cumulative Nationality/Ethnicity Index breaks down the authors and titles covered in each volume of the NfS series by nationality and ethnicity.

A Subject/Theme Index, specific to each volume, provides easy reference for users who may be studying a particular subject or theme rather than a single work. Significant subjects from events to broad themes are included, and the entries pointing to the specific theme discussions in each entry are indicated in boldface.

Each entry has several illustrations, including photos of the author, stills from film adaptations (if available), maps, and/or photos of key historical events.

Citing Novels for Students

When writing papers, students who quote directly from any volume of Novels for Students may use the following general forms. These examples are based on MLA style; teachers may request that students adhere to a different style, so the following examples may be adapted as needed. When citing text from NfS that is not attributed to a particular author (i.e., the Themes, Style, Historical Context sections, etc.), the following format should be used in the bibliography section:

□Night.□ Novels for Students. Ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski. Vol. 4. Detroit: Gale, 1998. 234-35.

When quoting the specially commissioned essay from NfS (usually the first piece under the □Criticism□ subhead), the following format should be used:

Miller, Tyrus. Critical Essay on □Winesburg, Ohio.□ Novels for Students. Ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski. Vol. 4. Detroit: Gale, 1998. 335-39.

When quoting a journal or newspaper essay that is reprinted in a volume of NfS, the following form may be used:

Malak, Amin. □Margaret Atwood's □The Handmaid's Tale and the Dystopian Tradition,□ Canadian Literature No. 112 (Spring, 1987), 9-16; excerpted and reprinted in Novels for Students, Vol. 4, ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski (Detroit: Gale, 1998), pp. 133-36.

When quoting material reprinted from a book that appears in a volume of NfS, the following form may be used:

Adams, Timothy Dow. □Richard Wright: □Wearing the Mask,□ in Telling Lies in Modern American Autobiography (University of North Carolina Press, 1990), 69-83; excerpted and reprinted in Novels for Students, Vol. 1, ed. Diane Telgen (Detroit: Gale, 1997), pp. 59-61.

We Welcome Your Suggestions

The editor of Novels for Students welcomes your comments and ideas. Readers who wish to suggest novels to appear in future volumes, or who have other suggestions, are cordially invited to contact the editor. You may contact the editor via email at: ForStudentsEditors@gale.com. Or write to the editor at:

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