In the early 1900’s, new critics argued that literary texts transcend their historical and geographical situations (117). They argued that literature is timeless in the sense that it is completely unaffected by the physical and psychological realities of its time and location. In contrast to this and other understandings of history, the mid 1900’s, with the influence of the post-modernism era saw history and literature as having very different kinds of dynamics. The new historicists argued, “literary texts are embedded within the social and economic circumstances in which they are produced and consumed” (119). New historicism thus states that literary texts always allude to their time and location; literary texts are a part of the world, not separate from it— “to talk about texts as “representing” reality simply overlooks ways in which texts are already a part of that reality” (33).
One way to demonstrate the way history and literature are intertwined is to view *Invisible Man* as a novel about understanding and creating identity. Although finding identity is a timeless aspect, the kind of identity that the narrator of *Invisible Man* is trying to find for himself is dependent on his historical and geographical situation. His search for identity is in and of itself a result of his historical and geographical situation. As a result of slavery and the taking of African Americans from their own home lands–African Americans were left with the question of their identity. After slavery ended, African Americans were no longer slaves, they were no longer Africans. They no longer had any idea of who they were prior to slavery and if they did know, they weren’t sure of whether they wanted to go back to their prior identities or if they wanted to find a new identity for themselves.

These questions of identity are embedded throughout *Invisible Man* in the search of identity that the narrator goes on. His sense of lost identity is most visible when he is in the hospital and being asked who he is, “Who am I? I asked myself. But it was like trying to identify one particular cell that coursed through the torpid veins of my body” (Ellison, 187). Not only is the narrator questioning who he is and is unable to identify himself as someone, but he also brings in the issue of the whole African American race. He alludes to the loss of the identity of all of the African American people when he says that he is just “one particular cell” in a body. And if the body itself – the African American people–doesn’t have an identity, then how can a single cell in the body be identified? In the same scene, the narrator is also asked who his mother is, but cannot remember; he states, “This was stupid, you always knew your mother's name” (188). The mother-child relationship...
is traditionally the most sacred relation between humans and the narrator’s inability to know who his mother is speaks of his loss of identity.

New historicists also argue that history is not independent of prejudice and personal agendas. In previous discussions of history, history was always viewed as factual and without interference. For example, old-historicist critics viewed history as “a series of empirically verifiable events” (Bennett & Royle, 119). In contrast, new historicists argue that history is not closed off from entity; it is subjective, which makes history literary and textual. New historicists thus make a distinction between “History” (with a capital H) which is the history that is presumed to be purely factual and is the standard view of history (i.e. taught in history classes) and “history” (lower case h) which is the history of an individual or a group of people which challenges the standard “History” (118-120). [For the rest of the essay I will use these two terms- History and history].

Ralph Ellison wrote *Invisible Man* in 1952. At this period and even until recently, when the History of African Americans was bought up, the emphasis was not on all the negativity, but on the Civil Rights Movement. The focus was not on the brutality against the African American people, but on their freedom. This complex relationship between History and history is apparent within *Invisible Man*. The narrator of *Invisible Man* wants to be part of History, but is constantly reminded that his personal history is not a part of the standardized History. A concrete example of this is when the narrator is asked to remove Brother Tarp’s leg link by Brother Wrestrum (Ellison, 304). Brother Wrestrum is a part of the History, which denies or undermines the violence that was done against
African Americans. In opposition to History, the leg link represents the untold history of violence against African Americans; Brother Tarp tells the narrator “I got this limp from dragging a chain… Nobody knows that about me, they just think I got rheumatism. But it was that chain and after nineteen years I haven't been able to stop dragging my leg” (209). This shows that most people in the Brotherhood believe that Brother Tarp has rheumatism because that belief supports their own notion of History. Yet, the context of the situation and the narrator’s insistency on keeping the link out in visible light challenges the History that the Brotherhood is trying to promote.

After slavery was abolished in 1865, within the African American and overall society, there was an emphasis on becoming like the White man as opposed to African Americans finding an identity of their own. These problematic ways of thinking and self-understanding that were part of the society and time that Invisible Man was written in are apparent in Invisible Man. For example, the narrator of Invisible Man can be seen as invisible because the people around him are constantly projecting their own understanding or image of him onto him, as opposed to allowing him to create his own identity. The narrator says in the prologue of Invisible Man, “invisibility to which I refer occurs because of a peculiar disposition of the eyes of those with whom I come in contact. A matter of the construction of their inner eyes, those eyes with which they look through their physical eyes upon reality” (Ellison, 3). Also, although the narrator of Invisible Man looks up to African American individuals, he aspires to have the qualities that rich and successful white men have. The narrator says of Dr. Bledsoe, “he was the example of everything I hoped to be: Influential with wealthy men all over the country;
consulted in matters concerning the race; a leader of his people; the possessor of not one, but two Cadillacs, a good salary and a soft, good-looking and creamy-complexioned wife” (79). The narrator goes as far as to say that he aspires to be like Dr. Bledsoe because he has a “creamy-complexioned” as opposed to a dark complexioned wife. These passages really show the way in which African Americans had a contaminated way of looking at themselves as a result of slavery and White supremacy.

Furthermore, the African Americans in the 18th and majority of the 19th century also wanted to leave behind their African heritage. This is also examined in Invisible Man, showing that a text is not distant from the literal world (Bennett & Royle, 31). In the beginning of Invisible Man, the narrator refuses to identify himself with the habits and practices of African Americans. For example, the narrator doesn’t allow himself to enjoy eating yams or to eat walking out in public because it wasn’t proper (Ellison, 203). The narrator address the dilemma of choosing not to do these things for so long, saying “Why, you could cause us the greatest humiliation simply by confronting us with something we liked” (Ellison, 204). This phrase from Invisible Man, a literary text, speaks of a true world where White supremacy led to African Americans rejecting their own ideals in order to assimilate into and be accepted by White people (Bennett & Royle, 28). This leads to the proposition that “literary texts are acts that destabilize the very notion of the world and that disturb all assumptions about a separation between world and text” (29). New Historicists also explore the ways in which History is a form of narrative. They argue that History is a process and not simply an act of writing down facts. For example, when telling a History, the writer that narrates (tells or writes) the History decides which
events become part of the History (55). The writer/narrator also decides the order in which the History is told. “Time is crucial to the narrative” and yet how much or which parts of time are told, depend entirely on the narrator and “the temporal ordering of events is not the whole story” (56). Here, the new historicists are pointing out the power of narrative. They are showing the ways in which the people who write history shape history- they include the events they want to include, they tell the story from one side (biased) and they can go as far as lying about or changing the “facts”. Narrative power is thus a tool that allows us to think of ways in which the “events and actions themselves” relate to “the author or teller and the reader or listener” (58). This narrative power is observed in the fact that the kind of history that Invisible Man narrates is not a part of the History that most people know.

This obscurcation of facts and power of narrative is observed within Invisible Man when the Brotherhood changes their opinions about Brother Clifton. At one point, the Brotherhood views Brother Clifton as an important ally and a man who contributes extensively to their cause (Ellison, 281). But later on in the novel, the Brotherhood has a conflict with Brother Clifton and they thus refuse to celebrate his life and give him a funeral (347). The Brotherhood only views Brother Clifton as valuable when he is doing something that supports their agenda (347). Another example of power of narrative within the novel is that Dr. Bledsoe is the man that all the people he writes to in New York believe in. Although he is wrong, his power and influence allow him to tell a narrative that supports his personal agenda (147). New historicists thus argue that “to tell
a story,” whether it’s History, history or literature, “is to exercise power” (Bennett & Royle, 59).

Another aim of new historicism is to establish that “history is the ‘history of the present’” (119). They argue that history is “in the making” rather than a static object that is immovable or unchangeable. They argue that history is constantly remaking and transforming itself (59, 119). This also relies on narrative power, because the way in which a writer of history writes about history is dependent on the intended audience. For example, most American History books focus on the Civil Rights movement as opposed to the injustices done on African Americans in order to promote a good image of America. But, in recent years, History books are starting to include more of the history of African American people as opposed to favoring a History of America. This is happening because the American people, as a society, are becoming more accepting. The readers want to know about African American history, which leads the writers of history books to narrate that history. Thus, the claimed “factual” History is forced to revise itself due to the challenges presented to it by the silenced African American history.

This complex intertwining of History, history and literature are observed in Invisible Man in that the individual history of the narrator in Invisible Man is challenging the "factual" History that society has established. For example, the society that the narrator belongs to has already decided not to acknowledge the hardships of people like Brother Tarp (Ellison, 304). Or his society established that all African Americans can sing (242). What’s also interesting is the way in which the narrator of Invisible Man forms his
identity on the very reshaping and re-understanding of History. Every time the narrator is put in a situation he doesn’t understand, he looks to his past to help him understand the current situation. For example, after realizing the intention of Dr. Bledsoe and the content of the letters he gives him, the narrator is forced to revisit his past, he states “I could not believe it, yet I had a feeling that it all had happened before” (148). Through every hardship that the narrator faces, he realizes how much of his history shapes his identity; his re-learning of his own history helps him embrace his African American heritage and history. When the Brotherhood simply decides to “sacrifice” the African American cause for their bigger plan, the narrators’ view of the history of the Brotherhood is completely shattered and reestablished. Every time the narrator takes a “plunge” out of History, he seems to plunge into his own history and the history of his people (346). In the beginning of the novel, the narrator talks only about himself, but the progression of the novel shows how the narrator slowly comes to understand how the personal history of his life is bound by the history of his people.

In conclusion, *Invisible Man* demonstrates how History simply aims to teach us facts, but literature teaches us history in a way that we may come to understand history. Literature converses with history, it tends “to throw off the mask of custom and manners that insulate man from man, and converse in naked honesty and frankness” (Ellison, 144). *Invisible Man* is thus an attempt by Ralph Ellison to help African Americans, Whites, and all the other racial groups in America understand the history of the African American people.
Works Cited


