The Quest for Identity
In
Ralph Ellison's The Invisible Man

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Abstract

Ralph Ellison (1914-1994) is an African-American novelist, and literary critic. His fiction asserts the need for white Americans to recognize the Negro identity in all its complexity. His most famous novel, Invisible Man, is published just before the crest of America's revolutionary wave of Civil Rights for minorities. It is hailed not only as the first significant novel by a black author to receive the prestigious National Book Award for Fiction in 1953, but to change the shape of American literature. The study traces the physical and psychological transformation of its hero, an unnamed narrator; a young Southern Negro, a college-educated, who is relentlessly struggling to survive and delineate himself in a racially-divided society that refuses to see him as a human being.

The aim of the study is to examine and analyze the theme of a man's lifelong quest for his identity and place in society as a black man in white America—a perilous journey from blind ignorance to enlightened awareness and disillusionment—or, according to the author, "from Purpose to Passion to Perception," a triumvirate that Ellison says spurred his efforts, as seen from the perspective of the first-person narrator, and through a series of flashbacks in the forms of dreams and memories. It also illustrates the powerful social and political forces that conspire to keep black Americans, in Ellison's words, "in their place," denying them the "inalienable right to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness" guaranteed to all Americans.

Keywords: racism, Blackness,Whiteness, segregation, quest, identity, flashbacks, memories, masks, reminiscence, retrospection, recounting, cultural heritage, leadership

البحث عن الهوية في رواية "الرجل الخفي"(1953)

للكاتب الأمريكي رالف إليسون

رالف إليسون (1914-1994) روائي أمريكي من أصل أفريقي، وناقد أدبي، تؤكد رواياته افتقار الأمريكيين السود إلى نظرائهم البيض للاعتراف بالهوية الزنجية (السوداء) في كل تعقيداتها. تُعَد روايته "الرجل الخفي" الأكثر شهرة، والتي نشرت قبل ذروة الموجة الثورية الأمريكية للحقوق المدنية للأقليات. وقد أشاد النقاد بالرواية ليس فقط باعتبارها الأولى المهمة من قبل مؤلف أسود تحصل على جائزة الكتاب الوطني المرموقة للرواية عام 1953، وإنّما لتغييرها شكل الأدب الأمريكي.

تقتفي الدراسة الرحلة البدنية والنفسية للبطل، وهو أيضـًا الراوي الذي لم يفصح عن هويته، ذلك الشاب الزنجي الجنوبي، الذي تلقى تعليمـًا جامعيـًا، ويكافح من أجل البقاء ومن أجل رسم هويته في مجتمع منقسم عنصريـًا يرفض أن يراه كإنسان.

وتهدف الدراسة أيضًا إلى فحص وتحليل موضوع بحث البطل الدؤوب مدى الحياة عن الهُويّةِ والمكانة في المجتمع كرجل أسود بين الأمريكيين البيض، رحلة محفوفة بالمخاطر، من الجهل المُطبِق إلى الوعي المستنير والتحرر من الوهم وخيبة الأمل، أو وفقـًا لما يقوله المؤلف: "من الهدف للعاطفة إلى التصور والإدراك" الثلاثية التي يقول عنها إليسون بأنها حفزت جهوده، كما يرى من منظور ضمير المتكلم للراوي، ومن خلال سلسلة من ذكريات الماضي في أشكال الأحلام والذكريات. وتوضح الدراسة القوى الاجتماعية والسياسية القوية التي تتآمر لإبقاء الأمريكيين السود—كما يقول إليسون— "في مكانهم"، نافيـًا عنهم "حقهم الذي لا يمكن التنازل عنه ومصادرته" في الحياة والحرية والسعي لتحقيق السعادة والذي يُضمَن لجميع الأمريكيين.

In his review and insightful comments of the Swedish sociologist Gunnar Myrdal's book *An American Dilemma*, Ellison writes, "In our society, it is not unusual for a Negro to experience a sensation that he does not exist in the real world at all. He seems rather to exist in the nightmarish fantasy of the white American mind as a phantom that the white mind seeks unceasingly, by means both crude and subtle, to slay" (qtd. in Yancy: 40). This paragraph gets recycled and anticipates the premise of *Invisible Man*. As the narrator's opening lament about his social condition is: "You often doubt if you really exist. You wonder whether you aren't simply a phantom in other people's minds. Say, a figure in a nightmare which the sleeper tries with all his strength to destroy" (*IM*, p.4). According to Stephen Schryer:

> This idea established the basis for Ellison's version of novelistic modernism [...] he wanted to avoid naturalistic representations of the damaging effects of social environment on the black psyche. Ellison instead focused on the ways in which black social reality is invisible to whites because of the mediating presence of racist stereotypes; like other postwar writers, he sought to create a higher realism of the cultural apparatus. (63-64)

During the late 1940s and early 1950s many African Americans were subjected to racism in America. Blacks during this time had few opportunities and were constantly ridiculed by whites based on the color of their skin. So, they experienced the feeling of estrangement and isolation. In other words, they suffered detachment from others, and were split up within the self. Moreover, being a cultural and racial minority, they felt like outsiders within the white society, with a stereotyped white image of Africa, according to which black races and cultures were regarded as inferior and primitive.

As a black writer, Ellison's voice can justly be regarded as one of the loudest and strongest of that period. Through *Invisible Man* and essays collected in *Shadow and Act*, Ellison's writings epitomize the ethos of the 1950s. As James McPherson argues: "While *Invisible Man* is a story of one man's attempt to understand his society and himself, the essays outline Ellison's successful

struggle to master the craft of the writer and to understand, and then affirm, the complexities of his own rich cultural experience" (361). Thus, *Invisible Man* comes out as a vitriolic, albeit honest, endeavor to establish a realistic exposé stemming out of a plethora of social and economic injustices together with racial suppression. In it, Ellison depicts skilfully the misery of African Americans as that of a minority that is destined to suffer racism in crushing environments.This becomes more evident through different ways or stages in the protagonist's struggle for self-realization: reminiscences, impressing the cultural heritage, and searching for leadership. Each stage can be viewed as a lesson that contributes to the protagonist's growth and awareness, bringing him closer to an understanding of his own people's culture, history and his true identity.

Set in the U.S. in 1930s when segregation laws barred black Americans from enjoying the same basic human rights as their white counterparts, the novel opens in the South, although most of the action takes place in the North. Through his protagonist, Ellison explores the contrasts between the Northern and Southern varieties of racism and their alienating effect. Because the narrator is black, whites spurn to see him as an actual, three-dimensional, flesh-and-blood person; hence, he secludes and portrays himself as invisible, describing them as blind.

T. F. Cassidy views the novel as "the conscience of all races" (90). On his comment on *Invisible Man*'s artistic and literary accomplishments, Eric J. Sundquist writes: "No book […] sums up the psychological and cultural effects of segregation in the United States more thoroughly than Ellison's" (qtd. in Hill: 1). As Ellison explains, "I would have to approach racial stereotypes as a given fact of the social process and proceed, while gambling with the reader's capacity for fictional truth, to reveal the human complexity which stereotypes are intended to conceal" (qtd. in Callahan: 488). Durthy A. Washington considers racism as "a devastating force, possessing the power to render black Americans virtually invisible" (8). In the same vein, Maria Helena Noronha also declares that:

> With his social and spiritual aspirations usually frustrated ones, [the American Negro] feels himself displaced in his own country. This fact can't be forgotten when speaking of the hero of *Invisible Man*, whose problem is partly, but not exclusively, the modern and mechanized man's problem; he is an outsider who struggles for integration, for self-knowledge and self assertion in a segregationist world. (85)

In his book, *Reading the American Novel 1920-2010*, James Phelan declares that "Ellison tackles the situation of an African American man trying to find his place in a society dominated by whites, and especially white men" (148). Consequently, we cannot lose sight of color or race when speaking about the novel's narrator and his identity. Throughout the novel, "the narrator struggles to attain freedom against various barriers put in his way, and every barrier is, first of all, *racially* constructed. These barriers isolate and alienate the black man from the institutions of American life" (Powers 3).

Ihab Hassan concludes that in Ellison's *Invisible Man* "the negro as victim, rebel, outsider, scapegoat and trickster confronts us, in the darkness of which no man can bleach himself, with the question: Who am I" (80) Wherever he goes, the Invisible Man is emasculated and left rootless by people who either pay no attention to his inner existence or visulaize him only as a symbol, as abstraction. Hassan further adds that, "Throughout the novel the hero's personality shifted like a chameleon, but he threw off one mask only to find himself entrapped within another dehumanizing stereotype or disguise. Thus, like other black people, he was alienated from society and from himself" (81). Similarly, Phelan argues that the Invisible Man's isolation is "a sign of his outsider status, a double-edged position from which he can critique the world but not affect it—and one which he decides to abandon" (148).

In *Shadow and Act*, Ellison further explains that the Negro is placed in a precarious position because of such alienation:

> When Negroes are barred from participating in the main institutional life of society they lose far more than economic

> privileges or the satisfaction of saluting the flag with unmixed emotions. They lose the bulwarks which men place between themselves and the constant threat of chaos. For whatever the assigned function of social institutions, their psychological function is to protect the citizen against the irrational, incalculable forces that hover about the edges of human life like cosmic destruction lurking within an atomic stockpile [...] without institutions to give him direction, and lacking a clear explanation of his predicament [...] the individual feels that his world and his personality are out of key. (300)

In *Invisible Man*, Ellison lays out how the narrator (the "Invisible Man"), whose name is never revealed, encounters and experiences such institutions. The narrator discovers the obstacles in each one which are essential to define and delineate himself—such as: the community and its restrictions (the Southern white community), then, in order, the institutions of education (the Southern Negro college community), economics (the Northern industrial community), and politics (the community of the Brotherhood). He experiences the restraints of each as they are imposed upon the black man, hinder his self-discovery and distort his inner vision. As a result of such limitations, the black man's identity is defined by the dominant white society. Therefore, he finds himself unable to assert his distinct individual identity due to his concept of himself and of the identity imposed upon him by those in power in his community.

Erich Fromm asserts that "[the black man] has become, one might say, estranged from himself. He does not experience himself as the center of his world, as the creator of his own acts—but his acts and their consequences have become his masters, whom he obeys" (120). Thus, he is caught in a duality of existence. This dual self-perception, in the words of the famous sociologist and civil rights activist William Edward Burghardt Du Bois (1868-1963), is defined as "double-consciousness." In addition, his plight is that he is unable to see himself except through somenoe else's eyes—that is, through others' lens of race prejudice. Du Bois comments that:

> The Negro is a sort of seventh son, born with a veil, and gifted with second sight in this American world—a world which yields him no true self-consciousness, but only lets him see himself through the revelation of the other world. It is a peculiar sensation, this double-consciousness, this sense of always looking at one's self through the eyes of others, of measuring one's soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity. One ever feels his two-ness—an American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder. (2)

Therefore, double-consciousness, according to Alpaslan Toker is "a negative notion. It is an anomaly, strife, and a conflict between the American identity and the Blackness of black Americans, between the role they are supposed to play for existence and their grasp of who they actually are" (27). This is exactly what the perceptive and sagacious elderly grandfather of our nameless narrator indicates when he advises him on his deathbed.

As an African American writer, Ellison is able to examine the universal human struggle of finding one's identity while living one's life in a world one feels worthless, displaced, disavowed; and that this world is built upon restrictive ideologies and stereotypes. Thus, throughout the novel, the search for identity becomes the dominant concern of the narrator's journey to identify who he is in this world and to escape from stereotypes and racial inequalities. In the prologue, the narrator recalls and meditates upon the events of his life. He tries to elicit out of the confusions of his experiences some pattern of meaning and essence of identity.

> All my life I had been looking for something and everywhere I turned someone tried to tell me what it was [...] I was looking for myself and asking everyone except myself the question which I, and only I, could answer [...] my expectations to achieve a realization everyone else appears to have been born with: That I am nobody but myself. But first I had to discover that I am an invisible man! (*IM*, p.7)

Todd Lieber sees invisibility as “the situation of men whose individual identity is denied” (86). Therefore, blindness is the state of those who refuse them as individual beings. Through his nameless narrator, Ellison reveals that the only way to liberate oneself from a certain role is by becoming “invisible.” In other words, “one must annihilate the socially constructed self to allow room for the true complex self to be created, a feat [the] narrator accomplishes through performance” (Sellers 2). Again, the narrator introduces himself to the reader as a man, not a ghost, in a state of invisibility and in an "underground hibernation." He also asserts his invisibility as though he is surrounded by “mirrors of distorted glass” so that the other people cannot see him. In the following reflection, the narrator states that:

> I am an invisible simply because people refuse to see me [...] When they approach me, they only see my surroundings, themselves, or figments of their imagination—indeed, everything and anything except me [....] Nor is my invisibility exactly a matter of biochemical accident of my epidermis. That 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 construction of their inner eyes, those eyes with which they look through their physical eyes upon reality. (*IM*, p.7)

Blackness also means invisibility, the narrator says, and invisibility has the power to drain vitality: "It's enough to make you doubt if you really exist" (p.13). The antidote for this doubt is searching for self-identity. As a result, the narrator struggles to develop an identity. "I was looking for myself," he says, "and asking everyone except myself questions which I, and only I, could answer" (p.8).

Being an invisible, though, one might say, is an advantage, it is most often rather “wearing on the nerves”(p.7). The narrator points out how he makes use of his invisibility and turns it to to an asset because no one acknowledges his existence. To illustrate, the narrator realizes then he can live rent-free and avail himself of free electricity. This also explains why he has his “refuge”—his cellar, illuminated by 1369 light bulbs that draw their power from

the white man's energy source, the Monopolated Light and Power company. He justifies the theft, saying that, "[it] allows me to feel my vital aliveness." To him, light is a symbol of truth. He is obsessed with a need for light to validate his existence:

> I love light [...] Perhaps you will think it strange that an invisible man should need light, desire light, love light. But maybe it is exactly because I am invisible. Light confirms my reality, gives birth to my form [...] The truth is the Light and the light is the Truth. (*IM*, p.7)

More than that, this condition of invisibility creates within a sense of irresponsibility. The narrator questions: "But to whom can I be responsible, and why should I be, when you refuse to see me? Responsibility rests upon recognition and recognition is a form of agreement" (p.16).

As a music lover, the Invisible Man has only one radio-phonograph; yet, he plans to have five so that he can feel as well as hear his music. He understands and feels Louis Armstrong's sounded interrogative refrain: "My only sin is my skin.What did I Do to Be So Black and Blue?;" perhaps because both are invisible. Indeed, it is his condition that allows him to respond so deeply and admires the Negro musician because Armstrong knows how to transcend his invisibility. This point is further developed when the Invisible Man proclaims that "I play the invisible music of my isolation" and then asks, "Could this compulsion to put invisibility down in black and white be thus an urge to make music of invisibility?" (pp.10-11).

The narrator's thoughts on music, while smoking narcotics, lead him to indulge in reminiscence about his past. He, then, recognizes the failures of his life. Thus, there arises the idea of recounting his life and writing his memories. For Ellison, writing is a way of communication. So, in the first twenty chapters following the prologue (which are a series of "flashbacks" in the first person) we are presented with the early years of the protagonist's life.

Does the narrator's state of mercurial hibernation last very long? All we know is that he doesn't consider it as permanent: "a hibernation is a covert preparation for a more overt action" (p.34). We can conclude from the epilogue that he considers the necessity of abandoning that state and coming back and facing the world once again: "Nevertheless, the very disarmament has brought me to a decision. The hibernation is over. I must shake off the old skin and come up for breath," also reasoning that "even an invisible man has a socially responsible role to play" (p.468). His attitude toward life and his perspective is that, "There is a death in the smell of spring and in the smell of thee as in the smell of me. And if nothing more, invisibility has taught my nose to classify the stenches of death" (p. 468). Noronha highlights that:

> This act of reconciliation is a necessary, conscious one. It is necessary because, as he confesses to us, every man, even invisible, has a mission to fulfill and if he doesn't do it he practices a social crime; it is conscious because only now, knowing the realities of the world that he imagined perfect, does he accept the necessary coexistence of the vile and the marvellous. (88)

Yet, by the end, the Invisible Man realizes that the world around him has not changed significantly. He still recognizes that a false concept, to which he submitted his whole life, lies at the original base of his situation:

> And my problem was that I always tried to go in everyone's way but my own. I have also been called one thing and then another while no one really wished to hear what I called myself. So after years of trying to adopt the opinions of others I finally rebelled. I am an invisible man. (*IM*, p.462)

Noronha also adds that "the spiritual conflict that prevails over the hero's rebirth is translated into dualism," both negation and acceptance of his past: 'Open the window and let the foul air out," "it was a good green before the harvest.' Then, much later, he changes to an attitude of compromise. From the man he had been, he only accepts the condition of invisibility, 'a condition he doesn't want to leave, to contest against the chaos of the world to which he returned'" (88)

Throughout the novel, the nameless narrator is seen as a victim of himself and of society. He is destined to take a journey in search for his human identity while seeking a model of African American leadership. He confesses that he has fought all his life for the truth. He condemns himself because he tries to build his image according to others' eyes. That truth is nothing other than his self-knowledge. Yet, he has a different heritage bestowed upon him by his grandfather.The narrator recollects the puzzle of his grandfather's deathbed speech. The dying grandfather, representing the ancestor or ghost of slavery that continues to haunt black Americans, shocks his family by revealing himself as a traitor and a spy to his race in the white man's world. The old man explains that the life of the black man is a war to gain their independence. So, he becomes whatever the white world wants him to be. He also advises his children to maintain two identities: the bitter, resentful part of themselves and the stereotypical model of the meek, subservient Negro. According to Carol Davis, "From this model, his descendants can protect their personal self-respect, yet internally despise the second-class citizen status given by the white man" (qtd. in Callahan: 264). On the throes of death, the old man delivers a message that continues to resonate throughout the narrator's life. These exhortations and revelations serve as a catalyst for the narrator's quest throughout the novel. Here is the grandfather's dying words:

> Son, after I'm gone I want you to keep up the good fight. I never told you, but our life is a war and I have been a traitor all my born days, a spy in the enemy's country ever since I gave up my gun back in the Reconstruction. Live with your head in the lion's mouth. I want you to overcome 'em with yeses, undermine 'em with grins, agree 'em to death and destruction, let 'em swoller you till they vomit or bust wide open. (*IM*, pp.19-20)

This scene is an integral part of the novel and has an impact on the narrator's life. Though the grandfather's enigmatic advice may be considered as a delirium of a dying old man, the narrator is seriously haunted by these words, which he fails to comprehend. These words torment him all the way his uncommon

journey into invisibility. Yet, he doesn't exclude the possibility of its being full of meaning. Hence, he searches for the meaning behind it till he comes to grip with its symbolic significance. Over time he comes to think of this speech as a "curse" (p. 15, 30), because of its effect on his thinking: When he acts in a way that garners praise from the "most lily-white men of the town" (p.14), he feels guilty because he thinks that he is doing what his grandfather recommended and is therefore somehow acting against the wishes of the white men. In addition, he becomes afraid of the phony nature of his actions that prevents him from showing his true colors; that "some day they would look upon me as a traitor and I would be lost. Still I was more afraid to act any other way because they didn't like that at all" (p.15).

In "Change the Joke and Slip the Yoke," Ellison comments on the use of the mask, saying:

We wear the *mask* for purposes of aggression as well as for defense; when we are projecting the future and preserving the past. In short, the motives hidden behind the mask are as numerous as the ambiguities the mask conceals. (*Shadow and Act* 58)

Blacks use masks not only because of fear, but to hide their own identities. As can be seen, the character of the narrator's grandfather, who, behind his kindness hides the good sense of saying "yes" wanting to say "no." So, his behaviour is a denial and rejection through agreement:

> The grandfather has learned that conformity leads to a similar end, and so advises his children. Thus his mask of meekness conceals the wisdom of one who has learned the secret of saying the "yes" which accomplishes the expressive "no." (Ibid., 59)

Yomna M. Saber assumes that the advice is cloaked in much ambiguity for the young Invisible Man since "it denotes that the grandfather wants them to live the same kind of life that he defines as treacherous" (80). The Invisible Man totally fails to probe deeper into its contradictions and it "becomes a constant puzzle which lay unanswered at the back of [his]mind." So, he

decides to follow it from its superficial aspect and regard humility as the right path to black progress as he declares in his graduation oratory speech. Likewise, Phelan unequivocally comments:

> The Invisible Man resents the advice because it unsettles his conviction that his success in life depends upon his ability to earn the approval of white society. His grandfather's speech becomes a nagging voice in his ear that he wishes would just shut up, but his inability to make that wish come true indicates that at some level he is not wholly comfortable with his conviction and the behavior that follows from it. His strategy for success depends both on denying any fundamental conflict between the races and on accepting his own subordinate status, while his grandfather's advice calls both of those assumptions into question. From this perspective, it is to his credit that he cannot stop hearing his grandfather's voice. (156)

Yet, later, in the epilogue, the Invisible Man begins to understand the deep meaning of his grandfather's words. Moving from doubt to doubt, he ends with another question:

> Agree them to death and destruction—grandfather had advised. Hell, weren't they their own death and their own destruction except as the principle lived in them and in us? And here is the cream of the joke: weren't we part of them as well as apart from them, subject to die when they died? I can't figure it out; it escapes me. (*IM*, p. 497)

In retrospecting his early life, the unnamed narrator tells how he, as a docile Southern Negro, is faithful to the principle "White is Right." At the same time, he is anxious both to toady the "rich white folks" and to honor his own people—within the established limits. He also believes that "humility was the secret, indeed, the very essence of progress" (p.87). Due to his oratorical skills, the narrator recalls being invited to a community meeting to give his high school graduation speech in the presence of the town's leading white citizens. This is meant to defend humility as the essence of progress—not because the narrator believes in it, but, as he confesses, because he knows that acclimatization can be a rapid practice of gaining acceptance in community.

After going through a lot of outrageous experiences, the narrator can understand its true meaning. In his article "I Yam What I Am: Naming and Unnaming in Afro-American Literature," Kimberly Benston writes that "the refusal to be named invokes the power of the Sublime, a transcendent impulse to undo all categories" (4). Yet, things are not that simple and he discovers that acclimatization can transform into completely different human beings.

In recounting his grueling ordeal to amuse the drunken white men, the narrator remembers how he is invited to fight blindfolded with his other black classmates in the degrading "battle royal"—a wrestling exhibition—as part of the evening's entertainement. The prize for the winner is some gold coins set in an electirfied carpet. The narrator is thrown into the boxing ring and is shaken and bloodied. After the fight, he realizes, then, that he is just like the other black men: blind with naivete and unseen by whites as an individual. Symbolically, the scene introduces the struggle among blacks for an elusive prize that often remains beyond their reach. Through this act of humiliation, the narrator is permitted finally to deliver his speech and receive his prize. His speech represents the final humiliation before this crowd of rude and racist white men. In his heart, he knows that he has played the fool. To avoid similar moments in the future, he needs to learn some lessons about his identity.

The narrator's submissiveness is extolled by the white school superintendent and grants him a calfskin briefcase that contains a scholarship to attend the local college for Negroes: "Keep developing as you are and someday it will be filled with important papers that will help shape the destiny of *your people* [italics mine]" (p. 34). The italicized expression suggests division and the whites' incapability to see blacks as equal as the rest. Thus, blacks are invisible to them as individuals who can be integrated in society. The whole scene foreshadows the cruelty of the outside world and how the narrator will forcibly lose whatever identity he has already formed. In his essay,"American Nightmare" (2012), Nathaniel Rich explains, the battle royal is a

representation of "a race stripped of volition and dignity, divided against itself, callously exploited, rendered both invisible and blind." Phelan declares that, "these remarks take for granted that the Invisible Man both knows his place and will stay within it: there is no reference to his having any interaction with white society" (157). But he is nevertheless "overjoyed" and even reports that he "felt safe from grandfather, whose deathbed curse usually spoiled my triumphs" (*IM*, pp. 30-32).

Yet, later on, the Invisible Man understands better that such freedom is impossible. That night, the very truth is shown to him through a dream whose meaning he cannot yet fully grasp. He dreams that his grandfather tells him to open his briefcase where he finds a seemingly endless series of envelopes until he gets to one that his grandfather tells him to open. Inside is an engraved document whose words he reads aloud: "To Whom It May Concern […] Keep This Nigger-Boy Running." He wakes up "with the old man's laughter ringing in [his] ears" (p. 35). Though Ellison closes the chapter with the remark that the Invisible Man "had no insight" (ibid.) into the dream's meaning, Phelan comments that

> But in Ellison's audience we have considerable insight: his unconscious has recognized how the white men regard him ("Nigger-Boy"), and his unconscious has understood how his attitude has made him perpetually subject to seeking approval from others by doing their bidding. In that way, as we soon learn, his unconscious is also accurately predicting his future. (158)

Recalling his days in the all-black college, as a student, marks another stage in the Invisible Man's search for identity. This corresponds to his last years in the South. During his short stay there, he is so optimistic that not even an unjust punishment can discourage him. There, he regards Dr. Bledsoe, the Negro president, as a model for imitation, of success. So, the narrator works diligently to ingratiate himself with Dr. Bledsoe. Thus, he pays homage to him in such words:

He was the example of everything I hoped to be: Influential with wealthy men all over the country, consulted in matters concerning the race; a leader of his people […] what was more, while black

and bald and everything white folks poked fun at, he had achieved power and authority; had, while black and wrinkle-headed, made himself of more importance in the world than most Southern white men. They could laugh at him but they couldn't ignore him. (*IM*, p.52)

Nevertheless, it is Dr. Bledsoe who is closely related to the narrator's tragic fate, either destroying his first identity or recommending his permanent unemployment. There, at the college, the narrator is told that his role is to act as white society wishes while keeping hidden any power he can gain: "'I mean it, son,' Dr. Bledsoe said [...] 'Yes, I had to act the nigger!' he said'" (P.56). So, he scrambles to please white patrons, and strives to "know his place at all times" (p.58).

To continue his quest for acceptance and identity, the narrator remembers how he is assigned by Dr. Bledsoe to show off to Mr. Norton, a Northern white trustee and philanthropist, a wealthy donor who contributes much to the college, building the games' yard. The narrator interprets the mission as a leap forward into the acceptance to the white man's world. At the benefactor's request, the narrator chauffeurs to the old slave neighborhoods off the campus. There, Mr. Norton is able to see the misery, the corruption, and the madness that exist behind the College walls and all had been craftily hidden by Bledsoe.

Along the way, Mr. Norton tells the narrator about his dead daughter. As he drives, the narrator takes him to a log cabin where there lives a Negro family whose chief, Jim Trueblood, a local black farmer who committed an unintentional incest with his own daughter. Despite the narrator's repeated pleas to leave, Mr. Norton is so curious and wants to hear from the Negro all the details of that story. Deeply moved by Trueblood's self-confessed tale, Mr. Norton gives Trueblood a hundred-dollar bill as a gift before departing. The Invisible Man says:

> Suddenly Mr. Norton touched me on the shoulder.
>
> — I must have a little stimulant, young man. A little whiskey.
>
> — Yes, sir. Are you all right, sir?

— A little faint, but a stimulant ... (P. 61)

Thus, Mr. Norton becomes so delirious and asks the narrator to take him somewhere for a drink to collect himself. Deciding that downtown is too far to go, the narrtor drives to the Golden Day, a local black bar and brothel with a bad reputation.

The character of Jim Trueblood wears another mask of humility that the Invisible Man equally misses out. Trueblood's character, as John Wright describes, is one "involving absolute opposites that define a center of conflict and that, like dreams in Freudian analysis, place in stereoscopic contradiction what one wants but has not got with what one has but cannot avoid" (176). Noronha also comments that "Some critics think Norton is an 'alter-ego' of Trueblood and say both committed the same crime; while Norton only desired it, Trueblood did it" (92). One is reminded of Norton's comments about his daughter during the drive:

> Her beauty was a well-spring of purest water-of-life, and to look at her was to drink and drink and drink again [...] She was rare, a perfect creation, a work of purest art. A delicate flower that bloomed in the liquid light of the moon. A nature not of this world, a personality like that of some biblical maiden, gracious and queenly. I found it difficult to believe her my own. (*IM*, p.58)

However, instead of having a comfortable and relaxing respite, Mr. Norton and the narrator meet up with an enigmatic veteran who is also visiting the Golden Day. With a touch of irony, the veteran reveals to Norton the basic truth: "You cannot see or hear or smell the truth of what you see" (p.87). The narrator remembers how he listens for the first time to the revelation of his true identity. The veteran says, turning to Mr. Norton:

> He has learned to repress not only his emotions but his humanity. He is invisible, a waking personification of the Negative, the most perfect achievement of your dreams, sir! The mechanical man! [...] Poor stumblers, neither of you can see the other. To you he is a mark on the score card of your achievement, a thing and not a man; a child or even less—a black amorphous thing. And you, for all your power, are not even a man to him, but a God, a force [...]

> He believes in you as he believes in the beat of his heart. He believes in that great false wisdom taught slaves and pragmatists alike, that white is right. I can tell you his destiny. He'll do your bidding, and for that his blindness is his chief asset. He's your man, friend. Your man and your destiny. Now the two of you descend the stairs into chaos. (*IM*, p.87)

It sounds as if a mad strength impels the passive narrator to the most revolutionary behavior and then to his own destruction. According to Marc E. Black,

> It is the Vet's double consciousness that enables him to see Invisible Man and Mr. Norton from their shared perspective while also seeing their perspectives from his own. Mr. Norton and Invisible Man are invisible to themselves and to each other. Only the Vet has the double consciousness necessary to see their assumed familiarity, which is actually alienation. (285)

Returning to the college, Dr. Bledsoe, who is "consulted in matters concerning the race" (*IM*, p.92), berates the narrator furiously for allowing the patron to see the old slave-quarter section of town. He also condemns him because he can't lie, when the lie is for a Southern Negro what most pleases the white: "My God, boy! You're black and living in the South— did you forget how to lie?" (p.107).

Again, the real meaning of his grandfather's advice is further blurred by Bledsoe who is infuriated by the narrator's blind obedience to Mr. Norton's request: "haven't we bowed and scraped and begged and lied enough decent homes and drives for you to show him?"(p.112). He also urges the narrator to play the game without worrying about the notion of dignity and to "let the white folk worry about pride and dignity—you learn where you are and get yourself power, influence, contacts with powerful and influential people—then stay in the dark and use it!" (p. 117). Dr. Bledsoe relishes in his power that he has gained through the support of influential white men, and intends to stay in power, even if it is at the cost of the dignity of those of his own race (Trimmer 47). In this regard, Saber explains that:

> Bledsoe's approach to life is similar to the grandfather's advice; he also yeses the whites and wears a mask of meekness to attain what he wants. He plays the part of the black trickster figure who manages to attain power and maintain it, even if it means stepping over his own people. (81)

She further illustrates that the Invisible Man fails again to see through Dr. Bledsoe's Machiavellian strategy of living as "he is incapable of conceiving the difference between wearing a mask and manipulating it to serve his own ends" (ibid.). Bledsoes uses masks not only to dupe the whites but to dupe his own students. As noticed before, the narrator's grandfather advises his family to use masks as a form of self-defense against racist white power, but Bledsoe instead uses masks as a weapon against members of his own race. We can argue that Bledsoe's character shows the ultimate limitations of the grandfather's philosophy: African Americans will not win true power for themselves as a people if they continue to lead double lives. Trimmer has pointed out that, "Unfortunately the narrator has fallen into the trap of believing in the mask: he sees neither the ambiguities nor the possibilities of the mask" (48). Yet, in her article, "The Meaning of Narration in Invisible Man," Valerie Smith holds the opinion that Invisible Man partially dismisses the values Bledsoe stands for and states that:

> Considering him utterly insignificant, the college president resolves to destroy the protagonist's career, despite his innocence, in order to save the image of the school. The protagonist finds Bledsoe's logic incomprehensible, if not nonexistent; he therefore distances himself from the traditional American values Bledsoe embodies in order to preserve or create his own identity.(36-37)

It is true that Blacks can try to meet with the demands of White people and turn into stereotypical figures but in reality hating Whites inherently.Thus, they end up doing the exact similar things that Bledsoe does. The narrator has no intention to become "the most perfect achievement of [someone else's] dreams…The mechanical man!" as the veteran at the Golden Day tavern sarcastically and mockingly labels him (*IM,* p.94). Therefore, he gradually starts to notice the existing defects within his education

and how he is being educated by an establishment which advocates the ideologies of people who are nothing like himself (Toker 29).

In a reminiscence of that major transition that occurs in his life, the narrator tells how Dr. Bledsoe orders him to leave his beloved college and to go to the North, promising to help him there. Bledsoe is afraid that someone like the narrator, whom he sees as a potential threat, will undermine his authority and withdraw his financial support. So, he gets rid of him forever. He gives him some letters of recommendation, all of them closed. Bledsoe assures that the letters will help the narrator get a job in New York where he can earn enough money supposedly to return to the college in the fall. The poor hero blindly accepts the letters and does not suspect that they will condemn him to perpetual unemployment. Once again, he needs to learn lessons about his identity.

In this moment of crisis, the narrator sees his grandfather's ghost smiling at his failure. So, he doesn't desist. He sees his punishment only as a proper recompense for his fault: "Somehow, I convinced myself, I had violated the code and thus I have to submit to punishment" (*IM*, p.131). Yet, the only thing that relieves him is the thought of returning to the campus as soon as he earns enough money to continue his education and gain Dr. Bledsoe's forgiveness. So, he heads north to New York hoping to get a job there as soon as possible with the help of Bledsoe's letters. Yet, much to his chagrin, the narrator discovers the contents of Dr. Bledsoe's letters as well as his betrayal. In actuality, the letter is addressed to Mr. Emerson and informs him that the narrator has been expelled from the school pemanently, and that he, "gone grievously astray," should never know that he cannot return. Bledsoe ends the letter thus: "I beg of you, sir, to help him continue in the direction of that promise which, like the horizon, recedes ever brightly and distantly beyond the hopeful traveller" (p.155). It is until then that the narrator knows that he is permanently expelled from college. Losing hope of returning, he feels that his life is over and sets his sights on revenge. Only, then,

does he become fully aware of the formidable power manipulated effectively by those who use words as weapons. Not only does he feel disappointed and lost, but he feels the weight of his past as well:

> Twenty-five years seemed to have lapsed between his handing me the letter and my grasping its message. I could not believe it, tried to read it again. I could not believe it, yet I had a feeling that it had all happened before. (P.168)

Certainly, Bledsoe's punishment is related to the 'battle-royal' scene—in both situations we see the subjugation and destruction of the negro by the negro, and the strongest being victorious. There is still a parallel between the narrator's dream, when he gets his certificate and Bledsoe's letters, both confirming the message "keep this Nigger-Boy Running." Thus, Bledsoe's behavior is a result of his wish to please the whites, whom he believes to hold power (Noronha 94). Bitterly, the narrator reflects that "Everyone seemed to have some plan for me, and beneath that some more secret plan" (P.170).

Shortly after discovering the contents of Bledsoe's letter, the narrator retrospects how he gets a job at Liberty Paints, a factory which advertises its white-colored product with the slogan "Keep America Pure with Liberty Paints" (p.173). There, the narrator's task is the addition of the special ingredient of "optic white," as the foreman tells him, ""It's the purest white that can be found. Nobody makes a paint any whiter" (p.176).

To produce optic white to paint national monuments, ten drops of a black liquid must, ironically, be mixed with white paint to make it still whiter, the "optic white," that is nothing but an optical illusion. The white becomes whiter because it assimilates the black vitality. In addition, the white paint symbolizes America's refusal to accept the diversity of its citizens and its attempt to whitewash or cover up the issue of racism.

Lucius Brockway is the old African American man in charge of this production. He tells the narrator later, "Our white is so white you can paint a chunka coal and you'd have to crack it open

with a sledge hammer to prove it wasn't white clear through" (p.179). Like Bledsoe, Brockway resents the narrator's presence and feels threatened by him. Like Bledsoe, Brockway does not only use his power to promote his own selfish interests, but he also relies on past connections with powerful white men to safeguard his position. He tells the narrator that he "not only intends to protect hisself, he *knows how* to do it! Everybody knows I been here since there's been a here—even helped dig the first foundation. The Old Man hired me, nobody else; and, by God, I'll take the Old Man to fire with me" (p.175). The narrator works three levels underground where all the furnaces, boilers, pipes, and cables are kept. According to Saber, "Ellison continued to lay much emphasis upon this underground position in the fabric of American culture as the metaphoric space where American identity is structured" (82). Ellison comments:

> Down at the deep dark bottom of the melting pot, where the private is public and the public is private, where black is white and white is black, where the immoral becomes moral and the moral is anything that makes one feel good (or that one has the power to sustain), the white man's relish is apt to be the black man's gall. (*Shadow and Act* 49-50)

Saber significantly adds that Brockway becomes Ellison's "parable symbol of the indispensable position of the African American in American society and his production is the ultimate embodiment of the diversity of that society" (82). In this view, Christopher Douglas also illustrates that Ellison's allegory suggests that:

> Whiteness is constructed only through the incorporation of its absolute racial and metaphysical other, blackness. That is, for whiteness to define itself as an essential racial quality requires an equally essential alterity against which it discovers its contours and limits, and confirms its qualities and attributes. (168)

Reflecting upon the events of his painful experience there, the narrator recounts how he mistakenly uses the wrong formula and dilutes the white paint and "a grey tinge glowed through the whiteness." Accordingly, the black power wrongly used can contribute to annul white power. It is interesting to note that this

failure is only visible to the personage, which proves that the black paint is invisible like the narrator, and his grandfather's words are right:

> I looked at the painted slab. It appeared the same: a grey tinge glowed through the whiteness and Kimbro had failed to detect it. I stared for about a minute, wondering if I were seeing things, inspected another and another. All were the same, a brilliant white diffused into gray. I closed my eyes for a moment and looked again and still no change. Well, I thought, as long as he's satisfied. (*IM*, p.180)

When the narrator's failure is discovered, he is transferred to another section where he must run the machine which prepares the base for the white paint. In a strange turn of events, after finding out that the narrator blunders into a union meeting, Brockway attacks him and the narrator knocks out his false teeth (the battle royal again, with blacks fighting balcks). To revenge himself, Brockway tampers with the boilers to explode. Accordingly, the narrator gets hurt and they take him unconscious to the plant hospital. This episode marks an imperative stage in his development. Thus, the narrator suffers his most bitter betrayals at the hands of his black brothers such as Lucius Brockway and Dr. Bledsoe.

At the hospital, the narrator recollects how he also undergoes a luridly painful experience. He is the outcome of unmitigated oppression and callous racism. There, he is subjected to electric shock therapy. As an educated black man, the narrator is fully aware of the animosity of the white medical establishment toward blacks. Thus, being vulnerable—as a black man—and at the mercy of white doctors, they attempt to perform a lobotomy on him in order to wipe away all his memories and attain a total transformation of his personality. He wakes up unable to remember his name or anything from his past life. Yet, he achieves a new vision and realizes his target. He is in a relentless and unrewarding challenge to exist with an identity, declaring that: "There was no getting around it. I could no more escape than I could think of my identity. Perhaps, I thought, the two things are

involved with each other. When I discover who I am, I'll be free" (p.198). In this regard, Saber illustrates that:

> The hospital experience enables the invisible man to reach a new realm of existence in which he envisions his identity in relation to the present, rather than the past. He finally starts to see beneath the surface of things and realises the intricate relation between attaining his sense of identity and his ontological freedom in a chaotic world. (83)

In both the battle-royal and the hospital episode, it becomes quite clear that, whereas the battle-royal represented the narrator's initiation into a chaotic world of violence and brutality, the factory hospital episode represents his rebirth into a new reality. The head doctor tells him: "Well, boy, it looks as though you're cured [...] You're a new man" (*IM*, p.205). He is freed from the hospital as a new person with a new identity, but he finds himself fired from his job. Now reborn, the narrator rejects the white imposed norms and decides to create his own instead by recalling and making peace with the past. To impress his cultural heritage, he no longer feels compelled to hide his identity as a Southern black. He tries to exist with his blackness without assimilating to the white culture and society. During a moment of nostalgia, while walking in the streets of Harlem, the narrator decides to eat the hot buttered Carolina yams in public and proclaims to himself that, "They're my birthmark [...] I yam what I am" (p.220). In fact, embracing his cultural heritage and eating yams in public indicate that he has reconciled with his past and has overcome his shameful emotions at being identified as a Southern Negro, which marks an important turning point in his quest for identity. The narrator realizes that he has struggled through illusion and reached reality. "How does it feel to be free of illusion?" he wonders. He reflects on his past attitude and his new understanding:

> Now that I no longer felt ashamed of the things I had always loved, I probably could no longer digest very many of them. What and how much had I lost by trying to do only what was expected of me instead of what I myself had wished to do? What a waste, what a

> senseless waste! [...] But what of those things which you actually didn't like...? How could you know? It involved a problem of choice. I would have to weigh many things carefully before deciding and there would be some things that would cause quite a bit of trouble, simply because I had never formed a personal attitude toward so much. I had accepted the accepted attitudes and it had made life seem simple. (*IM*, pp. 222-223)

Nevertheless, the narrator's vision remains blurred but his quest is unfinished. To realise his new targets, he starts his search for a leadership to follow. Moved by the eviction of an old African American couple, the narrator uses his oratory skills and gives an emotional public speech that touches the hearts of his audience. The eviction does not only alter the narrator's perception of the impoverished black neighborhood of Harlem but also raises his awareness of his social responsibility to the black community. As he revolts for the first time in his life, he sees that he can control the masses and lead them. At this point, Ellison foreshadows his upcoming role as a black leader. It is this speech that wins him a position and leads the narrator to meet Brother Jack, the leader of the radical organization called the Brotherhood. Yet, Dolores Powers remarks that:

> What he doesn't yet realize is that the Brotherhood is another puppet role for him to play—an imposed political identity. The young man must be disillusioned by this final American institution of politics before he is able to assert his own identity. (28)

The first hint of the political puppetry involved in the Brotherhood occurs when the narrator meets Brother Jack. After witnessing the narrator deliver his impressive impromptu speech against the eviction, Jack tells him:

- I'm an admirer.
- Admirer of what?
- Of your speech, he said. I was listening.
- What speech? I made no speech, I said.
- He smiled knowingly. I can see that you've been well trained. (*IM*, p. 244)

When this 'well trained' young man is invited to join the Brotherhood, he finds "the barriers in this political system as formidable as those in any other American institution, but better hidden, since the ostensible ideology is that of brotherhood" (Powers 28). This proposal is a promising one to him, but he has not yet known the rules of the movement. Brother Jack's exclamation during the meeting accelerates the change to come regarding his identity: "You're not like them. Perhaps you were, but you're not any longer [...] Perhaps you were, but that's all past, dead. You might not recognize it just now, but that part of you is dead!" (*IM*, p. 250). The narrator accepts the offer so that he can assert himself and be somebody socially. At this point, the narrator clarifies that, "If I refused to join them, where would I go—to a job of porter at the railroad station? At least here was a chance to speak" (p.267).

Recalling his experince there, the narrator also recounts how he is given a new name and a big salary and is asked to forget about his past identity. Being eager to be a leader, the narrator accepts his new identity as the chief spokesman for the Brotherhood in the Harlem community. Moreover, he also accepts his new apartment, and his proposed role as the new Booker T. Washington. Though, he must not only break the memory of the past but also submit to a hard training according to the principles of the movement. During then, he feels optimistic about and faithful to the chances given to him by the Brotherhood—apparently a non-racist movement.

> Here was a way that didn't lead through the back door, a way not limited by black and white, but a way which, if one lived long enough and worked hard enough could lead to the highest possible rewards [...] For the first time, lying there in the dark, I could glimpse the possibility of being more than a member of a race. (P. 297-300)

Thus, through his induction into the Brotherhood, the narrator resolves to take full advantage of his new position. Yet, this transformation underscores the uncertainty and danger that await him as he plunges into the underworld of the Brotherhood.

Things are out of place and contrary to the expectations. The narrator tries his best for the Brotherhood, but the members send him "downtown" (instead of "up north") to speak on behalf of women's rights. Considering the narrator's lack of knowledge regarding women's issues, this situation is filled with irony. This shows the Brotherhood's focus on groups rather than on individuals. This is because their interest lies in addressing broad issues such as the 'Woman Question' and the Negro problem rather than in helping individual women or Negroes.

The re-assignment (his first glimpse of the truth about the Brotherhood) is sent in an unsigned letter to the narrator, warning him not to "go too fast" and to:

> Keep working for the people but remember that you are one of us and do not forget if you get too big they will cut you down. You are from the South and you know this is a white man's world. So take a friendly advice and go easy so that you can keep on helping the colored people. They do not want you to go too fast and will cut you down if you do. (*IM*, p.321)

One day, at a meeting of the Brotherhood, the narrator recalls how he learns about the sudden disappearance of Tod Clifton, one of the Brotherhood's comrades. It is Clifton who advises the narrator about the false aims and sinister motives of what turns out eventually to be a communist front organization. Feeling betrayed by the Brotherhood, Clifton leaves it and spends his last days of life selling dancing paper "sambo-dolls" on a street corner in New York. Symbolically, the doll reflects the true position of the Negro in the Brotherhood. Robert Bone sums it up in these words:

> His sense of self has in fact been threatened all along by the position of the Negro in the Communist movement. On the one hand, he is constantly reminded of his Negro heritage and encouraged to embrace it; on the other, he is warned against the dangers of black chauvinism and offered all the inducements of universal brotherhood. (209)

Yet, to use Powers words, the narrator is still "devoid of Clifton's enlightenment" (33) and when he comes across with Clifton giving his spiel he feels betrayed:

> What had happened to Clifton? It was all wrong, so unexpected. How on earth could he drop from Brotherhood to this in so short a time? [...] He knew that only in the Brotherhood could we make ourselves known, could we avoid being empty Sambo dolls. Such an obscene flouncing of everything human! (*IM*, p. 376)

Having no license to sell the dolls, Clifton is arrested by a white policeman, who harasses and abuses him verbally. When Clifton strikes back, the policeman shoots and kills him. His death begins the Harlem Revolt. His death also compels the narrator to examine the meaning of life. The narrator sees that Clifton's peddling of the dolls is not a spiteful or ignorant act aims at humiliating the black community. It is a desperate, self-destructive act designed to express his own self-hatred at "selling his people"(p.338), as Ras accuses him before, by being part of an organization that exploits blacks, using them only to advance its own social goals and seeing them as nothing more than dolls or puppets. Reaching that breaking point, Clifton decides that he can no longer deal with the pressure of living a lie. He refuses to be a puppet. So, he chooses death over life in a culture that denies him the right to be a man (Callahan 67). One can say that Clifton has an unrestrained desire for freedom, which is, perhaps, best expressed in the words of the renowned patriotic American hero, Patrick Henry: "Give me liberty, or give me death!" (a speech made to the Second Virginia Convention, on March 23, 1775).

Yet, Saber sees Clifton's catastrophic death from another perspective. According to her, it is Clifton's tragic death which opens the eyes of the narrator to another hidden reality, that is, the use of the mask, for the Sambo dolls are, after all, masks. She goes on to say that the idea of the mask forces the reader to consider the "differences and the similarities" between"the self and the mask." The narrator realizes the big mask game of the Brotherhood that betrayed him, Clifton, and all African Americans. The initial impression, in her words, the narrator gets of Clifton's

farcical show is one of disgust and he thinks that going against the Brotherhood is a decision "to fall outside of *history*" (*IM*, p. 372). Moreover, Saber makes clear that:

> Clifton really falls out of history; his reaction is a bitter escape since he recoils from positive action and accepts the mask of a Sambo doll in an act of cynical public humiliation, but the invisible man finally gets into the arena of history by understanding both the possibilities and paradoxes of the mask, as he steps into another domain of existence in which he gains more control. (86)

Without consulting the members of the movement, the narrator organizes Clifton's funeral on his own. He also delivers a speech during the funeral ceremonies which angered the Brotherhood, as he has no right to exercise his individual responsibility and his ultimate responsibility is to the group. It is then, after an argument, that Jack tells him that discipline and blindness are the most important items in the Brotherhood. That is the crucial point for the narrator because he realizes, at that time, what is hidden behind appearances and beneath the veneer. He soon begins to realize that his goals and values are completely opposed to the Brotherhood's goals and values. Despite being disillusioned with the Brotherhood, the narrator cannot leave it:

> I felt as though I had been watching a bad comedy. Only it was real and I was living it and it was the only historically meaningful life that I could live. If I left it, I'd be nowhere as dead and as meaningless as Clifton. (*IM*, p. 413)

Brother Jack's argument with the narrator echoes Dr. Bledsoe's before. The narrator begins to see more clearly. It is Jack's attitude that shatters completely his illusions:

I couldn't leave it and I had to keep contact in order to fight. But I would never be the same. Never. After tonight I wouldn't ever look the same or feel the same. Just what I'd be, I didn't know. I couldn't go back to what I was—but I'd lost too much to be what I was. Some of me too, had died with Tod Clifton. (P.425)

There is an allusion to the Cyclops here by Ellison. The Cyclops is a mythical one-eyed monster in Homer's *Odyssey*. On

his voyage home from the Trojan War, Odysseus has lost his way. The Cyclops threatens him and his men, and Odysseus is clever and cunning enough to outwit the Cyclops and blind him; thus enabling his men to escape. If Brother Jack is the Cyclops, the narrator is assigned to the role of Odysseus, who defeats the monster and finds his way home.

In an attempt to escape from Ras' men, the narrator decides to disguise himself in dark glasses and a wide-brimmed hat to hide in plain sight. From then on, while roaming in Harlem he is mistaken for someone named Reinhart. It is through the invisible character of Reinhart that the narrator acquires consciousness and learns his lessons. For Reinhart, the world is possibility and facility. Reinhart is described by Ellison as a "master of disguise, of coincidence, [...] Reinhart is my name for the personification of chaos. He is also intended to represent America and change. He has lived so long with chaos that he knows how to manipulate it" (*Shadow and Act* 181). According to Noronha, "Reinhart is the 'alter ego' of the narrator's invisibility which he unconsciously creates" (99). Undoubtedly, he is the best example of using a mask in the novel. More specifically, he is a character of "many faces, representing America and its evolution, the chaos in a country without a past" (ibid., 113).

Saber perceives that: "It is an encounter through the mask since Reinhart never makes a physical appearance but he manages to set the invisible man free from the rigid notions of both history and identity as propagated by the Brotherhood" (86). Reinhart is what James Lane describes as "a peculiar breed of the ghetto, a self-styled Harlem cat with nine different lives" (68); he is everything to everyone whether he is a lover, a preacher, a briber, or a numbers runner. According to Saber, "[Reinhart] lives on the borderline between the realms of reality and dream and his multiple identities shift with unbelievable flexibility according to each situation, but he emerges as a winner in each case" (86).

The experience of Reinhart, in Saber's words, is quite "apocalyptic for the invisible man who discovers through illusion

the reality of the situation" (ibid.). It is through Reinhart's invisibility that the narrator recognizes his own and declares: "Well, I *was* and yet I was invisible, that was the fundamental contradiction. I was and yet I was unseen. It was frightening and as I sat there I sensed another frightening world of possibilities"(*IM*, p.436). The narrator also considers his invisibility a constant in his life though only now is he conscious of it:

> And now I looked to a corner of my mind and saw Jack and Norton and Emerson merge into one single white figure.They were very much the same, each attempting to force his picture of reality upon me and neither giving a hoot in hell for how things looked to me. I was simply a material, a natural resource to be used. I had switched from the arrogant absurdity of Norton and Emerson to that of Jack and the Brotherhood, and it all came out the same—except now I recognized my invisibility. (P.439)

Moreover, the narrator learns the deception underlying the Brotherhood's concept of a color-blind society as well as their regard for the Negro: "I thought they accepted me because they felt that color made no difference, when in reality it made no difference because they didn't see either color or men" (p. 439).

After many encounters with the chaotic existence of Reinhart, the narrator opens his eyes to the potentialities of the mask. Pondering upon Reinhart, he perceives and philosophizes about him that:

> His world was possibility and he knew it. He was years ahead of me and I was a fool. I must have been crazy and blind. The world in which we lived was without boundaries. A vast seething, hot world of fluidity, and Rine the rascal was at home. Perhaps *only* Rine the rascal was at home in it. (P.439)

Saber sees that Reinhart offers a contradictory multiplicity of identities and an amoral approach to the world that the narrator decides to follow. She further adds that: "Although Ellison stresses that Reinhart is his conscious symbol of chaos, Reinhart displays a unique art of detachment and he presents the best use of masks" (87). Reinhart teaches the narrator that he is

free to create his own identity and has further subverted his faith in the Brotherhood. Moreover, it is Reinhart's strategy that invokes the narrator to recall his grandfather's words though it does not resolve the riddle. Thus, the narrator is able to see it in new lights, declaring that: "I didn't know what my grandfather had meant, but I was ready to test his advice" (*IM*, p.457). Feeling invisible to all, the narrator decides to agree with Brother Jack though this is against his methods and principles till he has something "real" to hang on: "For now I saw that I could agree with Jack without agreeing […] I'd have to do a Reinhart" (p.439).

William Goede argues that Reinhart stands for "the ultimate incarnation of the grandfather's political theory" (qtd. in Saber: 87). In fact, we can argue that Reinhart's approach to life is Machiavellian: he yeses both the African Americans and the whites to reach his targets. Thus, he bears resemblance to Dr. Bledsoe who treads upon the dreams of his own people and eventually ends with no sense of identity. Like the Brotherhood, in his domain "individuals do not count and his many personalities would lead the invisible man astray into more fragmentation." In addition, the outbreak of riots helps the Invisible Man witness both the collapse and chaos of Reinhart's world (Saber 87). Moreover, Reinhart's role in the structure of the narrative is, as Ellison has pointed out, "to suggest to the hero a mode of escape from Ras, and a means of applying, in yet another form, his grandfather's cryptic advice to his own situation" (*Shadow and Act* 59-60).

Thus, in his flight, the Invisible Man comes at last to the realization of his true identity:

> Knowing now who I was and where I was and knowing too that I had no longer to run for or from the Jacks and the Emersons and the Bledsoes and Nortons, but only from their confusion, impatience, and refusal to recognize the beautiful absurdity of their American identity and mine […] I was invisible, and hanging would not bring me to visibility, even to their eyes[…] better to live out one's own absurdity than to die for that of others, whether for Ras's or Jack's. (*IM*, pp. 483-484)

Trying to escape from Ras' men, the Invisible Man falls down an open manhole from which he cannot escape, another image of his invisibility—a "nigger in a coal pile" (p.489), there but unseen. Soon, he begins by burning what William J. Schafer calls his "cancelled identity cards"(88), all the papers in his briefcase, accumulated from his experiences. In resolving his own identity, he must reject all those identities imposed upon him. Ellison states:

> I rejected all negative definitions imposed upon me by others; there was nothing to do but search for those relationships which were fundamental [...] I feel to embrace uncritically values which are extended to us by others, to reject the validity, even the sacredness of our own experience. It is also to forget that the small share of reality which each of our diverse groups is able to snatch from the whirling chaos of history belongs not to the group alone, but to all of us. *(Shadow and Act* 166)

The Invisible Man resolves to remain in his cellar, stripped of his illusions. He sees his life with renewed vision and clarity. He now begins to see the possibilities that exist for him in the American society:

> Now the world seemed to flow before my eyes. All boundaries down, freedom was not only the recognition of necessity, it was the recognition of possibility. And sitting there trembling I caught a brief glimpse of the possibilities posed by Reinhart's multiple personalities and turned away. (p.489)

Powers assumes that: "Rinehartism must be rejected because It is neither reality nor order, but chaos." He further points out that:

> Violence, too, is chaos, and for this reason it must be rejected as well, whether it be directed toward other blacks, whites, or theself. For If one identifies himself through a force of chaos, he is in danger of losing his identity rather than arriving at self-identity. Each of the identities imposed on the narrator by the institutions of society, education, economics and politics must likewise be rejected. He cannot be anyone's puppet nor can he allow any group to swallow him until he is no longer an individual. (40)

Thus, the Invisible Man reaches what he has long been seeking: he must reject each expectation that does not conform to his own reality of identity. Richard Lehan states:

> The narrator [...] rejects Jack and the Brotherhood because he realizes that to Jack he is only an economic pawn, to be thought of in terms of a dialectical process of history. He rejects Ras the Exhorter, a black nationalist, whose belief in Negro racial superiority fires Ras to violence. He rejects Mary, the prototype mother, who wants him to be careful, to conform, to succeed in the white man's world. He rejects Lucius Brockway, a Negro who wants to see other Negroes kept in their place so they will be no threat to him. (40)

However, he is not left, as Lehan claims, "without anything more to reject—and without anything to affirm; he ends alone, abandoned, on an underground coal pile"(41). The narrator learns, not only what he is not, but what he is, as he states it, "I'm invisible, not blind" (*IM*, p. 498). He also learns that there are two conditions in society: limitations and possibilities. He looks at the world optimistically, "Until some gang succeeds in putting the world in a strait jacket, its definition is possibility"(ibid.).

In “Black Boys and Native Sons,” Irving Howe explains that: “to define one’s individuality is to stumble upon social barriers which stand in the way” (43-44). Then, Ellison’s Invisible Man will not stay in the hole, but he will make a decision of action and come out to assert his self-determined identity: "even an invisible man has a socially responsible role to play"(*IM*, p. 503). He learns how to take down barriers, how to operate within the American society; he “learns how to detect the unwritten rules of the game” (Geller 168). He has also learned that within all the limitations, possibilities exist. At the same time, he must derive from his self-knowledge and experience the power to assert his identity in the face of those institutions which would seek to crush him.

In going underground, the Invisible Man is both literally and figuratively subverting the society that lies above. As critic Aimable Twagilimana describes it, “though it would appear these authorities eventually force this alienation upon him, the Invisible

Man's movement underground is a demonstration of his freedom. He consciously acknowledges his invisibility and proclaims, 'I am nobody but myself,' telling us his 'hibernation'—his alienation from society—'is over'"(101). The narrator's movement underground, "his movement vertically downward (not into a 'sewer'...but into a coal cellar, a source of heat, light and power and, through association with the character's motivation, self-perception) is a process of rising to an understanding of his human conditions" (*Shadow and Act* 57).

The Invisible Man has removed himself from yet another facet of life controlled by society and in doing so "he created his own environment, an act that foreshadows his success in his most important performance yet, creating his own identity" (Sellers 5). Ultimately, he realizes that he must create his own idetity, which rests not on the acceptance of whites, but on his own acceptance of the past. Elison is able skilfully to reveal the African Americans' plight of being blacks. His voice reflects much bitterness and anger at the wretched condition of the African Americans in their ghettoes. His novel also reflects his true experiences in life, which are essentially racial. His quest is one for freedom and the self-expression of a new black identity in white America. Nick Aron Ford sees that "No white man or woman can understand the tragedy, the pathos, and the humor of being a Negro in America as well as a tolerated Negro" (qtd. in Saber: 77). With the final line of the novel, Ellison ends with this acknowledgement that invisibility is the way out of all kinds of oppression, not only racism, the answer "not only for Blacks but also for all modern men" (Stark 63): "Who knows but that, on the lower frequencies, I speak for you?" (P.503).

Conclusion

Through his anonymous narrator, Ellison was able to portray the misery of African Americans as a minority that has been suffering racism in crushing ghettoes. Though the narrator stumbled all through in his struggle to overcome the social barriers stood in the way, he could define his own individuality and achieve self-realization It would seem that he spent his entire life chasing a goal that was not ever there to begin with. This was in accordance with the dream he had about his grandfather. So, he was kept running, chasing after nothing, but eventually he paused and realized this nothingness. It was the fear of that nothingness that caused him to hold on to a pointless race.

Yet, even when he recognized his meaningless world and existence, the narrator saw that it provided room for possibilities. Regardless his numerous efforts in the past, he fully recognized that they (society/ white people/ Brotherhood) did not see him. He recognized his invisibility. He also saw that embracing invisibility was not a reason to plunge into despair. At last, he did not stand still, and learned that he had a social responsible role to play. He decided to personally establish his individuality from that invisibility. He found out the rules of the game: within all the limitations, possibilities exist. From his discovered world of possibility, our protagonist proclaimed that the end was in the beginning. Thus, deriving from his previous experiences, Ellison's protagonist was able finally to assert his identity and face the institutions that sought to crush him.

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