

**The inextricability of American
identity dilemma in
Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man*: A
*thematic study***

A paper submitted by

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Abstract

Though Ralph Ellison's masterpiece, *Invisible Man* (1952), has not been acclaimed by Black nationalists, both the book and the writer continue to create momentum, either by means of praise or criticism, within the literary arena at large. Ellison is the first African American writer to get the U.S. National Book Award for Fiction in 1953. Furthermore, in a Poll of two hundred authors *Invisible Man* was recognized as the most distinguished work at that period. In this novel, Ellison weaves the questions of human insight, social justice, and profound inquiries into the human mind and the justice of the heart together. The plot follows a search for self-identity reflecting American life in the 20th century. It is a journey undertaken through a labyrinth of freedom, assimilation, rejection, and opportunity. The aim of this study is to prove that the novel's influence transcends the previously mentioned framework. It echoes American man's desperate yearning to achieve his own individuality and identity as a human being. Thus, this paper unveils Ellison's unobtrusive and subtle outlook of American life and the theme of the inextricability of American identity dilemma in Ellison's *Invisible Man*. It highlights Ellison's belief that the plights of the White Americans at large and the African Americans are inextricable. Thus, the vision of *The Invisible Man* is not limited to ethnic struggle or race issues. It rather illustrates a national existential dilemma that describes the American society in the twentieth century.

Key Words: Black Nationalism-- American Identity plight – African Americans- Social Justice — the predicament of American society-- twentieth century.

Introduction

Thanks to *Invisible Man*, Ellison has secured himself a unique position among American authors; a position he continues to hold posthumously. The novel is renowned as a perennial oeuvre. In fact, seldom has an author been met with such acclaim and recognition for a single book. According to O'Malley " Ellison moved into the front ranks of American writers, after publishing *Invisible Man* in 1952" (O'Malley 1). Mark Bushy also praised the novel as "the most important 20th century American novel" (Busby 39). This view is further underscored by Dr. Muhammad Moustafa. For him, *Invisible Man* "has changed the shape of American literature" (Moustafa 7). Such features render the novel an original and enduring literary work that stands on equal footing with other masterpieces of American fiction, from Melville through Mark Twain to Faulkner. In fact, *Invisible Man* crowned Ellison's literary endeavors just as *Shadow and Act* established his standing as a prominent American author. Shapiro and Sawhill state that "Few novelists have enjoyed a literary debut as glorious as Ralph Ellison's". They add that "*Invisible Man*, his sweeping novel of a black man's search for recognition in America, appeared in 1952 and has been celebrated ever since, with millions of copies sold worldwide" (Shapiro and Sawhill 58). Being a masterpiece of American literature, *Invisible Man* tackles the torments and uncertainties of African American experience within a modernist framework. Ellison's literary output, which comprised two volumes of essays, along with his personal experience offered a vibrant depiction of America. Although Gary Shteyngart argues that "Ellison understood that a novel like *Invisible Man* might not be equaled by himself during his lifetime" (Shteyngart p.2), the novel continues to be an integral part of current American culture.

Theoretical Framework

Ellison has adopted an exceptional view of the White Americans' plight at large and the African Americans' in particular. He was quite aware that closed theories or single-minded views are no longer reliable sources for explaining histories. For him, the only reliable tool is the chaos threatening humanity as a whole. Furthermore, the white population cannot enjoy their freedom until the African Americans have theirs. Ellison believed that

the destinies of the white and African American are interwoven; a view that aggravated both the white liberals and the African American radicals. He points out that freedom he talks of is not an escape into the imagination, a flight from life, but a freedom in life. For Ellison, creativity is in itself a social action that further sparks another social action in real life by means of broadening the scope of possibility for its readers. Ellison had transcended prevalent concepts of race and created a vivid image of Americans regardless of how they came this land, their appearance or what shaped their characters. Conversely, to most international African American authors, Ellison had established himself as an American citizen and did not limit himself to the African American society alone.

Thanks to its diverse geography and ethnicities, the U.S.A. is endowed with an enriching cultural combination, which in turn renders it a country of splendid possibilities. Throughout his career Ellison adhered to native Oklahoma as model to validate his argument. He kept assiduously showing how various cultural forms were put together into an authentic American community. According to Brooke Allen, Ellison —wanted to build a bridge between Western culture and black vernacular"(Allen 26). Tangsoo Ping in this context admits that: “Ethnicity and its concern with cultural distinctiveness stress a sense of community and group differentiation. The focus on cultural separateness helps towards a sense of identity but this also tends towards isolation and aloofness from other groups. (Ping 81)

In his “Black Invisibility versus Racial Visibility “, Brahim Khaoula points out that “*Invisible Man* tackles one of the essential subjects in African American literature... namely, the quest for an identity in a white society that imposed upon the black people to be invisible” (Khaoula p. 47). According to Ellison, white Americans have experienced an existential dilemma springing from a deep feeling of uncertainty about their real origin. Thus, in their attempt to forge a unified identity, they scapegoated “outsiders”. However, the same sense of national ambiguity renders these “outsiders” exceptionally influential both politically and culturally. Whereas it politically allows them to urge the majority back to its purported values, it culturally enhances interacting within popular modes of expression that set America apart from a conventional and old culture. He goes further to highlight how the African American existence inspired creative entanglements which have,

in turn, been highly influential to high culture. Owing to oppression and displacement, African American life has lacked form and shape to a great extent. Since the mainstream culture did not offer accurate representations of African American lives, they were obligated to resuscitate their own identity through experimenting to develop novel language and culture.

Ellison has always regarded the African Americans as an intrinsic component of the American population, rather than a separate ethnicity. It is exactly as Christopher Benfy says, "The first conviction, drawn front Ellison's memories of Oklahoma, was that black and white culture were so inextricably intertwined that it was inaccurate to speak of one apart from the other" (Benfy 49). At a time when black nationalism and separatism rose to eminence, Ellison highlighted that Black Americans were mainly Protestants. Furthermore, they adopted westernized code of behavior and American secular values. Yet, he advocated that the shared style passed from one generation of Blacks to another is initiated by Negro Americans: rather than African. Instead, he purported that no mainstream American culture could be defined apart from its continuing interaction with an Americanized Black culture. Ellison: however, is still falsely accused by his fellow Black critics of making art transcendent to escape the demands of black liberation. He persistently responded that artistic technique is linked to the discovery of values which turn in their own way on the central issues affecting one's nation and time. For Ellison, the novel tackles the influence of transformation upon character. In his essay "The World and the Jug", Ellison clearly differentiates between what he calls his "relatives" and his "ancestors". According to him, "relatives" are those with whom, by accident of birth, one is naturally associated. Negro authors like Wright and Langston Hughes, for example, are Ellison's "relatives". Ellison argues that an ordinary person cannot choose his relatives, the artist; however, can select his ancestors. He lists T.S. Elliot, Malraux, Hemingway, Faulkner and Dostoevsky among his "ancestors" who had truly stimulated his own artistic impulses and ambitions. Thus, despite Ellison's profound respect for Wright's achievement, he believes that the latter had not influenced him in any significant fashion. Valerie Smith in 'The Meaning of Narration in *Invisible Man*' (2004) argues that *The Invisible Man has its own exceptional*

qualities. He, also, adds that Ellison “employs the narrative process in his quest for freedom” (Smith 192).

Yet, despite Ellison’s search as a scholar for his literary ancestors, there is still one “invisible” influence on him that has not been explored thoroughly in Ellison’s criticism: his indebtedness to early nineteenth-century American literary nationalism. Ellison locates the African American in the typical position of an early nineteenth-century American artist vis-a-vis exclusive European traditions. Accordingly, as an African American Ellison is inevitably preoccupied with major themes of the early nineteenth-century nationalist campaign. Ellison’s connections to authors like Mark Twain, Ernest Hemingway, Herman Melville, and William Faulkner, have been well-acclaimed by American literary criticism for almost four decades. Nevertheless, such a critical canon could not fully explain the connections between the aforementioned authors and African American neither literarily nor culturally. Alan Nadel in ‘Invisible Criticism: Ralph Ellison and the American Canon’ (1992) assures the significance of Black Americans’ historical and cultural impact on authors in the existing canon. Nadel also argues that *Invisible Man* cleverly unveils “some gap, some omission, some blindness in the way we read the past or wrote about it” (Nadel 4).

Both Ellison and his critics have perpetually pinned his frontier experience and boyhood memories in Oklahoma as indispensable to his writings. The varied influences of Oklahoma City, with its jazz and blues musicians, its solid middle class of African Americans, all helped shape his conviction in possibilities within the grasp of all American society. Interestingly, Ellison acknowledges the influences of Malraux, Henry James, Twain, Eliot, and Faulkner, but he has not firmly aligned himself with a black literary tradition. More importantly, Ellison’s writings are largely influenced by nineteenth century literary output as much as they are influenced by his everyday experiences.

Analysis

Ellison’s deservedly celebrated *Invisible Man* which speaks always of the styles, the intrigues, the ideas, the lamentations and the desires that reached across religion, class and sex. It basically delves into the humane aspect of African American community. In his

essay 'The Achievement of Ralph Ellison' (1995), James Tuttleton vividly indicates that "Ellison towered over his contemporaries James Baldwin, Imamu Amiri Baraka, William Melvin Kelley" (Tuttleton 12). The invisibility Ellison is trying to highlight is not limited to the plight of an anonymous African American protagonist. Instead, it further extends to show that the African American society is not just a mass of suffering victims with no autonomous existence of their own. He dismisses the prevalent premise of the white world's total control over the African Americans. Accordingly, he considers himself a chronicler of the human condition at large based on his own perception. For him, artistry, humanity and recognition are intricately woven tapestry.

He asserts his freedom as an intellectual author without denting his color. Within this context, Ellison criticized Richard Wright's work as limited and propagandistic. Ellison's view is that he would rather read Faulkner on 'niggers' than a James Baldwin's protest novel. The former is engaging thanks to its process of self-discovery, its emphasis on individuality as well as its technique of candid revelation. Ellison discusses that the question of dual identity, and the sense of agony it entails are pertinent to both African and white Americans equally. Henceforth, to emphasize it as an exclusively African American plight is fallacious. Daniel Kim, in 'Invisible Desire', supports this view: "this work gives voice to a particular intuition about the psychic motivations of white men" (Kim 309). Brittany Eide mentions that Ellison turns dreams from their rhetorical origins into "the very physical reality for American society in the twentieth century" (Eide p. 60). Moreover, in his article: 'American Culture is of Whole', John Callahan elaborates on Ellison's view in the following lines:

Naturally I did not write the book to degrade anyone.... Nor did I write it to falsify reality.... I wrote it in an attempt to give meaningful form to a body experience. I believe the picture presented in *Invisible Man* is a true one and that its statement about human life transcends mere racial experience. (Callahan 11)

Invisible Man extensively tackles the question of ethnic identity and its increasing significance as a tool to defy a "foreign" dominant culture. Being itself a means of self-assertion, ethnicity becomes an effective defense against eclipse or invisibility. Ellison

vibrantly portrays the enduring African American tradition. For Ellison, ethnic life is part and parcel of national culture. Therefore, his characters are renowned for their wholeness. Through the idea of cultural diversity, Ellison suggests a vision of selfhood and relationship. The threat of eclipse is replaced by the possibilities of self-creation and integration. Billington mentions that Ellison himself once wrote:

The novel was not invented by an American, nor even for Americans, but we are a people who have a form which can produce imaginative models of the total society. If there had been more novelists with the courage of Mark Twain or James or Hemingway, we would not be in the moral confusion in which we find ourselves today. (Billington 93)

It is noteworthy to highlight that Ellison's protagonists are adventurers rather than victims. American blacks set off on a quest towards the realm of possibility, oblivious of all hindrances they might encounter. He maintained that a person's sense of freedom is enhanced by his increased awareness of his personal, cultural and national history. Influenced by a broad range of writers, including Richard Wright, Andre Malraux, and Ernest Hemingway, Ellison focuses on the persons who, by force of character and will, manage to endure. Othman and Zeineldin (2021) argues that Ellison is highlighting the personal identity of the narrator as well as the American identity as a collective representation of American individuals. Othman and Zeineldin also add that "it is not only that Ellison is presenting the human condition in America in the post-World War II era but it could be a representation of the experience of innumerable other human beings in different parts of the world. (Othman & Zainalddin 18)

During the 1960s, Ellison's writings on the oneness of America received strident attack from radical blacks. Yet, the dignified manner in which he tolerated the offenses issued by his fellow African Americans reflects his personal magnanimity. They argued that his oeuvre attempts to conform to racist culture, rather than helping them eradicate it. Some black radicals reject his portrayal of Ras the Exhorter, who easily accepted his own destruction. In his article 'The Meaning of Narration in *Invisible Man*', Valerie Smith argues that for Ellison, the artist is a rebellious figure. Smith adds that for Ellison

“neither the tight, well-made Jamesian novel nor the hard-boiled novel can contain the complexity of American life”. (Smith 189)

It is the burden of a pioneer to be the presumed spokesman for all his people. Ellison was not every black writer; he was a black writer or, as he might prefer, a writer. His ambivalence about the opportunities and penalties of being black was part of his originality. It was not easy to handle this ambivalence in art or life, especially as Ellison did not want to deny himself any experience that would deepen his life and art. And, for some blacks, he was guilty of having allowed himself to be praised by white critics. Ellison did not believe in the separation of black literature in university courses like "The Negro Novel". Bearden, McPherson, Forrest, and Murray—all black artists struggling to communicate the functions and forms of American life—have succeeded, according to Ellison, because blackness for them was not an excuse to be obscenely second rate, but the cultural designation of a complex, tragic, zestful group of people, stubbornly determined to endure. This idea is significantly elaborated by Billington: " Ellison rejected labels. He once said: "I don't think the function of writing is to tell the reader what it feels like to be a Negro.... I think the function of literature is to remind us of our common humanity." (Billington 93)

In fact, neither Ellison’s essay nor his interviews reflect his opinions with as much candor as his letters do. He states that authoring *Invisible Man* is a social and artistic projection. He would even claim that art and protest are not at all dichotomous. He further believes that the challenge which the black American writers have to defy is their lack of craftsmanship rather than their protest. However, to avoid the restraints of the protest novel, Ellison employed the techniques he had learned from American great novelists. He admitted that it is difficult to create a novel of racial protest. Accordingly, he suggests that the contemporary novelist must "challenge the apparent forms of reality—that is, the fixed manners and values of the few ". (Shadow and Act 106)

In *Invisible Man*, Ellison strongly criticizes the Marxian dogmatism, which aligned race with social classes and viewed black culture and music as retrograde. Furthermore,

he realized that the communist party subordinated black reform to the Soviets' Popular Front strategy in war. The narrator in the novel transforms the Marxist perception of freedom as the recognition of necessity to the pluralist concept of freedom as "the recognition of possibility" (Strout 295). Later, in the 1960s civil-rights movement, political liberals reduced blacks to this stereotype of the racial victim who has been barred from American culture. African Americans were allegedly so search for a better life to bring about the socialist revolution because they were segregated and kept out of American society. As his articles make clear, black Americans have been completely integrated into society and culture, regardless of the meaning of the legal status of slavery and desegregation. Many black people were relegated to lowly jobs as cooks, housekeepers, sharecroppers, yard-boys, and manual labourers. Yet, with the passage of time, there emerged many black ministers, teachers, lawyers, musicians, businessmen, union leaders, and college presidents - all of them expressing a rich and diverse black culture. However, few liberal whites seemed to notice these blacks' contributions to American life. Indeed, this black culture was so diverse that not even any single black could express it. O'Meally's account is relevant here: " During the thirties and forties, Ellison was immersed in radical politics. He saw the writer's responsibility to create works encompassing the great social issues... As the forties wore on, it became clear to Ellison that lasting art transcended political argumentation after argumentation. (O'Meally 3)

Ellison wrote two essays as a reply to Irving Howe's 1963 essay "Black Boys and Native Sons." Though Howe praises both Baldwin and Ellison's performances, he argues that they rejected the naturalism and straight protest of Wright. Wright, on the other hand, accuses Ellison of avoiding direct protest. Like Wright's *Native Son*, Ellison's *Invisible Man* tackles various manifestations of white racism in a satirically straightforward manner. Furthermore, both texts explored the importance of freedom which has been voiced later in Benjamin Soskis' article, 'Freedoms and Fictions' (2002), " Freedom, the ability to choose one's own direction, makes life beautiful and pure"(Soskis 36). Ellison; however, was well aware that the frustrated, alienated and aggressive model offered by Wright is not the only option for a Black writer. As a result, he refused to degrade his anonymous protagonist to the subhuman position of Wright's Bigger Thomas. Therefore, Ellison and Howe are not on the same page concerning the essence of human misery. Whereas one

emphasizes man's status within the society, the other underscores man's position within the universe at large. McPherson said that Ellison insisted that "we could only find the right road signs and the gateposts of friendly way stations by seeing clearly the humanity of the very people who could not see us at all" (McPherson 445). Ellison's primary notion is that not all human suffering is racially motivated. Being Negro does not release one from the common burdens of humanity. Ellison addresses his concerns to the type of protest novel developed by Wright and praised by Howe and other writers and reviewers in his renowned rebuttal to Irving Howe's "Black Boys and Native Sons," entitled "The World and the Jug". Finding such depictions of black life to be overly dismal, he decided to write novels that "would preserve as they destroy, affirm as they reject." (Shadow and Act 114)

From the very beginning, Ellison rejects the categorization of novel into "protest" and "art" novel. He rather considers it trivial and untrustworthy, and his strategy is twofold. On the one hand, his view is that protest is an element of all art, yet, is not to be confined to social or political stances alone. In one sense, it might be "a technical assault". The apparent freedom from the ideological and emotional penalties suffered by Negroes in America displayed in *Invisible Man* is astonishing. Still, *Invisible Man* does escape the limitations of protest novel. As John Hersey puts it in response to Howe's statement that "there may of course be times when one's obligation as human being supersedes one's obligation as a writer," Ellison replies: "I think that the writer's obligation ... is best carried out through his role as writer. (Heresy 40)

The ongoing topic of the writer's function, particularly in the context of the strife for human freedom, is very clear in the exchange between Ellison and Howe. To Marxism, all literature is propaganda or becomes propaganda when it gets into the social field. As propaganda, it is implicitly a reflection of class attitudes. Therefore, the role of the writer in the Marxist theory is, to encourage the virtues of the working class, to sharpen their class consciousness hoping to overthrow the ruling classes and finally control the means of production. Thus, much of the anti-Ellison criticism springs from Marxian and Black Neo-Marxian thought. Literarily, this is called social realism. Some of Ellison's most virulent critics have been social realists.

Ellison's novel is an *American* novel; rather than a "Negro Novel", as it portrays the intertwined lives of blacks and whites together. In addition to being restricted to an expression of grief and injustice felt disproportionately by African Americans, *Invisible Man* is arguably the most profound novel about American identity written since war. The protagonist, in the course of his narration, maintains a detached attitude towards all racial prejudices and racial conflicts. He looks forward to establishing a common ground between the two sections of American population. *Invisible Man* highlighted the way in which the moral and social sphere of America reflected racial relations. Exploitation and subjugation testify to the degeneracy of the nation as a whole. The degradation of the Blacks links up with the decline of other relations as well. The experiences of all slaves are "records of degradation of both blacks and whites, - of suffering and moral corruption." (Yetman 103)

The main theme of *Invisible Man* is the narrator's quest to discover his true identity —who and what he is. Throughout his endeavors, he makes multiple discoveries about his society, his own self, his relationship to other people, and the significance of invisibility. Each chapter in *Invisible Man* is a sort of discovery process which reveals some sides of the narrator's personality, and to combine together all of the aspects and contributing factors would necessitate a new discussion of every individual chapter. However, Ellison has done this by writing the intriguing "Prologue" and "Epilogue" wherein the Invisible Man gives his discoveries in philosophical terms. Therefore, in the prologue and the epilogue there is a person with an identity, an identity that is synonymous with invisibility. This man tells the readers about his society, his complex feelings, thoughts, and his insights into his position as a black man in a racist society. His insights are genuine and profound because they were painfully gathered from his own experiences. The novel narrates those experiences while the prologue and the epilogue display his conclusions and philosophy. It is significant to consider the prologue and epilogue together because they are essentially the same thing. According to Patrick Shaw "both the prologue and the epilogue are set in the fictive present '1948' and 'thereby serve as the temporal frame for the retrospective narrative of the body'" (Shaw 117). These two records recount the life-story of the Invisible Man. A primary idea conveyed is that the narrator has spent his

entire life engaged in an assiduous quest. Thus, this novel may be regarded as a quest novel meaning that the Invisible 'Man has reached a point in his life when he feels compelled to come back to an earlier episode. It is a popular way of getting into a novel—realizing that one is in a certain stage of development and then returning to earlier stages to define the meaning of one's current life. The narrator of the novel proceeds: “I'd learned to look around corners; images of past humiliations flickered through my head. They were me; they defined me. I was my experiences and my experiences were me, and no blind men... could take that, or change one single itch, laugh, cry, ache, rage or pain of it. (IM 497)

The plot of *Invisible Man* follows the narrator on his journey from ignorance to knowledge and affirmation. The journey is exceptionally long and hard for this black American because, in his youth, he fails to grasp the significance of his experiences. He is eager and ambitious, and he aspires to rise in society via persistence and hard effort. Basically, sharing his tale helps Ellison to structure and narrate his events to show the meaning of his existence. The beginning and ending he selects, and the recurring pattern he reveals, disprove the prevalent belief that his existence is meaningless. He demonstrates through his narrative that his existence has structure and that his miseries are purposeful. As he learns the value of self-reliance, he develops from naiveté and helplessness to wisdom and helpfulness. He announces that both his quest and the failures that pursued, were essentially motivated by his naiveté. His utmost surprise happens when he is given the scholarship by the white men who have just used him in a disgraceful manner. The Invisible Man reuses the idea that his past experiences have no meaning. In his youth, he believed that identity could be developed willingly. Finally, he realizes that all other-imposed identities are fake. One's true identity is the sum of one's own experiences; therefore, to deny one's past is to deny oneself. He chooses a significant event of the novel one that highlights his naive character. As he opens the book with the battle royal, he attracts the reader's attention to his own myopia and his overdependence on others' values.

The narrator's entire life experience boils down to his lack of identity and even recognition as a human being. Ellison's experience as a Negro had taught him a profounder sort of invisibility than any chemically induced vanishing trick. As the narrator says in the opening paragraph, "it is as though I have been surrounded by mirrors of hard, distorting glass" (*IM* 3), so that other people do not see him but only his reflections of themselves. His expulsion from the college, his dismissal from a job on the factory; Breckway's attempt to kill him; the callous treatment by the doctors and the nurses at the hospital; Ras the Exhorter's efforts to destroy him; and, eventually, his taking shelter in the deserted basement of an old building, all these make the protagonist think that he is invisible to others.

The prologue is crucial since it introduces and explains the notion of invisibility by the novel's protagonist. Cushing Strout's view is that, "*Invisible Man* shares with Richard Wright's *Native Son* the central metaphor of black invisibility, and both men drew on Dostoevsky's *Notes on the Underground*" (Strout 295). In this context, invisibility simply refers to people's full indifference for the particular human being who appears to them to have no value or identity at all: "That invisibility to which I refer occurs because of a peculiar disposition of the eyes of those with whom I come in contact." (*IM* 3). Victoria Wendel in 'Ralph Ellison and the Postcolonial Identity of Black Invisibility' states that " This invisibility can be considered as the two sides of racism", one representing the victim and the other representing the perpetrator (Wendel p. 13).

In this oeuvre, the protagonist identifies himself as invisible entity, in the sense that people refuse to notice him. People, he believes, have never taken notice of him and have never even acknowledged his presence in this world. "I am an invisible man. I am invisible, understand, simply because people refuse to see me" (*IM* 3). Ellison was proud of his identification as a Negro, as an Oklahoman, as an American, and as an author over and over again, these remarkable letters insist upon his determination to set up an identity greater than the price of its pays.

Throughout the narrative, the anonymous protagonist's path of life coincides with various authoritative figures such as Norton, Bledsoe, the Brotherhood—who impose fake names or inappropriate identities on him. He has learned that the process of naming is intrinsically related to questions of control and power. He loses his identity and suffers betrayals when attempting to live according to the dictates of others. Only after assuming responsibility for naming himself by recounting his own tale does he uncover the actual purpose of his existence. It was not until "Battle Royal", that he realized the distinction between the Negro and the white. This episode leads to a sequence of realizations for him. However, the Negro problem is not the novel's main preoccupation; rather, it is utilized as a tool for commencing the book and as a means to which many other concepts and inquiries would subsequently be linked. In his futile attempts to socially flourish by believing others and obeying what he is taught, the protagonist is cruelly disillusioned and discovers that he is in a position where he has to confront his Southern Negro heritage.

The book begins and ends in a small underground room, situated in a border area. It is there that the unidentified narrator arranges his memories, structures his experiences, and creates his existence. It is important to bear this in mind since the novel is not only a record of events, but it also includes the narrator's realization of those events: "Herein lies the invisible man's motivation for going underground, to recount his story, to construct an identity, his own specific, unique being, through the writing of the narrative" says Stuart (Stuart 420). His little room is flooded with the light from 1.369 light bulbs. In reality, the electric light in this cellar represents the narrator's quest for his innate identity. His narrative explains how and why he became visible, how he learned to live in an underground cellar, and why he remains there until, he feels, he may come out into daylight rather than linger on in the artificial light of the electric bulb. Here Ellison talks of his hibernation in a hole. This hole symbolically represents the hole he has once been in — a hole that he did not know. He says he had to be literally "clubbed into the cellar" (*IM* 272) before he saw the condition of his life. Interestingly, in both passages, he talks about spring or emerging out of his hole, indicating that Ellison recognizes life's cyclical nature and understands that following winter hibernation comes spring revitalization. Once he says: "Mine is a warm hole. And remember, a

bear retires to his hole for the winter and lives until spring; then he comes strolling out like the Easter chick breaking from its shell" (*IM* 6). So, it seems that he has a special vision of life and he sees life in circular terms as in his statement "The end was in the beginning" (*IM* 571). The gnomic question which concludes *Invisible Man* reveals the scope of Ellison's vision: "who knows but that, ... I speak for you?" (*IM* 581). This is spoken out of that tangible darkness that the anonymous narrator has amplified with 1.369 light bulbs, and while it is as sardonic and double-edged as the rest of his narrative, it effectively expresses Ellison's purpose.

Thus, the narrator does not only start leading his life, but he also starts writing it down. Furthermore, as a writer or sensitive artist, he is aware that a man's sentiments are more sensible than his thoughts in some situations. As a result, he puts his narrative down - not as a mental exercise, but as a statement of his deeply felt understanding. Writing has a beneficial impact on him. Yet, he goes even further in the epilogue when he says that an invisible man is also a responsible person: "and wait until I reveal how truly irresponsible I am. Responsibility rests upon recognition, and recognition is a form of agreement" (*IM*.14). However, he struggles to fulfill a socially responsible role. As a result, he chuckles in his encounter with Mr. Norton, reminding Norton that he is his destiny. Ellison's quandary and confrontation with the absurd is that he believes in the Emersonian ideal while simultaneously realizing its futility. Certainly, he is implying that his tale is a series of masks hiding a faceless countenance. The Invisible Man, however, is building his identity or face as he goes. He can wear masks and play roles, too, but ultimately, he returns to work from his real inner self.

The invisibility of the Negro indicates his inclusive attitude, his bigger and more open sense of self, society, and existence. Masking, role-playing, the blues, and jazz, which reflect the process of self-creation and reconciliation, reinforce the Negro's ability to cope with life in all its ambiguity. One aspect of Black folklore that Ellison explores in his book is the character of the Black trickster and his technique of disguise. While he admires the subtle skill of disguising and role-playing, Ellison does not consider this aesthetic presence as just an intentional survival mechanism, as witnessed in the cases of Bledsoe and the Golden Day

convicts, respectively. The protagonist's approach of seeming compliance and accommodation is more than a system of deceit and intentional deception. Role-playing and posturing highlight white society's shallowness, blindness, and self-indulgence, as well as its frail, illusory system of dominance and authority. Masking and the feeling of self-eclipse it entails, also implies an all-encompassing direction on the side of the Negro, a willingness to face history, the harsh realities and requirements of existence. It compels him to confront his traumatic background and realize his ongoing oppression. However, this also helps to instill an inner freedom, for disguise and eclipse soon develop into a fluid art of self-extension and of discovering new spheres of being. As Ellison declares, masking the device of enforced submissiveness and self-effacement, is a play upon possibility. Its attendant characteristics of invisibility and namelessness, indeed, imply occasions for endless shaping. This is the protagonist's final realization in the grandfather's words, the idea of the possibility of a larger, freer life. However, this is not always realized. Bledsoe's guile connotes neither freedom nor self-discovery. His masquerade depicts a ready attitude of self-degradation and negation. Similarly, Rinehart's numerous poses do not suggest independence, only greed and opportunism. His extravagant roles are hollow, devoid of direction, aim, or a feeling of identity. Disguise is a pathetic cover-up for impoverished selfhood. The protagonist is more successful in the search for new frontiers for the self. He is quick to realize that disguise or masking shows a widening gap between appearance and meaning. He also discovers that the Negro folk tradition embodies an effective counterpointing of suffering and control. The lesson is driven home by Trueblood and Peter Wlicatstraw. The story begins with the protagonist as a pupil at school, and it ends with mingled hope and despair after having gone through a series of painful, shocking, and even traumatic experiences over two years. Philippe Whyte in "Invisible Man as a Trickster" clarifies this idea:

Although the story takes place after the abolition of slavery, the tensions of slavery days have not disappeared. Thus the blacks have still to fall back on trickery and ingenuity if they are to progress socially or even just survive. The needs which the trickster tales fulfilled ... have remained much the same. (Whyte 61)

In “Invisibility in the World According to Ralph Ellison”, Hana Novotná assures that “the grandfather asked the father to fight against the white people, but the narrator understands the message of the grandfather” (Novotná p. 32). The entire tale is a test of the grandfather's dual message of humility and animosity; the first of many pieces of advice he accepts without completely comprehending them. The grandfather's comments act as a recurrent leitmotif from an episode to another. The grandfather advises his family to follow his example and destroy the system while pretending to keep it. It is, in part, hinted in his grandfather's memorable advice: "Live with your head in the lion's mouth. I want you to overcome 'ens with yeses, agree 'ern to death and destruction, let 'ens swallow you till they vomit or bust wide open." (*IM*, 16). When the grandfather tells his son to say "yes ", he means to say "yes" to life. Before saying "yes" however the protagonist has to follow the advice of the mother "Go curse your God, boy, and die" (*IM*, 11). The woman does not mean that she wants the boy to curse the biblical God. The term here is merely symbolic. She wants the boy to curse "the white folks, authority, circumstances The force that pulls your strings until you refuse to be pulled any more" (*IM* 152).

A similar text is "To whom it may concern — keep this Nigger boy running," (*IM* 33) which he understands to be the message; he keeps as he tries to go on in life. He has created the illusion of progress at every step, just to continue running in place, to reach nowhere. To emerge into his own, he must reject accepted signals, socially assigned duties, customary constraints, and acceptable aspirations. In order to achieve this aim, he will have no scruples in using the same weapons as the trickster. As a result, the youth suppresses the emotional turmoil generated by the humiliations to which he is subjected; he conforms to white society's degrading standards. He encounters a sequence of catastrophic setbacks and is unable to comprehend them because he fails to employ his own sensibilities, his own perceptive faculties. This entails disguising one's genuine sentiments in order to appease others whose expectations one hopes to employ to promote one's aspirations. As early as the “Battle Royal”, he believes that he can play any game required of him. The protagonist is bitterly determined to do just that: “I'd let them swatter me until they vomited... All they wanted of me was one belch of

affirmation and I'd bellow it out loud. Yes! Yes! Yes! that was all anyone wanted of us, that we should be heard and not seen !" (*IM*. 13-14).

Dr. Bledsoe shares his grandfather's belief in deceit as a vital prerequisite for accomplishment. Similarly, the veteran is aware of the world's deceptions. He, too, advises the protagonist to discern pretense and learn to be deceitful: "learn to look beneath the surface.... Come out of the fog, young man. Play the game, but don't believe in". His grandfather on his deathbed has given the advice to "overcome 'em with yeses," and only by the end can the narrator see a possible hidden meaning in this exhortation. Before he leaves for New York, the vet in *The Golden Day* advises him that, once there, he should play the game without believing it: he explains that he will be "hidden right out in the open" because "they" will not expect him to know anything and therefore cannot see him. When asked by the narrator who "they" refers to, he answers, "Why the same they we always mean, the white folks, authority, the gods, fate, circumstances the force that pulls your strings until you refuse to be pulled any more" (*IM*,52). One of the motivations behind the protagonist's behavior is thus his desire to break free from a reductive perspective of reality. This entails rejecting the trickster archetype since he was the outcome of a collective racial experience in which the world was viewed as a form of battleground. Escaping such a dismal view requires placing one's faith in a community whose coherence and values are not reduced to a simple clash between white and black. The following passage from the "Battle-Royal" incident, refers to the grandfather as a picture on the wall: "When I reached home everyone was excited. Next day the neighbors came to congratulate me. I even felt safe from grandfather. I stood beneath his photograph and smiled triumphantly into his solid black peasant's face. It was a face that fascinated me. The eyes seemed to follow everywhere I went. (*IM* 26)

The traumatic experience of going to the white man's Celebration with the intention of giving a speech, but instead confronting the hypocritical values of the white Americans who want the Negro to shed his own blood, captures the mood of the whole novel. The tightness and uncertainty allude to the main theme of *Invisible Man*, that the Invisible Man anticipates one thing and encounters another. The white man prefers to believe that only the Negro writhes in front of a naked blonde dancer, and that only the Negro viciously beats his

own brothers; so, he rewards the Negro for playing out feelings that the white man is afraid to express for himself. The white man is oblivious that his paying for such indulgences is more demeaning than the Negro's involvement, because the Negroes perform merely for limited financial benefits, whilst the white man derives vicarious pleasure from the degrading spectacle.

There is always the idea that each Negro is waging his or her individual struggle rather than banding together to combat a shared oppressor. This is exemplified in the Battle Royal scene, in which the boys combat each other only to amuse white men. Even as he despises whites and emphasizes his own ethnic uniqueness, the Invisible Man acknowledges that the Black is fundamentally American, and that ethnicity must take national identity into consideration. Ellison himself has remarked that Negro life is "an irrevocable part of the basic experience of the United States," in the sense that it is "indispensable to any profoundly American depiction of reality" (Heresy 17). More significantly, Ellison also shows that the energy inherent in the Negro response to history and community is born of the pressures that face the race: "Much of the political energy of white society went toward proving that we were not human and that we had no sense of human values. But this in itself motivated you... You had to identify those values which were human against those which were inhuman. (Heresy 16)

The Battle Royal signals the narrator's awareness that he is an Invisible Man who must seek his own identity. Before being blindfolded the Negro boys are made to stare at a naked white woman; then they are herded into the ring, " everyone fought hysterically. It was complete anarchy. Everybody fought everybody else. No group fought together for long" (*IM* 23). Moreover, following the Battle Royal, one of the fighters, his mouth full of blood, is asked to give his school valedictorian's address. As he stands, the citizens make him repeat himself; an incident that nearly ruins him. Yet, he is awarded a scholarship to a Negro college. Ellison emphasizes the narrator's innocence by having him participate in a "Battle Royal" before the city's most prominent white citizens "hankers, lawyers, judges, doctors, fir chiefs, teachers, merchants . . . even one of the more fashionable pastors" (*IM* p.15). The Negro boys then battle again, this time

between themselves, for the pennies on the electrified rug. The gold coins they seek turn out to be brass, but there are plenty of dollars to go around. Following afterwards, the invisible man takes the stage and delivers his properly orchestrated address in which he supports the status quo of the Southern Negro attempting to improve himself via education in segregated institutions.

Following the fight, the boys are ordered to collect their reward, which consists of money, crumpled notes, and fragments thrown around a little rug. They are horrified to realize that the rug is electrified and glimpse one boy "literally dance upon his back, his elbows beating a frenzied tattoo upon the floor, his muscles twitching like the flesh of a horse stung by many flies" (*IM* p.22). The narrator reacts differently: "Ignoring the shock by laughing, as I brushed the coins off quickly, I discovered that I could contain the electricity— a contradiction, but it works" (*IM* p.22). The gold coins discovered in another photograph are forgeries. He resents participating in the battle because the idea of fighting against other black boys repulses him. He fears that the association will "detract from the dignity of [his] speech" (*IM* p.17). When the white people invite the hero to give an address, he intends to impress them. Without hesitation, he vows to memorize every phrase and notice every tone. However, the Invisible Man is unaware of the discrepancy between his anticipation and the real circumstance. He even discovers another discrepancy between appearance and reality when the meeting he thinks to be a peaceful, aristocratic gathering turns out to be a riotous stage celebration. These men force him to fight several other black boys, all blindfolded, before he can give his speech. The blindfold is also a symbol of the bonds of slavery out of which the Negro is slowly emerging, thus revealing the history and development of the Negro's struggle. The Author sees the narrator as a model of that struggle and thus as a natural result of that which has come before. He sees this blind fakeness not as an aberration of nature, but instead, as a logical consequence of history or historical circumstances.

Thus, the Negro and the nude white lady represent American degradation and sterility. They represent a nihilistic mentality whose destructiveness reaches demonic dimensions, particularly in the protagonist's vision of his castration and mutilation near the novel's finale. This scene appears to be mostly a description of what occurred to a few people at a specific

smoker in an anonymous southern town. With this scene planted in the memories of the readers, they gradually realize the degradation and sterility of the entire world of the book and almost all of the American community. Trueblood's incest, a byproduct of white domination, clearly demonstrates the white man's inherent depravity, as seen by Norton's secret love for his daughter and Sybil's sensuality. After all, Norton is just "monkey glands and goat balls... part goat or part ape" (*IM* p.76), and maybe both, as those at the Golden Day, are easily noticed. His descent into such outrageous bestiality represents the breakdown of basic human interactions and human order. Now, it is now clear that the Invisible Man, like many others before him, is looking for a new way of existing in reality. He has developed a fresh perspective on reality and his relationship with it. As he now sees it "my world has become one of infinite possibilities and life is to be lived, not controlled" (*IM* p.19). What he also acknowledges, and this is crucial, is that by writing the book, he, too, is imposing a pattern on reality. He includes understanding of the fact that simply perceiving reality requires organizing it in one's mind. As a result, the narration evolves into one of self-realization through reliance solely on oneself - a type of American self-reliance. For him, the concept of escape becomes inextricably linked with the concept of self-definition: "When I discover who I am, I'll be free" (*IM* p.p. 198). Thus, the pattern of the protagonist's quest is established, taking the form of a timid progress forward towards self-discovery disrupted by abrupt throwbacks to a prior period or identity that is fiercely rejected at times and enthusiastically, if momentarily, embraced at other times.

It is so vital to see that the protagonist considers education as more than just a springboard towards social accomplishment. It is expressed in language that renders it the physical manifestation of his conviction in the "rightness of things" (*IM* p. 29). The old buildings, the winding roads, the girls in bright summer dresses walking on the green grass, the playful rabbits "so tame through having never been hunted" (*IM* p. 33)—all these evoke an idyllic, pastoral world, the antithesis of the violence and anarchy embedded in the trickster's world. Dr. Bledsoe presents a more consistent visual representation of what the students' finest efforts may generate. His narrative is typical of the rags-to-riches formula: He came to college barefoot, driven by "a fervour for education," and quickly established himself as "the best slop dispenser in the history of the school" (*IM* p.114). After years of hard work, he became the school's

president, and a nationally acclaimed leader. The protagonist reveals his own mystification of Bledsoe, and his inability to distinguish between monetary gain and moral virtue: “ [Bledsoe] was the example of everything I hoped to be: Influential all over the country; consulted in matters concerning the race; a leader of his people; the possessor of two Cadillacs, a good salary and soft, good-looking wife”. (*IM* 99)

The narrator also describes the college as a "flower-studded wasteland," a statement that becomes essential later on after realizing that his time at college was spent in a wasteland. The college does not prepare him for the sort of life he would face along the way ; instead, it feeds him basic clichés and prepares him for betrayal by the president college later on. The narrator's recollections are flooded with yearning for what he refers to later as "this Eden" (*IM* p.86), with its peaceful garden images. Overwhelmed by his own feeling of duty as a student, he fails to see that this garden has mockingbirds and a rumbling black powerhouse, an image that resembles Dr. Bledsoe, the black college president, for whom power is the aim. The Invisible Man recalls the charming white cottages adjacent to the great black powerhouse in his undergraduate recollections. This is the picture of white against black that is continuously recalled throughout the narrative.

When the anonymous protagonist first challenges the current authority, Dr. Bledsoe tells him, " I'm at the controls" (*IM* 119). He later views two photos of bull fighting in a pub, one in which the matador smoothly masters the bull and the other in which he is hurled on the black bull's horns. Morality begins when man directs this power toward specified goals. According to the narrator's experience, it is typically utilized for the more or less cynical exploitation of individuals. The narrator's accomplishment must be to discover a way out of the power structure entirely and to illuminate the blackness of his invisibility, to be aware of his own shape. Expulsion from college clearly signifies more than merely a danger to his career's success. Bledsoe's success plan, dishonesty, and scorn for concepts as pride and decency are all blows to the young protagonist's frail shell of security. He expresses the significance of this occurrence by saying that amid the college's "calm greenness," he owned the "only identity I had ever known" (p. 84). He, thus, envisions the expulsion from the school as

"the parting of flesh" (*IM* 112) and places this loss on a par with a loss of faith in coherence " Truth, truth, what was truth?" (*IM* 120). He likes the college but is dismissed out by its president, Dr. Bledsoe, a great educator, and leader of his race. Taking what he thinks to be a letter of recommendation from Dr. Bledsoe he comes to New York. The letter warns prospective employers against him. The protagonist recognizes that all school values are false. Finally, he realizes that the American dream will never be fulfilled for him. It seems that the protagonist starts to recognize his own identity. The scene in which he eats yams indicates his self-acceptance. Eating the yams publicly shows his desire to enjoy the memories they conjure up: "At home we'd bake them, had carried them to school; we hid from the teacher. Yes, and we'd loved them, yams and years ago. Though the time seemed endlessly stretched as the spiraling smoke beyond all recall. (*IM*. 257)

All the representatives of social power seek to control reality and believe that they can do whatever they like with it. They have a mechanizing attitude towards reality, and it is not strange that the narrator is always getting involved with literal machines in the factory, the hospital, etc. On the other hand, these institutions, these people of social power, do seem to give the individual a role in the scheme of things. This is indeed the narrator's problem. When he is dismissed from the college, he feels that he is losing the only identity that he has ever known. And for a long time, his quest is for some defining and recognized employment. The matter of the letters from Bledsoe is instructive; they are expected to be helping him find a job which might enable him to get back to his higher education, while they are treacherously advancing Bledsoe's scheme of keeping him as far away from college as possible. He feels all along that he is playing part in some incomprehensible scheme. The protagonist will discover this in his attempts to achieve social success and shake of the "old southern backwardness" (*IM* 329) which he sees as an obstacle to his hopes. Such a man has only contempt for the "lack of judgment" of "northern-trained idealists" (*IM* 121) who fail to see that life is nothing but a "power set-up" (*IM* 119). View of the world as a kind of jungle means that the only rule is to be on the top by whatever means: "You learn where you are and get yourself power, influence, contacts with powerful and influential people" *IM* 121). Bledsoe questions the value of the education provided

by the college, seeing that its aims were to produce cheap imitations of the white masters. Real education should be obtained through experience of life, to help the protagonist become one of the "good, smart, disillusioned fighters" needed by the Negro race, that Bledsoe sends him out into the world with false letters of recommendation. It is a trick which ensures that he will never again return to the protective shell constituted by the college and will be launched on the road of self-discovery.

The hero realizes that trickery was not only limited to the conflict between whites and blacks, but it did in fact permeate every sphere of social activity. The crude advertisement in front of the paint plant makes it clear—"KEEP AMERICA PURE WITH LIBERTY PAINTS" (*IM* 122). Part of Ellison's vision of the boomerang includes his insight into the shifting nature not only of winter and spring or death and birth but also of evil and good and honesty and dishonesty. As an invisible black man the values that might appear obvious to others become confused. This confusion results in a soul sickness, something Ellison talks of throughout the whole book. But this soul sickness is not fatal for Ellison. The narrator says in the prologue, "All sickness is not unto death of neither is invisibility" (*IM* 14). Recognizing that he is invisible gives the protagonist a kind of power over those who refuse to see him — because he understands. This recognition gives him an identity the others may not have. The protagonist also now finds that, though he is still invisible, he is no longer blind. Furthermore, he is a believer, not in conformity but in diversity. America is woven of many strands; but despite this diversity, the country must remain one. Furthermore, he realizes that his period of hibernation must now end and that he has to begin a new and active life. The epilogue is valuable because it contains several valuable ideas which the protagonist has extracted from his firsthand experiences. In fact, one can safely agree with Jim Neighbors that "The self is discovered, an identity completed. After all, 'we must know who we are before we can be free'". (Neighbors 229)

Conclusion

To conclude, *Invisible Man*, portrays the enduring African American tradition vibrantly. For Ellison, ethnic life is part and parcel of national culture. Therefore, his characters are renowned for their wholeness. Through the idea of cultural diversity and oneness, Ellison propounds a vision of selfhood and relationship. The threat of eclipse is replaced by the possibilities of self-creation and integrations. Although *Invisible Man* is primarily about the lives of African Americans and their troubled relationship with whites in that country, it gains universality because the problems encountered by the narrator are problems that a significant portion of all humanity must face. More significantly, Ellison underlines the centrality of Black culture in American society and points out the enormous opportunities that come with marginal living in the modern world. Alienation, therefore, becomes a prerequisite for insight. Invisibility, rather than just expressing a minority group's deprivation and dispossession, also invokes an increasing feeling of cross-cultural linkages, and eventually describes the predicament of the American who is alone, but not without the capacity to be and act. Thus, the scope of *The Invisible Man* is not confined to ethnic struggle or race issues. It rather illustrates a national existential dilemma that describes the American society in the twentieth century.

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المستخلص

التعقيد في أزمة الهوية الأمريكية في رواية رالف إليسون الرجل الخفي: دراسة موضوعية

على الرغم من أن رانعة رالف إليسون *الرجل الخفي* (١٩٥٢) لم تلق استحساناً من قبل القوميين السود، إلا أن كل من الرواية والمؤلف لا يزالان يواصلان خلق مزيداً من الزخم في الدوائر الأدبية بوجه سواء من خلال المدح أو النقد. ويعد إليسون أول كاتب أمريكي من أصل أفريقي يفوز بجائزة الكتاب الوطني الأمريكية للأدب عام ١٩٥٣. و علاوة على ذلك ، فلقد تم الاعتراف في استطلاع شمل مائتي كاتب باعتباره العمل الفردي الأكثر تميزاً في ذلك الوقت. وي طرح إليسون في هذه الرواية أسئلة تتعلق بالبصيرة الإنسانية والعدالة الاجتماعية ويمزجها مع تساؤلات ثاقبة حول العقل البشري والعدالة الإنسانية. وتتمحور الأحداث حول سعي البطل لإثبات ذاته في رحلة حياتية تُعد انعكاساً للحياة في المجتمع الأمريكي إبان القرن العشرين. ويخوض البطل هذه الرحلة عبر متاهة من الحرية، والاستيعاب والرفض والفرص. وتهدف هذه الدراسة الى اثبات أن أثر الرواية يتجاوز الموضوعات السابق ذكرها. فهي تعكس في المقام الأول المحاولات البائسة للمواطن الأمريكي لخلق فرديته وهويته كإنسان؛ ومن ثم فإن هذا البحث يوضح نظرة إليسون الثاقبة للحياة الأمريكية وفكرة اللا انفصام في مشكلة الهوية الأمريكية في روايته *الرجل الخفي* ويلقي بالضوء على وجهة نظره حول الارتباط الوثيق بين محنة المواطنين الأمريكيين ذوات الأصل الأفريقي والمجتمع الأمريكي بوجه عام. ومن هنا يمكن القول بأن الرواية لا تقتصر على الصراع العرقي فحسب وإنما تتناول الأزمة الوجودية التي عانى منها المجتمع الأمريكي خلال القرن العشرين.

كلمات مفتاحية:

القومية السوداء- أزمة الهوية الأمريكية – الامريكان ذوات الأصل الإفريقي – العدالة الاجتماعية- أزمة المجتمع الأمريكي--
القرن العشرين